

‘THAT ODD THING, A MUSICOLOGIST’

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In this essay Sylvia Townsend Warner’s involvement with revivals of two different but quintessentially English music forms, folk songs and Tudor church music, is discussed. Shockingly for a musical nation, and given that Erasmus, writing in 1509, said of the English that ‘they challenge the prerogative of having the most handsome women, of keeping the best tables, and of being the most accomplished in the skill of music of any people’ (Sharp, 1972 p.162), neither type of music had been collected,

notated or published before in any systematic way. That these disparate musical revivals were happening concurrently confirms the burgeoning of the musical arts in England in the years just before and after the First World War, and constitute a real renaissance in British music.

By her involvement in the diverse musical life of London from 1916 onward, and the subsequent use in her writing of the knowledge that she gained of both types of music and their settings of village green and church choir, Warner expresses a true sense of 'Britishness', though it is unlikely that she would have approved of this naming. 'I am what is that odd thing, a musicologist' (Schmidt and Warner, 2002 p.43) she said, in an interview in 1975, three years before her death, aged eighty-four. The present tense of the statement is especially interesting as Warner had spent many more years writing imaginative poetry and prose, an acclaimed biography of T.H.White and translating Proust, than she had as a composer and musicologist in her youth.

In identifying herself publically with music late in life, Warner was signalling that music had always been essential to her. This is evidenced in her diary entries, spanning decades, which describe concerts which she attended and later, when living quietly in Dorset, listened to on the wireless. In these pieces of private writing Warner shows not only her musical knowledge, but also her emotional response to the music heard.

Sometimes, too, she gives the domestic circumstance in which she is listening, which reveals that music was threaded through her everyday activities:

In the evening I went to The London String Quartet concert. They played Beethoven, the Rasoumovski no.2, doing the exciting cold-blooded structural scherzo extremely well. The rondo subject, too, skipped over the empty stage from the top right to the bottom left hand corner in its oblique beam of limelight. Then G.ma op18. Then O wonder,

op135, [Beethoven String Quartet in F major.] The natural uproar of the second movement, the long evening of the third, and the tragedy of *Es mues sein* (sic) where at the end it is no longer a challenge and feels but an acceptance and renunciation. The introduction comes back with philosophy and then the last bars whistling over the love of it.

(Unpublished Diary, 28th November, 1927)

Or

And in the evening I heard the *romanze* from the Brahms *piano quartet in G* – very well played from the Edinburgh Festival, and as lovely as I remember it from my youth. I don't think I have heard it since Harrow, but it had remained exactly in my mind, from having the full score to practise reading C clefs by.

(Unpublished Diary, 31st August, 1952)

And again

After dinner, to the last act of *Figaro*, I brushed the cats. Mozart's Almaviva was not da Ponte's emotional, adaptable *perdona*, but a much more impressionable, wrong-headed, ultimately more right-headed person. This came out noticeably with an English cast. All the same, the total change of ethos is now overdone. Mozart does it all in his music, there is no need for the conductor to draw red lines and pointing N.B's all round it. But how lovely, how eternally lovely!

(Warner, 1994 p.299)

Claire Harman gives what little is known regarding music in Warner's early life in her biography (Harman, 1989 pp.21-22). Percy Buck, her music teacher and mentor, undoubtedly influenced Warner's piano playing, appreciation of music and possibly her composing when she was a young woman. He wrote prolifically about music, the Oxford University Press published many of his books, and as Richard Searle has indicated (Searle, 2011 p.85) Warner appears to have written or revised work on music under Buck's editorship. Warner also wrote the words to two songs in *The Oxford Song Book*, edited by Buck and published in 1916, and was possibly the chief researcher of others.

This collaborative work with Buck would have begun against the backdrop of an 'an enormously rich and prolific period in the history of English music' (Hall, 1981 p.3). The years prior to the First World War saw a burgeoning of the arts, due in part to a generation emerging with a better education thanks to the 1902 Education Act. There were more composers in England than at any time since the seventeenth century and native talent was being nurtured at home and without the necessity of studying abroad, as had been the usual practice. 'A new spirit in British music appeared, generated by native composers and people engaged in performing music' (Hall, 1981 p.51). A better education also resulted in a more discriminating and musically-minded audience who expected a high standard of performance: the nature of 'cause and effect' is seen here working very much to the benefit of British music.

