

THE MEANING OF "TRADITIONAL"

by

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Bypassing dictionary definitions, in common parlance "traditional" is often used to mean "anonymous", although obviously it is not a synonym. An instrumentalist, if asked about a tune, is frequently going to be very vague. He can tell you perhaps where he got it, but is unlikely to be as pedantically precise as a folk music scholar is (or should be), since he plays the tune, and has remembered it, solely because he likes it. Copyright rules, however, demand some precision, and for publication, or performance, details are asked for. If not given or found, the items can (must) be eliminated, just to err on the sane side. To label something "traditional" just because one knows nothing of its background is, if not dishonest, a mere sidestepping of the problem, which will not thereby disappear.

A well-known tune found up and down the country, passed on aurally from performer to performer, would seem to be in the tradition of popular music, but is not necessarily anonymous. The composer is in a way submerged, i.e., his persona merges into the multiple one of the folk; but if he is still alive, or his works are in copyright, his existence should at least be acknowledged. Of course, once he is dead and the statute of limitations runs out, he is fair game, and can be melded easily into the great button-pot labelled "anon.". All the same, his name should be perpetuated, if only in recognition of his services to the folk. For this reason I would reserve "traditional" for items of some age whose authors or composers are totally undiscoverable.

Some examples may make my argument clearer.

The "Strathspey King", James Scott Skinner, died in 1927 at an advanced age, having lived into the recording era, which means that we can hear how he performed his own works. He was a legend in his

lifetime, and his pieces were popular; many fiddlers played his music, spreading its fame over the U.K. and the Americas. (He himself undertook several tours of the United States.) Since he died so recently, he is still remembered, but since he died so long ago, his tunes are all safely in public domain (and "P.D.", indeed, may be what "traditional" most often means). I would not want to see him disappear in the trad pot, however, and so I wince when I see a tune such as "Angus Campbell" labelled "traditional". It is indeed a very popular tune, played all over the place, but it is not traditional in my sense of the word, although it is deliberately written in the tradition.

For me, *tradition* is a long process, constant yet ever-changing and developing, going back an appreciable time, and shaped by the consensus of the folk concerned. The *form* of a traditional tune varies over the years, but the *spirit* of the tradition remains, I think, the same. Themes also change with time, and can ultimately spawn new (or different) traditions on their own — whence you can classify folksongs into such groups as rural, urban, worksongs, satirical, bawdy, or what-have-you; fiddle music into the Shetland tradition, the Down-East tradition, and so on.

The trouble (or one of the troubles) is that the very term "folksong" is used so loosely as to include anything the user wants to include. The Germans are a little more accurate in their terminology, as may be expected: a *Volkslied* (folksong) is not quite the same as a *volkstümliches lied* (folk-like song), although the two may be indistinguishable. So: a folksong, for me, is traditional, and a song in the folk idiom is not, although it has every chance of becoming one. A song or tune that fits the tradition is (ultimately) traditional, and that means that its origin is lost: it becomes anonymous.

When I first heard Sidney Carter's "Port Mahon", I thought it was a real traditional folksong, it fitted so well. His "Lord of the Dance", similarly, is an interesting text to a catchy traditional tune (that of the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts", which appears to derive from an 18th-century march), the words having their own roots very far back in the Apocryphal Gospels. This combination gives the song (now in hymn-books) a real sort of authenticity, because both music and text derive from tradition. For this reason I can see this too becoming very well known and anonymous; yet it is to be hoped that Carter continues to get his credit.

I see no reason to deny composers the honour of remembrance just because their works are so popular a part of one's cultural heritage that they are in *that*

sense traditional. But I would reserve the term for pieces that are old and anonymous. Scott Skinner, then, should be credited on record sleeves and programmes as the composer of "Angus Campbell", its strathspey equivalent "The Laird o' Drumblair", the sweet air "The Bonnie Lass o' Bon Accord", and other well-known standards. This is not always done, I should point out.

Goring further back, and not counting things in dispute (the plagiarisms of Nathaniel Gow, for instance, or the queries about the originality of Stephen Foster's songs), we can mention Daniel Dow (1732-1783), whose strathspey reel (actually a rant) "Sir Archibald Grant of Monymusk" is shortened to "Monymusk" (or even, by folk etymology, "Money Musk"), its composer forgotten (or not sought for), and turns up in the repertoire of Quebec fiddlers as a traditional tune, "Le Moneymusk", often in quick reel time.

George Jenkins (c. 1760-1806) composed quite a few tunes still played, of which one is certainly a standard, viz., "The Marquis of Huntly's Highland Fling" (c. 1790), often titled just "Highland Fling", *tout court*, rather as "The College Hornpipe" is found as "Sailor's Hornpipe". Jenkins' name is rarely associated with his tune, however, which is often sung as a traditional *peurt-a-beul* and has been processed into "The Flax in Bloom", an Irish reel in Roche's collection, with the two strains in reverse order.

