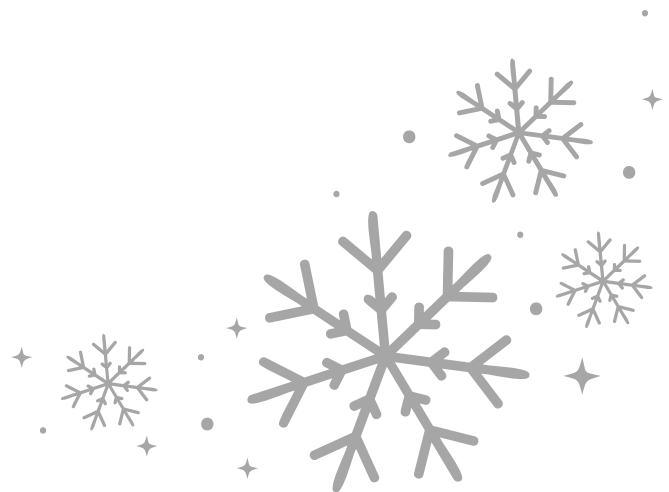




The Music of Winter

For most of us, winter means snow, biting winds, and cold, sunless days. It is a time when we celebrate many holidays at the start of the season, and always seems to go on a little too long as we wait for spring and warmer weather. However, winter is also a time of new beginnings, cozy fireplaces, hot chocolate, and time with family.

Although most songs about winter are based around the holiday season (Christmas, Hanukkah, Yule, and much more), there are several pieces based around the season itself. Some use snow as inspiration, either physical snowflakes or activities done in the snow, others recall the cold and dark of winter in their writing.





There are many different ways that composers can write music to make it sound “wintery”. The most obvious way is to use sleigh bells, which is a percussion instrument made of silver jingle bells on a wooden post. When we hear sleigh bells, we often think of Santa and the happy times of playing in the snow around the holidays.

When composers want to write music that imitates snow falling, they often use high pitched, delicate sounds like the high end of a piano, strings, or woodwinds. This imitates that delicate nature of snowflakes and how they gently fall from the sky. When snow falls heavier, composers will move to lower pitches and use ascending or descending patterns to show the movement of the snow.

After snow falls, it tends to be quiet and serene. Composers will mimic this by writing simple, slow moving melodies and chords.

Finally, winter is also a time of darkness, with days becoming shorter and clouds covering the sun. Composers will write in minor keys to give their music a dark and brooding tone. With that, some people become very sad and depressed from the lack of light. Some composers will address this with their music, writing songs that tell dark stories.

Here are the pieces we will discuss in this lesson:

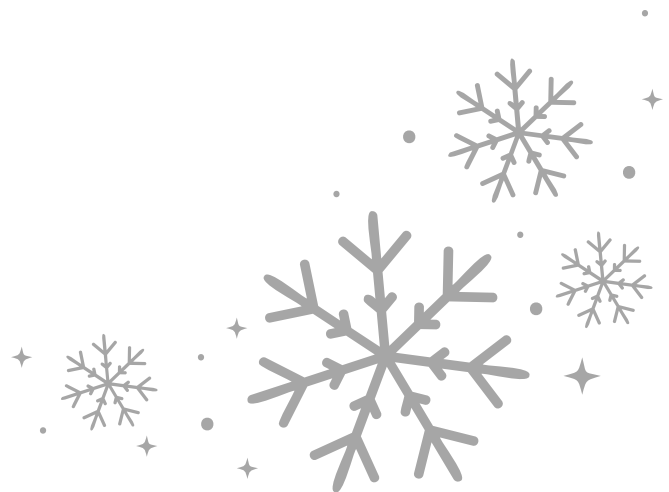
The Snow is Dancing by Claude DeBussy

Winterreise by Franz Schubert

Troika by Sergei Prokofiev

Winter Light by Matt Wasson

Snowfall by Claude Thornhill



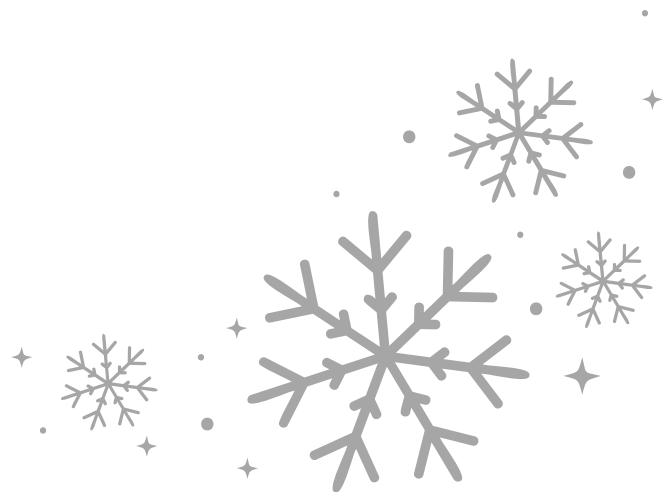


The Snow is Dancing

Claude Debussy

The Snow is Dancing is a short work for piano from Claude Debussy's *Children's Corner*. *Children's Corner* is a collection of six piano pieces dedicated to Debussy's daughter, Claude-Emma (Chou-Chou). The dedication translates "To my dear little Chouchou, with tender apologies from her father for what follows." As the title suggests, this piece represents snow falling and swirling in the wind. There is a darkness to it that suggests that it may be during a winter storm or blizzard and gives a feeling of bitter cold. There are moments of brightness that shine through like after the storm when children are free to play in the freshly fallen snow.

