
'If I was you, I wouldn't start from here'

Gordon Ashman

In this paper Gordon Ashman looks at some of the mistakes he himself has made over the years with his involvement in various 'revivals'. He stresses that music from the gallery period is not a revival and points to some of the other assumptions that are made about the repertoire. These include the ideas that the repertoire is crude, that it should be performed with a 'Mummersetshire' accent, and that the various colourful stories which surround the tradition can be taken at face value.

'If I was you, I wouldn't start from here!' is at least two things: first, the punchline of an old joke which I suspect will be familiar to most of you; secondly, a *blason populaire*, an idea which will perhaps be less well-known. Just in case someone hasn't heard the joke, it concerns, let us say, an Englishman who asks for directions at a cross-roads in Ireland from a member of the local populace. The local considers for a while the merits of the various alternatives – six miles on this road, four miles on that; the first is longer but has fewer potholes; but then the third is very pretty – oh, but it's all uphill, etc., until after an age of prevarication he finally says 'Well now, if I was you I wouldn't start from here!'

That's the first idea covered. Now to the *blason populaire*. I set the story in Ireland, but the same story told in Ireland might equally well concern a Dubliner and a Kerryman; you may have heard it set in the next village, town or county to wherever you live. In short, it is a satiric little story designed to tell of the primitive strangeness of people outside your particular (and of course much cleverer) group.

It's a story which has been told throughout the ages – the Wiltshire Moonrakers who tried to rake the reflection of the moon off their village pond in the belief that it was a giant cheese, the Cumbrian Gowks who tried to build a wall to contain the cuckoo – and thereby have summer all year long – 'It only flew over by a few inches, one more course and we'd have kept it.' And these stories contain just enough truth to have possibly happened (if you wish very hard).

Attitudes to gallery music

Now what have these stories to do with gallery music? I suggest a great deal. They are concerned with attitudes to people. To placing them below

the teller in terms of wisdom, or wit, or culture, or sophistication. In the gallery context, I, like you, have read or heard all too many stories of the awful harmonies, the exposed fifths, the unlettered sawing at a grandmother fiddle, the 'crude' or 'primitive' repertoires. The gallery musician is placed in the position of the Irishman, the Moonraker, or the Gowk; and all too often I have played the part of the sophisticate (as I suspect have too many of you).

I am frequently embarrassed at positions in which I have found myself when I have had time to reflect on my standpoints. Fortunately, good friends have picked me up, dusted me down, gently pointed me in the right direction – and have had the good grace not to say 'If I was you I wouldn't start from here!' I would like to discuss a few personal pitfalls and traps into which I have blundered in the hope that you may be spared it being said of you by future musicologists and historians: 'If I'd been him/her I wouldn't start from there!'

Revival

I can't think of a better place to begin this process than by looking at the schedule for the weekend. This paper comes within the section entitled 'Papers and Discussion IV: Decline and *Revival*'. I once believed that I was part of three revival movements. In the late 1970s and early 1980s I was the leader of a highly successful Border Morris dance side¹ who had done a good deal of research on the subject (Ashman, 1987, pp. 105–16), but I found myself increasingly embarrassed by what the members of the side thought we were. Oh, we were good. We were noisy, vigorous, boisterous – and black-faced. Naturally, the black faces attracted the obvious question from bystanders: 'Why do you have black faces?' I listened with growing disbelief to the answers given by other members of the group until the day at Whitby Folk Festival when I heard one dancer reply: 'Ah! it's traditional; we've done it for hundreds of years – ask him [indicating me], he's our historian.' 'Our his-

¹ The Ironmen Border Morris Dancers. During the period mentioned, the side appeared at national and international festivals such as 'Dancing England', the Sidmouth International Folk Arts Festival, the International Festival of Portugal, etc.

torian', however, was unfortunately all too aware that he had introduced the black faces only two years earlier, and had made up most of the dances to boot. Rather than reply, I took the line of the current lager advertisement 'Time for a Sharp exit' and departed over the harbour wall, thinking deeply about the Morris 'revival' of which I was a part.

In similar vein I began to see the incongruities in the 'revival' folk club we attended. There seemed to be something not quite right in seeing bearded, balding, ageing accountants and teachers singing (with total moral conviction) of 'going for a soldier with Marlborough and me' on Friday night, and going for a CND demonstration on Saturday. By the same token it was hard to take seriously someone who sang so heartily of pursuing old Reynard across Swarthfell Rocks and went on an anti-foxhunting demonstration the next day.

