

PETER DICKINSON (ED.), *CHAMBER MUSIC (JAMES JOYCE). THIRTY-TWO SONGS FOR HIGH VOICE AND PIANO BY G. MOLYNEUX PALMER* (Tewkesbury: Goodmusic Publishing, 2020). ISMN M-2223-1494-8, 88 pp, £15.

JAMES JOYCE'S FAVOURITE SONGS: CHAMBER MUSIC / THE JOYCE BOOK; MARTYN HILL, TENOR & PETER DICKINSON, PIANO (*CHAMBER MUSIC*); MERIEL DICKINSON, MEZZO & PETER DICKINSON, PIANO (*JOYCE BOOK*) (CD, Heritage Records HTGCD 175, 2020), £13.25.

For the first 25 years after his death, the Irish composer Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer (1882–1957) was known, if at all, as a composer of light songs in a folk idiom. In 1982, the American Joyce scholar Myra Teicher Russel, aware of the correspondence between James Joyce and Palmer, discovered the manuscripts of 32 songs in the library of the University of Illinois at Carbondale. They caused a sensation among Joyce scholars and musicians alike for here was an ambitious cycle of songs of outstanding quality that had completely fallen into oblivion—both from a critical and from a performance point of view, not to speak of recordings. The years that have passed since their first complete performances in the early to mid-1980s (including recitals in Ireland) demonstrate that recognition can go a long way because these songs are still far from well known among today's performers, and that includes those based in Ireland. The two publications under review, a new music edition and a CD, published almost simultaneously in 2020, seek to redress this situation. In addition to the 32 songs by Palmer, the CD also includes recordings of *The Joyce Book*, a volume of songs commissioned and edited by Herbert Hughes, which had appeared in 1933 in a blue-cloth luxury edition with Sylvan Press, London. Both sets represent the first complete recordings of the two projects.

Palmer was from an Anglo-Irish family with roots that extended back to the seventeenth century in the counties of Wicklow and Kerry. He was born in Staines, Middlesex, and grew up in South Woodford (north-east London) where his father was a Protestant clergyman, like many of his ancestors before. Young Palmer was a non-resident student of music at Oxford, where in 1901 he was the youngest ever Bachelor of Music graduate. From 1904 to 1907 he was one of a handful of Irish composition students who studied with Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music; this is usually not cited in the lists of Stanford's pupils.¹ From about 1910, Palmer lived in

¹ Besides Palmer, Stanford's Irish pupils would include Thomas O'Brien Butler, Herbert Hughes, Charles Wood, and, with reservations, E. J. Moeran.

Ireland, initially working as an organist. When multiple sclerosis increasingly affected his mobility, he ceased all employment and moved to Sandycove in south Dublin where two of his sisters ran a girls' school (Hillcourt) that is now part of Rathdown School (where there is still a 'Palmer Hall' named after the sisters).

Palmer, who shared his year of birth with Joyce, was presented with a copy of the writer's early poetry collection *Chamber Music* (1907) by his mother; he almost immediately began to set these poems to music. Palmer's recently discovered diaries for the years 1901 to 1907 reveal the first poem that he set to music, as he begins the entry for 16 July thus: 'Set the first of a little book of poems called "Chamber Music" by James Joyce, "Gentle lady, do not sing"'.² From 1909 to 1928, Palmer and Joyce corresponded frequently, with Joyce trying to convince Palmer to publish the music.³ As is well known, Joyce was very musical, and he considered the Palmer settings the best that he knew. By 1934 he wrote to his brother Stanislaus, '30 or 40 composers at least have set my little poems to music. The best is Molyneux Palmer. After him are Moeran and Bliss'.⁴

Palmer never revealed the reasons behind his reluctance to publish the settings, but it is generally assumed that this was related to Joyce's poor reputation in Ireland at the time and Palmer's dependence on the care of his sisters who would have wished to protect their school's reputation by not becoming publicly associated with Joyce. But another potential reason for Palmer's reluctance may also be that he wanted the cycle to be complete: he worked on the series until 1949 when he had set 32 of the 36 poems in *Chamber Music*. By then, Joyce was dead and his international standing already established. Palmer may not have been able to complete the cycle for health reasons. Certainly, during the 1940s Palmer no longer hid his songs. He rearranged some of them to suit the baritone voice of Tomás Ó Súilleabháin, and these were performed to the piano accompaniment of Rhoda Coghill on Radio Éireann.⁵

² The diaries are currently in private possession, but they were lent to me and scanned for use in a biographical monograph of Palmer, for which I am gathering material. It is planned that they will move to the National Library of Ireland in due course, which already has many items relating to Palmer, including manuscripts and correspondence. The volumes for 1902 and 1905 are missing.

³ Many of the letters and postcards Joyce wrote to Palmer have been digitized and made available in the online catalogue of the National Library of Ireland: <https://catalogue.nli.ie>, IRL-Dn MS 5,378 (letters must be accessed individually).

⁴ Stuart Gilbert and Richard Ellmann (eds), *Letters of James Joyce*, 3 vols (New York: Viking Press, 1957–66), vol. 3, 340.

