FOLK MUSIC IN NFB FILMS

by

George W. Lyon

Members of the Canadian Folk Music Society ought to be aware of the large, if desultory, film record of the nation's folk music. Folklorists and ethnomusicologists are increasingly using audio/visual recording in their work (especially in the form of easy-to-handle, unobtrusive, and relatively inexpensive videotape), though not much of this is yet available to the public. However, thanks to the National Film Board, a considerable amount of non-academic work, often of high quality, is available to the public; NFB materials are no longer free, but I believe that the rental fees are not onerous. The following discussion includes only those NFB films I have seen; there are a few others I'm aware of, and I know there are some produced by CBC, though I understand these are not loaned. There may well be still more available from private filmmakers. Some films that are basically on non-musical subjects may, like I've Never Walked the Steppes, contain valuable musical sequences. It would be useful to collate information on all of these and make it available to fans, teachers, and students.

"H, M, L." is my own impressionistic rating system, "High, Medium, Low", which refers to what I consider the priority for musical content or context; this rating does not refer to the quality of film, performance, or music. These are not meant to be reviews, merely notes. I was able to catch the dates on many of them (I don't always read Latin too quickly!), and I've included these, as well as rounding off the timings of the films.

Have you ever wished you could put your finger on something and say, "This is Canadian soul music?" You can — in Jean Carignan, Violoneux, Fiddlers of James Bay, and Every Saturday Night, for starters. Celtic Spirits and I've Never Walked the Steppes promise that there could be more films like these. I urge you to make use of these resources; in addition to increasing your own pleasure, by using these films you may help cause more to be made. Given various political and economic verities, the reverse could also happen. Ask Don Messer.

CADET ROUSELE - L - 7 min. A cartoon version of the song, which is presented here in a not-particularly-interesting choral version. The animation is OK, but the only true charm here is in the French lyrics.

CANADIANS CAN DANCE - L - 1966? - 23 min. Skip it. A half-hour of amateur troupes performing to orchestral versions of dance tunes at the Canadian National Exhibition. Instead of watching this, invite your friends over and push the rug out of the way; then the title will mean something.

CELTIC SPIRITS - H - 1978 - 29 min. This is a survey of the history and culture of the Gaelic people, starting in Cape Breton and moving eastward. There's some sloppy scholarship, including a lyre-shaped guitar mistaken for a harp and the disconcerting strains of a twelve-string guitar as the voiceover tells us that Celtic music has become a dominant force in the Canadian folk music revival, but the finer moments, especially the fiddling by Scotty Fitzgerald and Hector Mac-Donald, more than make up for them. Just bear in mind that this film will provide an introduction only — you must create the acquaintanceship yourself. Some pleasant moments with John Allan Cameron, particularly a song he sings with his mother.

DON MESSER: HIS LAND AND HIS MUSIC - H - 70 min. This was made shortly after CBC cancelled Messer, and there's reference to that incident here. All things considered, the film stands up pretty well, though from the split screens to the hairdos there's no doubt that this is mid-60s Canada. The music, lean and vigorous, hasn't really aged, though I'm sure most BULLETIN readers would never stage it the way it was done then. There's a fair share of unadulterated fiddling in this film, as well as a strong sense of what it was like to have Don Messer to kick around.

EVERY SATURDAY NIGHT - H+ - 28 min. Old time musicians in the Drumheller area of Alberta, the schoolhouse practitioners from the 30s onward, with their polkas, schottisches, waltzes, square dances, etc. As in The Fiddlers of James Bay, there's not a false note in the film, which doesn't pretend to do more than it can, a failing in such films as Celtic Spirits, which would offer insight into the personality of a race. These films attempt a limited field, but you come away from them convinced that you've really seen something.

FIDDLE-DE-DEE - H - 3 min., and HEN Hop - M - 3 min. Perhaps Fiddle-Dee is higher priority in
film history than in Canadian musical culture, but it's a gas anyway, so I'm giving it all the stars. Eugen Desormeux fiddled "Listen to the Mockingbird" and Norman McLaren put Canada in cinema history by painting on blank film. Hop is a bit of a let-down after Fiddle-Dee-Dee; it's the same idea, but seems less interesting the second time around. Who knows, if we'd seen this one first?... Nevertheless, the soundtrack to this deserves to be heard; is it George Wade?

The Fiddlers of James Bay - H+ - 29 min. Two Cree fiddlers, grandchildren of Orkney Island Hudson's Bay Company men, were taken back to those Scottish isles, where they performed and partied with the locals. The people - Cree and Scottish - of this film are genuine, warm, and humorous. The landscapes range from benign to haunting, and the music is archetypal, if I may be permitted a 60s-ism.

