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Dance in the Middle Ages

— Carols —

By *Shuko Honma**

The Middle Ages were the ages of Christianity and the way of thinking based on religion prevailed throughout Western Europe. However, a careful observation of data such as literary works and miniatures of manuscripts shows us that there were various secular and popular pleasures even in the society controlled by religion. The church interests condemned amusements and hobbies of the common people through sermons and others according to religious commandments. It may be said, however, this very fact affords a clear proof that the commons at that time took a cheerful view of life from the bottom of their heart.

I have investigated of "Carol", one of the dance-songs, dealt with some examples from the noble to the common and explained the popularity among all social classes, especially in England in the late Middle Ages.

The word "Carol" was used from about the 12th century in France, but it seems to have originated in the ancient pagan faith in fertility.

Carol, which the people of the Middle Ages always danced and in which they took much interest, assumes, viewed at the angle of its form, several characteristics listed below;

1. Male and female dancers join hands forming a ring, and dance to songs and musical instruments.
2. Dancers make three steps in the left direction and mark time then and there.
3. Dancers, while dancing with hands joined with each other, sometimes make gestures.
4. Dancers consist of a leader and a chorus.
5. The leader is also one of the dancers, and the dance is led by him.
6. The song is in four-stressed four-line stanzas with rhyme.

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7. The leader sings a lyric poem in stanzas, and when he has finished to sing the song, all the other members respond to it by singing and dancing refrains.
8. At the start of refrain, it is usual to make a sign with words or instruments.

Many men and women used to dance a Carol in the churchyard or greens, in spring or summer, especially at the Christmas season. According to *The Medieval Lyric* (1968) written by P. Dronke, the English people after the 14th century were in particular excited over Carol and they were technically excellent dancers.

The word Carol meant at first the dancing song. However, at the beginning of the 15th century, it separated into two meanings — song and dance, Carol remaining as a word meaning a song. Since then, it has been in existence as a holy song for celebrating Christmas — Christmas Carol, as we know very well.

As mentioned above, we find that the people of every class, in the ages under Christian control and in various districts of West Europe, were feeling themselves drawn toward the other world — the world of real existence, while they continued singing their joy of the worldly life. Carol is a proof that the dancing song continued to live as poems in praise of a vivid life of the commons even under the religious control of the Middle Ages.