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"Folk Songs and some Traditional Singers in East Anglia" by E. J. Moeran

In the years immediately preceding the first world war, there took place in London some remarkable choral and orchestral concerts at which the programmes consisted largely of British music. They were held due to the generosity and enterprise of H. Balfour Gardiner, and at them there were given many first performances of the works of such composers and Holst, Vaughan Williams, Arnold Bax and Percy Grainger, names at that time quite unfamiliar to the general musical public. Having just left school, I had come to London as a student at the Royal College of Music; apart from a certain amount of Stanford and Elgar, I knew nothing of the renaissance that had been taking place in music in this country. So one winter's evening, when I had been to St. Paul's Cathedral intending to hear Bach's Passion music and failed to obtain a seat there, feeling in the mood for any music rather than none at all, I went to the Queen's Hall where there was a Balfour Gardiner concert, prepared to be bored stiff. On the contrary, I was so filled with enthusiasm, and so much moved by some of the music I heard that night, that from then on I made a point of missing no more of these concerts.

Among other works I heard was a Rhapsody of Vaughan Williams, based on songs recently collected in Norfolk by this composer. It was my first experience of a serious orchestral composition actually based on English folk-song, and it caused a profound effect on my outlook as a young student of musical composition. This, and many other works

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which I encountered at these concerts, though not all based on actual folk-music, seemed to me to express the very spirit of the English countryside as I then knew it. My home at this time was in Norfolk, where my father was a vicar of a country parish, so I determined to lose no time in rescuing from oblivion any further folk-songs that remained undiscovered.

Accordingly, when I was home the following week-end, I tackled the senior member of the church choir after Sunday evening service. He mentioned a song called "The Dark Eyed Sailor", but nothing would induce him to sing it on a Sunday. I found afterwards that I never could persuade anybody else, even some hard-boiled reprobate, to perform for me on a Sunday, at least not in Norfolk and Suffolk. As for this "Dark-eyed Sailor", I was able to write it down, together with other old songs, on Monday: this was actually the first song I "collected" as a boy. True, it was not an entirely new discovery, but it was encouraging to me, and started my ball rolling.

I soon found that in the part of the county where I was living at the time, there was not much spontaneous singing of the old songs still going on. In any case, the 1914 war intervened to put a stop to my activities for the time being. As most of what I heard had been sung to me by elderly men, who assured me old songs were fast dying out, by the time the war was over I assumed there was no more to be had, and did not immediately make any serious efforts at collecting folk songs.

However, when I was visiting East Norfolk in the autumn of 1921 I received from a folk-song enthusiast, not himself a musician with the necessary knack of committing tunes to paper, an S.O.S. for me to come at once to Stalham. It turned out that accidentally he had overheard an old road-mender singing softly to himself as he was breaking stones. Thus I met the late Bob Miller, known for miles around the country as "Jolt". Bob admitted that he knew a few "old 'uns", but he insisted that he had not really been singing, but just "a-tuning over to himself". However, he was only too willing to sing to me under proper conditions and suggested my spending the evening with him in the Catfield "White Hart" or the "Windmill" at Sutton.

Old Jolt dearly loved conviviality, and was always at his best in company; he knew it, and liked an audience. In fact, he was incapable of remembering anything at all *a deux*. He required the atmosphere of a room full of kindred souls who would listen with appreciation, and he expected his full share of applause. At the same time he was a keen listener when somebody else held the floor in song or story. Anything in the way of interruption and he would

wither the offender with the glance of an autocrat. He gave me many very interesting songs, some of which were hitherto unpublished.

There seems little doubt that the traditional singers unconsciously adapt their tunes to their own personal fancy and singing idiom. Jolt was one who liked a tune with a wide tessitura. Also, he was fond of the drop of a major sixth; it occurred frequently in his songs.