Now I can personally reconcile my agnosticism with singing and playing Christian hymns – I love a jolly good sing and play, and you might feel that the Morris dancers and folk singers were operating in a similar mode. Wrong! They believed (and I suspect that they would have gone to the stake for their belief) that they were the revivers of customs and the bearers of a tradition – a sacred tradition. And I too had once believed this.

West gallery music – a revival?

I've mentioned two of the 'revivals' with which I've been associated; the third was, of course, west gallery music. In the early days of my researches (fifteen years ago), and especially in the early days of group performances (ten years ago), I was convinced that not only was I finding the most marvellous psalmody and hymnody, but I was also reviving the music simply by performing it. If I had been wrong in my beliefs about the Morris dancing and folk music, I was even more wrong in respect of gallery music.

I've spoken of this process with some levity, but I am in deep earnest when I see this as sounding an awful warning for us. We are not and never can be revivalists of the gallery tradition. In my personal researches into the tradition in Shropshire I have found several mentions of payments to sextons for 'burying the bones'.¹ These payments were not for funerals but for the disposal of the

remains of corpses buried within the church only a year or two earlier which had heaved up (via frosts and thaws) through the floor of beaten earth or emerged whenever repairs were carried out. I suspect that if they came up through the floor of the singing pew the singers would have sung of death with a conviction we would be able to muster today.

By the same token, you and I can sing of our labours, but not with the intensity of, say, the Sheffield composer John Hall (b. ?; d. 1794) who 'work'd at the Anvil, composed Oratorios and died in the Poor house'. Try as we might to empathise – and I've sat with Dave Townsend in the freezing gallery at Puddletown in November and thought that I had learned a little of why Hardy's choir took the hot beer and brandy that led to their downfall in 'Absentmindedness in a Parish Choir' (Hardy, 1894)² until I reminded myself that I was going back to a warm hotel room and a decent meal – the choir, like as not, went back to a room as cold as the church and went to bed hungry or at least under-nourished.

Musical case studies

I suggest that we are not, and cannot ever be, revivalists. The dislocations of time, place and sense are too great. Let us look at a musical example (Panel 1).

Appropriately, in this instance, the composer was a Suffolk man. William Cole was a psalmist from Grundisburgh, only a few miles north of here, and the book from which this psalm has been taken, *The Psalmist's Exercise*, was printed for John Shave at Ipswich and W. Keymer at Colchester and has been dated 1768.

Psalm 41, 'Blest is the man whose bowels move', produces from today's audiences a mixture of disbelief and embarrassed tittering. Verse 2, containing the line 'shall find the Lord has bowels too', produces mild scandal even in these liberal times. It takes a great deal of time to explain to a modern audience (or even modern gallery performers) that until relatively recently the bowels were regarded as the seat of the tender and sympathetic emotions and thus associated with pity, compassion, or feeling. From Wyclif's time in 1382, through both Canning and Carlyle, until recent editions of P. G. Wodehouse, the word 'bowels' was used in this sense (Simpson and Weiner, 1989, vol. 2, p. 455). Today any gallery choir can get a cheap

¹ To be found in churchwardens' account books typically those of Kinnerley in 1756: 'for making a hole to Bury ye Bones £0-1-6' (Shropshire Record Office, document 3879/Ch/1); Baschurch 1778: 'pd the Clerk for laying a Grave in the Aisle & repairing the sd Aisle £0-1-0' (SRO/4422/Ve/1).

² 'Absentmindedness in a Parish Choir' is a short story concerning a semi-drunken choir playing a dance tune in church by mistake.

Panel 1

PSALM XLI

Music: William Cole fl. 1765-1775 in
'The Psalmist's Exercise' 1768
Trans/ed. Gordon Ashman © 1996

Words: Paraphrase of Psalm 41

Blest is the Man whose Bow - els move, And melt with Pi - ty
Blest is the Man whose Bow - els move, And melt with Pi - ty
Blest is the Man whose Bow - els move, And melt with Pi - ty

to the Poor, Whose Soul by sym - pa - thi - sing
to the Poor, Whose Soul by sym - pa - thi - sing
to the Poor, Whose Soul by sym - pa - thi - sing

Love, Feels what his Fel - low Saints en - dure
Love, Feels what his Fel - low Saints en - dure
Love, Feels what his Fel - low Saints en - dure

- 2 His Heart contrives for their Relief,
More Good than his own Hands can do;
He in the time of gen'ral Grief
Shall find the Lord has Bowels too.
- 3 Or if he languish on his Couch
God will pronounce his Sins forgiv'n,
Will save him with a healing Touch,
Or take his willing Soul to Heav'n.
- 4 His Soul shall live secure on Earth,
With secret Blessings on his Head,
When Drought, & Pestilence, and Dearth,
Around him multiply their Dead.

