

Music expert says Christmas music not just limited to the season, and happiness it brings may be the reason

December 9 2011, By Jana Fallin

(PhysOrg.com) -- If it seems the sounds of the season -- "Jingle Bells," "Deck the Halls," "Joy to the World" and other holiday favorites -- are being heard more and more out of season, a Kansas State University music expert says there's a reason.

Hearing Christmas music before December is becoming more common, and Jana Fallin, professor of music education at Kansas State, says there may be a deeper meaning behind this trend.

"As far as people's obsession with Christmas music, I think they just like that warm, happy, joyous feeling it brings," Fallin said. "Part of it is what we want the music to represent, because we want Christmas to be about family, full of love and all of those thoughts. I think people just want to be happy."

Fallin said the meaning found in Christmas music is linked to the brain's [limbic system](#), which contains the amygdala, the location of [emotional responses](#), and the hippocampus, the area that consolidates memory.

"You know how you hear a song and you remember the person you were dancing with at the senior prom? It moves you around in time through those memories and emotions in the brain," she said. "All of that is going on with Christmas carols because it takes us back to our childhood. When we hear them, we remember gifts that we received as children or

family members that are no longer with us."

In the 15th century, priests used Christmas carols to tell the story of the birth of Jesus because of the high levels of illiteracy at the time. Fallin said carols were simple and easy to sing, which helped people remember the aspects of the story.

Christmas music has since evolved into a holiday tradition. Fallin says the custom of carols consists of four categories: religious, secular, traditional and humorous. Religious tunes relay the story of Jesus' birth; secular music involves tales of Santa Claus and Christmas love stories; traditional songs include holiday classics such as "We Wish You a Merry Christmas"; and the humorous genre is represented in such songs as "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer."

This tradition of holiday music creates a sense of timelessness surrounding certain carols, but it can also make it difficult for artists to write new Christmas music, Fallin said.

"I think it is harder for more contemporary artists to get original Christmas songs to become a hit," she said. "Some of them are just so trite, so sometimes I don't like the new stuff, and sometimes I do. It's just kind of whatever speaks to you."

Fallin suggests people look up their favorite artist online if they are looking for Christmas music that differs from the mainstream. The singer or songwriter may have recorded several original songs in the holiday genre or created a unique version of a classic carol that may be enjoyable.

While Christmas music may be an obsession for some, or a tolerated tradition for others, Fallin says it's hard to deny that carols are a major component of the [holiday](#) season.

"All celebrations have music -- weddings, funerals, graduations -- and we know through research that there has never been a culture that didn't have music, even early on," Fallin said. "So music helps us celebrate the traditions of our culture, and certainly Christmas [music](#) does that. It helps us celebrate."

Provided by Kansas State University

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