

Robin Milford (1903-1959)
A Compendium of Essays
An Exploration of Compositions, Style and Imagery

Piano Music

Milford's early compositions show the composer's keen sense of creativity and imagination. Genres embraced by the composer during these early days include piano music and choral works for children (e.g. the opera *The Shoemaker*).

It clearly was Milford's Edwardian middle-class background which created a solid foundation for imagination, and ultimate creativity, in the composer's mind. For the intelligent, sensitive and thinking child, the world of these years must have been wonderful stimulation for an already fertile mind. By the time Milford was born, not only were such children's stories as *The Water-Babies*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Golden Age*, and *Five Children and It* well established but so also were fairy stories such as those written by Andersen and Grimm. Similarly, by the time of Milford's 10th birthday such stories as *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *The Wind in the Willows* and *Peter Pan* had also appeared, not to mention the tales of Beatrix Potter. For a child such as Milford, this golden age of children's literature must have been a welcome and profound escape from the horrors of Victorian/Edwardian social conditions and rigidity.

The important point is that these stories for and about children (particularly of the middle and upper-middle classes) reacted with Milford's imagination from his earliest days, resulting in many compositions written for children. Examples include such works as *Three Sea Pieces* (1924) for piano, *A Fairy Revel* (1924) for piano, the children's opera *The Shoemaker* (1925) and the cantata *Rain, Wind and Sunshine* (1929). Children were now allowed to escape into their own imaginations, unlike the Olympians in *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days*. Milford could not but have been acquainted with this children's literature, especially in view of his father's background with the Oxford University Press. Yet such freedom created difficulties for many fertile minds in distinguishing between imagination and reality. Many

people, including Milford himself, resented having to function between these two realms, and had difficulty in so doing.

Even in later years Milford continued to respond to the 'Arcadian' literary movement of his childhood by continuing to write numerous imaginative compositions for children, including the song-cycle *Joy and Memory* (1940-43) and the ballet *The Jackdaw of Rheims* (1945) written for the pupils of Downe House. He was well ahead of his time in writing such works. Clearly in manhood, Milford's mind was still alive with children's literature as shown by this comment with reference to Parry's *Pied Piper*:

I shall certainly look soon: I like the poem, and moreover, find anything of that sort about children being enchanted (or even just, taken) out of this glum, grim world at present very sympathetic, and even touching.¹

Piano works such as *Three Sea Pieces* and *A Fairy Revel*, and the children's opera *The Shoemaker*, show the composer's dedication to, and involvement in, the writing of music for children and young people. Thus, in many ways, through his music written for children, Milford could be considered as the musical equivalent to the late Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian writers of children's stories - such as Kinglsey, Carroll, Grahame, Potter, Barrie and Milne. He constantly demonstrates his child-like imagination in these works.

Clearly, Milford preceded Benjamin Britten in composing for children. These compositions are lyrical, musically inventive and profoundly interesting and challenging for young performers. At the same time they are always realistic in terms of musicianship, technique and ability.

Milford's first published composition for children, *The Shoemaker*, was preceded and probably influenced by the first of a number of family performances of works. This was a dramatic cantata entitled *The Moon*, consisting of a series of Purcell airs arranged for treble voices by W. G. Whittaker and orchestrated by Milford. The dramatisation was created by Charles Williams who would in later years have a profound influence on Milford

¹ Milford letter to Finzi, 12 November, 1945

(Peggy Newsom (née Stainer) married
Kirstie's brother Allick
Elizabeth Stainer married Robin's brother
David
Pippa Milford — their sister
P. Newsom = Peep — Robin's name for Kip
Alicia Stainer — 3rd sister married
David Pennant
Celia Reid — cousin.

Miss Ford = Nora — lived for many
years in Lyne Regis & taught
violin at Badminton School in
Bristol.

Programme THE MOON

— A CANTATA —

prepared and arranged for
treble voices, from the airs
of HENRY PURCELL

by
W. G. WHITTAKER.

Orchestrated by - ROBIN MILFORD.

Words by - CHARLES WILLIAMS.

FOREWORD.

In presenting this performance of THE MOON, (a Cantata intended for production by children), an attempt has been made to extend the scope of the original intention, by the introduction of Scenery, Action, Dances and Incidental Music.

