

AN ANALYSIS OF A JEAN CARIGNAN RECORD

MILES KRASSEN

Jean Carignan. Jean Carignan with Gilles Losier.

16 selections, instrumental, stereo.

Philo Records, The Barn, North Ferrisburg, Vermont, 05473, 1974. \$4.50.

In the last fifteen years, Jean Carignan has attained a considerable reputation as a traditional or "folk" fiddler mainly through his virtuoso performances at large festivals like Newport. During this period two commercial recordings of his music have been issued in the United States. The first was a rather poorly recorded production on Folkways which stifled Carignan's gifts in mediocre duets, poorly chosen repertoire, and haphazard accompaniment by the ubiquitous Pete Seeger. Later the Elektra Company improved things slightly. Their record contained a few of Carignan's best solos but for the most part limited him to playing in a loud dance band which kept him largely inaudible.

This latest record on the new Philo label gives us at last the opportunity to appraise in depth and begin to understand the achievement of this unique musician. We have at hand a carefully-recorded and well-produced record consisting exclusively of fiddle solos by Carignan with his regular accompanist, Gilles Losier, on piano. The material is drawn from the three main sources we have come to associate with Jean Carignan: traditional fiddle tunes of French Canada, medleys drawn primarily from recordings by fiddlers of Scottish extraction, and selections from the recorded repertory of Michael Coleman, foremost of American Irish fiddlers who hailed from Knockgrania, Co. Sligo. In addition, a fourth source is presented: adaptations for the fiddle by Carignan from recordings made by the accordion virtuoso, John J. Kimmel, in the first decade of this century.

The extreme diversity of Carignan's musical interests and the virtuosity of his performance suggest a much less traditional background than the facts reveal. Carignan is the son of a traditional French-Canadian fiddler and was able to master his father's repertory by the age of ten. He has lived most of his life around cosmopolitan Montreal where French, Scottish, and Irish cultures have long been contiguous if not intermixed. Much of Carignan's early training, after his father's example, was at the hands of the best French-Canadian fiddlers in his area, Joseph Allard and Willy Ringuette, both of whom had commercial recording careers. From listening to the recorded examples of Allard and Ringuette one can find much that contributes to an understanding of Carignan's musical development.

It seems that French musicians in Canada have been fascinated and deeply affected by the music of the Irish immigrants since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Scottish players have had a similar but probably lesser influence. The long-standing process of assimilating elements of Irish traditional music into French-Canadian fiddling is exemplified on the current record both by tunes with traditional French titles that can be clearly traced to Irish variants and also by elements of technique representative of Irish styles which are applied even to tunes of probable French origin. While the

greatest number of these Irish ornamentations and their most sophisticated use have been learned by Carignan's listening to Michael Coleman's recordings, nevertheless the recordings of Joseph Allard, Carignan's childhood idol, reveal a prototype of Carignan's style. One can find in Allard's playing a similar though much more rudimentary use of Irish fingerings and phrasing dependent to some extent on a knowledge of Irish bowing patterns.

The influence of Celtic music on the Acadians is obviously a focal point that needs further illumination if any reasonable understanding of French-Canadian traditional music is to be reached. While it is most certainly true that traditional French-Canadian music exists independent of Celtic influence, a proper understanding of Jean Carignan's place in the traditional music of French Canada requires detailed study of the process of Celtic assimilation. For it is not the mere involvement with Irish and Scottish music that makes Carignan unique among French Canadians but rather the extent of his involvement. Carignan is from this point of view a supremely developed representative of a process that may have had its origins in the logging camps of the nineteenth century where many French Canadians worked and where Irish fiddlers were almost as important as the cooks.

Perhaps the greatest irony in Carignan's music is the fact that the process of French and Irish blending works in ways as mysterious to him as to us. On the current recording a fine example of "Snoring Gobeil" is included. This tune has been attributed to Willy Ringuette, yet its third part is clearly taken from the well known Irish reel, "The Maid Behind the Bar." Carignan plays this part with very characteristic Irish ornaments in a way that is suggestive of Michael Coleman's style. In fact, the use of this type of grace notes and "rolls" is much more apparent here than in Carignan's earlier recorded version on Folkways.

