



Dear Come Singing friends,

After the festivities of Christmas and New Year, January and February can sometimes feel like a long dark tunnel leading - at long last! - to spring. But there are already green shoots, with daffodils, snowdrops and primroses in flower in my garden, and everywhere signs of our annual human attempts to keep the gloom at bay. Chinese lanterns and decorations in shop windows marked the Chinese New Year, pantomime at the Theatre Royal (and even as a story line in *The Archers*!) and pictures in the news of Up Helly Aa, with its guizers, fire processions and burning of a replica Viking galley all help to keep spirits up and to shake a fist at the dark coldy-wets!



Snowdrops have inspired great and good poets, including Tennyson and Wordsworth, to verse, but simpler words can sometimes capture the essence just as directly. Here is *The Snowdrop* by the East Lothian historian, poet and author Nessie Gell:

*A fresh new snowdrop greeted me  
Amongst the leaves beneath the tree  
That delicate and tiny flower  
Braves frost and rain and snowy shower  
To tell us spring is nigh*

*My garden soon will bloom again  
In summer sunshine, gentle rain  
With pansies, roses, hollyhocks  
But none can bring such joy to me  
As that tiny snowdrop 'neath the tree.*



Mary Webb's *Snowdrop Time* puts me in mind of the moment when you realise, just in time to avoid treading on them, that the patch of frost in front of you is a clump of tiny buds breaking through the cold ground.

*Ah, hush! Tread softly through the rime,  
For there will be a blackbird singing, or a thrush.  
Like coloured beads the elm-buds flush:*



*All the trees dream of leaves and flowers and light.  
And see! The northern bank is much more white  
Than frosty grass, for now is snowdrop time.*

Mary was more famous for her novels, idealising life in the countryside, especially *Gone to Earth* and *Precious Bane*, but also for having prompted Stella Gibbons' glorious parody *Cold Comfort Farm*!

There don't seem to be many songs about snowdrops – or do you know one? They're mentioned in passing in *Country Gardens*, between foxgloves and forget-me-nots, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf9EsJXSMXg> but the next-best thing is Edelweiss <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tu-lcwhZcEs> or perhaps Lara's song with its promise of meeting again whenever the Spring breaks through... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuk1cm73clw>

There's no trace of fragile purity about another seasonal treat - the pantomime! We're usually told that this feast of colour and brazen nonsense came from the 17<sup>th</sup> century *commedia dell'arte*, Italian street entertainment, improvised around a traditional cast of young lovers, old men and quick-witted servants who get the better of their masters. In fact it goes back much further than that. The Roman 'pantomimus,' usually based on a myth or legend, was performed by a solo male dancer who took all the roles, employing the resources of masks, stock poses, gestures and hand-language. Music was supplied by flute with the percussive beat of a hinged iron-shod sandal called a scabellum.



Roman pantomime was very popular from the end of the first century BC until the end of the sixth century. Having started with artistic aspirations, it had by then grown into street entertainment, travelling from province to province in Italy and France, with comic stories and characters adaptable to be topical for wherever they were performed. England caught the bug in the seventeenth century, at first with the same cast of characters but later often basing the story on a fairy tale or nursery rhyme.

There are several key ingredients, and no panto can be without them. There has to be a dame (sometimes the hero's mother) who is usually played by a man; there must be plenty of audience involvement - hissing, booing, shouting 'Look behind you!' or 'O no it's not!' or joining in well-known songs; slapstick too for the children and double entendre for the adults; and there's often an animal – the pantomime horse or cow – played by two actors in 'animal skin'. One thing I hadn't realised is that the good fairy should enter from stage right (left, looking from the audience) and the villain from stage left. This tradition goes back to mediaeval mystery plays where the right side of the stage symbolised Heaven and the left side symbolised Hell.



Pantomime music is usually borrowed from whatever is popular and topical at the time, but performing rights make this quite a tricky business. Story lines are often built around fairy tales or cartoon characters, but Walt Disney (for example) are very protective of their brand and there are elaborate rules that might mean only being able to use the song *Hi Ho* from Snow White in a different story such as Cinderella – if at all!

But it's all worth it in the end. Whether or not it's your idea of a perfect night out, pantomime is great entertainment for all ages and brings larger-than-life colour, warmth and harmless anarchy just when it's most needed!

In a change from the usual music quiz, here's one about pantomimes – you can make up your own soundtrack!