This slight dramatisation of the work has stimulated the children's interest, and it is hoped that it will add to the enjoyment of the audience. The story is very simple, it tells of the children's search for the hiding place of the moon during the time that she is invisible; the action takes place in one day.

As the scenery at our disposal is very limited, such scenic effects as daybreak, twilight and moonrise will call for the exercise of a little sympathetic imagination on the part of the audience.

CHILDREN TAKING PART.

P. NEWSOM, P. MILFORD, K. BETHELL, C. REID,
E. STAINER, P. STAINER, A. STAINER, M. FLOOD,
M. DANIEL, M. TILDEN, B. MORAN, G. EGGAR.

Trained by - Miss FORD.
Conducted by - ROBIN MILFORD.

SCENE I.

DAWN: A GYPSY ENCAMPMENT.

Prelude.

THE PASSING OF THE MOON.

THE SEARCH.

SCENE II.

A WOOD.

DANCE OF WOODLAND SPIRITS.

THE WOODLAND DARK.

SCENE III.

THE QUESTIONING OF THE OCEAN.

DANCE OF THE CHILDREN.

Curtain.

THE ANSWER OF THE OCEAN.

SCENE IV.

DUSK: THE GYPSY ENCAMPMENT.

Prelude.

THE CLOSE OF DAY.

THE MOON REAPPEARS.

ROBIN MILFORD

Compositions

Three Sea Pieces

OPUS ONE

THE CAVE

PHOSPHORUS ON THE
WATER

THE PORPOISE



Price Two Shillings and Sixpence net



FORSYTH
BROTHERS LIMITED

Three Sea Pieces for piano (1924) were Milford's first published compositions. These piano pieces (entitled 'The Cave', 'Phosphorous on the Water' and 'The Porpoise') were composed for children and consist of three short movements. 'The Cave' depicts the depth, height, darkness, size and mystery of a cave through the use of the darkness of the B Phrygian mode, B minor and bass register chromatic chords. Other features reflecting these images include arpeggios rising to treble register, dynamics moving through *crescendo* to *fortissimo*, and a *fortissimo* harmonic presentation of the theme. The absence of an harmonic I-V-I closure, harmony falling by step (e.g. F#, F, E min., Eb, D) and frequent harmonic side-steps (e.g. D, C min., Bb, Ab, B) can be viewed as features which not only form part of the composer's style and syntax but also suggest the mystery of a cave.

The title of the second movement ('Phosphorous on the Water') suggests two main areas of imagery - brightness which then falls away. Such imagery is painted through the use of antiphonal answering of chords between the left hand (A major) and right hand (E minor), lively melody (decorated with double acciaccaturas, based on tonic and dominant notes), a broken quaver D ostinato, chromatic harmony, fast modulating sections, added-note harmony, and colourful harmonic side-steps. Possible declining light is suggested by the melody chromatically falling and descending harmony (F#, F, E min., Eb, D), and declining dynamics.

