

1998

## **John Jacob Niles's Settings of the Early Poetry of Thomas Merton in "The Niles-Merton Songs", Opp. 171 and 172.**

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**JOHN JACOB NILES'S SETTINGS OF THE  
EARLY POETRY OF THOMAS MERTON IN  
*THE NILES-MERTON SONGS*, OPP. 171 AND 172**

**A Written Document**

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts**

**in**

**The School of Music**

**by**

**Melanie Boney Williams  
B.M., Belhaven College, 1988  
M.M., Louisiana State University, 1990  
May, 1998**

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## **DEDICATION**

This paper is dedicated to the memory of my father,

**J.D. BONEY, JR.**  
1924-1985



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who were instrumental in the completion of this document. First, I wish to express my gratitude to my graduate committee, especially Professor Robert Grayson and Dr. Jennifer Williams Brown, for their assistance and encouragement during the editing process.

I also appreciate the enthusiastic cooperation and assistance of many people at the University of Kentucky. Dr. Ronald A. Pen not only provided any information I needed, but was a charming host and tour guide during my visit to the UK campus. I also wish to thank the staff of the King Library at UK for their hospitality and their assistance in locating items in the John Jacob Niles Collection.

My sincere thanks to Jacqueline Roberts for so giving so generously of her time to answer my questions. She has not only been an invaluable resource in my research of *The Niles-Merton Songs*, but her special memories and delightful stories about Niles and their concerts together gave me insight into his personality as well as his work.

Finally, I deeply appreciate the support of my family during these years in graduate school. I am especially grateful to my husband, Mark, for his love, patience, and support of my goals. His encouragement and his unwavering confidence in me have been a source of strength and motivation throughout this project.

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## **NOTATIONAL CONVENTIONS**

**Pitches will be denoted according to the following system:**

**Middle C is “C4.” All pitches in the octave beginning with C4 will be identified by the number “4.” The C one octave above is “C5,” one octave below is “C3,” etc.**

## ABSTRACT

John Jacob Niles (1892-1980) is renowned as a composer and performer of music in the folk style of his native Appalachia. However, his body of work also includes forays into opera, oratorio, symphony, and art song. In fact, Niles's final compositional endeavor was the setting of twenty-two poems by the poet and Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968), who resided at Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky. *The Niles-Merton Songs*, Opp. 171-172 were composed between 1967 and 1970.

This study focuses on text-music relations in seven settings of poems from Merton's first two poetry publications, *Thirty Poems* (1944) and *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946). They are "The Messenger," "The Nativity," and "Evening" from Op. 171, and "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943," "The Greek Women," "Cana," and "The Ohio River-Louisville" from Op. 172. These songs are examined with regard to Niles's use of melody, harmony, text painting, text alteration, dynamics, rhythm, tempo, range, motivic repetition, and accompaniment to express the texts.

Conclusions from this study include: 1) Niles constructed these songs in conformity to the formal divisions of Merton's text. The shapes and rhythms of the phrases preserve the natural flow of Merton's poems as they would be spoken; 2) minor text alterations were made only when Niles thought the music could thus be made more beautiful; 3) while examples of text painting are found in each of the songs studied, Niles placed more importance upon a subtler musical elicitation of the moods and images of the text, in which the piano plays a key role; 4) there are repeated motivic patterns that recur throughout the songs of both sets, but they perform no

unifying “cyclic” function; and 5) the influence of Niles’s friend and colleague, Charles Ives, is evident in Niles’s harmonic treatment. Niles’s folk background is reflected in the modal harmonies, broken chord accompaniments, and syllabic text setting of these songs.

## INTRODUCTION

Although the duality of John Jacob Niles's style has attracted many people, it has also been a source of controversy. A collector and arranger of folk music and a composer of original music in both classical and folk styles, he was often rejected by purists in both the folk and art music establishments. Ronald A. Pen relates the following experience when he had suggested the study of Niles's life and works as a dissertation subject to his folklore professor: "The folklorist cast a bemused glance over his tortoise shell glasses and said: 'He was a fraud. You realize, of course, that no folklorist would write his obituary.'"<sup>1</sup> After years of studying Niles and his work, Pen contends that Niles was certainly no fraud, but rather a postmodern man in a time before this concept had been defined:

[Niles'] intentional dissolution of musical context was not willful fraud, but rather a conscious aesthetic choice that challenged the conventions of modernist philosophy in which academically entrenched borders between elite, traditional, and normative musical functions were presented as unmalleable.<sup>2</sup>

This duality had its roots in Niles's early musical experience, which included exposure to both musical styles. Thus while folk music formed the basis for a large part of the composer's success and fame, it does not represent the entirety of his musical output. His classical training provided new experiences and influences that broadened his

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald A. Pen, "The Career of John Jacob Niles: a Study in the Intersection of Elite, Traditional, and Popular Musical Performance," *The Kentucky Review* 12, no. 1/2 (autumn 1993): 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Pen provides a thorough explanation of the term "postmodern." The facet of musical postmodernism that applies to Niles is defined on p. 6 as the "dissolution of the boundaries between musical functions--elite, traditional, and popular."

compositional palate to include experimentation with such forms as oratorio, opera, symphony, and the classical art song.

It is indeed fascinating that a man who received all of his classical instruction before the age of 33 would at the end of his career return to this early influence, producing his most ambitious classical compositions for solo voice and piano in his late seventies. These twenty-two songs, *The Niles-Merton Songs*, Op. 171 and Op. 172, represent his final and perhaps his finest classical works. The purpose of this paper is to study selected pieces from these songs, focusing on the relationship between the texts--the poems of the Trappist monk/poet Thomas Merton--and the music to which Niles set the poems.

These songs belong to the classical “art song” genre, and as such represent a stylistic departure for Niles. He exhibited this new approach to composition in three main ways: 1) he attempted to avoid the influence of the folk tradition that had preoccupied him for so many years,<sup>3</sup> 2) he selected works of an established poet, rather than his own,<sup>4</sup> and 3) he composed them for a classically-trained soprano, Jacqueline Roberts, instead of for his own voice. However, as abrupt as this new change of direction in Niles’s music may at first appear, examination of the composer’s background reveals that this turn toward the classical is in reality neither new nor

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<sup>3</sup>Jacqueline Roberts, interview by the author, Tape recording, Lexington, Kentucky, October 14, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald A. Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1987), 72. The only other set of songs for which Niles chose another poet’s texts were three songs to poems of Cale Young Rice.



abrupt. It is, rather, the culmination of the classical tendencies that existed in his music alongside the traditional folk style throughout his life.

There is to date little published scholarly research into the life and career of John Jacob Niles beyond short biographical sketches found in music dictionaries. The leading Niles scholar is Dr. Ronald A. Pen of the University of Kentucky, whose doctoral dissertation represents the first in-depth biographical study and catalogue of Niles's compositions. Pen has continued to research Niles's life and career; his detailed biography of the composer is forthcoming from the University of Kentucky Press.<sup>5</sup>

As an outgrowth of his dissertation, Pen has supervised much of the growth of the John Jacob Niles Collection at the University of Kentucky. This large collection contains invaluable resources to anyone interested in Niles research. In researching *The Niles-Merton Songs*, I traveled to the University of Kentucky, where I studied the manuscripts of the songs, and perused decades of correspondence between the composer and publishers, friends, and those interested in booking performances. Other documents in the John Jacob Niles Collection include the field notebooks in which Niles dictated folk song fragments as a young man, diaries from his days of military service, his poetry, manuscripts, and his unfinished autobiography. In addition, examples of Niles's artistry in woodworking are displayed, as is the portrait of the composer by Victor Hammer that, with that of Thomas Merton, graces the cover of *The Niles-Merton Songs*.

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<sup>5</sup> Pen also wrote an article, "The Career of John Jacob Niles: a Study in the Intersection of Elite, Traditional, and Popular Musical Performance," which appeared in the autumn, 1993 issue of *The Kentucky Review*. See footnote 1.

Among the most fascinating portions of my research were my interviews with Jacqueline Roberts, the soprano for whose voice Niles composed these songs. She not only provided much first-hand information about their composition and performance, but offered insight into the composer's personality and work habits as well. One of only two singers with whom Niles ever shared his programs, Roberts still resides in Lexington, Kentucky.<sup>6</sup> Her book, *A Journey with Johnnie: A Memoir of my Years with John Jacob Niles*, is forthcoming.

Other scholarly research into *The Niles-Merton Songs* has been generated by faculty and students at the University of Kentucky. Kerstin Warner, an English professor who assisted Jacqueline Roberts in writing her memoirs, also wrote an article that briefly recounts the circumstances of the songs' composition and concludes with a general overview of each of the twenty-two pieces.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Gina Epifano, a DMA student in vocal performance at the University of Kentucky, is currently preparing a performer's guide to *The Niles-Merton Songs* for her lecture-recital.

Whereas Niles exhibited a duality of musical styles, Thomas Merton's duality involved his vocations as a writer and Trappist monk. Merton remained a prolific writer of both poetry and prose during his twenty-seven years at Our Lady of

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<sup>6</sup> His only other performing partner was the contralto Marion Kerby, who is now deceased. This association is discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> The survey, entitled "'For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same': Composing the Niles-Merton Songs, 1967-1970" was published in the summer 1987 issue of *The Kentucky Review*.

Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky; he received acclaim for his poetry as well as his writings on contemplation and social issues.

Interest in Merton's life and work has continued to grow in the thirty years since his death in 1968. Shortly before he died, Merton himself organized The Merton Legacy Trust to oversee copyright issues related to his writings as well as the production of his biography. Collections of Merton materials are located at Bellarmine College in Kentucky, the University of Kentucky, and Gethsemani Monastery. Marquita E. Breit and Robert E. Daggy's *Thomas Merton: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986, 2nd.ed.) is the most complete listing of published books about the monk. Leading Merton scholars include John Howard Griffin, a personal friend of Merton who was the first official biographer commissioned by The Merton Legacy Trust, and Michael Mott, whose book, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) is probably the most widely respected Merton biography. One of the most important sources of information about Merton's poetry is *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979) by Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, a close friend to whom Merton sent all his original poetry manuscripts.

This paper is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 includes biographical information about John Jacob Niles and Thomas Merton, how they came to be acquainted, and the extent of their contact and collaboration in creating these songs; and a study of the working relationship between John Jacob Niles and Jacqueline Roberts during the composition of these songs is also recounted. Chapter 2 is devoted

to the poetry of Thomas Merton: after an overview of his style and works, the poems that provide texts for the seven songs chosen for study are discussed. The relationship between these seven poems and the music Niles composed to render them is examined in Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE MONK AND THE “BOONE CREEK BOY”: THE LIVES OF TWO AMERICAN ARTISTS

John Jacob Niles

Niles’s life can be viewed as a working out of the seemingly divergent influences of classical and folk music present from his earliest years. Let us trace the origins of these influences, and see how they manifested themselves in his career and ultimately in *The Niles-Merton Songs*.

A native Kentuckian, John Jacob Niles quite naturally acquired his early and extensive exposure to the oral traditions of Appalachian folk music. He was born in Louisville on April 28, 1892, and had the good fortune to be raised in an atmosphere rich in music of both the folk and classical varieties. Niles’s father introduced young “Johnnie” to the traditional ballads of the region, while his mother, a pianist and church organist, instructed her son in keyboard and music reading. The family, which was later enlarged with the arrivals of Johnnie’s four younger siblings, often spent their evenings telling stories and singing folk songs. They also read poetry and opera plots, further reflecting his childhood introduction to both the folk and classical traditions.<sup>8</sup>

Niles began collecting and arranging folk tunes when he was still a young boy. He composed “Go ‘way from my Window,” the first of many compositions in the folk style, from a fragment of a work song in 1907.<sup>9</sup> Others soon followed, including one

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<sup>8</sup> Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 28.

<sup>9</sup> Rena Niles, “The Songs of John Jacob Niles,” *National Association of Teachers of Singing Bulletin* (September/October 1982), 18.

that came about from his mother's notation of a bit of a Christmas song she had heard while visiting a Kentucky family. When she requested that he try to develop it into a song, Niles took the fragment of music and text and from it produced "Jesus, Jesus Rest Your Head."<sup>10</sup>

As a teenager Niles began traveling through the Appalachian region collecting folk tunes and texts in field notebooks, often arranging them with his own accompaniments. Pen cites two important attributes that enabled Niles to be successful at this endeavor: "First, he possessed a keen ear, capable of discerning modal and gapped scales frequently fraught with unusual intonation, and second, he had the uncanny ability to mix socially with all classes, thus insuring his subject's cooperation and good will."<sup>11</sup> He continued this practice, even combining it with his early employment with the Burroughs Adding Machine Company, in which capacity he traveled throughout the state of Kentucky repairing broken machines.<sup>12</sup> He also began to gain notoriety as a performer, singing his arrangements while accompanying himself on a homemade dulcimer.

The year 1917 brought abrupt and extreme change to this relatively simple life. With the onset of World War I, Niles enlisted in the aviation division of the Army Signal Corps and served as a pilot under the command of Fiorello La Guardia, who

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<sup>10</sup> John Jacob Niles, preface to *The Songs of John Jacob Niles* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1975).

<sup>11</sup> Pen, "The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles," 36.

<sup>12</sup> David Burg, "John Jacob Niles," *The Kentucky Review* 2, no. 1 (1980), 4.

later became mayor of New York.<sup>13</sup> Even under these adverse conditions, he continued to collect and arrange songs, including “Venezuela,” written in 1918 from a fragment of a song he overheard being sung by sailors from Barbados.<sup>14</sup> Later he published *Songs My Mother Never Taught Me* from songs he had heard among the regiments of white soldiers and *Singing Soldiers* from the songs of the black troops.

Niles’s active duty ended with a near-fatal plane crash in 1918 that left him severely injured and no longer fit for duty. After a lengthy recuperation in a French hospital, he studied at the Schola Cantorum in Paris before enrolling at the University of Lyon, where he studied opera literature, harmony, and theory. Pen notes that “this study also strongly colored his musical biases towards the compositions of the French Impressionist School, making him a romantic rather than a classicist in inclination.”<sup>15</sup>

Niles returned to the United States in 1919, and in 1920 enrolled at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. He remained there until 1923, focusing most of his energies upon preparation for a career as an opera singer, but also studying composition with Edgar Stillman Kelley.<sup>16</sup> It was during this phase of his musical development that Niles composed “The Lotus Bloom,” an art song with text translated

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald A. Pen, biography of John Jacob Niles, forthcoming, unpaginated.

<sup>14</sup> Rena Niles, “The Songs of John Jacob Niles,” 18.

<sup>15</sup> Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 39.

<sup>16</sup> Alanna Nash, “John Jacob Niles: A Song from the Heart,” *Beaux Arts* 1, no. 2 (summer 1981): 18.

from Chinese by a Chinese student at the Conservatory.<sup>17</sup> In 1923 he began study at the United States Veteran's Music School in Chicago. Still determined to launch an opera career, the young tenor won a place in the chorus of the Chicago Lyric Opera, and for six months actively participated in productions with the prominent company. After realizing his gifts were suited only to *comprimario* roles, however, Niles shifted his focus from the operatic stage to the concert stage. He also truly missed performing the traditional music he had presented in folk concerts before the war and in salons in France and Belgium, but such performances of folk style music in formal recital settings were unheard of on this side of the Atlantic.<sup>18</sup>

Determined to remedy this situation, Niles moved to New York and worked at several odd jobs while attempting to begin his unique performing career. One such concert in 1928 was attended by Marion Kerby, a contralto who eventually became Niles's performing partner. Their association, which was rocky to say the least, endured through five years of concerts in the States and two European tours, although their performances often achieved more critical than financial success.<sup>19</sup> When not busy preparing the repertoire for his concerts with Kerby, Niles served as an assistant to the photographer Doris Ullman, with whom he traveled throughout the southern states. These trips enabled Niles to resume his ballad collecting, which provided new

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<sup>17</sup> John Jacob Niles, preface to *The Songs of John Jacob Niles*.

<sup>18</sup> Pen, "The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles," 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.



material for the concerts with Kerby.<sup>20</sup> His interest in classical music was evident, however, in his experiments with composing larger-scale works such as *Africa to Harlem*, a vocal duet with two-piano accompaniment, and *The King of Little Italy*, an opera.<sup>21</sup>

Niles's ballad-collecting days essentially ended with the death of Ullman in 1934, and after Kerby's departure in 1933 he concentrated once again on his solo career. Soon, however, Niles entered the longest partnership of his life: he met the woman who was to become his wife, mother of his two sons, and his business manager for the remainder of his lengthy career. Niles first met Rena Lipetz in 1932, beginning a relationship that grew and endured the next four years of separation brought about by Niles's travels. Rena was the sophisticated daughter of prominent Russian parents who had fled to the United States after the Communist revolution. She was a graduate of Wellesley College and a journalist and editor of a magazine published in New York. Not surprisingly, her marriage to the much older John Jacob Niles, self-styled ballad singer and "Boone Creek boy" from Kentucky, was not quickly accepted by the bride's family.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Johnnie and Rena were married in 1936 and soon settled at Boot Hill Farm, a thirty-three acre spread near Lexington that would remain their home for the remainder of Niles's life. There he farmed, painted, wrote poetry, became quite

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald A. Pen, interview by the author, Boot Hill Farm, near Lexington, Kentucky, October 17, 1997.

good at woodworking (he even constructed the dulcimers he played in his concerts), and continued to compose.

As his fame grew Niles performed extensively, singing his folk arrangements and original folk-style compositions while accompanying himself on one of his dulcimers. During the years 1939-1942 he recorded “American Ballads,” a set of three folk albums and his first major recording on RCA Victor’s Red Seal label. Pen states that these recordings “were a testament to his ability to bridge the gap between folk and art audiences, as he was the solitary folk musician on a label that contained such classical music luminaries as Caruso, Heifetz, Toscanini, and Rachmaninoff.”<sup>23</sup> Niles’s distinctive vocal quality, his remarkably high range, and his natural charisma endeared him to his audiences, if not to some critics who judged his singing style--not to mention his folk arrangements--to be “inauthentic.” Whether he attempted to be authentic or not, Niles did much to promote the folk revival that blossomed in the 1960s. His aforementioned ability to relate to people from a wide spectrum of economic and educational backgrounds may have played a part in the instant rapport he often enjoyed even with large audiences. Whatever the key to his success, John Jacob Niles enjoyed an active performing career well into his eighties.

The pace of Niles’s performing schedule increased with his fame, but this by no means diminished his compositional output. On the contrary, his compositions from the 1940s onward began to reflect a turn toward the classical even as his performing career was singularly devoted to traditional music. He composed more extended

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<sup>23</sup> Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 70.

works, usually providing both text and music; these pieces include an oratorio (entitled *Lamentations*), cantatas, and other choral works. He also composed art songs--pieces that were completely new rather than based upon any fragment of folk music. Aside from three poems by Cale Young Rice, all the texts were again Niles's own.<sup>24</sup>

When placed at the end of this roughly twenty-year gravitation toward the influences of his youth, *The Niles-Merton Songs* of 1967-1970 no longer appear such an anomaly in the oeuvre of John Jacob Niles. Instead they represent the culmination of decades of influence, experimentation, and experience. These songs, however, do represent what was essentially the end of Niles's compositional career. He continued to concertize until 1978, although he sang less when he began sharing the stage with soprano Jacqueline Roberts and pianists Janelle Pope and, after 1970, Nancie Field.<sup>25</sup> He continued to write poetry,<sup>26</sup> and had begun his autobiography when he was stricken with a heart ailment in 1979. Niles never recovered from this condition, and died on March 1, 1980 at the age of eighty-eight.

At first glance it seems odd that John Jacob Niles, who almost invariably provided his own texts over sixty years of work, would be interested in setting the poetry of a Trappist monk. Indeed, these two men seemingly shared only geographical

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>25</sup> Roberts, interview. Niles introduced the songs and sang his folk arrangements, accompanying himself on the dulcimer. "His girls" performed the art songs, including selections from *The Niles-Merton Songs*.

<sup>26</sup> In 1977, Niles's publishing company, Boone-Tolliver Press, published his collection entitled *Brick Dust and Buttermilk*.

proximity, as Gethsemani Abbey is about an hour from Boot Hill Farm. Further examination, however, reveals some similarities that are almost hidden among their striking differences. Perhaps most appealing to Niles was the monk's study of Zen meditation techniques and philosophy, since Niles was becoming increasingly interested in Zen.<sup>27</sup> Both had spent time in France, where Merton was first exposed to a predominantly Catholic culture as a young boy and Niles broadened his musical training and experience during and after his World War I service. Both left New York City to seek a simpler existence among the rural hills of Kentucky: Niles returned in the mid-1930s with his new wife to the region of his childhood, and Merton began his monastic life at the Gethsemani Abbey in 1941, never before having lived in the South. Perhaps most important is the fact that, disparate though their two worlds were, Niles and Merton held a respect for each other as artists that produced a marriage of music and poetry in *The Niles-Merton Songs*.

#### Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France on January 31, 1915. His birth came during a time of increasing political tensions surrounding the outbreak of World War I in Europe and necessitated the return of the Merton family to the United States when "Tom" was barely one year old. Like Niles's parents, Merton's mother and father were both talented artists, but their medium was the canvas rather than music.

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<sup>27</sup> Kerstin P. Warner, "'For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same': Composing the 'Niles-Merton Songs,' 1967-1970," *The Kentucky Review* 7 (summer 1987): 29. In a performance of these songs at the University of Kentucky, he pronounced himself a Zen Buddhist who applied this to his composition: "I just sit quietly or lie in bed, do not hate anything or anybody-that's Zen-and then great ideas come crashing in on me."

