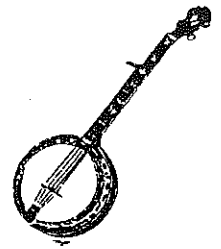




# The Folk Club

## *of Reston-Herndon*

### ...Preserving Folk Traditions



Vol 9, No 5; May, 1995

## Folk Music - A Brief Introduction

(Cont'd from March)

The melodic material of European folk music is closely related to that of art music. Seven-tone scales, sometimes using tonalities and modes like those of medieval church music, are widely used. The Dorian and Mixolydian modes are common in English folk song; the Phrygian, in Spanish. Especially common throughout Europe are pentatonic scales—five tones arranged like the black keys of the piano. More simple scales with three or four tones are found in children's ditties, counting-out rhymes, and songs of pre-Christian rituals.

Rhythm is sometimes related to the metric structure of poetry (see Versification). English folk song texts frequently use lines of four iambic feet, and the accompanying melodies are often set in one of three rhythmic patterns:

In Eastern Europe, complex rhythms such as 2+2+2+3 beats, as well as measures of five, seven, eleven, and thirteen beats, may be found, particularly in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, present-day Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Instrumental folk music tends to be rhythmically repetitive, but even in Western Europe, complex structures (such as the irregular alternation of four and three beats in Bavarian dances) may be found.

Most folk music is monophonic, unaccompanied melody. Instrumental accompaniment may provide simple chords or, frequently, a drone (one note or chord repeated under a melody). Polyphonic singing, with two or three voices pursuing independent melodies, is found particularly in Germany and Austria, Italy, Spain, the Balkans, and other Eastern European countries. Most frequently, singers relate the voices to one another by singing the same tune at different pitch levels—in thirds or sixths (Germany, Italy, Spain, the Western Slavic countries); fourths or fifths (Russia, Ukraine); or seconds (the Balkans). Drones (Italy), rounds or canons (universal), and more complex relationships (Russia, the Balkans) are also known. Polyphonic folk music is rare in Asia; in some countries such as Iran and Afghanistan, however, polyphony is more common in folk music than in classical music.

A striking contrast between folk and art music is in the use of the voice and the tone color of instruments. The bel canto style of trained opera singers is rarely used. In each culture or area, a characteristic vocal sound has been developed and is favored. In areas of Spain, Italy, and the

Balkans, a tense, nasal sound and highly ornamented melodies are used. In Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Russia, a more open-throated, clear sound and unembellished melodies are preferred. A mixed style lying between the two is found in industrialized areas, including parts of Britain, and France. Similarly, folk fiddlers do not use the vibrato or the slurred method of bowing of concert violinists, but instead give each note a fresh stroke of the bow. In U.S. folk music, singing style is the primary element that distinguishes among eastern, western, southern, and black American traditions.

### The Songs

The style traits described above characterize regions and countries. The folk tunes themselves, while developing variants, usually also remain in their homelands. Occasionally, however, they pass from one country to another, their style changing in the process. A song may be sung solo in one country, and its variant may be choral in another. It may be pentatonic in one and use the major scale in another. Indeed, very similar tunes are found in nations as far apart as Spain and Hungary or England and Slovakia; but in each country the tune reflects the local style. This may be the result of the diffusion of tunes, or of the existence of a standardized way of composing that is bound to produce similar tunes sometimes. The relationship of similar tunes so far apart cannot be traced.

Nevertheless, among the thousands of folk tunes known in one country, it is possible to identify those that appear to be related. They all seem to have come from a single parent tune through the process of oral tradition and communal recreation. A group of such related tunes is called a tune family. Although many folk tunes are surely centuries old, the versions now known come from records or printed collections rarely more than a hundred years old. Comparisons of these variants can reveal how a tune family may have developed. Tunes may be shortened; for example, when the four-line "Pretty Mohea" of Anglo-American tradition became "On Top of Old Smoky," it seems to have lost its first two lines. A shortened version may then have new lines added. In the interior of a musical line, the second of two contrasting bits of melody may be forgotten and replaced by a repetition of the first. A tune may borrow a line from a completely unrelated family; thus, in Czech folk songs, which often use the form AABA, the line B may move to other tunes as an independent unit.

