

KATEGORIE OR WERTIDEE? THE EARLY YEARS OF THE INTERNATIONAL FOLK MUSIC COUNCIL

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Founded in the aftermath of World War II, the International Folk Music Council was a diverse group of scholars, enthusiasts, and artists united toward three goals: the promotion of understanding and friendship between nations through common interests in folk music, the furtherance of comparative studies, and, most urgently, the preservation, revival, and dissemination of the world's rapidly disappearing musical traditions. But beyond these general common causes, its members differed widely on many topics—not least, on the very definitions of the term *folk music* and its all-important qualifier, *authentic*. The debate formally began at the Council's first general conference, in September 1948 in Basel, with a paper presented by Walter Wiora.¹

He began by citing a controversy that had arisen exactly one hundred years earlier between two prominent German musicians: Ludwig Erk, who was the leading scholar of German traditional music, and Johannes Brahms. The object of this controversy was Kretzschmer and Zuccalmaglio's collection of German folk songs.² Erk contended that most of the songs that Kretzschmer and Zuccalmaglio published were not traditional songs at all; they were either from doubtful sources, or from their own imaginations. Brahms, who used Kretzschmer and Zuccalmaglio's collection for most of his own folk-song settings, vehemently disagreed. He even turned the tables, asserting that the beautiful melodies in this collection were more genuine than the commonplace tunes collected by Erk and other scholars.

Wiora suggested that this striking disagreement about the nature of authenticity could be understood by distinguishing between the scholarly approach, which involved viewing traditional music as a *Kategorie* (category), and the creative approach, for which traditional music was a *Wertidee* (inspiring ideal). Demonstrating through older manuscript sources that some of Kretzschmer and Zuccalmaglio's formerly suspect

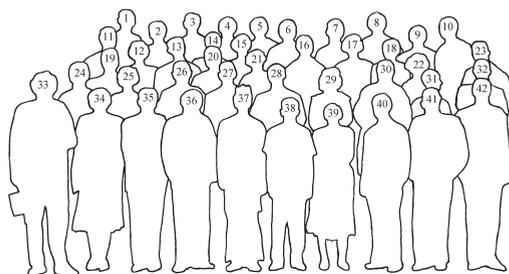
¹ Walter Wiora, "Concerning the conception of authentic folk music," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 1 (1949) 14–19. The paper was read in German; the published version is in English.

² Andreas Kretzschmer and Anton Wilhelm Florentin von Zuccalmaglio, *Deutsche Volkslieder mit ihren Original-Weisen* (Berlin: Vreins-Buchhandlung, 1838–41).



Conference of the International Folk Music Council, Bloomington, 1950.
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1. Reidar Thoralf Christiansen 2. E. Eddy Nadel 3. V. Dolan 4. Sam Eskin 5. Ahmet Saygun 6. Bertrand Harris Bronson 7. J. Olcott Sanders 8. Joseph Raben 9. Ruth Crawford Seeger 10. Charles Seeger 11. J. Mickey
12. B. Lattimer 13. H. Reeves 14. L. Austen 15. Sidney Robertson Cowell 16. George Pullen Jackson 17. Evelyn K. Wells 18. Mrs. La Farge 19. Jonas Balys 20. Duncan Emrich 21. May Gadd 22. A. Kaufman 23. H. Darington
24. Seán Ó Súilleabháin 25. Sirvart Poladian 26. Laurits Bødker 27. Albert Lord 28. Samuel P. Bayard 29. Nilüfer Saygun 30. Herbert Halpert 31. Elizabeth Burchenal 32. Åke Campbell 33. Otto Andersson 34. Mrs. Lumpkin 35. Ben Gray Lumpkin 36. Sigurd Emanuel Erixon 37. Jasīmauddīna 38. George Herzog 39. Maud Karpeles 40. Marius Barbeau 41. Walter Anderson 42. Stith Thompson.



songs were indeed authentic, Wiora vindicated Brahms's intuitive reaction to them: The composer saw through the editor's romantic colorings to the songs' essences, while the scholar "did not discern the true picture in its false frame."³

