

Letters to the Editors

...a column on Traditional Music will be appearing in the Newsletter of the North American Folk Music and Dance Alliance... I should like to invite you to send me notice of appropriate materials for the column which you know or may come to know about. I have in mind two categories:

(1) New or on-going scholarly research studies on traditional music and folk song in the United States, Canada and Mexico. I have in mind work being done by members of academic departments or by other, independent, scholars either working alone or in association with a foundation, a library or some other group. I should be pleased to have a brief (or longer) description of the work along with name and address, etc., so that members of the Alliance can contact the scholar. I'll also include notes on established archival collections, as I discover them, and bibliographical information as well. One cannot assume the Alliance member would know where to look for scholarly studies.

(2) Preservation projects. Here, I have in mind programs that seek to collect the songs of and the biographical details about a traditional singer, for example, or to collect the folk songs of a local community or ethnic group. Programs in schools or elsewhere designed to "pass on traditional folk

song" or even "reconstruct" (a term suggested by Joe Hickerson!) historical styles and types would be of interest, along with archival projects designed to preserve a given musical heritage. The point is this: there is much traditional folk song activity at the community level that has no perceptible "trade" orientation, but is devoted, rather, to carrying on a tradition of folk music in that community. (Not that many touring singers don't share in all that!) I recall, for example, a loose-leaf collection of song variants put together by a folk song group in Kansas City, Mo., back in the mid-60s. It was a serious piece of work, although not a scholarly study in the strict sense. Notice of such a project, however, might be of real interest to the membership of the Alliance.

I don't plan to write about straight recording projects or new releases of traditional folk song. Art Menius covers all sorts of recordings in his column, including those. By all means please send me names of persons to whom this letter should have gone, but perhaps did not.

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Reading Carmelle Bégin's review of my book Canadian Fiddle Music (26:4, p. 14) makes it clear that there is a major fault in the book: I did not properly explain what fiddle music is.

Fiddle music is dance music. Thus the test of good fiddle music and of a good fiddler is in the result: does it make people want to dance? A fiddler can play all the notes as composed, but if no one wants to dance, he is not a good fiddler. A fiddler can rest the violin on his chest, hold his hand half way up the bow, saw the strings, add or skip notes, and if he has everyone up on the floor, he is a good fiddler, and he may have turned a bad fiddle tune into a good one.

That is one reason why the composers' ornamentation and bow strokes have not been indicated in the published music, the main problem Bégin identifies with the book. Another reason is that, unlike classical music, the playing of fiddle music is a matter of individual style. Tunes are played differently across the country, in the same area, and by the same fiddler at different times on the same night. There is nothing "wrong" with this, but if they were played the same, then they would not match the different moods of the audience, and that would not be good fiddle music. Composers know this: almost none included ornamentation when they sent the music.

There are a few fiddlers, plus, of course, the serious students of fiddle music, who would like to know how the composer played his tunes. Had I been one of them, and had I tried to include ornamentation, the effort required to produce this book would have been doubled. In fact, the book

would never have been published. That is precisely one of the biggest problems in Canadian folk music: thousands of tunes are being lost, or at least not disseminated, because people are afraid to just put the notes down properly (as I and my friends did) and get the books out. What I did was save 463 tunes by 120 composers so that thousands of fiddlers can learn them. Anyone who wants to know the ornamentation can photocopy the tune and send it to the composer.

One further point is worth making. The best way to learn fiddle music, according to many fiddlers, is to learn the notes accurately from a book like mine, and then learn the rhythm and emphasis from watching or listening to the composer, other good fiddlers, and, of course, playing the tunes with fiddlers and for dancing. The section on composers, unique to this book, tells who they are and how to contact them. The discography, unique to this book, tells whether they have been recorded, so you can get their cassettes. The sections on types of music, unique to this book, explains, e.g., what a jig is. And the introductory essay on Canadian fiddle music, unique to this book, explains the different Canadian styles.

The book also gives my permanent home address where the book can be ordered (it is a non-profit project): 2130 Dutton Crescent, Ottawa, Ont. K1J 6K4. It costs \$20.00 plus \$2.50 postage, but can be purchased from any of the composers or folk music stores across Canada.

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