CANADIAN FOLK MUSIC –
MERELY A FADEING SOUND IN
A COMMERCIAL WILDERNESS?

The days of large folk festivals in Canada may be almost over. Mariposa seems moribund; Winnipeg's changing focus has now been admitted, with a change of name to merely “Music Festival” to legitimize the rock and country music that were already coming to be its principal features; Vancouver, I hear, is following suit; and from what I've seen of the Edmonton program, folk music was scarcely featured there this year.

Well, maybe the great Canadian public – inured as it is to processed food, beer and other drinks with flavour almost removed, and to comparably predigested literature and commercial music, designed for quick sale and (at least, so one trusts) a swift passage into oblivion – will scarcely be even aware of this shift in emphasis. However, it is a state of affairs that should sadden all readers of this magazine. In this country, folk music – the varied musical heritage brought by immigrants as well as the songs crafted here – is still striving desperately, and, alas, largely in vain, for the recognition it so amply merits.

Two decades or so ago, Alan Mills came close to creating an audience for our traditional folk music across Canada; indeed, he had inspired many singers and musicians before his endeavours were stilled by his early death. Though there have been good radio programs on folk music on CBC and on a handful of local radio stations (such as CJUS in Saskatchewan and CKUA in Alberta), no other person has since succeeded in presenting and advocating folk music so effectively. Moreover, now that the whole roots of CBC are being chopped away by Mulroney's financial axe, we seem likely to be hearing less, not more, folk music over the airwaves.

After all, who makes big bucks out of folk music? How are those greenbacks going to be accumulated, when you can’t even copyright that older stuff? And why, when we’re approaching that forced marriage with the United States – so alluringly mislabelled “free trade”, to persuade us that it won’t be a one-sided deal, despite all reasonable prediction – should anyone wish to encourage future disunity by admitting that there’s a distinctive Canadian folk music? That won’t help our relations with our southern neighbours, now will it? They don’t want to know, now do they? So why spoil that partnership (so-called, by its proponents only!) by telling them Canada is different?

It must be admitted also that folk music fared badly even in those old, happier days when Canada was striving for its sovereignty and cultural identity – when we were trying to emerge from the stable of the British Empire and run free as a nation, instead of meekly bowing our heads to receive the U.S. yoke. Only in Quebec has there been any real recognition that folk song and music is truly a factor of cultural identity. In the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland, folk music and song are growths vigorous enough to survive without most governmental monetary fertilization. Alas! that is not so elsewhere – and support has been so erratic from municipal, provincial or federal sources in other parts of Canada that during the last few decades folk music has wilted or withered away altogether.

Why this should be so is hard to understand. After all, we have inherited from our immigrants the richest diversity of song and music that any country can boast. Moreover, not just in Newfoundland, the Maritimes and Quebec, but in all parts of our country, people have been composing good tunes and writing good songs – songs that have a distinctive Canadian identity and express our special Canadian experience more clearly than do even our novels and poetry.

Yet, as I’ve noted above, even in the days when the thrust for multiculturalism was strongest, somehow folk music and song lost out. The money put into music was spent mostly to support symphony orchestras and opera – that is, to support expensive re-creations of music composed elsewhere and reflecting European experiences and values, not those of our own land.

Yes, there has been some financing of Canadian composers; but somehow grants have most often been given to people quite isolated from their own folk traditions. With only a few honourable exceptions, the sequences of bumps, squeaks and drones that such composers have formulated are too esoteric for comprehension outside their own musical clique; certainly they say little to Canadians at large. If Canada is to produce a truly distinguished composer in the classical vein, he has not yet emerged; and surely the meagre role played by our folk music in the curricula of Canadian music
schools is a major reason. Even now that we are seeing so creditable a strengthening of ethnomusicology in some universities and colleges, have we been given any reason to suppose that a knowledge of Canadian folk music is ever going to be required of students?