The Half Mast ed Schooner - L - 7 min. Watch out for this. The title sounds like it might be based on a folk song or a Stan Rogers pastiche, doesn't it? Well, it's nothing of the kind. There are a couple of good images, but it's mostly just bad rock and low-budget psychedelia.

I've Never Walked the Steppes - M - 1975? - 28 min. This film is about Ukrainians in western Canada in the 70s, really a portrait of how this group, exemplified by one particular family, joined the rest of Canadian society. There's a lot of talk about how important music is to Ukrainians, but only the opening sequence, of an old gent singing a tough, beautiful old ballad to the accompaniment of a hurdy-gurdy, is really of interest here. The one bit is well worth seeing, however; perhaps someday it can be edited into an anthology of folk music performances.

Jean Carignan, Violoneux - H - three reels, ca. 1 1/2 hours. This very important film will likely not be seen by many English-speaking Canadians, since it is entirely in French with no subtitles. Would an anglicized version be appropriate? Perhaps, but I respect the decision of the filmmakers to do as they have done, and I was willing to sit through long portions of interview, though my own French is minimal. Why? Respect, as I said, but primarily for the music that kept coming! If you ever had any doubt about Carignan's achievement as a fiddler, you won't after you've seen this film, which records Ti-Jean both in the controlled (but perhaps sterile) atmosphere of the studio and at a pair of house parties. It's easy to understand why he became somewhat bitter late in life, playing Carnegie Hall one night, driving a cab in Montreal the next day. I'm not sure it makes sense to call Carignan a folk musician, but anyone who Loves folk music should be aware of his work.

Matrionka - L - 5 min. This is thoroughly inessential to our subject, the music for this animation being an orchestrated Russian folk tune, but it is delightful.

The Owl and the Lemming - 6 min., The Owl and the Raven - 7 min., and The Owl Who Married a Goose - 8 min. - all M. These charming and poignant films integrate animated imagery with Inuit language (the first music is language!), throat singing, song, and vocal sound effect.

Paper Wheat - M - 1979 - 58 min. This is a film about the play, its audience, and its cast, not simply a film reproduction of the play itself, though considerable portions of the play are included. The film is articulate, interesting, and enjoyable, and there is some music in it. The play is from a popular tradition, and its heritage is Broadway and the West End, not folk tradition, though some of the songs show at least some awareness of what western Canadians used to play and listen to, and fiddler Bill Prokopchuk is the real thing. (But I still wish he'd left out "Orange Blossom Special"!)

The Story of the H.M.S. Shannon - L - 8 min. This little cartoon tells the story of the sea fight, then retells it with the ballad sung in a 50s folk-pop style with guitar accompaniment and a rehash of the same images. Does it work? Probably not, but for teachers determined to teach their students the details of this event, it's probably as painless a way to do it as you can find.

Teach Me to Dance - H - 1978 - 29 min. This is a dramatized story by Myrna Kostash, which, though sometimes a little wooden in performance, sweetly and poignantly presents the social and personal background to prairie esthetics. Culture on the prairies happened largely in the schoolhouse, and that historical situation is presented here, along with the anguish and bitterness that often provides the context for the most beautiful music that people make.

We Sing More Than We Cry - H - 17 min. This portrait of Acadia perhaps errs a bit much in the direction of the picturesque, but there's tantalizing bits of bawdy balladry, lilting, and fiddling. The ending of
the film is perhaps unfortunate. A young radical decries the use of the fiddle as a constant symbol of Acadians, comparing it to Indian drumming in cowboy movies. When the movie Indians stop drumming, he comments, they're ready to go to war. What happens, he asks, when the fiddler stops? The camera then cuts to Edith Butler's guitar, which may have seemed a revolutionary tool in the early 70s, but now is just pleasant. Perhaps the fiddle can be more revolutionary than some people realize.

FOLK MUSIC IN CHILDREN'S MUSIC EDUCATION IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

by

David W. Watts

[Editor's note: This article was adapted from a chapter in Mr. Watts' forthcoming book Exploring the Joy of Music With Young Children.]

GREAT BRITAIN

Although the influence of Orff and Kodaly spread to the U.K. in the 1970s, and is evident in the British primary music educational curriculum, not much attention has been paid to Kodaly's injunction that music education must be rooted in the local folk culture. The English are rather ambivalent here. Traditional songs such as "Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?", "Scarborough Fair", and "Early One Morning" are sung throughout the English-speaking world, yet the folk tradition, in its local richness and ongoing evolution, is little in evidence in the teaching of music in primary schools.

Folk music is regional in character. When non-Brits think of "British" folk music, it is often of songs from Scotland, Ireland or Wales. Even if we confine our thinking to the borders of England, it is still likely to focus on the outlying areas: Cornwall, which has its own "national anthem"; Yorkshire, with rousing chor-