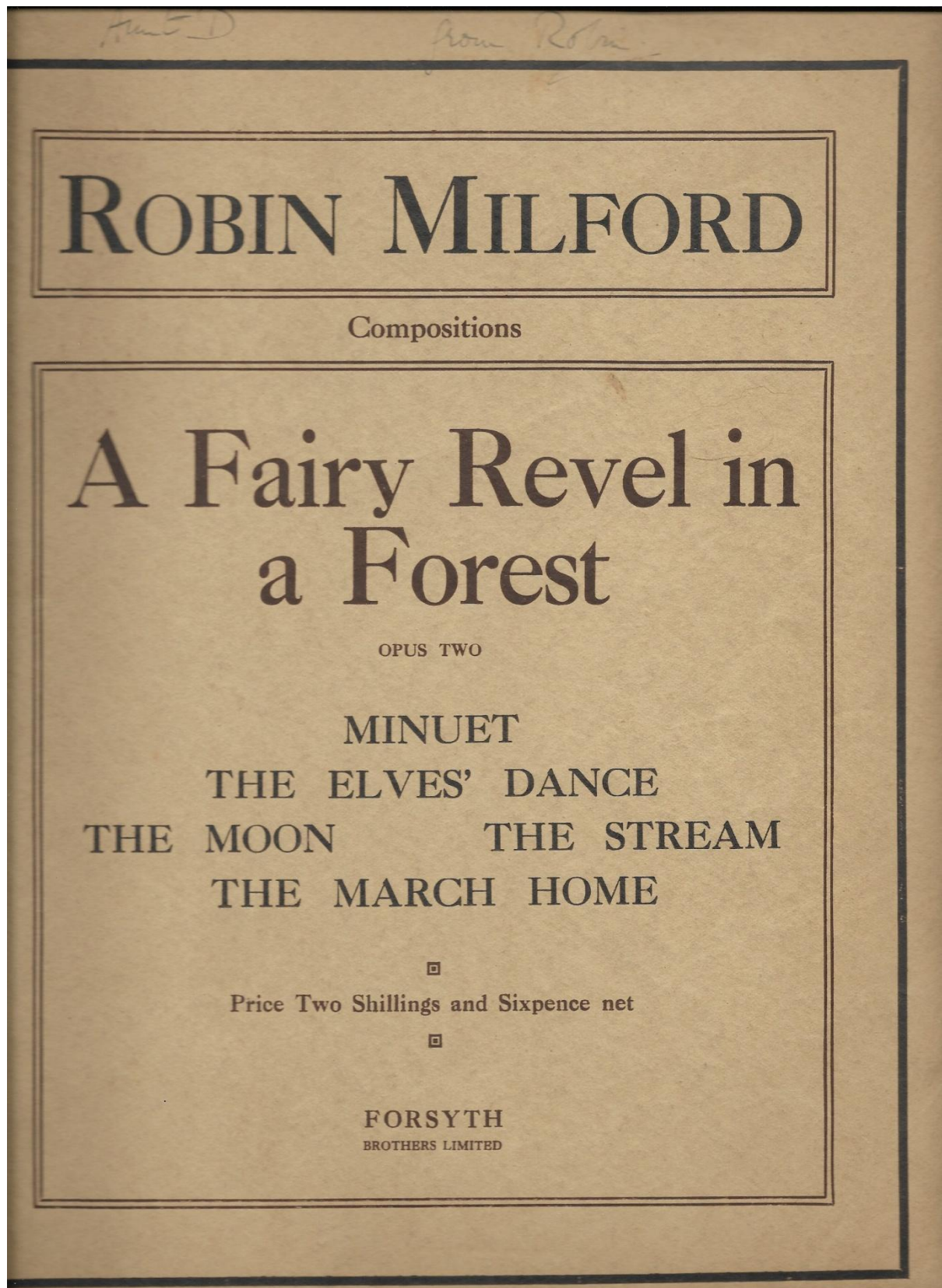
In her 'Memoir', the poet and Milford's cousin, Anne Ridler, remembered the composer playing the third piece of the set ('The Porpoise') at family gatherings. She wrote: "We always had a 'family concert' at some point in his summer visit, at which he would play his first piano composition, a piece entitled 'The Porpoise', with much gambolling in the bass".²

Set in the Aeolian mode, Milford creates the image of a moving porpoise through the use of a broken quaver ostinato in compound duple time, a character-based melody of running quavers (heard twelve times), and constant movement between treble and bass registers.

Requiring an elementary piano technique, *Three Sea Pieces* includes such features as modality, themes influenced by English folk-song, chords moving by 'step' thus creating 'parallel' fifths, chromatically-altered chords creating harmonic

² Copley, p 10

'side-slips' and constant time changes. The overall tonal/modal layout of the work does not create a unified whole, as might be expected.



Also written in 1924, *A Fairy Revel* is another short tone-poem, consisting of five short movements, entitled 'Minuet', 'The Elves Dance', 'The Moon', 'The Stream' 'Elegy' and 'The March Home'. 'Minuet' is a ternary-type structure in which the elegant 18th century dance is depicted through the use of a stately theme (with chordal accompaniment) constantly moving between simple triple and simple duple time.

The magic of elf-land in 'The Elves Dance' is suggested through use of the Aeolian mode, while the actual dancing is painted by an *Allegro* tempo and continuous disjunct quaver movement in both the melody and accompaniment. Chromaticism in the melody and accompaniment adds colour, with the movement ending on an E chord. Profoundly influenced by the poetic imagery of Wordsworth and Hardy, Milford would have wished his music to reflect the poetic possibilities of the title. Mystery is implied by an *Andante* tempo, calm rhythm with long durational melodic notes (minims, crotchets), and the use of parallel 5ths in the accompaniment in addition to 'step'-movement harmony and chromatic 'side-slips'.

