

## BOOK REVIEWS

*I Wonder As I Wander: The Life of John Jacob Niles.* By Ron Pen. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010.

Who could forget first hearing John Jacob Niles's amazing, wild voice, ranging far above that of most women, but still unmistakably male? When I was growing up in the 1940s and 50s, I heard Niles's recordings, along with those of other folk revival artists such as Pete Seeger and Burl Ives, but none of these others had the bizarre, indescribable quality of Niles's voice. Now, in the beginning decades of our new millennium, indescribable voices seem to be the norm, and perhaps Niles's time has come around again. Ron Pen's biography, with its detailed look at the life and times of the singer-composer, collector, artist, author, carver, and farmer—who in many ways foreshadowed much of what would happen in the development of folk music in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—will inform that revival, if it happens. At the same time, Niles can also be seen very much as a man of his own times, and Pen does a good job of explaining how he fit into the culture around him and how he broke loose from its habits and values.

In many ways this is a traditional biography, detailing the past of both sides of Niles's Kentucky-based family, with its mixture of German and English stock, and with piano making and furniture building as family occupations. (These family professions may have informed Niles's own instrument building and carving.) Niles was born in Portland, Kentucky, on 28 April 1892, and was exposed early on to diverse musical influences, including singing in a children's chorus on stage with Theodore Thomas's Chicago Symphony Orchestra at age eight, and visiting a minstrel show—performed by blacks—at age nine. Pen uses this tale of contrasting cultures to highlight, in his words, Niles's “‘middlebrow’ navigation of high and low art expressions” (21).

In his discussion of Niles's career as a collector and folklorist—a problematic mixture of impulses—Pen shows both how Niles documented the songs he collected and how he transformed them into material for his own performances. It is here, in the detailed accounts of how some of the singer's most famous songs came about, that Pen provides the most fascinating material. But he does not give the reader the notational tools (or recordings) to follow the important changes he tries to describe in words. For example, in his four-page description of Niles's collection and subsequent transformation of the song “Go 'Way from My Window,” Pen gives this description of a sketch from 1908: “There are two different melody sketches here, one based on a simplistic repetition of minor thirds and another marked ‘or perhaps’ that mirrors the final form that the tune took except for a different final phrase” (36). This description is both detailed and vague. It makes the musicians among us long for a notated version—or a recording—of both sketches to see the changes for ourselves. (However, Pen does provide a reproduction of the first line of this song, as transcribed in 1905, among the first set of illustrations.)

If, as I suspect, the publisher did not wish the book to look daunting to the general reader, then perhaps a less detailed verbal description accompanied by

an appendix with transcriptions would have been the better choice. Such phrases as “chromatically inflected or higher-order tertian chords” (90), used in Pen’s description of Niles’s accompaniments for his publication *Singing Soldiers*, are no less daunting than a short notated example. Because many of Niles’s recordings are still in circulation, the lack of an accompanying recording is not such a problem, but because Pen’s book presents a large amount of new information, the chance to see in detail how Niles re-worked individual songs would have been invaluable.

These musical quibbles aside, the book is a fascinating reading experience. Niles died in 1980, at the age of eighty-eight, and, in his long life, he encountered and interacted with many interesting people and aspects of American culture in his own idiosyncratic way. Besides his two wives, he had close friendships and/or affairs with many other women, including the famed photographer Doris Ulmann, whom he accompanied in her last trips to the Appalachians in the early 1930s, helping her document life there, while pursuing his own folksong collecting. He also interacted with the ever-growing Appalachian arts and crafts movement, including Jean Thomas’s American Folk Song Festival, which by 1938 had grown to an entertainment of forty acts with an audience of twenty thousand.

