A RESPONSE TO MR. PODOLAK

Having read Mr. Mitch Podolak's "Commentary" (CFMB, 25:2, p. 36), I wondered, as did Judith Cohen in her "Open Letter" to Mr. Podolak (CFMB, 25:3), whether the commentary was to be taken at face value, or whether the writer was being satiric and provocative. As I don't know Mr. Podolak, I can only address myself to the persona of his commentary, but I think that his small essay is indeed provocative and worthy of serious consideration.

Judith Cohen has already argued forcefully against Mr. Podolak's description of the work and motives of the ethnomusicologist. These arguments, however, are not likely to alter his views, since it is clear that Mr. Podolak has no intention of reading the work of ethnomusicologists, nor of engaging in intellectual debate. His stance, in fact, might be described as anti-intellectual, and is thus immune to any academic discourse on the realities of ethnomusicological research.

What is valuable in Mr. Podolak's commentary is the way it reveals a certain belief system which ethnomusicologists, folksong scholars and other professional researchers must confront, not only among non-academics such as Mr. Podolak, but also within themselves. Let me begin by trying to describe Mr. Podolak's belief system concerning folk music and ethnomusicologists. As I stated earlier, he is an anti-intellectual: for him, the detailed analysis and the kind of reasoned, dispassionate writings which ethnomusicologists engage in are destructive of the true understanding of folk music. Rather than analytic reasoning, Mr. Podolak believes that folk music can best be approached through emotion and romanticism — and there is something to be said for this approach.

Yet Mr. Podolak has taken his approach to such an extreme (in his attempt to justify his own relationship to folk music) that he is forced to view the world in a way quite different from that of many other readers of this journal. In his world, there is no compromise between the mind and the heart. Academics must therefore be reduced to pedants of the type whose only motive is self-aggrandizaton. In his world, ethnomusicologists are caricatures rather than full-blown human beings. Thus his ethnomusicological definition of folksong — "a song is not a folksong unless it has been passed down from one generation to another without being written down" — is not a definition which any scholar in the last 100 years would subscribe to — rather, it is a cartoon-image definition for a cartoon-image ethnomusicologist.

Immediately following this definition, Mr. Podolak places the next sentence into the mouth of his ethnomusicologist: "Folk music is something that must be placed under glass and protected and studied and written about before it has any relevance." The implication here is that studying a tradition kills that tradition. Anyone who has taught folklore or ethnomusicology is aware of this belief from students who think that intellectual investigation destroys the thing being analyzed. By the end of the course, these same students usually feel that their appreciation and understanding of their traditions has been enhanced by intellectual analysis, and they know that traditions are entirely too strong and resilient to crumble under the scrutiny of a professor.
Mr. Podolak's next quote from his imagined ethnomusicologist is "publish or perish": This academic proverb is all too true in many instances, but in the Canadian academic context, unfortunately, ethnomusicologists and folklorists are likely to perish whether they publish or not. What the writer implies, however, is that writing is not a worthy craft; intellectual pursuits are by their nature corrupt and self-serving, while other talents and activities, such as composing and playing music, are pure and unsullied by egotism. In the real world, however, egotism, individualism and even commercialism are part of human creativity. Composers of songs were never anonymous, nor were their motives free from self-interest; we all "publish or perish" in our need to be creative.

As I stated earlier, Mr. Podolak's view is a romantic one. His anti-commercialism is an emotionally persuasive idea, since our society tends to view money as a corrupting force. Mr. Podolak's view is also populist — perhaps in the great Canadian western tradition of populism, which sees institutions (e.g., universities) and élites (e.g., academicians) as essentially destructive of the common good — another alluring idea. This Manichean worldview is an attractive one because of its simplicity, but is it the best view for readers of this journal to hold? Does it not work against a view of the commonality of both self-interest and altruism which motivate all people when they create?

Mr. Podolak's views are representative rather than idiosyncratic. These beliefs are especially evident at folk music festivals — the supposed topic of Mr. Podolak's commentary, although he mentions festivals only in the last line of his text. The image which many organizers, attenders and performers wish to convey through the folk festival is one which is not far removed from the romantic, populist, anti-intellectual stance of Mr. Podolak. Yet without folklorists and ethnomusicologists doing fieldwork, writing down their findings, consulting with festival performers and organizers, and even performing themselves in one way or another, folk music festivals would be difficult to maintain. As often as not, it is the academic who is the intermediary between a local performer and the festival organizer. As well, professional folksingers rely, either directly or indirectly, on the work of professional collectors for their repertoires or for the songwriting inspiration which the collections of ethnomusicologists gives them.

Judith Cohen correctly pointed out that local creativity and commercialism are not always mutually exclusive, but this view goes against the romantic image which Mr. Podolak presents. In fact, all the performers at folk music festivals receive "payment" in one way or another, and the star attractions (the Joan Baezes) are as tied to commercial considerations as their counterparts in rock music, jazz, pop, country or classical music. Mr. Podolak's view of folk music festivals is undoubtedly as far from the mark as his view of the world of academe.

I stated earlier that Mr. Podolak's commentary should also motivate ethnomusicologists to re-examine themselves, for the lure of romanticism and even anti-intellectualism is present in the most serious of academics. None who call themselves professional scholars of music can deny their own emotional attachment to what they study (Mr. Podolak's views notwithstanding). No one who engages in fieldwork can escape the feeling of guilt — however slight — at imposing upon the
affairs of others. Entering a stranger's home or a community hall is not an easy thing to do, even when, as in most cases, the people being studied are amused, intrigued and even proud to have a researcher interested in their traditions. The unease of fieldwork is partly the result of the need to be at least somewhat dispassionate — the necessity to control one's emotions, to be less emotionally engaged than other members of the audience in one's observations. Observing, describing and analyzing a musical event do not destroy that event, but they might disrupt the emotional well-being of the researcher. At the risk of sounding hackneyed, I would contend that there is a little bit of Mr. Podolak in all ethnomusicologists — an inner gremlin whose irrationality and romanticism work against dispassionate intellectualism.

It would be easy to dismiss Mr. Podolak for his obvious wrong-headedness, but he teaches us some lessons. He gives us an insight not only into the workings of another kind of belief system, but also into those areas of our own anti-intellectualism which we would rather ignore. Perhaps it is not too extreme to admit that emotion is at the core of all good ethnomusicological research.

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THE FUNCTION OF FOLK FESTIVALS

I was asked by John Leeder, guest editor of this year's edition of the Canadian Folk Festival Directory (a mighty fine and useful piece of work, I should add), to write this short article. It was supposed to be about my "philosophy" on festivals. I'm not sure I would dignify my thoughts on the subject with the word "philosophy", but I certainly have some thoughts. These should be taken as personal, subjective and prejudiced to the hilt.

I got into this racket with a background in political organizing for social change and an embryonic academic career as a historian, therefore it really is not surprising that I think that the function of folk festivals is to change the world by arming people with an appreciation and knowledge of their history. These days it seems that there are two great dangers threatening festivals. The first one is that somehow their success may be measured by the size of their audiences and their box office. The second is that they are somehow becoming farm teams for the mainstream of the popular music industry. Let's deal with these one at a time.

Size, whether in sex, building construction or festivals, is a vastly overrated and potentially destructive obsession. Having the biggest anything strikes me, at best, as fetishism. At worst, it leads to the worship of form over content. And it is precisely content which I think is key to any kind of value that folk music festivals might have.

The second danger, which flows from the first, is that folk festivals may become places where you