

THE HEART OF THE FOLK SONG

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Anthropologists have found that song and singing have been very important in the life style of early cultures. Primitive societies existing today allow researchers to view the importance of music in the rituals, religious ceremonies, and recreation of these cultures.

It is this seemingly spontaneous song of various races and cultures that is considered to be "folk song". Today many popular singers write and sing what are commonly called folk songs because the form and sentiment have similarities with the authentic ones. The texts of the traditional folk songs give poignant reminders of the universal timeless characteristics of mankind in their living, loving, toiling, and suffering. The personal quality of the folk song makes the persons or events very real to the listener who closely identifies with those specific feelings. Perhaps this personal identification has made folk songs of any land vitally important.

Perhaps it is this close emotional association which causes the listener to consider the folk song as simple in form and style, accepting it without questioning its formal structure. At the same time the universal appeal through intrinsic beauty has given the folk song its standing as an authentic art.

Knowledge of the history of Canada is essential in understanding the mosaic of Canadian folk song. Part of this mosaic is supplied by the folk songs of Canada which were brought by European and Anglo-Saxon settlers to the new land. Cartier's historical journey, in 1535, to the territory that was to become Canada initiated the immigration of the French. Without too much delay people came from Great Britain, Germany, and other European countries to live in close proximity. Each brought a wealth of folk music from his homeland and some of it has survived to this day. Barbeau has estimated that well over ten thousand French folk songs and their variants have been collected in Canada. Many of the ancient ones have been forgotten in France.

An understanding of European and Anglo-Saxon folk songs serves as a basis for insights into the background of these songs now called Canadian.

Folk Song Definition

In 1954 the International Folk Music Council defined folk music as "the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (1) continuity which links the present with the past; (2) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group; and (3) selection by the community which determines the form or forms in which the music survives."¹

The International Council also stressed the fact that the term folk music, which includes folk songs, can be "applied to music which has originated with

¹A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1967), p. 15.

an individual composer and subsequently has been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community.”² Present-day collectors use the term as all-inclusive, covering many varieties of music of the common people.³

Types of Folk Songs

Since folk songs encompass every aspect of life and living the varieties or types are wide-ranging. Songs of every occupation are a part of the collection. Railroading, trapping, lumbering, herding, fishing, and tasks common to family life are included. Turning from the toil of survival in the work song man sings of the expression of the spirit resulting in songs of deeply religious significance and the joys and burdens of love. For the lighter moments of the spirit come the humorous songs and the gaiety of recreation and camaraderie. It was these things that bound people together and helped them feel the spirit of community and rise above and persevere through hardships.

Folk Song Tradition

Three major factors shape the folk song tradition: economic factors, anonymity, and orality.

Traditionally folk songs are one of the most intimate possessions of the so-called poor. For the most part, folk songs are evolved by labouring people, not exclusively the country workers, to suit their ways and conditions of life. They reflect the hopes and aspirations that rise from those ways and conditions. In England folklorists have found that economic conditions are the most decisive factor in creating this fund of songs. The most inventive bearers of folk songs are most often found to be the keenest minded, and best informed people of the community, but also the poorest.⁴

The economic factor is also important in terms of anonymity. By some definitions a folk song must be anonymous or it is not a folk song. This may mean that the first author was too poor for his name to be considered worth preserving. Other legends or folklore keep alive the name and personality of some of the more colourful authors so that some of their songs can be traced and identified.⁵

In all parts of the world it is generally agreed that in its natural state folk song is transmitted by word of mouth. Consequently, a song does not circulate in a fixed form but undergoes changes from singer to singer and place to place. These very changes are the signs of genuine folk character. However, whenever folk singers were also able to write, they would write down the words as an aid in remembering them. Thus orality cannot be considered an essential condition of folk song, although it is an important one. Even after songs are learned they become independent of the written word and subject to forgetful or fanciful singers.⁶

²Ibid.

³Ray M. Lawless, *Folksingers and Folksongs in America* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pierce, 1960), p. 4.

⁴Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, pp. 22-23.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 25.

Classifications of Folk Songs

Folk songs may be classified under several headings but three specific ones are most commonly found: the ballad, lyric, and dialogue song.⁷

Ballads are narratives or story-telling songs in which action predominates. The traditional ballad is one that has come down from the past, has lost its individual authorship, shows evidence of variation in content by the existence of more than one version, is compact and concise in narrative, and usually has repetition and refrain.⁸ A ballad is a folk song, but a folk song is not a ballad unless it tells a story. It might be about some aspect of love, work, religion, recreation, or any one of the various types of topics. It may be, and often is, of rather substantial length. Ballads are organized around an event which can be discussed in terms of action. The action can be related by a third person, from a dispassionate observer's vantage. It tells a story chronologically, and in terms of beginning, climax and ending.⁹ A Canadian folk song which is an example of a ballad is "The *Golden Vanity*."¹⁰ It has been found in widely scattered areas of America with at least five different texts and stories. It readily meets ballad criteria since the actions of the captain and cabin boy are related by a third person in chronological sequence.

