

Jay Ansill's "A Lost World: The Poems of Robert Graves Set as Songs."

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This is a remarkable project, setting 14 of the poems of Robert Graves to music of a folk or New Age persuasion, which does justice to the texts of the poems as it pays tribute to the Celtic background of the visionary love poems chosen for the recording by its producer and chief musician, Jay Ansill. It is well worth acquisition by lovers of Robert Graves.

Readers of this journal need little persuasion that Robert Graves' studies in folklore and mythology (as recorded in for example *The White Goddess*) call for minimal defense as means of stimulating poetry, no matter their scholarly reputation or founding in historical fact or archeological record. The closest analogue would be W.B. Yeats' "A Vision", directly responsible for inspiring some of the greatest visionary poetry of the last century. Celtic poetry and art would be infinitely poorer if Graves—and Yeats—had turned aside the call of their Muse, even if not all scholars can agree as to the historical or archeological reality of the visions called forth in their writings.

Similarly, listeners to folk music over the last few years need little persuasion that Jay Ansill is an enormously gifted Celtic harpist, whose accompaniment has graced a number of recordings by friends and fellow-lovers of that particular kind of Celtic music which is sometimes called "New Age," by way of betokening its contemplative or meditative goals. This music is often based on the kind of poetic

speculation which undergirds Graves' poetry, which is so similar in inspiration if not in achievement to that of Yeats, another believer in the inspirational voices from out of the "Celtic twilight."

Bringing together Robert Graves and Jay Ansill might then seem to some people to be at the least an interesting experiment, if not a musical and poetic inevitability. Indeed, there were a number of fellow musicians who agreed that this was a fascinating endeavor, among them the English folklorists John Roberts and Tony Barrant, best known for their recordings of British ballads for Folk Legacy, or their series of Mummers' records for Front Hall; the well-known singing trio Anne Hills, Cindy Mangsen and Priscilla Herdmann; the Scottish fiddler Johnny Cunningham; the cellist Abby Newton; John Gorka, the singer-songwriter from Pennsylvania who has recently won considerable critical acclaim for his recordings on High Street, a subsidiary of the California "New Age" label, Windham Hill; and Seamus Egan, Irish composer of a considerable body of music, including the score for the recent movie, "The Brothers McMullen." These friends, among others, have lent their considerable talents to this highly successful recording project.

The poetic texts are drawn from Robert Graves' published works, with settings by Jay Ansill, assisted by these friends in the "folk music community." Like some of the other terms used above, "folk music" needs some redefinition for its use in this context. It does not necessarily refer directly to the music of tradition-bearers within indigenous communities. Rather, although it may draw inspiration from them—as did Graves and Yeats—it also refers to university-educated poets and musicians drawn into the study of folk music in the course of studying poetry and anthropology as part of a more generally-defined liberal arts course. The phenomenon is as widespread in the United States as in Britain, and hardly needs further comment upon, except to note that it is clearly inspirational for a wide range of music and musicians on both sides of the Atlantic, among them participants in this recording.

Thus, when Jay Ansill puts his Celtic harp to use in musical settings for the poetry of Robert Graves, it is in this broader sense of "folk music," a sense which one cannot help but feel Graves would have endorsed, that one must respond to the resultant songs which emerge from Graves' poetry, itself of arguable definition as "folk" music.

Not all would fall into immediately recognizable "folk music" genres like, for example, the English and Scottish Popular Ballads collected by Harvard's Francis James Child in the last century. This was, of

course, never Graves' intention. He was working from a broader definition of lyrical poetry than the purist "Child ballad" which so obsessed coffeehouse musicians in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Rather, Graves seems to have had in mind the same kind of "folk" music and "popular balladry" which is encompassed by Robert Herrick and Renaissance "Arcadian" poetry, as well as by F.J. Child. He seems to have wanted these poems to be sung as part of romantic seductions, in some cases, as part of love-lamentation or celebration in others, in some cases as part of philosophical speculations on the nature of love and death. If some scholars would frown on this broad a definition of "folk music," then, regrettably or otherwise, perhaps so much the worse for them, when it comes to understanding the poetic aims of Robert Graves. His was far from an exclusive Muse; its eclectic nature is part of its continuing appeal beyond his death.

And so much the more we need a sensitive and intuitive response to Graves' poetry, such as is provided for in this recording, by Ansill himself and by the fellow musicians collaborating with him on this project. The steady, insistent flow of the Celtic harp, entwined through the pieces on this record, sets an undercurrent of trance-like meditation which sometimes underscores, sometimes undercuts the surface text which floats above the music (one must listen closely to "A Love Story" to spot the musical and verbal ironies which result from this swirling setting). The subtly rich female harmonies, in for example "The Far Side of Your Moon" and "Full Moon", extend the text in mysterious ways that Graves, for one, would have appreciated. Then, on the other hand, Roberts & Barrand's plaintive treatment of the sweetly lovely anti-war ballad, "Apples and Water"—so prescient for its time, when perhaps only Wilfred Owen was raising his voice against the usually-strident war-poetry of their contemporaries—stands out for especial note in this setting. Richard Shindell, a greatly underappreciated singer, does a fine rendition of the sombre meditation on life beyond death, "A Jealous Man" (is it also a meditation on the poet's submission to The Goddess?). John Gorka's wry treatment of the quasi-Renaissance scolding poem, "Down, Wanton, Down!" is one of the highlights of this wide-ranging selection from Robert Graves' poems.

There is considerable variety in the musical accompaniment, ranging from solo harp to a rather lovely re-statement of a traditional Mallorcan piece, embedded in and extending "She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep," which calls not only on a quartet of voices, male

and female, but also upon Seamus Egan and Johnny Cunningham's accompaniment, together with overdubbed Celtic harp, guitar and mandocello from the versatile Jay Ansill; the musical allusion to his adopted home would have delighted Robert Graves.

In summary, this is an experiment in the use of poetic text in a relatively elaborate "folk music" environment, put to the service of a poet who has been—arguably—unjustly ignored by anthologists and English professors alike. If the inclusion of Richard Shindell and John Gorka will persuade at least some of them to put this in front of their students, then Robert Graves might find a somewhat wider audience for his poetry than he has found in the recent "battles of the canon." It should be reported that this CD has found considerable airplay on college folk music radio programs. This, at least, would have made Robert Graves feel he has found an appreciative younger audience.