

In the Schools

by Lois Choksy



The argument goes: **Why** use folk songs? Why use **old** music with today's children? It just isn't relevant!" (Popular music, by implication, is relevant.)

There are many reasons for using folk songs in the schools - both musical and non-musical.

For Non-Musical Reasons

The five-, six- or seven-year old is very much involved in the task of acquiring his own language. He is learning to speak English (or French or German or Chinese). The natural rhythms and stress patterns of a language are mirrored in the folk music of that language to an extent that they rarely are in more contrived music. The vocabulary is usually simple; there is much repetition of words and phrases. Even refrains of nonsense syllables are so linguistic that they aid in the acquisition of language skill: "rinkum-dinkum"'s and "dilly-dilly"'s could never be mistaken for anything but English language refrains.

Folk song provides the child with a sense of both cultural identification and continuity with the past. The child living in Calgary may have been born in Los Angeles, gone to school first in New York and then in Toronto, before coming to Calgary at age seven. What "cultural identification" or "sense of continuity with the past" is possible in such a (frequent) situation? Considerable. First the child is most often English speaking. His folk song tradition is the whole English-language folk-song tradition - one of the richest and most varied in the world. Second, his tradition is that of the New World, of North America; his songs are both the songs of the United States and Canada and, most immediately at this point in his life, the songs of Alberta - songs of homesteading and cowboys. The sense of belonging in time and place can be greatly influenced through music used in this way in teaching.

The **subject matter** of most folk music (admittedly, not all) is eminently suitable for children, appealing, as it does, to the sense of humour ("Frog Went A'Courtin'"), touching chords

of sorrow ("Old Blue", "Who Killed Cock Robin?"), giving a sense of pride in the past ("Brave Wolfe"), reflecting sentiment and affection ("I Gave My Love an Apple"); there are songs with accompanying games ("Ring Around the Rosy", "Little Sally Saucer") in which the games and music have been transmitted from children to children, in some cases, for centuries; and there are songs portraying the whole history of a people - whaling songs, railroad songs, lumbering songs, songs of cattle drives, shanties.... These are not **relevant**? Are the pop songs about sleazy affairs and cocaine more relevant?

For Musical Reasons

The above are all **non-musical** reasons for using folk songs in the schools. There are **musical** reasons as well. Folk songs are usually constructed on smaller and simpler scales than those used in consciously contrived songs. They tend to be of more singable ranges. Their phrases are shorter and tend to be more repetitive. The musical characteristics that have caused them to undergo variation, survive, and become part of the ongoing folk-song tradition are the same characteristics that make them good material through which to teach musical concepts and skills.



Finally, in both the non-musical and musical aspects, folk songs are "**genuine**" - they hold a reality, they transcend the "cute", the "slick", the transitory world of "pop". They are enduring.

When we teach "I'se the B'y" to a third-grade class we are not teaching a "third-grade song", we are teaching a song for a lifetime. This is the most telling reason for folk songs in the schools. They are a gift of the past to the present for the future.