SMEA PRAIRIE MUSIC PROJECT 1988-89

by

Lynn Whidden

Several members of the Saskatchewan and Manitoba Educators' Association identified a need for French/Métis/Native tunes for use in schools. A song-gathering project was heartily endorsed by the membership, and during 1988-89 more than 100 songs were collected, transcribed and, when required, arranged, for school age children.

Following is an outline of what's in the collection, and with that, a glimpse of how it's put together. The outline also gives an indication of the wealth of traditional song, and of the “new” traditional song, awaiting the folksong performer and scholar on the prairies.

MÉTIS

The Henri Létourneau file, St-Boniface, Manitoba, contains an extensive collection of French song and folk belief, much of it by Métis as well as French-Canadians. There are Métis songs of Canadian composition, including the well-known “La Metisse”, “Sur le champ de bataille”, and “Les tribulations d’un toi malheureux”. The Létourneau prairie collection shows that Métis share in the enormous repertoire of “chanson” brought by Europeans to Canada, but the language and performance context of the songs is uniquely Canadian.

There are a few Métis who still carry on this oral tradition of French song. Joe Venne, of Birtle, Manitoba (formerly of Ste-Madeline), not only sings old French songs but also understands the Cree and Saulteaux languages. Joe remembers when families met at home to sing and tell stories. Sometimes the men would gather in one room exchanging songs until the drink was gone. And there are many, many of these lively songs which are unfortunately not included in the school collection, for they tell of the joys of drink and women, and comment on religion and politics. Here is one of Joe’s traditional French songs which was suitable for the school collection and which illustrates the Métis dialect:

Example 1. “La belle fille qui voulait se marier”

Standard French
Il y avait une belle fille
Qui voulait se marier
Elle demandait à son père
 Aussi sa tendre mère
 Bonjour mon cher père
 Je voudrais me marier
 Quand je pense aux amants
 Ça m’empêche de dormir

Oh, tais-toi ma chère petite fontise!
Tu n’as pas endormi quinze ans,
Tu penses aux amants
Et je t’emmènerai en ville
Dans un couvent des orphelins
Pour que tu pries Dieu
Pour tous tes beaux parents

Non, non je me pries pas
Pour aucun de mes parents!
Je prierai Dieu pour mon cher, fidèlement
J’écouterai du blanc
 Aussi des beaux rubans
 J’irai aux bals, aux danses
 À me divertir seulement

C’est le bout.

Joe’s Sung Version
Il y avait une belle fille
Qui voulait se marier
Elle demandait son père
 Aussi sa tendre mère
 Bonjour mon cher père
 J’voudrais me marier
 Quand j’ai pensé aux amants
 Cen m’empêche de dormir

Oh, té-toi donc ma chère petite fontise
T’y as pas encore quinze ans,
Tu pensais aux amants
Et j’te mènèrai en ville
Dans un couvent des orphelins
Lorsque tes prières Dieu
Pour tous tes beaux parents
Non, non jé prire pas
Pour auquin de mes parents
Jé prierai Dieu pour mon cher, fidèlement
J'équéterai du blanc
Aussai des beaux rebans
J'érai aux bals, aux danses
da dévérir seulement

Sé l' butt :3"ll

This traditional folksong was sung by Joe Venne of Birtle, Manitoba, and collected by Lynn Whidden, 13th December 1988.

Another Métis, Susan Ducharme, of St-Ambroise, Manitoba, still sings a few songs. Following is her family's version of "Marie Rouvin". When no fiddler is present to play, they sing the accompaniment and create a strong percussion effect with their feet.

Fiddling is a pervasive part of rural Métis life, so we included a Métis fiddle tune, which the children can sing using syllables. The syllables were created by two fiddlers (age 11), who use them to help the learning of new tunes.

We also included several popular songs with strong connections to folk tradition, as sung by contemporary Métis artists such as Suzanne Bird and Edgar Desjarlais, Winnipeg.

NATIVE

The Dakota Hotain singers of Sioux Valley, Manitoba, contributed several Sioux powwow songs for the collection, and there's a well-known "49er" in English

MARIE ROUVIN

[Music notation]

Je l'a deman-dé bien po-lite - men-

Où t'en va ma belle en-fant -

Et ma re-pond bien po-lite - men-

Je m'en vais ma co-mmis-sion Ma-rie Rou-vin

Pour l'ar-re-ter Ma-rie Rou-vin

Pour sa-voi p'tit Ma-rie For-ger

= fort ten
(a powwow social song, sung and danced by youths after midnight). There are three traditional Cree children’s songs, about the dragonfly, the nighthawk and the Rolling Head legend, and numerous offerings in Cree by contemporary singers such as Winston Wuttunee and Bill Ballantyne. The collection also includes prairie native songs selected from the early 20th-century collections of France Densmore (Chippewa, Sioux), Natalie Curtis and Alice Fletcher.

French songs can be heard in small communities across the prairies, many of them derived from the ubiquitous series La Bonne Chanson. Several of the well-loved but not too common songs from this series have been included in the present collection. Many individuals, from Duck Lake and St-Louis in northern Saskatchewan to Willow Bunch and Bellegarde in southern Saskatchewan, contributed songs. However, there remain many, many communities in which the music resources have not yet been tapped. Archives have provided a rich supply of French song. The Saskatchewan Archive holds a number of good collections with material suitable for children. Unfortunately, many of the songs in the Manitoba archives contain no indication of the tunes, but the Létourneau collection, as mentioned earlier, in the St. Boniface Historical Society archives contains a wealth of old French song.

And as for contemporary popular song in the folk idiom, the list is endless and we have included several by artists such as Jacques Chauvin of Calgary which are performable by children.

At this time, the prairie song collection is in the initial stages of publication, and will not be available until early 1990, but if you wish information on any of the other song sources mentioned, or even on the “mature” songs which will not be published, you may contact:

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THE VICTORIA “FOLK”:
SOMETHING OF A TRADITION
by
Denis Donnelly

It’s 8:00, the lights go down in the little hall, and the hubbub of talk and activity begins to diminish. After some welcoming words by the evening’s host, a rag-tag group gets up on stage. There is some banter, and then somebody launches into the first song of the evening, and immediately almost everyone in the hall jumps in on the chorus. On any given evening that song could be the Copper Family anthem “Country Life”, or any one of the extensive chorus-song repertoire built up over the years. Such shanteys as “John Kanaka”, “The Alabama” or “Hog-Eye Man” are often sung. Also there are spirituals such as “Down in the Valley to Pray” or “Lighthouse”, sea songs like “The Mingalay Boat Song”, or more modern composed songs such as “Where the Coho Flash Silver” or some of the somewhat irreverent Pete Seeger-inspired verses to “Old Time Religion”.

This, then, is how the Victoria Folk Music Society has been starting its Sunday folk coffeehouse evenings since their beginning in 1973. In that time “The Folk”, as it is affectionately known, has established itself as central to much of the folk and acoustic music activity in and around Victoria, and has a reputation as a “must visit” with many travelling musicians when they are coming through. Attendance is good, with enthusiastic audiences of between 50 and 100, which is the capacity.

It was not always thus. I remember a time in the late ’70s, after a particularly dismal night of attendance, when a group of us gathered in the kitchen to talk seriously about whether it was worth it, and “Why don’t we just shut ‘er down?”.

But that was then, and there wasn’t much general acceptance of folk music. Since then things seem to have turned around, and our folk club, like many others, is thriving again.

The format of the evening has developed over the years, and now is pretty well set, and seems to work well. The evening begins with a 10- or 15-minute “Ad Hoc”, which gets everyone into it with a few chorus