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Music and Society-2

The Impact of Industrial Society on English Folk Song — some observations

THE SUBJECT OF THIS ARTICLE is a vast one, in many respects barely worked on, and riddled with pitfalls. But I feel justified in writing, however tentatively, because of doubts I hold about what appears to be the accepted wisdom among historians of music and commentators on the modern cultural scene concerning the nature of pre-industrial society. More narrowly, I should like to suggest the need for a slightly different perspective upon the nature of folk music and traditional culture from the one usually given.

Despite the scholarship of the early folk song collectors, despite the recent revival of interest in traditional music, and despite the confident pronouncements of musicologists and social historians, we really know very little about traditional music in its social context, or its relationship to other forms of music. The assumption that 'the folk' and its culture was a pure entity in our rural past, hermetically sealed from the influences of the upper classes, the church and the printing press, seems to me essentially false; the notion that this culture, even if it existed, was swept away in some absolute fashion by industrial England seems to me a total misconception. The transition will not be understood until it is studied by scholars who know enough to demystify the pre-industrial 'folk' and who have a sympathy for, and who preferably have some involvement in, the musical activities of the urban working class. It seems likely that these scholars will discover that in many ways the discontinuity in the popular musical culture of the English people came not in the last half of the nineteenth century, but rather in the years that followed the Second World War.

Generally speaking, until certain elements of pop music were captured bymiddle-class adolescents in the late 1960s, academic or literary observers had little sympathy for popular music. It was seen, especially in that it represented another step in the Americanisation of British culture which had been drawing adverse criticism since the arrival of ragtime, as part of the general debasement of the masses, one element in the general slide into a materialistic consumer society. Condemnation of this deleterious influence has come from both the mainstream of criticism and the revolutionary proponents of the 'New Music'. Hence Wilfrid Mellers, in stressing the abnormality of a commercial music imposed on the masses, has referred to

> a synthetic or stock-response music manufactured because the majority of people's lives have grown, under the influence of the machine, non-creative and emotionally bogus ... the machine technique of music manufacture is so insidious and through mechanical means of reproduction so widely disseminated that it acutely accelerates the pace of the debasement of taste.[1]

Essentially similar sentiments were put forward by a composer attempting to 'channel socialist beliefs into practical activity' when he wrote

> Because of their situation in this industrial society, the working class has been largely deprived of even the possibility of creating more living cultural values. Young people's music apart, itself also in a state of revolt, what we normally call popular modern music is only a terrible sub-product of middle-class music, its function being essentially anaesthetic.[2]

The position of these two writers seems basically similar: if only the masses would learn what was good for them and give up Radio One, Cilla Black, sliced bread, Coronation Street and bingo! What makes the cultural plight of the masses all the more sad to the educated observer is that he has a more desirable state of affairs to look back on. Today, he would argue, the people, under the influence of the industrial society in which they live, seem happy to have synthetic rubbish imposed upon them; but it was not always so — once upon a time, things were very different.

In our pre-industrial past, we are told, the situation was much healthier. The elements contributing to a sounder cultural life were, according to standard interpretations, roughly as follows. Firstly, work and leisure were closely integrated, or — more accurately — were not perceived as being different and antipathetic activities. Once, we are told: 'Everyday life, in so far as explicitly freed from work, was organised in terms of religious and civic festivals. It derived meaningfulness from permanent (sacred, as Weber says) and ritualistic elements in human life.'[3] Secondly, work was more rewarding. The worker in

the past was not merely a machine operator in a factory, but a *craftsman,* and it is this emphasis on craftsmanship that is crucial to the distinctions so often drawn between the attitudes of labour in the pre- and post-industrial periods.[4] Thirdly, there is the assumption that there was less social stratification in the past, and hence that the differences between high and low culture, between the taste of the masses and that of the educated, was almost non-existent. Thus we are told that in the Elizabethan period 'At no time do we find such subtlety and maturity functioning as naturally as the human organism. The general level of taste, among artists and "folk", has never been so universally creative.'[5]

I have neither the room nor, perhaps, the conceptual framework, to enter here into a full criticism of this view of our cultural past, especially as some elements of it retain a lingering accuracy. Suffice to say that many of the statements made so confidently about medieval or pre-industrial society by historians of music and writers on modern England would send scholars working on the social history of these periods reeling across their boxes of filing cards, halfway between tears of despair and hysterical laughter. The description of Elizabethan England as an organic whole, although a concept dear to contemporary government propagandists (hardly the most disinterested of observers) is frankly unconvincing, and many of the assertions about leisure in this period, or of the universal prevalence of 'craftsmanship' are, to say the least, not proven. One of the more distressing features of the historian's life is the tendency for people who know very little about history to talk and write as though they knew a great deal.