This paraphrased version of Psalm XLI, 'Blest is the Man whose Bowels move,' is taken from *The Psalmist's Exercise or Set of Psalm Tunes and Anthems, all entirely New, Compos'd for the use of Country Choirs* by William Cole. It was printed for John Shave at Ipswich, and W Keymer at Colchester, and was sold by C and S Thompson in London. It has been dated 1768. Little is known about Cole except that he was a psalmist at Grundisburgh in Suffolk, active during the period 1765-1775 and, in common with other "country" composers, he included fugging tunes in his work.

The words of the paraphrased psalm will seem strange, perhaps even offensive to the modern reader/singer, but they must be read in the context of a society which at the time when the words were written, understood that the bowels were the seat of compassion – we share such beliefs when we describe the heart as the place wherein love resides.

I have transposed the middle line of this music from the tenor clef to the G clef for the convenience of the modern reader. The spelling and capitalisation in the verses are as in the original.

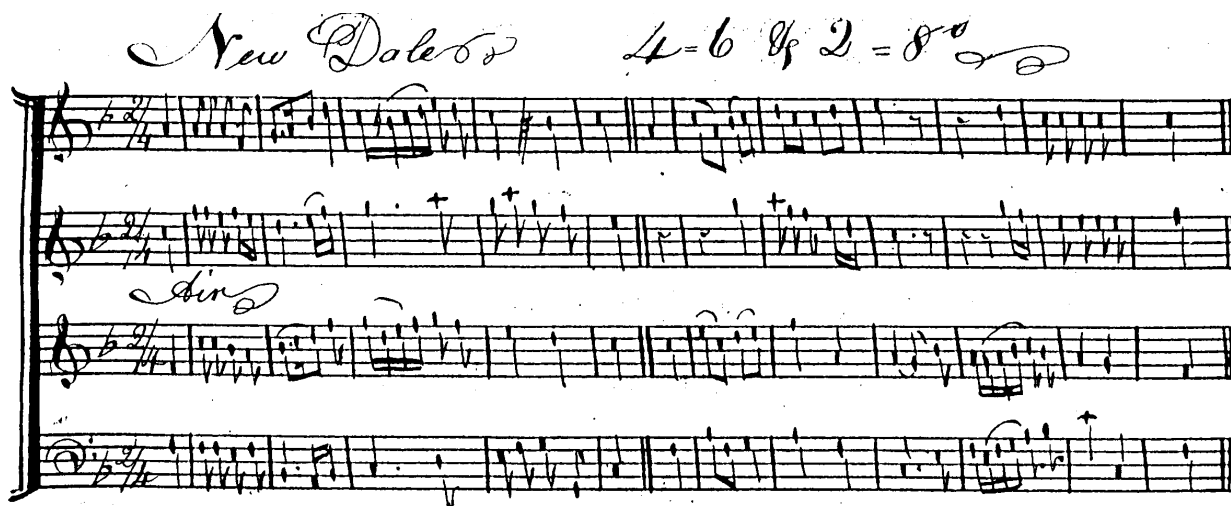
Gordon Ashman © 1996

laugh by performing this psalm without an explanation.

I turn now to the notion that much of the gallery music was for, of, and by, the musically unsophisticated. My start in such music came when I found a manuscript book of hymns by a young Shropshire nurseryman, John Moore, who was born in Wellington in 1820 and dated his book 1837 and 1839. I had already found and delighted

in his book of dance and song tunes (Ashman, 1991), but the sacred music took me into wholly unfamiliar musical regions. I consulted an acquaintance, an Oxford-educated professional classical musician, who described the music as 'looking like the attempts of a fourteen-year-old', adding after a moments thought, 'and not a very good attempt at that'.

