

Eight Fantasy Arrangements of Old Welsh Children's Songs (2022)

Table of Contents

Introduction & Notes for Each Song

- | | |
|--|-----------|
| 1) Deryn y Bwn o'r Banna | (E major) |
| 2) Robin Diog | (A minor) |
| 3) Dacw Mam y Dwad | (D major) |
| 4) Marwnad yr Ehedydd | (D minor) |
| 5) Can y Melinydd | (E minor) |
| 6) B'le wyt Ti'n Myned | (E minor) |
| 7) Bu Farw'r Cathod | (C minor) |
| 8) Dacw Dadi'n Mynd i'r Fair (A major) | (A Major) |

Notes to the Player

Minature Scores

Introduction

The original melodies of these songs are old nursery songs, adaptations of dances or old drovers songs, in some cases with new words. In Wales today they are sung in the school, at the *Noson Lawen* (lit. Happy Evening) or as competition pieces in various *Eistedfoddau* - previously they would have been sung in the home. I sang almost all of these to my youngest son when he was a baby; some I heard first in our village Eisteddfod.

Six of these songs I had originally set for solo guitar, but proved to be too difficult for most players. These duet settings are technically a little easier, but musically more difficult (if more rewarding) as require an intricate and precise dialogue between the two players.

The eight fantasias are not intended to be played as a complete set. Rather, one may choose sets of three or four fantasias. Alternatively several make effective encores to be played in isolation. I haven't suggested groupings because there were so many possibilities – each duet partnership will have its own favourites.

(1) Deryn y Bwn o'r Banna

*The bittern from the Beacons
Went for a walk
Where what would fall on its head
But a load of apples*

The plot of this very popular light-hearted song is that the bittern – who seems to be very smug sort of bird – is hit on the head by falling apples, he collects the apples together, flies to Chester with a barrel load and sells them for a good price, before returning home to brag about his commercial success in the apple market.

The mention of Chester as a destination is more than a little significant. Chester, standing as it does on the River Dee at the Northern end of a disputed Welsh/English border, was a natural battlefield. As early as 612 A.D. history notes that “Aethelfrith... offslaw Welshman without number” in numerous battles up and down the border area. More than a thousand years later one of England's most talented composers, William Lawes, died at the Battle of Chester (24 September 1645). It's no surprise that until recently an old Chester statute legalised the shooting with a crossbow of any Welshman from the Chester City walls.

In the music the boom of the bittern is quite plainly heard first in bars 14 and 15 and continues to form the backdrop to the remainder of the Fantasia – especially the end from bars 187. In bars 49 onwards where the tune is set in augmentation you might want to imagine our friendly, if oppressively smug, bird flying over the mountains to the Chester plain. From bars 124 we can imagine his flight back – this time not loaded with apples but with the booty from his successful sale.

Again as with all the faster pieces the pace should not be too fast – the attention should be on clarity and variations in tone production.

(2) Robin Ddiog

*I have a neat little house
And the wind by the door each morning*

*Open the door just a crack
So I can see the sea and waves*

*And then my life will be so contented
And the wind by the door each morning*

A beautiful gentle nursing song that would make an excellent quiet encore .

The song is usually entitled 'Lazy Robin' but there is no reference to Robin in the text. From the text it appears that Robin is the lazy fisherman – he's absolutely content to open the door a crack, lie in bed and gaze out at the sea and his friends fishing – some singers sing *mor a'r llongau* (sea and ships) in place of *mor a'r tonnau* (sea and waves) in the second verse.

However, under the haunting mournful character of this beautiful melody – I must have sung this song several hundred times – it has become, for me, something far more serious. The vision in my setting is of the same old lazy Robin as an old man – an old man sitting up in bed and gazing out through the same chink in the door to see the sea and ships for the last time.

Phrasing, articulation, and tone production are key to a successful rendering – although the song begins and ends quietly some of the middle sections can become much louder – and even possibly a little quicker. For example, one could accelerate through bar 18 and slow in to bar 19. In this arrangement care should be taken to bring out the canonic imitation at bars 13 – 16, bars 27-30, and at bars 41- 44. In bar 32 take care to observe the comma before moving on to sing the melody in the bass.

