

CORRECTION

In the Constitution of the Canadian Folk Music Society, By-Law 15 (BULLETIN, 22:1, p. 27), in the second line, following "francophone," the words "a Secretary, a Treasurer," should be inserted.

Dans la constitution de la Société, Statut 15 (BULLETIN, 22:1, p. 22), à la deuxième ligne, après "francophone," les mots "un secrétaire, un trésorier," devraient être insérés.

FOLK MUSIC TODAY: A PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

If one asked an average anglophone citizen to name a Canadian folksinger, it is likely that he or she would be quite unable to respond; but, if there was a response, probably Bruce Cockburn, Gordon Lightfoot or even Joni Mitchell would likely be named. And indeed, many members of our Society might consider such an answer to be perfectly proper. Over the last three decades, the popular concept of folk music has become so hopelessly blurred that the traditional element – the transmission of a song or of a tune from generation to generation – is being lost. Instead, folk music is coming to be thought of as any non-classical music that is not very commercially successful, played (usually for fun, sometimes for minor profit) by elderly amateurs and either without lyrics or having lyrics of a particular banal nature. Folksong, in contrast, is conceived of as the product of teen-to-20-year-olds, dissatisfied with their love affairs or the way the world is being run by their elders and releasing their emotions in this fashion because they have no proper work to occupy their energies.

Even for those of us who don't share such disastrous misconceptions, it is becoming hard to formulate a coherent definition of our music. One cannot, of course, rule out contemporary compositions; if, from generation to generation, no one had composed new songs or new music, there would obviously be no folk music. Nor is age a criterion; troubadours' songs and Elizabethan court-songs, however strong their kinship to the compositions of some contemporary folksingers, are not regarded as folk songs. For that matter, 20 years or so ago, such contemporary compositions would not have been accepted as folk-songs either! The concept of folk music was then clear and acceptable definitions were not nearly so hard to frame. How, nowadays, is folk music to be delimited? On the basis of instrumentation, maybe? In popular concept, music played on banjo, mandolin and guitar (either unamplified or amplified through extraneous microphone or loudspeaker systems), on concertina or



(if Scandinavian or central European in origin) accordion, or on such "ethnic" instruments as pan-pipes, bagpipes or bandoura, tends to be accepted as folk music. For folk-songs, the accompanying instrument is expected to be banjo or guitar, again amplified inefficiently or not at all; a concertina accompaniment is also acceptable, though rare enough to be surprising. However, quite other sorts of music can be played on these instruments or in such combinations, from Bach to film music of the '50s. No, we cannot define folk music by means of its instrumentation.

Yet it is hard to find any better means to embrace all the different musics currently presented, in clubs or at festivals, as being "folk music". How did the present confused and confusing situation arise? In a letter published recently in the FOLK MUSIC JOURNAL (vol. 5, no. 4, 1988), p. 488, the eminent English seaman-folksinger Cyril Tawney explains it so well that I shall quote him in full (the letter was written in response to a review of Pete Seeger's book How Can I Keep from Singing):

"In his review Paul Oliver brought into the open something which should have been aired long ago. That it was not is probably due to its being regarded by devout 'folkies' as a kind of sacrilege. I refer to the dilemma faced by Pete Seeger and his educated middle-class American colleagues, that of their 'non-folkness', and the steps they took to resolve it, namely to persuade first themselves, then the world that folk song was whatever they happened to be singing.

"To do this involved if not the formal forging of a new definition of what was meant by the term 'folk song' then certainly the mischievous distortion, by personal example, of the existing interpretation. Although it would hardly make sense to deny that orally-created traditional songs derive in the first instance from one or more original individual compositions and that therefore the continuation of such a tradition benefits from new songs being written, it is equally undeniable that up to then the ratio between primary creation and secondary creation in any body of folk song had been recognized as being overwhelmingly in favour of the latter. That is as it should be, otherwise why coin the distinctive term 'folk song' in the first place? The effect of what Pete Seeger and his comrades-in-song did was to turn this ratio on its head, so that freshly-written non-communal items intruded more and more into the 'folk song' repertoire until the genuine article stood in dire peril of being ousted from the nest.