Whatever doubts we might entertain about the accuracy of this model of the past in real terms, it remains the starting point for many discussions of folk song. It is significant that interest in folk music in England first developed within a few decades of the country's becoming recognisably industrial and urban, and it is arguable that this early interest was one facet of that great preoccupation of the Victorian age — the worry provoked by the new phenomenon of the urban Englishman. Already the agrarian past was being idealised. Sir Hubert Parry, in his inaugural address to the Folk Song Society in 1899, had the dichotomy between the rural and urban situations firmly in mind. Folk songs, to Parry, were 'characteristic of the race, of the quiet reticence of our country folk, courageous and content, ready to meet what chance shall bring with a cheery heart'. This peasant wholesomeness was contrasted with the conditions in

> the outer circumference of our terribly overgrown towns, where the jerry-builder holds sway; where one sees all around the tawdriness of sham jewellery and shoddy clothes, pawnshops and flaming gin palaces; where stale fish and miserable piles of Covent Garden refuse which pass for vegetables are offered for food.[6]

Cecil Sharp similarly stressed that folk song was the product of 'the spontaneous and intuitive exercise of untrained faculties', untouched by art or popular music, and was therefore to be found in 'those country districts, which, by reason of their remoteness, have escaped the infection of modern ideas'.[7] The supposed uncorrupted non-synthetic nature of folk song has led to some very broad claims being made on its behalf by scholars. On hearing a traditional song, we are told

> The impression still tends to the merging of the personality in something outside itself. For all the local detail of the songs, the effect is not that of any expression of a personality, but of a creative act which is independent of any particular person, made manifest through the human voice.[8]

There is some truth in such sentiments, although contact with traditional performers can elicit a less exalted view of folk culture. One is reminded of the Somerset singer, Sidney Richards, who when asked the significance of a particular wassail custom by a song collector, shifted uncomfortably and replied hesitantly 'Well, I reckon it were just an excuse for a good booze-up'.[9]

Before examining the implications of the impact of industrial society upon the uncorrupted world of folk song it is perhaps necessary to attempt to define it. The classic definition of folk song was laid down by the 1954 International Folk Music Council and consisted of the following basic elements. Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The tradition is shaped firstly by continuity, linking the present with the past, secondly by variations which springs from the creative individual or the group, and thirdly selection by the community, which determines the form in which the music survives. The term can also be extended to include composed music which has subsequently been absorbed into a living tradition, and re-fashioned into such a form as to give it a folk character. In addition, importance has been placed upon the social context in which folk art was performed. Folk culture is seen as dealing directly with the concrete world familiar to the audience, and involved a direct relationship between the performer and the audience, with a large element of participation on the part of the latter, who would be largely familiar with the material of the former.

This definition is, perhaps, the best we have at present (although it is worth pointing out that the best-informed recent commentator on English folk song has remarked that 'after three-quarters of a century of tune-collecting and nearly two hundred years of text-study, we are still without a definition of folk song that really fits our local conditions').[10] If it is accepted, it is easy to see, on a superficial level, why folk song should die when isolated rural communities with an oral culture were submerged by the literate urban masses. Unfortunately, the story is nowhere near as simple as it is so often portrayed, and the easy assumption that an oral, participatory folk culture was replaced in a short space of time by a mass culture

in which music was consumed ready-made is a false one. The idea of the 'death of folk song' wilts under closer examination, as indeed does the idea of urban masses devoid of any desire to make their own music.