Upon their return to America, they settled in Flushing, New York, where a second son, John Paul, was born in 1918. Merton remembered his mother as a very stern woman and strict disciplinarian who recorded everything he did in a journal she called "Tom's Book."<sup>28</sup> Tom was by all accounts a very bright child who had inherited his parents' artistic inclinations. By age five he could already read, write, and draw quite well.<sup>29</sup>

While Merton's mother placed much emphasis upon the education of her children, she was never concerned with their spiritual development. His grandparents were at best indifferent toward religion, and his grandfather had a strong dislike and distrust of Catholicism:

It seemed, in Pop's mind, that there was a certain sinister note of malice connected with the profession of anything like the Catholic faith. The Catholic Church was the only thing against which I have ever heard him speak with any definite bitterness or animosity.<sup>30</sup>

Financial necessity provided the source of Merton's earliest memories of organized religion when in 1921 his father secured the position of church organist at the Episcopal church in Douglaston, New York, where Tom's maternal grandparents resided. Merton often accompanied his father on the five-mile trip from Flushing to Sunday services at the church.

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 17.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

The family's financial difficulties were apparently due to Ruth Merton's stomach cancer, from which she died in 1921. Owen Merton then moved his two young sons to their nearby grandparents' house and soon began to travel in search of inspiration for his painting, accompanied by Tom. This wandering marked the beginning of Merton's uprooted, unconventional upbringing that took him away from his brother and his grandparents. After taking the boy with him to Cape Cod and then to Bermuda, Owen, who was beginning to enjoy some success as an artist, decided to return to France. Tom soon joined his father, but John Paul remained with his grandparents in Douglaston.

Upon settling in Avignon, Tom quickly learned French and began attending a French boarding school in nearby Montauban in 1926. However, father and son soon relocated to England, where Owen Merton's new benefactor resided; this patron supplied an annual stipend for five years in exchange for his choice of the artist's works each year.<sup>31</sup> Although he loved France, Tom held no fondness for his boarding school and in the spring of 1928, readily accompanied his father to England, to the home of an aunt and uncle in Ealing. He found life there to be quite agreeable and his new school much friendlier, but his happiness was to be short-lived. In the summer of 1929, just before Tom was to leave for boarding school at Oakham, his father was diagnosed with a fatal brain tumor.

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<sup>31</sup> Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 40. Mott writes that Owen Merton saw this as a reminder that he could not support his family, but himself had to be supported.

Despite his personal difficulties, Tom enjoyed Oakham: he studied English literature, which he loved, and the Greek classics, which he hated. The headmaster encouraged Merton to work toward the goal of earning a scholarship to Cambridge, and "let me follow the bent of my own mind, for Modern Languages and Literature."<sup>32</sup> Merton discovered modern writers such as James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and D.H. Lawrence. During the time he first read them, however, he was becoming more and more independent and somewhat rebellious, behavior not atypical of a boy in his mid-teens.

In January, 1931, Owen Merton died in a London hospital. After returning to New York in the summer of 1931 to visit his family, Tom continued his education at Oakham, spending Christmas and Easter vacations in Germany studying French and German. One significant journey in February of 1933 took Merton to Italy, where the foundation for his religious conversion may well have been laid: after a week or so in Rome, he found himself drawn to the artwork in the churches, particularly Byzantine mosaics.<sup>33</sup>

Merton earned a scholarship to Cambridge, where he undertook studies in French and Italian in the autumn of 1933. Unfortunately, his academic success there was so compromised by his wild behavior outside class and lack of attention to his

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<sup>32</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 120. He recalls the curiosity about Catholicism caused by visits to the churches, and specifically mentions the mosaic at St. Praxed's as one of his favorites. This is no doubt the inspiration for *Mosaic: St. Praxed's*, the text of Op. 172, No. 12 of *The Niles-Merton Songs*.

studies that his career at Cambridge was short-lived. Merton returned to New York, took up residence with his grandparents and brother, and enrolled at Columbia University in February of 1935.

It was during his years at Columbia that the seeds of the Catholic faith--perhaps sewn in him as a young boy playing among the churches and statues in Avignon and revived as a teenager admiring Byzantine mosaics in Rome--began to flower. Merton himself credits much of his first understanding of God and the Christian faith to his study of the poetry of William Blake, who was the subject of his Master's thesis in English at Columbia.<sup>34</sup> Merton formally converted to Catholicism in 1938, and, having completed his degree, embarked on a teaching career. He began what he considered his true vocation, however, when on December 10, 1941 he entered Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery near Bardstown, Kentucky, and became a Trappist monk. He took the name "Father Louis" and lived the remainder of his life in this cloistered setting, worshipping, instructing novices, and writing prolifically about various topics, including civil rights, the Vietnam war, the nuclear arms race, and Zen mysticism.

Toward the end of his life, Merton's solitude became increasingly threatened by his many visitors to the abbey: the steady stream of guests included friends and literary colleagues, unknown poets seeking a mentor, Protestants and Catholics in search of spiritual wisdom, and social activists, including Joan Baez, who admired his courage

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 211.



and social conscience.<sup>35</sup> Indeed the notoriety of Thomas Merton, famous poet, author, and activist, often encroached upon the time for prayer and meditation that Father Louis, humble Trappist monk, so craved. For a time in the 1940s, he struggled with the problem of combining contemplation with writing, especially the writing of poetry. Merton, however, later came to reconcile monasticism and writing as dual vocations to which he was called, an expression of his faith and convictions through which Kramer notes that he “was to combine questions about himself with questions of, and for, the world.”<sup>36</sup> His books, articles, and poetry were outpourings of his contemplative life that undoubtedly influenced others to embark on their own spiritual journey.

It was a spiritual pilgrimage of his own that led Merton to the Orient to study Eastern religions and monastic meditative practices. On December 10, 1968, just two days after his arrival in Bangkok, Thailand, he was electrocuted when he touched the frayed cord of an electric fan. He was interred at Gethsemani Abbey on December 17, with a large crowd of friends and associates in attendance.

#### The Composition of *The Niles-Merton Songs*

Although Niles and Merton were a generation apart in age, both had attained a certain maturity of style when they first met in 1967. After being introduced to the poetry of Thomas Merton by Carolyn Hammer, wife of the artist Victor Hammer and mutual friend of Niles and Merton, Niles began to study editions of Merton’s poetry in

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<sup>35</sup> John Howard Griffin, *“Follow the Ecstasy”: Thomas Merton: The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Ft. Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983), 129.

<sup>36</sup> Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, Twayne’s United States Authors Series, ed. Warren French, no. 462 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 12.

search of texts for musical setting.<sup>37</sup> While Niles had the poet's complete approval for such a project, there was apparently no direct collaboration between poet and composer regarding the choice of poems to be set. In fact, Niles had already completed work on two songs, "The Messenger" and "The Nativity," before meeting Merton, and only ten of the eventual twenty-two had been set before Merton's tragic death in December of 1968.<sup>38</sup> Rena Niles recalls that the initial meeting of the two men took place at Gethsemani Abbey in the late summer of 1967; Merton heard the first three completed songs when he visited Boot Hill Farm in autumn of the same year. There weren't many other meetings between Niles and Merton:

From the late summer of 1967, when Mrs. Hammer first took the Nileses to Gethsemani to meet Thomas Merton, until the early fall of 1968, when Merton made the second of two visits to Boot Hill Farm, the poet and the composer met no more than half-a-dozen times. Merton was allowed to visit the farm because it was on the way to his doctor in Lexington. There were also three or four picnics in the woods at Gethsemani, one of them on a memorable, bright, cold February day. These were the only times when John Jacob Niles saw Tom Merton. Yet when he heard that Merton died in Bangkok in December of 1968, he felt that he had lost an old and close friend.<sup>39</sup>

If there was any collaborator with Niles in the creation of this music, it was surely Jacqueline Roberts, the soprano for whose voice the songs were tailored. According to Rena Niles, "the quality of that particular voice was certainly a determining factor in the structure of these songs, much as the demands of his own

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<sup>37</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>38</sup> The ten completed songs comprise Op. 171.

<sup>39</sup> Rena Niles, "The Songs of John Jacob Niles," 17.

soaring male alto with its 'electrifying C sharp' had much to do with the structure of his earlier work."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, her strong lower range, ease in singing ascending leaps, and beautiful high G, which Niles considered "Jackie's best note," were all utilized in these melodies.<sup>41</sup> Roberts's voice was the inspiration for all the songs after "The Messenger" and "The Nativity," which he asked her to read for him after hearing her audition at Boot Hill Farm.<sup>42</sup> Niles was impressed by her musicianship and offered to employ her with her accompanist, Janelle Pope, to sing and play the fragments of these songs as they were composed and to perform them in subsequent concerts along with other repertoire he had written for high voice. Roberts and Pope began a schedule of weekly meetings, arriving at Boot Hill Farm at ten a.m. sharp (Niles demanded promptness) to sing through the revisions and new music he had completed since the previous session. His normal compositional procedure was to notate his first thoughts in pencil, then ink in the final version.<sup>43</sup>

To what extent did Roberts influence Niles in the composition of these songs? Pen says that the collaboration of Niles, Roberts, and Pope involved working out

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Pen, "The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles," 83. Niles and Roberts first met on March 31, 1963 at Christ Church in Lexington, where Roberts was employed as a soloist. When Roberts contacted him in the spring of 1967 to request repertoire for a recital, he invited Roberts and Pope to Boot Hill Farm.

<sup>43</sup> Pen, "The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles," 213.

“problems of range, setting, and interpretation.”<sup>44</sup> Warner’s account of their rehearsals describes how Niles experimented and revised his initial ideas after hearing the musicians perform them.<sup>45</sup> When I asked Roberts if she ever offered suggestions for these revisions, she replied that she almost never made any comment of this type because she greatly respected his compositional abilities and didn’t feel it was “her place” to make such critiques. A notable exception was her response to “Evening”: after Roberts and Pope insisted on their preference of one version over another, Niles discarded the latter immediately.<sup>46</sup> Robert’s most significant contribution was, therefore, not as critic, but as a singer whose vocal qualities provided the parameters of the twenty songs Niles composed after their collaboration began.

Merton obviously concurred with Niles’s choice of muse. Upon hearing “The Messenger,” “The Nativity,” and “A Responsory, 1948” at his first visit to Boot Hill Farm in October of 1967, he wept, struck not only by the beauty of Niles’s settings of his poetry, “but above all by this lovely girl, Jackie Roberts, who has put her whole heart into singing them.”<sup>47</sup> Merton’s second and final visit to Boot Hill Farm was in the fall of 1968 shortly before departing to Asia. Whereas Pen states that Merton heard only the first eight of Opus 171,<sup>48</sup> both Warner and Rena Niles record that he heard all

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Warner, ““For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same,”” 30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 501.

<sup>48</sup> Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 212.

ten songs of the set.<sup>49</sup> Roberts believes he must have heard all ten since they were complete at the time of his visit, especially in view of the fact that he would miss their premier in November.<sup>50</sup> Sadly, Merton died without ever hearing the twelve that followed in Op. 172.

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<sup>49</sup> Warner, ““For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same,”” 32; and Rena Niles, “The Songs of John Jacob Niles,” 17.

<sup>50</sup> Roberts, interview.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE POETRY

Since Niles rarely set poetry that was not his own, Merton's poems must have had a significant effect upon the composer to inspire such an almost unique undertaking at the end of his career. This chapter is devoted to the poetry of Thomas Merton: the conditions under which he composed his poems, the collections he published, and a study of the seven poems that became the texts of the songs analyzed in Chapter 3. All the poems mentioned in the initial overview of Merton's body of work were also set in *The Niles-Merton Songs*.

#### Merton's Style and Works

Thomas Merton was already a writer when he began his monastic vocation in December of 1941. Indeed, his almost life-long habit of keeping personal journals reflects a love of writing that began in childhood and received a new spark of inspiration from his religious awakening in 1938. Merton produced at least forty-five articles for student publications while attending Columbia University, and wrote an occasional book review for the *New York Times* to supplement his income.<sup>51</sup> During his subsequent tenure as a professor at St. Bonaventure College in Olean, New York,<sup>52</sup> he also tried his hand at writing novels, though all these early efforts were rejected by

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Kountz, *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk: A Cultural Study, 1915-1951*, vol. 11 of *Chicago Studies in the History of American Religion* (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1991), 119.

<sup>52</sup> Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 338. Merton held a teaching position in the English Department at this Catholic college in upstate New York from fall, 1940 until he joined the monastery in December of 1941.

publishers. Both at Columbia and St. Bonaventure he also produced poetry, something that he later said he was unable to do before becoming a Christian.<sup>53</sup>

Merton was prepared to leave the world when he entered the monastery even though he knew that this “dying to self” might include giving up writing: he wrote in his last journal before leaving for Gethsemani that he was prepared to do this if God required it of him.<sup>54</sup> As part of becoming a Trappist monk he took a vow of silence wherein he renounced verbal communication not related to worship or the edification of the Church;<sup>55</sup> but writing gave Merton another voice to communicate his thoughts to the world from which he had removed himself. His fear that the beauty he saw in the contemplative life could be lost in his desire to write--to actively express himself--was a source of inner turmoil that began during the months preceding his entrance into Gethsemani. Resolution was not quickly forthcoming: this struggle only worsened during his first ten years there. The 1940s were thus difficult for Merton. His struggle with his identity was only exacerbated by his superiors at the monastery, who put his literary talents to use “writing pious books about little-known Cistercian saints and studies of the monastic life.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 314. He wrote that his first real poem was *Song for Our Lady of Cobre*, inspired by his 1940 visit to the Shrine of Our Lady of Cobre in Oriente, Cuba.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1959), 270.

<sup>55</sup> George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet, a Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978), 48.

<sup>56</sup> Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Ft. Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), 2.

Perhaps the most painful aspect of the monk's dilemma was his inability to justify to himself the writing of poetry because he saw no way that it could serve to enrich the contemplative life. The importance such writing held for the monk is evident in the fact that, while he burned or gave away all his other manuscripts, he took his poems with him to Kentucky.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, he continued to compose them only in obedience to his superiors, particularly Father Abbot Dom James Fox. In the hope of helping Merton resolve his problem, the Father Abbot provided him an office, a typewriter, and instructions to write his own life story.<sup>58</sup> The results of this assignment were Merton's second poetry publication, *A Man in the Divided Sea*, and his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Although it drew criticism from those who thought he had broken his vow of silence by writing it, the autobiography was a critical and popular success. Unfortunately, this recognition from the world he had left behind only intensified the monk's unrest.<sup>59</sup> He continued to write for the rest of his life: his poetry and other work was molded by, and eventually became reconciled with, his contemplative vocation as a Trappist monk.

The poetry published in the 1940s includes *Thirty Poems* (1944), *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946), *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947), and *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949). From the beginning, Merton disliked adhering to form in writing poetry.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>58</sup> James Laughlin, "Merton the Writer," chap. 1 in *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*, ed. Paul Wilkes (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 19.

<sup>59</sup> Kountz, *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk*, 129.



He preferred instead a free style that, while often rooted in traditional forms, reflected the influence of poets such as Federico Garcia Lorca, James Joyce, and Dylan Thomas.<sup>60</sup> He used imagery and metaphor with increasing mastery through the decade, and began experimenting with surrealism, which would become a hallmark of his poetry in the 1960s. By the fourth book, his poetry had become more focused and more personal in nature, with what Lentfoehr describes as “a trend toward lean metaphor to emphasize the inner event implicit in juxtaposed images.”<sup>61</sup>

Although they reflect the stylistic changes of a decade of writing, Merton’s poems from the 1940s hold as their common thread an underlying theme: the joy and wonder of the monastic life. Poems extolling the importance of silence and contemplation are prominent not only in these early collections, but in every subsequent poetry publication as well. The contrast these poems provide to the secular ones in the early volumes reflects the difficult problem Merton faced as he sorted through his need to reconcile his poetry to his monastic calling. In his early poetry Merton expressed a dark, at times apocalyptic, view of a corrupted modern culture that had turned its back on God; his strong dislike of cities provided a theme that would become more pervasive in later poetry. Such poems contrasted, especially in his early work, with religious verses inspired by the beauty of his surroundings at Gethsemani.

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<sup>60</sup> Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979), 7. She notes Lorcan influence in Merton’s alternation of quatrains and six-line stanzas in some early poems.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

At the end of *Figures for an Apocalypse*, Merton included an essay, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," in which he declared God, as seen by faith and revelation, to be the only subject truly worthy of the Christian poet. He recognized that contemplation could contribute to the art of poetry, but warned that "poetry can, indeed, help to bring us rapidly through that part of the journey to contemplation that is called active: but when we are entering the realm of true contemplation, where eternal happiness begins, it may turn around and bar our way."<sup>62</sup> He therefore concluded that the only course for the Christian artist truly seeking mystical communion with God is the "ruthless and complete sacrifice of his art."<sup>63</sup>

It is interesting that after presenting such a black and white argument, Merton in the final paragraph of the essay pondered the situation of the artist who nevertheless feels morally certain that God desires that he continue to write. He stated that in such a case, as when one is obligated by his superiors to pursue one's art, one should continue, taking comfort in the fact that the poet can express to others for their benefit the joys of the contemplative life.<sup>64</sup> Merton was obviously no closer to reconciling his need for poetic expression with his desire for such a life; it would be ten years before he would revise this essay after having come to terms with this problem.

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," in *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947), 109.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

In light of his remarks in "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," one can imagine the anguish with which Merton produced *The Tears of the Blind Lions*. These poems reflect his inner struggle in that they are less focused upon the ultimate fate of the outside world. They are rather more personal and introspective; the wonder of the monastic life again provides the underlying theme.<sup>65</sup> The poems also reflect a trend toward simplicity and directness both in form and subject: Merton made more liberal use of free verse and shorter lines than in previous works in this attempt to express the difficulty of writing about the joy of contemplation through poetry.<sup>66</sup>

Eight years passed before another volume of poetry by Thomas Merton was published. *The Strange Islands* (1957) was Merton's only issue of newly published poetry in that decade.<sup>67</sup> Most of these poems had been written in 1955 and 1956; the six-year span since the completion of the previous volume can be traced to his decision to give up poetry after he was ordained to the priesthood in 1949.<sup>68</sup> He had remained active as a writer in the interim, however: he produced essays, translations, and pamphlets for the abbey library and for the many visitors who made retreats to the monastery.

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<sup>65</sup> Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, Twayne's United States authors series, ed. Warren French, no. 462 (Boston: Twayne Publishers), 77.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>67</sup> *Selected Poems*, published by New Directions in 1959, is a compilation of poems chosen from earlier publications.

<sup>68</sup> Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, 123.

Merton's return to the poetic idiom followed at least partial reconciliation of poetry and monasticism in his own mind. It is no surprise that the poet again stressed the virtues of silence and the contemplative life in *The Strange Islands*, but he now seemed to apply poetry to this end with more ease as he included meditations about culture and contemplative poetry alongside the formal poems in the collection.<sup>69</sup>

Some of the poems of this era reflect the poet's growing interest in Zen meditation techniques. In "Wisdom," for example, Merton tried to evoke within the reader the feeling of pure existence, as Lentfoehr describes, "in the sense that they belong to *what* one is and *who* one is. This Merton expressed in lines of naked simplicity and directness, using descriptive analogies that can equate with both the Zen awareness and the mystical experience."<sup>70</sup> This fascination with Zen mysticism would grow to exert great influence upon Merton's writing about contemplation and meditation during the last years of his life.

Merton exhibited a concern for mankind in *The Strange Islands* that had not shown through in earlier apocalyptic verses. He included poems about social issues such as urban blight and the noise of the cities that he blamed for drowning out the voice of God; his opinions on social issues became a hallmark--and a source of controversy--in subsequent poetry and essays. He also criticized aspects of religious life, as in "Birdcage Walk," a lengthy poem in which an authoritarian "gaitored bishop"

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<sup>69</sup> Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, 79.

<sup>70</sup> Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, 55.

is excluded from contact with the “paradise bird” because of his insular, privileged lifestyle.<sup>71</sup>

Merton, by now completely free of his initial reticence toward writing poetry, realized opportunities in the 1960s to use the poetic medium not only to edify the Christian in contemplation, but to bring about change in the secular world beyond the monastery walls as well. His keen social conscience forbade him to remain silent about such volatile issues as racism, government treatment of native Americans, oppression in Latin American countries, and U.S involvement in a war for which he could find no justification. Lentfoehr explains that in Merton’s later writings ‘he now found relevance in all that touches his fellow man, with whom he closely identified, living in the aftermath of two world wars, a season of political unrest, and a deep emptiness of spirit.’<sup>72</sup> He despaired over the racial situation at the time, and equally abhorred technology because he believed that it would ultimately lead to the end of mankind.<sup>73</sup> Frustrated by the lack of action by the Catholic Church to renounce these social and political injustices, Merton freely expressed his views through his writing. His social activism often placed him at odds with the Father Abbot, the censors, and conservative

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>73</sup> Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, 86. One of the issues that greatly concerned the poet was the use of nuclear weapons. This certainly must have played a part in shaping his apocalyptic view of man’s fate at the hands of technology.

Catholics, some of whom branded him an atheist and burned his books in Louisville after he spoke out against United States involvement in the Vietnam conflict.<sup>74</sup>

In the early 1960s, Merton began to translate the works of South American poets, who, in his opinion, had the most to say about the state of the world at this time: "I am not a North American poet, but rather a South American. I feel closer to them because of their sensitivity, irony, political point of view, etc."<sup>75</sup> His *Emblems for a Season of Fury*, published in 1963, contains translations of poems by writers such as Alfonso Cortes, Jorge Carrera Andrade, and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, whose beliefs and works he admired. Also included are translations of poems by Raissa Maritain, a French Catholic contemplative and poet.<sup>76</sup> The friendship and writings of Maritain and her husband, Jacques, provided inspiration to Merton in his own spiritual journey.

