

Memoir of a Memorable Collaboration

Review of

A Journey with John Jacob Niles: A Memoir of My Years with Johnnie

By Jacqueline Roberts with Kerstin Warner

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Reviewed by **Jacqueline Chew**

What a thrill when I saw Jacqueline Roberts and Kerstin Warner's book *A Journey with John Jacob Niles* at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. It was March 2004, and from Thomas Merton's seventh journal, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, I knew that Jacqueline Roberts was the soprano who originally sang *The Niles-Merton Songs, Opus 171 and 172*. I had performed some of these songs and now here was first-hand information from one who worked with composer John Jacob Niles (1892-1980) and Thomas Merton to bring this music and poetry to life.

This memoir presents a comprehensive view of John Jacob Niles' music, personality and creative process in his later years. Because the Niles-Merton Song Cycle demonstrates the transition from Niles' familiar world of folk music to one of classical art song and is the musical work that bound composer and soprano together, Ms. Roberts devotes a full third of her book specifically to this piece. It is primarily this song cycle associated with Merton on which I will focus.

It was the year 1967 when Jacqueline Roberts met John Jacob Niles, who had just begun to set Thomas Merton's poetry to music. Probably many are familiar with Merton's account of going to Boot Hill Farm, Niles' home, to hear the musical settings of "The Messenger," "Carol" (which Niles renames "The Nativity [Carol]"), and "A Responsory (1948)." "I thought the settings very effective and satisfactory," he writes. "In fact was very moved by them. . . . I do think John Niles has brought out a lot of what I wanted to say and made me value my own poems more. . . and I burst into tears at Jackie's singing" (7). And now we see the scene as well through the singer's eyes: "I sang the newly written songs from my heart. I was facing him while I sang. I will forever remember his expressions of joy and the tears in his eyes as he listened" (31). Although this particular visit is not shown, two of the book's ten photographs

Jacqueline Chew trained as a pianist at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and SUNY: Binghamton, and is best known for her performances of the music of Olivier Messiaen; her recording of his two-hour piano cycle, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus*, was released in 2004. She performed the complete Niles-Merton Song Cycle at the ITMS Ninth General Meeting at the University of San Diego in 2005, and has recently released a CD recording of the cycle with baritone Chad Runyon. She currently teaches at the University of California-Berkeley, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the San Francisco Community Music Center. In 2005 she became a Benedictine Camaldolese oblate, associated with the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, CA.

record Merton's 1968 visit, when he heard the seven remaining songs comprising Opus 171. Niles also discussed with Merton at that time poems he had selected for the proposed Opus 172, which were composed in the two years after Merton's death.

Following the description of these meetings between Merton, Niles, Ms. Roberts and pianist Janelle Pope, two chapters of the book are devoted to commentary on the Niles-Merton songs. Niles recalls Merton's fascination with the words "violins" ("The Greek Women," "Cana" and "Autumn") and "violence" ("The Ohio River – Louisville"). When questioned about Clytemnestra's anachronistic violins, the poet admonishes the composer, "Oh, don't be tiresome" (56). There are references to certain poems being autobiographical ("Birdcage Walk," "Jesus Weeps into the Fire" and "Cana"). However, Niles' and Ms. Roberts' assessment of this may be questioned since Merton is also described as having "retired" into his hermitage (62).

Illuminating are the inscriptions Niles has penned on Ms. Roberts' personal manuscripts. Some are additional instructions to the musicians. In "Sundown" he wrote the pianist should play "as if on muted strings" (42). Niles drew arrows to the final two minor chords of "Autumn" and added, "This is the mystery" (52). Other inscriptions reveal the transformation Niles was undergoing as he composed these songs, his last published work. At the age of 75 years, he became immersed in Zen Buddhism and was also introduced to Merton's poetry through Victor and Carolyn Hammer. These factors, plus working with classical musicians Jacqueline Roberts and Janelle Pope, propelled him from his previous compositional style in folk music to a new expression in classical art song. On Ms. Roberts' manuscript of "Wisdom" he noted, "I am so weary I could weep. This may be the last of it" (28); and on "Mosaic: St. Praxed's," the last of the twenty-two songs, Niles wrote, "I started these two cycles, Opus 171 and 172, with *The Messenger* 3 years ago, and though it was the most moving musical and creative experience of my entire life, many times I have wished I had never heard tell of this wonderful 'Poetic' material. It taught me a new kind of music composition and the writing of poetry. Johnnie Niles. P.S. For me nothing has ever been the same" (63).

Intriguing from a musician's point of view are the details of "performance practice" of the Niles-Merton songs. Along with specific concert dates, locations and people, Ms. Roberts documents titles of songs performed and includes Niles' entertaining and informative remarks introducing each song. A typical concert began with Niles singing his songs and playing his many dulcimers. Ms. Roberts and her current pianist then performed a number of the Niles-Merton songs, as well as Niles' folk songs. Only twice was the complete Niles-Merton cycle, which spans an hour, performed in its entirety. Surprisingly there was also one performance of the Niles-Merton songs which included a cellist, Michael Fitzgerald. As no cello part exists in the score, presumably he was doubling the keyboard bass line. Niles felt strongly that providing audiences with a printed text of Merton's poetry would aid in their understanding of the songs. In cases where this was not possible, the poems were read aloud preceding the song or projected on a screen. He encouraged audiences to listen from a contemplative state, saying, "I do not expect you to understand the philosophy and the meaning behind these words at first glance. . . . It took me some time. It wasn't until it was set to music that the meaning of the thing began to percolate to me. And it showed me something about how important it is that poetry should be set to music if you ever expect to understand it completely" (39). Those reading this memoir will also want to hear its companion CD, *Jacqueline Roberts Sings the Music*

of *John Jacob Niles* (both the book and the CD are available on Ms. Roberts' web site: www.jacqr.com/book-cd.htm). With pianists Nancie Field and Janelle Pope, Ms. Roberts performs nine songs from the Niles-Merton cycle and ten folk songs.

While we are provided a host of information on John Jacob Niles, the person, the composer and the performer, perhaps he is most revealed by the music itself. In a touching account, we learn of Gay Reading (nephew of Carolyn and Victor Hammer) hearing a tape of the Niles-Merton songs while serving on the Mekong River, Vietnam, in 1969: "At this song ["The Greek Women"], Gay said he wept. 'There were many of us in Viet Nam, like me, who felt strongly opposed to war, especially this war. To hear on my birthday tape these powerful peace songs was a very emotional experience. I saw Agamemnon fulfilling his karma, and Clytemnestra as an avenging angel! *The Ohio River: Louisville, The Mirror's Mission, Cana, Wisdom, The Lament of the Maiden*, one after another, concluding with *Responsory*, all of them peace songs. I rounded up some of my buddies and played the tape for them, with the same effect'" (150-51).

This informal memoir, *A Journey with John Jacob Niles*, is an invaluable source of information for anyone desiring to know more of this composer and his song cycle, *The Niles-Merton Songs*, which enables us to "hear" Thomas Merton's poetry so beautifully.