<https://youtu.be/fT-fvB2PPRA?si=Qz5sFSSGGXhMOAus>





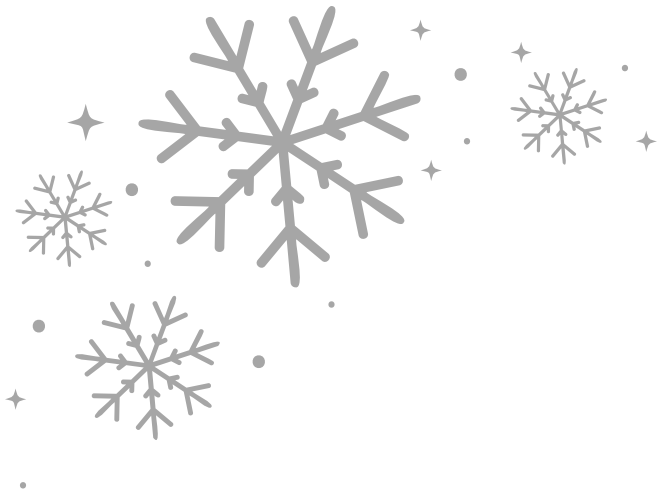
Winterreise

Franz Schubert

Winterreise (*Winter Journey*) by Franz Schubert is a song cycle originally written for tenor vocalist and piano. Each piece of the cycle is set to poems by Wilhelm Müller. A song cycle is a group of songs designed to be performed together in sequence. Song cycles typically tell a longer story, although each song could be studied and performed individually. Schubert described the song cycle as a set of “terrible songs”. The protagonist of the cycle tells the story of watching his beloved marry another man, taking a journey in the dead of winter, and submitting to his fate amid the cold. The example below is one of the songs from the cycle called *Frühlingstraum* (*Dream of Spring*). It begins in a major key, suggesting some hope within the story, but quickly falls to minor as the narrator recalls his beloved.

<https://youtu.be/-fCA1AyUU0w?si=PO2VrtfnxiqxtlvT&t=1941>





Troika

Sergei Prokofiev

Troika is one of five movements from Sergei Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kijé Suite*. The suite is adapted from Prokofiev's music for the film *Lieutenant Kijé*, where a fictional "Lieutenant Kijé" is enrolled in a military company. To avoid embarrassment, a Kijé is invented by the company, and they create his story. The suite is in five sections: Kijé's birth, romance, wedding, troika, and burial. The *Troika* from Prokofiev's suite has become a staple in holiday concerts, the original *Sleigh Ride* as it were. A troika is a sleigh pulled by three horses side-by-side, popular in Russia due to the cold weather and snow. In this piece, we hear sleigh bells, but not in the context of Christmas. Here, the sleigh bells represent the horses drawing the sleigh.

https://youtu.be/Eu69ToYc6ak?si=IE3e_ypzfoDqySul



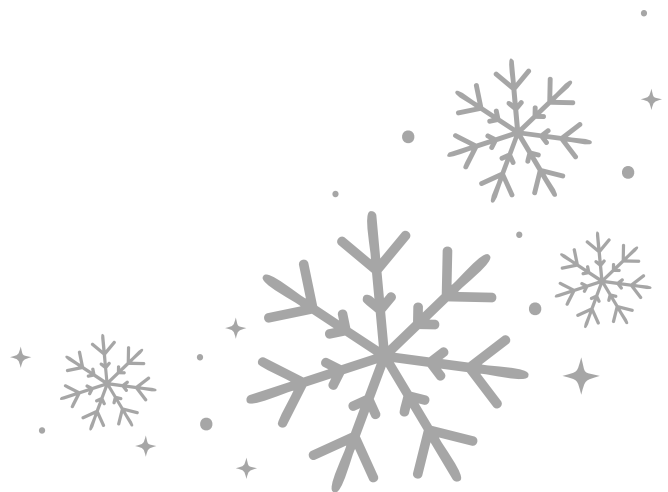


Winter Light

Matt Wasson

While a lot of composers write about the darkness of winter, Matt Wasson's *Winter Light* was written to represent the different types of light that one may see during the winter season. Here is how the composer describes his work: "Winter often means an absence of light - perhaps this is why some religions incorporate candlelight into their holiday celebrations during this season... In this piece, however, I wanted to represent many different kinds of light, each suggesting their own winter scene: the fresh light of a crisp winter morning; the gleam of sun on freshly fallen snow; the warm glow of roaring fire; and the child-like wonder of seeing the neighborhood lit up with holiday lights for the first time."

<https://youtu.be/EibMP8P7G-k?si=eHC00et9zFk05ZEW>





Snowfall

Claude Thornhill

Claude Thornhill was a composer and band leader in the early years of jazz. He led several big bands, played piano for his own band, and was good friends with Glen Miller. What was unique about Thornhill's band is that he employed six reed players that often played clarinet instead of saxophone. The original recording of *Snowfall* showcases the clarinet sound in his band, mixed with Thornhill's delicate piano playing, and powerful brass section. The piece itself seems to paint a scene of looking out one's window into a freshly snowed world.

https://youtu.be/JoQORyMyWfk?si=h2U_8FBEZcHeddfU

