

MUSIC OF THE SCA

A CASE STUDY OF FOLK SONG

by

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This is a case study of the creation and performance of folk song within a small community. I have been a participant in and observer of this community for about ten years. This preliminary study is impressionistic, unsystematic, and not at all comprehensive.

John Leeder (the BULLETIN editor) was present six years ago when I first proposed the idea of such a study. Last year John asked me to write about it, and this article has been simmering since then. Soon after I began writing, I began to read The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World by Philip Bohlman, and found therein as cogent an echo of most of my thoughts on the subject as one might ever hope to find. That book has sharpened the focus of much of what follows.

THE COMMUNITY

The community is the 24-year-old not-for-profit non-religious Society for Creative Anachronism ("SCA"), which is interested in the study of the Middle Ages (primarily Western Europe from 650 to 1650). The SCA has members throughout the United States and Canada, and has recently spread to Australia and New Zealand.

The members re-create (and re-interpret) many aspects of the period, from banquets and tournaments and wars to academic research and dozens of practical crafts. In the process the SCA has created its own internal customs and history. This "modern (SCA) history" (accurate or not) is seldom written down, and is maintained orally.

There is a constant dialectical tension between the real Middle Ages (often romanticized), and the "Modern (SCA) Middle Ages". Most members realize that there is often a considerable difference between these two worlds, and the contradiction is commonly summed up and dismissed in the phrase "the Middle Ages as they should have been".

The region of the SCA for which this article should

be moderately accurate is Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Washington and Oregon. The average active membership in this region for the period of the study may be estimated as 3000 adults (based on 650 dues-paying members). Direct personal contacts are strong and frequent within this region, and infrequent outside. During the summer months members drive all over the region to spend their weekends under canvas in partially medieval encampments, and to engage in partially medieval activities.

The age of members ranges from 10 to 90, with a large bulge from about 20 to 25 and a smaller one around 40 (refugees from the 1960s). There is considerable real respect for elders and real tolerance of youngsters. Members come from a broad socio-economic cross-section, with the median status in the urban lower middle class. Regardless of socio-economic status, the level of interest in books is extremely high (the majority of members have personal libraries of hundreds or even thousands of volumes).

Sexual equality is well advanced. While the activities chosen by individuals still show a distinct gender bias, when it comes to actual power and respect within the SCA, males and females are almost (but not quite) equal. In eight of the last ten years the president of the SCA has been female.

The members are almost all Caucasian, but I do not believe that this is due to racial discrimination within the SCA.

For members, the SCA is a place for the most marvellous fancy-dress parties, plus an important educational activity, plus an inspiration for one or more derivative hobbies, plus an important source of social interaction and growth. Although this was not its original purpose, the SCA has become moderately good at encouraging, supporting and recognizing personal development within a setting that emphasizes courteous and chivalrous behaviour. These values are attractive to the members because they are often in short supply in modern North American life. For many members, the SCA functions both as extended family and as village community.

To what extent this pseudo-medieval community can be viewed as a laboratory for investigating the folk process is of course impossible to say. This article hopes

to make the case that there is at least some relevance in such a study.

The essence is that the experiences that are the subject of many of the SCA songs were acquired in company. The songs are sung by and for the very folk who took part in those experiences, and the songs are seen by those folk as a very valuable and organic part of the community.

CContexts for Music in the SCA

The first context for music in the SCA is in conjunction with ceremonies (such as coronations) or as entertainment at banquets. These occasions involve formal performances of instrumental and vocal art music from the Middle Ages, with some folk music numbers. Medieval dancing in this region is done to cassettes of medieval dance music (primarily French court dances, and dances from Playford's Dancing Master). There is also considerable use of medieval art music cassettes for background music in banquet halls, at merchant's booths and so on. These contexts will not be discussed further.

The most frequent and most important occasion for music is at so-called "bardic circles". In winter bardic circles usually take place informally at private homes following more formal events (in other SCA regions they may happen during the event). In summer they take place every evening at weekend campouts, around one or more bardic fires under the night sky. Music typically occupies 90 to 100 per cent of the available time. Other contributions to a bardic circle may include stories, poetry, playlets, Middle Eastern dancing and juggling.

A typical summer bardic circle begins at dusk and continues until past midnight, and is not significantly disrupted by light rain, nor by cold. The number of people at a bardic circle is typically between 10 and 50. A bardic circle may attract most of those attending a small event. Participants come and go as they choose throughout the evening. The most common alternatives are socializing and medieval dancing.

Folk singing may occasionally break out on other occasions, such as among those doing the dishes after a feast, or among those in a vehicle travelling to an event.

