Musical Mosaic

This review originally appeared in the Newsletter of the Calgary Irish Cultural Society.

What does a sarangi, a bowed psaltery and a hand saw have in common? OK, let's add a sitar to that list. Now you think you have it. A sitar, as everyone knows, is a stringed musical instrument from India—a long-necked lute, to be exact, with eighteen movable frets and a wooden body—Ravi Shankar, and all that.

But what does a sitar have in common with the other three? You might be inclined to guess that they were all musical instruments, except that a bowed psaltery sounds more like a book of psalms that someone sat on, and a hand saw is a hand saw and not a musical instrument.

But then some of you from Belfast with a memory to match the length of your tooth might remember yest little man who used to sit on Donegal Square of Castle Place, every day bar Sunday with a dunce at his feet, a few coppers or may be a couple of tanners in it, playing beautiful melodies on—that's right—a musical saw. And man, how he could play that thing. Fine as a fiddle. First busker I ever knew—before I even knew the word, "busker".

So back to the sarangi and the sitar and the bowed psaltery. Yes, they're all musical instruments. So's the humble hand saw. And what this is all leading up to is the other thing they all have in common. (Can they have something else in common?) Yes, they were all played in the Cultural Centre on the evening of October 27, 1990. That night Celtic Folk played host to members of the Canadian Society for Musical Traditions, who had come to Calgary from all over Canada to attend their annual convention. And what better way for members of a society for musical traditions to spend a Saturday evening than by listening to some of the best practitioners of Canada's varied musical traditions?

So what's Canadian about a sarangi or a sitar? Or a bowed psaltery for that matter? A hand saw's something else, but not too many Canadians play music on it. Well, they are all part of our musical traditions now. And like Ukrainian dancing or Chinese cooking or Hutterite farming, they're part of the Canadian cultural scene. Canada, we've been told for years, is a multi-cultural mosaic, where everybody's traditions becomes Canadian traditions because they're carried on in Canada. And with any luck they'll go on being practised here for a long time to come.

Judging by the performers who entertained us on October 27, we need have no fears for the longevity of musical traditions in Canada. Such a wide variety of music and song from so many different parts of the world has almost certainly never before been heard in this city in one place. All of the above is in fact a true international musical mosaic where all the pieces fitted so well together, they made a most exciting, entertaining show.

So what's a sarangi? It's the Indian—East Indian—equivalent of a fiddle, but it has a four cornered, skin-covered, wooden sound box, with a rather wide finger-board, three strings and maybe a dozen understrings—sympathetic understrings, I think they're called. It sounds like a viola. Regula Qureshi, who now lives in Edmonton, played it to accompany James Hamilton on sitar. The amazing thing is that James Hamilton lives in Vancouver. He and Regula had only just met for the first time, but played as if they'd been accompanying each other for years.

That kind of thing isn't as rare as you might think when member of the Society for Musical Traditions get together. Josko Caleta hails from Croatia, but now lives in Vancouver. He's a singer, and a fine one. Judith Cohen lives in Toronto. She's a singer too, specializing in Sephardic Jewish and Moroccan songs. Somehow or other, never having met before, and with only two hours of practice, Judith and Josko say a duet from Yugoslavia that was so hauntingly lovely it sent shivers down your backbone.

Judith came back later as a soloist to sing songs in Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language spoken by Sephardic Jews from the Balkans and the Middle East. (There's got be be a lot of history hiding there.) She accompanied herself on a drum that looked like a first cousin of the bodhran, except that it was held between the palms of both hands and played with the fingers. Even so it had a range of percussive sounds such as I've never heard from any bodhran.

And the bowed psaltery? The psaltery is an ancient instrument, 12th century at least, that's related to the zither, but smaller and made in a variety of shapes. David Woods put aside his musical saw and played a small, triangular psaltery with the same bow.