Besides the translations, this latest volume contained prose sections, a new formal device that he also used in his subsequent and final two books. He also experimented with the sparse use of punctuation and what Labrie describes as the "steady loosening and expansion in the lines and stanzas as well as a greater colloquialism than ever."<sup>77</sup> Merton employed symbolism and imagery, two mainstays

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas Merton, letter to Ernesto Cardenal, dated 3-15-1968, *Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), 161.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., letter to Herman Lavin Cerda, dated October 6, 1965, *The Courage for Truth*, 205.

<sup>76</sup> Translations of all these poets' works were set in *The Nilas-Merton Songs*.

<sup>77</sup> Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, 130.

of his style from the earliest poems, to express his view of a chaotic and volatile world mortally threatened by technology; numerous elegies accompany the familiar themes of worship and solitude. The increased number of secular poems in this book reflects the poet's strong social conviction, as well as his new found willingness to challenge the censors who had always held authority over his publications.<sup>78</sup> The influence of his Zen study can be seen in these later writings, manifesting itself in such poems as "Sweet, Irrational Worship," through which Merton sought to introduce an alternative to contemporary culture; nature imagery again marks his description of a purer form of worship.<sup>79</sup>

Undoubtedly the most striking formal innovation of Merton's later poetry was motivated by his view of language as distorted and corrupted by modern technological society. This led the poet to employ what he called "anti-poetry" in the final two collections. He described this method of writing as one beyond symbolism, one,

through which the antipoet "suggests" a tertiary meaning which is *not* creative and "original" by a deliberate ironic feedback of cliché, a further referential meaning, alluding, by its tone, banality, etc., to a *customary and abused context*, that of an impoverished and routine sensibility, and of the "mass-mind," the stereotyped creation of quantitative preordained response by "mass-media," had so eroded any

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<sup>78</sup> Laughlin, "Merton the Writer," 3-10. Merton realized his power as a writer after the success of his autobiography. Although he strongly believed in subordination to his superiors, he came to view writing as a tool for social activism, while the Father Abbot viewed the monk's role as one of constant prayer that God would heal social problems. Censorship of Merton's writings thus increased in the 1960s, an obstacle he eluded by writing numerous short magazine articles, as these were not censored by the Church.

<sup>79</sup> Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, 132.

individual personal response that the encouragement of spontaneous was needed to jolt the establishment out of its fog.<sup>80</sup>

Merton employed this alternative to conventional symbolism in both *Cables to the Ace*, or *Familiar Liturgies of Understanding*, which was published in 1967, and *The Geography of Lograire*, published posthumously in 1969. Both contain alternations of free verse, anti-poetry, and prose in a style meant to give the effect of a mosaic or collage of images that Merton believed touched the subconscious mind through associations that were not evident on the surface or attainable through traditional language.<sup>81</sup>

The “cables” of *Cables to the Ace* refer to actual technology-related physical structures such as bridge supports and telephone wires. Technology is placed in opposition to God, who is revealed at the end to be the “ace of freedom” holding all the cables that bind our world.<sup>82</sup> Themes of nature and Zen mysticism return near the end of the text as well: “Slowly, slowly Christ Comes through the Garden” recalls the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ seeks out the disciple who is sleeping, but, according to Lentfoehr, “whose consciousness when he awakens will find itself transformed into the consciousness of Christ, ‘the Lord of History.’”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 286, as quoted in Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, 135.

<sup>81</sup> Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, 21.

<sup>82</sup> Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, 137-138.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.



The title of his last book reflects the poetic global tour of lands and cultures contained therein. Here Merton examined similarities among various cultures at different times in history in an attempt to illuminate modern Western man's disregard for the value of any culture other than his own.<sup>84</sup> Merton told James Laughlin that he intended to work on *The Geography of Lograire* for the remainder of his life and complete future volumes of the story.<sup>85</sup> The publication that now exists is taken from a first draft of the volume he submitted the summer before his untimely death in December of 1968. His remarks indicate that had he lived longer, he would have continued to express his conscience through poetry in experimental, innovative ways designed to reach the soul of the reader.

Merton's First Two Poetry Publications: *Thirty Poems* and *A Man in the Divided Sea*

Of the twenty-two poems that John Jacob Niles selected for musical setting, seven were written before or during Merton's first years at Gethsemani and appear in the first two published volumes of poetry. Obviously, something about the young poet's early style appealed to the composer. Indeed, these poems have many images that would be familiar to Niles, who grew up amid the rural Kentucky beauty that inspired many of the early nature settings in the poems. Although they were certainly much more sophisticated than the folk lyrics Niles had collected over the decades, Merton's early poems nonetheless include some of the same themes--devotion to God and love of nature--that the composer encountered in the music native to his region.

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<sup>84</sup> Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, 135.

<sup>85</sup> Laughlin, "Merton the Writer," 11.

Further, many of them have a personal quality about them that likely appealed to Niles the poet while their relatively short length and lyrical verses would have attracted Niles the composer.

During his years at Columbia, Merton had formed a close circle of friends who would impact his writing career over the next decades of his life. Two of these were Robert Lax, a fellow student and aspiring novelist, and Mark van Doren, an English instructor who served as a mentor to both Lax and Merton during their student years. When Lax later visited Merton at the abbey (around Christmas, 1943), he asked Merton to choose some of his poems for Lax to take back to New York. Lax sent the resulting manuscript to van Doren, who forwarded it to James Laughlin, editor of New Directions Publishing. Laughlin published these poems under the title *Thirty Poems* in 1944.<sup>86</sup>

Approximately half of the poems Merton selected were composed before he entered the monastery—mostly between 1940 and 1941. Even though only three years had passed since he had composed them, Merton later wrote, “getting those poems together and making a selection was like editing the work of a stranger, a dead poet, someone who had been forgotten.”<sup>87</sup> Victor Kramer notes that most of the chosen poems written at Gethsemani are religious in nature: “the celebration of having found a way of life which allows a man perspective on the world is, perhaps, the core of the

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<sup>86</sup> Kountz, *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk*, 126.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Merton, from his personal journal, page 409, as quoted in Kountz, *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk*, 126.

book.”<sup>88</sup> Merton was reading the works of the metaphysical poets John Donne and Andrew Marvell as well as Catholic poets such as James Joyce, Gerard Manly Hopkins, and Federico Garcia Lorca. These influences, when combined with his fresh religious zeal, account for the rather formal structure and strong Catholic tone Laughlin found in these works.<sup>89</sup> Although written by a young poet, *Thirty Poems* contains traces of Merton’s more mature style. Most notable are his innovative use of real-life metaphor to express religious subjects, and the hints of the surrealism that became so dominant in his poetry in the late 1950s and 1960s.<sup>90</sup>

*Thirty Poems* was already out of print when *A Man in the Divided Sea* was published, but was reprinted as an appendix to the second collection.<sup>91</sup> The poetry of the second book, published by New Directions in 1946, represents Merton’s first seven years as a Catholic. While a small number of the poems date from before he entered the monastery, most were written at Gethsemani during his initial years of soul-searching over his dual vocations as monk and writer.

Some of these poems reflect his frustration at the corruption and godlessness he saw in modern society. His disregard for cities shows through in “The Ohio River—Louisville,” a depiction of the city as seen from the river’s banks. In “The Greek Women” he expressed the futility of urban life through images of Classical figures

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<sup>88</sup> Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, 41.

<sup>89</sup> Laughlin, “Merton the Writer,” 4.

<sup>90</sup> Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, 113.

<sup>91</sup> Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, 7.

preparing for a returning hero, cast against images of modern life-like cities making what he termed “false preparations.”<sup>92</sup>

These secular poems are balanced by Christian lyrics of a more personal nature about devotion, worship, and contemplation, again inspired by the beautiful landscape around the monastery. This contrast results in a book that Kramer describes as “somewhere between the land of bondage and the promised land.” He elaborates that

Merton’s metaphors are often meant to suggest his wonder and surprise that man is given a chance to escape from Egypt, while his tone of urgency remains strong; in some of the poems the speakers seem so concerned with man’s mistakes as if to forget that the peace of God has been found.<sup>93</sup>

Indeed, even the title of the book reflects the author’s own lack of inner peace. Like the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, he has been freed from the bondage of his former life, but he is still pursued by what he fears would again enslave him--the selfishness of his worldly desires as represented in his love of writing.

While the subject matter of the second book shows little variation from that of the first, there are style changes evident in the poems of *A Man in the Divided Sea*. Labrie notes the continued use of form that is based upon traditional poetic construction, but views these poems as more innovative than those of *Thirty Poems*--as lyrics in which Merton

moved away from the highly intellectual and compressed idiom of poetry which he admired in Eliot, and toward a poetry which was more personal and direct, a poetry based more upon his

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>93</sup> Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, 44.

attachment to the land and the simple rhythms of living experienced at Gethsemani.<sup>94</sup>

The second volume of poetry, like the first, contained many of the traits that would develop into Merton's mature style, but it was not until the third publication that he would more fully explore the possibilities of imagery and form.

#### Early Poems Selected as Texts for *The Niles-Merton Songs*

Three poems from Merton's *Thirty Poems* were set to music in *The Niles-Merton Songs*: "The Messenger," "Evening," and "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943." The first two reflect the English poetic tradition of mixing religious and nature imagery,<sup>95</sup> while the third is an intensely personal expression of grief and hope. Each of these poems is divided into five stanzas, but none makes significant use of rhyme or any regular metrical pattern. Rather, the text flows in a natural, speech-like way, in an organic development that reflects Merton's fascination with free verse.

#### *The Messenger*

There is some sentry at the rim of winter  
Fed with the speech the wind makes  
In the grand belfries of the sleepless timber.

He understands the lasting strife of tears,  
And the way the world is strung;  
He waits to warn all life with the tongue of March's bugle,  
Of the coming of the warrior sun.

When spring has garrisoned up her army of water,  
A million grasses leave their tents, and stand in rows  
To see their invincible brother.  
Mending the winter's ruins with their laughter,

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>95</sup> Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, 60.

The flowers go out to their undestructive wars.  
Walk in the woods and be witnesses,  
You, the best of these poor children.

When Gabriel hit the bright shore of the world,  
Yours were the eyes saw some  
Star-sandelled stranger walk like lightening down the air,  
The morning the Mother of God  
Loved and dreaded the message of an angel.

“The Messenger,” written before Merton entered the monastery, recounts the angel’s annunciation to Mary that she would bear the Christ child. Apocalyptic and redemptive messages are expressed through the intermingling of war and nature imagery; this is evident from the first line, in the “sentry at the rim of winter.” The bleak, wintry scene depicted in this first stanza adds to the ominous quality of the approaching stranger. In Stanza 2, however, compassion tempers the apocalyptic words of warning:

He understands the lasting strife of tears;  
And the way the world is strung;  
He waits to warn all life with the tongue of March’s bugle,  
Of the coming of the warrior sun.<sup>96</sup>

Such subtlety captures the essence of the fear and hope contained within the message of the sentry. The substitution of “sun” for “son” further softens the military image of the warrior by tying the coming of Christ to the arrival of spring, which is commonly used as a metaphor for resurrection.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, 112-113. Merton’s use of antonyms, such as “sun” for “son” here, was a favorite device in his early poetry.

<sup>97</sup> Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1994), 103.

The personification employed in Stanzas 3 and 4 intensifies the paradoxical introduction here of military imagery into that of nature. The grasses emerge and line up as troops in a wonderful image of the renewing power of spring:<sup>98</sup>

When spring has garrisoned up her army of water,  
A million grasses leave their tents, and stand in rows  
To see their invincible brother.  
Mending the winter's ruins with their laughter,  
The flowers go out to their undestructive wars.

In the fourth and final stanza, Gabriel is finally identified as the "star-sandelled stranger" who approaches to deliver his message to Mary. The final two lines of the poem are simple yet important:

The morning the Mother of God  
Loved and dreaded the message of an angel.

The conflicting images of destruction and renewal, of doom and redemption, of fear and hope culminate in these last words.

#### Evening

Now in the middle of the limpid evening,  
The moon speaks clearly to the hill.  
The wheatfields make their simple music,  
Praise the quiet sky.  
And down the road the way the stars come home,  
The cries of children  
Play on the empty air, a mile or more,  
And fall on our deserted hearing,  
Clear as water.

They say the sky is made of glass,  
They say the smiling moon's a bride.  
They say they love the orchards and apple trees,  
The trees, their innocent sisters, dressed in blossoms,

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<sup>98</sup> Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, 81.

Still wearing, in the blurring dusk,  
White dresses from that morning's first communion.

And where blue heaven's fading fire last shines  
They name the new come planets  
With words that flower  
On little voices, light as stems of lilies.

And where blue heaven's fading fire last shines,  
Reflected in the poplar's ripple,  
One little, wakeful bird  
Sings like a shower.

This poem was inspired by the hills surrounding Merton's new home at Gethsemani. It possesses a simple quality that suits this portrayal of a pure, uncorrupted nature scene. The use of the adjectives "limpid" and "quiet" to describe the scene heighten the tranquil beauty of this evening landscape bathed in moonlight. Semi-consonants abound and mutes are few in these lines so that the sounds as well as the words evoke the desired impression within the listener.<sup>99</sup>

The only sound that enters upon the scene comes in the second stanza from the distant, joyful "cries of children" that "play on the empty air a mile or more." Kramer notes that this "child" image is one of the most entrenched of Merton's early symbols.<sup>100</sup> In Stanza 3, the poet blends child and nature imagery to equate the simplicity and purity of this unspoiled landscape with the innocence of the children, whose voices fall "clear as water" on the listener's ear as:

They say the sky is made of glass,  
They say the smiling moon's a bride.

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<sup>99</sup> Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, 22. A "mute" is defined as "a consonant that cannot be sounded without a vowel, and which at the end of a syllable suddenly stops the breath."

<sup>100</sup> Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, 116.



They say they love the orchards and apple trees,  
The trees their innocent sisters, dressed in blossoms  
Still wearing, in the blurring dusk,  
White dresses from that morning's first communion.

That the flowering trees, the "innocent sisters" of the children, figuratively wear white communion dresses reflects the interconnection among the children and the nature and religious imagery. This is demonstrated again in Merton's use of nature imagery to describe the children's words that "flower on little voices, light as stems of lilies."

In the fifth stanza, their voices fade with the twilight, replaced by the song of the night bird as the simile in the final line evokes another water image:

One little, wakeful bird  
Sings like a shower.

The poem thus concludes with another sound of nature, distant and removed from the listener.

*For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943*

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep  
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;  
And if I cannot eat my bread,  
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.  
If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,  
My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.

Where, in what desolate and smokey country,  
Lies your poor body, lost and dead?

And in what landscape of disaster  
Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?

Come, in my labor find a resting place  
And in my sorrows lay your head,  
Or rather take my life and blood  
And buy yourself a better bed—

Or take my breath and take my death  
And buy yourself a better rest.

When all the men of war are shot  
And flags have fallen into dust,  
Your cross and mine shall tell men still  
Christ died on each, for both of us.

For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,  
And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring:  
The money of whose tears shall fall  
Into your weak and friendless hand,  
And buy you back to your own land:  
The silence of Whose tears shall fall

Like bells upon your alien tomb.  
Hear them and come: they call you home.

The final poem Niles selected from *Thirty Poems* is anything but distant and removed from the suffering of the poet. Merton wrote this, his first elegy, for his younger brother, John Paul. A World War II fighter pilot, the younger Merton was reported missing in action after his plane crashed, and soon confirmed dead. The influence of the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca can be seen in the alternation of six-line groupings and quatrains in the first four stanzas of this poem.<sup>101</sup> The proliferation of metaphors and similes intensifies the contrast between Merton's own grief and his desire to comfort his brother, as in the first stanza:

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep  
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;  
And if I cannot eat my bread,  
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.  
If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,  
My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.

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<sup>101</sup> See footnote 60.

Merton's sorrow was obviously worsened by the fact that John Paul's body was buried at sea, never to be returned to his home:

Where, in what desolate and smokey country,  
Lies your poor body, lost and dead?  
And in what landscape of disaster  
Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?

The third stanza more directly reflects the poet's desire to take his brother's suffering upon himself somehow--to bring comfort and redemption to his lost body:

Come, in my labor find a resting place  
And in my sorrows lay your head,  
Or rather take my life and blood  
And buy yourself a better bed--  
Or take my breath and take my death,  
And buy yourself a better rest.

The parallel between Merton's sacrifice and that of Christ is obvious and moving: although powerless to do so, Merton would willingly give his labor, his sorrows, indeed his own life and blood to deliver his lost brother's body and soul to a place of rest. The image becomes complete in the final lines that recount the poet's faith in his brother's spiritual redemption through the sacrifice of Christ:<sup>102</sup>

The money of Whose tears shall fall  
Into your weak and friendless hand,  
And buy you back to your own land:  
The silence of Whose tears shall fall  
Like bells upon your alien tomb.  
Hear them and come: they call you home.

Thus the poem that began with such desperate grief concludes with images of hope in Christ to offer the deliverance that the poet cannot. Merton's words and phrases are

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<sup>102</sup> Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, 9.

simple in this poem: the text consists of a preponderance of monosyllables, relatively few words of two syllables, and almost none with more than two. The result is a sincere expression of mourning for a lost loved one.

Each of the three selections from *Thirty Poems* contains at least one example of musical imagery, from the comforting bells in lines quoted just above, to the singing of the “little, wakeful bird” and the wheatfields that “make their simple music” in “Evening,” and the unsettling image of the bugle announcing its warning in “The Messenger.” The four poems Niles selected from *A Man in the Divided Sea* also contain musical references. The strong sound images in the first two poems to be discussed reflect Merton’s experimentation with words that evoke aural, as well as visual, imagery.

#### *The Greek Women*

The ladies in red capes and golden bracelets  
Walk like reeds and talk like rivers,  
And sigh, like Vichy water, in the doorways;

And looks run down the land like colts,  
Race with the wind, (the mares their mothers’, lover)  
Down to the empty harbor.

All spine and sandal stand the willow women;  
They shake their silver bangles  
In the olive-light of clouds and windows,  
Talking, among themselves, like violins;

And, opening their eyes wide as horizons,  
Seem to await the navy home from Troy.

No longer stand together, widow women!  
Give your gold ornaments to the poor,  
Make run the waterspeech of beads between your fingers:  
For Troy is burned, and Greece is cursed,

The plague comes like a cloud.  
All your men are sleeping in the alien earth,

But one.  
And Clytemnestra, walking like a willow, stares.  
Beads and bracelets gently knifeclash all about her,  
Because the conqueror, the homecome hero,  
The soldier, Agamemnon,  
Bleeds in her conscience, twisting like a root.

This six-stanza secular poem is a fine example of Merton's use of subtle sound imagery to enhance his already vivid visual descriptions. The first three stanzas describe the women:

The ladies in red capes and golden bracelets  
Walk like reeds and talk like rivers,  
And sigh, like Vichy water, in the doorways;

Lentfoehr notes that in reading this first stanza one not only visualizes the bright red capes, but also hears them swish as the women move, their bracelets clinking together, reflecting the light.<sup>103</sup> The familiar water theme appears in the simile in line 3; this image returns twice in the poem.

Another example of Merton's attention to detail in describing the carefree women is found in Stanza 3:

All spine and sandal stand the willow women;  
They shake their silver bangles  
In the olive-light of clouds and windows,  
Talking, among themselves, like violins;

Here, the poet's alliteration of [s] and [w] sounds in the first two lines adds another dimension to the sound imagery, as does the musical simile in the fourth line.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 18.

The initial air of malaise is abruptly and brutally shattered in the lines of Stanza 5, where the substitution of a “d” for “l” turns the “willow women” into “widow women” whom the poet orders to give their gold to the poor:

Make run the waterspeech of beads between your fingers:  
For Troy is burned, and Greece is cursed,

Images from the past are conjured up as another religious image is introduced in the beads that suggest the rosary. Even more unsettling words complete the fifth stanza:

The plague comes like a cloud.  
All your men are sleeping in the alien earth,

These apocalyptic lines also divert focus from the women so specifically described in earlier lines to the men that have been conspicuously absent from the scene.

The shift from present to past becomes complete when in the final lines a specific Greek man and woman from antiquity are named. Here, Merton revives the earlier images of the women to describe Clytemnestra:

And Clytemnestra, walking like a willow, stares.  
Beads and bracelets gently knifeclash all about her,  
Because the conqueror, the homecome hero,  
The soldier, Agamemnon,  
Bleeds in her conscience, twisting like a root.

The subtlety of the language is remarkable, especially the word “knifeclash” that hints at Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon with a double-edged ax, and the red image from the first line that makes a gruesome reappearance in the final words.

#### *The Ohio River–Louisville*

No one can hear the loud voice of the city  
Because of the tremendous silence  
Of this slow-moving river, quiet as space.

Not the towering bridge, the crawling train,  
Not the knives of pylons  
Clashing in the sun,  
And not the sky-swung cables;  
Not the outboard boat  
Swearing in the fiery distance like a locust,  
Not the iron cries of men:  
Nothing is heard,  
Only the immense and silent movement of the river.

The trains go through the summer quiet as paper,  
And, in the powerhouse, the singing dynamos  
Make no more noise than cotton.  
All life is quieter than the weeds  
On which lies lightly sprawling,  
Like white birds shot to death,  
The bathers' clothing.

