How exciting to see yet another book in Ward Lock Educational’s excellent series of spiral bound folk song collections. The good format of all of these books, plus pleasant black and white illustrations always make me want to browse in them, and the focus of this volume (seasonal songs from around the world) is particularly inviting to me. Here old favourites (such as the Scottish “Auld Lang Syne,” the German-Canadian “Jack-O-Lantern”, the American “Hush Little Baby,” and the Jewish “Dayenu”) rub shoulders with new (to me, anyway) versions of seasonal favourites such as the “Pace Egg Song,” the “Apple Tree Wassail” and “John Barleycorn,” plus there are a great number of unknown songs from many places, simply arranged, waiting to be tried out. Some, such as the Japanese Cherry Blossom song, “Sakura,” I have heard of before, but not had to hand at an appropriate time, and others are brand new, such as the Jamaican “Jacky Lodo.” And indeed, this is the importance of such a collection, that it is a mixture. Not only is it a representative yet stimulating sampling of songs from the world’s festivities; not only is it well made (spill-proof cover and spiral binding that sits flat on a piano); and not only is it up to date and available (the only other similar, though far less comprehensive book I know of is Esther Nelson’s Holiday Singing And Dancing Games, published by Stirling in New York, in 1980); but it is also a collection that eliminates a lot of work for the user. A Musical Calendar puts materials from many different sources between the covers of one book, and arranges them by month in a very useful order. I personally own several of Barbara Cass-Beggs’ source books, but I am pleased, nonetheless, to have songs from them all put into a sequence that I can use as the year progresses, without having to search very far. The only possible improvement that might have been made with the calendar sequence, as this is a book that teachers especially will use, would be to begin with autumn, when the school year and the Jewish New Year, among others begin. Back in the Year of the Child, the Ontario Ministry of Education issued a multicultural calendar for school use, and it began in September 1979, so the idea was precedence. However, as Barbara Cass-Beggs explains,
she is using the Roman Calendar, one of many, and it starts in January.

As I browsed through A Musical Calendar of Festivals, I had several different less general reactions, mostly to specific songs, which follow here:

— Why, for instance, is “Candlemas Eve,” the lovely Herrick poem set to a carol tune, missing two good stanzas?
— And, isn’t that interesting? — The Indonesian Ular Naga is surely an antecedent to the so-called “New Game” of Catch the Dragon’s Tail.
— I don’t think The Battle Hymn of the Republic is appropriate for US Thanksgiving, at all. My choice would be the popular “Come Ye Thankful People Come,” albeit a hymn.
— In fact, I think including nationalistic, patriotic songs at all (“America the Beautiful,” “La Marseillaise”) is tricky — of course a song appropriate to American Independence or Bastille Day is logical, but it could be a folk song (she gives “Un Canadien Errant” for Dominion Day, and “Havah Nagilah” for Israel Independence Day). National anthems are readily available elsewhere, as well; to me, it doesn’t make sense to include just some and not others — better none at all.
— In the December section I would have included a song for St. Nicholas Day, December 6th, with commentary on how “St. Nick” developed into an integral part of our present-day Christmas celebrations, as well as a folk song referring to the Christian event itself (something like the spiritual “Mary Had a Baby,” comes to mind).
— Although the explanation of May Rogationtide is an interesting and useful one, I think “John Barleycorn” could have been better put into the August section, associated with harvest, especially as Ms. Cass-Beggs has given that month the fewest selections (only three, whereas all the other months have from 5 to 9 song entries), and May the most.
— While on the subject of harvest, I wonder if there isn’t a good grape harvest/winemaking song somewhere, to give the Mediterranean more representation?

These are all small cavils, however, as I appreciate how difficult making the selections for this sort of a book must be, as well as the fact that an international collection, published in England, must necessarily have a preponderance of British-origin or English language songs. In fact, songs written in English and coming from the USA, Britain or the Commonwealth countries make up approximately half of the 80 songs included in this collection, and this seems a good proportion to me.

This brings me to another query, which also has to do with language. Although I am delighted with the many new-to-me treasures in this book, I am a folksinger very interested in seasonal lore and new material, and I wonder if teachers or other singers will easily pick up a song in an unfamiliar language — does that automatically work against the average browser’s interest? We need to have heard more of these songs that “Sambalele” and “La Cucaracha,” perhaps, to feel confident of singing them ourselves. “Oh Vreneli,” called “Ureneli” here, is a song familiar to me from childhood community sings, I discovered (we grew up with those little songbooks from Cooperative Recreation Services in Ohio, which certainly broadened my horizons in the ’50s). Finding a song which I vaguely remembered was nice, and motivated me to try it out — the tune soon came back to me. Maybe what is needed is a tape or record to accompany the book (although I know this is an expensive proposition for publishers) and to help with pronunciation, rhythm and emphasis on the foreign language songs, especially. I would be interested to know if Ward Lock did badly or well with sales of Alison McMorland’s record The Funny Family, accompanying the book they published with the same name, early in this series; I for one liked having both the book and record by her.

This also raises the whole question of English versions — how singable are the words, once rendered understandable to the person who doesn’t speak Ghanaian or Japanese? Barbara Cass-Beggs is inconsistent in how she presents these translations, though this is only a minor point: for “The River Wisla,” the English words precede the Polish; for “The Grasshopper and the Ant,” the Italian comes first, and for the lullaby from Sri Lanka, there are no Sinhalese words.

Further, I notice that here and there obscure words are clarified in brackets — in “Click Go the Shears,” she explains that “yoe” is “ewe,” for example, but in a number of places the meaning has to be deduced from the context: “I ruggit at the poukin pin,” from “Altered Days” (the song of a Scottish immigrant to New Zealand), sounds like a hard life, but I don’t really know what it means. I can see that the issue of “which words to footnote where” is a sticky one, and has its pros and cons’, but I personally would prefer a few more, and so, I imagine, would a teacher trying to answer a curious child’s questions.

One more minor criticism is that the source of each song is not listed with the song, but just follows the title in the table of contents. Though the notes to many songs indicate their origins, this too is not consistent, and it is annoying to have to turn back to the front to check. I would also welcome further details than just the name of the country from which a song comes — which part of England does the little Shrovetide song come from, for instance.

Finally, I cannot tell if either Barbara Cass-Beggs or the publisher had a clear idea of the age of her audience, because the range of songs presented in the book is quite broad — everything from “Hot Cross Buns” to the “Agincourt Song!”
To my mind, this variety makes the book a good library resource, but perhaps not ideal for a classroom teacher.

Which brings me back to my initial points of appreciation — it is good to have lively set of seasonal songs arranged by month in one handy, well bound book. I only wish I’d done it myself!

Caroline Perry