In Irish music, although Turlogh O'Carolan is usually accorded his rightful place in the bardic hall of fame as the composer of (e.g.) "Planxty Irwin", we find situations where a piece is labelled "traditional" out of what seems sheer laziness. Cornelius Lyons' fine tune "Miss Hamilton" has been so treated. Thomas Moore, also, has been bilked of his credit many times (even during his lifetime), and in this as in so many other ways he resembles Robert Burns, upon whom into the bargain are fathered many things he never saw, including "Bonny Mary of Argyll", which is not traditional either. Burns, of course, while taking pride in his productions, scorned the slavish recognition other more proprietary creators expected, deliberately concealing authorship oftentimes, and so submerging his own genius in that of his nation that it is frequently impossible to tell what (if any) parts of a song are his.

Percy French is safely dead, but his name lives on; nonetheless, many of his songs are blithely called "traditional" in the same way as those of Burns, Moore & Co. He again was operating in a tradition, though somewhat peripheral to folksong as such,

namely, the sentimental or comic stage song, which the folksinger naturally took over, as usual, into his come-all-ye repertoire. As a result, French's "The Mountains of Mourne" is as common as one can meet, and one finds it mostly without French's name, while Houston Collisson, who arranged the tune from the traditional "Carrighdown", is also ignored. French's "Abdulla Bulbul Ameer" has given rise to a parody which is a "real" folksong, whose author would probably prefer to remain anonymous, i.e., the bawdy version, to be heard in Rugby Club and Armed Service situations, about a phallic contest between Abdul the Bulbul Ameer and Ivan Skavinsky Skivar. I believe it was Frank Crummit who popularized the clean version, and also neglected to tell the world about Percy French.

Composers like their tunes to be played, and, while they may be somewhat flattered by being taken to be "traditional" — i.e., their music is so good and folk-sounding that they are assumed to be "old and anon." — they may also be a little chagrined at being denied their due (whether in reputation or royalties) because of their success. One may of course derive a secret delight in one's traditional status, which explains literary forgeries like those of Chatterton, Pinkerton, Hogg, and their Bohemian disciple Vaclav Hanka.

The "Scarborough Settler's Lament" (by Sandy Glendining, recorded well by the late Stan Rogers) goes to the first strain of the "traditional" tune of the Scots song "Of a' the Airs", a favourite Burns item. Yet Burns set his words to a tune well-known in his day by a living composer, namely, William Marshall, butler to the Duke of Gordon. Marshall called his air "Miss Admiral Gordon's Strathspey" (1781), and his title, and his authorship, should be (as they are usually not) given in a note on the song.

The facts of this case are very easy to find; I admit difficulties occur other times, for the further away in time (and space) we get from a piece, the more diffuse becomes the information, and this is especially true when a song or tune is composed deliberately within the tradition. Who, after all, can pin down even approximately the date and place of composition of such a well-known tune as "St. Anne's Reel"? We are in a better position when it comes to songs written quite recently, particularly if they are composed with a polemic purpose. Mere lyrical songs, or humorous satire, are a little more amorphous, to say the least.

There is a qualitative difference, but not a great one, between the song from the Irish Rebellion of 1798 "The Croppy Boy" (to the "McCaffery" tune) and that of the same title by Carroll Malone from

1916 (to the old air of Tudor times "Calling Cusurame"). Both are in the tradition, yet one is anonymous, like so many broadsides, and the other a modern production whose author should be (and often is) recognized. In contrast, there is a great deal of difference (in style of melody and text) between two songs by the same author: Wade Hemsworth's "Wild Goose" and "The Black Fly Song." The former is a beautiful piece, but really an art song; it is not in the folk tradition, and probably never will be. The latter, however, is firmly rooted in tradition, and one of these days will be labelled "traditional", I'm sure. Yet Hemsworth should not be so disregarded, even though, having been taken into the tradition, his song is subjected to the famous "folk process" and acquires variants and new stanzas.

The singer can't usually be bothered about authorship, though he may well know who wrote the song (and indeed he may be better informed on this than the college professor). He may also, for obvious reasons, know more about a local song than about a professional pop song. Yet all kinds of songs are grist to his mill; he sings them, new and old, trad and pop, because he likes them, or perhaps because in specific instances he is persuaded to perform them by the avid collector. The fiddler may be very knowledgeable about his repertoire, but will probably not be overparticular about authorship unless pressed for footnotes by a professional academic looking for material for a book. However, as a sheer matter of justice, let alone pedantry, the origins of a song or tune should be rooted out, and if the "onlie begetter" is to be found, he should be given liner-note credit. The question of copyrighting what is already authored is another can of worms that need not be opened here.

The folk performer, if amateur, can be excused from a precise accounting; the professional, on the other hand, cannot. The scholar, by definition, has a *duty* to delve into the background of a piece, beginning with details of collection and ending with as close an ascription of origin as possible. That this is difficult in many or most cases is no reason for falling down on the job or throwing up one's hands in despair. These days, with a vast array of technical aids to assist the investigation, one has no dearth of information to excuse vagueness, as could be argued in the early years of scholarship; yet even then there were giants who did some wonderful work armed with nothing but a good memory and a hungry curiosity.