The dulcimer is a psaltery in which the strings are struck with hammers instead of plucked or even bowed. And yes, among the CSMT performers there was a hammered dulcimer player—that is, the dulcimer was hammered. The player, not hammered, was Sheila Brunskill from Manitoba, who, along with Gregg Brunskill on banjo and fiddle, make up the duo known as "Meadowlark".

And that brings us to performers closer to the Celtic Folk tradition using fiddles, guitars, whistles, bodhrans, autoharps, dulcimers and, of course, the human voice itself. Colin Quigley, from Los Angeles, teaming up with his old buddy, Neil Rosenberg from St. John's, Anelia Kaminsky, a fiddler from Edmonton; Bill Sarjeant, a singer from Yorkshire; and Calgary's own singer-songwriter, Vic Bell. And what held this multi-coloured, multi-talented musical mosaic together were strong performances from Celtic Folk's own meadowlarks. Deirdre Halferty and Maureen Hutchens, and familiar Celtic Folk musicians hiding behind less familiar names like Scatter the Mud and Banshee. What a night!

Ron Duffy

Newsletter—Irish Cultural Society, 6452 35 Ave., NW, Calgary, AB, T3B 1S6, Dec-Jan 90/91.

The Musical Saw

ENDANGERED SPECIES FOLK INSTRUMENT

The Musical Saw gained much popularity during the 1920's and 30's but as depression and war years entered it nearly became a forgotten instrument. Today many of the players are in their 60's, 70's, and 80's. As an instrument there has been a resurgence of saw playing especially in California. We now have address lists of over 1600 names.

In French it is called La Lame Sensitive, in German it is Bingenh Saxe and in English is it the Musical Saw. There are short references to the musical saw in The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments, edited by Stanley Sadie, and in the Handbook of Instrumentation by Andrew Stiller. However, years of failure to record
information about the Musical Saw have made its beginnings very obscure. There are
gods of its early appearance in Scandinavia, South America, Germany, and
even the Orient. But we like to believe it was
native to North America where the
lumberjacks played a part in carving the land
out of the wilderness and, just maybe, were
responsible for bringing the beautiful tones from
a woodsman’s tool. There are three
companies (Mussel & Westphal, Valley
Saw, Inc. with C. Blacklock Special, and
Sandvik Stradivarius) that produce
professional musical saws today but many
run-of-the-mill hardware store saws will play
some very beautiful music.

The Musical Saw has been used to play in
many environments including vaudeville,
symphonies, jazz, gospel, classical,
semiclassical, Blue Grass and other folk
types. It has had a place in ethnic music in
audio tapes received from Australia, Italy and
Japan containing local music. We have had
teachers at Musical Saw Festivals from
England, Ireland, British Guyana as well as
from Canada and the United States. The saw
is generally played by drawing a rosined bow
across the straight flat side of the saw
opposite the teeth. In order to obtain sound,
an "S" curve must be produced in bending
the saw usually with the saw handle between
the knees with the teeth towards the player.

The bow must be placed near the handle with
saw attitude nearly straight up for low notes
and bent to a very acute angle with the bow
near the tip for the very high notes. All the
rest of the notes fall somewhere in between.
If you liken the saw to a harp you can
visualize the long strings for low notes at the
bottom and the short strings at the top for
high notes. Then the strings are stroked with
the bow to produce the notes unlike a violin
on which the bow is usually drawn in the
same place. Either a violin or cello bow
can be used. Additionally, the saw can be played
with a mallet—usually felt tipped, or for larger
saws a kettle mallet has been used.

In 1979 the Festival of the Saws was initiated
in Santa Cruz, CA, by a man, Tom Scribner,
who had been a lumberjack. There has been a
statue erected in his honor in that city. This
Festival continued through 1984 with
winners of several categories and a Judge’s
Grand Prize Winner. The author was the
winner of the Grand Prize in 1984. The
Festival of the Saws was moved to Portland,
Oregon for about three years when the desire
to bring it back to California established a
festival in conjunction with the Summer
Solstice Folk Festival in California State
University at Northridge. The Festival
remained there for two years and was
relocated at Disneyland in September 1989.
The Festival of Saws will appear again at
Disneyland in September 1991. In the
meantime a small saw festival was born in
Michigan with eight players at Bowens Mill,
started by Gerald Jennings Carns. It was
held at the Iona Frink Fair for about four
years and will be held at Michigan State
University, East Lansing, MI, August 16,
17, & 18, 1991, with the major events on
Saturday. It is anticipated that this festival
may be held at Henry Ford Museum and
had its first saw festival with seven present,
hosted by Ian Hill. We do what is called
"jamming" here; they do what is called
"busking" there.