A fundamental problem is the difficulty of accepting Sharp's definition of folk song as essentially the property of the unlettered, isolated rural community. At an informed guess, such communities had been so rare in England as to be insiginificant for a good three centuries before Sharp wrote. We know little as yet about literacy (let along musical literacy) in pre-industrial England. We do know that broadside ballads enjoyed a large sale from the late sixteenth century onwards. We also know that John Playford's compendium of country dance tunes, *The Dancing Master,* first published in 1650, had gone through seventeen editions (under minor variations of title) by 1728. It seems likely, therefore, that the relationship between the music of town and country in the two centuries before industrialisation was one of interaction rather than antipathy — broadside publishers collected and printed country tunes, country singers bought and learnt broadsides. One also suspects that the most active carriers of English folk song in its heyday were not the elderly and illiterate labourers whom Sharp studied, but rather the most educated, lively-minded, and outward-looking members of the community,[11] capable of absorbing a wide range of musical influences other than those of the broadside ballad and the tune book. Church music must have been a major influence, and many country musicians and singers must have received an elementary musical training in church. Thomas Hardy, in his anecdote 'Absent mindedness in a Parish Choir', set in the mid-nineteenth century, describes a village band consisting of fiddle, bass viol, tenor fiddle, serpent, clarionet and oboe, who

> one half-hour . . . could be playing a Christmas carol in the squire's hall to the ladies and gentlemen, and drinking tay and coffee with 'em as modest as saints; and the next, at The Tinkers' Arms, blazing away like wild horses with the "Dashing White Sergeant" to nine couple of dancers and more, and swallowing rum-and-cider hot as flame.[12]

What we describe as folk music has never existed, at least in the case of England, in isolation. An important consequence of this, and one which Sharp of course realised, was that folk or traditional music was never static. Perhaps the most important evidence of vitality in a living folk tradition is not some purity of form or content, but rather an ability to absorb new influences, even if this process necessarily produces changes in that tradition. I would argue that previous studies of folk song in the closing years of the nineteenth century have rather missed the point by concentrating on the decline in the singing of the classic folk song as defined by Sharp.

The folk song enthusiasts of this period were convinced that the form that they so admired was facing extinction from the music-hall song and the parlour ballad — that they were witnessing, as it were, a transition from a folk to a popular culture. A great deal of evidence can be adduced to support them. Consider, for example, two stories from Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford,* an account of childhood and adolescence in Oxfordshire in the closing decades of the last century. While describing singing at the local pub, she recounts how, with the exception of some chorus songs, the old songs were being ousted by the new products of the town, whose arrival was eagerly awaited by the young men of the village. So far had the old folk song declined that when one of the village ancients was called on to sing his version of 'The Outlandish Knight' (a very old ballad) it was generally taken by the wives of the hamlet that proceedings were at an end, and that the men would soon be home. Even so, for a while the two forms co-existed. Similarly, she tells of a lad in the hamlet who was bought a melodeon by an aunt. This was used not only to accompany dancing on the green, but also to play 'all the old favourites — "Home, Sweet Home", "Annie Laurie", "Barbara Allen", and "Silver Threads Among the Gold" '.[13]

The willingness among participants in traditional culture to adopt new material and perform it alongside folk material proper becomes even more marked if the repertoires of country singers who survived into this century are examined. Percy Webb, the recently-deceased Suffolk singer, sang a collection of songs ranging from the impeccably traditional 'Nutting Girl' through the Victorian tear-jerker 'If Those Lips Could Only Speak' to 'Old Shep', more familiar to the present writer through the singing of Elvis Presley.[14] The 1936 songbook of Jim Copper, member of a Sussex family of singers whose performances had been noted by collectors since tte 1880s, shows a similar eclecticism.[15] Many country musicians have possessed an immensely varied repertoire, evidence of a comparable variety of influences. Scan Tester, the Sussex multi-instrumentalist now best known for the concertina playing that made him a major influence on southern-English style revivalist musicians, demonstrates this premise. He began as a child playing tambourine in his father's pub, graduated to melodeon, had contact with gypsy fiddlers in the Ashdown Forest, and after the Great War organised a dance band, 'The Tester Imperial' (named after a brand of gramophone record then sold in Woolworth's). Scan also played cornet in the Horsted Keynes town band until a new bandmaster banished all non-music-readers from its ranks. On Sharp's strict definiton Scan Tester was not a folk musician: it is difficult, however, to think of an alternative description of him.[16]