1. In Jack and the Beanstalk, what does Jack exchange for magic beans?
2. Can you name all seven of Snow White's dwarfs?
3. What is the name for the young male pantomime character usually played by a young actress in boy's clothes?
4. In older pantomime, who traditionally falls in love with Columbine?
5. From which book of Middle Eastern folk tales does the tale of Aladdin come?
6. Which hospital is entitled to all royalties on J M Barrie's Peter Pan since they were signed over by the author in 1929?
7. Which pantomime gives its name to describe someone's rags-to-riches story?
8. Complete the title: Ali baba and.....
9. Which bells called Dick Whittington and his cat back to London?
10. In Cinderella, the fairy godmother transforms a pumpkin into a magic coach. Which creatures become the horses, coachman and footmen?

Thinking back to Mary Webb, and elm buds flushing ‘like coloured beads’: one of the great delights of winter is seeing the silhouettes of bare trees and trying to identify them by outline or by the formation of twigs and buds. It’s not quite as easy as in summer, but the height, bark, pattern of branches and habitat are all good clues. One of the easiest (for me) is the oak, with its sturdy trunk, wide domed canopy and branches often quite low, with clusters of buds at the end of each shoot. The gracefully lower upturned branches of the horse chestnut, the beech too, with its smooth grey bark, sinuous limbs reaching upward and fine delicate crown, and the spindly angularity of the common lime: they are just as beautiful as when they’re covered in leaves.



There are so many songs about trees. Here’s a quiz to remind you of a few of them...

1. *‘Let me be by myself in the evenin’ breeze and listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees’* but my dearest wish is ...
2. Where will you hear: *the buzzin’ of the bees in the cigarette trees, the soda water fountain, where the lemonade springs and the bluebird sings’* in that ...
3. The official march of our Royal Navy and of the Royal Canadian and Royal New Zealand: *‘hearts of ... are our ships, jolly tars are our men...’*
4. A little more exotic! Yellow bird, up high in ....tree. Yellow bird, you sit all alone like me’.
5. Only I’m allowed to sit with you under this tree.
6. Joni Mitchell sang: *‘They paved paradise and put up a parking lot, with a pink hotel, a boutique, and a swinging hot spot’* But what happened to the trees?
7. A Welsh favourite but now a lament in the wake of disease : *‘down yonder green valley...’*
8. A Christmas carol telling the miracle of a tree bowing down Mary. What was the fruit she had asked Joseph to pick for her?
9. In the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia we carved our names on which tree?
10. A wistful love song - not about conifers - as winter approaches...



It's always lovely to include your news and ideas in the newsletters, so do please share or send in your thoughts to [heatheredwardsmusic@gmail.com](mailto:heatheredwardsmusic@gmail.com)

In the meantime, keep warm, cheery and healthy, and we'll hope to see you soon!  
With best wishes and love from all at Come Singing

#### Pantomime quiz answers

1. A cow
2. Dopey, Grumpy, Sneezzy, Happy, Sleepy, Bashful and Doc <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIOxOKYChq4>
3. The principal boy
4. Pierrot. There are echoes of this in the song *The carnival is over...* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-OnyUH2a\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-OnyUH2a_4)
5. One Thousand and One Nights
6. Great Ormond Street
7. Cinderella. The story is a mixture of fact and fiction: there was a real Richard Whittington who was Lord Mayor of London in the 14th/15<sup>th</sup> centuries, but he was from a wealthy family. He worked for Admiral Fitzwarren, bought a cat and travelled on Fitzwarren's ship to North Africa where the cat cleared the Sultan's palace of rats. With his reward he returned to London, married Fitzwarren's daughter and became Lord Mayor three times, as the bells had predicted.
8. The Forty Thieves
9. Bow bells
10. White mice, rat and lizards.

## Tree quiz answers

1. Don't fence me in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXkE7f0AMiA>
2. Big rock Candy Mountain <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWminVCg3TA>
3. Hearts of oak <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NXFCDgyanA>
4. Yellow bird <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LORtQRnZwSw>
5. Don't sit under the apple tree <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcyiC79I910>
6. Big yellow taxi <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SY07dHiT2-s>
7. The ash grove [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6oJpU\\_GeUY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6oJpU_GeUY)
8. Cherry tree  
carol <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5DSEeqnwjE> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlqSAyp34TU>
9. On the trail of the lonesome pine <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imeRMj6R6Xc>
10. Autumn leaves <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gnp58oepHUQ>