

# The Past President Looks at the Past

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During my four-year tenure as President (2001 to 2005), the inner workings of the CSTM revealed themselves to me at a slow and leisurely pace. I was already primed by my view from the outside, thanks to the *Journal* and to *Canadian Folk Music*. It appeared that the only prerequisites for election as President were a bottomless enthusiasm for the organization (no problem there) and a basic understanding of the workings of an executive committee. However, I discovered that this apparent calm was only one stretch of a larger stream of activity that also featured troubled waters due to alarmingly severe budget restrictions.

I came to the Presidency as an ethnomusicologist with a new-found appreciation of ethnic music study in my own backyard, Canada. My training had been in places now called Other (in my case, Japan and England, and even the Other of West Coast First Nations), and that training allowed me to see my cultural home with fresh eyes and ears. No doubt you are recalling T. S. Eliot's famous line at this moment:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
("Little Gidding," from the *Four Quartets*).

My responsibilities appeared to be modest. The executive met once a year, for four hours each year, at an Annual General Meeting. Those Sunday morning business meetings were barely enough time to make acquaintances, let alone create business initiatives, but the society appeared to be in a successful holding pattern, similar to a caretaker government. I was required to be a "chair" with Robert's Rules of Order neatly at hand, and to mediate debates and discussions. Those friendly yet hectic meetings were followed by year-long silences, broken only occasionally by letters and an anxious phone call or two. The www has changed that somewhat, with instant communication filling the space between AGMs, thanks to email.

I was impressed from the very first meeting by the amazing way that various committee members took care of business without any prompting from the executive. In particular, the

editors of the *Bulletin* (David and Rosaleen Gregory), *Journal* (Gordon Smith), Treasurer (James Prescott), the website (Heather Sparling) and others were exemplary self-starters. Veteran, distinguished board members such as John Leeder were also key to the continuance of the CSTM and its ideals. That is not to say that there were not some occasional misunderstandings, only that operation was low maintenance, as far as executive decision-making was concerned.

However, membership and treasurer reports did not substantiate the calm state of affairs that seemed to rule the day. There seemed to be two faces of the CSTM, the official history full of good works and commendable actions, and the unofficial history that was not keeping up with sweeping changes in the cultural landscape and its gardeners, i.e., funding agencies. I became haunted by Harry Truman's famous quote – "those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it". Past presidents including myself seemed to have been caught in the middle of these two histories.

The official history of the CSTM is credible and even exemplary. It is easily accessed by reading the entry for the Society in the *Encyclopaedia of Canadian Music* which is now on-line. Thanks to the authors of the entry, Helmut Kallman and Alan Thrasher, one discovers that the society was created in 1956 by the great Canadian folklorist and ethnomusicologist, Marius Barbeau, with the help of Maud Karpeles, using the template of the International Folk Music Council, founded by Ms. Karpeles in 1947. In those pioneering times, folklore and folk music ruled the day, with First Nations music relegated to the (now) Museum of Civilization. Gordon Smith (Queen's University in Kingston) has prepared a paper on the history of the *Journal* which no doubt will fill in many gaps in the story following those heady early years (The back issues of the informal *Bulletin*/magazine await the same kind of scrutiny.) The Constitution of the non-profit society (and the last four years of AGM minutes), available on the excellent CSTM web site, also gives one an excellent view of the ideals and lofty ambitions of the Society.

However, the 'other' history is not quite so accessible. The unofficial history begins as a tale

of palmy days of healthy income, followed by chronic shortages of money. An account of this history would likely be in the minutes of Annual General Meetings, but these documents are not readily available, perhaps because the story refuses to resolve itself, as evidenced in tangled and dangling threads of motions and debates. Of course, I stand to be corrected on this point, and all other thoughts I mention in this article. The short of it is that the CSTM currently leads a very frugal life and it is constantly haunted by the spectre of red ink. That is not to say that the membership did not faithfully pay their dues, which they did. But the CSTM, like any other special-interest organization, needs far more than the income accrued from membership fees to sustain its curiosity. And don't we all know that where there are money problems, other conflicts lie just below the surface.

In my first couple of years as President I learned that the CSTM had suffered a severe indignity at the hand of provincial and federal funding agencies. Sometime in the mid or early eighties, the prime source of funding, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council ("Shirk") did an audit of the membership of the CSTM and promptly cut off its yearly funds for publications. Why? Apparently they took issue with the inherent dual citizenship of the CSTM – academics and performers. The latter are mostly non-professionals with one particular interest which can be called revival singing for lack of a better term.