Bob Miller was an old bachelor of absolute integrity, but it delighted him, especially late in the evening, to take on the semblance of a disreputable character, and it was invariably just before closing time when he would come out with something to suit his rakish humour. He had several scandalous ditties.

This singer, by his enthusiasm and personality, opened the way to a series of convivial evenings at which I soon found out that the art of folk singing, in this corner of Norfolk at any rate, was still flourishing in the 1920's.

About the third occasion on which I was at one of these gatherings, Jolt greeted me with an introduction: "Here's Harry: he've come over from Hickling purpose to sing to you tonight." Thus it was that I first met Harry Cox, still in his prime today, and probably unique in England as a folk-singer, presenting his songs with true artistry in a style which has almost disappeared. The Cox's have been musicians and singers for generations, and Harry has such a prodigious memory that, apart from his large repertory of songs handed down through the family, he is capable of hearing, on no more than three or four separate occasions, a song of a dozen or more verses, and remembering it permanently.

These public-house sing-songs, or "frolics" in local parlance, led to opportunities of meeting and hearing many other songsters. They also led to a friendly rivalry on the part of some of them as to who could contribute the most songs to my collection. Even if a song was one already known, or possibly not a folk-song at all, I found it expedient to pretend to be noting it, in order not to cause offence. For one evening Jolt had stopped dead halfway through a song and, in spite of shouts of encouragement from the assembled company, "Go you on, old Bob, you're a' doing", he refused to sing another note. "No, I ain't a goin' on," he said, "he ain't a' writin' on it down in his book."

Naturally, I heard many songs that were not traditional; these were mostly examples of the Victorian ballad epoch. The people who sang had little idea of what was the nature of a folk-song. Perhaps the most surprising appearance of an old

song that was not a folk-song was when a greybeard, wearing ear-rings, who hitherto had always sat silent, suddenly announced that he was about to entertain the company with a song. "That's a rare old-un," he said turning to me, "I'll lay you hain't heard it afore." I was somewhat startled when the song turned out to be "Rule Britannia", and still more so when the whole gathering not only sat it through, but solemnly joined in the chorus after each verse.

As for the actual folk-songs, it is difficult to single out many of them as belonging exclusively to any one part of England. At the same time, I found a few that certainly have not been known to occur away from Norfolk. There are certain tunes, too, which in one variant or another, are commonly used for many different songs. Such a one is the second of these "Highwayman" tunes I heard on the same evening. The first one, of a rather curious tonality, was probably one peculiar to the particular singer who supplied it. Later in the evening, Harry Cox capped it with his own version, but with a tune used for a number of other widely different songs.

It seems likely that the spontaneous singing of old songs when men foregather on Saturday nights has now died out.

Until the advent of the radio, it held on in certain isolated districts, in particular where there was a sprinkling among the population of those who annually used to follow the herring. It was customary to sing at sea in the fishing fleet, and until comparatively recently it was still possible to visit many an inn within easy reach of Great Yarmouth, and while away an evening with a sing-song of the real old songs. If you travel further along the Norfolk coast, no matter how remote the place seemed, you would encounter a little of the kind. It was the proud boast of the late Bob Cox, Harry's father, that he would go to sea for the herring fishing season, sing two songs every night aboard, and never repeat himself.

In this account of some of my experiences of English folk-singing, I have not been concerned with the artificial revival of the art. In other words, with those who set about the teaching of folk-songs in schools, or the organising of garden fetes, etc., at which folk-songs are sometimes performed in the highly sophisticated manner of those who have never heard a real traditional singer. Well-intentioned as these efforts may be, they evolve something quite apart from the art of those who have it in their bones, handed down from father to son. It is unfortunate, too, that up to the present the verbal text of nearly all published collections of English folk-songs bears about the same resemblance to the genuine article as

does Thomas Bowlder's version to the authentic Shakespeare. It is to be hoped that some day this may be remedied by a complete edition of the country's heritage in song, in which nothing worth while is glossed over or left out for reasons of squeamishness or timidity.