

# Lessons Learned, Questions Raised: Writing a History of Ethnomusicology in Canada\*

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The lessons and questions of this article's title arose in the course of writing, with Beverley Diamond, the entry on "Ethnomusicology" for the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*. This entry surveys the history of Canadian traditional-music studies. Writing a history of a kind of study—in this case, ethnomusicology—raises hard epistemological questions at the outset. One of the most insistent is asked by Gregory Bateson, in the title of one of his "metalogues," namely, "Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?" (1972: 3-8). This question is raised when the history writer tries to focus on the patterns that seem to emerge from the history written. Things get in a muddle right away, because it seems that patterns may appear to exist in the eye of the beholder rather than in the object beheld. While we attempt to contextualize past research, we are caught in our own context and are at the mercy of the trends of our own times, one of which—a vogue for self-reflection—is exemplified throughout this very article. But abandoning ourselves to this muddle, as Clifford Geertz quotes the economist Robert Solow, is "like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer" (1973: 30). So with tattered objectivity wrapped about our contingent shoulders, we forge on in the quest for patterns in the object, and find—another muddle.

The new muddle, it turns out, is the pattern. One of the most striking things about the history of traditional-music research in Canada is that it is uneven: as a pattern, it is irregular. That unevenness is partly a result of where boundaries have been set for what is to be studied. In some cases, the unevenness of coverage is an artefact of research. Embarking with conventional notions both of scholarship and of traditional music, we generally turned to other kinds of sources (novels, commercial publications and recordings, and travel documents) only when "scholarly" reports and collections were not available. We were further dependent on previous bibliographic work to a large extent. But the availability of sources reflects in some respects the real history of documentation: there were no *scholarly* collections of certain things; there were no *commercial* productions of others.

## Who?

The search for regularities or patterns in our predecessors' sins of omission rapidly encounters a few strong and humbling correlations. First, *who* was *not* studied? There is a correlation with Canada's immigration policy: the groups that had traditionally received preferential status were studied; recent immigrants or descendants of those who had come to Canada under special circumstances (e.g., the Asian workers who built the railroads) were not.

Although one might expect to find correlations of numbers, there are some striking anomalies. On the waves of European immigration in the early twentieth century came scholars and musicians such as Alexander Koshyts, who in the 1940s documented the "folk" music of his fellow immigrants from Ukraine. But if similar collecting activity occurred among the similarly numerous Italian Canadians, it has so far escaped our notice. To explain the differences in research with respect to these two rather large immigrant populations, Ukrainian and Italian, we must consider the traditions and self-images of European musicians. Koshyts's activities—collection and composition—resemble those of generations of Central- and East-European scholar-musicians, including such figures as Janaček, and of course, Bartók. For them, following the paradigms of Herder, national cultures were rooted in the folk.

A programme from the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Toronto gives a picture of a very different conception of national culture. In the fall of 1991, musical offerings in their "Cultural Program" included a classical guitar concert by Roberto Porroni, a talk by Ruby Mercer about her book on the operatic Quilico family, and a chamber concert by clarinetist Ivano Rondoni and pianist Loredana Romana. These events were scheduled alongside such folksy items as a conference on "Vico and Postmodernism." The schedule lists "Other Italian Cultural Events in the Toronto Area" including *La Traviata*, the Toronto Symphony with Daniele Gatti and Nadja Salerno Sonnenberg, a concert by Mario Bernardi, and "Il Ballo d'Amore," described as "an evening of spectacular Renaissance Italian courtly dances" brought back "by popular demand."

## What?

These observations lead to a consideration of the second "sin of omission," namely, *what* was not studied. When we see that folksong scholars tended to overlook instrumental music, sacred music, and commercial music, we discern a congruence with the purist activities of Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles. The congruence becomes uncomfortable when we acknowledge having been led by much the same ideology; for example, whereas we included commercial song collections as representing compilations of musicological data, we omitted musical instrument catalogues. Richard Stewardson (1992) has recently noted a listing of twenty-one differently priced banjos in the Montreal publication *L'écrin musical* (Nov.-Dec.