Revival singers, as opposed to singer-songwriters, are devoted to maintaining the songs collected by songcatchers, a well-known pursuit of a hundred years ago. At that time, there was no end to the repertoire and its variants throughout the English (and French) speaking worlds. The songs also exemplified a life-style and value system that seems timeless, such as home music-making. Revival singers feed off the wonderful discoveries of songcatchers who, in turn, are beholden to culture-bearers. Perhaps the most famous songcatchers within the CSTM were Marius Barbeau (1883–1969), Helen Creighton (1899-1989), and Edith Fowke (1913–1996), a founding member who was also central to the CSTM in the sixties and seventies, especially in regard to funding.

Shirk did not want to fund performers, particularly amateur ones, and they did not see enough academics in the membership roster to warrant their largesse. This decision is hardly surprising. Shirk's mandate, as given to it by the people of Canada via the federal government, is

to support academic research, not culture bearers, or their revivalists and "interested parties". Performers are supported by Canada Council. Songcatchers and their culture-bearers come under the prerogative of Canadian Heritage. Even given the presence of non-academics, how could Shirk possibly ignore the value of the *Journal*!? It brims with academic insights, even if it has been chronically hamstrung with tight production budgets.

So who assists the singer-revivalists? The glaring error in the tidy logic of the Ottawa mandarins is the importance of practicing musicians, especially amateurs, to the CSTM and traditional music in general. The singer-revivalists who bring the work of Edith Fowke and others to life are emulating the passage of traditional songs already in circulation via the old-fashioned folk process of oral transmission. The singer-revivalists are the very reason why folk music exists in the first place, and their presence is a crucial balance to the top-heavy nature of academic navel-gazing. Unlike the traditional folk singers of long ago, some of whom became culture-bearers, modern-day singer revivalists want to spread the word well beyond the travels of any of the old culture-bearers who sang for themselves and their friends. Their repertoires became icons of their culture, and it is this symbolism that needs to be known in the rapidly changing culture of Canada. An ongoing record of this point of view is readily available in the CSTM *Bulletin* which is an excellent historical record unmatched by any other publication in the world. It is Canada.

The singers who attend the AGMs appreciate the paper-sessions that sometimes take them from their familiar roots to distant places, giving them new vistas of appreciation for their own musical efforts. They even contribute some fabulous research that is purely from interest, and not because of any fears of "publish or perish". Nevertheless, for the singers the casual sing-arounds on the Saturday and sometimes Friday evenings of AGM weekends are the highlights. As an academic I was inspired and not a little intimidated by the challenge of participating as a performer. Fortunately my time in a Morris dance team at countless after-dance pubs allowed me to learn some chorus songs and hack away at jigs with a penny whistle. These experiences allowed me to join in, albeit with some trepidation. As I think about it further, it should be a condition of Canadian music academic employment that all Canadian music academics can hold a tune, dance a jig, and

accompany on a banjo. Then there would be no “us” and “them”.

Be that as it may, even in 1999 when the dual nature of the CSTM was explained to the Shirk mandarins in Ottawa, they were just as unsympathetic as they were in the mid 1980s. It would seem that they viewed the overall membership as a group of passionate hobbyists and not in their purview.

Since then, money to publish the journals and bulletins of the society has been chronically deficient all the time. It is very likely that the CSTM publications would be dead from financial starvation if it wasn't for the fiscal forecasting talents of the long-time treasurer, James Prescott. Another sombre fact is the flat-line of the membership which has been at about 300 for decades (with an unexplained spike of 500 in 1987). This stagnation is in direct contrast to enrolment in Canadian ethnomusicology and folklore departments, and the passion for folk music among summer festival-goers, etc.

One can only marvel at the lack of support from all levels of governments, private industry, and, dare I say, academic institutions. The CSTM appears to be almost the sole custodian of the music that formed the very fabric of Canadian history. (Certainly organizations like the folklore departments of Memorial University of Newfoundland and Laval University do an excellent job of maintaining their provincial musics.) Traditional music's roots help connect Canadians to their Old Worlds. Its topics and dreams give voice to the Canadian experience. Even Canadianists(!), those professional academics who study Canada as Other, have a huge investment in Canadian traditional music. One can see their passion on the website of the International Organization of Canadian Studies.

This travesty of neglect is also in stark contrast to the passion for Canadiana in literature such as Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972 and still in print!), Michael Adams' *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada, and the Myth of Converging Values* (2004), and a host of other titles which devote themselves to the exploration of Canadian identity well beyond its three Ds (dress, dance, diet). How can there be such enthusiasm for this exploration of the elements of Canadian identity and a complete lack of financial and spiritual support for the CSTM?