"It would be uncharitable, not to say churlish, to suggest that their motive was anything other than that put forward by Paul Oliver, to wit the justification of their claim to be 'the natural inheritors of the American tradition'. But had it fallen within the framework of his review he might have gone on to point out that others less altruistic were not slow to note the pecuniary advantages of enjoying a ride on the folksong bandwagon, then very much in commercial vogue, while at the same time being entitled to one hundred per cent undisputed copyright on the material, a two-fold privilege not enjoyed by people who sing truly traditional songs in the public domain. Seeger and his friends may have grown fairly wealthy from their chart successes but at least along the way they had played a prominent part in re-acquainting millions of people with authentic folk songs. Sadly, they were followed by a host of singer-songwriters who grew rich beneath the 'folk song' banner while peddling exclusive self-penned, non-traditional material. This alone would have been bad enough, but unfortunately as they attempted, with the waning of the folk craze, to distance themselves from that now unfashionable category, all they succeeded in doing was to drag the label along with them and their consumer-oriented produce into the insatiable realm of show-business.

"What emerged was the notion, widely-held by an uninformed and undiscerning public on both sides of the Atlantic, that 'folk song' comprised a vast preponderance of commercially-based compositions by individuals but only a negligible amount, if any, of communally re-worked traditional material. Regrettably the

legacy of confusion and misunderstanding remains with us. I seem to have spent over thirty years denying that I 'write folk songs'; a Dorchester paper, approached about a forthcoming local evening of Dorset traditional song, told us to 'go down to the Weymouth paper. They run a teenage column, we don't'; and certain Arts bodies, who ought to know better, still deny funds for the promotion of folk music on the grounds that their money is 'for cultural purposes only', the inference being that folk song is a branch of the popular music industry. Readers could no doubt furnish many more examples. It should not be forgotten, either, that such a misconception is capable of working against the interest of both parties. They have been many instances of the public paying good money for a genuine folk song event in the belief that they knew what 'folk song' was, only to suffer disappointment once the performance began.

"However noble their intentions, Pete Seeger and his partners cannot escape responsibility for the mess that resulted from their re-casting of the term 'folk song', inasmuch as they should have had the foresight, as educated intelligent people, to realize that their new interpretation would prove to be open-ended; that before long it would be difficult to refute the proposition that a folk song was any song written by anyone anywhere at any time (which again prompts the question: Why, then bother with the separate term 'folk song' at all?). If only someone in those early days had had the initiative to demand of these people clarification of what is not a folk song, their attempts at an answer might have proved both amusing and illuminating.

"There is no way back. In the words of the late A.L. Lloyd: 'If "Little Boxes" and "The Red Flag" are folk songs, we need a new term to describe "The Outlandish Knight", "Searching for Lambs" and "The Coal-owner and the Pitman's Wife" '. If the Pete Seeger school could offer a suggestion valid enough to allow the rest of us to escape from the embarrassing collective dilemma with which we have been plagued ever since they resolved their own all those years ago, I am sure it would be accepted as some measure of reparation."

This problem lies at the heart of the dilemma confronting our Society. Article 2 of our Constitution states that we exist:

"(a) to encourage the study, appreciation and enjoyment of the folk music of Canada in all its aspects;

“(b) to promote publication and performance of Canadian folk music; and

“(c) to stimulate international understanding through a common interest in folk music.”

Well and good; but what is Canadian folk music? Clearly it embraces music from all sections of the ethnic mosaic that is Canada. This has been recognized, in concept at least, by our Society throughout its existence; yet, in our publications and on the handful of records and tapes we have sponsored, anglophone and francophone music have received overwhelming attention, other traditions being rarely featured. With the present rising interest in ethnomusicology in Canada, this situation both can, and should, change.

With initial leadership from David Spalding (who provided a draft definition for its consideration — now in print in the CANADIAN FOLK MUSIC JOURNAL (vol. 16, 1988)), a subcommittee of this Society has been striving to frame a definition of folk music acceptable at least to themselves; but to find one acceptable to our whole membership may well be impossible. Some members, indeed, feel it's a futile exercise; why strive to define something we can all recognize? Others feel strongly that, as a Society, we should be purists, striving to set the concept of folk music back onto its proper rails by a vigorous restriction to pre-Seeger concepts. Yet others feel equally strongly that the really important songs are those written in response to contemporary situations; why sing songs lamenting Prince Charlie or the Press Gang, when their relevance is gone?

Well, what do *you* think, reader? What are the limits *you* would wish to see imposed on the Society's concerns? How, within its Constitutional framework, do *you* believe we should be carrying out our task? By going beyond an advocacy of traditional Canadian folk song and music, are we exceeding our mandate? By restricting our concerns to traditional material, would we be failing in our proper task?

Editor John Leeder tells me that he will welcome your letters, so go to it! And, if you can formulate a new term either for those older songs with which Cyril Tawney is primarily concerned or for songs being written nowadays, not in the old mode but in Seegerian extensions outward from the older idiom, please let us have your suggestions. A more coherent terminology might help us to escape from the present morass of musical misunderstanding!

William A.S. Sargeant
President