

JOY TO THE WORLD

Joy To The World” is adapted from five verses English hymnist Isaac Watts (1674 — 1748) took from the Old Testament’s *Psalm 98*. Once referred to as “the father of English hymnody,” Watts wrote over 450 religious songs, and his vivacious poetic style helped revolutionize church singing in the 1700’s.

As a teenager, Watts’ puritanical Deacon father angrily challenged him to write better songs when his young son expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of quality

he felt existed in the hymns he was hearing in church. By the next Sunday, at the age of eighteen, he penned his first work, and

went on to become an Anglican preacher until illness forced him to move into a friend’s estate and abandon his ministry. Although Isaac Watts would never recover, he spent the rest of his life creating music for the church, and wrote “Joy To The World” while convalescing.

The original tune is not the song we sing today, and while most of Watts’ lyrics have survived, the current melody was created sometime in the early 1800’s. Lowell Mason, once the leading Presbyterian hymn composer in America, is credited with uniting this new strain with Watts’ old



Isaac Watts



WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FLOCKS BY NIGHT

Like Watts, who relied on the Bible for his “Joy,” English poet laureate Nabum Tate (1652 — 1715) paraphrased Luke 2:8-14 when he wrote the lyrics for “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night,” which were first published in 1700. In England, the song was radical for its time, since before it, Christ-

mas hymns weren’t sung in church. Because Tate’s tune was so closely associated with scripture, it became the only one officially accepted by the Church of England, and was the first Christmas song people could freely sing during divine services. The melody most closely associated with it in America is an adaptation of an aria taken from “Siroe, Re di Persia,” a 1728 George F. Handel opera. In that aria, a princess disguised as a man, finds herself obligated to make love to a woman.



George F. Handel
(1685 — 1759)

lyrics. He published a new version of “Joy” in 1836. For over a hundred years, it was believed that Mason adapted this music from part of classical composer George F. Handel’s *The Messiah*. It is now commonly held that the new notes were most likely crafted by an English choir conductor named William Holford.