There was a decline in lush Victorian sentiment in music and a movement towards a more varied and powerful musical expression: Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Sea Symphony*, *London Symphony* and *The Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and Elgar's first two symphonies and the *Violin Concerto*, for example.

Competition and provincial festivals had begun to be staged at this time and they quickly established themselves as a force in the musical life of England. New works were commissioned for the festivals which, like the

Carnegie Music Publication Competition, gave opportunities to young and aspiring composers to have their work both performed and published.

The Folk-Tune Revival was into its third decade and the interest in a truly native English music had not lessened; its influence was being heard in the new music of composers who were part of the Revival. Ralph Vaughan Williams was one of them and comments:

We were dazzled, we wanted to preach a new gospel, we wanted to rhapsodize on these tunes just as Liszt and Grieg had done...we were simply dazzled

(Williams, 1934 p.191)

Richard Hall sums up the efforts of Vaughan Williams and his contemporaries regarding this rediscovered, and re-interpreted, British music:

In English folk-song he and a number of his contemporaries recognised a means towards a distinctive English idiom, a wholly native musical strain of irreproachable artistic integrity which could be enormously helpful in giving English music a distinctive voice.

(1981, p.117)

Cecil Sharp, the most well-known of the leaders of the Folk Tune Revival, is more portentous in his view of what was happening to folk music in England:

The opinion has been freely expressed that the recent recoveries of English folk song are destined to create a revolution in the musical taste of this country...But it is certain that the sudden and unexpected discovery of an immense mass of melody, not only rich in emotion, but possessing withal a distinctive and national flavour,

cannot fail to produce some effect upon the musical life of England.

(Sharp, 1972 p.161)

Coming of age in 1914, Warner would have experienced at first hand this re-discovery of the music of the rural working class, and the work with Buck in creating the *Song Book* may have been started at this time because of this particular trend.

An English musical renaissance was underway and Warner took part by entering the newly-founded Carnegie Music Publication Competition of 1917 with a composition entitled *Folk Tunes for Viola and Orchestra* (Mutti, 2011 p.23). The Carnegie (UK) Trust Archive, held within the National Archives of Scotland, has no further information on Warner's entry, but the title suggests that this composition was part of the Folk Tune Revival trend and it was entered into Class 3 of the competition; 'Choral work with accompaniment for large or small orchestra' (Carnegie, GD281/41/24); further evidence, perhaps, of Warner's interest in the movement. It is possible that Buck urged her to enter the competition: as has been noted elsewhere (Mutti, 2011 p.32), Warner appeared never to promote either her music or her writing, or venture willingly into the public domain during her early years away from Harrow.

In her essay 'Trees and Dreams: Sylvia Townsend Warner, The Pastoral and Fantastic Ruralism', Mary Jacobs discusses the use of the folk-song 'The Brisk Young Widow' collected by Cecil Sharp in 1905 as the starting point for Warner's long story entitled *Elinor Barley* (2011, p.12). As she states, Benjamin Britten's setting could not have been Warner's source for the ballad because of its late date. Now that there is more evidence of Warner's interest in the Folk Tune Revival, it is likely that she would have known of this particular folk-song from her connection with the collectors and the words and music that they discovered. That she developed 'a subtle, multi-layered text from a basic folk-song' (Jacobs, 2011 p.12) is indisputable. With direct reference to Tudor

Church Music, the other particularly English musical endeavour of the first quarter of the twentieth century that Warner was to be involved with, Mary Jacobs' interestingly gives information regarding Warner's 'multi-layering' that resonates strongly with it:

This practice was familiar from the *missa parodia* of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. *Missa parodia* developed complex polyphonic masses from sometimes startlingly simple chansons.

(p.12)

It can be conjectured that Warner's interest in folk-lore and songs and rural traditions, which she often used ironically and subversively in her later writing, has its roots in this extraordinary time in her life when music predominated. Jacobs makes a particularly apt point, touching as it does on 'Britishness':

It is specifically *women* in Warner's pastoral writings who are the principal guardians and practitioners of an arcane knowledge about a rural past that lives on secretly under the present...Warner's most developed personification of this ancient power by far is Mrs Disbrowe in *The True Heart*, the pub landlady who knows 'The True Secret of England's Greatness'.