Musical Sawdoo has progressed to the extent
that there are publications about it. Mussel
& Westphal issue a paper called Sawing
News of the World, while another
publication of music, by Lilian Harris of San
Diego, CA, is called Musical Saw News. In
January 1989 Jim Leonard and Janet
Graebner published a book called Scratch My
Back that reports much Musical Saw history,
has technical information, and contains
information from saw players around the
world. There have been numerous "how to
play" books in the past. The three most
current are Larry Tyrrell’s Saw Playing:
Chris Michaels’ How to Play the Musical
Saw, with booklet and tape, using any saw;
and the newest by David L. Youngs, the
Sonorous Sawist, Saw Sounds will also be
published with a tape.

As near as the Musical Saw came to
extinction all the evidence is that it is thriving.
Festivals are one means of communicating
the beauty of the Musical Saw to a new
generation and will encourage more young
people to get a "handle" on Saw Playing. As we
play in public, interested people ask
where they can learn. Classes at Greenfield
Village are offered to those desiring musical
saw playing instruction, young and old.

Charles W. Hardy, Master Sawyer #7
The Mellifluous Musical Saw Player

We Give What We Have
by Cathy Winter

Far to the north where the January sun never brings the light of day,
Food is bought in the ice or bought at the store where there’s money enough to pay.
It wasn’t long ago the winter ran too long, the ice grew thick and the hunt fell low.
Everyone remembers the cry of hunger in the night.
When the evening news told of Africa’s plight, her bones growing thin in the hot sunlight,
Everybody talked about what could be done.
They said, “When food is short we divide what we have, if it’s meat or oil or ice.
If money will feed those people, then we can help pay the price.”

“We give what we have, we have more than we know.
The earth, the heart, the hands create all.”

The word went out through the land of ice and snow --
"Raise what you can from what you’ve got; to Africa the money will go.
When we were in need, people fed our towns. Now the helping hands circle ‘round.
An auction, a bake sale, or door to door -- somehow the money will be found.
A penny will do, a quarter if you can, though a dollar will buy much more.
Give what you can when the little children come and knock on your door."

At the end of the week, an auction was called; and the whole town filled the hall.
Clothes from the Bay and hockey sticks signed by Guy LeFleur and more.
Things that came from far away, things made by the young and old.
Inuit and White bidding together for everything that was sold.
"Now what am I bid for this polar bear who stalks the seal alone?
You can feel the muscle under her fur, though she’s carved out of green stone.
One hundred, now two, who will make it three? Four, four-fifty, five."
Old Henry’s eyes fill up with tears for the people his bear keeps alive.

The dollars and coins kept adding up, though the towns are known as poor --
いくら二十 thousand dollars, Pengerton five thousand more.
How can it be that on this earth that grows so green so much land.
Hunger can rule a country with an iron hand?
Where is the wheat from all the fields in the photos we remember?
Where are the fruits from the southern lands we know all the world buys?
Where is the money from all that trade? Do they just hang it up on a wall?
Or is it building a monument where, someday, it’ll crumble and fall?
We hold the gift we all call life right in the palm of our hands;
You clutch it tight or open it wide, it’s how you make your stand.

There are two slightly different melodies used for the verse -- choose or adapt whichever one feels best for each pair of lines.

This song is on Cathy Winter’s 1988 recording “Travelling Home”, on Flying Fish records. She writes, “I was performing in northern B.C. in 1984 on the Northern Music Circuit of coffee houses. On an off night, I caught What