

The 'Nationalising' of Folksong in Nineteenth-Century Europe

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The Age of Enlightenment, believed to promote reason and dispel superstition, was a great creator of myths; myths not in the sense of fabulous inventions, but as widely held beliefs that could not be proved or disproved. One of them was a belief that human beings were basically the same, hence the apparent savage could be seen as a 'noble savage,' and slavery came to be branded as unnatural. Another was the belief that the history of mankind was a progress, with the help of reason, from a raw and primitive tribalism to a humane and sophisticated society; hence the enthusiasm for education, for technology and for spreading enlightenment to the dark corners of the earth.

But quite early, dissenting voices were heard. Rousseau saw civilisation as a process of corruption, spoiling man's inherent innocence and goodness by the possibilities it created for self-indulgence and the domination of others—a secular variant of the paradise-and-fall myth. It was no accident that Rousseau¹ was the first to note the songs cowherds used in his native Switzerland to call or to calm the cattle, the 'ranz de vaches' or 'Kuhreihen;' here was the voice of untutored and unspoiled human nature. Rousseauism contributed to playing at being shepherds becoming an upper-class pastime even in Versailles, but the pastoral fashion had much older roots, in Renaissance variations on Virgil's *Eclogues* and the poetry of Theocritus, criticisms of civilisation in their own time. In Germany, Johann Gottfried Herder, coming from the ethnically mixed Baltic countries, became a prophet of multiculturalism: the differences between people of different languages and backgrounds were real, and this diversity was a wealth that should not be covered with a unifying varnish. Nations, not in the political sense of states but of a shared language and shared traditions, had each their own genius or spirit, and that genius could best be found in isolated, untutored societies that preserved their local oral traditions, an anonymous collective cultural treasure. Hence his call to gather these treasures before they were overlaid by a universalist civilisation and forgotten. His international collection of folksongs² (texts only, no music), later called *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*³ (voices of nations in song) was his most significant contribution to this endeavour.

¹ In his contribution to Diderot's *Encyclopédie* of 1749; repeated in the *Dictionnaire de Musique* published under his own name in 1767, reprint (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969).

² *Volkslieder*, Leipzig 1778/9, reprint (Hildesheim: Olms, 1981).

³ Ed. J. v. Müller (Tübingen, 1807); many subsequent editions.

It was only during the turbulence of the Napoleonic Wars that a political dimension came to be added to this new interest. Napoleon's attempt to dominate Europe did threaten the historical and cultural diversity of that continent and laid the seeds of nationalism. Publications of folk material that probably would have reached only a limited public before, became hits since they now were welcomed as building blocks of a national identity. This was true of Arnim's and Brentano's motley collection of written historical and some orally transmitted material of 1806-8, again without music, called *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*,⁴ an inspiration still to Mahler, and the Brother Grimm fairytales first published in 1812-15.⁵ In Denmark, where ballads had been printed since 1591, a comprehensive collection was published in 1812-14, and here, tunes were given for about a third of the material.⁶ The Swedes followed suit in 1814-18.⁷

With Napoleon safely locked away on St. Helena, an attempt was made to restore the old order, and nationalism was discouraged since it threatened most existing states either by absorbing them into larger units or by dismembering them because of their ethnic and cultural diversity. But the yeast was there, both the yeast of liberalism, with a clamor for constitutions and popular representation to replace the sovereignty of kings and princes, and the yeast of nationalism, with a clamor that linguistic and cultural unity was the only natural foundation of states. The revolutionary movements of 1848 were crushed but their momentum remained, leading to the unification of first Italy, then Germany, and to growing unrest in the multicultural empires of Austria and Russia. Music, being tied neither to language nor to visual representation, might appear an unsuitable medium for nationalism but, in the end, composers, too, were eager to use material that could be identified as 'national.' Chopin, Verdi, Dvořák, Grieg, Sibelius are just a few examples.