Set in the E Aeolian mode, the flowing water of 'The Stream' is depicted by an interesting texture which suggests an elementary organ chorale-prelude texture where a hymn-like melody is heard above running quavers in 3rds (in the middle and lower textures) forming an ostinato. A more advanced form of this texture is met again in the song *Old Age* (1925), while running quavers (in triplets) also depict a stream in the Bridges' poem 'Clear and gentle stream' nearly ten years later. This movement is a fine example of Milford's ability of writing simple music for children, accompanied by varied and interesting features; the final six bars consist of a variation of the theme using rhythmic diminution.

After a four-bar introduction, the quirky melody of 'The March Home' (set in the F# Aeolian mode and A major) is characterised by the prominent interval of a 3rd. This is underpinned by an accompaniment using regular austere chords which suggests march-movement through the constant use of simple duple metre. Other colourful features include harmonic movement by 'step', parallel 5ths, added-note harmony and constant changes between simple duple time and simple triple.

These works are, of course, typical of the period. Balfour Gardiner and John Ireland each had piano miniatures already in print before Milford composed these works. However, Milford's little compositions truly illuminate their programmatic intent and serve as interesting piano works for the early pianist.

A Fairy Revel in a Forest, however, received severe press criticism in *The Musical Times* because of its folk-song influence, its use of “parallel” fifths and overall stylistic language. Milford suffered severely for the syntax he had derived from his composition teacher. The writer of the article clearly does not approve of Vaughan Williams and the ‘Pastoral School’:

As a result we have a race of young students and composers who are apparently anxious to avoid anything that would lead the pupils to suppose they had studied elsewhere than under one of our Huckbalds. Here, for example, is a quotation from an Opus 2 (‘The March Home’), published a few weeks ago:³



The article continues with devastating effect for three pages, ending “There are not two bars of decent part-writing in the whole affair”.⁴ The critic then quotes from *The Moon*, ending “This lunar inanity is solemnly repeated and forms the core of the piece. The left hand deals in fifths throughout, save in about half a dozen places where an enterprising sixth occurs”.⁵

The writer was quite correct in identifying these features as the foundation of Milford’s musical language but failed to grasp that these features merely formed a base from which Milford could develop. Vaughan Williams saw such features as

³ Musical Times Article, January 1, 1925

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Musical Times Article, January 1, 1925

being part of the syntax of English folk-song and, therefore, the starting point for many young composers of the age. He felt this Englishness would assist in bringing about a 'national identity'.

The *Musical Times* critic then attacked the Minuet:

I cannot resist the temptation to quote yet one more extract from this set of pieces:



and continued:

The reader would never guess the title of the work from which this is taken; hence the value of labels. It is called a Minuet. Of course it might have been called by a score of other names, any one of which would have fitted it better. When an old composer wrote a dance, nobody could mistake it for anything but dance music, and they were even able to distinguish the minuets from the gavottes without seeing the title-page. But with this young hopeful's Minuets, Moons, and Marches, you have to look at the labels, and even then you wonder whether they haven't somehow got mixed in the wash.⁶

The writer then went on to criticise Milford and the whole 'pastoral school':

Well, I may be a Philistine, but I see no sort of future for a school of composition so imitative as that of today. There is scarcely a composer with any resource left if you bar him from folk-song, the ancient modes. and the idiom of the Mediaeval and Tudor composers. I am as enthusiastic as anybody over all these things [but] we don't want these delightful things out of season as well as in.

⁶ Musical Times Article, January 1, 1925

The fact is, a good many composers are badly overdoing the sham-antique, and in such a way as to suggest that certain idioms and progressions are a mere stop-gap and substitute for original thought.⁷

There is no evidence to show that this criticism had any detrimental effect on Milford, but one can imagine the effect it might have had on a young composer just setting out on a compositional career. The criticism seems unjust as Milford was simply using the form of language which came naturally to him. These compositions simply aimed to reflect their titles, and the titles their music, within the concept of programme music. However, following Walter Carroll, these works show Milford as being one of the early composers to write piano works specifically aimed at children. Somewhat influenced in style, by the piano works of Balfour Gardiner, these short pieces place Milford in the long line of composers who wrote piano 'water colours' for children during the early years of the twentieth century.