(3) Dacw Mam yn Dŵad

*There comes mum crossing over the stile
With something in her apron and the jug on her head
The cow in the cowshed bellowing for the calf,
and the other calf playing Jim Cro.*

[Chorus]
*Jim Cro Crystyn,
one, two, four,
and the piglet sits
prettily on the stool*

While this describes the mother coming towards the child – '*Dacw Dadi'n*' (number 8) has the father going – but there is much in common between these two songs. Not least the mood of an innocent agricultural life. However, while '*Dacw Dadi'n*' is based on a foursquare walking rhythm – this is much more of a dance. It was probably originally an instrumental and has acquired words. As is the case so often, the words don't make a lot of sense (the Chorus is half in English.) There are two additional verses but they don't make much sense either!

As with '*Dacw Dadi'n*' the challenge for the player is to hold music together, as it begins so simply but at times becomes quite agitated and dramatic.

(4) Marwnad yr Ehedydd

*I've heard the lark is dead on the mountain;
If I knew the words to be true, we'd gather men and tools,
To bring the lark's body home.*

A strange and tragic song – the singer doesn't ever recount the death of the Lark – on the contrary there is only a suggestion it's happened somewhere else. Throughout there is a background feeling 'If only I had known...' that there is a tragedy that should have been avoided.

One of the most demanding pieces in this collection, it requires careful attention to dynamics – and also to tempo, which can vary quite considerably in the cadenza sections.

Particular points to note are:

The opening should be very legato

The melody in bar nine should enter clearly over the repetitive accompanying figure.

Bar 43 – our 'Lark Ascending' figure should accelerate throughout, despite the technical difficulties

Bar 71-78 (also bars 82-92) the crescendo should build up gradually so that the sudden change into completely different orchestration in bar 80 (also bar 95) is come as a complete surprise.

The cadenza should have a feeling of a joint collaborative improvisation – starting slowly in bar 98 and accelerating to bar 110

Even after the previous changes of orchestration and dynamic the sudden change of dynamic and tone at 133 should take your listener by surprise.

(5) Can y Melinydd

*I've a light brown colt, Rising four years old
And four silver horseshoes, Under her four feet
See her Mary dearest, See her dear Mary*

Well before Schubert's Die schöne Müllerin millers were often the subject of songs and with good reason. To some extent they worked apart from the rest of the community and worse often had a reputation for being a little dishonest – probably undeserved but stemming from the fact that they could never let the millstones run without grain between them – thus causing every farmer to be suspicious that he wasn't getting back in flour what he'd provided in grain.

But above all, from the musical standpoint, there was the repetitive, rhythmic, industrial noise of the mill – something simply not heard anywhere else. Running a mill was a stressful occupation – at any time a change in the wind or water, or a lapse of concentration, could lead to an uncontrolled runaway or fire. I've tried in the setting to bring out both the tension of dangerous mill machinery and the sound of the great wooden gear wheels turning and occasionally miss-meshing.

In playing be very careful not to be caught between the mill wheels (you'll need to count the “jolts” in the 5/8 bars carefully) – particularly in bars 59 (and 137) onwards and also at bar 127 where the melody returns in the midst of an inter-meshing of wooden gears.

(6) B'le wyt Ti'n Myned?

*"Where are you going to dark-eyed maid?"
"Going to the milking, Oh! Sir," quoth she
O her cherry red cheeks, and lovely dark eyes
Yonder at the foot of the mountain I saw her*

The English nursery song 'Where are you going to my pretty maid' may not share the same melody but certainly shares the same theme: The gentleman meets our heroine, likes what he sees, but on closer investigation discovers there is no dowry, and while her face might be her fortune it's not going to be his!

I've taken the sense of the opening words 'Where are you going to...' very literally – where indeed? Musically we drift off first into a relaxed laid-back smoochy existence – and then worse still head off in a hard rock style – not a suitable destination for our young lady.