The term lyric may be considered to apply to a song which emphasizes the emotions of an individual rather than the actions of a group of people. "It is organized around a situation and its attendant mood."¹¹ The emotions are expressed through the first person. Again, it might be any one of the types of songs such as work songs, love songs, or recreational songs. "Six Girls"¹² is an example of the lyric classification of Canadian folk songs. In it the singer claims that he was once a lady's charmer but is unhappy now because of the problems he created by courting six girls at one time.

A third classification is the dialogue song in which the dramatic confrontation of characters is important. The dialogue, usually between two people, shifts the first person point of view to correspond to the change in speaker. As with the other classifications this may encompass any of the various types of folk songs. "Le Tambour" is one of the *Jongleur Songs of Old Quebec* collected by Marius Barbeau.¹³ The conversation in the song is between the rich young man, posing as a poor drummer, and the king who has a daughter the gentleman wishes to marry. This song is one of the best known songs in the French repertoire and approximately thirty versions of it are in existence.¹⁴

⁷Roger O. Abrahams and George Foss, *Anglo-American Folk Song Style* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 37.

⁸Lawless, *Folksingers and Folksongs in America*, p. 5.

⁹Abrahams and Foss, *Anglo-American Folk Song Style*, pp. 83-85.

¹⁰MacEdward Leach, *Folk Ballads and Songs of the Lower Labrador Coast* (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 201, Anthropological Series No. 68, 1965), pp. 44-45.

¹¹Abrahams and Foss, *Anglo-American Folk Song Style*, p. 87.

¹²Helen Creighton, *Maritime Folk Songs* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 128.

¹³Marius Barbeau, *Jongleur Songs of Old Quebec* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962), p. vi.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 119.

General Characteristics

The most distinguishing characteristic of European folk songs is their strophic structure. The tune is repeated several times, each time with different words. This repetition determines the number of verses and the length of the song. European folk poetry lends itself to this melodic treatment since poems are arranged into units of two, three, four, five or six lines. Each unit is called a strophe or stanza and has an individual form which is repeated. The text coincides with the music in regard to phrases and cadences. There is also a close relationship between stress and accent of the word structure and the music, and the length of the tone and the syllable.¹⁵

In most Anglo-American folk songs the stanza is taken as the essential unit. English folk song, for the most part, is put in lines of four stresses with a marked break in the middle. The lines generally group themselves in couplets which are not necessarily rhymed. The most common pattern consists of two couplets which have a rhyming arrangement occurring at the end of each line or every second line, thus emphasizing the binary nature of the stanza.¹⁶ The Maritime folk song, "Six Girls," may be seen as an example of this rhyming arrangement. The first stanza reads:

Once I was a lady's charmer but I'm unhappy now,
For courting six girls all at once to serve me anyhow.
Ma said that it was wicked but I laughed at her advice,
I knew it was very naughty but also very nice.¹⁷

Repetition is one of the most important characteristics of the folk song. It is a primary organizing principle since it performs many functions. It establishes a sense of familiarity within a certain piece enabling the audience to follow and sympathize and empathize. It aids memory and identification of its listeners to a point of involvement with the art. The melody is the most often repeated element, intensified in some cases by refrains and choruses.

Bruno Nettl reports that wandering melodies is the term given to tunes whose variants were found firmly fixed in the folk traditions of widely separated countries, often using widely-varying texts. Scholars who have discovered this phenomenon are unable to prove whether or not the tunes had migrated.

Folk Song Style

Alan Lomax points out that song is "a complex human action since it is music plus speech, relating performers to a larger group in a special situation by means of certain behaviour patterns which give rise to a common emotional experience."¹⁹ Because of this, he proposes a new science of musical ethnography based on the study of the musical styles and musical

¹⁵Bruno Nettl, *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continent* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 34-37.

¹⁶Abrahams and Foss, *Anglo-American Folk Song Style*, p. 62.

¹⁷Creighton, *Maritime Folk Songs*, p. 128.

¹⁸Abrahams and Foss, *Anglo-American Folk Song Style*, p. 62

¹⁹Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style* (New York: Folksong Center, Reprint Series No. 1, 1960), p. 928.

habits of mankind. He believes the “term style gives a sense of dynamic current.”²⁰ A style is a result of a certain group of practices, while at the same time it is the goal of the culture. It represents the intention of a culture.