The number of tune families in a given folk music repertory seems to vary greatly. Hungarian folk music

seems to have hundreds. The American scholar Samuel Bayard (1908- ) stated in 1950 that Anglo-American folk music is dominated by some 40 or 50 families, of which 7 account for the vast majority. In Iran, each genre of text, such as songs about heroic warlords, or songs about the martyrdom of Muslim holy men, seems to be associated with one type of melody; thus, the total number of families is very small.

A set of words such as a ballad, with its characteristic story, may be sung consistently with one tune and its variants. Typically, however, it will sometimes also be sung to tunes from several families, and the various members of a tune family will be sung to a variety of texts. Because these texts, such as ballad stories, diffuse, they are held in common by a number of countries in Europe and the Americas; the same is true of members of a tune family. The two do not, however, usually move together. The ballad "Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight," common in English folk music, is found all over Europe, but in each country it is sung to a distinct group of tunes.

The large number of tunes in a typical folk music repertory is the basis for various systems of tune classification. Because oral tradition is so unpredictable, what remains constant when a tune is changed differs markedly from culture to culture. For these and other reasons, no satisfactory way has yet been developed to classify all the tunes that are generically related members of one family. In English folk song, for example, contour (the general outline of melodic movement) remains constant, whereas in Hungarian folk music, the consistent elements are the rhythm and the configuration of final notes of the several (usually four) phrases.

### Types of Songs

One way to examine the function of folk songs is to define the uses in society of different types of folk song. Among the best-known kinds of folk music is the ballad, which can best be described as a song that, in a set of stanzas, tells a story involving one main incident. In the English-speaking world, "Barbara Allen" and "Lord Randall," both sung in countless variants, are among the best known. The American scholar Francis James Child (1825-96) collected 305 of the oldest English and Scottish ballads, which he classified and numbered (because variants have no standard titles). These songs are thus called "Child Ballads"; "Barbara Allen" is Child 78, "Lord Randall," Child 12, and so on. Child ballads have been particularly well preserved in the U.S. and Canada, and they constitute an especially large proportion of the body of folk songs in Appalachia. Sung mostly to rather old tunes, which are frequently pentatonic, they show little influence from art or popular music. More recently composed ballads, often circulated in printed form on large sheets called broadsides and then passed on orally, frequently use tunes in major or minor. They are often sung with instrumental

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accompaniment and are closer to popular song and modern Protestant hymn styles. Their texts concern unhappy love, murders, events of war, and tragedies such as railroad wrecks. In contrast to the Child ballads, broadside ballads are specific and consistent in giving names, places, and dates, at one time serving as a way of disseminating news. Although English ballads are best known in North America, the ballad as a type is found in all Western cultures.

Another type of narrative folk song is the epic, a drawn-out account focusing on the exploits of a heroic figure in wars and other conflicts. Found mainly in the Balkans, Russia, Finland, and the Middle East, epics are usually organized in lines or couplets rather than stanzas. Best known are the Yugoslav epics telling about conflict between Christians and Muslims (circa 1200-1600). Sung by professional singers in cafes, and sometimes taking several hours to complete, they are partially improvised with the use of melodic formulas and are accompanied by the *gusle* (a fiddle with a skin belly and one string of horsehair). In Iran, epics concern pre-Islamic kings and the deeds of the early leaders of Islam. Epic folk traditions are found throughout Asia.

Related to the narrative songs are genres of folk theater, found throughout Asia and in parts of Europe. Similar to the medieval mystery plays, they can be illustrated by narrations of the Christmas story in dialogue form; in these genres, the style of the music is typically simple, involving repetitive melodies with short formulas and few tones.

