

Roll Over Beethoven

Dig that Celtic Folk

by Lewis Jones¹

Today, in the United Kingdom, folk is a marginal musical form, crushed between the two juggernauts of pop and the classics. Recently our flagship "pop" programme "Folk on 2" was axed when its presenter, Jim Lloyd, retired. Over at "classical" Radio 3 British folk music is treated with haughty disdain, and gets far too little airtime.

Around 1800 the world of classical music was different. Both Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) and Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) were less snobbish than the Radio 3 mandarins of today. Between them they wrote hundreds of settings of British and Irish folk songs. Beethoven was at first sceptical. But he later grew to like the work, and he refused other contracts in order to pursue it.

Haydn's contributions began during his period in London from 1791 to 1795 and continued into the early years of the next century. About 800 folk song titles are listed against his name in The New Grove Dictionary, although some dated after 1802 may have been wholly or partly composed by his associate F. Kalkbrenner.

From about 1809 to 1820 Beethoven was arranging folk songs for the Scottish publisher, George Thomson. In all there are 176 settings, mainly of Irish, Scottish and Welsh songs. Some of these are of considerable interest. "Sir Johny Cope", for example, about the battle of Prestonpans in 1745, has a full and fine text which rubs salt into the hapless English general's wounds even more effectively than, for example, Ewan MacColl's version:

For all their bombs and bombgranades,
Thei cou'd na face the Highlands lads,
But to the hills scour'd off in squads,
Pursued by the clans in the morning.

Typically, Haydn's and Beethoven's folk song settings are for violin, cello, piano and voice. Both composers seem to have been given only the traditional tunes. These they set and returned to their editors who then fitted the words. These pieces are not folk songs in the normally accepted sense. For example, many of the songs published by Thomson have traditional tunes set to texts commissioned from living poets.

It is quite difficult to find a selection of Haydn's folk song settings on CD. There is the odd song here or there, but usually as a filler for one or more longer pieces. Some of his Scottish songs are on Nimbus CDE84222, but they share the CD with piano trios.

The Phillips CD 442 784-2 has 20 of Beethoven's folk song settings sung by the German baritone, Wolfgang Holzmair. His articulation and pronunciation of English leave much to be desired, but he is a good classical singer and fans of that style will enjoy his renditions. An accompanying booklet contains background information and song lyrics.

A fine example of the folk songs set by Beethoven and published by Thomson is "Oh! Who, my dear Dermot" (WoO 154 No. 5).² The tune is "Crooghan a Venue." The text, by William Smyth (1765-1849), concerns the events surrounding the passing of the Act of Union in 1800. After 500 years the Irish Parliament in Dublin, bribed by Lord Castlereagh's "English gold," voted to abolish itself. Ireland is depicted as "Norah," a beautiful lady devastated that Dermot, the once faithful Irishman, has betrayed her. I particularly like verse 3, a rhetorical question to which the answer is "No." (Cf. Micah 6:6-8 for a striking Biblical equivalent.) "Erin go Bragh" is a nationalist slogan. I am told by Irish friends that it is untranslatable. One rough approximation is "May it go well with Ireland." In the song as here printed I have left out Beethoven's instrumental accompaniments for reasons of space. You can hear them on Holzmair's CD, but there verse 2 is omitted without notice.

¹ This article was first published in *English Dance and Song* in September 1998.

² The sheet music is in .pdf (portable document file) format, and can be opened, read and printed off with Adobe's Acrobat Reader, available free from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html> The guitar chords are modern, and are not derived from Beethoven's arrangement.