

AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON FOLK MUSIC

by
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John Leeder asked me recently to write an article for the BULLETIN on ethnomusicology and folk music. Until he asked, I had no idea how interesting such an effort would be for me. It is in the hope that readers of the BULLETIN might find the subject as interesting as I have during the last little while that I am responding here to John's request.

I should emphasize at the outset that the following is only "*an* ethnomusicological perspective", not "*the* ethnomusicological perspective." Ethnomusicology is extremely diverse as a field, and its practitioners are so heterogeneous in outlook that I doubt any of my ethnomusicological colleagues would come up with precisely what follows. Nevertheless, I will attempt here a composite view of how ethnomusicologists in general would view folk music, and how folk music might fit into their world view.

The phrase "world view" is not entirely inappropriate, for several leading ethnomusicologists have declared that all music is fair game for ethnomusicological treatment. Between declaration and practice, however, there has been a certain gap. By and large, ethnomusicologists have ignored so-called "art music" or "concert music" in the European tradition. One would have to look rather far in ethnomusicological writings to find more than passing references to Bach, Beethoven or Brahms, or to Britten, Boulez or Berio. All the same, just about everything else one would call "music" has found a secure place under the ethnomusicological umbrella.

With regard to the term "folk music," one would find ethnomusicologists nowadays somewhat ambivalent. "Folk music" is a phrase that would seldom arise spontaneously in a discussion between ethnomusicologists. To be sure, an ethnomusicologist might use "folk music" as a historical term or to designate, for example, the sort of activity that goes on in a folk music club or to refer to a certain category of entertainment music which has often been commercial. But significantly, during the 1970's, the most important worldwide or-

ganization devoted to ethnomusicology changed its name from the "International Folk Music Council" to the "International Council for Traditional Music".

Whereas "folk music" might designate certain kinds of music in Europe and North America, it suggests, to some people at least, an opposition between, for instance, "folk" and "art" that many ethnomusicologists find difficult to deal with. "Folk music" also suggests a particular view of culture which, however appropriate for the West, does not translate well into other situations. On the one hand, some ethnomusicologists study, for example, Javene court music, which by any criterion could well be grouped in the "art" category, and on the other hand, some ethnomusicologists examine the music of, for instance, the Bushmen of southern Africa, where there is nothing like the Western distinction between "art" and "folk".

Most ethnomusicologists would agree, at least in spirit, with the famous bluesman's remark that "I guess all songs are folk songs; I never heard a horse sing them," a statement that has taken on special significance for the field as a whole during the last three decades. But apart from the special case of Western concert music, most ethnomusicologists would now say that virtually all music is traditional music or music of the people. What this means for devotees of "Canadian folk music" is that just about any of the music with which they are concerned, whether it has arisen in the countryside, in a folk club or on a commercial label, might be studied by an ethnomusicologist. And as testimony to the breadth of interest which ethnomusicologists currently have in Canadian traditional music, one might consult the long list of papers given at the First Conference on Ethnomusicology in Canada, which appeared in the 1988 JOURNAL (p. 55).

Recently, especially during the last 30 years, the statement that "I never heard a horse sing them" has had special significance for ethnomusicologists. Since the '60s, ethnomusicologists have particularly emphasized the human aspect of music. There has been a large-scale move away from studying the sounds of music in a disembodied way. Instead, ethnomusicologists have tended to concern themselves with the social, cultural, historical, political, economic and psychological aspects of music.

In 1964, one of the most important ethnomusicol-

ogists of all time, the late Alan P. Merriam, outlined, as his framework for studying music in general, the following three aspects of music: concepts, behaviour and sound. Since then, it has been clear that one is somehow "doing ethnomusicology" if one is dealing in a scholarly way with people's concepts about music (e.g., their ideas, thoughts, feelings and values), if one is concerned in a scholarly way with people's concepts about music (e.g., their ideas, thoughts, feelings and values), if one is concerned in a scholarly way with people's musical behaviour (e.g., how they tune or play an instrument, dance, or even talk about music) or if one is occupied in a scholarly way with how the music sounds (e.g., by analyzing its words and/or notes). As well, ethnomusicologists have increasingly tended to view a concern with what music sounds like as somehow "more ethnomusicological" if it is connected in some manner with musical concepts and behaviour. Indeed, Merriam himself seems to have regarded the sounds of music as merely the results of musical concepts and musical behaviour. And although many ethnomusicologists would now criticize Merriam's framework in one respect or another, it provides the most concise view of the current preoccupations of the field as a whole.

Ethnomusicologists engage in several sorts of activities. Since the 1950's, more and more ethnomusicologists have been active as performers. In particular, a doctrine of so-called "bi-musicality" arose during the '50s which has had a great influence since then. According to this doctrine, one of the best ways to learn music is by performing it: knowing, in the sense of knowing how, by doing; learning "from inside the music", as it were. The most spectacular instances of this sort of learning have involved Western musicians, especially North Americans, learning, in this manner, music of non-Western cultures (e.g., of South India, Japan, Indonesia and West Africa). Less developed (or at least, less spectacular) seem to have been ethnomusicologically-inspired efforts of, for example, middle-class North Americans to master the traditional forms of their own cultures. Though many important folk-music revivalists have made this sort of effort, by and large their attempts have taken place outside the mainstream of ethnomusicology. Nevertheless, what needs emphasizing here is that, however enjoyable or lucrative the performance of traditional music might be for an ethnomusicologist, such a person, as an ethnomusicologist, is most concerned with learning music, with the "ology" of ethnomusicology, even when performing.

As is well known, ethnomusicologists also do field work. Here they have tended in recent decades to de-emphasize the mere collection (e.g., on tape) of songs and instrumental pieces in favour of trying to acquire an understanding of their hosts' outlook on music. Similarly, when ethnomusicologists publish the results of their fieldwork (e.g., in the form of recordings, films and printed anthologies), their principal aims have tended to be to document and to explain rather than to entertain or to exploit commercially. In fact, ethnomusicologists have increasingly tended to view their informants as collaborators with whom they consult constantly rather than as some sort of "natural resource" (i.e., of music) to be exploited (like oil or forests).

Linked to both fieldwork and publication are activities involving what might be called "cultural advocacy", in what seems to me to be the most enlightened recent instances of cultural advocacy, ethnomusicologists have "empowered" their hosts with skills and technologies that will allow them to preserve, document, revive and disseminate their own indigenous traditions rather than having precious materials sent off to some culturally alien repository or rendering the ethnomusicologist somehow indispensable to the community. It seems to me that such an approach would be particularly welcome in a country which claims that it values "multi-culturalism", but little of this sort appears to have been tried in Canada.

If all of this seems somewhat idealistic and noble, it should not be forgotten that an ethnomusicologist can be as fallible, foolish and stupid as anyone else. Indeed, insofar as so many ethnomusicologists are academics, they might be even more prey to silliness than the general run of humanity. But the ethnomusicologists' intense interest in traditional music, an interest which is both passionate and dispassionate, cannot be denied, and could prove valuable to those who support Canadian folk music.