





John Wright Unaccompanied

vocal / jew's harp / fiddle / mouth-organ

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Unaccompanied singing has long been an accepted thing amongst folk revivalists, but unaccompanied instrumental music is perhaps less so. Personal taste rather than doctrine has drawn me towards this sort of expression and, although I do enjoy group playing, it occurs to me that the traditional musicians that I most appreciate have, at some time in their lives, played singlehanded for dancing and could often keep going for a whole night at a stretch, or at the very least they would be session musicians ready to play with all comers and having avoided the rigid discipline that some bands impose. These people know how to make their instrument tell the whole message, be an orchestra in its own right, and to this end, they resort to all kinds of tricks, from the vamping of a mouth-organ player to the drones, simple chords, (sometimes barely suggested), graces, parallel fifths, bow noises etc. that a fiddler can resort to.

There seems to be a growing tendency among today's musicians, especially fiddlers, to reject or ignore this idiom and to go for cleaner, more linear and monodic styles - this applies to players both in the tradition and the revival. Group playing is perhaps partly responsible for this but, in my opinion, many fiddlers are influenced, consciously or no, by the classical violin either because of its prestige or simply due to the way that the violin is taught - or half taught - privately or in schools. At one end of the scale, this results in smooth, sweet, superficial playing often abounding in boring slides and trills, and at the other end, in flashy virtuoso "Fastest-Gun-in-the-West" types of settings destined to annihilate all eventual competition. Whilst there is much evidence that art music has exerted an influence on traditional playing for a very long time indeed, this has always been counterbalanced until recently by a healthy direct, practical approach to the instrument which has given birth to a wide variety of styles to be found today mostly among the older generations of players. In the current revival, a musician has as much to learn from these people as a singer has from his sources, but a fiddler especially should remember that perfect sweet intonation is not necessarily the be-all and end-all, and will often be deliberately avoided, and that even if the playing of a very old musician is rougher than it used to be, his music will often be very rich in content with subtle rhythmic and/or melodic invention in which one is always finding something new - qualities also to be found in early jazz, for instance, or in good traditional singing.

As I have already said, personal taste more than anything drew me into this sort of singing and music. Like many revivalists, I am of urban origin; nevertheless, between the ages of eight and eleven - impressionable years - I did get a reasonable insight into country life as at that time my father was a farm worker under an abortive post-war government scheme to get people back on the land, and I often used to accompany him to work. But it was only much later in the early sixties that I became seriously interested in this music, at first as an unaccompanied singer. A large part of my song repertoire comes from this period. Interest in instrumental music began about 1965 when I took to playing Irish music on the jew's harp. I now live in France and for the last few years have been looking into the hitherto little-known fiddle repertoires over here, especially those of the Massif Central and the West. Technically, French (especially Western French) and English country music seem to have much in common - the styles, of course differ, but in both cases we are dealing with functional dance music rather than session music, and some dances, dating from the nineteenth century are almost identical. This has renewed my taste for the playing of fiddlers like Stephen Baldwin and Jinky Wells, and English music in general. So the wheel has turned its full circle!

Awake, Awake You Drowsy Sleeper is from the Sharp manuscripts, no 1309, collected from Jack Barnard, Bridgewater, 4/4/07. There is a French song that begins *Reveillez-vous belle endormie* which is also about elopement, has the same poetic metre and, most surprising of all, is found with almost the same tune as that used here.

Four-hand Reel (mouth-organ) Taken from an old BBC recording - no 14627, and originally played on the melodeon by Harry Hawkins of Netherbury in Dorset.

Murphy's Hornpipe (jew's harp) I suddenly found myself playing this hornpipe at the end of a four-month stay in the Eastern United States. No idea where I picked it up, but my good friend Lani Herrman, a fiddler from New Jersey helped me fill out the third part.

Gypsy Hornpipe (fiddle) This is the Herefordshire fiddler Stephen Baldwin's setting of a little-known hornpipe to which I am very partial. I have tried to keep a step-dance rhythm, but it's rather faster than he played it.

Henry Martin This is Phil Tanner's well-known version, made famous a few years ago by Joan Baez, but with a rather unfortunate melodramatic chromatic run in the third line which I have always disliked. I have preferred to restore the modal structure that Tanner used.

Bridget Cruise Nos 2 & 3 (jew's harp) Played on a Norwegian harp specially reserved for slow airs. There are four 'Bridget Cruise' tunes attributed to O'Carolan, the famous Irish harper (with strings), and dedicated to the one woman he is said to have loved. These tunes have a more intimate character than most of those made to order and dedicated to some patron; the first three are also rather archaic and modal in character as if the subject inspired him to go back to his roots rather than employ his habitual hybrid 'Irish Baroque' style. I chose nos 2 & 3 because they were the ones that worked best on the jew's harp.

Tailor By My Trade From the Sharp Mss, collected from Tom Sprachland, Hambridge. 1903, plus one or two verses pinched from Paddy Tunney. This song's not a profession of faith, so don't take it to heart girls. I just take a perverse delight in the bad rhyming.

Scottish Pipe Tunes (jew's harp) Homage to Angus Lawrie of Oban, the first, and still the greatest jew's harp player I ever heard. He is reputed also to have been a great piper and he played the same tunes on the jew's harp. As far as I know the titles to these tunes are: **Dornoch Links** (march)/**The Shepherd's Crook** (strathspey)/**Lochiel's Awa' To France** (reel).

