

## 'Sumer is Icumen in'

*Painted by Ernest Board, R. W. A (1877-1934), 1920*

Object no. 1931. 276. 1

Location - Concert Hall lobby, Town Hall



This painting represents the Benedictine monk who is thought to have first written down the 'Reading round'. This is a song for six voices entering in turn, producing polyphonic harmony rather than a single line of melody.

Polyphony tended to be used on special occasions instead of plain song, and only one song would have been used in the performance. *'Sumer is icumen in'* is described as 'in advance of that of any other contemporary composition... reflecting glory on the English school of music in the thirteenth century'.

The manuscript, now in the British Library, is the oldest known canonical music in Britain. It was written down in around 1240, and the dialect is believed to be thirteenth-century Wessex/Berkshire/Wiltshire. The song itself may well have been composed years before. The lyrics include:

*Summer has come in  
Loud sing cuckoo.*

*Ewe bleateth after lamb.  
Loweth after calf cow.*

Songs appreciating nature are common in early English poetry. The monk is shown pausing to look out of the window at the 'messenger of spring', the cuckoo, flying in the cloister garth, and he is serene, enjoying the first glimpse of good weather. Another feature of interest is the regal, or portable, organ on the right of the picture.