The music at a bardic circle may be instrumental or vocal, but vocal music typically occupies 80 to 100 per

cent of the available time. Purely instrumental music may be art or dance music from the middle ages, semi-folk music from later periods (the music of Carolan, for example) or modern SCA compositions imitating one of these styles. Music in which instrument and voice are equal occurs occasionally. Instrumental music will not be discussed further.

Most vocal music at a bardic circle is unaccompanied, and such accompaniment as exists is seldom more than a strummed guitar.

The participants at a bardic circle may include seasoned public performers with wide repertoires, specialty performers known for certain songs or categories of song, listeners who join in whenever they can, and fundamentally passive listeners. The only significant differences between the average singing style at these bardic circles and the average cantometric profile for Europe (Lomax 1968) are the fairly strong tendency for the audience to join in, and a low overall level of nasality. There is usually some attempt at simple harmonization on the better-known songs when many people have joined in the singing.

Participants, performers and composers seem about evenly divided between males and females. Most performers are soloists, but duos and groups are not uncommon. Performers, and particularly performers who compose, have high status within the SCA. Specialty performers may develop into generalist performers. Few of the performers have much formal musical training, nor are they on the whole aware of any aspect of the academic study of folk music.

The actual participant mixture naturally varies widely, and the apparent mix changes further with the format of the bardic circle. The format may vary as a result of local custom or personality, from monopoly through oligopoly to a strict democratic rotation (in which non-performers are required to request a song). The possession and use of an instrument seems to favour the more monopolistic formats.

The strict democratic format is sometimes regulated by passing a lantern from person to person around the fire to indicate who has the turn. This format, because of the many requests that it encourages, provides unusually direct feedback to the performers. A typical bardic circle of 30 persons employing this format might include 3

generalist performers, 5 specialty performers, 4 listeners who can occasionally be coerced into starting a song, 13 listeners who will sing if someone else leads, and 5 listeners who do not sing. Throughout the region (of about 3000 persons) I estimate that there may be 60 generalist performers and 90 specialty performers. Most of the former and some of the latter will have tried their hands at composing at least one SCA folk song.

THE REPERTOIRE AT SCA BARDIC CIRCLES

The material presented at bardic circles covers much of the range of some of the wider definitions of folk song. The mixture will vary considerably as a function of the active performers and the audience (as evidenced by their requests).

The repertoire at any one bardic circle is seldom as broad as the proportions in this section might suggest. Performers who dislike the balance at a particular bardic circle may try to introduce compensating material. They may even as a last resort leave and set up a competing bardic circle featuring their preferred format and repertoire mix. In response to perceived long-term imbalances, performers may change their personal repertoires in a compensating direction.

Some overall characteristics first. Most traditional songs are sung in modern versions learned from commercial recordings. In general, songs in which the audience can join in are more popular than purely performance pieces. The audience is not prepared to listen to long songs (but, interestingly, will tolerate stories of over 10 minutes). The performers and listeners do not on the whole seem to know or care deeply about whether the song, or even its subject matter, dates from before 1650. They seem to require only that the song be acceptably traditional (in some sense determined by themselves).

The stylistic centre-point for the folk material is England about 1750 (largely modern vocabulary, spelling, and syntax; the presence of the first and second person in lyrics; and non-modal melodies). This centre-point is undoubtedly in part the result of dialectical tensions between genuine acceptance of and identification with the older idioms, and deliberate medievalism; and similarly between the need for a patina of antiquity, and the need for easy accessibility to the participant and the words and music.

I have not observed melodic improvisation at a bar-

dic circle, but textual improvisation (in the strict sense of composing while singing) does occasionally occur. Some improvisation of harmony does occur.

The following numerical analysis of the repertoire is based on the Elf Hill Times Song Book (the regional songbook), augmented by analysis of the personal (handwritten or typed) performance books of several seasoned performers. This sample represents only a portion of the actual collective repertoire of the region, although I believe that it is broadly representative. When the relative frequency of performance of any category seems to differ significantly from the static analysis of the repertoire, this has been noted.

The total number of songs in the corpus is 263, comprising 165 general folk songs and 98 SCA folk songs. Multiple versions among them are counted as only one song. The proportion of SCA material in actual bardic circle performance may be slightly higher. A number of the songs in the SCA folk song section were composed in other SCA regions and have been imported. A few others are thought by me to have originated as science fiction "filk songs", but as my knowledge is incomplete I have not attempted to categorize them separately.

The 165 general folk songs in the corpus may be assigned to the following categories:

[30] Child and other ballads. Most are sung in abbreviated versions. The performance ratio is lower than this, but the number of ballads sung is still surprisingly high. "The Two Sisters", in several versions, is easily the most commonly performed.

[24] English folk songs. This category may inadvertently include a few songs which retain no outward trace of an origin which is actually Scottish or Irish. "Martin Said to His Man" and "Country Life" may be taken as typical.