Folk song, not being the province of educated people until the nineteenth century, was traditionally local or regional, the texts often in dialect, with an admixture of material from broadsheets, and their subject matter was either functional, as in work songs, sentimental, as in love songs, or sensational, as in ballads: murder, unfaithfulness, man-made or natural disasters, with a sprinkling of supernatural agents, whether from heaven or hell or wild nature. Hardly the sort of stuff amenable to being celebrated and taught as a national treasure, and after it had been discovered by the educated middle class, its main use for a while was to create atmosphere on the stage, like the ditties in Shakespeare plays.

I take a Danish example, a singspiel or musical from 1828 that turned into the most successful play ever in Denmark, still performed practically every year. Its title, *Elverhøi* (*Elves' Hill*) is taken from a rather undramatic ballad that is sung in the play: A young man lies down on Elves' Hill and in a dream sees elves urging him to join their dance. But fortunately, he wakes up before he yields to the temptation and so avoids the fate of another young ballad hero who on the way to fetch his bride did not resist and died after reaching home. The author,

⁴ The first volume, edited by Ludwig Achim von Arnim, was revised in 1819; the second and third volumes were the work of Clemens Brentano. Reprinted many times; critical edition by Heinz Rölleke (Frankfurt, 1975-78; Stuttgart: Reclam, 1987).

⁵ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Berlin: G. Reimer); thoroughly revised edition 1819, with further changes up to the 7th ed. of 1857.

⁶ *Udvalgte Danske Viser fra Middelalderen ... udgivne af Nyerup og Rahbek* (Kjøbenhavn: J.F. Schultz, 1812 [I, II], 1813 [III, IV], 1814 [V]).

⁷ *Svenska folk-visor från forntiden*, ed. E. G. Geijer och A. A. Afzelius (Stockholm: Strinnholm och Häggström).

Heiberg, had been asked to provide some theatrical entertainment for a royal wedding but was told not to make any direct reference to the event. So he made up a story about the popular seventeenth-century King Christian IV visiting a backward part of his country where people still believed in elves and their master, Klintekongen ('the Cliff King'). This is combined with an intrigue of mistaken identities, and the King both solves that piece of detective work and brings enlightenment to a superstitious local population; in the end the mysterious 'elf girl' is shown to be identical with the King's godchild one of his courtiers was to marry. The ideological purpose was to show the benefits of royal rule—Denmark was still an absolute monarchy at the time—and to show the King communicating with all layers of society, thus becoming a symbol of comprehensive social bonding. The songs used in the play—some adapted from existing ones, others made up by the author—followed traditional patterns: ballads about the supernatural as the one that gave the play its title, love songs, hunting songs, wedding songs. Where no melodies were readily available because the songs were made up, Heiberg was very specific as to what material he wanted the composer, Kuhlau, to use so as to create the right sort of atmosphere. Most melodies in Danish folk song were happy and pretty ordinary, undistinguishable from those used in Germany, while many Swedish and Faroese melodies sounded more archaic, more mysterious, more suitable for a play taking place in seventeenth-century rural Denmark. Heiberg was by no means a nationalist, but by virtue of the play's national subject matter and its immense success, these melodies came to be felt as quintessentially Danish or at least Nordic. For even before the middle of the century, philologists were at work trying to reconstruct a common Nordic tradition of balladry, the result of their efforts being published between 1853 and 1976 in the monumental work *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*.⁸

Herder was no ethnographer. Just as Heiberg had no qualms about writing new folksongs, though he was a highly educated city person, Herder had no qualms about including in his folksong collection some texts written by his young friend Goethe as long as they conformed to his idea of a folk song in spirit, in terms of images, simplicity of language, etc.; and Goethe's 'Heideröslein' would in time become a real functional folksong by virtue of its concise symbolic expression of a universal (and sensational) theme. There were many folksong editions by people who simply wished to make such basically local or regional musical material more generally known and accessible, that is by providing them with piano accompaniment or transcribing them as instrumental pieces, and just as pure text anthologies could include made-up material, musical collections could contain musical fakelore. One very gifted such editor was the Rhinelander Zuccalmaglio, whose collection *Deutsche Volkslieder mit ihren Originalweisen* (German folk songs with their original tunes) of 1838-41⁹ became very popular all over Germany; Brahms used a number of them, some of which were Zuccalmaglio's adaptations or inventions—these were the more mysterious and archaic-sounding ones.

