

## Eight Traditional Welsh Children's Songs arranged for Virtuoso Guitar Quartet

### Programme Notes (all Songs)

Originally, along with many traditionally-minded parents in Wales, I sang these songs (and many others) to a baby at bedtime. I've sung each several hundred times and still love them (and the baby), but as the baby grew the requirement for soporific bedtime songs diminished. Once the pressing need for parental sleep was over I've been re-working these lovely melodies as fantasias for solo guitar, guitar duet, choir and here guitar quartet. (Recordings on YouTube).

In each Fantasia I have tried to bring out something of the meaning of the words, but also let obvious melodic harmonic or rhythmical features in the songs develop and flower to their full extent. In that sense – and probably in that sense only – I follow Michelangelo “The sculpture is already complete within the marble block”. Just like Michelangelo all I do is “chisel away the superfluous material,” dress the result for four guitars and my fantasia is complete.

#### **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 popular light-hearted song begins with bittern hit on the head by falling apples. Rather than lament his misfortune our resourceful friend cheerfully collects his apples together, air freights them off to Chester and sells them all for a good price; returning home unloaded to brag about his commercial success in the English apple market. In the original melody the bittern's characteristic “boom” is most plainly heard. In the Fantasia the “boom” isn't just part of the melody but forms the varied counterpoint to the melody. Later the fantasia depicts our newly enriched entrepreneur calling to his other bitternish friends as he flies back home over the mountains.

#### **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*

This song is usually entitled 'Lazy Robin' but there is no reference to Robin. I've assumed Robin is the lazy fisherman – content to open the door a crack, lie in bed and gaze out at the sea and his friends fishing – I've heard *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 to my baby son a hundred times – it became, for me a vision of the same old lazy Robin as a very old man.. In my arrangement he's still gazing out through that same chink in the door; but now to see his sea and ships for a very last time.

#### **Hen Fenyw Fach Cyweli**

*Little old lady of Kidwelly*

*selling black toffees,  
ten for a halfpenny,  
but eleven for me.  
Well, this is the best news for me, for me,  
Well, this is the best news for me, for me,  
ten for a halfpenny,  
but eleven for me.*

What a lovely song. In a world overburdened with complexity, pathos and sophistication I'd like to be remembered for this song. Our singer is full of exuberant joy and contentment, taking his joys from the commonplace delights of life. In each verse joy follows upon joy. First the little old lady of the song's title sells him eleven black toffees for the price of ten; in the second verse he's warmly welcomed into the farmhouse to sit on a stool and given a delicious baked apple to eat; finally in verse three he's got his new pair of bellows "full of wind", no doubt a warm coal fire will be rapidly kindled.

I have to be honest with you: I've changed this tune! This was one of my little son's favourite songs – as I sang it those many times those elated and confident words ran away with me, and its my "improved" version", with a rising exuberant sequence (not present in the original) that is set here. In the fantasia those rising exuberant sequences get carried, Vivaldi-like, into remote keys before returning back triumphant home.

## 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.*

*Mi glywais fod yr 'hedydd, Wedi marw ar y mynydd;  
**Pe gwyddwn** i mai gwir y geiriau, Awn a gyrr o wŷr ac arfau,  
I gyrchu corff yr 'hedydd adre.*

This is commonly regarded as an “Elegy” to the Lark, indeed when I set this as a solo guitar piece I made that assumption. However, the phrase “Pe gwyddwn i” is grammatically called “the hypothetical conditional clause”. One grammar site gives a 'hypothetical conditional' example as “**If** I was the King of France”. So the Lark is not dead – and reinforcing my view is the fact that when you walk grassland in rural Wales you can always hear at least one Lark, often several.

So, far from being an Elegy my arrangement is a celebration of the glorious life of the Lark. Towards the end we pretend we are the Lark. As a lark we don't look up into the sky we look down. The lark's viewpoint is of the landscape below a deep blue ocean of air, a sea as supportive to his flight as the liquid sea's surface is to a boat.

## 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*

Millers have often been a subject for songs – Schubert's song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* is the most famous example. Millers lived and worked apart from the rest of the community and the mill itself was a mysterious machine. It was easy to gain a reputation dishonesty, The bags of flour coming out of the mill were never going to be as big as the bags of grain going in and because millstones must always be run with grain between them every farmer could be suspect that at least part of his crop had gone to a more favoured farmer. But above all, from the musical standpoint, there is the repetitive, rhythmic, industrial noise of the mill – something simply not heard anywhere else in pre-industrial days .

In the music I depict a tour around the mill. In some parts of the mill machinery light cogs are spinning quickly, but down near the water line it is a very different story. In the gloom great unguarded wooden gear wheels trundle just above the murky water. The noise as those square cut cogs engaged is quite disorientating, but you need a clear head and good shoes. One slip down here and you're 'a gonna' – crushed and/or drowned as appropriate.

My grandfather was a mill mechanic in a textile mill – touring the mill was the greatest childhood treat. Some rooms hummed and buzzed with high speed spinning wheels, other clattered and clacked in interesting and ever changing rhythmic cross patterns, Most rooms had quite an interesting mixture of sounds. One room, however, we never entered. As my grandfather said “this is where deaf people work” – just passing the door of that carding room was like passing a cavern of demons.

Surprisingly the words have no connexion with the mill at all, Its conceivable that the words and the text come from two quite different places

### **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. So musically its all downhill. First she drifts off into passages of delicious relaxed laid-back “smoochyness”. From there she descends still further to the commercial disco and punchy hard rock. She may have got here by a very different route but her sound world is surprisingly close to the deafening mechanical sounds of a carding room in 19th century mill.

Whatever the destination she's headed for – none of them look that great.

### **Bu Farw'r Cathod**

*Auntie's 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 English folks know as “*Frere Jacques*”.

In my setting we imagine the mice are carrying the open coffin of a cat. It's an idea that alternately thrills them with dread, with dancing joy, calm confidence, triumphant victory and even unexpected sadness over the fate of their fallen foe – to say nothing of the physical difficulty of carrying the heavy animal. We hear them stumbling under the weight of the bier. Unfortunately our bold mice quite have forgotten that cats play dead. The end is as you might expect – the piece ends with one of the mice expiring pathetically under the cat's paw!

### **Dacw Dadi'n Myndi'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*

Wales on Line under “*we-love-welsh-nursery-songs*” puts “*Dacw dadi'n mynd i'r ffair*” into the category of “make-believe ” and how it 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”.

But I have had farmer friends. It is just not like that; like everybody else many things go pear-shaped – it doesn't rain, or it rains far too much, the merchant contracted to sell you feed at a fixed price can't honour the contract. Meanwhile the pedigree cows you so enthusiastically overbid for don't like your land and go sick. 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 got you evicted. Nowadays it's only a little better; in the modern world faceless banks send you web forms to fill in, and then takes your farm.

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