As It Comes - The Fiddle in Northern BC


This is the third recent publication in the National Museum's Mercury Series to deal with instrumental folk music - specifically, violin music. It follows Gibbons' earlier work, Folk Fiddling in Canada: a Sampling (no. 35) and Carmelle Begin's La musique traditionnelle pour violon: Jean Carignan (no. 40), and indicates a new-found interest, long overdue, in one of Canada's first and foremost folk instruments.

The present volume is a logical extension of Gibbon's earlier publication for the Museum. Now focusing his attention from the west in general to Prince George in particular, the author presents fourteen tunes from the repertoires of three local fiddlers (Frank Lowery (6), Arthur Lindstrom (3), Max Sexsmith (5)). He includes brief biographical sketches for each and a general introduction to the historical context and current status of folk fiddling in Prince George. His purpose is to "introduce a sampling of the region's fiddling culture to a broader circle of musicians and folklorists through a historical overview of the genre, an account of the musical behaviour of its exponents and examples from the repertory."

The entire volume is short (thirty-five pages including bibliography) and the length obviously imposes limitations on the content. The introduction provides a good overview of the general context, but it is unfortunate that it could not have dealt in greater depth with certain issues. For example, we are told that "although fiddle music and folk dance came to Fort George ... with the fur traders of the early 1800's, the music began to increase markedly in popularity in the 1950's", but we are not told explicitly why, and how this is manifest; similarly, it would have been interesting to learn more of the "confusion in the nomenclature of traditional dances with their respective melodies and alternate selections" which, we are told, results from tune substitution; and the concluding statement, "The key determinants of contemporary old-time fiddling style are
the emphasis placed on the Messer technique and the changes in the nature of social dance," would have benefited from elaboration.

The biographies of the musicians suffer most from this brevity. It would have been more satisfying to read about them in narrative prose rather than in the clipped point form used by the author.

Much care is taken in the transcriptions. Unlike Gibbons' earlier publication which presented only the first repetitions of the strains of the tunes, the variants in the repetitions now also are indicated. Likewise, Gibbons includes greater detail in ornamentation and bowing. Although there is an inherent danger in attempting to indicate bowing from an audio recording, this is largely obviated here by using sound film as well as audio tape. The only reservation I have about the transcriptions concerns the waltzes: Gibbons has chosen to notate them 9/8. Surely, however, the more conventional 3/4 is much easier to read for both "musicians and folklorists." All transcriptions are complimented by brief yet comprehensive notes to the tunes; these provide important information concerning the tune's origins, any idiosyncrasies in its performance, and where the fiddler learned it.

The care taken in the preparation of this study is evident. Nonetheless, certain methodological questions remain unanswered. Why, for example, were these three particular fiddlers chosen? And why were these particular tunes isolated from their repertoires? Presumably, the fiddlers were chosen to illustrate differences in the styles of individual performers. But this itself raises another major question (which is not limited only to this study): to what extent is it possible to represent, through transcription alone, a style which is characterized by its very flexibility. In this earlier study, Gibbons wrote "... in each performance, there are variations in rhythm, tempo, melody, embellishment, bowing and in the duration of the repeated phrases." (p. 3). Furthermore, is our notation even capable of indicating subtleties such as character of the backbeat, quality of vibrato, tempo variation? Indeed, can someone unfamiliar with this style play these tunes from this notation and achieve the appropriate style?

Shortcomings in our notational system beg that more be written about specific fiddling styles to complement the transcriptions. What exactly is meant by saying that "Arthur Lindstrom exemplifies stock old-time fiddling... while Max Sexsmith patterns his style after Don Messer...?" No doubt, recordings and live performances provide the best answer. But as long as we continue to document and attempt to understand different musics and styles, critical stylistic analysis should not be ignored. And, in particular, studies such as this one by Roy W. Gibbons indicate that much scholarship can yet be done in the realm of Canada's instrumental folk traditions.

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