

TEACHING FOLKLORE AT CAMMAC...

EXPERIENCES OF A FOLKLORIST AMONG WESTERN ART MUSIC AFFICIONADOS...



I first met Judy Cohen at the Canadian Folk Music Society Annual General Meeting in Montreal last November. A native of Montreal from a Russian-Jewish family, Judy speaks several languages and is presently working on her Masters in Etudes Médiévales at l'Université de Montréal. She teaches recorder and performs folk and Medieval music. She has travelled through and learned folk dances from Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Turkey, Bulgaria, Roumania and Yugoslavia, and plays clarinet, recorder, guitar, veille, psaltery, derbouka, dulcimer, rebec and Turkish spoons.

Rika Ruebsaat

For the past several summers, I've had the good fortune to be invited to teach folk dancing and folksinging at the CAMMAC (Canadian Amateur Musicians—Musiciens Amateurs Canadiens) music centre, idyllically located alongside a sunny lake surrounded by hills and woods, north of Montreal. The summer camp programme is a unique one, offering one or more weeks of musical instruction and activities, at all levels, to entire families—there is no minimum or maximum age limit for attendance, and courses are given for people aged four and up. By and large, emphasis is on western art music, with courses in the Orff Method, eurythmics, breathing techniques and theory; and occasional forays into breadmaking, crafts (for children) and bird-calls.

My own function is teaching folk-dancing and singing to adults and children. I try to involve the children as much as possible in singing and playing their own accompaniments to songs and dances; with the adults, I tend to take a somewhat more didactic approach. The dances I teach are largely from the Balkans, Turkey and Israel; and I give as much cultural background as possible as we go along, putting rhythms, modes and movements new to most of the students into broader cultural contexts. (Since the average age range in the adult group is between 13 and 70, a certain balance between movement and explanation is necessary.) People have responded to horas, lesnotos, debkas kolos, sirbas and other dances with enthusiasm—at times

accompanied by a mild astonishment on the part of seasoned musicians at the refusal of their feet to obey orders from their heads.

In the folksong class for adults, I decided to concentrate on material which most of the students would be unlikely to hear elsewhere, using a combination of tapes (field recordings), and song sheets with words, music and pronunciation guides. The time distribution has evolved to something like 30% listening and discussion; and the rest singing, and trying out different vocal techniques. Diaphonic Bulgarian women's songs have become a favourite over the past few summers; we've also sung songs I learned in various parts of Spain, *complaintes* from Quebec and Acadie, sephardic *romances*, Yiddish lullabies, Cajun songs, Scottish ballads, Appalachian dance songs. . . and talked about travelling, collecting songs, learning more about our own traditions, adapting mind and ear to different cultures—and how folk music developed into a phenomenon that now has to be constantly defined and redefined—if this is even possible.

At the end of the week, several people express surprise at the variety of instrumental, vocal and improvisatory skills of the folk musicians we've listened to. Naturally, different people like, dislike or are indifferent to, different things—I feel, as I do when giving performances of traditional or medieval music, that how much people “like” the music may be less important, at a certain point, than the fact that they are hearing and singing it, that it is starting to exist for them outside the dusty covers of bound journals.

The atmosphere at CAMMAC is a particularly open, friendly and relaxed one. Still, as the only folklorist usually present, I have sometimes caught myself feeling either timid and apologetic about folk music—or overly defensive to the point of aggressivity. Whatever this has to do with my own personality, it is related to an attitude among many “classical” musicians that folk music is pleasant and interesting, but somehow not *really* terribly important—an attitude easy to maintain if one has not heard very much folk music, especially from a variety of cultures. Of course there are ever-increasing exceptions, but I have found that, conscious or not, it's an attitude I've been confronted with often. Far from being a deterrent, though, it's part of the very pleasurable challenge of teaching folklore at a place like CAMMAC, which has given me the continuing opportunity to work with children and adults, musicians and non-musicians—learning more all the time about folklore, and our reactions to it.

Judy Cohen

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