A more developed composition for piano is *My Lady's Pleasure* (pre-1925)⁸. The work consists of three movements entitled 'Pastorale', 'Gavotte' and 'Jig'. These dances show the composer looking back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for inspiration in terms of title and form.

The overall image of a 'Pastorale' is created through the use of the E Aeolian mode and rhythmic units within compound duple metre. The 8-bar theme, derived from English folk-song, is heard in 7 variations, using two-part imitation, transposition, semiquaver figuration and chromatic homophonic writing.

Set in G, 'Gavotte' shows the influence of the Neo-Baroque/Neo-Classical vogue which swept through English music at this time. The image of this eighteenth-century dance is painted through the use of the usual rhythmic anacrusis and repetition of material, all underpinned by harmony coloured by chromaticism and syncopation.

Similar to 'Pastorale' the more robust image of a 'Jig' is also set in the E Aeolian mode and painted through melodic contours derived from English folk-song, involving two alternating themes (constructed through repeated phrases, melodic units and rhythmic units). The themes are presented in monophony, two-part

⁷ Ibid

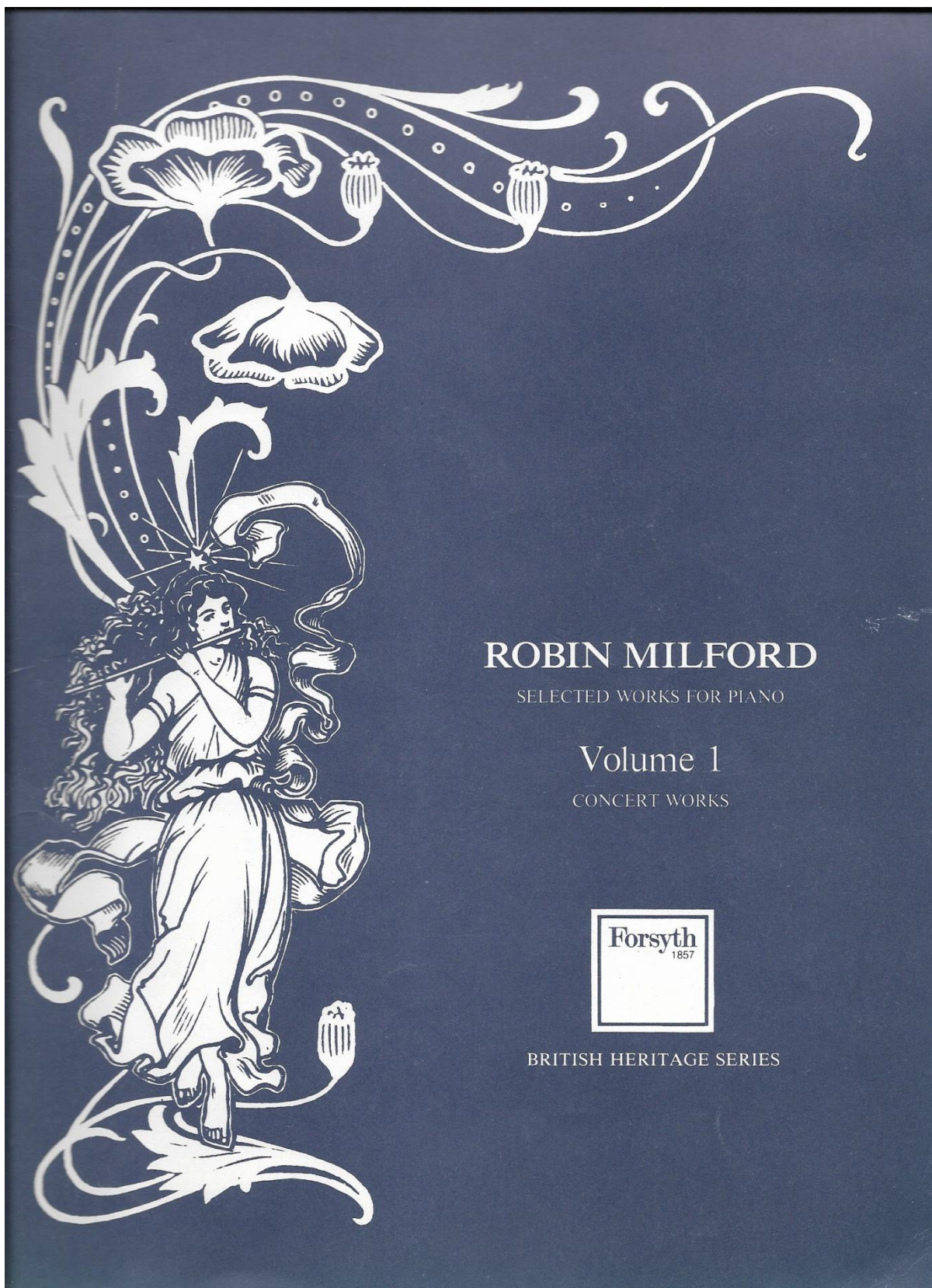
⁸ Republished as *Three Dances*, as requested by the composer