As for multiculturalism, yes, it has done a great deal to enrich our lives. At annual folkfests we can devour interesting foods to the point of repletion (or even indigestion!). We can enjoy Scottish and English ales, Irish stouts and German lagers that make us realize how flavourless and characterless most North American beer truly is. We can watch frilly-skirted girls performing Irish reels and vigorous males executing Ukrainian dances that require quite startling athletic skill. We can see morris-dancers, bells on their pants, acting out pre-Christian rituals whose meaning is long lost, or maypole-dancers performing similar rituals whose meaning remains all too evident. We can even watch Iranian, Indonesian or Filipino dancers performing in solemn expression of religious beliefs still current, or enthuse over Oriental martial arts whose solemn, ceremonial hostility is also almost religious. We can view, with emotions ranging from entire fascination to utter boredom as pavilion after pavilion is visited, displays of embroidery, pottery, painting, carving and beadwork in a variety of styles and techniques, some vigorously alive in their own countries, but many preserved there only by a dedicated few exponents, and some surviving nowadays only in Canada.

All of which is good; but the music? Well, yes, there are the Scottish pipe bands (do they know any tunes other than “Scotland the Brave”, one sometimes wonders?) and yes, occasionally bands or individual musicians do accompany some of that dancing — though, more often, a cracking tape (beginning and ending abruptly, as a result of inept manipulation of controls) is preferred. (Musicians’ performances are so tiresomely varied, aren’t they, and after all, such variations just confuse the dancers!) Usually it is only in South American and Irish pavilions that one can hear music and song presented for their own sake. Are the other immigrant traditions performing their songs and music only for each other, at private parties, or are they forgetting them altogether? That is a question I cannot answer, though I fear the worst.

In such folkfests, how often is there a Canadian pavilion? Let’s not pretend that we encounter distinc-
just another sort of background noise — and modern life is much too full of background noises.

And records and tapes? Yes, there are some very good ones, to which members of this Society have easy access through our Mail Order Service. Yet in the average record store west of Quebec, they're scarcely to be found; and in the catalogue of our principal federally-subsidized recording organization, CBC Records, sadly, few are listed.

Even before the free-trade manoeuvrings, folk music in Canada has been suffering greatly from U.S. pressures. Our recording companies are largely controlled from south of the border. Should a Canadian folk musician be considered by the Toronto office to be worthy of recording, that opinion has to be justified to New York or Los Angeles — and all too often, it will be discounted by a cynical U.S.-dollar-conscious headquarters staff.

Canadian writers have long been complaining, justly and vociferously, of the unwillingness of U.S. publishers to purchase and publish novels having Canadian settings. My friend Alan Bradley, for example, wrote a highly amusing novel that was set in a small southern Ontario town. The publishing firm to which his manuscript was submitted liked it and said, yes, they'd accept it — but only if he'd change the setting to a New England town. He wouldn't, and the novel remains un-published.

Yet the writers have been vociferous in their complaints, and those complaints have been heard — at least to the point that subsidies to enable publication within Canada have been forthcoming from federal and provincial sources, even if distribution of their books remains poorly-organized and, outside Canada, meagre. Folk musicians have not been nearly so vociferous. Folk musicians have not been nearly so vociferous. This Society has never been strong enough, regretfully, to serve as their voice, and that voice, if heard at all, has been ignored.

For U.S. folk singers and musicians, visa requirements have made travelling to Canada difficult; for Canadian singers and musicians, the combination of visa requirements and union pressures have made tours in the U.S.A. virtually impossible. Will circumstances improve under “free trade”? There is no reason to believe so.

Yet probably the greatest single problem we folk music enthusiasts face is the conservatism (with both a small and a large C) of most Canadians. In the view of very many Canadian businessmen, alas! all folk singers and musicians are radicals or lefties. (The word “pinko”, once so much used, may have passed from favour, but the attitude which it expressed has not.) Even traditional folk music from their own ethnic background makes such businessmen (unless they are Irish!) uneasy; Canadian folk music in general, and — oddly enough — traditional music in particular, is anathema. Aren't there songs protesting social injustices, talking about strikes and such? About attitudes and events of other sorts that disturbed business and cut profits? Well then, how can they be expected to support an art form so subversive?

The answer to that is, of course — yes, some songs do treat such themes (though it’s hard to imagine subversive music); but then, folk songs reflect all aspects of human activity, from birth to death and even into the hereafter. Consequently, such songs form only quite a small part of the whole fabric of folk song. Though the present writer wouldn’t agree, the very existence of such songs might be considered an argument against supporting gatherings of contemporary-style folk musicians, where songs of social protest might be featured prominently. However, surely this does not justify a refusal of funding for traditional Canadian folk music of any kind, from whatever ethnic background!