What emerges from these examples is a suspicion that even though the classic folk song was in decline (i.e. the repertoire of the tradition was changing) the style of playing and singing new material remained much the same, as did the social context in which it was performed. What is perhaps more remarkable is evidence that the new urban masses were not merely passive consumers of the product of the music

industry, but were themselves evolving a style of performance and a canon of accepted songs. The subject is a little-studied one, but finds its classic description in Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy,* a sensitive celebration of a working-class culture that is now dying, as surely as the rural culture which Sharp describes so fondly was dying when he wrote. In a lengthy section[17] the author describes singing in a working man's club, and from this description two important points emerge.

First, there was a central body of repertoire, most of it originating from the years 1880-1910, but from which old songs were continually dropped, and to which new ones were constantly being added. These new songs, although often of American provenance, had to fit to a 'firm and restricted set of conventions' before being accepted. They were, moreover, delivered in a distinctive manner, which Hoggart describes as the 'big dipper' style, and which put a local stamp even on transatlantic imports. This style needs to be analysed before it too disappears, as it represents a logical progression from the older style of delivery described by Sharp and others. It certainly caught the attention of John Steinbeck, who as a war correspondent in England in 1943 gave his impression of English pub-singing:

> A mixed group of pilots and ATS girls at the other end of the pub have started a song. It is astonishing how many of the songs are American. "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home to" they sing. And the beat of the song has subtly changed. *It has become an English song.*[18] (My italics).

This resilience of a distinctive style of singing and pub and club playing which survived unchallenged until the post-war innovations of piped music and the juke box must modify any flat assertion that the rise of industrial society rapidly created a race of musical consumers. It cannot be denied, of course, that the peculiar circumstances of industrialisation in England did provide the necessary market for an enormous leisure industry. It is no accident that the growth of the music hall (itself an evolution from earlier forms of musical and 'variety' entertainment) began in the 1860s, only a few years after the census revealed that for the first time a majority of England's population lived in large towns. This emergence of the music hall as a mass entertainment coincided with the development of many other forms of working-class leisure which became fully embedded in British culture, of which perhaps the two most important constituents were seaside holidays and professional football. The subject is one that is only just beginning to receive serious attention. Most labour historians have so far concentrated on political movements in the working class, which probably tells us more about the preoccupations of labour historians than it does about those of the new industrial masses. Richard Hoggart's contention that historians of working-class life 'do not always have an adequate sense of the grass-roots of that life'[19] still contains a large element of truth.

Secondly, despite the steady growth, since about 1880, of a leisure industry dependent upon consumers, many of the urban masses spent at least some of their spare time in active, even creative leisure. The subject is a truly immense one, and here I can do little more than suggest a few areas in which people were actively taking part in musical activities. So far few good regional studies of which might be termed the 'musical explosion' of the late nineteenth century have been published,[20] but it is obvious that recently urbanised England suffered from no shortage of interest in music. The new industrial areas were the home of a lively tradition of choral singing, while it has been calculated that in 1889 there were some 40,000 amateur brass bands in England, many of them in the industrial areas, most of them consisting of working-class musicians. Meanwhile, the wide use of the Tonic Sol-Fa system in schools meant that perhaps two million children could read music by the end of the century. Even earlier in the century, before the emergence of a leisure industry, it seems that at least some sections of the working class were actively involved in music making, especially in areas where enlightened factory owners felt that such pursuits had a 'civilising' effect upon their operatives.[21]

Technical innovation, so often seen as the villain of the piece when the emergence of 'synthetic' music is discussed, was itself a necessary contributor to this wide involvement in musical activity. Good, cheap instruments — concertinas, brass band instruments, and above all pianos — became available in quantity for the first time. Cheap printing techniques allowed mass sales of sheet music: evidence of widespread musical literacy and an extensive desire to perform. As an extreme example, and a rare case of ability to match theory with practice, one might cite the American Charles K. Harris, the author of *How to Write a Popular Song,* who in 1892 composed 'After the Ball', a sentimental ballad which in the twenty years following its publication sold ten million copies. The arrival of mechanical music devices, from the pianola onwards, did not kill participation in music, and replace the performer with the consumer. Even the gramophone and the radio, so often berated for nipping embryonic performers in the bud, have done much to disseminate tunes, styles, and an interest in music among actual or potential participants.