Bars 46 and seq. should have a really striking sound – there is every possibility of making a penetrating ponticello here.

Bar 167 should have a somewhat triumphal feel – even if short lived.

Bar 205 - 244 is a kind of rhythmic fugue leading to as near as I can get to a hard rock sound (without plugging in your guitar!) Bars 245-246 can be particularly tasteless and raucous.

Bars 248 to the end. With her attitude, prospects for our young lady look bad– even so the ending should take your audience by surprise.

(7) Bu Farw'r Cathod

*Aunties Cat has died
Gwen's Cat has died
Our cat has died of a headache
Next door's cat is ill with the same sickness
A curse has come upon the cats of the parish*

Surely one of the weirdest songs regularly sung anywhere and not just in Wales. Musically, I'm greatly indebted to Malher's first Symphony for the idea of a mock funeral. In Malher's work the animals carry the coffin of the Huntsman to a minor key arrangement of the tune we know as Frere Jacques.

In my setting undoubtedly the mice are carrying the coffin of the cat. It's an idea that alternately thrills them with dread (bars 99-104, 119-122) , with dancing joy (bars 105-118), calm confidence (bar 25-29), triumphant victory (bars 122-26) and even sadness (bars 127-131) – to say nothing of the physical difficulty of carrying the heavy animal – bars 5-19 and especially stumbling under the weight of the bier in bars 154-169.

Bar 170 and seq. however, should remind us that cats are very good at playing dead – something, it appears, that our bold mice have forgotten!

Playing this piece should give you every opportunity to produce that most amazing variety of tones that Segovia so valued.

(8) Dacw Dadi'n mynd i'r Fair

*There goes daddy off to the fair
To buy a cow to eat the grass
To learn how to milk her
To pay the rent to Jones at Park House*

There is a superb performance at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlXiZpA_KXI

Wales on Line under we-love-welsh-nursery-songs puts "Dacw dadi'n mynd i'r ffair" into the category of make-believe "...explains the farmer's life with beautiful innocence and not a trace of envy. Dad goes to the fair to buy a cow to eat the grass to produce butter to pay rent to Jones y Parciau. That's just how it is".

I know some farmers. It just not like that; like everybody else many things go pear-shaped – it doesn't rain, or it rains far too much, or the pedigree cows you paid too much for don't suite your land and go sick. Indeed back in the days of *Dacw dadi'n mynd i'r ffair* being a prominent nonconformist or voting for an alternative to “Jones y Parciau's” chosen member of parliament could get you evicted. Nowadays it's a little better, its just some faceless bank that takes your farm.

On the other hand I wouldn't treat my Fantasia too literally as agrarian political protest – it's abstract music. The challenge for the players is to start from the innocent simplicity, – get to the land of mystery and sinister suspense, – and then get back again, without losing the continuity or plot.

Notes to the Player

Segovia characteristically described the guitar as a miniature orchestra, surely a duet is even more so. These pieces to provide vehicles for gifted players to recreate Segovia's vision.

I have provided some dynamics, some phrasing and some articulation but their absence does not mean that unvaried tone or dynamic is required. On the contrary, variation is the art of performance – every phrase begins somewhere, says something and ends somewhere. So where I haven't marked in each *tasto ponticello*, *diminuendo*, or *crescendo* it simply means you are expected to imaginatively provide them: I should leave something to your creativity and musicality as the performer!

The majority of these pieces are orchestrally conceived. Your listener should hear the blare of the trumpet, the swirl of the string section, the call of the muted horn, the soft melody of the flute and perhaps more than anything else the gentle ripple of the harp – the native instrument of an idealised Wales of running crystal streams, bleak mountains, gentle rain and restless waves.

For all of these pieces it is possible to find many vocal performances on the Internet. In general, the most characteristic performances will be those for solo unaccompanied voice – that will give you a much better feel for them as 'children's songs'.

*The whole trouble with a folk song is that once
you have played it through there is nothing much you can
do except play it over again and play it rather louder :*

Constance Lambert (1905-1951)