

DING DONG! MERRILY ON HIGH

*Traditional Irish carol
arranged by Douglas Mears*

Instrumentation

Flute

Oboe

English Horn

Clarinet in A

Bassoon

3 Horns in F

Timpani

Percussion

*Finger cymbals, tambourine
suspended cymbal, mark tree*

Harp

Celesta

SATB Choir

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

Notes

Ding Dong! Merrily on High is one of the most joyful and spirited of all Christmas songs. Like many traditional carols still sung today, it originated centuries ago. The earliest manuscript of this melody dates back to 1588, making it over 400 years old. Interestingly, the piece initially had nothing to do with Christmas—it was a secular dance tune known as “Branle de l’Official.” The earliest surviving manuscript shows this melody written vertically in a collection titled *Orchesographie* by Thoinot Arbeau, the pen name of Jehan Tabourot (1519-1595). His pen name choice was fascinating because it is an anagram of his real name—the same letters placed in a different order.

Orchesographie is a valuable historical document that includes many of the French Renaissance’s popular melodies, and it instructs how to dance to the music. The branle was danced by a chain of dancers, usually in couples, with linked arms or holding hands. Though the music for “Branle de L’Official” is included in Arbeau’s collection, there is no indication that he wrote it.

This popular tune circulated throughout Europe for over 300 years before it was given an English text by the Anglican priest George Ratcliffe Woodward (1848-1934). “Ding Dong! Merrily on High” was first published in 1924 in *The Cambridge Carol Book*. Woodward’s lifelong interest in church tower bell ringing and archaic poetry no doubt influenced the writing of this beloved Christmas carol.