During these same years, he was also concertizing in New York and Europe with Marion Kerby, presenting a wide range of repertory, including his arrangements of folk songs and larger works such as his *Africa to Harlem* suite (1932) for two voices and two pianos. Despite their onstage successes, Niles and Kerby had a difficult personal relationship, and, by 1933, while on a European tour, their act had dissolved, as we learn from a letter from Kerby to Niles, preserved along with many other documents in the John Jacob Niles Center for American Music (for which Ron Pen serves as director) at the University of Kentucky. Excerpts from the letters and journals of Niles and his associates, Niles’s unpublished autobiography, and interviews with Niles’s widow and friends greatly enrich Pen’s narrative, although at times the details overshadow some of the larger picture.

Pen brings out several of the important issues raised by Niles’s relationship with folksong, and discusses his performance philosophy, which, as Niles explains in the following passage from his autobiography, is the art of interpreting folksong for the modern audience rather than trying to be an authentic folksinger. “If the singer of folk music is to reach the hearts of his listeners, he needs must employ every trick in the book trying to reach back to the ancient bewhiskered bard, and then to the folk informant, or to the poet and composer. And he must do this without seeming to do it at all” (222).

More problematic is Niles’s treatment of the “folk informants” he interprets. As Pen points out, in Niles’s *Ballad Book*, published in 1961, the pseudo-Elizabethan artificiality of some of the texts and the unusual melodic turns of many of his tunes make it hard to trust his transcriptions, even before the addition of accompaniments, which, as Pen explains, emulate the style of Vaughan Williams and make them sound “far more British than Appalachian, far more composed than documented” (255). Among sixty-five ballads, some with several versions, Niles’s *Ballad Book* features versions of ballads that had never been collected elsewhere, including three versions of “Judas” (Child Ballad No. 23). Because all of the singers from whom Niles collected had died before Pen began his research, it is impossible to verify

that they sang what Niles transcribed, and even if we allow, as Pen suggests, the subjectivity of the transcriber's ear, it is still difficult to understand how some of his melodies represented as traditional ended up so very different from any other versions, a problem recognized by Bertrand Bronson, who included only one of Niles's transcriptions in his comprehensive collection of the tunes of the traditional Child ballads (Child Ballad No. 4, Variant 96).

Because Niles copyrighted many of the versions printed in *The Ballad Book*, it seems clear that he himself recognized his own agency in creating particular versions of these ballads, and wished to protect them from the unattributed uses that had already been made by other singers. Although reproductions of the pages with three of Niles's best-known non-ballad songs ("Jesus, Jesus, Rest Your Head," "Go 'Way from My Window," and "I Wonder as I Wander") are provided, it would also have been good to see some of the actual texts and melodies as recorded in Niles's field notebooks to compare with the versions published in *The Ballad Book*, as well as in some of Niles's earlier published collections from the 1920s and 1930s. Even though I would like to see more discussion of Niles's folksong collections and collecting practices from a musical perspective, Pen's book is a fascinating study of a fascinating man, whose life story brings into stark relief many of the problems of folksong collecting, revival, interpretation, and performance that continue to be discussed to this day.

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*American Orchestras in the Nineteenth Century*. Edited by John Spitzer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Orchestras play too much Beethoven, cater to the rich, shun popular culture, and exude pretentiousness. It takes little reflection to note that these hackneyed complaints about today's symphony orchestras echo many of the criticisms leveled at the discipline of musicology during the 1980s and 1990s. The connection is simple to pinpoint. Beginning largely in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, both institutions matured across a lengthy era that increasingly favored ideologies of canon formation and a brand of musical idealism privileging the inviolate, transcendent notion of "the music itself," a work of art standing entirely outside the context in which it is produced. Although the efforts to disentangle musicology from these intellectual roots are ongoing, they have undeniably increased the discipline's vitality. The precarious financial position of greater numbers of symphony orchestras indicates that a similarly fundamental re-assessment of values might be useful for their continued solvency, and indeed for their very existence.

Intentionally or not, this new collection of essays on orchestras in the nineteenth century, written by scholars from a variety of disciplines and career stages,