

REVIEW

FOLK SONGS OF CANADA

Joyce Sullivan and Charles Jordan, Waterloo C SPS 858. (Available from Waterloo Music, P.O. Box 250, Waterloo, Ont. N2J 4A5).

The sleevenotes say: "This album gives a good idea of the richness and variety of our national heritage. It includes songs of Indian, Eskimo, French, English, and American origin, as well as some that could have originated nowhere other than in Canada."

Well, Edith Fowke's observations can usually be relied upon as correct: and so, indeed, the record does. It will serve as a good introduction to Canadian folk music for someone to whom this field is new and whose musical background is essentially in other areas than folk music; and, let's face it, persons knowledgeable about traditional folk music are pretty rare birds nowadays.

For those who *are* well acquainted with traditional folk song, it is a different matter. First of all, the songs on this record are, with two possible exceptions, very familiar ones. Secondly, the performances are not in folk style; these are essentially renditions by singers who have been trained to perform any sort of material in a standard fashion. It just happens to be a fact that these are folk songs; but let's not worry too much about that. . . .

Joyce Sullivan is, no doubt, a credit to her vocal teachers; she has

the "trained" sound to the *n*th degree, in particular that special wobbliness on sustained notes which is apparently regarded as so desirable. For me, her voice simply does not suit folk song: her performance of "The Farmer's Cursed Wife" especially makes me wince and it is surely no coincidence that I like her best in those duets where her voice is not too obtrusive ("D'ou viens tu, bergère?", for example) and in "Old Grandma," which I cannot regard as a true folk song.

Charles Jordan fares much better; his strong and virile voice has much less artificiality about it and he sings more whole-heartedly. When afforded the sensitive guitar backing of Stan Wilson, his performances are both acceptable and enjoyable; in "When the Ice Worms Nest Again," for example, or when revelling in the deliberate goriness of "Blood on the Saddle."

The accompaniments of pianist Gordon Kushner are not always so sensitive. His backing of "A la claire fontaine" is good, though Charles Jordan is not at his best, and both singer and pianist do well in their restrained rendition of "Brave Wolfe." Kushner's accompaniments to two of the duets, "Dans tous les cantons" and "D'ou viens-tu, bergère?", are sensitive and creditable.

Unfortunately, an anonymous chorus pops up its massed ugly head on five tracks; and, though doubtless their leader will regard it as a tribute when I say that they remind me of the BBC Men's Chorus, I do not, remembering too many poor little folksongs trampled to death under the massed boots of that outfit. This

sort of tidy chorus, with its self-conscious effects, just does not suit folksong: for example, it ruins for me Charles Jordan's spirited singing of "Vive la Canadienne," and when it is joined by the pianist at his worst (as in "I've seen the B'y that Builds the Boat" and "We'll Rant and We'll Roar Like True Newfoundlanders") the result is dismal indeed. The chorus sounds as much like a group of Newfoundlanders as might a Glee Club from Bombay....

Well, the sleeve is attractive, the words of the songs can be heard clearly; and the selection is a fair portrayal of the most popular Canadian folk songs. If you're an enthusiast for traditional folk song, by all means buy it for someone you'd like to convert to a similar interest; it forms a suitable bridge, I suppose, between art song and folk song. However, if you buy it for yourself, I doubt if you'll play it often. I certainly shan't.

William A.S. Sarjeant



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