imitation, three-part writing and homophonic forms. Other features of interest include pedals, the overlapping of the two themes, rhythmic and harmonic colourful sections separating themes A and B, and short references to the two themes. The coda consists of constant references to theme A, underpinned by sustained 'tonic' harmony, in short imitation, in transposition and against a pedal A.

Milford's piano compositions of the 1930s are more developed than those from the 1920s. They include *Jenifer's Jingle* (1930), *Prelude, Air and Finale* (1935), and *Diversions* (1939).

The image of a jingle is created in *Jenifer's Jingle* through use of short melodic and rhythmic motifs employed in repetition. Set in G major, these melodic fragments spring primary harmony. With reference to the spelling of 'Jenifer', Marion Milford relates the story that she once challenged Robin on his spelling of 'Jenifer'. He appeared quite unrepentant and explained that he only knew one person named Jenifer and she spelt her name with one 'n'!

Other points of interest in *Jenifer's Jingle* include, simple piano figuration ranging from simple two-part to three-part textures and homophonic four-part texture (fig.). Other features include fragmentary themes with distinct melodic and rhythmic motifs, harmonic side-slips amidst simple harmony and constant syncopation.



In 1935, Milford composed *Prelude, Air and Finale*. This work was designated by the composer as being based 'on a well-known mordent', the mordent in question perhaps the famous lower mordent which commences Bach's *Toccatà in D Minor* for

organ (BWV 565). It is, however, only the two outer movements which involve the famous lower mordent.

Prelude, Air and Finale abounds with melodic inventiveness and rhythmic vitality, not to mention novelty. 'Prelude' employs an extended rondo-type form, in improvisatory style. It consists of three main alternating sections. Section A is based on the introductory lower mordent which employs fast-moving harmony. This leads into a B section, characterised by scalar figuration and syncopation. It moves through a series of time changes - 7/4, 3/4 and 3/2 before returning to 3/4 time. Section C is based on a folksong-styled melody suggesting the transposed Dorian mode. It also refers to the lower mordent and retains the crotchet/ quaver/quaver derived from section one. This material is presented in various guises, including with a superimposed countermelody. Other characteristics of the movement include gentle dissonance and fast-moving harmony.

'Air' shows an interesting aspect of Milford's musical personality – surprise. This movement commences with a simple but unusual nine-bar melody for the treble register only, suggesting English folk-song. It soon opens out into theme and variation form with the most wonderful 'workings' of the theme. These include two-part and three-part textures, gently dissonant harmony, superimposed chromatic harmony, pivoting semiquaver figuration, the theme sounding in the bass with semiquaver scalar figuration above, and extended register between the hands. Before the final presentation of the theme in its original register, now accompanied by chords, Milford presents a highly chromatic section which hints at the theme. This involves the alternation of decorative pianistic figuration with chords and interesting cross-rhythms.

Although the opening of 'Air' suggests use of the Aeolian mode (juxtaposed with A major tonality), Milford concludes the movement with definite V-I closure in A major – another of his many surprises! Finally, *Air* shows distinct stylistic development through its more complex form of language and texture, especially when compared to 'Pastorale', 'Gavotte' and 'Jig' from *Three Dances*.

'Finale' returns to the lower mordent as its inspiration but now in *Lento* presentation. The material and improvisatory style of the opening movement becomes the main form of construction.