(Jacobs, 2011 pp.4-5)

Towards the end of 1916 Warner was also singing with the Bach Choir in London where many of Buck's contemporaries were Committee members. Warner would have had an entree into the charmed circle of the great and musically good of London because of her connection with him. Several of the Committee were eminent composers and music teachers, including Sir Charles Villiers Stanford and Sir Hubert Parry who were Vice-Presidents of the Bach Choir. On December 12th, 1916 at

the Queen's Hall, Warner sang singularly 'British' music composed by them: *Songs of the Fleet* by Stanford, and *The Chivalry of the Sea* by Parry; another instance, perhaps, of the popularity of British music at this time and Warner's immersion in it.

At the same time that she began singing with the Bach Choir, Warner was also studying the intricacies of Tudor notation with Richard Terry, choirmaster and organist at Westminster Cathedral; her other, more complex and demanding involvement in the musical renaissance of the time.

The reputation of Tudor Church Music had declined following its zenith of popularity in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and had not been rediscovered, transcribed into a notation that modern musicians could understand, and performed until the last years of the nineteenth century.

Cecil Sharp, discussing the English habit of self-deprecation regarding music, lauds the Tudor composers, thereby linking the two-fold involvement of Warner in the early twentieth century's British musical renaissance:

Prior to Purcell...musical England held a proud position among the nations of Europe. Her madrigal composers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were unsurpassed, while her writers of sacred music of the same period stood very high in the estimation of Europe.

(Sharp, p.162)

That the Carnegie-funded *Tudor Church Music* project came into being at this time was in keeping with the new interest in, and revival of, English music of both a secular and religious nature; as noted above, both village green and church choir contributed to the rediscovery of an English musical heritage.

There is no documentary evidence to show how Warner came to be learning Tudor notation with Richard Terry at this time (Searle, 2011 p.71). However, Buck and Terry were friends and both were organists and would have known each other professionally. Buck had won an organ scholarship to Worcester College, Oxford where Dr (later Sir) Henry Hadow was Dean, and after gaining a BMus degree in 1892, he remained at Worcester as organist for the college until 1894. He would have known Hadow well and that this connection was helpful to him is given in the entry for Hadow in the *Dictionary of National Biography*:

A significant number of musicians at Worcester College...benefited from their contact with Hadow, in particular Percy Buck, who also contributed a great deal to English musical education.

(Shera and Golby)

It is possible that through these contacts Buck had learned of Hadow's approach to Carnegie early in 1916 and saw an opportunity for Warner to become involved should the project proceed. It says a great deal about Warner's musical ability that a man as busy and notable as Terry was at this time should consider her a suitable candidate for instruction.

Buck had no specialist knowledge of Tudor music and was heavily involved with his post at Harrow School and was, concurrently, the non-resident Professor of Music at Trinity College, Dublin. In addition he was appointed to the staff of the Royal College of Music in 1919 by the new Director, Hugh Allen, to teach music theory. By this time, too, Buck had succeeded the late Sir Hubert Parry as President of the Royal College of Organists and was an examiner in music where 'He exerted a consistent influence in favour of the more liberal treatment of examinations in music theory.' (Colles and Turner). Like his mentor Hadow, Buck was at the centre of the musical

life of Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Hadow was aware of Richard Terry's work in transcribing unpublished Tudor manuscripts in the British Museum and using the rediscovered music to great effect firstly with the choir at Downside Abbey, and later at Westminster Cathedral.

Hadow wanted to see a body of Elizabethan and Tudor music published and set about the task of convincing the Carnegie (UK) Trust that underwriting the costs of locating, editing and publishing these forgotten manuscripts would be of enormous benefit in establishing a body of national music.

In a letter to Charles Cannan, Secretary to the Delegates of the Oxford University Press whom it was hoped would publish the edited music, Hadow writes:

There exists a large amount of extremely fine English Church music composed between 1540 and 1623. It is mostly in MS parts; very little of it has ever been printed; a definitive Edition of it would be literally the greatest English musical work ever published. The value of it is not only that of an historical monument but that of a living and permanent art: the best work of our best period. (Letter, 2nd June 1916)

It is clear from this that up to that date, 1916, there did not exist a definitive catalogue or publication containing the printed music of English composers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It should be mentioned here, although I am jumping the narrative gun, that the Editorial Preface to volume one of the Carnegie-funded *Tudor Church Music* includes an appreciation of the work of past collectors and editors of polyphonic Church music and a paragraph which sets out the definitive ideal of the edition:

Our edition owes much to all these its forerunners in that they have kept in memory the great music of the Tudor period...And the very fact that they have only been able to make selections imposes an obligation to publish a collection which shall be as complete as it is possible now to make it (Buck *et.al.*, 1923 p. xiv)

The Carnegie Report dated 30th May, 1916 entitled 'Publication of Tudor and Elizabethan Music in the British Museum' gives comprehensive information for the Executive Committee of the Carnegie Trust to deliberate upon when deciding whether to fund the proposed project:

Of the composers of the Tudor and Elizabethan period whose works at present lie buried and unseen in the BM, the following names may be mentioned, with the approximate dates of their works: Taverner, about 1525; Merbecke, 1535; Shepherd & Tye, 1540; Robert White, 1560; Robert Parsons, 1563; Farrant, 1569; Thomas Tallis, 1515-85 and William Byrd, 1542-1623.

Of these composers nothing produced by Taverner and Shepherd has been published. Very little (almost none) of Tye, White, Parsons and Farrant has ever been produced. Of Tallis' work there are over 100 Mss. compositions which have not been printed, although there have been about 50 of his works imperfectly edited and produced in scattered form. Of Byrd a little has been published, but there is a very large proportion that has not been, and all wants re-editing. Of the names mentioned, little more than 10% of their total output has ever been seen or heard by the public.

(Carnegie GD281/41/225)

Hadow's desire to see the works of Byrd published and used is underlined by his remarking that 'They call William Bird the English Palestrina; I shall not rest until Palestrina is called the Italian Byrd!' (Shera and Golby)

The interest in re-establishing truly English music that Hadow showed during these years is substantiated by two publications written by him. One of these was at the request of the Carnegie (UK) Trust who published it for private circulation in 1921. It was entitled *British Music: a Report*, and its purpose was to lay before the Trust the true position of music in English life at this time. As ever, Hadow is optimistic; 'at no time since the Elizabethan days have the prospects of our musical art been brighter' (Hadow, 1921 p.8). This report would have formed the basis for future charitable works of a musical nature undertaken by the Carnegie Trust. The second publication was a slim volume entitled *English Music* published in 1931.

Hadow's persuasiveness prevailed with Carnegie, and in June 1916 Richard Terry was appointed Editor-in-Chief of the *Tudor Church Music* project to research, edit and publish the complete works of two major English composers, John Taverner and William Byrd. Terry's brief very quickly expanded to include all of the significant Tudor composers, Thomas Tallis, Robert White, Thomas Tomkins and Orlando Gibbons among them, and he was still working without the assistance of a formally structured committee of editors.

Buck's probable influence in ensuring that Warner was ideally placed should the project proceed was successful: she was assistant and secretary to Terry when the project began although it was mid 1917 before an editorial committee was proposed.

In two statements by Terry that have been cited by Richard Searle (Searle, 2011 pp.73, 74) concerning Warner's musical talent, the words 'brilliant' and 'genius' are used. It is clear that Terry thought highly of her ability, and whilst he and Henry Hadow sought to encourage more established musicologists such as Cecie

Stainer, daughter of the composer Sir John Stainer, to join the Editorial Committee, is a very real sense Warner was already there, having proved to be an apt pupil and assistant to Terry for a year before the idea of an editorial committee was mooted – she was an obvious choice.

The assistance that she gave Terry with his work and her ‘first class intellect’ (Searle, 2011 p.71) used to rapidly learn a difficult area of musicology were paying dividends for Warner and establishing her among her peers as a musicologist of distinction.

Terry also appreciated Warner’s composing skills. This is evidenced in May 1919 when he wrote of a possible new school of church music composition coming into being: ‘Of modern music composed specially for the Cathedral witness the remarkable *Dum Transisisset* of Miss Townsend Warner’ (Andrews, 1948 p.134).

That Warner’s contribution was considerable can be substantiated by a list of works transcribed by her found among Richard Terry’s papers at Westminster Cathedral Archive. This list contains all of the twenty one items of the Bodleian’s Sadler MS. by composers including Shepherd, Taverner, Merbecke, Aston and White; as well as work by Byrd, Taverner and White from Christ Church’s MS.45. She also discovered what came to be known as the ‘Tenbury MS’ whilst researching in the library there and undertook extensive work on the transcription of manuscripts in the British Museum.