By their very titles, this and similar song collections postulated folksong as a phenomenon with national properties; and they became the vehicles by which the songs spread nationally. There were many occasions when they were *used* nationally, at national meetings of students,

⁸ Begun by Svend Grundtvig; 12 vols.

⁹ The work, published in Berlin, was begun by August Kretzschmer and continued by Anton Wilhelm von Zuccalmaglio; reprint (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969).

choristers, athletes, sharpshooters and a variety of professional, party and hobby associations met at conventions and celebrations where communal singing was high on the agenda. The feeling of community and unitedness of purpose experienced at these mass meetings undoubtedly also tinged the songs heard or performed on such occasions, irrespective of their origin and content; what had once been a Swabian or Bavarian song became a 'German' one because of its use on such occasions. Students were both fierce nationalists and fierce promoters of the new popular song culture, often going on concert tours, and university choir conductors such as Friedrich Silcher in Tübingen, Otto Lindblad in Lund, Henrik Rung in Copenhagen and Joh. D. Behrens in Christiania played a key role in the refashioning of rural and regional material for urban and national users and audiences.

The nature of the texts was something of a problem to the editors and educators. Love songs and stories about murder and adultery were hardly suitable material for schools, and they also sadly lacked national content, unless it was a story of a countryman of yours defeating a foreigner—a Greek killing a Turk, a Spaniard killing a Moor, a Dane killing a German. There was a limited number of songs about famous battles or other historical events but they were not frequently used in popular singing, and often they could only be found in written sources, without a melody; but that could be remedied. I take another Danish example. One of the most widely spread songs in the nineteenth century, which for a few decades was generally believed to be an old folksong, dealt with the mythical Queen Tyra building a line of fortification in Slesvig, with help from all parts of her kingdom: the ideal sort of thing to promote national unity and distancing yourself from your southern neighbours. The text was written by a seventeenth-century schoolmaster with similar ideals, and the melody was composed by one of the contributors to the 1812–14 collection mentioned above. When he sent it to the editors, he said the melody was from his home region—which was not a lie, since he lived in that region. It is quite unlike genuine folksong melodies from oral tradition; which only shows how little the musical material mattered as long as the belief in its being a folksong was strong enough.

To have a national song treasury mattered most in nations which were only emerging as independent states or aspiring to that position. Finland is a case in point. For centuries part of Sweden, it passed to Russia in Napoleonic times, becoming a Grand Duchy with an amount of cultural and administrative autonomy. The educated classes were still Swedish-speaking, and they were eager to create a 'Finnish' national tradition. Runeberg, author of the national anthem, tried to write a kind of simple folk poetry with a Finnish atmosphere, but his models, in imagery and metre, were the Serb folksongs that had become known in early nineteenth-century Europe in German translation. His countryman (and fellow Swedish speaker) Elias Lönnroth saw a need of finding Finnish-language roots for a new national folk poetry. He collected a number of so-called rune songs in the backwards rural areas of the easternmost province of Karelia, and he fused these into an epic he called *Kalewala*, later to inspire artists such as Gallén-Kallela and composers such as Sibelius—both of whom also came from Swedish-speaking homes. Which just confirms both nationalism and folksong as concepts and ideals of the middle class, the culturally dominant layer of society in nineteenth-century Europe. Norway was the other Northern country that aspired to, and finally achieved, independence in the nineteenth century. There too, folksong and folkmusic survived best in the secluded mountain

valleys and fjords and was eagerly collected and used to substitute a distinctive national tradition to the legacy of five centuries of common culture with Denmark. The Norwegians even went so far as to create a new artificial language based on the more archaic southwestern dialects, and thanks to a number of gifted writers using this new idiom, it has survived until today, being used by about one fifth of the population in preference to the Norwegianised Danish common in the cities. On the Faroe Islands, it could be claimed that the old ballads, not only sung but also danced, were the only surviving elements of a native tradition. The creators of the modern Faroese written language used the texts of these ballads as a basis to work from, and the singing and dancing of ballads has remained the main manifestation of national identity on the Faroe Islands until this day.