The piano music of the 1930's demonstrates a distinct development in style from quite simplistic and non-dissonant writing (e.g. *Three Sea Pieces*) to a more

complex form of piano figuration, construction and chromatic style as found in *Jenifer's Jingle*, and then, finally, to a neo-Impressionistic style as in *Diversions*. The composer himself acknowledged such a development when, of *Diversions*, he wrote: "I've got so sick of writing dull, well-mannered pieces lately, so, if anyone suggests I may be making a bit of a change, I'm only too delighted".⁹ He went on to state: "Also I believe these pieces should 'come off' quite well, which is what so much of my music doesn't do. Balfour [Gardiner] wrote to me such a nice letter about these pieces too, so I feel a bit encouraged - otherwise I've felt damned depressed about my music lately, particularly since no-one has taken on my Violin Concerto for a second performance, which I really do (or, at any rate, I did) feel is a good work ..."¹⁰. [Ibid]

Howard Ferguson gave the first performance of *Diversions* at a Newbury concert in 1938 and described the work as being 'very awkwardly written for the instrument' [4], a fact he fully understood, knowing that Milford, himself, was not a pianist.

Diversions is a neo-impressionistic work using a more progressive syntax in improvisatory style. The first movement employs such characteristics as Debussy-type arpeggiation, harmony moving by 'step', austere repeated chords, linear figuration in the left hand, wide range between the two hands, and antiphonal-answering between the hands. The second movement consists of a series of minute repeating sections in which each section is built upon a specific melodic motif. Other features in this movement include 'cluster' chords, fifty-one time changes, piano figuration ranging from delicate two-part writing to austere and demanding textures and figuration, and a more dissonant usage of chromaticism. Movement three employs two-part piano figuration in the style of Stravinsky, Spanish rhythms (as in the second movement), and wide-range chromatic chords. The fourth movement is the least developmental of the entire work. It makes use of a delicate theme in the Ionian mode on G and employs light piano figuration throughout. Similar to *Prelude, Air and Finale*, the fourth movement commences with a lower mordent-effect which appears throughout the movement. The fifth movement, again employing Spanish rhythms, consists of theme and variations. This movement makes use of such features as large range chromatic chords and fast linear figuration.