[18] Scottish folk songs. The performance ratio may be slightly higher than this. "The Skye Boat Song" may be taken as typical.

[16] Modern folk songs with a traditional flavour. Modern folk songs are under-represented in the corpus, and the performance ratio is higher than this. "The Witch of the Westmorland" by Archie Fisher may be taken as typical. "Barrett's Privateers" by Stan Rogers is

frequently requested, and even "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda" by Eric Bogle is sometimes requested.

[16] Bawdy folk songs. These are mostly English in origin. Bawdy songs appear to be completely acceptable in this region, but this is not so in some other SCA regions. "The Cuckoo's Nest" may be taken as typical.

[16] Carols and hymns in English, and assorted songs in Latin. The performance ratio is lower than this. "Gaudete" is easily the most commonly performed.

[9] Irish folk songs. Irish songs are underrepresented in the corpus; however, the performance ratio is higher than this. This I attribute to extensive popular memorization from the recordings of such groups as the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. "The Wild Rover" may be taken as typical.

[9] British and other music hall songs. "With Her Head Tucked Underneath Her Arm" by Bob Weston and Bert Lee may be taken as typical.

[8] Art songs of the middle ages (in English and other European languages). The performance ratio is lower than this. "Now Is the Month of Maying" by Thomas Morley may be taken as typical.

[7] Rounds. The performance ratio is lower than this. "Hey Ho, Nobody Home" may be taken as typical.

[6] French folk songs. The performance ratio is lower than this. "Chevaliers de la table ronde" and "À la claire fontaine" may be taken as typical.

[5] Songs from Shakespeare's plays. The performance ratio is lower than this. "When That I Was a Little Tiny Boy" may be taken as typical.

[1] Poems. The solitary example in the corpus is "Oak and Ash and Thorn" by Rudyard Kipling, set to music by Peter Bellamy.

[0] Modern so-called "rugby" or "army" songs (explicitly vulgar and/or sexist). These songs are not found in the corpus, but seem to be occasionally performed by specialty performers when a bardic circle is small and otherwise inactive. They do not appear to be generally acceptable, and they do not appear to attract additional participants to a bardic circle.

The texts of the 98 SCA folk songs in the corpus may be assigned to the following categories:

[27] Primarily non-narrative original songs describing situations and emotions in the Modern Middle Ages. Some of the songs are based in whole or in part on actual occurrences, but most deal with apocryphal or archetypal situations. About half of the songs are written as humorous songs, and for more than half of these numerous songs it is customary for performers to write additional local verses.

[26] Primarily narrative original songs describing events in the Modern Middle Ages. The majority of these songs are based in whole or in part on actual events, although some deal with apocryphal or archetypal events. Often the subject is treated humorously. Many of the texts in this category and in the preceding category are completely modern in every respect except for the subject matter.

[12] Original songs describing situations or events (usually imaginary) set in the real Middle Ages.

[10] Original songs expressing local or regional patriotic sentiment in the Modern Middle Ages. The performance ratio is higher than this.

[7] Original songs describing situations or events set in a fantasy Middle Ages.

[6] Borrowed poems with an SCA flavour set to original music. Half of these poems are by Rudyard Kipling. One song uses a modern English translation of old Norse poetry.

[4] Original drinking songs with an SCA flavour.

[3] Original love songs with an SCA flavour. Such love songs are underrepresented in the corpus. In addition, a number of the songs in other categories were inspired by and dedicated to a member of the opposite sex.

[3] Original songs with Christian or pagan religious motifs. The performance ratio is lower than this.

The SCA folk songs exhibit great variety in verse form. About one-third of the songs have four-line verses with no chorus, and about one-third have four-line verses with a four-line chorus. The remaining third of

the songs have 2, 3, 6, 8, or more lines (about one-third with chorus). Throughout, line length and metre varies widely. In those cases where the text is set to an existing tune, the text may be a recognizable derivative of the associated words.

The sources of the melodies for the 98 SCA folk songs in the corpus may be assigned to the following categories:

[41] Original SCA compositions. This number may be a slight over-estimate if borrowed tunes were not all properly attributed. I have not spotted any obvious correlation between any of the preceding textual categories and the use of original tunes.

[32] Traditional carols, folk tunes, national tunes, or hymns. Carols are a surprisingly common source of borrowed tunes. I know of no SCA folk song set to a medieval dance tune. No song in this corpus is set to art music of the middle ages, but there exist examples from other SCA regions.

[12] Modern (post-1945) popular tunes, including musicals and rock and roll.

[7] Modern (post-1918) folk tunes, both composed and anonymous.

[3] Music hall tunes or similar.

[3] Classical music.

In addition to the 10 per cent of SCA folk songs which have by custom gathered a large number of (often anonymous) secondary contributors, another 10 per cent were originally the result of a collaboration between two or more persons.