1887). This provides an entrée into what is undoubtedly a fascinating mix of traditions, that might form a background to our understanding of such important early twentieth-century Canadian musicians as May Irwin and Shelton Brooks. Stewardson also notes an absence of references to the banjo in histories of Canadian music by Helmut Kallmann (1960) and Timothy McGee (1985), and a similar absence in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*. I am sorry to say that we ourselves have perpetuated that lacuna by an unconscious adherence to early models of research in musicology and ethnomusicology.

To ignore history is to repeat its errors. But to ignore it is also to ignore a wealth of fine thought. To extend by reversal Isaac Newton's famous metaphor, if we climb down from the shoulders of giants because *they* did not see as far as *we* do, we can anticipate not seeing very far at all. Many of the central problems of ethnomusicological theory were raised by early researchers in Canada. When Ernest Gagnon dropped ornaments from his 1865 edition of *Chansons populaires du Canada* in the 1880 edition to make the songs easier to sing, he was implicitly acknowledging the different kinds of notation later described by Charles Seeger as prescriptive and descriptive. Gagnon also formulated a distinction between two types of rhythm—"poétique" and "prosaïque" or "oratoire"—anticipating Bartók's well-known dichotomy between "tempo giusto" and "parlando rubato."

Franz Boas developed transcription technique with his use of staffless notation in the 1889 study "Eskimo Tales and Songs." His remarkable study of the previous year, "Chinook Songs," deals explicitly with many concerns of recent ethnomusicology: urban settings, Christian missionary influence on secular music, acculturation, and the problem of "writing culture".<sup>1</sup>

Marius Barbeau in 1919 had broken from the folksong paradigm by collecting instrumental music, transcribing tunes for fiddle and guimbarde, as reported in *Veillées du bon temps* (1920: 86-93). And Helen Creighton, like her inspiration Roy Mackenzie, wrote an autobiography (1975), providing not only ethnographic information absent from her previous song collections, but also anticipating the self-reflection of present-day musical scholarship (although with more narrative skill).

## How?

This brings us to patterns in *how* research is done, for the absence of ethnography in Creighton's early folksong collections (e.g., 1932) represents the rule, not the exception. In scholarly work, there have been two main styles, corresponding to studies of the music of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

Native music attracted anthropologists and music scholars rather than folklorists, virtually all from outside the linguistic and cultural communities they studied, and most committed to salvaging products of what were taken to be fast-dying traditions. They were often more interested in

questions of ethnography and musical style than in collecting. Folk music studies, on the other hand, were often undertaken by members of the linguistic community under scrutiny, and much work focused on the history, diffusion, and variants of individual songs. By far the lion's share of these studies has been of repertoires in English and French. It would be rewarding if we could peer inside the heads of those collectors to discover the extent to which they saw themselves as sharing a "culture" with the people from whom they collected. Certainly, in terms of class, education, and musical practices, there was a great gulf between the collectors and the collected-from.

The urge to cross that gulf appears to have been stronger among collectors in French than in English. Whereas a clearly patronizing attitude was expressed by some French collectors—the Abbé F.-X. Burque suggested "les retouches" be made in folksong collections, especially of poor grammar (1921: vii-viii)—, still, since the middle of the nineteenth century and the works of LaRue and Gagnon, folk music in Quebec was seen as a kind of national patrimony. Barbeau, who not only collected but brought his informants to perform in downtown Montreal, was motivated by the desire to provide an authentic basis for national music. Better, he thought, that Canadian music be represented by works based on folksong than by some set of "variations banales pour le piano, composées il y a un demi-siècle par un Allemand en voyage" (1920:4). This statement, acute though it may be, is cast in the form of standard late nineteenth-century musical nationalism: national folk music provides the raw material for national music. The gulf is still there, but bridged by a kind of musical pipeline.