⁹ Copley, p 57

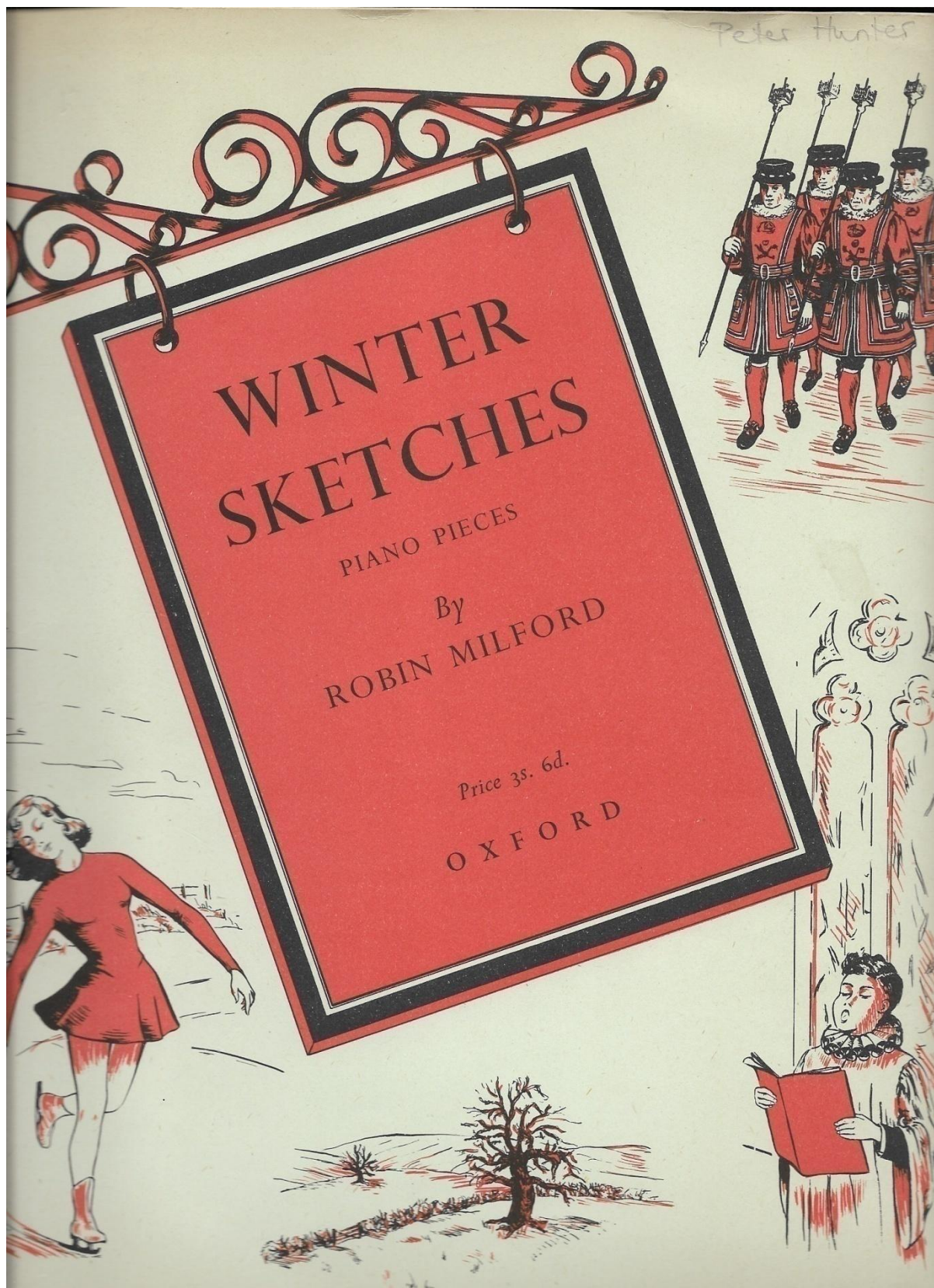
¹⁰ Ibid

Diversions also include such features as melodic and harmonic chromaticism, harmonic dissonance in terms of chords with added sixths, sevenths, ninths and tenths, improvisatory sections with repetitions, a wide range of pianistic figuration, simple two-part texture, contrapuntal writing, rhythmic drive and variation and modality.

Other compositions for piano include *Waltz* (1938) and a set of arrangements entitled *Reputation Square* (1937). Milford prefixed these arrangements with: "These pieces are arranged from a book of tunes called 'Hornpipes', probably collected early in the 19th century, though the title page, which would have had exact information on this point, is missing. The book was lent me by Miss Willis of Downe House, to whom I am therefore indebted for many hours of pleasurable browsing amongst its contents, and for the material for the following pieces".

That Milford did, indeed, have 'many hours of pleasurable browsing' is obvious from his delightful settings of these tunes. *Reputation Square* is a set of six 19th century hornpipes and tunes arrangements ('Matthew's and Welch's, 'Reputation Square' [from whence the set derives its name], 'George's and the New Wells Hornpipe', 'Trim the French', 'Jack in his Trousers' and 'Jupiter in the Clouds').

Reputation Square employs textures which demand a wide range of piano techniques. In addition to Milford's wonderful melodic treatment, such technique permits piano figuration which includes 18th dance-styles, trills, three-part textures, running quaver accompaniments, wide registers, long pedal notes superimposed with short durational notes and wide use of dynamics.



Winter Sketches (1948-1949) is a programmatic suite of four short movements ('Procession', 'The Dancer', 'Winter Landscape' and 'Carol'). The image of a procession is portrayed in the first movement by an imaginative 4-bar first theme (expanded to A, Ai),

ironically, in simple triple time but marked *alla Marcia*. This theme is transferred between the hands in treble and bass register, all against a chordal accompaniment. The second theme suggests a 'pierrot' dance, which might occur during a procession, through the use of a semiquaver figure, again, against a chordal accompaniment. In the second movement, a dance is painted through a quirky 6-bar melody (characterised by a 'neighbour-note' structure EDE), eventually used in antiphonal answering between both treble and bass registers, in addition to acciaccaturas and syncopated harmonic 'side-steps'. The bleakness of a winter landscape in the third movement is suggested through the use of an ostinato consisting of a pedal A and rolling 3rds (characterised by rising 3rds), and a *cantando* irregular theme (3+6), all within the evocative Aeolian mode. 'Carol' consists of a carol-like theme, set between simple quadruple and simple duple time, consisting of AB strands, again in the Aeolian mode with 'music ficta'. Set overall in AAI form, the theme moves to the bass register in the second section for satisfying variation.

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