Young Charlotte or The Frozen Girl or A Corpse Going to a Ball The last mentioned, according to Art Rosenbaum and Pat Dunford is the original title to this American ballad, a chilling story in more ways than one, written by one Seba Smith and published in 1843 in *The Rover* (vol 11, no 15, p 225) the event having reportedly taken place on the eve of January 1st, 1840. My version was taken from a Library of Congress recording of I G Greer, a Kentucky doctor and a fine singer. Greer's version is interesting in that the song seems well on its way towards being a traditional ballad, with the worst of the Victoriana skimmed off, the drama being built up more through repetition of phrases than by the use of over-colourful language. I nevertheless filled out the end of the story with words from a more melodramatic version sung by Vern Smeltzer, Paoli, Indiana (Folkways FS 3809) - a phrase like 'he kissed her marble brow' was just too good to miss! One can laugh, but in our sheltered island we tend to forget just how violent nature can be.

19th Century Couple Dances: **The Varsoviana** - England (mouth-organ)/**La Valse Vienne** - France (fiddle)/**La Scottisch Anglaise** - France (fiddle)/**L'Angoise** - France (fiddle)

These dances emanating from the early nineteenth century ballrooms, spread like wildfire throughout Western Europe and are still popular with country musicians in many countries. **The Varsoviana/Waltz Vienna** and **La Varsoviennne/Valse Vienne** played here in English and French styles, are somewhat akin to a mazurka. The two dances that follow were learnt from Louis Rousseau, a fiddler from the Pays de Retz, a small parcel of Brittany to the south of the Loire estuary. **Scottisch Anglaise** was what Rousseau called a dance more often known as *La Sept* and the way he has it is closer to the tune of the English *Seven Steps*, or *Italian Schottische*, than any other French versions I know. **L'Angoise** is a sort of novelty dance based on the polka with various hops, step and jumps -- played a bit too fast for dancing here.

Our Captain Cried All Hands A bit of a concoction: the tune is from the Folk Song Journal (no 3, p 131) collected by W P Merrick from Mr Henry Mills at Lodsworth, Sussex in October 1900 and the seemingly irregular rhythm works out at 13/8. The words are mostly from a version collected from Mrs Overd, Langport. The text is sometimes joined on to that of *The Blacksmith*. Whether it is really a separate song I do not know.

Country Dances (fiddle) Ninepins/Saturday Night and Sunday Morning/The Punk's Delight Like many people, I left junior school with a chronic allergy to Playford and country dances in general and it's only in the last few years that I have come to realize that there really are some rattling good tunes in these collections.

Ninepins was collected in the '50s in Northamptonshire, and is to be found in Sybil Clark's *Seven Midland Dances*. The other two were taken directly from the facsimile of Playford's 1651 *Dancing Master* and played on a reconstruction of a Baroque fiddle which explains the difference in pitch.

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4, rue de la Reine, Blaise,
PARIS, 13^e
France,
17-7-75

Dear Jerry.

Thanks for the letter of
27th August. I would certainly be
interested in doing a record with you
of British Isles material. I have been
thinking of and putting off - doing
a similar record with chanteurs du monde
for some time now but could never
reign myself to bringing out an
English language record in France.
Your offer therefore gives me a chance
to dig up the project and rethink it.
We shall be in England for
Christmas as usual so we should
be able to find time to discuss
the fact. I am afraid that I won't
be able to give you any fixed dates
yet, but the moment I get to London,
P.O.

I'll give you a ring so that we can
fix a rendez-vous.

I hear that the Duke in the Clear Air
has sold well. They were on sale at
the National Folk Festival last year and
sold like hot cakes.

I hear also that some Jew's harp
was used by the BBC recently to
introduce "Dinner with Mother" for a
footnight. I don't know which record
they came from, but do you know if
there are any royalties on it? I know
that in France they have begged borrowed
or stolen Jew's harp music for time-
signals, signature tunes, the lot, but as
it is mostly traditional material or
improvisations they get it for nowt!
In America there is a copyright on the
performance but I don't know what
the situation is in England. I would be
very glad if you could enlighten me
on the subject.

(2)
Last Christmas I bought the Newcastle
Breakdown and the East Anglian
record and have just about worn
them out. I hope that you have
similar projects in hand. Also whilst
I was ^{over} there, I listened to ~~the~~ ^{BBC} records of
^{English} traditional fiddle and harmonica at
C Sharp House. It was the first time
for many years I had done so and
people like Jimmy Walls and Stephen
Baldwin made an even stronger impression
now that I have the experience of
French fiddling behind me. There
was also a magnificent harmonica
player from Oxfordshire whose name
I forget but whose playing of the
Basson pipes was quite fantastic.
Anyway, if ever you decide to

(3)
bring these people out on record,
I would be interested in writing a
few words on the fiddle techniques
at least.
In any case, I think that
a record on old Morris dance musicians
would be very welcome. Their strong
intense playing contrasts sharply with
the heavy chod-hopping styles that
one hears so often these days.
Anyway I am looking forward to
seeing you at Christmas and talking
about all that
all the best,
John Wright.