The singer-revivalists are mirrored in the general folk music revival movement which became mainstream popular music in the fifties, peaking in 1963 with the American television

series *Hootenanny*. Within a year this program was axed because of the overwhelming British Invasion led by the Beatles. It was replaced with a rock and roll dance program called *Shindig*, one indicator among many that folk music was doomed to be eclipsed by rock and roll. Folk musicians reacted with folk-rock fusions in the early seventies but the merging of the two styles shook the folk music community's faith in folk music's basic tenets—home music-making. Folk music retreated to a niche market, albeit huge, judging from summer music festivals. Even so, these are dominated by singer-songwriters. Still, the current prevailing attitude to folk music was encapsulated in the 2003 mockumentary *A Mighty Wind* (Warner). It portrayed a prevalent view that folk singers are cultural dinosaurs.

Despite the eclipse of the popularity of folk music in the mid sixties, British folk songs from hundreds of years ago have proved to be an almost bottomless pit for academic exploration. They exist in great profusion and diffusion, with ambivalent meanings embedded in their lyrics. Even today there are international gatherings of ballad scholars who continue to scale the heights of the ballad literature. So, there is a clear avenue of endeavour for the singer-revivalists who might want to bulk up the academic side of the CSTM and produce research that will be published. But I suspect that research is seen by some as dry and beside the point. Singer-revivalists would prefer to walk the walk, rather than talk the talk.

After the collapse in government funding in the mid eighties the CSTM was rescued by yearly, modest grants from SOCAN (Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada). At about the same time, new players entered the fray, Canadian ethnomusicologists. Actually, ethnomusicology always had a somewhat modest place in the CSTM, beginning with Barbeau's interest in the music of the Ontario and Northwest Coast First Peoples. But in the seventies and eighties, ethnomusicology became a viable domain in university schools and departments of music.

The ethnomusicologists were courted, presumably in the hope that they might tip the balance of the CSTM in favour of academics (and satisfy the dubious demands of Shirk). Seemingly to this end, the CSTM, originally the Canadian Folk Music Society, followed the example of the International Folk Music Council which had transformed itself into the ethnomusicologically-based International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) in 1981.

The Canadian Folk Music Society changed its name in 1988, enlarging its mandate to include traditional music from around the world, from world folk music (e.g., Japanese minyo) to world art music (e.g., Japanese gagaku). “Folk music” as it is commonly understood, was subsumed into a smaller category. The term “traditional” has been in for a rough ride in the last decade or so, because it hints at a permanent culture and a cache as authentic, both of which are very debatable. But the average reader gets the point.

Despite the courtship of the ethnomusicologists, the romance never ensued. They did not flock to the society in significant numbers. Sometime around 1988 they even began a process of founding their own constituency. A hint of this re-alignment is found in the publication titled *Ethnomusicology in Canada* (Toronto, 1990), edited by one of Canada’s most important ethnos, Robert Witmer. The book is essentially a record of the proceedings of a gathering of ethnomusicologists from across Canada in 1988. I was among those who gathered at the inaugural meeting of all those in Canada somehow connected to the business of ethnomusicology. (At that time I was only a bit player.) The tentative title for the group was the Canadian National Committee of the ICTM, following the example of the National Committee of Great Britain, which was founded in 1973 (and then went on to great endeavours and an excellent journal). But it does not seem to have moved forward from this early stage.

It would seem that Canadian ethnomusicologists cannot resist the pull of the (American) Society for Ethnomusicology, which is very central to ethnomusicology in the New World, given its huge membership base, brilliant academic stars, and inclusive nature. Today, almost all ethnomusicologists in North America look to the SEM for validation and even prospects of employment. Aside from a few bright lights, there seems to be little interest in the CSTM among the Canadian ethno community. It would be interesting to know exactly why.

One aspect of traditional folk music that has fuelled the imagination and the motivations of the revival singers is the sustenance of home music-making, as I mentioned earlier. Ceilidhs, the fires in the kitchens. The singer-revivalists harbour the fear that making music at home and in intimate community settings is in serious decline, thanks to the advent of mass market electronic music designed to be appreciated in a

passive state, and subject to sound-surround ubiquity.