Wiora was not out to discredit Erk and other scholars of traditional music; rather, he was urging the members of the Council to develop an ability to judge authenticity as Brahms did—by intuitively grasping essences—rather than simply assuming that anything sung by *das Volk* was automatically genuine. This call for discrimination was echoed five years later, in a much less nuanced tone, by the Council's president, Ralph Vaughan Williams:

I believe that folk music has in it the possibilities of the greatest and purest beauty. But of course there are dull songs and dances, just as there are dull people who have passed them on in former generations ... Now there is a tendency at present to think that everything that is danced in the village hall or sung in a public house is FOLK, and therefore to be encouraged. This is [a] fatal example of dangerous broadmindedness.... Only that which is genuinely traditional must be preserved, and all that must be recorded in our libraries and museums; but only that which has the germs of great art must be let loose on the simple-minded public whom we invite to sample our wares.⁴

Composers like Brahms and Vaughan Williams were confident in their ability to recognize cultural value instinctively; but clearly many members of the Council wanted a concrete definition of what it was that they were trying to preserve and disseminate. Wiora offered some observations: *folk* does not refer only to country people or peasants; *authentic* should not be confused with *old*; and anonymity and oral transmission are not necessarily proofs of genuine folk music.⁵

These ideas were controversial, to say the least. In the discussion that followed Wiora's presentation, Maud Karpeles contended that the only satisfactory definition of *folk song* was "a song that during the course of time has been submitted to the process of oral transmission."⁶ Patrick Shuldham-Shaw disagreed, insisting that new folk songs and folk tunes are constantly appearing in flourishing traditions. He had been particularly impressed by the creativity of the fiddlers he had met in the Shetland Islands, who composed new tunes regularly, without recourse to notation; surely these new creations were no less authentic than the older tunes in their repertoires.⁷

A lively debate followed. Gwynn Williams differentiated between *conscious invention* and *unconscious expression*, the latter representing authentic tradition.⁸ Ahmet Saygun distinguished between *popular* and *folk*: Just because someone whistles a tune from *Carmen* doesn't make it a folk tune.⁹ (It is interesting that his "popular" example is an aria from an opera.) Finally, Karpeles agreed that a composed song could eventually become a folk song, but only after it had been sufficiently subjected to oral transmission and re-creation to become fully idiomatic.¹⁰

³ Ibid., 17.

⁴ Ralph Vaughan Williams, "Opening session", *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 5 (1953) 8.

⁵ Wiora, "Concerning the conception", 15-16.

⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

The distinction between *folkloric* and *popular* was taken up again by Albert Marinus, one of the Council's vice-presidents, a few years later. Defining popular songs as the creations of songsmiths who sought to please the public, he agreed with Karpeles that a popular song could in time become a folk song. However, he maintained that new songs composed by performers of traditional music were just as authentically traditional as older songs: "To only consider music of such origin to be popular would be foolhardy". Marinus rejected the notion that songs ever arose unconsciously or spontaneously among "the people": Each had an original author, even though that person's name is unknown. His final definition of *folkloric song* was intentionally vague; a definitive definition, he argued, "prematurely freezes knowledge."¹¹

Meanwhile, Karpeles was trying to hammer out a clear definition that the Council could agree on. At their third meeting, she presented her views on the matter in a paper that provided an interesting mixture of certainty and uncertainty: For example, her opening paragraph includes both the admission that "authenticity must always be a comparative rather than an absolute quality" and the assurance that her goal is "preserving the purity of the folk music that has come down to us."¹² Her proposed "working definition" of folk music was "music that has been submitted through the course of many generations to the process of oral transmission."¹³

"Art music", she stated, "although it owes something to tradition, is in the main the product of an individual.... Folk music, on the other hand, develops mainly unconsciously. Its evolution is dependent not on one person but on many; its conception is a matter of many generations; and, strictly speaking, it never attains a final form."¹⁴ She discussed the three aspects of this necessary evolution—continuity, variation, and selection—noting that in the "variation" phase "the untutored artist of today will adapt indiscriminately from traditional and from composed sources,"¹⁵ and that the third phase, "the verdict of the community", is no longer sufficiently operative: "As far as we can see, modern conditions are such that natural selection cannot operate freely, because it is continuously subjected to interference."¹⁶ As an example, she cited the modern tendency among Appalachians to add banjo or guitar accompaniment to their formerly unaccompanied traditional singing. She considered this to be a "popular" development, brought on by contact with the outside world—above all, by listening to the radio. She noted that purists consider this music to be less authentic. "And", she said, "I think the purists are right."¹⁷