⁵ Details unknown; relayed to me in a private meeting with Tomás Ó Súilleabháin c2010.

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The first publication, however, did not occur until decades later in an edition (1993) by the Joyce scholar Myra Teicher Russel (1920–2005).⁶ It was accompanied by an optional music cassette on which all songs were recorded by the tenor Robert White and the pianist Samuel Sanders. Why a cassette was included instead of a CD is a justified question, as by 1993 CDs were well established and would have been much handier to include in a printed edition. But that was not the only puzzle associated with this publication. Anthony Burgess criticized the fact that the edition did not name Palmer as the composer of the songs on its title.⁷ It is indeed a strange oversight, and one that can only be explained by the fact that the publication primarily addressed Joyce scholars and not musicians or musicologists (there are few examples of a song edition where the text author's name appears but the composer's does not). And that is indeed how the public reception of the volume continued in the following years; there are quite a few citations of the work in literary circles but very few indeed in musical ones.

A notable exception was Peter Dickinson's review of the score and cassette in *Music & Letters* (1995).⁸ Dickinson (b1934) is a noted pianist, composer, and musicologist who, five years before the 1993 music cassette, had recorded the songs for the BBC with tenor Martyn Hill. It is that recording—made on 18 November 1986 and first broadcast on 17 March 1988—that has now been published as a CD on the Heritage Records label. Although it comes 27 years after the music cassette, it is therefore the first recording of the complete cycle of songs (as far as it can be called complete). Peter Dickinson is also the editor of the new edition of the songs, and I will briefly summarize from his *Music & Letters* review the reasons why he considered a new edition to be necessary—and it is not only to do the composer justice. Many of these are related to the fact that Teicher Russel was a literary scholar rather than a music scholar.

First, it should be emphasized that the extensive introduction and biographical background in the 1993 edition are not what should concern us here. Although some of it would require revision in the light of new research, it was and still is the most

⁶ Myra Teicher Russel (ed.), *James Joyce's Chamber Music. The Lost Song Settings* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁷ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1 October 1993, 18, referenced in Peter Dickinson, 'James Joyce's *'Chamber Music': The Lost Song Settings* by James Joyce, Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer, ed. Myra Teicher Russel', *Music & Letters* 76/3 (August 1995), 472–75: 472.

⁸ Dickinson, 'James Joyce's *Chamber Music*, ed. Myra Teicher Russel'.

elaborate text about Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer and the story of how he came to write, and then hide, the Joyce songs. It is rather the music edition that is often problematic as well as, in some instances, the recording.

In his 1995 review, Dickinson argues convincingly that the sequence of tonalities applied by Palmer is related to the sequence of poems (an ‘innocence-to-experience scenario ... that was decided upon not by Joyce but by his brother Stanislaus’⁹). Some of the songs on the 1993 music cassette, however, are transposed, ‘ruining the vital key sequence’.¹⁰ Then, there are quite a number of misreadings of the manuscript scores in Teicher Russel’s edition, such as when she claimed in song VIII (Joyce’s numbering), ‘Who goes amid the green wood’, bars 7 and 17, that the ‘A-sharp clashes painfully with the A-natural in the right hand chord’.¹¹ Dickinson comments that this observation ‘seems simply wrong’, arguing that the ‘so-called clash is standard appoggiatura decoration around a pedal A’.¹² There are several instances of misread (or deliberately changed) accidentals that lead to quite different musical results including an example in song XXVI, ‘Thou leanest to the shell of night’, where an intended D major appears (and is recorded) as D minor. In one case, according to Dickinson, Russel mistook an ink blob for a note. The mistakes are not so many as to make the previous edition totally unacceptable, but they are a nuisance that do occasionally alter the composer’s meaning and are now, thanks to Dickinson, avoidable.

The hope that Dickinson expressed in his 1995 review that eventually a new edition would appear that corrects these (and more) mistakes has now been realized in the new edition, appearing with a small, independent English music publisher. In addition, the 1986–8 recordings on the 2020 CD already include those corrections. In other words, it appears clear that it is the new edition that should be used in the future, and the recording should be warmly welcomed as it makes those songs audible again in light of the fact that the music cassette would certainly find no player anymore.

The revised edition of the music has considerably less commentary than the first edition (only two pages of introduction and one page of editorial notes at the end), but for performers it is about right. The edition clearly addresses musicians and not primarily Joyce scholars. It comes on bright white paper in a very clear and legible

⁹ Dickinson, ‘*James Joyce’s Chamber Music*, ed. Myra Teicher Russel’, 474.

¹⁰ Dickinson, ‘*James Joyce’s Chamber Music*, ed. Myra Teicher Russel’, 472.

¹¹ Dickinson, ‘*James Joyce’s Chamber Music*, ed. Myra Teicher Russel’, 474, quoting Russel edition.

¹² Dickinson, ‘*James Joyce’s Chamber Music*, ed. Myra Teicher Russel’, 474.

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design and layout. The green outer covers, unfortunately, are sensitive to scratch and will quickly show signs of use.

