HISTORY OF FOLK-MUSIC

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New ideas in music are either emanations of individual genius or national traits as incorporated in folk-songs.

Although folk-songs are originally the product of individual minds, they are usually anonymous. Since they have no famous name attached to them, every singer feels that he has a right to alter them to suit his taste.

Some of the finest folk-songs were, no doubt, invented by some crude peasants in moments of grief or love. Such crudities as remained in these songs were gradually removed as they passed from mouth to mouth, and finally melodies remained as finished and epigrammatic as those proverbs of the people which have a similar origin, and as perfect in form as one trained musician could have made them.

In this way, it happened that countries like Russia, Poland, Bohemia, Scandanavia, Hungary etc. possessed numbers of the most artistic folk-songs before

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they had produced a single musical genius.

In the 13th century music began as an art, and skilful composers have availed themselves of the folk music as a foundation for many of their more elaborate works. The folk-music of a nation is an important factor in determining its musical rank, after it has passed to the artistic stage and possesses skilful composers.

"Folk-tunes are the wild flowers in the realm of music."[1] They are valued today more highly than ever both for their intrinsic beauty and as themes for composers with nationalistic tendencies.

The mediaeval folk-music is more artistic than the art music of the composers of the same period. While the ecclesiastical composers were still hampered by the unwieldy church modes, folk-music had instinctively adopted the modern major and minor modes.

Folk-music had more rhythmic variety, so it is not surprising that church compposers as early as the

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1. New International Encyclopedia, "Folk-songs."

12th century began to adopt folk-tunes as themes for their masses and molets. In the 16th century Luther adapted them to the church service just as they were excepting for change of words. Church composers were few and hampered. The assertion that the folk-songs were invented by troubadours and minnesingers is not true. Usually folk-songs were sung as melodies only, being so rich in melody that they did not need harmonizing.

Of all European countries, Germany probably has the greatest number of good folk-songs. As folk-music is anonymous and not copyrighted, it is not surprising that few of the old German tunes have come down to us unaltered. They were affected by contact with art-music, which gradually polished them; and since Germany has set the standard in modern music, it is logical that German music is deficient in those exotic traits which characterize the popular music of such countries as Russia, Scandanavia and Hungary.

Weber was one of the first to appreciate the use of folk-music in art-music. "Der Freischutz" is

so dear to the hearts of the Germans because it incorporates so much folk-song. No one before Weber had been able to strike the characteristic tone of the Volkslied as did Weber. Other German composers who adapted folk-song into their art music were Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms.

While Germany holds first place as to the quality and variety of her folk-song, Russia certainly takes second place. The typical folk-song is of limited compass and this is probably due to the primitive instruments of the lute and violin families long in use. The prevailing mood is melancholy. Florid passages in one syllable occur and harmonies are apt to be bold and harsh. Rubenstein, Cui and Tschaikowsky have dealt much with the folk-song of their country. As folk-songs have no date and as the first important concert music in Russia dates back but little more than half a century, it shows that the history of Russian music previous to this time is almost purely ecclesiastical, which has but little artistic value.

Italy, the land of song, has contributed very

little of great value to the world's stock of authentic folk-music. Italian musicians hold the popular songs of other nations in higher esteem than their own. In their collections of folk-song it is hard to tell whether their songs are genuine folk-music or whether they were taken from the thousands of operatic scores which have monopolized the Italian musical interest. Their harmonic accompaniments are simple and commonplace and the songs are more interesting melodically than rhythmically.

In French folk-music also no great attention is paid to harmony or accompaniment, but rhythmic variety and piquancy constitute a striking traits, and words are apt to govern the tune instead of vice versa as in Italy. It is seldom so soulful and romantic as the German folk-song, or so poignant in expression of grief as the Russian and Scandanavian.

In the neighboring country of Spain folk-music has much more of an exotic character than in France, Italy or Germany; for in Spain the Moorish influence makes itself strongly felt. This is shown in the

predominant use of song as accompaniment to dancing; also in the quaintly oriental melodic intervals, in the abundance of ornaments, and in the simultaneous use of several rhythms; but whether oriental or purely Spanish, there is an ineffable charm in the national music of Spain. Bizet used some of this charming music in "Carmen," and if Spain ever produces a great genius, wonderful music may be expected.

While England has never produced a composer of note, there was once a time when the people of that country were as musical as those of any other part of Europe so far as the enjoyment and performing of music was concerned. Every man was expected to sing and accompany himself on the harp. The most surprising thing about English music, both professional and popular, is the lack of nationalism.

The charms of Irish folk-melodies have been made known to thousands by the association of a number of them with Moore's poems and, in more recent times, through a collection made by Stanford, who also wrote an opera full of quaint folk-songs.

There are almost as many folk-songs of Scotland as of Germany, and they include many gems of the first water. The bagpipe is typical of Scotch folk-music. It uses the pentatonic scale. Like Spain and Ireland, Scotland has great possibilities in folk-music, but no genius to develop it. The Norwegian, Grieg, was partly of Scotch descent, as was his music.