Carignan's near idolatry of Coleman has been expressed not only by his musical directions but also in many reverential statements that he has made. Carignan has stated publicly that he would never change a note of Coleman's music and that he always plays Coleman pieces exactly the way Coleman recorded them. The present record will, hopefully, completely dispel this myth. There are four medleys on the Philo record which were learned from Coleman's 78's. One of the selections, "The Bird in the Tree Medley", can also be heard in Coleman's version as the "Kerryman's Daughter" on a recently reissued Coleman anthology, *The Musical Glory of Old Sligo*, IRC Records, N.Y., q.v. Although this particular selection is certainly not the best of Carignan's versions of Coleman tunes, it does indicate most of the important ways in which his versions differ from Coleman's.

The immediately obvious fact is that Carignan's tempo is noticeably faster. It may seem at first that he is playing the same notes, but the more important factor is that his phrasing has very little in common with Coleman. There is a lightness and fluidity in Coleman's playing which renders one virtually unaware of the technical difficulties he has surmounted. While Carignan can finger all of the most difficult passages, his playing does not create the same effect. Awesome virtuosity replaces lightness and too often the technical achievement seems more emphatic than the music's subtleties. Whether or not Carignan is playing the "right notes" becomes irrelevant for in

expression his playing differs markedly from Coleman's. The fact is that close listening will show that Carignan does not play the same notes as Coleman, variation for variation. Coleman himself was greatly respected for his ability to improvise. Carignan's deviations are not necessarily inappropriate. Carignan's artistry is estimable in its own right and his inaccurate claim of "recreating Coleman" only obfuscates his own musical position.

There are two primary elements in Carignan's musical identity which in combination with his temperament distinguish his playing from Coleman's and perhaps in the same way from all of the originals he has chosen to emulate. First is his eclecticism.

Most musical traditions tend to be exclusive. Styles are developed among players who listen mainly only to each other and their forbears. Traditional players develop in individual ways through the deep knowledge and personal mastery of what may be termed the total common idiom of their musical tradition. Carignan has had little experience of the underlying idiom of traditional Irish or Scottish music. He has only heard the masters at their very best performance level: individuals who were attempting to express their idiom's highest forms. But without a thorough understanding of the basis of a traditional musical idiom, a knowledge of its history, it is questionable whether any individual can attain a high level of mastery that can be considered representative and relevant by other members of this tradition.

This is precisely the criticism that has been made on Carignan's *Playing of Irish and Scottish music* by serious traditional Irish and Scottish musicians. Everyone admires his dazzling virtuosity, but from traditional Celtic points of view, his playing is full of inaccuracies, improper phrasing, and eclectic and inappropriate techniques. This is certainly not meant as an ultimate statement of his music's worth but merely to put things in a proper perspective from the standpoint of the particular traditions concerned.

It is only when viewed as perhaps the foremost representative of a branch of French-Canadian traditional music that Carignan can be properly appreciated. Even in his nominally Irish and Scottish selections, there is a French-Canadian sense of phrasing. His beat is never quite the light and subtle rhythms of the fiddlers from Sligo or the intensely restrained and precise patterns of the Scots. In all his playing the buoyant and exuberant pulse of French Canada comes through.

The other telling feature in Carignan's performance is his application of classical techniques. In his French-Canadian selections, these uses are minimal and mainly involve slightly more complex bowings than would be common. *Rarely does anything seem inappropriate in these selections.* For this reason, the tune Jean learned from his father, called here "Fiddle tuned like a Viol," and Ringuette's "Joyous Waltz" are probably the most moving tunes on the album. In both cases Carignan's virtuosity achieves its most perfect function, carefully expressing the music's qualities without intruding.

In the Irish selections, the classical touches are probably most intrusive in that they create phrasing patterns that are not expressive of the musical qualities that are cultivated by the Sligo fiddlers. This is particularly noticeable in the "Pat Sweeney Medley." In the second tune, "The Silver Spire," Carignan's introduction of detached classical bowing renders the

phrasing too syncopated for proper Sligo expression. His use of the lower half of the bow also adds to the weighty exaggeration of his beat.