Although I make no claims to being a musician,



I felt instinctively that this simply wasn't so and contacted Dr Ian Russell whom I knew as an authority on traditional music and dance. After pointing out that this was not art music, nor was it to be judged by art-music standards, Ian set me off on the road which brought me here today. Better yet, Ian and then Dr Vic Gammon helped me towards an understanding of the music which led to my critical acquaintance undergoing a Pauline conversion, becoming a leading member of the West Gallery Music Association, and ultimately coming to regard this particular tune as a fine example of the genre.

'New Dale' is from John Moore's manuscript book of hymns (the first page of the tune is reproduced below), and is named for a village near Wellington which was once a centre of Methodism as well as early innovative iron works. Sadly, all that remains of New Dale is buried under a modern traffic roundabout and open-cast coal workings.

Doubtless classically trained musicians will have noted several musical solecisms in the work. I hope that its vigour, the rightness for its time and place, the fact that it worked have also been noticed. To criticise a tune like this for not conforming to the ideals of the art music of its time (or even worse, the art-music standards of today) is simply crass. It is akin to criticising the marvellous parish churches and chapels in which it was performed for not being cathedrals. Much of this music, like the places in which it was performed, grew out of the local soil, or mine, or furnace. It seems to express an aesthetic for a particular time, place and group of people which often included the composers and performers as well as their immediate audience. Patently, it developed largely outside the music taught in schools or academies, but it was not necessarily uninfluenced by such music. Please don't think for a moment that I am suggesting that this music is above criticism. All

that I ask is that critical judgements are made from a proper and appropriate standpoint. But, if the standpoint is exclusively that of the fine arts or solely as an art musician, then 'If I was you I wouldn't start from here!'

Pitfalls for the unwary

I now turn away briefly from pitfalls into which I have fallen and look to those which may have trapped others. In a sense my lack of formal training has served me well here. I have not had to unlearn anything – a process which seems to be more demanding than learning. Thus I have never seen the repertoire as 'crude' or 'primitive'. I can accept that it may contain crudities (even when judged by its own standards), but I cannot accept that the repertoire is primitive – except to the most outdated and prejudiced observer.

In considering west gallery music we are undoubtedly working in a field which includes folk music, which is within the field of folklore, which is within the field of anthropology. For anyone to suggest that a repertoire (much less the people who created it) is 'primitive' is to ignore nearly a hundred years of scholarly research, to set at nought the thinking of every intellectual musicologist and anthropologist. Nearer home, it simply takes no account of the excellent work of researchers such as Ian Russell, Vic Gammon, or Ruth Finnegan¹ – it could be a very long list. It was acceptable in 1869 (though only just) for the great county folklorist Charlotte Burne to write of being able to learn the growth of customs by studying 'the modes of thought of uneducated people at the present day' (Burne, 1869, p. xi). It is hard to believe that such views can be held today but

¹ See, for example, Russell (1987), Gammon (1988), and Finnegan (1989).

patently they are alive and well in the minds of those who view the music of the galleries as 'primitive'. Oh, if I was you ...!

Talking of folklore reminds me that I have heard, all too often, what are patently folkloric tales peddled as fact. These stories afford delegates to this conference such as Rollo Woods¹ and me a lot of wry amusement until we realise that so-called 'authorities' on gallery music are retailing this nonsense. The nine bassoons story (concerning the squire who so hated the singers that he bought nine bassoons to drown out the voices) is a classic.² It is, of course, but only in the sense that it is a 'dangler' (another technical term like *blason populaire*) – a tale with local place and personal names for verisimilitude, and the bit which dangles down – the nine bassoons, or the 'Here George, pass up the rosin and we'll show 'em who's the King of glory!' Best of all, they grow. I recently heard on Radio 2 a variant of the nine bassoons story but with eleven trombones.³ 'If I was you ...'