On the 7th April 1922 Warner and the Bach Choir sang William Byrd’s *Six Part Motet for Chorus, Strings and Organ* in a concert conducted by Ralph Vaughan Williams at the Queen’s Hall (Bach Choir Archive). She would have brought detailed knowledge of Byrd’s part-writing to this performance as she and the other Editors of the Carnegie *Tudor Church Music* project were then preparing the first volume of Byrd’s *English Church Music* for publication in time for the Byrd tercentenary celebrations the following year.

Throughout this period Warner was writing novels and poetry. She was also writing extensively about Tudor notation in the *Oxford History of Music* (1929), in journal

articles and in a paper for the Musical Association on *The Point of Perfection* (1919). Her distinctive writing style is evident in the prefatory matter in volume one of *Tudor Church Music* and in several of the biographical essays in other volumes. As Claire Harman observes in another context, ‘the style and voice of the piece(s) seemed so entirely Warner’s’ (Harman, 2011 p.40). A good example is to be found in the ‘Historical Survey’ part of the prefatory matter of volume one:

The danger underlying such a step is that the music may become finicking; but the influence of their own past, with its tradition of vitality and movement, was strong to save them; and to the traditions of that past they dedicated their newly won technique with such results as the *Miserere* of Robert White, one of the finest examples of an unslackening, unswerving impetus in the whole of music.

(Warner in Buck *et al.*, 1923 p.xxxi)

This passionate exposition on early music is reflected in Warner’s later writing where music is used to explain, emote, describe and amuse, as the following extracts show. She was interested in all aspects of music and the connections that could be made between them. For example:

There was a wireless in the restaurant, and we listened to a very good Blues. I thought how close the analogy is between jazz and plainsong: both so anonymous, so curiously restricted and conventionalised, so perfectly adapted to their metiers, both flowing with a kind of devout anonymity.

(Unpublished Diary, 19 April, 1928).

An unpublished poem, discovered in the back of a diary for the years 1939-45, uses the tone of musical

instruments and the moods associated with them to define both peace and conflict:

O, throw away the drum,
 There's nothing charming
 In drum taps at the pavement's edge
 When nations are disarming

But keep the fiddle and the barrel organ
 For peace like war will come.

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Discussing Jane Austen's three manuscript volumes of 'Juvenalia', Warner writes: 'All of them, plainly, were written with delight and *brio*. They have a ringing brilliancy, like the song of the wren' (Warner, 1951 pp.9-10).

The following is from Warner's guide book, or as she called it, her 'err and stray' book to Somerset written in 1949:

As for the valley of the Avon, to go through it on some October morning when the first frost has set fire to the woods and the meadows have their second flush of green, and then to find Bath sunning itself round the corner is like going from a Mozart adagio to a Mozart minuet.

(Warner, 2007 p.30)

The last example is a long extract from Warner's diary of July 1930 that brilliantly combines description, explanation and emotion. She is at a musical event at Cambridge University with Percy Buck and other musicians:

At about 10.30[pm] we went to the chapel [at Kings]. It was quite dark, except for the bicycle lamp, and under that enormous roof one had the feeling of being out of

doors...The air was warm and sweet with wax candles. We sat at the west end while Boris Ord played (first something I didn't know, then the *Fantasia in G*, with the roulades escaping on iron pinions after the pause) and the light in the organ sent an enormous rod of shadow along the roof. Then he called Teague. [Buck] There was an interval of conversational voices, and he began to extemporise. I thought I should never hear that again, and in that terrific tunnel of dark masonry with its one useless shaft of light piercing the upper dark, it was like a Donne poem and a funeral. Just at the end, or rather just as one felt the end, he let off for a minute and then started the theme on all the most tigerish and domineering reeds – a last jutting-out rock of a mainland – and then away pianissimo... It was beyond all my dreams, to be listening to music so, in the dark of that ancient and bare building.

(Warner, 1994 pp.63-64)

Warner's own words, quoted at the beginning of this paper, indicate that music was ingrained life-long and musical themes were used extensively in her writing. The two important strands of British music collecting in the first quarter of the twentieth century which occupied her attention were inter-related, for the gathering and notating of folk song had an exact parallel in the locating and transcribing of Tudor manuscripts and both were concerned with the preservation and publication of centuries-old British music that had not previously been attempted with any semblance of cohesion. These very different strands of music of the first decades of the twentieth century come together in the experience of this exceptionally talented musicologist and writer; her involvement with both sheds light on a quest for a British musical heritage.

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