One does find a curious shyness among North Americans when it comes to singing in public, and it is tempting to attribute this near phobia to some sort of North American trait that arose after the death of singing at home. But public singing thrives in countries where pop music also flourishes. And more important, live singing is doing very well right here in Canada in the form of, wait for it, karaoke. The surest test for this form of active music participation is found in TV programs like *Canadian Idol* and *American Idol*, not so much in the programs themselves, but in the enormous line-ups of contestants who wish to enter the first round of competition. I was in Montreal recently and witnessed the queue for *Canadian Idol* contestants, which must have been at least two city blocks long. Kids love to sing along with their musical tastes in the company of their friends. We await research on this phenomenon to learn whether it is a flash in the pan or an evolutionary step in singing out loud. This form of home music-making is also alive and bursting out of its seams in the proliferation of garage bands. Ask any retailer of electric guitars. Rock and roll research in Canada is being overseen by the Canadian arm of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music.

It is interesting to compare another organization that aspire to somewhat the same ends as the CSTM – the Folklore Studies Association of Canada/ L'Association canadienne d'ethnologie et de folklore (ACEF). They also experience the enormous gravitational attraction of an American counterpart, the American Folklore Society, but unlike most Canadian SEM members, FSAC members value membership in both organizations. On the other hand, they only have one constituency, academics, who sustain a very impressive journal. They do not have culture-bearers and their revivalists who sit patiently while academics pour over the minutiae of their lifestyles.

FSAC is sustained by extremely active and vibrant folklore departments in Newfoundland (MUN) and Quebec (Laval). I can think of no university music department that takes pride in a component of folk music, except perhaps for those at Memorial University of Newfoundland and University of Cape Breton. They offer programs in say, fiddle with a minor in squeeze-box. Further, it seems that FSAC strives to be functionally bilingual, more so than the CSTM.

(I admit guilt in this regard. I grew up on the Prairies and my generation was force-fed French but with no sense of its life in Canada.)

So, in conclusion, where are we? What is the CSTM nowadays, and does it have a future?

Canadian ethnomusicologists prefer to participate in the Society for Ethnomusicology, and seem to exclude the CSTM from their dossier of work.

Canadian singer-songwriters (albeit with an interest in their folk music roots) get their sustenance (and career boosts) from the 'folk music industry' (magazines and music organizations devoted to their entrepreneurial ambitions).

Canadian home music-making is alive and well, but its predominant repertoire is pop or rock music, not traditional music.

Ballad scholars can easily avail themselves of associations (and departments) of folklore, given their mutual interests in cultural context. Their contribution to the CSTM is at their whim.

That leaves the revival-singers, who carefully tend the repertoires of folk songs from the British Isles. I should properly include French folk songs, something I know all too little about. Of course, they would want to continue to receive sustenance from the ballad scholars. And they enjoy the occasional foray into world music so they can compare and contrast. But I suspect they are happiest when they revel in the performance (and only secondarily in the contemplation) of ballads.

However, folk song performance and research into traditions deriving from the British Isles may not be enough to sustain the CSTM on the national stage, partly because it is a limited interest and often does not include traditional instrumental music. More importantly, Canada is inexorably becoming multicultural, with emphases on hyphenated music, such as Irish-Canadian, Muslim-Canadian, etc. which is trumping *les deux solitudes*, Franco-Canadian and Anglo-Canadian music. So research in old Albion's balladry could contribute to this climate but its organization would probably have to abandon its current title, CSTM, and rename itself CS T M of the United Kingdom, Ireland, Brittany, and Normandy.

The CSTM seems to have been struggling with this Gordian Knot for decades, which explains the lack of information about the President's place in the CSTM. It is not a conspiracy of silence, but a speechless bewilderment at a predicament with seemingly no solution.

It is very tempting to let sleeping dogs lie. Every CSTM AGM I've attended has been great—great papers, great company, great music-making. Presentations included core English and French music literature, and World Music excursions. But it would appear that the CSTM continues to fade from public consciousness, and therefore its sources of funds. Its precarious position is also evident in the tenuous place of its long-term executive members, any one of whom may retire at any moment. And then there is the alarming lack of interest among the academic community, particularly the ethnomusicologists. For example, each AGM has a shocking lack of local academics and their students, despite one or two token appearances. And finally, the untenable neglect of Shirk and the other federal department with even more reason to pay close attention, the Department of Heritage, also leaves one at a loss for words. The Department of Heritage seem to be entirely focused on the Intangible Cultural Heritage of First Nations (especially language), UNESCO-like intercultural initiatives, and the Canadian pop music industry.

There is an alleged Chinese curse that says, "May you be born in interesting times". This is obviously the lot of the current CSTM. I look forward to seeing the dialogue that will come out of the struggle to re-examine the basis of the CSTM and its constituency. My money is on a rebirth that will focus on the CSTM as a leader in the key markers of the Grand Canadian Narrative—defining who we are.

