



Complete Dance Music from the Sharp Collection: Volume 1 – Tunes for Social Dance and Step-Dance

Dave Townsend (ed.). Littlemore, Oxford: Serpent Music, 2021. viii + 88 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. ISBN: 978-1-838-40830-5 (pbk).

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Dave Townsend has compiled all the tunes collected by Sharp that are associated with social dancing. The book consists of 204 tunes, twenty-four of which were collected in North America, the rest in England. This challenging task was made possible

by the digitization of material. While the sources are available online, this book offers so much more than a simple re-presentation and, unlike web searches, it is not dependent upon the researcher knowing the manuscript references, or the tune names, or even the source players. Townsend has not scrimped on the details either, each transcription (in the original manuscript key) contains the variations found in Sharp's notebooks. This publication is, in other words, a heaven-sent gift for the individual at the start of their research journey.

The notes that accompany the tunes add considerably to the value of the publication. Townsend has compiled many biographical details on the source players. Notes are also given as to the tunes themselves, with helpful cross-references to other collected versions. Consideration is applied to the question of whether a certain tune is a variant of, or bears some similarity to, other tunes. The index provides a helpful guide to alternative tune names and also groups the tunes together, making it easier to find the variations, which, due to the organization by source players, are scattered throughout the book.

The selection of tunes themselves was, for me at least, an exciting starting point for a number of research questions. Versions of 'The Triumph' and 'Greensleeves' abound, surely indicating, as Townsend discusses, Sharp's interest in those tunes/dances rather than the popularity of those melodies in the vernacular tradition. On another tangent, while Sharp was trying to avoid collecting stage and minstrel melodies, there are a number of such tunes present. Was his knowledge of the popular culture of only fifty years previously really quite limited? I was also fascinated by Townsend's documentation of Sharp's reappropriation of tunes within the Edwardian revival. For example, 'The Staffordshire Hornpipe', collected from John Locke in Herefordshire, was published as a tune for the Flamborough Sword Dance with the new title 'Three Jolly Sheepskins' in 1912. This is valuable detective work which considerably lightens the load for current and future researchers.

Due to Townsend's unevenly applied referencing system I would hesitate to regard this as an academic text. The notes are not exhaustive and in this regard tunes are unequally treated. For example, while manuscript books of village fiddlers are mentioned, there is no categorical referencing of such material.

Likewise, the notes for some tunes refer to late twentieth-century uses, but most do not. Regularly, URLs are given, but without the critical additional information needed to find the website should the URL change. I was also mildly perplexed by Townsend's categorization of tunes as 'widely known' or otherwise, as I could not decipher whether that referred to historical sources, or the tune's popularity in the current folk music scene, or both.

While there are interesting variations of well-known tunes, lesser-known tunes, and a few idiosyncratic melodies of varying degrees of (to use a modern folk revival judgement) quality or interest, this publication is not an obvious choice for the less adventurous ceilidh band repertoire seeker. The tunes are not grouped by type, either length or time signature, and neither is there an index of such types. The rhythmic irregularities of a minority of tunes, the lack of 'melodeon friendly' keys, and the deliberate lack of a musical filter to present only the 'best' variants also complicate the suitability of this publication for a market that appears to demand standardized tunes in a standardized format.

With these caveats in mind, I am happy to pronounce that this book will be worth every penny to all those interested in collected dance music from England and North America. Townsend has created the foundational resource for those interested in the rural social dance tune repertoire of the early twentieth century.

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