This rupture in the workings of tradition, brought on by modern developments, gives special urgency to understanding true authenticity:

[W]hereas formerly the evolution of folk music was an unconscious matter, there are now conscious agencies at work. There are the many folklore societies that are actively engaged in bringing the songs and dances before the public by means of instruction, social gatherings, performances, festivals, and so on. There are the schools that include

¹¹ Albert Marinus, "Chanson populaire—Chanson folklorique", *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 6 (1954) 21–25. "Nous considérerions en tout cas fort téméraire de vouloir ne considérer comme populaire qu'une musique ayant semblable origine." "On fige ainsi précocement le savoir." (All translations from French are by Murat Eyüboğlu).

¹² Maud Karpeles, "Some reflections on authenticity in folk music", *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 3 (1951) 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

folk song and folk dance in their curriculum. There are the entertainers of various kinds, including the radio. And finally, there are the individual collectors who publish their material. All this is excellent, of course, provided that it is done with a full sense of discrimination and responsibility.... We have therefore a great responsibility.... For, by selecting the best and most authentic folk music, we may in some measure counteract the damaging effects produced by modern conditions.¹⁸

Scholars can help in determining what is “the best and most authentic folk music” by demonstrating what has stood the test of time, but mere age is not enough: “the ultimate test should be based on artistic grounds.”

The purest folk music is that which has been submitted to the crucible of tradition, and which emerges as a complete artistic unity. If the modern ingredients in folk music do not stand out as misfits but merge with the older elements so that together they make a satisfying whole, then I think we can be confident that this music has as much claim to authenticity as the music produced by the peasants of some isolated region who have had no contact with modern ways of life.¹⁹

Again, a lively debate ensued. Albert Lord suggested that “oral composition” was a better criterion for folk music than “oral transmission.”²⁰ George Herzog disagreed, saying that Lord’s focus on individual creativity was understandable given his work with epic singers, but that one should not generalize about folk song on the basis of the epic tradition. However, while Herzog agreed with Karpeles’s emphasis on oral transmission, he expressed reservations about her subjective criteria for judging authenticity.²¹ Karpeles agreed that such subjectivity could be problematic, but stated that sufficient immersion in the tradition enabled the acquisition of a sure taste for authenticity.²² Sidney Robertson Cowell noted the difficulties of being simultaneously a musicologist, philosopher, and aesthete, maintaining that one must find the proper balance between subjectivity and objectivity.²³ Stith Thompson questioned whether collectors should search for ideal versions of songs; the Bengali poet Jasīmauddīna responded that everything sung by the unlettered should be collected, and that value judgments could come later.²⁴ Opinions ranged widely, and the session chair ultimately had to close the discussion.

The debates continued, and the Council’s meeting in 1952 included three discussion sessions focusing largely on matters of definition and clarification. One of the most contentious matters involved the idea that a song had to pass through several generations in order to become a folk song; this criterion was particularly questioned by delegates from non-European countries. Based on his experiences in what was then Northern Rhodesia, Arthur Morris Jones declared that the idea that folk music could not be spontaneously created was biased by Western thought.²⁵ U Khin Zaw, from Rangoon, asserted that the very timelessness of folk music meant that it could be born any minute.²⁶ Several delegates expressed the opinion that the definition should

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁰ Ibid., 14.

²¹ Ibid., 14.

²² Ibid., 14–15.

²³ Ibid., 15.

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵ International Folk Music Council, “General report”, *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 5 (1953) 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

not be applied from the outside, but should simply be based on majority acceptance by the country or community in question. Karpeles disagreed with the idea that common currency was enough to turn a song immediately into a folk song, but she accepted the idea that new material could become absorbed into the tradition fairly quickly.²⁷ For her and a number of others, the question of time was less important than the question of whether the song had been refashioned through variation and selection.