About one-third of the SCA folk songs in this corpus were written "on demand" (in response to a songwriting contest, an unpaid commission from one of the SCA nobility, or some similar request).

The quality of the average SCA folk song is not high, but there are occasional lyrics or tunes that are quite pleasing, and which would not seem out of place in the repertoires of traditional folk singers. "The Brave and Bonny Host" by Roger Shell (words and music follow the article) is one of the better songs, and has become the anthem of the region

No one person is responsible for more than about half a dozen of the SCA folk songs in this corpus. In contrast, I have a booklet of 86 songs written by an SCA member from California, of which about 40 are set to original tunes. Booklets and cassettes of general and SCA folk songs are produced occasionally in this and other SCA regions.

TRANSMISSION AND VARIATION OF MUSIC

Most of the audience at an SCA bardic circle never see written music for any of the songs. Any learning of tunes they do is oral. As for the performers, the majority of their general folk song tunes were learned directly from commercial recordings. The rest, and almost all of their SCA folk song tunes, were learned orally at bardic circles. Even if they had the music written down, only some of them could read it. Further, the music as transcribed in such sources as the Elf Hill Times Song Book often does not (for whatever reason) reflect the melody as it is commonly sung. For example, its music for "The Brave and Bonny Host" has one note published incorrectly (7 times). Tunes are learned by heart in this community.

Most of the significant variations in tunes in this community arise from incomplete learning. The most extreme example of this that I have ever witnessed befell the traditional tune "The Black Velvet Band". A new set of words about an actual event had been written to this tune in Texas in early May. Later that same day the words were sold as a broadsheet throughout the encampment by their strolling and singing composer. Someone present "learned" the tune and, upon returning home to Oregon, "taught" it to a seasoned performer. In late May I heard that same seasoned performer sing the words to a meaningless sequence of notes that bore no discernible relation to the original melody (or any other). The performer announced the tune's title as "The Black Velvet Band". I afterwards inquired and learned that the performer had never heard the traditional tune.

Deliberate modifications to existing tunes are rare. Most changes to tunes are unconscious, regardless of the magnitude of the change. Some variation may arise from attempts at harmonization that persist into later solo performance. unconscious variations in tune may include the adding or removal of embellishments, shifts in tonality and modifications to rhythm. For example, the low D in "The Brave and Bonny Host", which the composer had sharpened twice, is sharpened throughout

by some singers, emphasizing the harmonic minor rather than the natural minor key (although the high D is never sharpened). In the same song many singers moderate or eliminate the time value contrast between the dotted eighth notes and the following sixteenth notes.

An existing tune used for new words usually acquires subtle differences in rhythm, tonality and other characteristics to match the structure and mood of the new words.

Performers in this community seeking to add to their repertoires may deliberately select from commercial recordings those songs with a more "antique" tonality, generally without knowing that they are thereby shifting the repertoire slightly in favour of music that is more modal.

I have also noticed that sometimes an SCA performer trying to compose a new tune later discovers that it is different from, but obviously related to, some existing tune which has been supplied in whole or in part by the subconscious. This process might account for some of the variation in tunes that has been observed in other folk communities.

TRANSMISSION AND VARIATION OF WORDS

Most of the audience at an SCA bardic circle never see the words of any of the songs written down. Any learning of words they do is oral. As for the performers, on average the words of a song are first partly or completely learned from a commercial recording or from a bardic circle performance, and only later written down as an aid to memory. Thus, most lyrics at some point pass through a non-oral stage in this community. Note that the words that one performer passes on to another in writing almost always differ in some way from what that first performer commonly sings in actual performance.

Most specialist performers (and some generalist performers) have their repertoires by heart. Most generalists, on the other hand, have their own personal performance books and/or the Elf Hill Times Song Book (which they consult with the aid of a lantern or flashlight). These books are used mostly as repertoire prompts and as verse prompts, particularly later in the evening, when the performer may be tired or somewhat drunk. In addition, they are used as a source for the

words of any song for which the performer knows only the tune.

Some variations in text arise from forgetting or misunderstanding, but most major changes in this community are deliberate actions on the part of the performer. Changes to SCA folk song texts are common, and these changes are applied nearly as often to traditional folk songs as to SCA folk songs. Awkward scansion and other defects may be repaired. Unfamiliar words may be replaced. Verses may be added, dropped, combined or significantly re-written. For example, many performers omit the fourth verse of "The Brave and Bonny Host". A performer might attempt to recreate a more "antique" version of a traditional ballad by selecting or even rewriting verses to emphasize the magical or supernatural elements in the story.

Performers in this community seeking to add to their repertoires often deliberately select from commercial recordings those songs that they believe to be from prior to 1650, or at least songs with a more "antique" flavour.

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