Norway claims the distinction of having, of all Scandanavian countries, produced the greatest number of unique folk-songs. Grieg was more thoroughly imbued with the spirit of his country's national music than any other composer. He did not incorporate Norwegian folk-music in his compositions. What he did was to write in the style and spirit of his country. This music shares the rugged, gloomy characteristics of Norwegian scenery and climate. It changes rhythm and tempo; its melodic intervals are strange. If Grieg's "Peer Gynt Suite" does not actually incorporate the Norwegian folk-music, it is certainly written in the spirit of it.

Scandanavian folk-songs partake of the general

characteristics of exotic music--frequent changes of rhythm conditioned by close union of words and melody, and a preference for the minor mode. A further peculiarity of Scandanavian popular music is that the same melody that is first played or sung in quarter notes is repeated in eighths, and then sixteenths, giving an increasing animation without change of measure.

Bohemian music is remarkable for its varied rhythm and great diversity of dances.

Hungarian folk-music is in abundance and very typical of the country. The favorite Hungarian scale has an augmented fourth which gives it two leading tones and produces the effect of an intensified minor. This melancholy scale gives a unique effect which is increased by rhythmic peculiarities and a profusion of Oriental embellishments. The tempo rubato, or capricious and frequent change of time, is an essential trait of Hungarian music.

Liszt has done more for the development of the folk-melodies of his country than any other composer in any nation. Into his collection of over twenty Hungarian

rhapsodies, each one of them incorporates a folk-melody most artistically and cleverly, each having a clearly distinctive Hungarian trait.

Polish folk-music is chiefly instrumental. Its general traits are known by Chopin's works, especially the mazurkas. There is more of fire and passion in Polish folk-music than in that of many of the other nations.

Closely allied to the folk-song is the ballad. These ballads were the legends and stories of the people gradually developed into poetry and intended to be sung. As far as subject is concerned, a ballad is a species of minor epic. There can be no doubt that the ballad has been the earliest form of poetry among all nations, just as the folk-song is the earliest form of song. The old ballads were handed down orally and thus underwent constant changes and had no individual author. These ballads make their appeal directly to the common feelings of love, hate, fear, shame and grief by means of a great variety of incident, the best of which spring from native tradition.

Ballads of different nations are frequently based upon the same or similar incidents. Of British ballads, the best are those in Scotch dialect, and Scotland has been wonderfully rich in ballad literature. The Scottish ballads have been enthusiastically admired by English poets, and have served as the inspiration for musicians, native and foreign. Loewe, one of the very best German song writers, has developed the ballad into an art form, and "Edward" and "Archibald Douglas" are Scotch ballads which, with the setting Loewe has given them, are among the most impressive and beautiful songs in musical literature. Loewe and Schubert were both impressed by the beauty of the German ballad, both composers having splendidly dramatic settings of "The Erlking."

In piano literature Chopin is the most important composer who has felt the ballad influence. His four "Ballades" for piano are all descriptive pieces for each of which, no doubt, he had some story in mind when he was composing.

The following story, whether authentic or not it

would be hard to say, is told as being the inspiration for Chopin's second "Ballade": A quiet little Polish village lay in the valley between the mountains. The country was at war with a powerful foe, but this village was so secluded the people thought they would never be disturbed. But one day tidings came that the enemy was approaching their valley. The villagers held a hasty conference and decided that if the tidings proved true, rather than be captured, they would turn the waters of the lake, which was close them in the mountain, in upon themselves, and submerge the town. When the enemy came, the plan was carried out and, of course, the town was destroyed.

Chopin's "Ballade" begins with rather a long, slow, monotonous succession of simple chords, suggestive of the tranquil, secluded life of the village. Then there is a sudden change to a restless, loud, rapid movement, harsh and chromatic in progression,followed by a passage having chromatic runs for the left hand. This section describes the warning, the discussion and the plans afterward. Following this is a return to the

quiet first part indicative of the return of the villagers to the former peaceful life to await the coming of the enemy.

Then there comes a long passage similar to the second part, only very much more agitated, shrill and tragic in effect, which is intended to portray the attack of the enemy and the carrying out of the plan the people had agreed upon. The "Ballade" ends with a return to the first theme, only this time it is taken in a minor, giving a reminiscence of what had been and a sense of the sadness and desolation now existing.

Brahms has written four ballads for piano, the first based upon the Scotch ballad Edward, which Loewe had set so splendidly as a song.

Of the moderns, Howard Brockway and Debussy have written piano ballads.

To return to the discussion of folk-music, it must be borne in mind that folk-music is never the growth of a few centuries. It requires ages and isolation, and this is why the new world, America, has comparatively

none. There being a scarcity of American folk-music, its true sense can only be derived from Indian or plantation life.

It must be remembered that Indian music is not that of a single race, but many races. Some of the Indian tribeswere quite unmusical; others were fairly cultivated in the art. Most of the Indian scales differ somewhat from our diatonic scale, and when we reproduce the melodies in our notation or upon our instruments, we generally find distortion of the original.

