

## An Attempt at Defining Folk Music

I am not sure that it is possible to define folk music absolutely. However, many knowledgeable people have attempted it, and their efforts are illuminating. The most helpful attempt at a technical definition I've heard is by Cecil Sharp (a nineteenth-century collector who recorded and anthologized folk songs)<sup>1</sup>. Here is my paraphrasing of Cecil Sharp's definition of folk music:

*Folk music is a musical tradition that has taken shape through the process of oral transmission. This process has several factors: 1) continuity that links the present with the past; 2) variation springing from the creative impulse of an individual or group; 3) selection by the community, which determines the form in which the music survives.*

Let's start with the process of oral transmission. Consider how many songs you have learned by oral transmission. Although America's folk music culture isn't very vibrant, it's still alive. Chances are, you were not taught such rhymes and songs as *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, *Silent Night*, *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*, *Humpty Dumpty*; you most likely learned them by hearing them and singing them year after year. Why is it that we all could probably sing along to *Amazing Grace*, *Clementine*, *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, *the Eensy Weensy Spider*, and many others? Because we learned them from Wee Sing, school choirs, our grandmothers, boy/girl scouts, preschool, church--all of which are in some channels of oral transmission.

These are not all the most authentic channels of oral transmission, however. Many of these, such as Wee Sing or school choirs, teach not a living tradition, but an anthologized, dumbed-down and politically correct version of the song. Nonetheless, these songs can take on a new life, and often do, once freed from their anthology. To bring music to life again, we have to sing from memory, and teach our children orally.

Oral transmission is part of the continuity that folk music brings. Although there may be a generation gap between little Charlie and his

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil Sharp's work is extensively catalogued by the Vaughn Williams Memorial Library, which can be found here: <https://www.vwml.org/vwml-home>. I drew my material from Cecil Sharp's introduction to *One Hundred English Folksongs* (printed by Dover Publications).

grandma, they can both participate in a shared culture of folk music. By the very act of transmitting the songs to little Charlie, Grandma is handing on something valuable to Charlie, initiating him into something bigger than himself, as well as creating something common, a link, in their relationship. Learning, or teaching, music orally is inherently relational. This is why Sharp says that folk music is formed by the *process* of oral transmission. The method of transmission itself helps form that continuity with the past.

The subject-matter, the vocabulary, and even the rhythms of folk music all help link us with the past as well. When we learn a folk song, we also internalize old idioms, beliefs, jokes, and stories. The most potent element in folk music's continuity, however, is the continuity we feel when we make this music in community. No one is excluded from participating in folk music by reason of his generation or age; rather, it invites old and young to enjoy something together.

When a song is orally transmitted, it is somewhat inevitable that some variation occurs. (This seems to be particularly true with ballads.) Each singer, as he internalizes the song, experiences the song differently, and represents the story with their own interpretation. Moreover, a faulty memory, elaboration, or imperfect technique can all vary the way a song is sung. This variation is sometimes slight, and sometimes so drastic that it develops into a different song entirely! If this variation were to happen with a Mozart aria, it would be considered simply incorrect. With folk music, however, creative variation and development is part of its very essence. A common example of this in America is the folksong "The Cuckoo". There are countless variations of the basic strophe that "The cuckoo is a pretty bird/who warbles as she flies/But never says cuckoo/till the fourth day of July". Various melodies and various lyrics are arranged around this refrain, depending on the region or era in which it is sung.

This brings us to the last, and in my opinion, hardest to define, factor in Sharp's definition. Folk music is something that is communal. The community--whether that is a culture, a church, a family, a school-- "owns" the music. As I mentioned above, there is no absolute correct or incorrect way to sing a song. However the community does it, that is the right way. Moreover,

it is the community who decides, as it were, which songs will be adopted. Some songs simply do not last, even if they were popular in their own day. Some, for whatever reason, are taken up by the community and handed down into the folk tradition. This process is somewhat mysterious, but in general, a song has to have enduring content, appeal, and singability for it to become adopted in this way.

Cecil Sharp has this to say:

*“The term [folk music] can be applied to music that has been evolved from rudimentary beginnings by a community uninfluenced by popular music and art music and it can likewise be applied to music which has originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community.”*

This first description of folk music as something old, something uncomposed, emerging from the mists of the past, is probably familiar to us all. But the second element is also more common than many of us realize. For example, did you know that *Down by the Sally Gardens* was a poem written by W. B. Yeats? That *Swanee River* was composed by Stephen Foster, a professional musician? These songs are excellent examples of an individual’s composed song being “absorbed into an unwritten living tradition of a community.” Some of John Denver’s songs (*Country Roads*, *Leaving on a Jet Plane*) are, I believe, just now crossing this line between an individual’s song and a folk song.

This brings us to a new question: what’s the difference between folk music and just a really good, widely-sung song? Again, Cecil Sharp:

*“The term [folk music] does not cover composed popular music that has been taken over ready-made by a community and remains unchanged, for it is the re-fashioning and re-creation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character.”*

Some songs, although extremely popular, are just unsingable, and so unable to be adopted by the community, the folk. An extreme example of this would be any “pop” music. This is music created by specialists and a lot of technology to be passively consumed by the listener. If it is sung, the goal is to sound as exactly like the original pop artist as possible (e.g. karaoke). Pop

music does the work; we are not invited to co-create. A trickier example would be much of Bob Dylan's music. *Girl from the North Country* is a beautiful re-working of a very old folk song and theme, but it is fairly tuneless and hard to sing. Will it ever become its own folk song? I doubt it, although the tune is lovely. Another interesting example is Johnny Cash's *Folsom Prison Blues*. This song is greatly beloved and seems to have staying power, which could lead to its adoption by the community, but it is still sung almost exclusively as a "cover version"<sup>2</sup> of Johnny Cash. (We've probably all heard a college boy strumming his guitar and busting out his best Cash-like bass.) This is not yet a folk song, because it has not been re-fashioned by the community.

Folk music is a tradition that belongs to the community. Like human nature itself, it is mutable, yet constant. It arises out of individual experiences, yet is expressed communally; and in that expression, it forms the community in turn. Like all folk arts, it enriches our daily lives with whimsy, humor, tragedy, beauty. Like all traditions, it takes what is limited and particular, and raises it up out of time and into a kind of timelessness. Most fundamentally, however, folk music is just well worth doing: meaningful, simple, and fun!

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<sup>2</sup> Interesting to note that a "cover" is a concept utterly alien to folk music and to classical music alike. It is unique to commercial music.