But only where the swimmers float like alligators,  
And with their eyes as dark as creosote  
Scrutinize the murderous heat,  
Only there is anything heard:  
The thin, salt voice of violence,  
That whines, like a mosquito, in their simmering blood.

This secular poem was inspired by a walk Merton took along the river's banks while passing through Louisville on his first visit to Gethsemani.<sup>104</sup> He wrote in his journal that "the Ohio River is the most beautiful thing in Louisville,"<sup>105</sup> so it is understandable that this poem would reflect his distress over man's encroachment upon it, as recounted by Labrie:

The river, used as a sewage basin by the cities along it, is a symbol of the obliteration of nature by urban life. The waterfront is dominated by "the towering bridge," "the crawling train," and the "sky-swung cables" of the derricks. Louisville is a tintype of the New York skyline

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>105</sup> Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, vol. 1 of *The Journals of Thomas Merton* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 358.

and thus a symbol of the endless duplication of such scenes throughout America.<sup>106</sup>

Merton's aversion to cities and the social and environmental problems therein is obvious even in this early poem. Like that of "The Greek Women," the imagery employed in "The Ohio River–Louisville" is very subtle, but its allusions are strong. One has to look beneath the surface of these verses to uncover layers of implication in the poet's words and phrases, just as the observer on the banks of this river must look beyond the "tremendous silence" that paradoxically drowns out the "loud voice of the city."

It is precisely this juxtaposition of loud and soft upon which Merton constructs the entire poem. In the first stanza words like "slow-moving" and "quiet" are associated with the river, while the second stanza introduces the first allusions to violence and anger in "the knives of pylons / clashing in the sun" and "the iron cries of men." They are all lost in "the immense and silent movement of the river" that overlays the scene with a veneer of tranquility.

Stanza 3 describes the river's silencing of the noise of industrialism in what would initially strike the reader as something akin to the stillness of a nature setting:

The trains go through the summer quiet as *paper*,+  
And in the powerhouse the singing dynamos  
Make no more noise than *cotton*.  
All life in quieter than the *weeds*  
On which lies lightly *sprawling*,

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<sup>106</sup> Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, 118-119.



Like *white birds shot to death*,  
The bathers' clothing.

+ Italics mine.<sup>107</sup>

However, closer examination reveals thinly veiled references to racial tension between the black and white citizens of the city. The noises of the trains and the powerhouse are compared to paper and cotton, both of which are white objects. Further, the statement that life is quieter than "the weeds" is certainly a jarring and unexpected turn of phrase. It hints that all is not quite perfect in this city, as more obviously does the description of the clothing "sprawling" in the fashion described in the following line, which again implies violence.

Until one reads the final stanza, it would seem that the rumblings of violence and racial tension are, like the industrial noise, drowned out by the river. These final lines, however, are ominous in tone and more blatant in their imagery. The swimmers "float like alligators" with eyes that are "as dark as creosote," a deep black substance commonly used in the area.<sup>108</sup> The final four lines of the poem dispel any thought that this tension will remain suppressed, as the dark eyes,

Scrutinize the murderous heat,  
Only there is anything heard:  
The thin salt voice of violence,  
That whines, like a mosquito, in their simmering blood.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 118. Labrie notes the suggestiveness of the word "creosote" to convey racial tension in the final stanza. This prompted me to examine the poem from this viewpoint and look for other such subtle images in the text. The results of my search are shown in italics.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 119.

Only at the end does Merton reveal the one sound that will not be overcome by the artificial calm signified by the river. Still faint, it is nonetheless persistent: the violence simmering in the blood of the oppressed will eventually boil over and become a stronger force than even the water of the river.

The final two poems are deeply religious in nature, inspired by Merton's first celebrations at Gethsemani of liturgical feast days in the months after he became a monk. Both poems are beautiful depictions of events in the life of Christ: the first celebrates his birth, and the second is based upon his first miracle at the wedding in Cana. The young monk's wonder at these events is evident in the tone of both compositions.

### Carol

Flocks feed by darkness with a noise of whispers,  
In the dry grass of pastures,  
And lull the solemn night with their weak bells.

The little towns upon the rocky hills  
Look down as meek as children:  
Because they have seen come this holy time.

God's glory, now, is kindled gentler than low candlelight  
Under the rafters of a barn:  
Eternal Peace is sleeping in the hay,  
And Wisdom's born in secret in a straw-roofed stable.

And O! Make holy music in the stars, you happy angels.  
You shepherds, gather on the hill.  
Look up, you timid flocks, where the three kings  
Are coming through the wintry trees;

While we unnumbered children of the wicked centuries  
Come after with our penances and prayers,

And lay them down in the sweet-smelling hay  
Beside the wise men's golden jars.

In "Carol," the nativity of the Christ child is celebrated through nature imagery; the first three of its five stanzas set the peaceful scene in which the miracle takes place. In the three lines of Stanza 1 we find the flocks grazing in their pastures:

Flocks feed by darkness with a noise of whispers,  
In the dry grass of pastures,  
And lull the solemn night with their weak bells.

The musical tinkling of the sheep's bells adds detail to the sound imagery so vivid in these first lines.

The towns "look down as meek as children" in Stanza 2, in another use of the "child" image so common in Merton's early poetry. It is interesting, then, that in the next stanza Merton instead employs metaphors for the Christ child:

Eternal peace is sleeping in the hay,  
And Wisdom's born in secret in a straw-roofed stable.

These metaphors sharpen the contrast between this humble stable setting and the magnitude of the event that has taken place there. The importance of this birth is encapsulated in the fifth stanza, where Merton expresses the hope of mankind in Christ:

While we unnumbered children of the wicked centuries  
Come after with our penances and prayers,  
And lay them down in the sweet-smelling hay  
Beside the wise men's golden jars.

Merton's image of believers through the centuries figuratively laying offerings of "penances and prayers" in the manger is profound in its simple encapsulation of the Christian faith.

Cana

Once when our eyes were clean as noon, our rooms  
Filled with the joys of Cana's feast:  
For Jesus came, and His disciples, and His Mother,  
And after them the singers  
And some men with violins.

Once when our minds were Galilees,  
And clean as skies our faces,  
Our simple rooms were charmed with sun.

Our thoughts went in and out in whiter coats than  
God's disciples',  
In Cana's crowded rooms, at Cana's tables.

Nor did we seem to fear the wine would fail:  
For ready in a row to fill with water and a miracle,  
We saw our earthen vessels, waiting empty.  
What wine those humble waterjars foretell!

Wine for the ones who, bended to the dirty earth,  
Have feared since lovely Eden, the sun's fire,  
Yet hardly mumble, in the dusty mouths, one prayer.

Wine for old Adam, digging in the briars!

"Cana" was one of the first poems Merton wrote after entering the monastery.

In it he recalls the wedding feast at which Jesus performed his first miracle, and superimposes images of his first celebration of the liturgical feast commemorating this event at the monastery. The joy and sincerity Merton shared with his monastic brothers is expressed in the first stanza:

Once when our eyes were clean as noon, our rooms  
Filled with the joy of Cana's feast:  
For Jesus came, and His disciples and His Mother,  
And after them the singers  
And some men with violins.

Musical imagery, a common element in Merton's poetry, heightens the celebratory quality of these lines.

This blending of the Biblical wedding scene and the liturgical feast continues in the second the third stanzas, in which Merton recalls the purity of their worship:

Our thoughts went in and out in whiter coats than  
God's disciples',  
In Cana's crowded rooms, at Cana's tables.

Merton draws a parallel in the fourth stanza between the wine miraculously created from water at the wedding in Cana and its parallel in the communion wine at the feast:

Nor did we seem to fear the wine would fail:  
For ready in a row, to fill with water and a miracle,  
We saw our earthen vessels, waiting empty.  
What wine those humble water jars foretell!

In the final stanzas, Merton extends the image of the wine to express his obvious frustration at the world as he saw it at this time:

Wine for the ones who, bended to the dirty earth,  
Have feared since lovely Eden, the sun's fire,  
Yet hardly mumble, in their dusty mouths, one prayer.

Wine for old Adam, digging in the briars!

This solitary image of Adam in the final line, which is itself separated from the previous stanza, strengthens the contrast between the joy of those celebrating the feast and those outside of communion with Christ--where Merton himself had been until only recently.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE MUSIC

#### Background and Style of Opp. 171 and 172

The poetry discussed in Chapter 2 provided a wealth of evocative ideas and images for musical setting. However, the task of rendering such poems into art songs was nonetheless a formidable challenge for this composer, who, although educated in and influenced by classical music, composed the great majority of his vocal music in the folk style. In this chapter we will explore how Niles set these poems to music, examining evidence of word painting in the vocal line or accompaniment, his use of rhythm and melody to highlight the natural flow of speech, and his use of harmony and dynamics in expressing the poetry. Significant instances of text alteration will be examined as well.

John Jacob Niles was an elderly man when he began composing *The Niles-Merton Songs* in 1967. Why would a musician who had already enjoyed a decades-long career as a successful performer and composer in the folk idiom turn to art song this late in life? I posed this question to Jacqueline Roberts, who explained that he was weary of criticism surrounding the “authenticity” of his music. She spoke of the pride Niles took in this attempt to compose music completely different from that for which he was famous--“he felt that he had finally become a composer”--and observed that this endeavor was “like a shot of adrenaline--he was living again.”<sup>109</sup> Obviously, the composer felt these songs would lend a legitimacy to his career that his detractors had

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<sup>109</sup> Jacqueline Roberts, interview.

so far found lacking. Niles might also have viewed these works as the realization of Charles Ives's influence. These two composers not only shared an interest in American music and respect for each other's work, but they enjoyed a close friendship as well (Roberts stated that Ives visited Boot Hill Farm).<sup>110</sup> Niles related to Noel Coppage in an interview for *Stereo Review* that Ives had often encouraged him to "give up this folklore nonsense" and try his hand at classical song composition.<sup>111</sup>

Despite his enthusiasm, Niles's notes in these manuscripts, especially later ones, reveal the struggle and frustration he experienced while setting these twenty-two poems. At the end of "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943" he wrote that this was "the most difficult and demanding piece I have ever written," and at the end of "Cana," "it is finished. I will not change a f \_ \_ \_ \_ g note of it." Perhaps his remarks on the final manuscript, "Mosaic," best encapsulate both the difficulty and the reward of his labor: "I started these two cycles, Opus 171 and 172, with "The Messenger" three 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' [sic] material. It taught me a new kind of music composition and the writing of poetry. Signed, Johnnie Niles." His postscript, "For me nothing has ever been the same" summarizes the uniqueness of this endeavor.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Noel Coppage, "John Jacob Niles," *Stereo Review* 34, no. 1 (January 1975): 60.

<sup>112</sup> Kerstin Warner, "'For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same,'" 32.

While Niles often referred to Opp. 171 and 172 as “cycles,” he clearly felt that the twenty-two songs formed two complete groups within one cohesive unit, which was likely the basis for his use of the term “cycles.”<sup>113</sup> The songs do not, however, possess any narrative theme or motivic device that recurs prominently enough to qualify them as “song cycles” in the tradition of, for example, *Die Schöne Müllerin*. In fact, when we examine concert programs for recitals by Niles, Roberts, and Pope/Field we can see that when excerpted for performance, the order of songs was altered, and numbers from the two sets were sometimes intermingled. The common thread that connects these compositions is the poetry of Thomas Merton.

Whether or not Niles conceived *The Niles-Merton Songs* as cyclic, he certainly intended to create a group of art songs that would stand apart from his earlier compositions. There are many characteristics of *The Niles-Merton Songs* that reflect these efforts: two of the most notable are the accompaniments that are often completely independent of the vocal melody but play a vital role in evoking the text, and the use of dissonance and tonal ambiguity that quite possibly reflects the influence of Ives. The most obvious departure, however, is found in the formal structures. Although strophic form is the norm in his earlier songs, it is found in only one of these settings. More typical of Opp. 171 and 172 is through-composed form. Several songs exhibit strophe-like melodic repetitions, but these recurrences are varied and often interspersed with new material. In short, the forms of the songs are dictated by the

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<sup>113</sup> Letters in the JJN Collection show that despite diligent efforts on the composer’s part to have these songs published as a unit, G. Schirmer refused. Marc Foster Music Company finally published *The Niles-Merton Songs* posthumously in 1981.



structures of Thomas Merton's poems. Sections of music correspond to divisions within the poems--and, therefore, to shifts in the focus of the poetry; punctuation, sentence structure, and poetic divisions are also preserved. In no case does any alteration of the text by the composer upset the structure of the poem. Rather, the small number of changes made by Niles and his apparent care in setting these texts indicates his respect for both the poetry and the poet.

Further evidence of Niles's respect for Merton's poems is the fact that Niles chose to set these, another poet's texts, as his previous compositions almost exclusively contain texts he wrote or heard as he traveled through the Southeast collecting folk songs. There must, then, have been something very powerful in Merton's poetry that inspired Niles to undertake such an ambitious project. As he later said, "I heard [Merton's] magnificent and far-out poetry and realized I'd been missing something. And slowly the music of the *Niles-Merton Cycle* began to boil in my imagination."<sup>114</sup>

Hard as he tried, Niles was not completely successful in his attempts to depart from the deep-seated influence of folk music in these compositions. Many of the songs contain modal writing, a common feature of folk music that is found in his other solo songs, as are the 4/4 and 6/8 time signatures common to these pieces.<sup>115</sup> In

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<sup>114</sup> Kerstin Warner, "For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same," 32. In this quote Niles refers to these songs as comprising a single cycle, perhaps because he was speaking of the early stages of the compositional process. He much more commonly called them two cycles.

<sup>115</sup> J.W. Hendron, "A Study of Ballad Rhythm: With Special Reference to Ballad Music," *Princeton Studies in English*, ed. G.H. Gerould, vol. 14 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), 2.

addition, the introductions and accompaniments of many songs move primarily in eighth notes, often in a single-note texture that recalls the accompaniments he wrote and played on his homemade dulcimers.

The most striking similarity between these songs and his earlier works, however, is his attention to text setting. This aspect of song composition was of great importance to Niles when working with his own texts, and was no less so when setting another poet's words. Roberts showed me fragments of melodies that Niles had jotted down over the poems in his poetry books, and recalled how Niles would speak the text aloud to try to incorporate its character into the melody.<sup>116</sup> His concern for the preservation of the natural rhythms and inflections of speech is manifest through the primarily syllabic text setting that affects the rhythm and shape of the vocal line. Beautiful music was also important to Niles: he asked for and received permission from the poet to alter the text when he thought the melodic or rhythmic flow of a song could thus be improved. These changes are generally minor: they typically involve repetitions of words or phrases, inversions of word order, or substitutions of new words that in his opinion rendered the phrase more singable without changing the meaning of the poem. Since Merton's poems are in free form, such changes do not affect the syllable count or line length; Roberts remembers that Merton, in fact, "couldn't care less--it didn't bother him."<sup>117</sup>

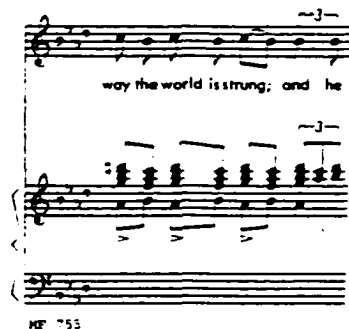
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<sup>116</sup> Jacqueline Roberts, interview.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. She stated that she was present when the two men discussed text changes.

Although I do not believe Opp. 171 and 172 to be cyclic, they do contain some recurring melodic and rhythmic gestures; these, however, seem more like general features of Niles's style than deliberate attempts to "unify" the songs. For example, triplets are frequently encountered in these pieces--they are most often included for textual emphasis or to preserve the rhythm of the spoken text. Parallel third motion also abounds; chains of thirds often progress in the eighth-note rhythms mentioned above.<sup>118</sup> The most prominent motivic recurrence among the seven songs to be examined involves the alternation of adjacent notes; I will refer to this motive as "the neighboring tone motive."

Example 1: "The Messenger," m. 14



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Example 1 shows the clearest example of this motive in the twenty-two songs. Here it is found not only in the vocal line, but also in right hand chords of the piano against contrary motion created by its inversion played by the left hand. The neighboring tone motive appears in the vocal line and/or accompaniment of ten of *The Niles Merton*

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

*Songs*, including all but one (“Cana”) of the seven songs discussed in this chapter. Occurrences of the neighboring tone motive will be noted in the song analyses that follow.

### Text Setting in the Selected Songs of Op. 171

The ten songs of Op. 171 include three with texts from Merton’s early poetry. Niles had great admiration for the Blessed Mother (Warner states that he kept small statuettes of the Madonna and Child on his piano); he composed many songs about maternal love in general and the nativity of Christ in particular. It is not surprising, then, that the first Merton poem he set was inspired by the angel’s annunciation to Mary that she would bear the Christ child (“The Messenger”); the second celebrates Christ’s birth (“The Nativity”).<sup>119</sup> The third early poem is “Evening,” which describes a nature scene at sunset. The formal structure of Niles’s settings shares a common characteristic: the melodic material that begins each of these three songs also returns at the end. Each song begins with an introduction that not only contains musical figures that recur throughout, but also introduces a tonality that is different from, but related to the overall key of the piece; the true tonal center of the piece is thus delayed until the vocal entrance. Additionally, modal writing colors the harmonic scheme and heightens the textual expression in each.

Roberts remarked that singing *The Niles-Merton Songs* “was like wearing a dress especially designed to fit” because they were composed to enhance her vocal

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<sup>119</sup> Kerstin Warner, ““For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same,”” 34.

capabilities.<sup>120</sup> However, it has already been noted that Niles had completed “The Messenger” and “The Nativity” before he began working with Jacqueline Roberts and Janelle Pope. Examination reveals that these first two songs have slightly higher ranges and tessitura than the twenty that followed, and contain phrases that ascend to Ab5 or Bb5 for textual emphasis. Although these first two were not lowered, the later songs, particularly those of Op. 172, are replete with phrases that ascend only to G5: Niles was especially fond of the sound of her high G “and he just put them all over the place.”<sup>121</sup>

*The Messenger (No. 1)*

The music of “The Messenger” is at times strongly dissonant and at other times beautifully delicate as it expresses poetic images of war and strife, redemption, and the renewal of spring. Niles’s musical setting of this poem can be divided into three distinct sections that correspond to the divisions of the poem. Stanzas 1 and 2 are set in Section A. Here the music expresses in a declamatory fashion the approach of a military figure. The fluid eighth-note movement of Section B renders the images of spring’s reawakening that are described in Stanzas 3 and 4. Part C sets the fifth and final stanza of text; its soaring lyrical phrases correspond to the text that identifies Gabriel. Finally, Niles repeats the initial melodic phrase of the vocal line to set the final two lines of Stanza 5. These lines contain the only reference to Mary, the mother of Jesus; they are thus set apart from the earlier music and text of section C while evoking the same air of mystery that surrounds the first hearing of this phrase.

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<sup>120</sup> Jacqueline Roberts, interview.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

A six-measure introduction precedes the vocal entrance; its single-note texture evokes the isolation of the “sentry at the rim of winter” proclaimed in the first line of text. This introduction begins in C minor, then shifts to the relative major, Eb, for a two and a half octave scalewise descent. Only at the downbeat of m. 7 does the piece settle into F minor, although the remainder of the music contains a wealth of D naturals that suggest the Dorian mode.

Section A begins at m. 7, where the melody enters with the text, “There is some sentry at the rim of winter / Fed with the speech the wind makes in the grand belfries of the sleepless timber.”

Example 2: “The Messenger,” mm. 7-10

The musical score for "The Messenger" (mm. 7-10) is presented in a standard musical notation format. The vocal line is written on a single staff, and the piano accompaniment is written on two staves. The score includes a six-measure introduction in C minor, followed by a shift to Eb major for a two and a half octave scalewise descent, and finally settles into F minor at the downbeat of m. 7. The lyrics are: "There is some sen-try at the rim of winter Fed. with the speech the wind makes in the grand belfries of the sleepless timber." The score is marked with a mezzo forte (mf) dynamic level.

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The declamatory quality of this line, shown in Example 2, is achieved by the straightforward adherence of the melody and rhythm of the music to the natural inflections and rhythms of the text; these elements are enhanced by the *mezzo forte* dynamic level, as well as the open spacing and parallel dissonant intervals in the piano.

The resulting effect is a sparse and unsettling musical portrayal of the military figure beyond the barren landscape.

Niles uses the neighboring tone motive to express the text of mm. 12-14. As seen in Example 3, the right hand of the accompaniment is comprised of parallel G minor and F minor triads. These chords alternate to form the neighboring tone motive over an ascending Dorian scale in the bass. In m. 14, the voice takes up the motive as well, and the bass line now sounds its inversion.

**Example 3: "The Messenger," mm. 12-14**

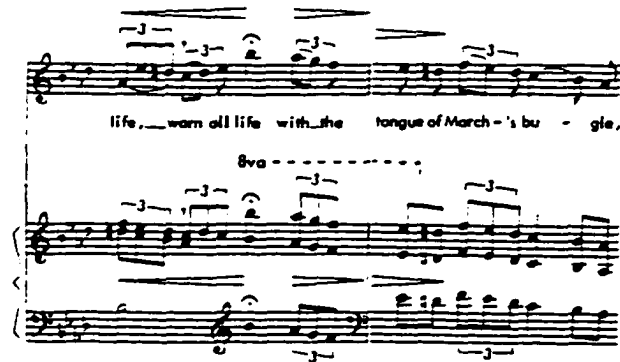


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This motive is thus interwoven around the text, "He understands the lasting strife of tears, / And the way the world is strung."