Lomax believes that the study of musical style should embrace the human situation which produces the music. This would include the number of people habitually involved in a musical act and the manner in which they cooperate; the relationship between the music makers and the audiences; the physical behaviour of the music makers (body stance, gestures, facial expressions); the pitch and vocal timbres favored by the culture; the social function of the music, and the occasion of its production; the psychological and emotional content expressed by the song texts and the interpretation given this traditional poetry by the culture; and, finally, how songs are learned and transmitted.²¹

A musical style is learned by the people as a whole and responded to by members of specific cultures. The learning of the style is a gradual process for the child as he acquires the language and emotional patterns of his society. It would seem that as people live, so do they sing.

Folk Song Structure

The formal structure of the music itself is of utmost importance. This includes scales, the interval systems, the rhythmic patterns, the melodic contour, the harmonic techniques, the metric patterns of the verse, the structure of the poetry, the complex interplay between poetic and musical patterns, and accompanying instruments and instrumental techniques. Nettl stresses the importance of making a careful examination of the basic structure of folk songs although he emphasizes that understanding the music comes much more easily through listening to it than reading about it. It is only after aural understanding that written analysis is meaningful.²²

In making a study of folk song for its form, the size and number of sections are considered, and whether they are contrasted, repeated, or varied, as well as their overall relationship. The arrangement of performance as to solo, chorus, unison, harmony, or alterations is also important. The AABA form so often considered typical of folk song is only one of many possibilities.

The scale or mode on which the folk song is structured gives it one of its distinguishing characteristics. It may be built on the five-tone pentatonic scale, the major or minor scale, or any one of the modes – Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Aeolian, Mixolydian, or Ionian.

The melody of folk song has been of great interest to the students of folk music and often the most difficult to describe. It is necessary to know whether the melody generally rises, falls, remains at the same level, or moves by steps, skips, or leaps. The range is of great importance and may be partly determined by the scale or mode on which the selection is based. The melody is often determined by the meaning and content of the text.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., p. 929.

²²Nettl, *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents*, p. 16.

Rhythm, metre, and tempo are also important in structural considerations. The rhythm may be regular or irregular. Within this overall flow and movement is the length of the notes or tones which may be long, short, even or uneven. There is usually some regularity of a recurring accent pattern in the metre of the folk song. Much of it is in simple metric patterns such as 4/4, 3/4, or 6/8. There are songs in which there is alternation of rhythms or an occasional extended measure. The use of *fermata* is a common deviation from the metric pattern. A consideration of tempo and whether the song moves quickly or slowly is vital to the interpretation of the song.

Canadian Folk Songs

Although an analysis of Canadian folk songs is not possible here, it is interesting to note some details of the three songs used as examples in this study.

"The *Golden Vanity*" is in the key of C major and is strophic in form. Each verse has four regular four-bar phrases and a fifth one of three measures added as a short refrain. The third phrase is almost the same as the first phrase while the second and fourth are different. The fifth phrase is a cadence which serves as a coda and allows the repetition of the words of the fourth phrase in a short refrain. In the Labrador version the rhythm is that of the rocking of the ship and is a regular 6/8 metre until the fourth phrase where it alternates with 9/8.

"Six Girls" is in the Dorian mode and 2/2 metre with the beat subdivided. Each stanza of the song divides very neatly into four, four-bar phrases and can conveniently be tabulated as ABBA form.

"Le Tambour" is strophic in form with each stanza consisting of three phrases. The second phrase is a repetition of the first, beginning a note above the original thus producing sequence. The third phrase begins differently but the last half is the same as the very first phrase excepting for the cadence. The metre is the regular 6/8 and the rhythmic devices often produce effects reminiscent of drumming techniques. The key is G major but the sequential phrase written a second above gives the natural minor, or Aeolian modal, quality. A complete analysis is necessary to illustrate the intrinsic complexities of each seemingly simple song. This careful examination would also reveal the unique way in which the text and musical elements are interwoven to make the artistic whole.

The present surge of interest in collecting folk songs of all Canadian ethnic cultures now needs to be coupled with the study of the musical structure and legacy of each group. Perhaps through finding musical and emotional characteristics common to various ethnic songs, Canada might find a unifying quality within the folk song heritage.

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Résumé: *Isabelle Mills parle des facteurs qui déterminent la forme des chants de folklore, de leurs genres, classifications, caractéristiques générales, style, structure et analyse trois exemples Canadiens pour démontrer leur complexité quoiqu'ils soient simples en apparence.*