

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 Métisse", "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 Saukteaux 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 frontise!
Tu n'as pas encore quinze ans,
Tu penses aux amants
Et je t'emmènerai en ville
Dans un couvent des orphelins
Pour que tu prieras Dieu
Pour tous tes beaux parents

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

C'est le bout :³||

Joe's Sung Version

Il y avait une belle fille
Qui voulait se mareiller
Elle demandait son père
Aussi sa tendré mère
Bonjour mon cher père
J'voudrais mev mareiller
Quand j'ai pensé aux amants
Cen m'empêche dé dormir

Oh, té-toi donc ma chère petite fontise
T'y as pas encore quinze ans,
Tu pensais aux amants
Et j' t'emmènerai en velle
Dans un couvent des orpheliens
Lorsque tes prieras Dieu
Pour tous tes beaux parents

Non, non jé prire pas
 Pour auquin de mes parents
 J'é prieraï Dieu pour mon cher, fidèlement
 J'équétèrai du blanc
 Aussai des beaux rebans
 J'érai aux bals, aux danses
 a dévèrtir seulement

Sé l' butt :³ll

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

(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 Wutunee 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:

Lynn Whidden, Ph. D.
Ethnomusicologist
Department of Native Studies
Brandon University
Brandon, Manitoba
Office: 727-9640
Home: 726-8305