Somewhat the opposite effect is employed for the subsequent text, "He waits to warn all life with the tongue of March's bugle." Tonal clarity marks the text setting in mm. 16-17, shown in Example 4. Here, the melody becomes the trumpet call, set in triplets interrupted by the Bb5 quarter note on Niles's repetition of the word "life" in m. 16; this high pitch is further emphasized by a dynamic climax and fermata.

**Example 4: "The Messenger," mm. 16-17**



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From this point until the end of m. 17, the tones of the vocal line are paralleled in two octaves in the piano; their high pitch levels create a brassy timbre that is wonderfully evocative of the bugle in the text.

Example 5 illustrates the dissolution of the voice/piano unison after the word "bugle"; the vocal line and right hand of the piano subsequently alternate between triplet and eighth note movement over parallel open fifths in the bass that add a touch of military precision to the text "the coming of the warrior sun." Niles then repeats the phrase and stretches the word "warrior" over an entire measure dominated by a dotted half note Ab5 to reinforce this unsettling image in Merton's text.



**Example 5: "The Messenger," mm. 18-22**

The musical score for "The Messenger" (mm. 18-22) is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line with lyrics "of the com-ing of the warri-or sun," and the piano accompaniment. The second system shows the vocal line with lyrics "The com-ing of the war - ri-or sun." and the piano accompaniment. The music includes triplets and a piano interlude.

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These final words are followed by a piano interlude in m. 23 that concludes Section A.

The poem's initial focus on the messenger gives way in m. 24 to images of emerging spring. The music of Section B sets these lines: like that of the preceding measures, it is largely built upon eighth-note and triplet movement, but the dissonance is softened, as is the war imagery of the text. The accompaniment underneath the text "When spring has garrisoned up her army of water" programmatically flows in eighth and sixteenth notes from m. 24 until the change to 5/4 meter in m. 28 (Example 6). In contrast, Niles here sets the text "mending the ruin of winter" in triplets; the phrase was altered from the original "mending the winter's ruins" to conform to this rhythm.

Example 6: "The Messenger," mm. 24-28

When spring has garrisoned up her army of water... A million grasses leave their tents and

stand in rows to see their invincible brother. Mending the ruin of winter,

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It is clear from this example that although Niles was careful to preserve the spoken quality of the text in his melodic writing, he also made slight alterations to the text in order to preserve the beauty of the melodic line.

Eighth note figures first heard in the introduction return at m. 34 to accompany the line "Walk in the woods and be witnesses, / You, the best of these poor children." Although this "walking" pattern ends on the downbeat of m. 39 with the arrival of Section C, the device recurs a few measures later.

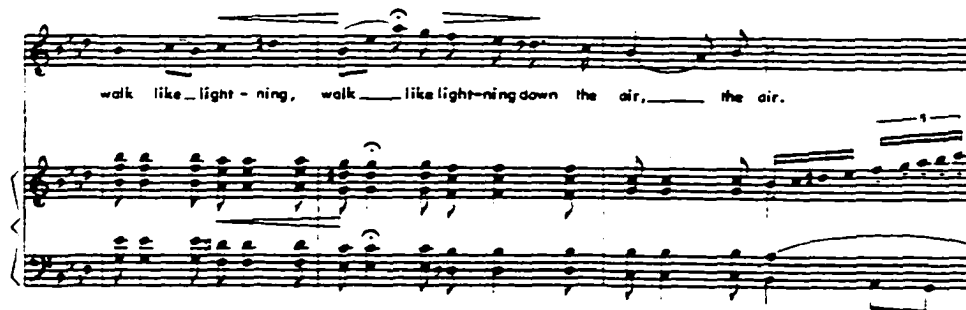
The final section of music introduces text in which the messenger is identified as the archangel Gabriel. His name is set off by quarter notes--a G5 marked *forte*

descending a fourth to D5--punctuated by block chords in the accompaniment (through mm. 39-40) at the text "[When] Gabriel hit the bright shore of the world." The vocal line is doubled in the piano here to further emphasize the text.

The piano returns to the walking eighth note pattern to accompany the next line of text ("Yours were the eyes saw some star-sandelled stranger") before suddenly changing for the first time to syncopated chords for "walk like lightening" in m. 43, as seen in Example 7. It seems odd that the walking eighth notes cease before the word "walk" actually arrives in the text if Niles was indeed trying to enhance this word of text. The syncopated motion of the music at this point in the text, however, creates added intensity and momentum that is heightened by a crescendo into the next measure, in which Niles repeats the phrase "walk like lightening." The word "walk" is also emphasized by its ascent to Ab5, which is sustained by a fermata. Niles further isolated the tone by placing the fermata in the piano a half beat before the vocal arrival at the highest pitch.

Example 7: "The Messenger," mm. 41-45

The musical score for Example 7, measures 41-45, is presented in three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, with lyrics: "yours... were the eyes saw some star... sandalled stran - ger". The middle staff is the piano accompaniment, starting with a piano (pp) dynamic. The piano part features a syncopated chord pattern. The piano part has a fermata over the final chord.



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Warner notes that as Gabriel walks “like lightening down the air,” in m. 44, the vocal line descends stepwise down toward the middle range.<sup>122</sup>

The vocal melody that is heard in the final four measures restates that of mm. 7-8, although it is rhythmically adapted for the new text. This simple device provides the listener with a point of musical closure at the end of the piece. Moreover, the reprise of the Dorian melody first associated with the mystery and uncertainty surrounding the unknown sentry underscores the mixed emotions of fear and joy that Mary must have experienced.

### *The Nativity (= Carol) (No. 2)*

“The Nativity” is a setting of Merton’s poem, “Carol.” When I asked Roberts why the composer chose not to retain Merton’s title, she laughed and replied, “It’s because--and this is the silliest thing--his daughter-in-law’s name was Carol! You’d think a man like Thomas Merton would object to that, but he did not. He said, ‘Let’s

<sup>122</sup> Kerstin Warner, “For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same,” 33.

name it “Nativity.”<sup>123</sup> Pen offers another possible reason for Niles’s desire to separate this song from his many other Christmas carols: “In his extended compositional career, Niles had written a vast corpus of music based on the nativity. However, this song, written sixty years after “Jesus, Jesus, Rest Your Head,” is completely divergent stylistically from Niles’s other, folk-derived, carols.”<sup>124</sup>

The poetic structure of this text--five stanzas depicting three sections of images--lends itself well to the three-part form of Niles’s setting. Stanzas 1 and 2 describe the peaceful countryside surrounding Bethlehem. This scene is set in Section A of the music: here a simple melody in 6/8 time sets the lines of the first stanza, then is partially repeated for Stanza 2. The repetition ends, however, at the last line of the stanza, “Because they have seen come this holy time,” which serves as a transition to the manger scene of the third stanza. The music likewise departs from its melodic repetition and begins a transition to Section B.

Both the text and music of Section B are more joyful and celebratory in character than that of previous measures. Stanza 3 expresses the wonder of the nativity while Stanza 4 calls heaven and earth to celebrate the event. With the exception of measures of quiet music evoking the image of the baby sleeping in the manger, Section B is characterized by wider leaps, louder dynamic levels, and a higher tessitura in the

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<sup>123</sup> Jacqueline Roberts, interview. The manuscript is entitled “Carol,” so this change was made sometime between August 3, 1967, the date Niles signed the completed manuscript, and the premiere of Op. 171 in November, 1968.

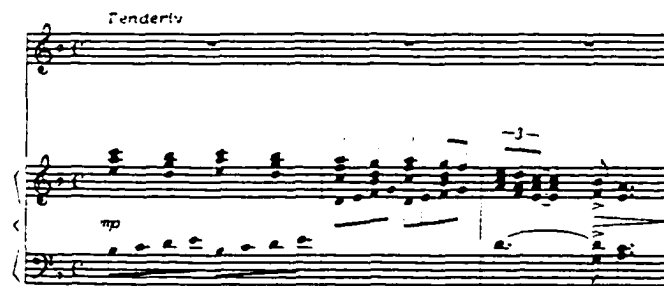
<sup>124</sup> Ronald A. Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 209.

vocal melody. This free-flowing melody reflects the outpouring of excitement in the text, building upon itself as each phrase evolves organically from the one before.

Niles uses the melody of Section A to set Stanza 5, but the return is again only partial. Repetition of material from A, however, strengthens the contrast between the purity of the long ago scene this music first evoked and the “unnumbered children of the wicked, wicked centuries” of this repetition. The music of the final measures is built upon fragments of both A and B as the music, like the text, blends images of the past and present.

Roberts described this piece as having “a feeling of Gregorian chant in it,” no doubt because of the declamatory style of the melody.<sup>125</sup> The Lydian sound of the piano introduction, shown in Example 8, also contributes to the archaic feel: the left hand begins with a four-note pattern of eighth notes starting at Bb3 and ascending to the tri-tone in a progression of whole steps that yields a characteristic Lydian sound.

Example 8: “The Nativity,” mm. 1-3



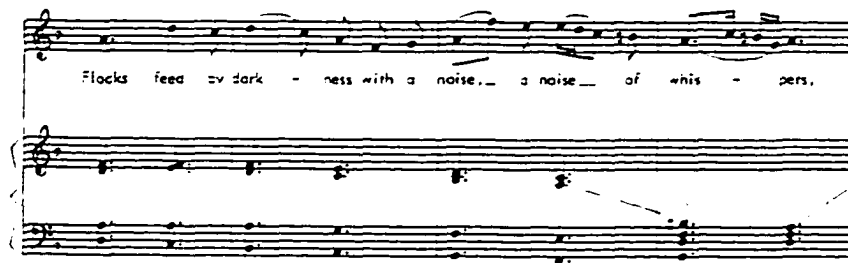
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<sup>125</sup> Jacqueline Roberts, interview.

The tonal center of the opening is obscured by the piano's right hand, which plays a version of the neighboring tone motive (alternating A minor and G minor chords). In the second measure, however, the left hand pattern moves up a third to D4-E4-F4-G4 to form a whole-step, half-step, whole step Dorian sequence before a half cadence on an A minor triad in m. 3 that clarifies D as the tonality.

In m. 4, the time signature changes from 4/4 to 6/8. This measure also includes the introduction of a motive that is heard before each statement of the initial melody. Example 9 shows the first four measures of this melody: it begins when the voice enters at m. 5 with the text "Flocks feed by darkness with a noise of whispers, / In the dry grass of pastures and lull the solemn night with their weak bells."

Example 9: "The Nativity," mm. 5-8



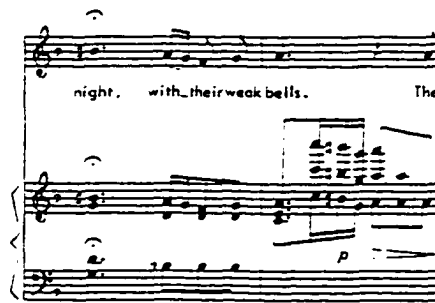
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Niles's repetitions of "a noise" and "lull the night" preserve the strong beat emphasis of the 6/8 meter; Warner notes the gentle rocking motion of a lullaby thus created in the

music.<sup>126</sup> This motion is reinforced by the accompanying block chords that sound on the strong beats of mm. 5-8.

The most obvious example of text painting is found in m. 14, shown in Example 10. The measure begins with a cadence on the dominant (A minor) on the word “bells” and ends with a return of the motive introduced in m. 4, here centered around A4 and reinforced one and two octaves above.

Example 10: “The Nativity,” mm. 13-14



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These high tones softly recall the “weak bells” of the text.

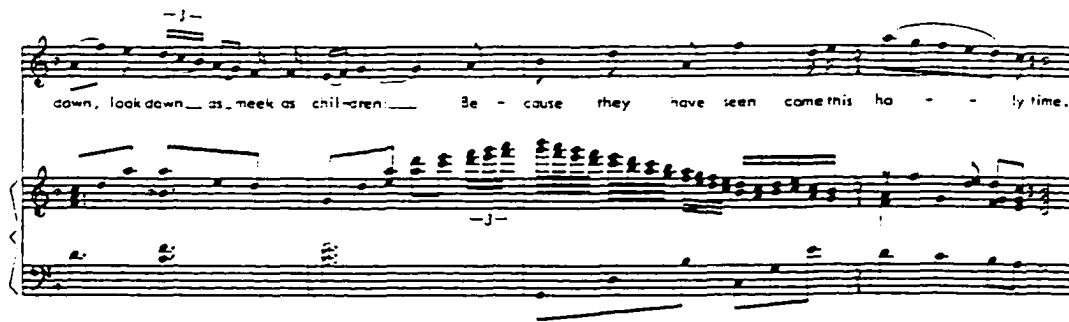
The motive in m. 14 announces the restatement of the initial melody that begins in m. 15. This repetition of earlier melodic material causes one oddity in the text setting in m. 17: the word “down” is set on A4 that leaps upward a minor sixth to F5, the opposite of the word being sung. Niles’s subsequent repetition of the words “look down,” however, follow in a step-wise descent that is much more overtly reflective of the text.

<sup>126</sup> Kerstin Warner, ““For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same,”” 34.



In m. 18 the vocal line departs from this melody and begins to go its own way. The music of mm. 18-20, shown in Example 11, corresponds to the final line of Stanza 2: the phrase “Because they have seen come this holy time,” which is the first reference to Christ’s birth. As the poetic focus shifts to the events related in Stanzas 3 and 4, the wider vocal range and falling parallel thirds in the right hand of the piano mark the beginning of the musical transition to Section B.

Example 11: “The Nativity,” mm. 18-20



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Warner notes the lengthening effect of the 5/4 time signature at m. 20 upon the words “holy time” that are already emphasized by its eighth-note step-wise descent from A5 on the downbeat to a half-note B natural 4.<sup>127</sup>

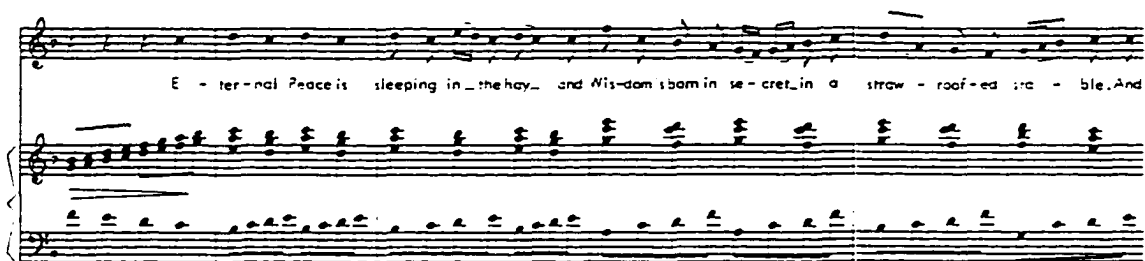
The return to the 4/4 time of the introduction at m. 24 signals the arrival of Section B. Both the vocal and dynamic ranges are wider here than in the previous section. The *forte* dynamic level at the downbeat of m. 24 is followed by a crescendo toward the vocal entrance on the fourth beat. The text “Oh, God’s glory now” (“Oh”

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 34.

is an addition by Niles) begins on F5 with a triplet sweep upward to Bb5--the highest note found in the vocal line--that accentuates the word "God's."

In contrast, the music of mm. 28-31 is quite simple. The accompaniment of mm. 28-29 is identical to that of m. 1 and thus recreates the mystical quality of the introduction to heighten the text "Eternal Peace is sleeping in the hay, / And Wisdom's born in secret in a straw-roofed stable." As seen in Example 12, the neighboring tone motive is sounded by the piano's right hand chords (mm. 28-31) and in the vocal line (mm. 28-29) to evoke the illusion of rocking so prominent in earlier measures. The repetitiveness of this motive in the voice and piano over the modal passage underneath gives the music an intimate quality that beautifully expresses the text.

Example 12: "The Nativity," mm. 27-31



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However, the celebratory mood cannot be contained for long. Niles subtly builds the intensity through these measures in three ways: 1) although the piano continues the same patterns, both the right hand chords and the eighth notes in the left hand ascend to higher pitches in mm. 30-31; 2) the vocal range broadens again in mm. 30-31; and 3) the quarter-note movement of the vocal line at m. 28 escalates by m. 30-31 to eighth-

and sixteenth-note movement, creating a sense of forward momentum that propels this final line of Stanza 3 into the beginning of Stanza 4.

By m. 32, the earlier exuberance of Section B has fully re-emerged. The vocal line leaps from C5 at the end of m. 31 to a half note A5 on the downbeat of m. 32, then descends by step in eighth notes to C5 before rebounding to F5, only to tumble downward once again on the text, “And O! make holy music in the stars, you happy angels. / You shepherds.” The sense of celebratory abandon with which the vocal line moves relentlessly forward barely allows the singer even a quick breath, which only adds to the exuberant quality of the voice against the neighboring tone and modal patterns in the accompaniment. The wonderful effect of this passage is a delirious release of joy in calling the flocks, angels, and shepherds to rejoice with the performers at the birth of the holy child.

The motive first heard in m. 4 sounds twice in mm. 37-38: as before, this figure announces a statement of the melody of Section A, which had earlier depicted a peaceful, holy night long ago. Niles reuses this material to set the text “While we unnumbered children of the wicked, wicked centuries,” thus drawing a stark contrast between past and present. A jarring cross-relation between A5 and Ab4 in the piano accentuates the repetition of the word “wicked” in m. 42.

In Example 13 we can see that the eighth-note movement so dominant in the piano in prior measures is replaced by sustained chords in mm. 44-45 that isolate the text, “Come after with our penances, and with our prayers.”

Example 13: "The Nativity," mm. 43-49

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On the word "prayers," the vocal line departs from the repeated melody of A and ascends stepwise in the Phrygian mode to A5. Here begins a stepwise descent that musically reflects the text "[lay] them down in the sweet-smelling hay." The final words "Beside the wise men's golden jars" are set to melodic material very much like that found in m. 29 (Example 12), another measure whose text refers to the hay of the manger.

Evening (No. 7)

Niles's setting of "Evening" reflects the composer's desire to capture the childlike innocence and simple beauty described in Merton's five-stanza poem.

Although the song employs a three-part form that conforms to the main divisions of the poem, it is unified by three aspects of the music that remain constant throughout the piece: 1) the 4/4 time signature; 2) the C major/A minor tonality; and 3) the motive that occurs in almost every measure. The facts that Niles made no alterations to the time signature, chose a key signature that contains no flats or sharps, and constructed the entire piece upon a short, plain motive reflect his simple approach to rendering this text. Perhaps this simplicity, which makes “Evening” quite accessible to the young singer, is what led Niles to include it in the *The Songs of John Jacob Niles* later published by G. Schirmer.<sup>128</sup>

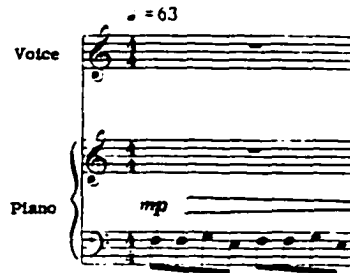
Merton contrasts the quiet stillness of the night in the first and fifth stanzas with the distant voices of the children described in Stanzas 2-4. Nature imagery is musically expressed through a simple vocal melody made up of repeated pitches or simple stepwise movement in the middle range of the voice. In contrast, more lyrical phrases characterized by wider leaps and higher pitches set text related to the children. Where Merton blends these images in stanza 3, Niles employs a seven-measure sequence in which the pitches of the vocal line repeat within each measure then rise by step in each subsequent bar, increasing the intensity. He thus combines the simplicity of the “nature” melody with the excitement of the lyrical “children’s music.”

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<sup>128</sup> John Jacob Niles Collection, King Library, University of Kentucky. In a letter to G. Schirmer, Inc. dated January 12, 1974, Niles lists “Evening” first on his list of selections for this collection.

A two-measure piano introduction precedes the beginning of Section A. The most obvious, persistent, and important motive in the piece is introduced very clearly in the first four notes of m. 1 (Example 14).

Example 14: "Evening," m. 1



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This group of four eighth notes is often referred to as the "whippoorwill motive" because its creation was apparently inspired by a whippoorwill the composer heard as he struggled to capture the musical essence of this Merton poem. Roberts recalls that one evening, Niles attended a party at the home of a friend in Lexington

and this was on his mind. He stepped out onto the patio and he heard the whippoorwill. The man who told me this didn't know that this was because he was writing a piece. He said, "You know, when he heard that whippoorwill, tears started coming down his cheeks." It was the sound of evening. He came home and wrote that first version that I learned.<sup>129</sup>

I find it interesting that this motive is not introduced in the high pitches that one would expect of a bird song imitation, but at the lowest tones at which it sounds in the entire song. However, the pattern almost immediately begins to ascend: it sounds an octave higher at m. 3 when the voice enters, then continues to rise as the range of the piece

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<sup>129</sup> Jacqueline Roberts, interview.

broadens until it sounds in the higher soprano range one would associate with a bird song. Repetition of material from Section A then returns the motive to the middle range in the final measures of the piece. It is only in the last lines of text, “One little, wakeful bird / Sings like a shower” that the object of this symbolic figure is identified.<sup>130</sup>

Pen points out that in addition to evoking a poetic image of evening, this motive provides the fundamental structural unit of the song, thus serving “as both symbol and structure.”<sup>131</sup> It continues hypnotically in the piano, often paralleled a third above in the upper range and supported through most of the piece by the half note open chords that form a rhythmic motive in the bass; this bass pattern further contributes to the hypnotic, liquid quality of the accompaniment that evokes the feel of evening.

