

# **Bridging the Gap Between the Folk Musician and Academia: An Alternative Approach to CSMT as Discussed with Thomas Kines**

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What struck me most about my initial conversation with Thomas Kines (in July, 1993) was his set of strong views on the role of the Canadian Folk Music Society, the name of the Canadian Society for Musical Traditions (CSMT) when he was first involved in the organization. He told me that he went to one of the executive meetings in the 1960s to plead, or rather demand, that the annual meetings be less academic and get closer to the “real thing,” the folk songs that the researchers claimed they were studying. He called for more “hands-on” workshops and less dry analysis by “arm-chair ethnomusicologists.”

Kines was particularly impressed by the 1966 Keele Folk Festival, held at Leeds University in England. Hosted by the British Folk Song and Dance Society, the festival was followed by a week of “folk-life studies” which entailed detailed instruction in the art of folk song. Kines returned invigorated and eager to learn more about the music he had been exposed to. He attended a board meeting of the Canadian Folk Music Society to try to convince them to adopt a similar program, but without success.

This is where I believe the CSMT should be headed if it wishes to address the needs of the performers in its midst and attract other performers and former members to join the Society and make it their own. I am disturbed at the apparent division in the Society between the “folkies” and the “academics.” The Canadian Folk Music Society used to have a larger base of performing musicians. Around the time of the name change to The Canadian Society for Musical Traditions (to reflect musics other than strictly “folk”), performing folk musicians felt less at home and dropped off, while academics linked to universities increased. There should be a way for the two factions of folk performer and academic researcher to work together to produce an environment conducive to growth on everyone’s part. Or better still, have enough researchers with equal commitment to their performing that no split can be determined.

Thomas Kines provides a model to which to aspire. Deeply committed to the performance of folk songs, Kines would make a thorough search to unearth all the versions of a song he could find before he settled on the one

version that he would sing for that particular performance. As host of a weekly CBC radio show during the 60s and 70s, he did intensive research on a variety of folk music. During this time, he performed at the Mariposa Folk Festival, toured Ontario and Saskatchewan, and was featured on several records. Not all of us will have performing careers as illustrious as Thomas Kines did in the course of his research, but we would have greater understanding of the music we study through active participation as performers.

The 1993 Conference of the CSMT (at the University of Ottawa, November 12-14), attempted to involve performing musicians, both local and visiting, in its sessions and concerts. Workshops were held simultaneously with paper sessions and many of the workshop presenters were featured at two concerts. This made it possible to learn something about the music and the musician rather than just attend the concerts without any preparation or follow-up. Some presenters participated in workshops and paper sessions as well as playing at the concert: for example, Brian Cherwick on the Ukrainian *tsymbaly* (hammered dulcimer) and Regula Qureshi on South Asian *sarangi* (bowed fiddle). I was struck by the large quantity of papers that stressed the active participation of the researcher in the fieldwork, and the number of researchers who had learned to play the instruments or sing the songs they were studying.

What I found most stimulating were the workshops given by performers who would play or sing and then talk about the background of the song or tune, its various versions, etc. At the informal workshop on English-Canadian ballads with William Sarjeant, Dave Pearson, and TC Pettitt, a lively discussion ensued, participants and audience interacting in an informative yet non-confrontational atmosphere. This is the kind of session that Thomas Kines felt to be vital if the CSMT was going to grow and meet the needs of its members.

The music first heard in the region which became Canada was that of the First Nations. This music is being passed on today in a number of ways. Some First Nations musicians are involved in music-making that stems from the old oral tradition; others, in creating a musical expression that merges with various other traditions. Such music needs to be performed and documented within the scope of the CSMT.

Bruno Nettl has used the term "folk music" to refer to musical traditions that move parallel to "art" or "classical" music in a particular region (1975, 1). Like First Nations music, such "folk music" is not self-contained. Even the British and French folk-music traditions of Canada have drawn on music, which, in a European context, would be designated as classical or elitist. There are now several musicians in Canada who perform in certain traditions that have a folk basis but are presented in a quite classical context (e.g., Cantonese opera that uses what could be called folk tunes). Nettl

suggests that we “accept a theory of mutual give-and-take to describe the relationship between folk and art music” rather than insist on the superiority of one over the other (1975, 14).