The Ojibways, the Zunis, the Moquis and the Omahas have a fairly large repertoire of songs. The Iriquois, Apaches and Comanches possess far less, and of a more primitive character, most of them without harmonies and, as with all savage music, given with gesture, pantomime and dancing rather than purely vocal works. Ghost dances, war dances, snake dances and many other semi-religious species of music exist. An extremely strong rhythm is often the chief characteristic and it is seldom varied enough for the purposes of the composer who desires to weave it into the larger forms of music. The Iriquois,

more warlike and less musical than many of the tribes of the South, have left no love songs or historical ballads with the exception of one: this song seems to do little else than mention the names of the chiefs and counsellors.

In regard to the execution of the Indian folk-songs, it is generally somewhat poorer than would be found among white singers.

There is a keen sense of interval and pitch, but the quality of voices is not usually attractive. In the matter of instruments there is also much restriction. The drum is used most of all. Many songs and dances are accompanied by drums alone or by drums and rattles. Besides these exist flageolets, flutes, pans-pipes, one-stringed harps and in a few cases more developed instruments. While these are used for love songs and songs of sentimentality, the drum is the instrument used for religious purposes.

The classification of the songs and dances is almost as follows:

1. War dances, generally wild and furious.

2. Religious dances.
3. Mystery dances, sometimes used to heal the sick, to banish evil influences, to bring rain.
4. Historical songs.
5. Songs of mourning.
6. Love songs.
7. Convivial or social songs.

Although such music is interesting it still falls short of forming a national folk-song and it is not surprising that little use has been made of it.

The most important and beautiful work as yet evolved from Indian sources is MacDowell's Indian "Suite." The charm of this is due more to the poetic presentation of the phases of Indian life and romance than the fact that the figures developed in the work are chiefly taken from Indian sources.

Folk-song that has grown up around Southern plantation life is much more advanced. The banjo, the chief instrument of the plantation, is much more advanced than any instrument which we find used by the Indians.

It has been charged against the negro music of the South that it is not American at all, but African. While the melodies have been brought forth by Africans, the music is distinctly the result of American surroundings. It was the life of the cottonfield, the cabin and the river that gave birth to these expressive musical numbers.

Slave life speaks its melancholy in some of these songs. There is a very close analogy between the slave music in its religious phrases and the music of the Bible. There have been some remarkable applications of the negro music in classical forms. Mr. G. W. Chadwick in the scherzo of his Second Symphony has made use of this native material. Anton Dvorak has built an entire symphony, " The New World," and considerable chamber music, upon these melodies.

E. R. Kroeger used them in his ten American sketches, as did Henry Schoenfeld in his "Sunny South Overtures," his rural symphony, and in a sonata for piano and violin.

Stephen Collins Foster is truly the folk-song

genius of America. If there is any true folk-song music in the United States, this of Foster is. While it did not originate as genuine folk-music does, yet after it was given to the world, it was used as such. Foster wrote both words and music to all his folk-songs, and his poetry is as natural and spontaneous as his music.

The chief American folk-song is "The Old Folks At Home." Foster wrote about one hundred and sixty songs in all, among which some of the most popular are, "My Old Kentucky Home," "Massa's In The Cold, Cold Ground," "Old Uncle Ned," and "Nelly Bly." In these we find the same tender melancholy that one finds in the actual songs of the plantations, such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Nobody Knows The Trouble I Have Seen."

Coleridge Taylor, although not of American birth, is the first negro to win renown in the field of art music. His piano transcription of such songs as "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," "Steal Away" and "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child," are really gems of this class.

In Louisiana the music of the negro took on a special color owing to the influence of his creole masters. This is noticeable not only in the French patois of his songs, but in the character of the music of both songs and dances. A distinctive feature of the early songs of the creole negro is its story of animal life. Some historical events are chronicled in these Africal creole songs. The African negro is the most musically gifted of the undeveloped races. Many of their songs were brought with them from Africa and were connected with their religious ceremonies and formed a foundation for the music which d eveloped under the new environment. The later music shows the traces of the influence of the white masters. Many of their melodies are based upon the pentatonic scale. The prevalent use of the minor mode is another characteristic, and triple time is rarely used. In the matter of rhythm the negro is more gifted than any other race. Many of their songs are in syncopated rhythm.

The negro is naturally carefree and happy, but, oppressed by care and exile they express in the words

and music of their songs the spirit of resignation.

Many of their songs picture conditions in slave life. These were those sung at dusk, when returning from work, and these plaintive songs show the dark side of slavery. There are again others which show the brighter side. When dancing was allowed and unrestrained laughter resounded round the cabin fire, the songs were gay. The short songs were sung under stress of greatest religious excitement and served as aids to the mourners who had not yet "got through."

The songs of the negroes voice the child-like simplicity and faith of a people as yet on the borderland of enlightenment. Among the negroes of the South, during slavery, a type of song developed that is distinctive and is thoroughly pervaded with the emotional quality which characterizes the folk-song of the musical races of Europe; and it can always serve the purpose of imparting local interest to the American composition.