This quality figures prominently in the evenly flowing eighth and quarter notes of the vocal melody as well. Series of repeated notes in the vocal line combined with the repetitive patterns in the piano create an ethereal aura around the corresponding text. This is especially true of mm. 3-6, shown in Example 15.

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<sup>130</sup> Kerstin Warner, “For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same,” 35. She points out that although the motive persists throughout the piece “like one of Schubert’s rippling brooks,” it is not identified until the final two lines as representing a bird call.

<sup>131</sup> Ronald A. Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 218.

Example 15: "Evening," mm. 3-6

The musical score for Example 15, "Evening," measures 3-6, is presented for Voice and Piano. The Voice part is written on a single staff in treble clef, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The lyrics are: "Now in the mid-dle of the". The Piano part is written on two staves (treble and bass clef) in the same key signature and time signature. The lyrics continue: "lim - pid - eve - ning. The moon speaks clear-ly to the hill. The". The piano part features a melodic line in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand.

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Section A begins with the vocal entrance at m. 3. The tone A4 sounds in nineteen of the first twenty-one tones of the vocal line, then continues to permeate the measures that follow, as described by Pen:

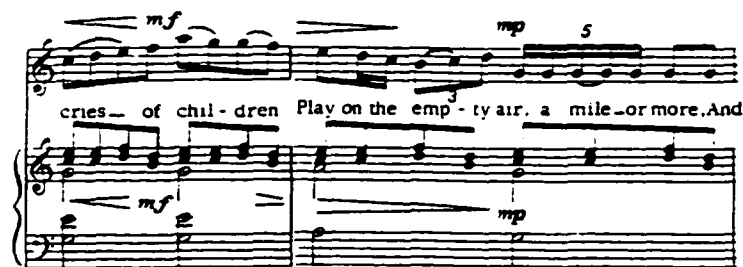
The vocal melody moves as an incantation, paralleling the whippoorwill motive. The entire first phrase is based around the solitary note a, which forms a mysterious and evocative tension as it is placed in conjunction with the g of the pedal tone. The melody then continues to shadow the outline of the text, contributing a shimmering effect through a series of ever-increasing scale figures that always return to the central note, a.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 219.



This pedal tone G2 in the bass forms the root of a dominant seventh chord outlined in the piano by D3 a fifth above, the F4 of the whippoorwill motive, and the neighboring tone pattern that returns to B3 on beat 3 of mm. 3-11. This harmony against the A4-dominated vocal line of mm. 3-9 leaves the listener uncertain whether the tonal center in these measures is the A minor implied by the vocal line or the C major suggested by the accompaniment. The impressionistic character thus created further elicits the poetic scene and perhaps provides another example of the influence of Ives upon Niles. It is not until the C major I 6/4 chord at the downbeat of m. 12 that we find a clear, albeit weakened, arrival at C major.<sup>133</sup>

This arrival at the major key coincides with the welcome intrusion of children's voices upon the tranquil stillness of the evening, shown in Example 16. The higher tones of the young voices are recreated in the vocal line, which, having heretofore limited the upper extent of its range to F5, climbs to A5 to set "The cries of children." Example 16: "Evening," mm. 12-13



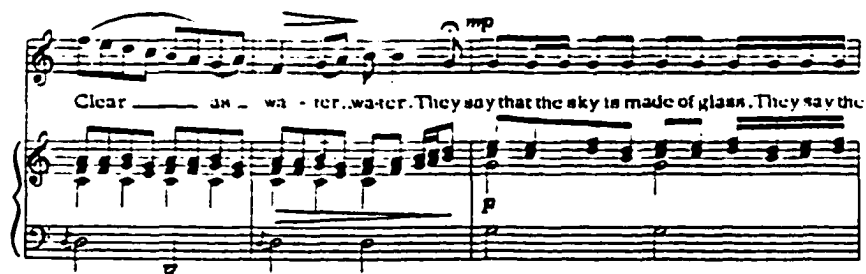
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<sup>133</sup> Although the piece favors C major, these I chords are always in second inversion, while A minor I chords on the downbeat of mm. 13-14 are in root position and on strong beats. However, the C chords are always preceded by the dominant, G, in the bass and/or vocal line to form a V-I cadence on the tonic.

This phrase is enhanced by a crescendo to *mezzo forte* at its height, the first dynamic marking beyond *mezzo piano* found in the piece. The voice just as quickly returns to the middle register; the accompanying diminuendo gives the impression of distance as the fading voices “Play on the empty air a mile or more, / And fall on our deserted hearing, / Clear as water.”

Section B begins in m. 17, where the vocal line and accompaniment embark on a step-wise, measure by measure climb that echoes the climactic poetic crescendo in the text (Example 17).<sup>134</sup> The excitement in the children’s voices grows as they talk about the scene around them: the sky, the moon, and the still-blooming trees. The whippoorwill motive sounds in thirds in this passage, consonant with the vocal line until m. 20, from which point onward it remains one step higher than the voice. The resulting dissonance pulls the voice upward as the dynamic level crescendos to *mezzo forte* and then to *forte*.

Example 17: “Evening,” mm. 16-24



<sup>134</sup> Ronald A. Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 218. He notes that this dual ascent of the voice and accompaniment intensifies the poetic climax of the text.

smil-ing moon's a bride. They say. They say they love the *3*

This system shows the first line of the song. The vocal melody is on a single staff, and the piano accompaniment is on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The lyrics are 'smil-ing moon's a bride. They say. They say they love the' followed by a triplet of eighth notes.

or-chards and ap-ple trees, The trees, their in-nu-cent sis-ters, dressed in

*poco a poco* *mf*

This system continues the melody. The piano part includes the instruction 'poco a poco' and a dynamic marking 'mf'. The lyrics are 'or-chards and ap-ple trees, The trees, their in-nu-cent sis-ters, dressed in'.

blos-soms. Still wear-ing, in the blur-ring dusk. White dresses from that

This system continues the melody. The piano part includes a dynamic marking 'f'. The lyrics are 'blos-soms. Still wear-ing, in the blur-ring dusk. White dresses from that'.

morn-ing's first com-mun-ion. And,

*rit.* *gus* *3* *rit.*

This system concludes the melody. The piano part includes the instruction 'rit.' and a triplet of eighth notes. The lyrics are 'morn-ing's first com-mun-ion. And,'.

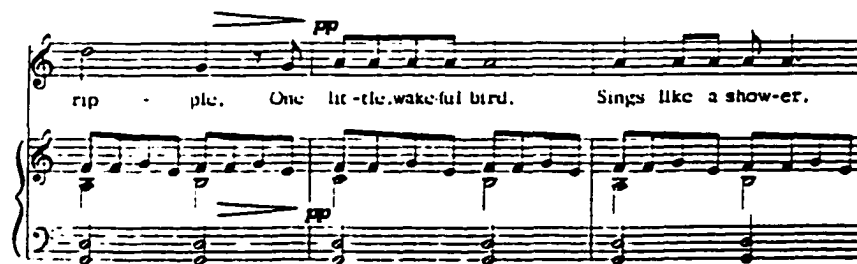
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This tension is only released with the arrival of the voice at E5 accompanied by a C major chord on the downbeat of m. 24.<sup>135</sup>

The music of the ensuing measures rejoices in the happiness of the children as the soaring lyrical melody “underscored by ecstatic cascades of scale-derived material in the accompaniment,”<sup>136</sup> releases the energy of the prior measures before melting into a beautiful diminuendo at m. 29, which Niles extends by repeating the phrase “stems of lilies.”

The mystic music of mm. 3-12 returns at m. 30. This reprise of material from Section A parallels the poetic return to the nature images of the beginning, in Pen’s words, “completing the circle.”<sup>137</sup> In m. 34 (Example 18), the text “One little, wakeful bird / Sings like a shower” focuses the listener’s attention upon the source of the motive heard from the beginning.

Example 18: “Evening,” mm. 33-39



<sup>135</sup> The arrival of the C major tonality at m. 24 helps to dispel the earlier dissonance and brighten the tone of the passage that follows.

<sup>136</sup> Ronald A Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 219.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.



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Niles repeats the text “little, wakeful bird / Sings like a shower, like a shower” with music that grows softer and softer as if the bird were flying away.<sup>138</sup> The final notes of the piece offer only a fermata over the A4 in the voice against the same accompanying notes found on the first beat of every measure since m. 34. The lack of a final cadential “arrival” is Niles’s reminder that this lovely scene persists, even though our senses can no longer take it in through darkness and distance.

#### Text Setting in the Selected Songs of Op. 172

The most important event that separated the composition of Opp. 171 and 172 was the sudden death of Thomas Merton in December of 1968, just two weeks after the premiere of Op. 171. Although Niles had already begun work on Op. 172, one can only guess how or if the second set might have been different had Merton lived. Of course, the second set contains many of the musical trademarks of the first, including chains of parallel thirds, stepwise eighth-note movement in both the voice and piano, 5/4 measures, generous use of fermatas, modal harmonies, and some familiar motivic patterns. While nine of the ten poems set in Op. 171 are religious, this is true of only

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<sup>138</sup> Roberts interprets the final bars in this way and made this suggestion to the author.

three of those in Op. 172, although many of the secular poems contain religious imagery. On the whole, the music of the second set expresses poetry that is more diverse and, in some cases, more personal than that of the first set.

*For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943 (No. 5)*

The most intensely personal of Merton's poems is "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943." Setting this poem was challenging for Niles, as can be surmised by his comments on the manuscript, dated August 22, 1968: "The most difficult and demanding piece I have ever written is finished. I am going to ink this piece before I have time to tamper with it."<sup>139</sup> Niles succeeded in musically portraying the profound grief expressed in these lines, which sets the poem apart from Merton's other poetry.

The composer's simple and direct setting of this text contributes greatly to the song's effectiveness. The G minor tonality clearly stated from the beginning modulates only to the parallel major in the middle section, then returns in the final portion; this simple tonal scheme, according to Warner, "shows sensitivity to the structure of Merton's poem, which moves outward in three stages from the personal to the general."<sup>140</sup> Within this overall framework, however, Niles composed contrasting music to set each of the five stanzas. His recreation of the rhythms and inflections of the spoken text throughout the piece is likewise straightforward: stepwise melodic motion, repetitions of the same pitch throughout entire measures, and appearances of

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<sup>139</sup> Ronald A. Pen, "Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles," 212-213.

<sup>140</sup> Kerstin Warner, "'For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same,'" 38.

the neighboring tone motive combine to render a simple melody with the focus upon the words. Further, the alternation of dotted and even rhythms in this overwhelmingly syllabic setting not only adds contrast, but enhances this touching recreation of the poem's anguish.

As in the songs of Opus 171, the piano accompaniment plays an important role in eliciting the text. The left hand begins the piece by sounding G1 on the downbeat of m. 1, which is sustained through the measure while the right hand plays a simple chordal motive that further tonicizes G minor. This dotted eighth-sixteenth-quarter (or half) note motive, seen in Example 19, recurs throughout the piece; it most frequently in the accompaniment, where it expresses the weight of the sorrow in the vocal line.

Example 19: "For My Brother," mm. 1-3



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The solitary bass notes (C2 and D2) that follow comprise the only other accompaniment in mm. 2-3. A gulf of over two octaves between the vocal line and these tones creates a somber, desolate quality, an effect heightened by dissonances that

further evoke the sorrow of the text.<sup>141</sup> Such a sparse accompaniment, combined with the abundance of fermatas in both the vocal line and accompaniment, results in a recitative-like text setting of the first two measures. Niles repeats the words “Sweet brother” in m. 3 to complete the melodic descent from D5 down an octave to D4, a passage made more expressive by the inclusion of the C#4 and F#4 borrowed from D major.

In m. 4, the tempo becomes more regular as the piano takes up a chordal accompaniment that is built upon the rhythmic motive introduced in m. 1. The heaviness created by these halting rhythms and the dense chordal texture contrasts with the simple vocal melody to suggest an anguish barely suppressed by the singer.

In m. 8 (Example 20), the dotted rhythms move to the vocal line, where they add emotional weight to the words, “My fasts shall live like willows where you died.” In contrast, sixteenth notes in m. 10 create the illusion of accelerating the text “If in the heat I find no water for my thirst.” This effect propels the vocal line into the highest note of the phrase, the G5 on the downbeat of m. 11. Here, dotted rhythms in the vocal line against the largely even accompaniment evoke a sobbing quality in the melody as it completes the phrase by descending down an octave to G4.

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<sup>141</sup> Note the dissonance formed by the C2 in the bass against D5 in the voice that moves to C#5 in m. 2, and the Eb4 in the voice against D2 in the bass in m. 3. The Eb4 resolves to D4, dissolving the dissonance. This dissonance and resolution nicely sets the repeated words “sweet brother.”



Example 20: "For My Brother," mm. 7-12

bread, my bread, My fasts shall live like wil - lows where you

died. If in the heat I find no wa - ter for my thirst, My

thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor travel - ler.

mf 755 tre corde

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This emotional outburst ebbs in the descending vocal line with the text "[My] thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller."

The text of mm. 13-18 expresses Merton's pain and frustration that his brother's body would never return home: "Where, in what desolate and smokey country / Lies your poor body, lost and dead? / And in what landscape of disaster has your unhappy spirit lost its road?"<sup>142</sup> Such emotionally laden words would be a challenge to any composer, but Niles sets them, as is often his approach, with a simple melody (Example 21). Here, the accompaniment carries the weight of the grief: the dotted rhythmic motive appears in the right hand chords of mm. 13, and 15-16 against bass movement in mm. 13-14 that foreshadows the funeral dirge of later measures. The vocal line at m. 13 repeats the same pitch, D5, through almost the entire measure: the rhythm of these repeated notes mimics the sound of speech. The expanded vocal range of the next measure includes E naturals in both the voice and piano that suggest the Dorian mode, and a triplet on beat 4 that stresses the word "body" and its ascent by step from D5 toward G5 on the downbeat of m. 15. Here, the high pitch levels and triplet rhythm on beat 1 heighten the sense of pain and frustration expressed in the word "lost" as it begins another octave descent to G4. Warner notes that this melodic descent "runs down an octave, landing on low G, with a sad and hollow dramatic effect" upon the text "Lost, lost and dead."<sup>143</sup> Sixteenth notes on beat 2 of m. 15 accelerate the vocal descent and dramatize the words "lost and dead"; the first

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<sup>142</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 445-446. Merton recounts here that on his last visit to Gethsemani monastery, John Paul Merton embraced Catholicism and was baptized by his brother. Although Thomas Merton's pain over the loss of his brother was intense, he also found hope through their shared faith.

<sup>143</sup> Kerstin Warner, "For Me Nothing Has Ever Been the Same," 39.

utterance of the word “dead” is all the more jarring because of its placement at the bottom of the octave run.

Example 21: “For My Brother,” mm. 13-18

Where, in what des-a-late and smok-y coun-try lies your poor bo-dy,

lost, lost and dead? And in what land-scape of dis-as-ter

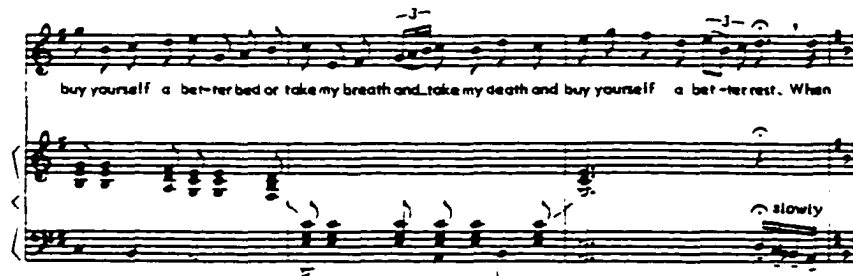
as an aside  
ppp  
has your un-hap-py spir-it lost its road, sweet bro-ther?

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Both the neighboring tone and dotted motives weep in the vocal line at m. 16 as horrible images of the “landscape of disaster” are expressed. Niles repeats the notes, if not the rhythms, of the descending melody in m. 3 to complete this phrase; the borrowed tones subtly reflect the way the “spirit lost its road.” To end this section, Niles then reiterates the words “sweet brother” almost exactly as they were set in m. 3. This reappearance of initial melodic material at the end of the section is reminiscent of a similar repetition at the end of “The Messenger.” In both cases, musical restatements correspond to restatements of poetic imagery. In “The Messenger,” feelings of fear and hope that were first represented by the sentry return in the final reference to Mary: in “For My Brother,” the melodic repetition brings closure to the first section of text, which ends, as it began, with Merton’s expressions of sorrow over the loss of his brother’s body.

The middle section begins at m. 19 with a tonal shift to the parallel major; the major tonality and thinner texture of the accompaniment reflect the corresponding change to images of the poet’s sacrifice for his brother’s comfort in the third stanza. Example 22 shows the downward progression of the piano chords in mm. 23-24 that widens the gap between the piano music and the vocal line.

**Example 22: "For My Brother," mm. 23-25**



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A sustained chord on the downbeat of m. 25 further isolates the voice; this abrupt cessation of the established syncopated rhythm focuses complete attention upon the text "buy yourself a better rest."

The final section of Niles's setting begins in m. 26 with a monotone D5 that not only coincides with the restatement of G minor, but also recalls the vocal writing of m. 13 (Examples 21 and 23). But the contrast between the texts of these two measures is striking: the first frames a desperate question expressed in dotted rhythms, whereas the second begins a new poetic direction toward hope, comfort, and reunion reflected in the even eighth notes over block chords that emphasize each beat.

**Example 23: "For My Brother," mm. 26-32**

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system contains measures 26-27, and the second system contains measures 28-32. The vocal line is written in a single staff, and the piano accompaniment is written in two staves (treble and bass clef). The lyrics are: "all the men of war are shot And flags have fal - len in-to dust, Your cross and mine shall tell men still Christ died, Christ died on each, for both of us." The music is in 2/2 time, and the key signature has one flat (B-flat).

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This hope is revealed in the subsequent text, "Your cross and mine shall tell men still / Christ died on each, for both of us," and quickened by the music that begins in m. 27: At this point, the quarter note movement of the accompaniment in m. 26 yields to eighth note movement in the next measure before a tempo change to 3/8 in m. 28 accelerates the pace. The 2/2 that arrives in m. 29 broadens that measure and accentuates m. 30, where the words "Christ died" are boldly trumpeted by a half note and two quarter notes that ascend from G4 to Bb4 and on to Eb5 to outline an Eb I6

chord; Niles further emphasizes these two words by repeating them in the next measure.

The funeral dirge implied in earlier measures arrives in the bass line at m. 33 to set Stanza 5. As shown in Example 24, the right hand chords double and harmonize the vocal line over this steady alternation of open fifths and octaves sounding deep in the bass through the remaining bars. The idea for this bass pattern was inspired by an event that occurred many years before, as explained in the following quote by Niles in Roberts's memoirs:

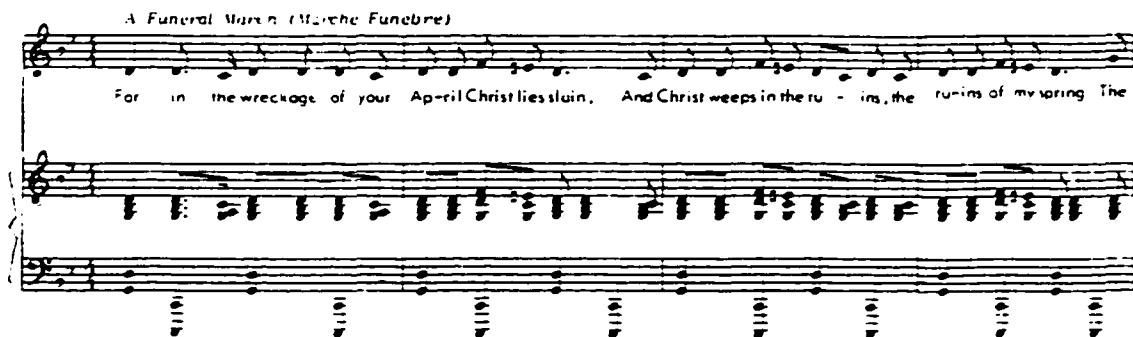
Many years before I'd been concertizing in Holland, and I saw eight men carrying a coffin on their shoulders. Peasants they were. They wore tall black hats and black clothes, sogging[sic] through the December mud. Somehow, although there was no music actually being played, I heard music. I wrote it down, and I kept it many years. Ultimately it found its place in this composition.<sup>144</sup>

When the vocal melody in mm. 33-36 is compared with that of mm. 13-14 and m. 26, the similarities are evident. The third incarnation is set an octave lower than the first two so that the text "For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain, / And Christ weeps in the ruins, the ruins of my spring" is sung in the low register of the soprano range; the vocal line here is doubled in the piano's right hand chords. The resulting somber vocal color intensifies the effect of the "dirge" in the bass (Example 24).

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<sup>144</sup> Jacqueline Roberts, *A Journey with Johnnie*, unpaginated. She points out that this motive also appears in other compositions as well, most notably "The Gambler's Lament" in the *John Jacob Niles Songbook*.

Example 24: "For My Brother," mm. 33-36



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Niles's repetition of the words "the ruins" not only emphasizes this image, but adds a beat to the line of text so that it conforms better to the rhythmic pattern of the funeral dirge.

Still doubled in the piano, the vocal line ascends in the ensuing measures.