Basically, the musical traditions that are part of the purview of what members of the CSMT are examining are all traditions that at some point have been transmitted orally. Folk singers can find a lot of material in books, as Thomas Kines did, but they do not “read” from the book when they perform in public, and musicians in the audience generally base their understanding of a song on live performances or recordings rather than written versions. In this way, oral transmission is the defining aspect of such musical traditions. There is no single way to perform a song, just as no particular group is the only exponent of a particular musical tradition.

The division between “academics” and “folkies” in the Society is somewhat reminiscent of two groups of ethnomusicologists, one group concentrating on the music “itself,” the other on its cultural context. As Nettl points out, these two groups were “frequently at odds” (1983, 5). Eventually this dispute died down and the two groups managed to find a way to work together (or have they?). Again, we have opposing views and a plea for liberality. There seem to be considerable differences of opinion in ethnomusicology; perhaps this is necessary in the formation of a new discipline. But surely, if we are all working towards the same goal, namely, a better understanding of all types of musical traditions, we can find a way to work together in harmony without one group feeling that the other group believes itself to be somehow privileged. (Indeed, which group is? The academics, with their specialized higher education? Or the performers, who represent the “real thing”?).

I think that the CSMT will have a better chance to become a strong voice for all people interested in folk and traditional music if its members recall that “since folk music is the musical expression of ... a significant portion of a culture, it must be performed and accepted in order to remain alive” (Nettl 1975, 15). I do not deny the importance of academics studying folk and traditional music — otherwise I have just wasted fifteen years of my life. I just maintain that we should stay in close touch with the object of our study and remember that we can obtain valuable insight into the music we study by becoming students ourselves and through discussion with performers. The performing members of the CSMT provide an excellent, accessible resource that we should not overlook.

Mark Slobin and Jeff Todd Titon define the task of analysis as finding the rules and principles that are used to produce “meaningfully organized sound,” i.e., the *musical performance* (1992, 4). Therefore, close contact with the performer is critical. After all, without the performer, the analyst would have nothing on which to base research. If one combines the two diagrams that Slobin and Titon use to explain music’s place in society as a

whole, one has “music”/“affect” in the innermost circle; “performers/performance” in the next, surrounding circle; “audience/community” in the next; and in the outermost circle, “time and space”/“memory-history” (Slobin and Titon 1992, 3-4). These diagrams remind us of our complete dependence on the performer as the vital link between the music and the eventual place of that music in history. Let us not be guilty of assuming that the performer does not really understand what he/she is doing and that we (i.e. the analysts) somehow know better.

Lack of mutual respect concerns me most when I think of the future of the CSMT. It is essential that we foster an atmosphere of trust and camaraderie among all members of the Society, whether they are linked to universities or perform within their own communities. Newly CSMT president Judith Cohen has excellent credentials for the job of tying it all together. Her familiarity with academia and her identity as a performer allow her to see the situation from both sides. If she can convince more of the membership to have an equal commitment to both research and performing, maybe we can get closer to the ideal Society that Thomas Kines envisioned — one where folk performers can go to replenish their stores while simultaneously creating an environment where academics and performers meet and exchange ideas.

#### REFERENCES CITED

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- . 1983. *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-nine Issues and Concepts*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Slobin, Mark and Jeff Todd Titon. 1992. “The Music-Culture as a World of Music.” *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music to the World’s Peoples*, ed. Jeff Todd Titon, 2nd ed. Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada.

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**Sommaire:** Prenant comme point de départ ses discussions avec le chanteur folklorique Thomas Kines, Paula Conlon examine la nature des relations antérieures, présentes et futures en vigueur à la SCTM-CSMT, entre les tenants de l’exécution musicale d’un côté et ceux de l’approche académique, de l’autre. Conlon préconise des liens plus étroits entre les deux types d’activités, et ce, tant pour le bénéfice de la Société comme entité, que pour celui de chacun des membres.