

Merton Set to Music

Review of

Sweet Irrational Worship

The Niles-Merton Songs, Opus 171 & 172

Chad Runyon, baritone and Jacqueline Chew, piano

MSR Classics, MS1174 (B000EMGESQ) / \$14.95 Audio CD

Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

Attendees at the Ninth General Meeting of the ITMS, in June, 2005 at the University of San Diego, were treated to an evening performance of “The Niles-Merton Songs.” For those who wish to enjoy at their leisure these 22 poems of Thomas Merton set to music by John Jacob Niles (1892-1980), a clear, accurate, and musically satisfying CD has been recorded by baritone Chad Runyon and pianist Jacqueline Chew, two of the performers in San Diego.

The history of this song cycle by the well-known Appalachian balladeer and composer of the American folk spirit, John Jacob Niles, bears repeating. After the theft of all his unpublished music on his seventy-fifth birthday, the bereft composer faced a moment of decision: cease writing or seek a new direction for his creative energies. Fortunately, through the courtesy of Carolyn and Victor Hammer, Niles was introduced to the poetry of fellow Kentuckian Thomas Merton. Niles had his new challenge. On October 27, 1967, Merton heard soprano Jacqueline Roberts with pianist Janelle Pope perform “The Messenger” and “The Nativity” at Boot Hill Farm, Niles’ home. Merton’s response was enthusiastic, and the next year, on his second visit to Niles’ home, he heard the ten songs of Opus 171, giving Niles permission to tweak poetic lines in a second group of poems to better fit the musical phrase. Sadly, Merton’s death prevented him from hearing Opus 172 – the additional twelve songs that Niles created over the next two years. Selections from the song cycle were presented by Roberts and Pope at Agnes Scott College in 1971 and all 22 songs were performed at the University of Kentucky Newman Center in 1975. The manuscript was not published until 1981, a year after Niles’ death, edited first by Janelle Pope and later by Nancie Field. Shortly after, in October 1982, selections from the Niles-Merton Songs were performed at Nazareth College of Rochester by soprano Barbara Staropoli, SSJ and pianist Louise Morris.

The songs in Opus 171 reflect Merton’s fascination with nature and the “secret vegetal words” that speak to his heart. For example, “Evening,” echoing the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, celebrates the “simple music” of nature at rest, with musical patterns introduced by the piano and repeated in the vocal line. Moon, wheatfield, children settle into serenity; then the intensity of the music gathers together not only the myths of children but all creatures – until the evening rhythm again settles on “One little, wakeful bird” who “Sings like a shower.” According to Jody Black’s fine liner notes, the three-note melodies in “Evening” imitate the whippoorwill’s repetitive call. In “The Messenger,” descending triplets represent sunlight spilling forth with the “coming of the warrior

sun”; the three sections are alternately improvisatory and declamatory to underscore the profound meaning of the text.

The selections in Opus 172 reflect the devastation and grief Niles experienced with Merton’s death. The setting of “For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action 1943” perhaps best epitomizes this personal sorrow. The falling melodic line at the beginning in the minor key resolves itself at the end to a major key to match the hope of the poetic line “come: they call you home”; nevertheless, the piano concludes the piece with a series of fifths and octaves to resemble a funeral march. “Ohio River” echoes the style of Charles Ives with its cluster chords on the sharps and flats to emphasize the noise of the city in contrast to the sparse piano accompaniment meant to be the contrasting “tremendous silence” of the meandering river.

It needs to be mentioned that Niles’ musical setting of these poems, while enjoyable, is not simple, not easily understood. Departing from his usual folk music idiom, Niles created eclectic art songs, difficult to perform, and requiring careful attention from both artist and audience. In fact, Niles requested that program notes of the poems be printed for every performance of the songs because he wanted the audience to be reflective and engaged in the experience.

This particular rendition of the Niles-Merton songs is appropriately named *Sweet Irrational Worship* – the title of one of Merton’s best mystical poems and a favorite of mine – celebrating the communion of Merton with the Beloved, symbolized in the image of the bobwhite. Ornithologists tell us that the bobwhite’s song – a vocalization of its own name – is synchronized between male and female, the male beginning the song and the female finishing it. These vocalizations intensify the bonding process between mates. Musically, this bonding is illustrated in the final lines of the song by the transformation of triple metre into duple. For Merton, an experience of being “a lake of blue air,” of being “earth” deepens the bonding between himself and God. Hence, out of his own “grass heart” rises the song of the bobwhite with its “foolish worship,” its irrational yet sweet worship.

I invite you to experience Merton’s poetry in a new dimension by listening to this well-crafted and splendidly interpreted recording. Baritone Chad Runyon, oratorio soloist, actor, conductor, and former member of Emmy-winning Chanticleer, is well matched by the sensitive piano artistry of Jacqueline Chew, an Olivier Messiaen specialist and Benedictine Camaldolese Oblate. Although written originally for soprano and piano, this rendition, adjusted for baritone voice, is both pleasing to the ear and gracefully situated in the male vocal range. Indeed, this recording is not just technically proficient; it is intelligently musical, doing justice to the creative vision of both Niles and Merton.

Further information on the songs, the artists, this recording, as well as a sound sample, is available at www.chadrunyon.com/sweetirrationalworship.html.