Among English-language collectors, collecting folk music was less a nationalist and more a single-minded academic enterprise, validated—and in many instances carried out—by scholars from abroad. It began as an extension of the ballad scholarship of the American Ivy League, with Mackenzie in Nova Scotia in 1909, and in the 1920s to early 1930s, Elisabeth B. Greenleaf and Grace Y. Mansfield, followed by Karpeles in Newfoundland. When a Canadian—Creighton—began her prodigious collecting in the early 1930s, the "Child canon" approach still dominated research. Creighton sent the songs she collected to the English Folksong Society who classified them variously as "good and worthy of publication" and "genuine, but better variants known elsewhere." Nevertheless, to her everlasting credit, Creighton ignored their advice and published songs of both categories.

In French Canadian folksong scholarship, study outside the boundaries of Quebec came late, by more than half a century. Again, the most obvious explanation for this is nationalism. The boundaries of a political entity were seen as the boundaries of a cultural entity, following the consciousness of 1867. The pattern in English folksong scholarship was virtually the reverse: it began in the place where, literally, the first collectors took vacations: the

quaint, backward, romanticized Maritimes, and only much later turned to that region never damned with the epithet “regional”: Southern Ontario. The English pattern forms part of the construction of a specious notion of progress, whereby the present becomes a function of geographic location and social status; it reflects a perception that the “folk” belong to the past, are incompatible with the present; the “folk” are the embodiment of values we have traded off for our good reasons: they are not us.

### Why?

In addition to these patterns of who, what, and how, there is one more: *why*. This is the most muddled of all, but can be divided into three broad, crude, and partial categories: an instrumentalist search for knowledge (as in the early explorers), a purportedly non-instrumentalist search for knowledge (as in academic research), and a desire for commercial profit.

The publicity director of the CPR, J. M. Gibbon, is an important representative of the last category. In an effort to increase tourism, he, in collaboration with Barbeau, encouraged public awareness of the diverse ethnic traditions in Canada by organizing a series of folksong, folkdance and handicraft festivals beginning in 1927. In 1928, the Winnipeg festival featured music of nineteen different national groups, embracing a great deal more diversity than folk music scholarship of the time. We may find Gibbon’s example praiseworthy indeed; not only did he get out there to the people, but he consulted Barbeau, one of the experts, one of “us.” We must therefore remember that it is not the business of business to question its own premises; and so a self-reflective and self-critical search for knowledge is ultimately incompatible with commercial endeavour, even commercial endeavour that consults with scholars.

### Conclusion

If history teaches us that commercial enterprises have at times cast wider nets and crossed more boundaries than scholarly ones, then it teaches us that we need to do our jobs better: we have to cast our nets still wider and cross still more boundaries. And we have to keep asking those questions peculiar to our enterprise, about our own epistemological tools, goals and assumptions: Just what *are* nets? What *are* boundaries? And which way shall we choose to get *out* of the muddle?

### NOTES

\* This is a slightly altered version of a paper read at the Canadian Society for Musical Traditions Conference in Montreal, May, 1992. At that time it followed a companion piece by Beverley Diamond which we hope will be published in a future issue of this journal.

1. The term “writing culture” was popularized through its use in Clifford and Marcus’s anthology (1986); their anthology bears this phrase as its title and deals

extensively with questions of embedded meaning and value in the narrative structures used by anthropologists, and with alternative modes of presentation.

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#### Résumé:

*James Robbins décrit les études antérieures de la musique traditionnelle au Canada, faisant une brève récapitulation de leur histoire telle que révélée dans les publications précédentes. Il discute quelques fautes communes de celles-ci, et suggère les questions qu'il faut étudier à l'avenir, soulevant les questions de «qui», «quoi», «comment» et «pourquoi» en ce qui concerne l'ethnomusicologie canadienne.*