The CD recording has obvious advantages over the one on the cassette, which is partly the result of the much higher quality standards of a modern CD player (the reviewer used quality appliances for both technologies in making direct comparisons). But some of the differences are also due to the studio recording standards. Here, the BBC recordings, compared to the rather simple ones provided by Indiana University Press, are of a far superior quality. They also use subtle reverberation to imitate recital hall acoustics whereas the cassette has a rather dry sound that comes across as a mere reference recording to provide an illustration to Joyce scholars. In other words, in terms of audio quality, the Palmer/Joyce songs have never been better served than here.

Audio techniques alone, however, are but one side in assessing the quality of recorded performance. When it comes to the singers, Robert White's voice on the Indiana cassette is much more in the foreground, clearly focusing attention on the tenor. The balance is quite different on the BBC/Heritage CD which makes the subtleties of the piano much more audible in relation to Martyn Hill's restrained voice. The approach of the two singers could not indeed be more different—even though this could also be the pianist's influence. But the vocal qualities themselves are of different worlds, or perhaps schools. White's career, although he has recorded works by moderately modern contemporary American composers, has mainly been influenced by his imitations of John McCormack, especially by the latter's operatic side. White has a bright, voluminous voice with sharp, quick tremolos that can become shrill at times. Hill is, in comparison, a much more sensitive performer with softer and more fluid expression. Their vocal range is not identical either. Where White clearly must work hard to reach the high A in no. III, 'At that hour', for example, one doesn't hear such effort from Hill. This song is also a good example to highlight the different approaches to interpretation by the two performers. The White/Sanders recording completes this song in 2'02, while Hill/Dickinson record the same piece in a time of 2'40, which seems more suited to Palmer's indication of an *Andante misterioso*. Likewise, no. XIV, 'From dewy dreams', is 1'16 with White/Sanders and 1'37 with Hill/Dickinson, which makes quite a difference in such a short piece.

Throughout the CD, Dickinson's touch on the keys is considerably more sensitive than Sanders's. If one considers the light tenor Joyce himself appears to have been, and the youthful love described in these poems, Hill and Dickinson may well serve the composer's and the poet's intentions and are not pushing themselves into the foreground in their virtuosity. White, in contrast, makes but few differences at all in

dynamics—he is almost always too loud. It is that sensitivity that makes the interpretations on the new CD so congenial to what Joyce and Palmer may have both had in mind in their youthful oeuvre.¹³

The direct comparison of the 1993 cassette and the 2020 CD is important because the more recent publication presents a very different approach that may alter the opinions of those who (like the reviewer) knew the previous recording. The songs are a unique achievement in pre-1950 Irish composition, a cycle that has sometimes been compared to Schubert's *Winterreise* in its compass and achievement, and which in an Irish context, as a cycle of more than 40 minutes duration, is a worthy predecessor to the extended song cycles written in the 1980s by Seóirse Bodley.

It is also important to emphasize how different these songs are compared to Palmer's usual vocal output for voice and piano. There is no other song cycle of his that would come near this one in its duration and versatility. There are sets of *Two Folk Songs*, Op. 12 (c1912) and *Three Irish Folksongs*, Op. 15 (1913) and several single settings of poems by Heine, Rossetti, Davis, Allingham, and Yeats. But apart from the early Heine song, written before his move to Ireland in 1904, and the late Yeats one 'When you are old' (c1950), the rest is written in a style to please an Irish audience accustomed to Irish ballads. He may have sensed that his Joyce songs were looking for an audience that was not in his immediate neighbourhood for most of the time he was working on them, a period which spanned more than four decades.

Here now is the potential to change musical historiography in Ireland, if that is not too large a term in this admittedly small niche. Like Rhoda Coghill's remarkable 1923 cantata *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* (first performed in 1990) and perhaps Frederick May's String Quartet in C Minor (1935, first performed in 1950), the Joyce songs by Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer are further Irish works of the early twentieth century that shed a new light on this period. These should enter the curriculum in vocal tuition in Irish third-level music teaching in an effort to generate more performances.¹⁴ Peter Dickinson is to be thanked and congratulated on his

¹³ For readers who, despite the losses in sound quality, prefer an online recording to a CD, all tracks of the new Heritage Records CD can be heard on YouTube on Martyn Hill's channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2_hsst8Ely-HmyKblEyCmg. Nine minutes of Robert White's recording can also be heard on YouTube <https://youtu.be/aPV-dYuEK0g>.

¹⁴ Such efforts have already begun, with two performances in 2022, one in the Dun Laoghaire Public Library and one in the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin. Like the ones in the early 1980s, they were connected to anniversaries of James Joyce. But this song cycle can and should stand on its own, and that is still far from established. The first performance was reviewed by Peter Dickinson on the basis

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achievement of providing a revised score that can lay the basis for such a re-evaluation.

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of its broadcast on RTÉ lyric fm, 2 February 2022: Peter Dickinson, 'James Joyce's Chamber Music', *Musical Opinion Quarterly* 145/2 (April–June 2022), 51.