The search for the historical roots of folk culture was a general phenomenon, and in Germany as in Scandinavia it was seen as confirmation of the sought-for political unification. In Scandinavia, there was a strong academic middle-class movement aiming at a united Nordic state, which came to grief when Sweden-Norway only sent volunteers, not the regular army, to help the Danes in the two Slesvig wars. In Germany, the first comprehensive and scholarly historical collection, *Alte Hoch- und Niederdeutsche Volkslieder*, was published by the poet and historian Ludwig Uhland in 1844.¹⁰ The title is significant: that high and low German songs should be collected together was not a matter of course, given that these two forms of German were mutually comprehensible only to a limited degree. It was a cultural programme paralleling the programme of political unification eagerly pursued by the Frankfurt Assembly of 1848, nicknamed the 'Parliament of Professors.' In effect, Low German songs (among which Uhland included Dutch and Flemish material) never quite made it in the larger Middle and Upper German areas; songs that succeeded getting a solid foothold such as 'Aennchen von Tharau' and 'Die zwei Königskinder', did so in High German translation. And with the extent and diversity of the German-speaking areas, the task of gathering folk songs into a national treasure became colossal. Ludwig Erb, director of music at the Prussian Teachers College in Berlin, was the most assiduous collector, but he never managed to publish more than eight fascicles of ballads in the 1850ies. After his death in 1883 Franz M. Böhme sifted through the material, publishing a total of 2175 songs, with variants and notes, in his colossal *Deutscher Liederhort* of 1893.

Austria was in a difficult position, politically as well as culturally. The German-speaking population was a minority within the Habsburg Empire, and while the German unifiers would have welcomed them to the new united fatherland, they did not want all those Slavs and Hungarians and Italians and other nationalities that came with Austria—nor did these nationalities wish to be part of a united German state. This did not prevent folk music from the mountainous areas of Tyrol and Styria to become a European hit. Like a lot of people in unindustrialised and agriculturally meagre regions, Tyrolians and Styrians were dependent on earning a crust elsewhere during the summer months, and quite a few of them did so by yodeling and singing, and fiddling and Zither-playing their way across nineteenth-century Europe, keeping their regional identity and thus escaping being claimed as embodiments of a national spirit.

¹⁰ Tübingen/Stuttgart; reprint (Hildesheim, Olms 1968).

Multicultural states were highly endangered in the age of nationalism. Not only the big empires were dismembered, though only after the First World War; smaller states, too, broke up: the German-speaking third of Denmark joined Germany after two wars and Norway broke away from Sweden without a war. The Swiss had a hard time justifying their separate existence; a common history and a Republicanism linked to strong traditions of local autonomy being their most powerful arguments for a separate national identity, but folk music also played its part. Only a small minority of Swiss had ever been cowherds in the Alps, just as only a small minority of Australians have ever roughed in the bush, but it was their music—like the bush ballads in Australia—that people identified as a national tradition. The alpenhorn was saved from extinction by the growing interest of tourists around 1800, and singing and playing folk music retained the double function of creating an archetypal ideal Switzerland both for the visiting tourist and for the resident city dweller or the farmer from low-lying districts where folk music was not a living tradition. When threatened from outside, there was so much more of a need for such identifiers, and the Swiss Broadcasting Company kept up an endless production of synthetic folk music in the 1930s and during the Second World War, extinguishing much of the distinct local traditions in the process.

But there are more recent examples of the rallying force of song and folk music for political purposes. In the old Soviet Union, cultural diversity, especially of a popular kind, was encouraged as long as the party's monopoly of power was not called into question. In the Baltic States, groups devoted to folk song and folk dance became the crystallizing points of resistance and were catalysts for the independence movement when the iron grip of the police state weakened. Once independence was won, interest in these activities dropped dramatically, and now such groups are singing and playing mainly for foreign tourists. And although the tourists would like to hear the genuine exotic thing, the performers are gradually adapting to Western forms of popular music. Maybe, despite the loss of diversity it entails, this is a natural and inevitable process. It is the use of folk song and folk music for political purposes that seeks to freeze them into something archaic and unchangeable since they are meant to represent something people want to hold on to as a foundation of their collective identity.