The delegates also worked on clarifying these processes, and here we may begin to understand why these debates mattered so much to them. The discussion of the process of continuity was largely about its disruption, and whether the Council could do anything about it. Several delegates spoke of the pernicious influence of radio; for example, the Norwegian folklorist Ole Mørk Sandvik stated that “The radio has become a formidable rival to traditional song. Every minute of the day the children can hear music from remote places, and in the long run this may destroy the sense of the national musical mother-tongue.”²⁸ Variation was also the subject of some concern: A number of delegates expressed worries that songs were crystallizing due to the efforts of the very people who were trying to preserve them. Patrick Shuldham-Shaw, for example, stated that he knew of instances where judges at folk music festivals had deducted marks when singers deviated from printed versions of songs.²⁹ Discussion of selection again raised questions of value. Donal O’Sullivan, for example, stated that when scholars encounter newer folk songs that they feel run contrary to the tradition they should not encourage them.³⁰ Others, like Felix Hoeburger, raised the idea that new developments are signs of a healthy tradition, and that those who place a high value on quaintness are cooperating more with tourism than with scholarship.³¹

The urgency of the Council’s work was addressed directly. Industrialization was destroying any sense of community, and the nature of industrial labor produces spiritual numbness. Stupefied workers are manipulated by the mass media into accepting passive forms of entertainment that only increase this numbness. A return to traditional recreation is necessary to revive the common person’s creativity and vigor.³² The German folklorist Kiem Pauli summed up the importance of the Council’s endeavors—speaking, of course, to an audience still reeling from the events of World War II:

Whoever cultivates the deeply-rooted native element in his own little circle, whoever co-operates with fundamentally sound human beings by means of fundamentally genuine folk songs, exerts an influence far beyond the confines of his native land.... The more firmly a people is rooted in its native soil, the more easily will it understand the individuality preserved by other peoples, in conjunction with whom it will offer resistance to the continuously crushing process of mass production and levelling that today annihilates the divinely ordained diversity of the world.³³

The next year Karpeles presented a final definition of folk music, and it was accepted—though not unanimously—by the Council.³⁴ It was brief and somewhat

²⁷ Ibid., 10.

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

²⁹ Ibid., 13.

³⁰ Ibid., 14.

³¹ Ibid., 14.

³² Ibid., 14–15.

³³ Ibid., 16.

³⁴ International Folk Music Council, “Resolutions,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 7 (1955) 23.

anticlimactic, omitting the topics that had proved most contentious; by 1954, six years after the Council's founding, *something* had to be produced for general agreement. It reaffirmed the importance of continuity, variation, and selection; it allowed that it could be the product of an individual, and it specified (and this is likely what caused some objection) that "it is the re-fashioning and re-creation of music by the community that gives it its folk character."³⁵

Recalling the terms Wiora raised in his presentation at the Council's first meeting, we can see that the organization quickly set off in the direction of *Kategorie*, working hard to define genuine folk music so it could be protected and encouraged, both in terms of products and processes. As the field of ethnomusicology developed and the International Folk Music Council became the International Council for Traditional Music, the emphasis on authenticity, in one sense or another, remained. But *Wertidee* remained a vital element. These people were not simply motivated by utopian social engineering: They loved the music. Many were performers, even composers, themselves. Today's ethnomusicologists, for all their ethnographic training, tend to be music lovers as well.

However, the Brahms-Erk dichotomy has not disappeared. In the mass-mediated domain of world music, intuitive value judgment reigns supreme; and while the word *authentic* is bandied about, consumers have no more interest than Brahms did in commonplace music. Composers like the singer-songwriters Peter Gabriel and David Byrne enthusiastically promote their favorite world music performers on the basis of aesthetics alone, as do many record companies and concert organizers, with impressive public support. It is a world that could not have been foreseen by the members of the IFMC in the 1940s and 1950s, and it encompasses some of their worst nightmares and loftiest dreams.

³⁵ Maud Karpeles, "Definition of folk music," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 7 (1955) 6.