In concentrating upon working-class music, I have ignored not only the musical taste of the middle and upper classes, but also the whole problem of social stratification in culture. All I can do here is repeat my suspicions that the supposed organic nature of pre-industrial society seems very unconvincing, and that any stratification that exists after industrialisation should therefore be studied in terms of continuity as much as complete novelty. A second element in the subject which I have barely touched upon is the influence of American music, from ragtime to acid rock, although as I have suggested, the edge of the American invasion has at least been blunted.[22]

Despite these omissions, and the drawbacks inherent in a very compressed treatment of the subject, I feel that two major points have emerged. Firstly, that the industrialisation of this country did not produce a musical desert in which rustic ballad singers were replaced by a commercial entertainment industry and passive consumers. Secondly, that 'folk' or 'traditional' art, except perhaps when it is moribund, is never static: I suspect that the history of English traditional music is one of steady change, with new material, styles and instruments being absorbed at one end and old ones being discarded at the other. If this is correct, the technological changes of the nineteenth century might, perhaps, in many ways be most usefully interpreted as an acceleration of a traditional process of change. The most important question, then, is to decide at what stage, and under what influences, the rate, or quantity of change produced qualitative change and a definitive break with the past. As a historian, I am trained to avoid absolutes of this sort, but as a tentative guess I would suggest that such a change did not come about until the Second World War. I would also suggest, again very tentatively, that the first few generations of industrial workers had more in common, in terms of their relationship with music as in so much else, with their agricultural forbears than with their consumer-society descendants.

NOTES:

[1] Wilfrid Mellers, *Music and Society* (2nd. Edn., London: Dobson, 1950), p. 19.

[2] Henri Pousseur, quoted in *Contact 13* (Spring 1976), p. 13. I would guess that the 'young people' to whose music Pousseur refers favourably are essentially university-educated, middle-class young people. I see little revolutionary potential in, for example, the work of the Bay City Rollers, despite the youth of the bulk of their admirers.

[3] Tom Burns, 'Leisure in industrial society', in *Leisure and Society in Britain,* ed. Michael A. Smith, Stanley Parker and Cyril S. Smith (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 53.

[4] Hence Mellers, op. cit., p. 25, after criticising machine culture, says 'we have to make our machines, and our machine music, work effectively to recover a sense of craftsmanship'.

[5] Mellers, op. cit., p. 85.

[6] *Journal of the Folk Song Society,* No. 1(1899), pp. 1-3.

[7] Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions* (4th. Edn., ed. Maud Karpeles, London: Mercury Books, 1965), p. 5.

[8] Mellers, op. cit., p. 38.

[9] From the sleeve notes of Shirley Collins, *Adieu to Old England* (Topic Records 12TS238).

[10] A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1967), p. 14.

[11] This suspicion is prompted especially by reading David Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

[12] Thomas Hardy, *Life's Little Ironies* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 233.

[13] Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 141-142. The description of singing at the local pub can be found in Chapter iv, 'At the "Wagon and Horses" '.

[14] *Traditional Music,* No. 2 (late 1975), pp. 20-21.

[15] Ibid., No. 3 (early 1976), p. 38.

[16] From the sleeve notes to *Boscastle Breakdown* (Topic Records 12T240) and *English Dance and Song,* No. 34 (1972), p. 112.

[17] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), pp. 149-166.

[18] John Steinbeck, *Once There Was a War* (London: Heinemann, 1959), p. 27.

[19] Hoggart, op. cit.. p. 16.

[20] Two useful studies are Reginald Nettel, *Music in the Five Towns, 1840-1914: a study of the social influence of music in an industrial district* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944) and E. D. Mackerness, *Somewhere Further North: a history of music in Sheffield* (Sheffield: Northend, 1974).

[21] See, for example, the cases quoted in E.D. Mackerness, *A Social History of English Music* (London: Routledge, 1964), pp. 129-133.

[22] The rise of American popular music and its impact on Britain is charted by Ian Whitcomb, *After the Ball* (London: Allen Lane, 1973).