Editing

Now to editing. As far as I am aware, I have stayed on my feet when editing or presenting gallery music, probably because I'm really a social historian or folklorist. For this reason, respecting my sources, I never intentionally change or make amendments without quoting or noting the original exactly, even when the source is palpably and demonstrably 'wrong'. For example, suppose you are editing or transcribing from a manuscript source. You, like me, may find an error – a simple slip of the pen, a note between the lines instead of on it, a C instead of a B \flat in a bass line. Everything in the context, setting and harmony will tell you that this is a simple error, not a gallery-style discord – so obvious a slip that it can be corrected unremarked – but in so doing you may destroy a valuable piece of evidence. I found just such an error in John Moore's Shropshire (sacred) manuscript. Fortunately I did not 'correct' the error. A little later Dave Townsend and I found exactly the

same error in the same part, in the same tune, in the Martin manuscript from Dorset. We not unreasonably conclude that both Moore and Martin's source transcribed the 'error' from a common, possibly printed, source. We have not yet found the printed source but recovering such information remains possible only because neither of us would dream of 'correcting' such an error without drawing the reader's attention to the original. If you ever even think of making such an emendation, then 'If I was you ...'

Conclusion

It occurs to me that many of you will now see me in a dreadfully negative light. I've already said 'I wouldn't' far too often for my own comfort – so what would I do?

Keep an open mind. Despite all of the sometimes marvellous work which has been done, I am not sure that we know exactly what gallery music was. Or rather, the more I see of it the more I realise that it was so many different things to so many different people. A source of income to an itinerant composer or parish clerk, an act of worship by a singer, an enjoyable opportunity to sing to another, a chance to meet members of the opposite sex, a means to get one's hands on a musical instrument, a bit of status in the community – perhaps all of these things in one individual. David Ward (then Education Correspondent on the *Guardian*) wrote a seminal article on the subject 'Bright Believing Bands' and tried to crystallise why we sing Vital Spark when we could be singing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or the Monteverdi Vespers (Ward, 1994, pp. 23–31).

Do try to see and hear the gallery singers and instrumentalists in their social setting. Learn of them as people, find out about their lives. Look at and listen to their whole repertoires, not just the bits you like or fancy. It is hard to communicate just how contemptuous many modern researchers are of some of the early song collectors who only recorded what fitted their theories. Modal, minor melodies are lovely, but Sharp *et al.* seem to have simply ignored much else of their informants' repertoires (see, for example, Harker, 1985).

Do try to play and listen to the secular repertoires of gallery sources. The Hardy family, Moore, and Leadley manuscripts offer a delightful insight into musicians' activities outside church or chapel and may serve to give a great insight into performance styles – remember what happened in 'Absentmindedness in a Parish Choir' (Hardy, 1894).

Let me finally come back to an area wherein I have fallen – that is, committing the sin of what I

¹ Rollo Woods may be said to be the doyen of west gallery studies. Certainly, as a scholar and professional librarian, musician, Morris dancer and folklorist, he brings both experience and sound sense to some of the sillier stories of gallery folk.

² A nonsensical story regaled as fact during the Radio 3 broadcast in the 'Spirit of the Age' series on 24 December 1994.

³ Another variant of the 'nine bassoons' story repeated by Bob Copper (who should have known better) during a Radio 2 broadcast on the Downs during summer 1995.

call 'Jack Hornerism'. You will recall that in the nursery rhyme Jack

Put in his thumb and pulled out a plum,
And said 'What a good boy am I'.

Given a manuscript source I suspect I have not been alone in the pattern of skimming through, mentally marking out the hits and misses amongst the psalms and hymns therein. Another Shropshire source led to just such a mistake; from it I pulled out the plum of what has become known as the 'Shropshire Funaral Hymn' [sic]; Robert Bunting, in turn, pulled out the fine 'Anthem out of Psalm 66'. Only recently did I do what I should have done in the first place – that is, accord the manuscript the respect it deserved by systematically working through the material.

Thus I eventually fell upon a fine example of a psalm setting which I should have discovered earlier. It is unknown to Professor Nicholas Temperley (we may therefore reasonably conclude it is probably unknown to anyone else). It came from

my area, but was potentially lost or at least unrevealed because of my carelessness or lack of application. The setting is the common metre version of Psalm 42 (OV) 'Like as the hart doth pant and bray, the well springs to obtain' (Panel 2).

I shall dedicate it to all those who, like me, have made mistakes – saying, for the last time:

If you think that you are part of a revival movement ...

If you think that the gallery repertoire is 'crude' or 'primitive' ...

If you don't accord the music (and thereby the people who made it) the respect it (and they) deserve ...

If you retail folkloric stories as the truth ...

If you've ever picked out the best bits ...

If you sing in Mummiesetshire accents ...

If you perform the music at silly tempi ...

... then if I was you I wouldn't start from here!