Momentum climbs with the pitch to express text that reflects the poet's confident assurance of his brother's redemption by Christ, "The money of Whose tears shall fall / Into your weak and friendless hand, / And buy you back to your own land."<sup>145</sup>

Paradoxically, the melody reaches its highest and loudest point on the downbeat of m. 40 on the word "silence," which refers to the silence of Christ's tears that "shall fall / Like bells upon your alien tomb." The following, final, line of text, "Here them and come: they call you home," is poignantly set: as the funeral dirge continues in the bass, the first four words are sung in m. 42 to a Dorian melodic phrase that implies the sound

<sup>145</sup> The manuscript contains a crescendo that begins on the downbeat of m. 39 and arrives at *forte* by beat 3, "your." The crescendo begins on beat 3 in the published music, reaching its height on the downbeat of m. 40 at the word "silence." The points of diminuendo agree in the manuscript and the publication.



of bells, as do the right hand chords in this, their only departure from doubling the vocal line of the final section (Example 25).

**Example 25: "For My Brother," mm. 37-44**

The musical score for "For My Brother" (mm. 37-44) is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

**System 1:**

Vocal: money of Whose tears shall fall in - to your weak and friendless hand, And

**System 2:**

Vocal: buy you back to your own land The si - lence of Whose tears shall fall like

**System 3:**

Vocal: bells up - on your a - lien tomb. Hear them and come they call you name. —

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Niles concludes the phrase by setting the final word “home” on B4, thus creating a sweet picardy third, a musical symbol of hope inspired by Beethoven’s fifth symphony that here reflects Merton’s hope of reunion with his brother through Christ.

*The Greek Women (No. 6)*

Niles again chose a three-part structure to set the three poetic divisions of this six-stanza poem. The lazy, languid scene of the first four stanzas is evoked in Section A: an ascending parallel third chain in the piano introduction sets the carefree tone that is sustained through the first seventeen measures, in which the Greek women are colorfully described. The major key, *mezzo piano* dynamic level, and evenly flowing vocal line over a thinly textured piano accompaniment help to keep the mood light.

The tone of Section B, however, is much more serious. Modulation to C# minor and strong dissonance throughout the section replace the cheerful major orientation of the first section as images from ancient wars are evoked: “Troy is burned and Greece is cursed.” The dynamic level in mm. 18-29 is usually *forte*, with *sfz* or *ando* indications that strengthen the impact of the thick block chords in the accompaniment. Additional weight is added to the already heavy atmosphere by the lower range of the bass line. Meanwhile, the vocal line takes on an emphatic quality in these measures due to the abundance of triplets that add stress to each syllable thus set.

A partial return to Section A begins in measure 30. Here Niles repeats the sequential passage from A to set Stanza 6, in which poetic images expressed in the first occurrence of this sequence are restated. After a final phrase of new vocal melody, the

piece ends with an ascending chain of parallel thirds in the piano very similar to the one that began the piece.

Although the key signature contains only three sharps, mm. 1-9 (shown in Example 26) strongly suggest the dominant E major. In fact, the D5 in m. 5 (one of the few to be found in these bars) sounds like an altered tone in the midst of all the D sharps, so it adds a nice coloration to the word “sigh” on which it is sung.

The text of these measures describes the Greek women, detached and carefree in their malaise; ascending parallel thirds in the piano in m. 1 and the rolled chord on the downbeat of m. 2 just prior to the vocal entrance serve to evoke this mood. (Indeed, mm. 2-10 begin with rolled chords, as if to recall the strumming of some ancient stringed instrument.) The vocal melody then commences with an occurrence of the neighboring tone motive in m. 2, but departs from this pattern by the second bar. The accompaniment’s own countermelody begins here as well; like the voice, its movement is mostly stepwise, but usually in contrary motion to the vocal line.

A subtle example of text painting is found in mm. 7-8, where the melody falls stepwise a ninth from D#5 before rebounding to A4 as “looks run down the road like colts race with the wind.”

Example 26: "The Greek Women," mm. 1-10

Moderato

The lad-ies in red capes and gol - den brace-lets

Moderato

walk like reeds and talk like ri - vers, and sigh, like Vi - chy wa - ter, in the

door - ways, the doorways; And looks run down the land like colts, race with the wind, (the

mares, their moth - ers' lov - er) Down to the emp - ty har - bor. All

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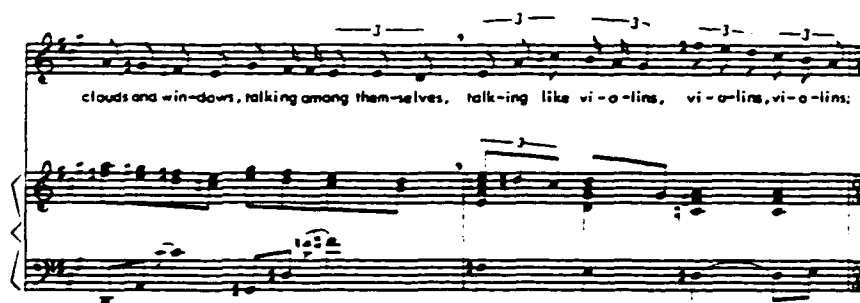
The neighboring tone pattern then returns for the iambic phrase “the mares, their mothers’ lover.”

Although m. 10 sets the final line of Stanza 2, the music here is different from that in mm. 1-9. First, while it does begin with a rolled chord, this chord and the E5-A4 vocal descent that follow clearly declare A minor. The piano countermelody also ceases after m. 9, further isolating this V-I descent in the vocal melody. However, although this setting of the last line of stanza 2 sounds like the beginning, rather than the end, of a musical section, it does not belong to the sequence that begins in m. 11. Rather, the line “Down to the empty harbor” serves as a bridge between the second and third stanzas of the poem while its music provides a transition to the sequence that follows.

Niles’s setting of the third stanza begins at m. 11 with a sequence that through its repetition enhances the description of the women and dispels the E major implications of earlier measures (Example 27).

Example 27: “The Greek Women,” mm. 11-14

The image shows a musical score for four measures (mm. 11-14). The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are: "saine and san-dal stand the wil-low women; they shake their sil-ver bangles in the o-live light of". The bottom three staves are a piano accompaniment in bass clef, with a brace on the left. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. A fermata is placed over the final measure of the vocal line.



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In this sequence, the vocal line is divided into groups of notes that descend stepwise a fourth, then start again, with the initial note of each group beginning a step lower than the one before. The right hand of the piano falls in similar motion: the upper notes of the parallel third chains in the right hand double the vocal line an octave higher. The bass line likewise takes up its own sequential activity by recalling the type of broken chord eighth note accompaniment found in “The Messenger.”

These sequential patterns are replaced in m. 14 by triplets that imitate the violins in Niles’s added text, “Talking like violins, violins, violins.” The triplets in the first half of m. 14 seem quick and *pizzicato* after the languid sequence that precedes it, while the even, stepwise descent of the triplets in the second half of the measure evoke the sound of a lyrical line played with long strokes of the bow. The potential performers of this piece should note the mistake in the published copy of this measure: the G#4 in the vocal line and piano on beat 2 is sung on Roberts’s recording as a G natural. Niles’s manuscript reveals that although he did not alter the G# in the vocal melody, he did lower the piano note to G natural. Roberts, who remembers that Niles

“was bad about forgetting to add flats and sharps,” confirms that a G natural belongs in both parts.<sup>146</sup> There are a few other notational omissions that will be footnoted at the appropriate points in the discussion of this song.

Changes of meter characterize mm. 15-17 (Example 28): the 5/4 time signature of m. 15 changes to 4/4 in the next measure before returning to 5/4 at m. 17. The effect of these changes is a sense of lightness and spontaneity in the vocal line as its text describes the women who open their eyes “as wide as horizons.” This phrase is delightfully mirrored in the vocal writing in m. 16: the bar begins with a descending quintuplet figure that stretches the word “wide,” and ends with a fermata over the quarter note that has already lengthened the last syllable of the word “horizons.”

Example 28: “The Greek Women,” mm. 15-17

And, op - 'ning their eyes, their eyes as wide as hor - i - zons, Seem to a - wait the na - vy home from Troy.

mf.

mf.

mf.

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<sup>146</sup> Jacqueline Roberts, interview.

Hints of E major resurface in m. 17, as does the neighboring tone motive in the voice and piano on beats 3-5. This pattern nicely emphasizes each syllable of the final four words of the phrase “Seem to await the Navy home from Troy.” The music slows, then stops by means of a *ritardando* on beats 4-5 before a fermata over the bar line to end the first section.

The stark contrast between the previous music and that beginning in m. 18 parallels the abrupt shift in Merton’s poetic imagery. A C# minor I chord crashes down *sforzando* upon the listener on beat 1; it is quite unexpected after the playfulness of the previous three measures. The whimsical tone of the piano is replaced in the ensuing passage by a bare, ominous accompaniment that focuses all attention upon the *forte* pronouncements of the vocal line: “No longer stand together, widow, widow women.”<sup>147</sup> An abundance of triplets adds weight to the vocal melody through their even stresses of the text.<sup>148</sup> Triplets also dominate mm. 23-25, shown in Example 29; they emphasize the harsh words, “Make run the water speech of beads between your fingers: / For Troy is burned and Greece is cursed.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Niles’s repetition the word “widow” draws attention to the substitution of this word for “willow” used earlier in the poem to describe the women.

<sup>148</sup> The Ds in the vocal line in mm. 20, 21, 23, and 25 should be D#s. The accompaniment is correct.

<sup>149</sup> The acute accents Niles added over the “-ed” suffixes of the words “burned” and “cursed” indicate that these suffixes are pronounced. This is common in all of *The Niles-Merton Songs*, and is perhaps reflective of English-derived folk music influence.



**Example 29: "The Greek Women," mm. 23-25**

mus. f.

Make run the wa - ter speech of beads between your fingers: For Tray is burned and Greece is cursed, the

755

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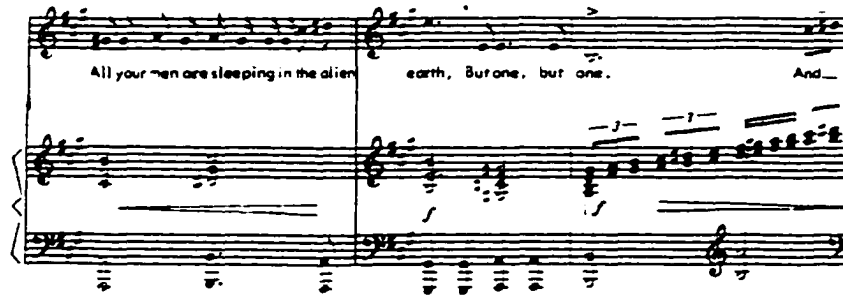
**Parallel octave motion in the bass also contributes to the impact of these dire words.**

The octave ascent in m. 23 quickens its pace with each beat--from quarter note to eighth notes to an eighth note triplet to sixteenth notes--as it mirrors the action of beads falling through their fingers like grains of sand. The text "Greece is cursed" is strongly accentuated by the piano in the last two beats of m. 25 by means of the chord that sounds on the word "Greece" and then is sustained by a fermata. All the activity of the heavy accompaniment thus stops for the singing of these three words.

In the context of the mostly step-wise progression of the vocal line through the song, the wider intervals of m. 28 stand out. The text "All your men are sleeping in the alien earth, / But one" holds the explanation for Niles's departure from the melodic "status quo": this line marks the first reference to a single person, as expressed in the words, "but one." As shown in Example 30, the word "earth" is placed at the peak of a melodic ascent to E5 that arrives at beat 1, with these last two words set on E4--an entire octave below--as an eighth note followed by a dotted quarter note. Niles then

repeats the words “but one” in similar rhythm: the eighth note is now placed on E4 continuing down a fourth to a dotted half note B3.

**Example 30: “The Greek Women,” mm. 27-29**



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The vocal line thus spans one and a half octaves in the space of four notes and seven beats.

The final section of the piece begins at m. 30. Parallel thirds akin to those in m. 1 lead upward in m. 29 to the beginning of the same sequence first found in mm. 11-13. Niles’s repetition of this melodic sequence in mm. 30-32 aligns with Merton’s evocation of poetic images first set by the sequence in Section A; this poetic return can be observed by comparing the text and music of Example 31 with that of mm. 11-13, shown in Example 27 above.

Example 31: "The Greek Women," mm. 30-32

Cly - tem - nes - tra, walking like a wil - low,

stores. Beads and brace - lets gent - ly knife - clash all a - bout her, be -

cause the con - quer - or, the home - come he - ra, the sol - dier, A - ga - mem - non,

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This time, however, the end of the melodic sequence does not correspond to that of the poetic image. Instead, the 5/4 time, triplets, and ascending melodic line of m. 33 set

the text “bleeds, bleeds in her conscience”; Niles added the repetition of the word “bleeds,” which he set in triplets for emphasis. The final phrase, “twisting like a root,” descends in the Dorian mode to F#4; the rolled chords in the piano are reminiscent of those found in mm. 1-9.

The accompaniment extends this final poetic image in the last two measures. A parallel third chain recalls the melody, if not the mood, of the first bar as it ascends to G5/B5. When these notes are added to the A major triad in the left hand, the resulting dominant sound of the final chord leaves the tonal question asked at the beginning unresolved.

#### *Cana* (No. 8)

“Cana” is one of the three religious poems set in Op. 172. Niles’s uncomplicated approach to the form, tonality, and melody of this setting reflects the poet’s simple, honest account of a religious celebration. As before, Niles employs both the voice and piano to evoke the atmosphere and emotions portrayed in the text.

The ABAC form of this piece corresponds well to the divisions of Merton’s poem. When the first half of the beautiful melody of the initial section is repeated, it is subtly molded to enhance the poetry of the third stanza so that it is not at all compromised for the sake of the musical repetition. Just the opposite, the simplicity of a repeated melody captures the scene in a way no through-composed form could. Further, the new music introduced in the final, contrasting portion is strengthened because it follows this melodic material.

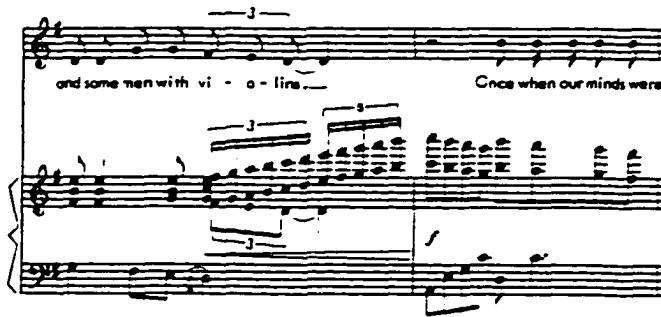
The first section encompasses mm. 1-7, shown in Example 32. The voice and piano enter simultaneously in m. 1: the piano's G major chord and the sung word "once" are sustained by a fermata.<sup>150</sup> This elongation creates an air of anticipation that draws the listener in to the story about to be told. When the tonal center settles in the relative minor at the downbeat of m. 2, it doesn't sadden the music, only deepens its color.

The 4/4 time not yet really established changes to 5/4 in m. 3, which allows the text "filled with the joys of Cana's feast" to fit into one measure in such a way that the important words "joys" and "feast" fall on strong beats without being rushed.<sup>151</sup> The additional beat also improves the text lay of m. 4 so that the stressed syllables of the text "Jesus came" fall on the strong beats of the measure. The syncopated rhythm of these beats is replaced on beat 4 by a triplet that propels the vocal line up to G5 on the downbeat of m. 5 to emphasize the textual reference to the disciples (Example 32).

Example 32: "Cana," mm. 1-8

<sup>150</sup> This is one of only two songs in which the piano and voice enter simultaneously to begin the piece. The other is "When You Point Your Finger," (Op. 171, No.5).

<sup>151</sup> "filled" is pronounced as a two-syllable word, as is "charmed" in m. 12.



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The Phrygian colorations of the melodic descent that follows enrich the reference to Mary, “His mother.”

The only overt word painting in this piece is found in m. 7 (Example 32), where ascending octaves in the piano’s right hand imitate the playing of violins mentioned in the text. This pattern descends in m. 8 as an echo of the melody from m. 6. Interestingly, the piano repeats both the melody and harmony of m. 6 while the voice begins Section B.

The poetic images in Section B express the experience of worship during this feast. Example 33 shows the simple parallel third chains running through mm. 11-12 to accompany the text “our simple rooms were charmed with sun.” Tonal fluctuations in

mm. 8-14 enhance the rich imagery of this text: before returning to E minor at m. 15, the music goes through microtonicizations of A minor, C major, F major, and D minor as fluidly as the monks' thoughts "went in and out in whiter coats than God's disciples'."

Example 33: "Cana," mm. 10-14

skies our faces, Our simple rooms were charm-ed with sun. Our

thoughts went in and out in whiter coats than God's dis-ci-ples'.

MF 755

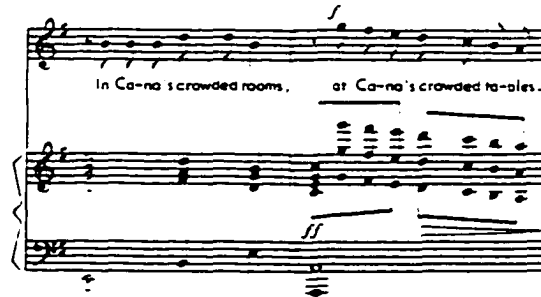
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The F#5 on the downbeat of m. 14 over a D dominant seventh chord is thus emphasized not only for its high pitch, but because it is the first one sung in this new

section of music and poetry.<sup>152</sup> Indeed, the entire line “whiter coats than God’s disciples” is accentuated by the piano’s sustained chord underneath the eighth notes of the vocal line, a device Niles has used more than once in these songs for textual emphasis.

The arrival of I in E minor and the hymn-like chordal character of the accompaniment in m. 15 (shown in Example 34), create a reverent atmosphere around the text “In Cana’s crowded rooms.” Reverence erupts into joy in the next measure, where a *fortissimo* chord on beat 1 precedes a vocal descent from G5 to A4 on the text “at Cana’s crowded tables.” The piano reinforces this vocal passage at the unison, as well as an octave above and below.

Example 34: “Cana,” mm. 15-16



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Niles’s insertion of the word “crowded” from the previous line above into this text brings a balance to these two lines that enhances the melodic flow.

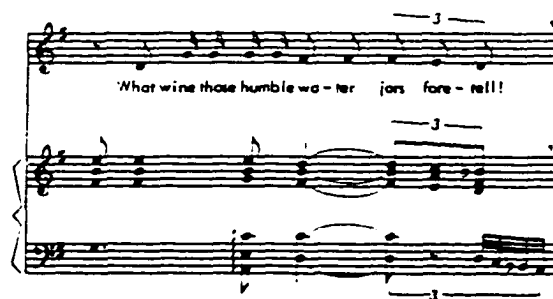
<sup>152</sup> Two f naturals have recently sounded in the vocal melody, the first of which is similarly strengthened by its placement high in the tessitura as a quarter note on the downbeat of m. 11.



Beginning at m. 17, the melody first heard in Section A makes a partial reprise. While Niles made a few minor alterations for textual purposes, much of the poetry fits the repeated melody very well. In mm. 21-22, for example, the notes that earlier contained a reference to Jesus, the disciples, and Mary now tell of the water jars--and symbolically the monks--“ready in a row to fill with water and a miracle.”<sup>153</sup> The G5s on “water” descend as before, but now the modal colorations enhance the words “and a miracle.”

The voice painting of “violins” in m. 7 is replaced by a chordal accompaniment at m. 24 (Example 35), over which sixteenth notes in the vocal line declaim the words “What wine those humble water jars fore-tell!”; a triplet on beat 4 stretches the final two words in a written-in ritardando.

Example 35: “Cana,” m. 24



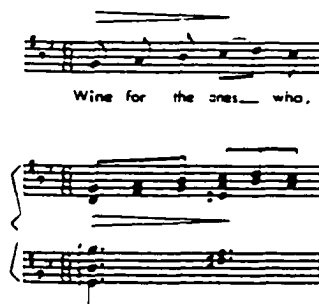
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<sup>153</sup> Niles set the phrase “For ready in a row, to fill with water,” then repeated “ready in a row, to fill with water and a miracle” so that Stanza 4 would fit the repeated melody of A, which set the longer Stanza 1.

The bass note descent on beat 4 of this bar is an almost exact repetition of the bass passage in m. 25 of "For My Brother." In both instances, the passages lead to new sections of music in G minor.

At m. 25, the melody abruptly departs from its repetition and progresses instead to Section C (Example 36). The arrival of this new music coincides with the sudden poetic shift from the warm scene of worship to the suffering of those people outside of communion with Christ. This change is further accented by modulation to G minor, as well as the 6/8 tempo in mm. 25-26 that accelerates the melody and text, "wine for the ones who bended to the dirty earth." The accompaniment here is uncomplicated: the rhythm of its generally chordal structure adheres to that of the vocal line, which it doubles through most of these last measures so that the focus is always drawn to the vocal melody and text.

Example 36: "Cana," mm. 25-32



bended to the dirt-y earth, Have feared, since love-ly E-den, the sun's fire, yet hard-ly

mumble, in their dusty mouths, one pray'r, one pray'r, Wine for old Adam... digging in the briars!

Nr 755 8va

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The vocal line is slowed again by the return to 4/4 in m. 27 that adds weight to the text “feared since lovely Eden, the sun’s fire.” In the following bar, the voice leaps up a fourth to G5 (beat 1), then plummets an octave (beat 2) to express the words “sun’s fire.” The wide leaps, broad range, and comparative length of these notes in a sea of eighth and sixteenth notes effectively set these words apart from the rest of the line.

