

25 Hunting the Wren

RESOURCES

■ You need to know

Throughout the ages, people have found ingenious and good-natured ways of trying to earn some extra money or food to keep them going in winter. Alongside wassailing and the performance of Mummer's plays (see No. 27) is the custom of wren hunting, which belongs to Ireland, Wales, the Isle of Man, and north-west England, and this song originates in Manx Gaelic. The tradition of hunting the wren is described in a book written in 1731, but it certainly goes back a lot further than that. On St Stephen's Day a wren would be caught and killed, put in a suitably decorated box or willow cage (called the 'bush' from the holly and ivy ornamentation), and carried around the streets to the singing of the song. Feathers would be plucked from the unfortunate bird and given to householders or passers-by in exchange for food or coins. The feathers were to be worn as good luck or protective charms. Eventually, the poor, bald bird would be buried to the singing of a dirge accompanied by a circular dance, or else put in a pie for supper. David Oliver learned this song, with its dance, from Alan Brown and the Monkseaton Morrismen in 1971. John Kirkpatrick and his 'Wassail' band used it in a Folkworks project in 1995 and some of his ideas are incorporated into the arrangement on the CD.

■ Warming up

- To ascending and descending scales, sing the words 'Robin the Bobbin' in the notated rhythm to stretch voices, establish the 6/8 'bounce', and loosen up the lips.
- Practise singing the entire range of this song by extending the scale above the top 'do' up two more notes to 'me'.

■ Learning

- Basically, this is a question and answer song in which the same cast of characters remains throughout. The melody is easy to learn; teach it to everyone a phrase at a time.
- There are some slight melodic changes between the verses, but the melody is so straightforward, these shouldn't present a challenge. Just make sure that everyone is singing together.
- There are no breaks in the melody so snatch quick breaths where you can or, better still, take a big enough breath at the start to get right through the verse. A compromise might be to sing up to 'Jack o' the Land' in

one breath, make 'Land' very short, and snatch a breath there. In performance, if the lines are shared out (see below), this won't be a problem.

- The words must be very clear to maintain the narrative. Pay particular attention to those on the upbeat notes.
- Make the style very light with clear articulation; don't hold on to any notes.
- The harmonies, for high and low voices, are also straightforward to learn and originate from an arrangement by David Oliver and others. The cue-sized notes in bar 4 provide an alternative line which works well for the final verse.
- The two-bar instrumental break for the ends of verses, and instrumental verse (three options for variety), also originate from David's arrangement and can be added with whatever melodic instruments you have at your disposal, e.g. fiddle, flute.

■ Listen out

- Find a speed which is fast enough to give a light, bouncy style, but not so fast that the words become a scramble.
- Check the join from bar 2 into bar 3; make sure that the leap (a 9th) is clean and focused. The same care is required with the minor sixth at the end of bar 5.
- If dividing up into solos or groups for individual phrases (see below), make sure everyone follows seamlessly without breaking the flow.
- Check changes from unison to harmony; each voice must move decisively, knowing where they are going.

■ Creating a performance

- Like a sea shanty, this song can go on for ever with made-up verses. Try mixing soloists and groups for variety, and add in some instrumental breaks if possible. On the CD, it's sung by a small group with fiddle and accordion accompaniment. Verses 2–11 are sung alternately by two contrasting voices, and the other verses are sung by the group: verse 1 in unison, unaccompanied; verse 12 in three-part harmony, unaccompanied; verse 13 in harmony with simple chordal accompaniment. Try slowing down the last two verses and adding a pause after 'great' in the final verse. Note that, on the CD, there is a three-phrase instrumental passage between verses 7 and 8.

25 Hunting the Wren

Isle of Man

arr. David Oliver, Stewart Hardy, and Rachel Unthank.

Based on an idea by John Kirkpatrick

A good pace; full of energy
B \flat

Melody

1. 'We'll hunt the wren', says Ro - bin the Bob - bin. 'We'll

High

1. 'We'll hunt the wren', says Ro - bin the Bob - bin. 'We'll

Low

1. 'We'll hunt the wren', says Ro - bin the Bob - bin. 'We'll

3

F C7 F B \flat

hunt the wren', says Rich - ie to Ro - bin. 'We'll hunt the wren', says

hunt the wren', says Rich - ie to Ro - bin. 'We'll hunt the wren', says

hunt the wren', says Rich - ie to Ro - bin. 'We'll hunt the wren', says

6

E \flat F7 B \flat

Jack o' the Land. 'We'll hunt the wren', says e - ver - y - one.

Jack o' the Land. 'We'll hunt the wren', says e - ver - y - one.

Jack o' the Land. 'We'll hunt the wren', says e - ver - y - one.