Greensleeves

Story of the evergreen 16th Century English folk song

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Countless melodies have been written over the centuries and - before the widespread use of notation and recording - almost all of them have been lost in the sands of time, never to be heard again. However, a small handful of these melodies possess a quality that allows them to endure through the ages. What magic formula of melodic simplicity, lyrical content, musical accessibility, harmony and plain luck is needed to ensure the persistence of a piece of music over the years is not clear, but it is certainly possessed by the ever popular English song //Greensleeves// - a piece of music that has remained in public consciousness for over four centuries.

A common myth surrounding //Greensleeves// is that it was written by King Henry VIII for his future wife, Anne Boleyn. This attractive story is repeated so often that it’s almost been accepted as fact. Unfortunately, it is most probably untrue. One reason why it is extremely unlikely that Henry VIII could have composed the piece is that its style – a late 16th Century Italian ‘ground’ form - would not have been known to him in his lifetime. Despite this being known for years, the myth continues unabated. People just love a good story.

The first publication of the piece’s lyrics appeared in London in 1580, as //A Newe Northen Dittye Of Ye Ladye Greene Sleves// by Richard Jones. Although Jones claimed ownership in this publication, other composers (Henry Carr, Edward White and William Elderton) quickly released very similar versions. But actually it seems that many of its lyrical and musical elements predate all these versions, and the original composer – if there was just one – has not been found. The tune’s popularity rose swiftly and by the 17th century it had reached broad public consciousness, and is even mentioned in Shakespeare’s 1602 //Merry Wives of Windsor//.

//Greensleeves// is likely to have been played originally on the lute because the late 16th century witnessed a wide popularity in the instrument. Although the modern guitar is not a direct descendant of the lute, they probably shared a common ancestor (possibly the //bowl harp// or //tambur//) making the guitar and lute instrumental cousins, and they have co-evolved over the years, the guitar has for example, adopted much of the lute repertoire, and the lute took the idea of frets from early guitar designs. The lute in the late 16th Century would have generally had 15 strings arranged in seven pairs (‘courses’) and one single high string (the ‘chanterelle’). This may seem like a far cry from the modern guitar, but there are similarities: The tuning system of the lute often used perfect 4ths and a major 3rd (like today’s guitar), and it was at this time played with a pick. In addition, improvisation around set chord sequences was an expected skill of the lutenist and the preferred method of musical notation was – and still is – tablature, identical in principle (and predating by hundreds of years) the modern guitar tab seen in TG. Furthermore the Renaissance lute composer, of which John Dowland (1563-1626) is perhaps the finest example, was at once a song-writer, instrumental composer, lyricist, improviser, singer and seller of his own works; a touring musician whose collection of songs entranced
listeners with stories of love, sorrow, vengeance, passion and regret: The prototype singer-songwriter-guitarist.

The enduring melody has since been adapted by composers and instrumentalists of many styles and genres. Some notable classical uses include Busoni’s //Turanot// opera, Holsts’s //Second Suite In F// and most famously Vaughan-Williams’ 1934 orchestral work //Fantasia On “Greensleeves”//. Jazz musicians such as Dave Brubeck and John Coltrane have also given their particular stylistic takes on the tune. Lute versions (such as Julian Bream’s) abound but – perhaps due to its familial connection with the lute - the melody has found a natural home on the classical and acoustic guitar. Craig Ogden has released a multi-tracked classical guitar duo version while fingerstyle virtuoso Chet Atkins opts for a sophisticated and understated chord-melody archtop guitar arrangement with lush string and small band accompaniment. Derek Trucks plays expressive slide-guitar in his jazz-folk version complete with adventurous solos. Former Deep Purple axeman, Ritchie Blackmore approaches the tune in a prog-rock style, layering acoustic and electric guitars, the female vocalist sings the melody as the guitar interjects solo lines. Electric guitar hero Jeff Beck interprets the piece very traditionally, and quite uncharacteristically, on acoustic guitar and similarly Andy Timmons, rejects his typical rock approach for an acoustic guitar, light jazz-pop arrangement with a somewhat Spanish feel. Steve Lukather’s jazz-fusion version uses a searing lead tone and whammy-bar vibrato however -with the odd exception (check out Chris Barker’s version with neo-classical sweep-picking and chorused clean guitar) - unashamed rock guitar performances are relatively rare. This we aim to remedy right here in TG with this arrangement.

//Greensleeves// is written in 3/4 time which gives the piece its lilting elegant rhythm. The melody has been interpreted in a few different scale types in its many versions over the years. Here the sophisticated and mysterious A melodic minor scale is used (A B C D E F# G#) generally when ascending and the A natural minor scale (A B C D E F G) usually when descending. After a brief intro the piece is structured in alternating verses and choruses. The moody minor key verses are complemented with the brighter character of the choruses, which start in the relative major key of C major.

TG’s arrangement is reminiscent of Metallica’s ‘classical-folk’-tinged tracks such as //Nothing Else Matters//, //Unforgiven// and //To Live Is To Die//. Metallica’s approach (and previously Led Zeppelin’s) of contrasting subdued folk-like acoustic guitar arpeggios with rhythmically accurate chugging guitar, complex song structures and quite traditional - non blues-based - harmonies works perfectly with this evergreen piece.

Three of a kind: If you like //Greensleeves//, try these…

//Scarborough Fair//
Simon & Garfunkel
//Simon & Garfunkel’s Greatest Hits// [1972 Sony]
This is the most famous modern day interpretation of //Scarborough Fair// an ever popular haunting British folk song whose origins may be traced as far back as 1650.
The well known melody of this 16th Century Christmas carol has a similar beguiling effect to that of //Greensleeves//.

The Renaissance genius John Dowland composed this - as well as many other great works – for voice and lute, here performed by The Consorte of Musicke with lutenists Jacob Lindberg and Nigel North.

Or

The Renaissance genius John Dowland composed this - as well as many other great works – for voice and lute, here performed by Sting and Edin Karamazov