The voice remains at A4 or higher to the end as the poet’s heavy-hearted frustration builds. Measure 29 is another 5/4 bar: sixteenth notes in the vocal line here accelerate the text “mumble in their dusty mouths one pray’r” and heighten its percussiveness, as do the repetitions of Eb5 on the first beat and D5 on the second. The fifth beat also allows the rhythm of the last three words to slow to eighth notes; a

crescendo over this G5-C5 descent and the fermata that sustains the final note add additional emphasis to the words “one pray’r,” which Niles repeats.<sup>154</sup>

The time signature returns to 4/4 at m. 30 for the final line of the poem, “Wine for old Adam, digging in the briars!” The vocal line ascends a final time to G5 to place the word “Adam” on the highest note of the final melodic phrase. A crescendo that begins here arrives at *forte* on the final note of the vocal melody; this C5 is sustained by a fermata that lengthens the word “briars.” The piano again concludes the piece with octave Ds that sound deep in the bass to end the piece on the dominant.

*The Ohio River–Louisville (No. 8)*

The final piece to be examined is unlike any of the others. Although Thomas Merton wrote “The Ohio River–Louisville” in 1941, Niles’s choice of this text was particularly timely in light of the racial tensions in the South in the 1960s. Perhaps it was these events that inspired such an eloquent composition.

Besides the subtle musical shadings of particular words or phrases, there is also a more constant text painting at work in the accompaniment, which, in Pen’s words, “becomes the river.”<sup>155</sup> It can be described as having three layers: the first is the sustained bass notes found in the most of the bars. The texture of this layer is quite thin, typically consisting of single tones or open fifths. The second layer consists of

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<sup>154</sup> In Niles’s manuscript, the crescendo in this bar continues to the arrival at the notes held by the fermata. In the published copy, the crescendo indication is for both musicians to continue the crescendo though the sustained notes, which is, of course, impossible for the pianist.

<sup>155</sup> Ronald A. Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 224.

cluster chords played by depressing the black keys with a special wooden board ten and 7/8 inches long.<sup>156</sup> All of these tones are found in the key of Gb major,<sup>157</sup> but the sound of them together brings a vague, impressionistic character to the accompaniment that expresses the power of the river to drown out the noise of the city both literally and figuratively.<sup>158</sup> The third layer is made of shorter notes that double or echo the sung melody, and form the brief interludes between sections of the music. When all three layers are combined, the resulting accompaniment achieves what Pen describes as a “coupling of the structural and symbolic levels so that the listener [is] continuously aware of the river, but not so much as a sound to be heard but rather a presence to be felt.”<sup>159</sup>

This is the first of *The Niles-Merton Songs* that actually begins in 5/4 time and maintains it through much of the piece.<sup>160</sup> While his use of this time signature should come as no surprise, Niles masterfully employs it to optimum effect here to enhance the tranquility of the flowing water. Interspersed 4/4 bars speed up the flow of those

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<sup>156</sup> Jacqueline Roberts, interview. Niles claims to have gotten the idea for this board from Charles Ives.

<sup>157</sup> Niles’s choice of the key that employs all the black notes to set this poem about racial tension is another subtle form of text setting.

<sup>158</sup> The abundance of Cbs in the music again suggests extensive borrowing from the dominant.

<sup>159</sup> Ronald A. Pen, “The Biography and Works of John Jacob Niles,” 224.

<sup>160</sup> The only other one that begins in 5/4 is “Original Sin,” (Op. 172, No. 9).

passages of text that refer to the city and provide contrast to the longer 5/4 measures that usually describe the river.

Niles employs dynamics nowhere more perfectly than in this setting. Just as Merton's calm, soothing images of the river overcome the loud noises above, so louder phrases about the "sky-swung cables," the "outboard motor," and the "iron cries of men" diminuendo to the soft level of the accompaniment--of the river that overpowers them. Pen notes that in this manner Niles "fashioned sound out of silence" in the music of the piano.<sup>161</sup>

While the role of the accompaniment is largely passive, the more active part of the music is found in the vocal melody. It, too, is consonant and flowing so that small deviations from its overall character stand out. Pen points out the effect of the melody that begins in the same way to introduce the second and third sections of the poem, which clearly defines the structure of the piece:

Structural cohesion is produced by this repetition, but the repetition is masked by the continuous feel of the piano and the subtle variations on the melody, so that one's attention is drawn to the unity rather than to the divisions.<sup>162</sup>

Dynamics enhance the first occurrence of this melodic material and its text, "No one can hear the loud voice of the city / Because of the tremendous silence of this slow-moving river" (Example 37).<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 224. Pen notes the sense of calm the composer created that musically silences the noisy poetic images.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>163</sup> Niles omitted the final words of this line, "quiet as space."

Example 37: "The Ohio River-Louisville," mm. 1-4

*Languidly, with tenderness*  
*sp*

No one can hear the loud voice of the ci - ty — Because of the tremen-dous

si - lence of this slow-mov - ing riv - er. Not the tow'ring bridge, the crawling train.

\*Cluster chords are played on the black notes only with a felt covered board 10 7/8" long. If two notes appear, play the lower one with the left hand and use the upper note as the lowest note of the cluster chord.

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The melody flows easily through these measures as the *mezzo piano* at m. 1 (over a *mezzo forte* cluster chord) crescendos toward the word "city" before a diminuendo toward "silence." The setting of the word "river" in sixteenth notes that ascend by step to Db5 sustained by the first fermata of the piece evokes the tranquil quality that is persistent in the piano.

While obvious text painting in either the melody or accompaniment is unusual in this piece, there are two such instances in m. 4. The vocal line climbs to Gb5 as it refers to "the tow'ring bridge"; a fermata sustains this, the highest pitch sung, before

the melody begins its descent, which the piano doubles an octave below. The lower pitches and the triplet contained in the phrase heighten the text “the crawling train.”

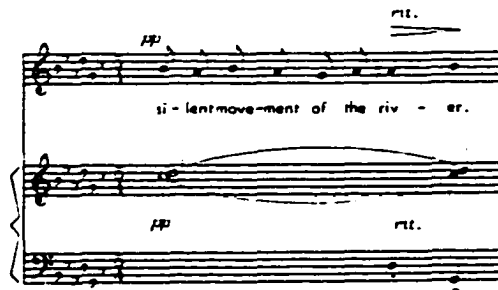
More often, dynamic contrast between vocal line and accompaniment create subtler enhancements. Such is the case in mm. 7-8, where another crescendo strengthens the vocal melody at “Not the outboard motor / Swearing in the fiery distance.” The word “swearing” is further articulated by a *sforzando* in the otherwise placid accompaniment, while cluster chords on beats 3-4 seem to soften the image of the words “fiery distance” as the dynamic level again subsides.

In m. 10, it is the cluster chord in the piano that is played *forte*, as if to cover up the vocal phrase “not the iron cries of men,” which only begins to grow louder in the last two beats of the measure. As shown in Example 38, this vocal crescendo leads to the downbeat of m. 11 so that the text “Nothing, nothing is heard” is sung over a now *mezzo piano* accompaniment.<sup>164</sup> Its dynamic level dies away to *pianissimo* and the 5/4 returns at m. 13, where Niles cleverly uses the neighboring tone motive in the vocal line to recall the tranquil state created by the “silent movement of the river.”

Example 38: “The Ohio River–Louisville,” mm. 10-13

<sup>164</sup> The repetition of the word “nothing” was added by Niles for emphasis.





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For added emphasis, the eighth-note motion of the melody slows to quarter notes at the word “river”; a ritardando and diminuendo here increase the effect.

The early measures of the second section are the softest of the song as they reflect the muffled sounds of the city from the banks of the river. The vocal ascent from Gb4 to Db5 on the words “noise than cotton” is lengthened by another fermata, then echoed in the following bar by the piano interlude that portrays an overpowering veneer of calm (Example 39). The quiet delicacy of the music in this entire section reveals much about the scene by its *lack* of stress on key words in the text. Rather, the vocal line seems to float through references to “the weeds, / On which lies lightly sprawling, / Like white birds shot to death, / The bathers’ clothing.” The only melodic clues to the unrest hidden just beneath the surface are a small crescendo as the voice itself “sprawls” to Eb5, vocal writing that only barely emphasizes “shot to death,” and the unexpected descent to Ab3--the lowest note of the piece--when referring to the “bathers.” Even more subtle is the unsettled effect achieved through Niles’s constant alternation of 4/4 and 5/4 in mm. 19-25.

Example 39: "The Ohio River—Louisville," mm. 17-23

sing-ing dynamos Make no more noise than cat-ton. All life is quieter,

quieter than the weeds On which lies light-ly sprawling, like white\_birds\_shot to death, the bathers— clothing.

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The composer's use of these musical devices to reflect the tension that is barely concealed in this text is nothing short of inspired.

The interlude in mm. 24-25, which continues in the 4/4 time established in m. 23, foreshadows the tone of the third section by its *mezzo forte* dynamic level and crescendo indications in each of the two measures (Example 40). The piano remains at this level when the vocal line re-enters at m. 26, but the familiar melody and tranquil accompaniment now take on the ominous tone of the text "But only where the swimmers float like alligators." Ironically, this feeling of unease is now increased by

two of the very tools that earlier suppressed such underlying feelings: first, the diminuendo of the vocal line against the accompaniment, as in m. 28 at the text “And with their eyes as dark as creosote”; and second, the return to 5/4 that earlier evoked the river now accents the words “dark as creosote” as they descend to Db4 in this slight variation of the melody.

**Example 40: “The Ohio River–Louisville,” mm. 24–30**

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a vocal line on a single staff and a piano accompaniment on two staves. The first system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "But on-ly where the swimmers" and the piano accompaniment with a *mf* dynamic. The second system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "floor like al-li-ga-tors, And with their eyes as dark as cre - o - sote" and the piano accompaniment. The third system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "scru-ti - nize the mur-der-ous heat, On - ly there is an - y - thing heard:—" and the piano accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

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The 4/4 of m. 29 quickens the subsequent text “scrutinize the murderous heat.” The already suggestive adjective “murderous” is musically emphasized by its triplet rhythm and leap up to Fb5; the doubling of the vocal line here strengthens and, in Pen’s words, “adds venom” to the final two words of the phrase.<sup>165</sup> However, the tone remains soft until the final phrase of the piece, where the “iron cries of men” that were earlier muted by the river return as “the thin, salt voice of violence”--the only voice that will not be silenced by the river (Example 41).

Example 41: “The Ohio River–Louisville,” mm. 31-36

The musical score for Example 41 consists of two systems. Each system has a vocal line on a single staff and a piano accompaniment on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The lyrics are: "The thin, salt voice of violence, That whines, like a mosquito," and "in their simmering blood." The piano part includes triplet markings (three eighth notes beamed together) and dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *mp* (mezzo-piano). The vocal line also features triplet markings and slurs.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 225. Pen also points out the same effect of this doubling upon the final two words of the song. When I examined the three points at which the accompaniment doubles the voice in this manner, I discovered that in each case, the word(s) emphasized are set in triplet rhythm.

The piano again envelops the song in the soft tranquility of the “river” in the final measures, but the last notes of the final vocal phrase echo persistently in the midst of the “calm.”

## CONCLUSION

John Jacob Niles and Thomas Merton were two men who led very different lives. They shared, however, a love for poetry, an interest in Zen meditation techniques, an appreciation for the natural beauty of Kentucky, and a mutual respect for each other's artistic gifts. These commonalities drew Niles to Merton's poetry and led to the composition of the twenty-two settings called *The Niles-Merton Songs*.

Whereas Niles demonstrated a duality of musical styles, the life of Thomas Merton reflects a duality of vocations. Chapter 2 demonstrated the inner struggle that Merton suffered as he sought to reconcile the roles of Trappist monk and poet. In the end, however, these two paths merged as Merton used his writing to speak out against the injustices that weighed on his conscience.

Much of Merton's early poetry expressed religious themes; these were often intermingled with nature imagery. But he also composed early secular poems to express his strong dislike of cities, technology, and the corruption he saw in modern civilization. All of these early subjects are found among the seven poems of Merton's first two poetry collections (*Thirty Poems* and *A Man in the Divided Sea*) that Niles chose for setting in *The Niles-Merton Songs*.

Chapter 3 revealed another motivation for Niles to set these texts beyond his respect for Merton's poetry. While he was principally known as a composer and performer of music in the folk style he had heard from childhood, Niles was also greatly influenced by classical music, although his classical compositions are not widely known. This, his last major compositional effort, was intended to belong completely to the "art

song” genre. By composing *The Niles-Merton Songs*, Niles hoped to be recognized as a “true composer” and gain the respect of those who questioned the legitimacy of his work.

Chapter 3 then illustrated the methods Niles employed to set this early poetry of Thomas Merton. Aspects examined included the composer’s use of form, rhythm, tempo, harmony, text painting, range, alteration of the words or form of the text, and motivic repetition. My research clearly indicates that not only do the formal structures of these songs conform to the formal divisions of Merton’s poems (shown in Chapter 2), but the vocal lines also adhere to the rhythms and inflections of the texts as they would be spoken. The fact that Niles made only minor alterations to these texts also reflects his respect for these poems. Such changes were made only when Niles thought the beauty of the corresponding vocal melody could thus be improved, and were done with the complete approval of Thomas Merton.

Beyond the “mechanics” of text setting, however, I was interested in determining the amount of care Niles took to preserve the rich images and emotions portrayed in these poems. I found that Niles indeed sought to recreate these meanings in his musical settings. There are examples of text painting of individual words or phrases to be found in each of the songs, but Niles seems to have placed more importance upon a broader and more subtle musical recreation of the images of the text; both the voice and the piano play a major role in this aspect of the text setting.

In studying these, as well as the other fifteen songs of Opp. 171 and 172, I have noted that there were motivic patterns that were repeated throughout the two sets.

The most notable of these is the “neighboring tone motive” that figures prominently in the voice and piano in several of the songs. Chains of parallel thirds are common, often used to evoke a mood of lightness or simplicity. Broken chord accompaniments are found as well, especially in the left hand of the piano; such accompaniments reflect the folk style influence that Niles was trying so diligently to avoid in these songs. While these do not perform any unifying “cyclic” function, it has nonetheless been interesting to note the numerous uses Niles found for these patterns in eliciting Merton’s texts.

The three songs from Opus 171 and the four from Opus 172 discussed above offer diverse but limited samples of the music to be found in *The Niles-Merton Songs*. While I hold the selections explored in this paper to be among the finest of these songs, there are nevertheless fifteen others that, regrettably, could not be included here. Although they were originally composed for the soprano voice, most of these twenty-two pieces would also be suitable for performance by the male singer--indeed, selections such as “For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943” would likely be enriched by a male voice. John Jacob Niles discovered a renewed enthusiasm for the arts of music and poetry through the composition of these pieces, and they would certainly bring similar fulfillment and reward to the musician who brings his or her talents to bear upon them.



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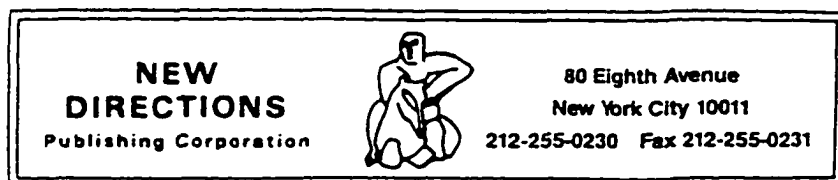
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## **APPENDIX**

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February 23, 1998


Ms. Melanie Williams  
135 Grande View Lane  
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Please feel free to call me if you have any further questions.

Sincerely yours,

  
Declan Spring  
Editor

13 April 1998

Melanie Williams  
135 Grande View Lane  
Maylene AL 35114

Dear Ms. Williams:

Thank you for your letter of 15 March and the subsequent telephone call. You may take this letter as confirmation of permission to reprint excerpts from the following songs from the Niles-Merton Songs: *The Messenger*, *Evening*, *For My Brother*, *The Greek Women*, *Cana*, and *The Ohio River - Louisville*. We would ask that the following notice be included below each excerpt from these works:

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David Bohn  
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Re: **THE NATIVITY** by John Jacob Niles

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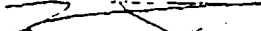
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## **VITA**

Melanie Gayle Boney was born in Jackson, Mississippi, on July 7, 1965, the daughter of J.D. and Berniece Boney, and the half-sister of Dianne and Eddie Weaver. She remained in the Jackson area, where she graduated from Manhattan Academy in 1983 and attended college.

After completing the bachelor of music degree in Vocal Performance at Belhaven College in 1988, Boney relocated to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and began graduate studies at Louisiana State University. She completed the master of music degree in Vocal Performance in 1990, and entered the doctoral program in Vocal Performance. As a teaching assistant, she taught voice, voice class, and vocal methods for instrumental majors. She also performed leading roles with Baton Rouge Opera and maintained a private voice studio.

Boney received a one-year appointment for the 1994-1995 school year to serve as Instructor of Voice and Director of Opera Theatre at Mississippi College. From 1995-1998 she served part-time as Instructor of voice and music appreciation at Hinds Community College; during this time she continued to perform and teach voice privately. In 1995, she married Mark Williams, and in 1998 the couple relocated to Birmingham, Alabama, where they now reside.

In addition to appearances in Baton Rouge, she has also performed roles in Mississippi Opera productions, and has appeared as a guest artist with Alabama Symphony, Arkansas Symphony, Kingsport Symphony, Mississippi Symphony, Monroe Symphony, and Opera Birmingham.




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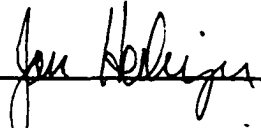
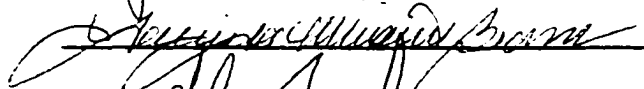

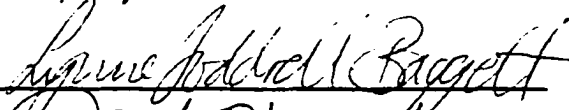

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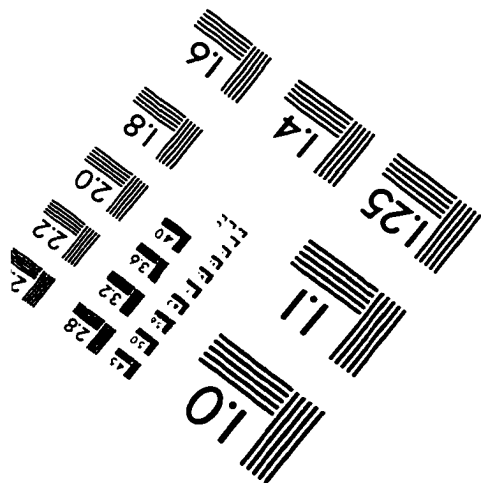
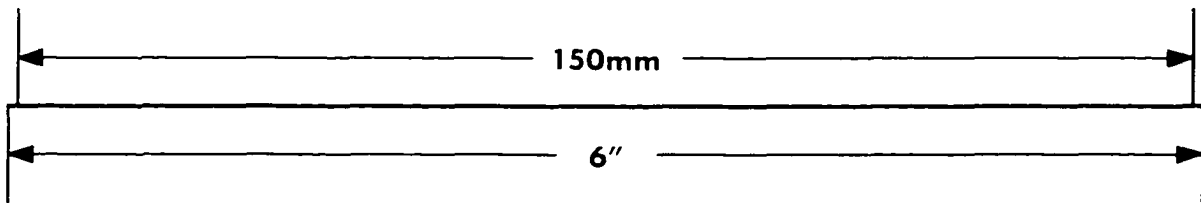
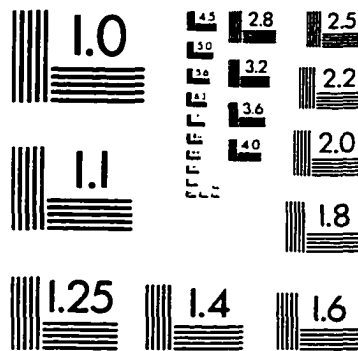
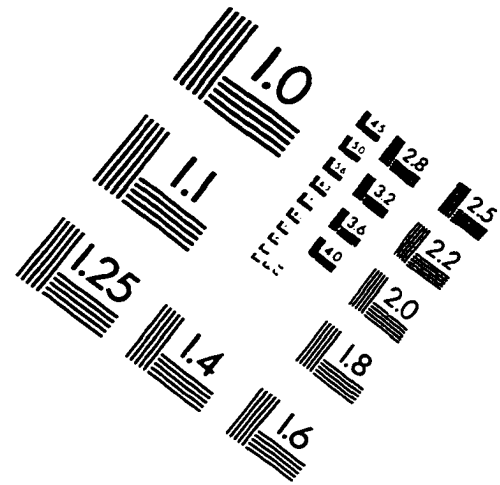
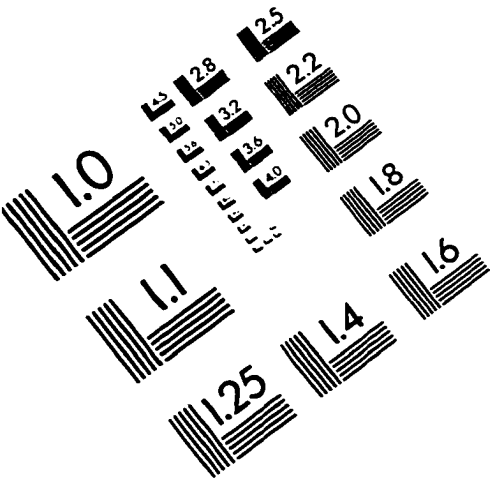
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