

Composer's Notes – The Texts in Context

These two song texts both come from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (as indeed does a third well-known lyric, "Blow, Blow, thou Winter Wind"). Some commentators have theorized that the Bard included so much music in this play to bolster the entertainment value of a script that he felt was not one of his strongest efforts! Whatever the reason, audiences have been grateful ever since—and so have composers, beginning in Shakespeare's own time with Thomas Morley, and continuing with the likes of Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gerald Finzi, Roger Quilter, John Rutter, George Shearing, and Ward Swingle, to name but a few.

In the play, the character who sings "Under the Greenwood Tree," Amiens, pauses after the first verse to see if his listener, Jaques, approves of the performance so far. Jaques urges him to continue, but Amiens is concerned that another verse might make him feel melancholy—to which Jaques replies: "I thank it. I can suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs." (In other words, he actually *enjoys* absorbing that mood from a song, and even finds it nourishing!) Amiens, probably hoping to elicit a compliment from his friend before he finishes the song, says, "My voice is ragged; I know I cannot please you." But Jaques avoids the compliment trap with this great line: "I do not desire you to please me. I do desire you to sing"! Then he cajoles his friend with the words, "Come, warble, come."

Interestingly, the notion of "No excuses: just sing!" comes up again when, later in the play, two of Duke Senior's pages are about to sing "It Was a Lover and his Lass." (Surely Shakespeare intended these "two pages" to be holding two pages of music—one each—when they sing, for comic effect!) The First Page suggests that they get on with the performance "without hawking or spitting or saying we are hoarse, which are the only [*i.e.* usual] prologues to a bad voice."

Incidentally, "ring-time," in the text of the second song, alludes to the practice of exchanging what we would call engagement rings, which couples commonly did on May Day (May 1st). "Between the acres of the rye" means "on the unploughed (and therefore grassy) strips separating one planted field from another." And "hey nonino" (or "hey nonny no")—like "fa-la-la"—means whatever you think it means or want it to mean!

So, no excuses now... and please, no hawking or spitting! Come, warble, come!

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