Classical influence is most appropriate in the selections of J. Scott Skinner's music and to a somewhat lesser degree in the Cape Breton medleys. Skinner was himself a classically trained violinist who as a young man decided to specialize in his native traditional Scottish music. He was extremely influential, all but driving the older forms of traditional Scottish fiddling out of Scotland into the safety of Cape Breton by introducing all manners of classical technique into his playing. Skinner also composed extensively and further affected the Scots' consciousness of their traditional idiom by introducing aspects of European chromaticism into his melodies. Actually, Scottish traditional music has been influenced by European classical music at least since the eighteenth century. It might therefore be expected that Carignan's style would be more acceptable in the Skinner selections and other Scottish material than with the Irish tunes. However, Carignan's idiosyncrasies come through even here and the Skinner selections have been criticized by experts as incorrect. The point is that Carignan's classical technique though clearly formidable is of the homemade variety and here again he must be considered an artist of the "folk."

Skinner is particularly relevant to an understanding of Carignan's position in the history of fiddling. To some extent the role of folk fiddler as international virtuoso derives from Skinner's example. This is an identity that would have to have a fairly recent origin. It involves the most modern forms of communication both for publicity and also for the creation of an audience that is sophisticated enough to be interested in cultural forms that developed in relatively isolated ethnic areas. The Irish equivalent would be, ironically, not Michael Coleman, who was a traditional Irish fiddler of the highest accomplishment and unquestionable validity, but rather Sean Maguire. Maguire, from the north of Ireland, has also adopted classical bowing techniques and is also influenced by Skinner and somewhat international in repertory.

It is perhaps in this niche that Carignan most conveniently fits: the modern tradition of folk virtuosos who listen to each other on recordings and play primarily concert-intended versions of traditional material in performances à la Paganini. However, even in this regard, Carignan must be recognized as exceptional. He has earned his position by remarkable individual effort and dedication. Unlike Skinner and Maguire, Carignan has received no specialized training. The deeper understanding of Carignan's music will always, I think, consider his French-Canadian background, and it is perhaps most correct to expect his influence to be greatest in his home area of Canada.

This record is of great importance to folklorists interested in traditional music. It is one of very few examples of French-Canadian music readily available. While it does not contain the music of the oldest surviving French-Canadian traditions, it does offer some of the most evolved and interesting examples of a process that has been occurring in French Canada for more than a century. Second, the production of this record is excellent. There is information provided on all of Carignan's influences and sources including

both biographical and discographical references. These are invaluable for anyone interested in traditional Irish, Scottish, or French-Canadian music and all students of traditional fiddling in general. The notes have been published in French and English and the entire production from the quality of the recording to the documentation reflects a sensitivity to the worth of traditional music that has rarely been shown by recording companies. The record should do much to penetrate the Carignan legends and permit a more intelligent appreciation of his music.

(Reprinted from *Folklore Forum*, April, 1974)

Bloomington, Indiana

Résumé: *Miles Krassen, une autorité dans le domaine de la musique de violon, présente un ample compte-rendu du dernier disque de Jean Carignan enregistré par la compagnie Philo. Il met en lumière les éléments Irlandais et Ecossais du style de Carignan et démontre comment il a été influencé par d'autres musiciens.*

OTHER RECORDS

In addition to the Jean Carignan record reviewed above, Philo Records of Vermont issued three other records of special interest to Canadians.

Owen McBride. Owen McBride, vocals and guitar. Philo Stereo 1005.

Owen is an Irish-born performer who has been living in Toronto for some ten years. He has performed at many folk clubs and festivals in both Canada and the United States. He sings mainly Irish and Scottish traditional songs.

Louis Beaudoin. Louis Beaudoin, fiddle and clogging. Sylvia Beaudoin Blaise, piano; Wilfred Beaudoin, guitar; Rod Fuller, bones; Lisa Beaudoin, tap dance. Instrumental. Philo Stereo 2000.

Louis's grandparents emigrated from the Laurentian region of Canada to Lowell, Massachusetts, and there Louis was born in 1937. He grew up hearing fiddle music and songs in the French-Canadian community, and has been playing all his life. His whole family is musical: his brother Wilfred and daughters Sylvia and Lisa join him on this record.

Philippe Bruneau. Philippe Bruneau, accordion; Yvan Brault, piano; Gilles Losier, bass. Instrumental. Philo Stereo 2003.

Phillippe was born in Montreal in 1934 and raised in a climate of folk music. He began to play the accordion when he was 15. He was influenced by the fiddler Lionel Simard and encouraged by Jean Carignan. He has worked with the Feux Follets and since 1968 with the folk dance troupe, Les Danseurs du St. Laurent. This record was conceived as the musical accompaniment for a folk dance show.