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*Esther Hovey*

The Genesis of Serge Hovey's  
*The Robert Burns Song Book*

The question is often asked: Why would a twentieth-century American composer become so involved with the songs of Robert Burns?

Serge Hovey (b. 1920, New York; d. 1989, Los Angeles) was an accomplished composer who studied under Arnold Schoenberg and Hanns Eisler. He was the musical director for the American premiere of Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo* in Hollywood in 1948. His ballet music *Fable* was performed by The Philadelphia Orchestra in 1949 and Hovey was well on his way to being accepted into the "serious" musical establishment of that time. But then he became interested in what he called "the cultural roots of American music." He became imbued with the notion that American music is comprised of the sounds and rhythms of the people who came to this land.

It is possible that his quest for these roots reflected his personal desire to establish his own cultural identity. His family traces back to Colonial days in Massachusetts and his father, Carl, was the editor of an early twentieth-century progressive magazine, *The Metropolitan*, which served as a spring-board for writers such as John Reed, Walter Lippman and Sinclair Lewis. His mother, Sonya Levien, was a Russian-Jewish immigrant who became a lawyer and a suffragist and then a successful screenwriter, working with George Gershwin and Will Rogers.

Hovey's first works in a classical-ethnic style grew out of his own cultural heritage: the music for the plays *The World of Sholem Aleichem* and *Tevya and His Daughters*, both based on Jewish folk tales. He continued to compose original orchestral works such as *African Ballet Suite*, *Weekend-USA*, *A Little*

*New York Music, Symphony No. 1*, and also worked on scores for documentary films.

When Serge Hovey became interested in ethnic music, that meant total immersion. His insightful theories on music history and ethnomusicology were developing constantly as he spent many hours in the communities of people whose music he was trying to interpret as an American composer. In a letter to Hamish Henderson (September 14, 1972), Hovey described his early involvement with the songs of Robert Burns:

My interest in Burns's songs, from the musical angle, started about twenty years ago. At the time I was living in New York, very much involved with Jewish music and off-Broadway theatre. I knew next to nothing about Scots songs. Then a friend, a Burns enthusiast, kept after me on a point of curiosity, i.e., what in the world were all these little tune indications under the titles of Burns's songs? He showed me, opening up the Barke edition to page 584: THE TAILOR and asked, what did that mean: "Tune: *The Drummer*?" Or page 600: O, THAT I HAD NE'ER BEEN MARRIED, "Tune: *Crowdie*?" Did these notations refer to tunes that still existed? Or tunes that had disappeared? Were they folk tunes? Or what? It's hard to recapture the state of total innocence and naivete with regard to the music for Burns's songs that I had then or, for that matter, most people in the United States (I won't speak for Scotland!) still possess. Most people? Most U. S. scholars as well, even in "English" departments of great universities! Sheer curiosity led me to *The Scots Musical Museum* and Thomson's *Scottish Airs* but once I realized that the tunes were still extant, that they were mostly Scots folk songs and, above all, that they sounded marvelous in conjunction with Burns's lyrics, then I was hooked.

From that point on, Burns songs became my hobby; I spent every spare minute arranging the songs. This was the magnetic attraction and still is: what could be done harmonically with these challenging, entrancing melodies?

In an autobiographical letter (August 11, 1982), Hovey wrote:

By 1973, I had completed the manuscript of *The Robert Burns Song Book*. The project is concerned with the re-creation and contemporary American interpretation of over 300 songs created or remodeled by the Scottish poet. The traditional tunes to which Burns either wrote lyrics or revised folk verses were largely lost, forgotten or scrambled in the years that followed his death. Many of these songs were brought to the New World by the early Scottish immigrants. The Burns and Scottish tunes worked their way into the bloodstream of American music. The aspirations of early Americans found many forms of cultural expression and, together with the writings of Paine and the spirit of the Enlightenment, we also find the songs of Burns.

Jean Redpath was introduced to Serge by Hamish Henderson in 1972. Between the years 1976 and 1989 they recorded eighty-eight Burns songs as arranged for small instrumental ensembles. These seven albums have recently

been re-released on four CDs by Rounder Records in the USA and by Green-trax Recordings in Scotland.

*The Robert Burns Song Book* contains 324 voice/piano arrangements presented with background notes and illustrations. The notes are summaries of the extensive research conducted by the composer/author on Burns's own sources and the extent to which traditional materials were retained or changed by the poet. This Burns bicentennial year has special significance for the Hovey family. For more than twenty-five years, they received polite letters of rejection from publishers who, while fascinated with the songs, were intimidated by the scope of the songbook. There is now an agreement with Mel Bay Publications of St. Louis, Missouri, that will finally bring this work to fruition in a four-volume edition to be produced in consecutive years.

The manuscript is being edited by Esther Hovey in collaboration with her son Daniel and music-copyist Ronald W. Hess. Continuing a relationship which began in 1968, Professor Robert D. Thornton is working with the Hoveys by proofreading and double-checking all the music, text and research data for each song. As Serge Hovey stated in his letter to Henderson (September 14, 1972):

Thornton contributed to my book in a major way, not only with that intangible but vital factor, encouragement, but with numerous concrete actions. He has examined every page with minute attention, making immensely helpful comments and criticisms. Recently, he contributed an excellent introduction.

Upon completion *The Robert Burns Song Book* will stand with Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* and Thomson's *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* as a major source for Robert Burns and his songs, making them available to twentieth—and twenty-first—century singers, musicians and scholars as the earlier did for enthusiasts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

### *Pacific Palisades*

*I am delighted to be able to announce that arrangements have been made for the Hovey archive to be transferred to the G. Ross Roy Collection upon completion of the research for the publication of The Robert Burns Song Book. This collection at the University of South Carolina contains one of the world's greatest assemblages of works by and about Burns, and the Hovey archive will materially enrich its research potential. I am most grateful to Dr. Esther Hovey for this splendid gift.*



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through the town  
A Gray 1996