Yet — yes, this extreme conservatism is causing problems for the acceptance of folk music in North America generally and Canada in particular. Many leading folk singers have been, and are, overtly socialist in viewpoint: Pete Seeger and Utah Phillips are well-known U.S. examples, but quite a number of us here in Canada — Jon Bartlett, Rika Ruebsaat and Phil Thomas are examples — hold and express that same faith. However, most artists and very many classical musicians are also overtly socialist without this being held against either their particular art form or their artistic product.

In fact, folk music transgresses all political boundaries. In some communist countries — Stalin's U.S.S.R. was an example — folk music was viewed as subversive and was deliberately suppressed. (Ask your Ukrainian friends about that!) Moreover, there are many perfectly genuine traditional folksongs that express social or political views nowadays unacceptable even to persons of left-wing views. “Sir Hugh of Lincoln”, as an in-
stance, is centuries old, but is so anti-Semitic that it is rarely sung nowadays, while there are many songs revelling in male oppression of females, and just about as many celebrating female mistreatment of males – contrast “Prince Heathen” and “Randall, My Son”, for example! This must be so, since all aspects of human concern have been celebrated in song over the centuries.

How to counter this common attitude of distrust of our music? Well, one might begin by enlisting, as patrons of any new or existing folk music organization, persons who are known to be sympathetic to folk music yet who are (in those businessmen’s eyes, at least) perceived as being of high status in the community – physicians, lawyers, other businessmen – and feature them conspicuously on the organization’s letterhead! Quite a few do turn out to have had involvements with folk music in their college days, or even to have sung or played folk instruments themselves. (Don’t choose university professors, though; they’re equally suspect as being a bunch of radicals!) Secondly, when soliciting funds or other support, it helps to dress as conventionally as your wardrobe permits; unconventional dress is usually equated with unacceptable political opinions. But most of all, if you hear such stupid views expressed in conversation or in the media, immediately challenge them and point out the truth!

What else is to be done? Well, a couple of years back I published an exhortative article in the CFMS Journal, with little visible effect. After serving almost three years as President of this Society – yes, there have been moves in the right direction. A beginning has been made upon regionalization, for example, and stronger links are being forged with the ethnomusicologists. However, in public terms, the condition of Canadian folk music and musicians seems not to be improving, but rather worsening. So I’ll repeat here, in briefer form, those same exhortations, and even add a few:

i. Form your own performance circle, at which people can get together and sing or make music. If you’re energetic and ambitious enough, form a club and invite visiting singers and musicians – though you’ll need to pay them expenses, at least, so this will require some financial arrangements.

ii. Whenever folk musicians or singers are featured in local coffee-houses, restaurants or bars, go along there, listen and applaud. They need to know they’re appreciated – and so do the proprietors!

iii. Put pressure on the organizers of regional or national folk festivals to book not only distinctively Canadian singers and musicians in contemporary styles, but also musicians and singers representing the many traditional styles that form part of our cultural weave.

iv. Buy a tape-recorder and seek out and record the songs and music of your own region. Label your tapes properly and lodge copies in an archive – the CFMS archive at the University of Calgary, or some regional archive, or (best of all) both – so that they won’t be lost.

v. Strive to ensure that your local bookstore sells Canadian song and music books and that your local record store stocks folk music records and tapes. Ask for them, order them and buy them, so the proprietors realize that there’s a market.

vi. Contact school boards and parent-teacher groups, asking that traditional and contemporary Canadian folk songs and music be given a proper place in school and college curricula.

vii. Write to your city aldermen, your MLA and your MP, asking that they give stronger support to the perpetuation and enhancement of Canada’s musical heritage. With MPs and MLAs, if you chance to be a member of their party or have given them your vote, be sure to say so! Seek supporting grants for your club, your festival, your planned publication or your collecting endeavours – and, if turned down, keep on asking!

Whichever of the above you decide to do, please do something! If you don’t, then our folk music heritage is going to be lost; and it’s too good to be lost. Yes, this Society has an executive, and we’re pretty dedicated people; but we’re few and Canada is huge. We need initiatives in all parts of our country, if the situation is to be improved. Take action now! It’s up to you, reader – and yes, I do mean you!

William A.S. Sarjeant
President