A large group of folk songs may be called *calendric*, that is, they accompany rituals that mark major events in life or in the year's various cycles. Included are songs sung at the birth of infants and at puberty, wedding songs, and funeral dirges. In the West the year is marked by songs of pre-Christian rituals such as those celebrating summer and winter solstice, planting and harvest; by music for Christian feasts such as Christmas, Easter, and Whitsun; and by combinations such as New Year's (with winter solstice) and St. John's (summer solstice). Calendric songs are frequently archaic, using short forms and restricted scales, and they are often associated with instruments such as rattles, one-tone wooden trumpets, and flutes without finger holes.

Another category of folk music involves songs for crises such as war and illness. Although songs of this kind were probably common at one time, they are rare now; their existence, however, shows the relationship of folk music to the music of tribal cultures.

Cont'd in future

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# Folk Club of Reston-Herndon



April 30 - June 10, 1995

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
Apr 30	May 1	May 2 7:30pm Folk Club	May 3	May 4	May 5 <i>Cinco de Mayo</i>	May 6 12:30pm Sweet Harmony @ NOVA Folk Fest 8:00pm Open Door Coffee House, Fairlington UM Ch, Alex
May 7	May 8	May 9 <i>Showcase Performance</i> <i>Pete Frailey</i> 7:30pm Folk Club	May 10	May 11 7:30pm Frederick Folk Club @ Ceresville Mansion	May 12	May 13
May 14  <i>Mother's Day</i>	May 15	May 16 <i>10th Birthday Party</i> 7:30pm Folk Club	May 17	May 18 8:00pm Shenandoah Coffeeshouse - Middleburg	May 19	May 20 <small>Armed Forces Day 2:00pm Hickory Grove @ Fort Hunt Pa. 8:00pm Shenandoah Coffeeshouse - Middleburg VA</small> 
May 21	May 22	May 23 <i>Cormack McCarthy (\$8/7)</i> 7:30pm Folk Club	May 24	May 25 <i>Ascension Day</i> 7:30pm Frederick Folk Club @ Ceresville Mansion	May 26 8:00pm Shenandoah Coffeeshouse - Winchester	May 27 Weekend @ Hurd's Cabin 7:30pm Hickory Grove @ Viva Vienna 
May 28 Weekend @ Hurd's Cabin 	May 29 Weekend @ Hurd's Cabin  <i>Memorial Day (Observed)</i>	May 30 Showcase Lottery Draw 7:30pm Folk Club	May 31	June 1	June 2 Washington Folk Fest - Glen Echo	June 3 Washington Folk Fest - Glen Echo 8:00pm Open Door Coffee House, Fairlington UM Ch, Alex
June 4 Washington Folk Fest - Glen Echo <i>Pentecost</i> 2:00pm Hickory Grove @ Herndon Festival	June 5	June 6 7:30pm Folk Club	June 7	June 8 7:30pm Frederick Folk Club @ Ceresville Mansion	June 9	June 10

## Coming Folk Club Events

**May 23 - Cormack McCarthy**  
**\$8/7**

**June 13 - Bill Staines**  
**\$9/8**

**July 25 - Richard Gilewitz**  
**\$7/6**

**August 15 - Mary Flower**  
**\$9/8**

**Sep 26 - Tom & Chris Kastle**  
**\$7/6**

**Oct 24 - Priscilla Herdman**  
**\$9/8**

**Nov 28 - Roy Book Binder**  
**\$9/8**

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### ATTENTION! ATTENTION! ATTENTION!

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## Showcase Performances

May 9, the featured performer will be Pete Frailey.

On the second Tuesday of every month we feature a Folk Club member in a showcase two-set (25 minute) performance. To become one of these "showcase" specials all you have to do is 1) be a member of the Folk Club, 2) fill out a lottery slip by the last Tuesday of the month, 3) win the drawing and 4) practice, practice practice!

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### The Folk Club

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