Reflections on the Problem: How Old Is the Concept Folksong?

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This year* musicology should remember the two men who have given a greater part of their creative life to the folk song: Béla Bartók, who died a quarter-century ago on September 26, 1945, and Werner Danckert, who passed away on March 5, 1970. Anyone who knows and reveres these men would never think that the object of their activity had been something unsubstantial or unreal. Yet such thinking has of late been expressed. The folksong, it is explained, simply does not exist, and it never has. The entire concept is a fiction, and whatever reality lies behind it is something completely at odds with what was conceived by Herder and Goethe and all the poets, composers, and scholars who came after them.

From what does this strange view derive? Fifty years ago, when Bartók, Kodály, and others investigated the folksong of Europe and non-European lands with renewed vigor, German literary scholars of the Hans Naumann school who remained apart from these investigations, evolved a radical theory out of a tradition that reached from Friedrich Nicolai to John Meier. This theory stated that the folksong was an inferior cultural heritage and that any notion of it, since Herder, was a poetical fiction. Günther Müller states in Geschichte des Deutschen Liedes (1925) that “one of the important yields of modern folk study for the history of the folksong should be that the effective but enigmatic concept ‘folksong’ be seen as the pseudo-historical garb of a new lyric force” (p. 204).

Ernst Klusen espouses this theory when he creates the title of his book Volkslied. Fund und Erfindung (Cologne, 1969) from an essay by Max Kommerell of 1932-33, and using the following sentences from this work as a motto: “The folksong is primarily a hypothesis, and as a hypothesis an invention. Neither at the time of the Minnesang, of Luther, nor of German Baroque did one speak of folksongs. A skeptic would say that Herder discovered not only the name, but also the whole content of the folksong. But to know how, in this case, the actual findings are related to the invention would be no small disclosure about the origin and nature of the German song”. Lacking the restraint with which Kommerell gives his doubts, Klusen declares that scientifically one could scarcely cherish illusions respecting the fictional nature of the concept of the “folksong”. Herder’s conception was a fiction even at the moment of its invention, although it was a creative kind of error which opened “direct paths, but also detours and dead ends as well” (p.

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“I thus clearly assert that the folksong simply does not exist in the sense in which the term has been used since Herder”. In its place, Klusen offers as a fundamental term “group song” (Gruppenlied), which was “a simple tool in the group life” of classes, national groups, working organizations, religious groups, rifle clubs, etc. (p. 189, 30 ff.). Klusen’s book does not measure up to the standard of international folksong research, as is clear already from its bibliography as well as from its name and subject indices. But it does contain good documentations of the history of our more familiar milieu. One should evaluate his positive aspects as well as his critique of this idealistic heritage in order to be in a position to reappraise further those still contested basic questions concerning folksong research, which might also be pursued with better methods of historical research.

The short contribution which follows is limited to two questions. Did Klusen properly interpret Herder’s pronouncements regarding the true meaning of the folksong? And was Herder’s concept so new that it could be called a discovery? Did there exist before him actually no general concept of a folksong?

I. Herder’s concept of the folksong.

The young “universal genius” to whom we owe the beginnings of folksong study was too rich in ideas to allow himself to be labeled by us with any simplistic descriptions. One may really come to terms with Herder easily only if one relies on current secondary sources, rather than being buried in the primary sources. In Klusen’s view, Herder’s conception of the folksong has these three attributes: Every folksong is 1) beautiful, 2) generally well-known, and 3) old (p. 133). If this interpretation were a fact, then a great mind would have given way to childlike illusions; he did, in fact, claim instead the opposite from what Klusen maintains he did.

1. Paul Levy made some criticisms of Herder’s “exaggerated evaluation” of the folksong, but these are not really reliable. That Herder took up only what appeared to him of value in his anthology, is hardly proof that what he did not accept he considered of merit, too. No one would impute the belief to publishers of German poetry anthologies that all of the poems which Germany has ever produced are equal in value. Herder states specifically that “rarely does one find beautiful works everywhere and at all times”. “What miserable songs” were included even by Bishop Percy in his Reliques of Ancient Poetry! The German folksong tradition, however, scarcely offers the rich treasures of the English, Herder claims. He adds that only in rare instances could the best pieces of the English, Spanish, or Germanic peoples be considered equal in value. “Whether this is due to internal or external factors (usually it is due to both), the German harp has always been muted, and the folk voice lowly and not very lively”. But also in general, and regarding the folk spirit of all lands, Herder not only revealed great enthusiasm for the significance of the folksong, but he also denied for it the
rank of mature art. That which he published "under the modest title" of folksong, he viewed more "as the raw material of poetic art rather than art in itself". He objects, on the other hand, to one's "regarding the lumpy metal which comes from the bosom of nature as finished, classic coins, or the flowers of forest and field as the crown with which King Salomon . . . is anointed".

2. Klusen says that in Herder's opinion folksongs were generally familiar among the whole people, and that their beauty was thereby demonstrated. Whereas the people of his day who published song collections for mothers, students, farmers, etc., knew that such songs never existed in an imaginary people but rather in tightly limited groups, Herder tended to cloak this true state of affairs with his "folksong" concept. But his already quoted sentence that "the beautiful is seldom everywhere at all times" demonstrates that Klusen is wrong. Herder repeatedly mentions songs of distinctive regions and classes of people: "provincial songs", "hunting songs", and "the rounds of country folk", etc. Also, what he intends by the word "folk" in his conception of the folksong is certainly not a country's entire population. A portion of the city population, for instance, does not seem to belong in this group: "The folk is not the mob on the streets, who never sing or compose but only yell and garble things". And if folksongs seem to him characteristic for particular peoples, appear as their "voice" or as a form of "national poetry", he does not claim, thereby, that they are generally accepted.

3. For Herder, as Klusen maintains, a folksong is inevitably old. In order to be able to assert the wide acceptance of a musical form suggested by the word "folk", Herder, he states, escaped into a mythical past which was for him a golden age. What does Herder himself say about this? If the songs collected by Charlemagne were to be found, they would be merely objects of study by antiquarians, and "not folksongs for our own time". The poems of the Minnesingers did not become "living folksongs", but rather they remained in libraries as a "collection of old and venerable pieces in miniature". Herder, as we know, called upon his contemporaries with much success to "sing the phenomena of our time with such naturalness, noble brevity, and spirit as the old songs were delivered in their time!" In this way, Herder was able to include Goethe's poems as folksongs in his collection, just as he named Gleim, who in 1772 brought out his own Songs for the People, "the first and almost only folk singer in Germany" (letter of 1777).

Herder's remarks about the folksong derive mostly from the epoch of his Sturm und Drang. During this period, and within a few years, a considerable transformation took place: from the first spark of enthusiasm for his initial idea, through the withdrawal of the first collection from the press in 1775, up to the time of the second edition—made against his will—and the bitter words of 1779: "There is a time to speak of folksongs, and a time not to speak of them. The moment has come for the latter, and I myself, over the past years, have heard enough even of the desecrated name 'folksong'. I would like to be rid of the matter even if my first aims have hardly been achieved".
was disappointed by the poverty of good material contained in his collection in Germany, and had grown resigned by dint of some forms of enthusiasm for the folksong among his contemporaries, as well as "some gentlemen who find great delight in discrediting folksongs in general."  

Even his first ideas depended on some experience when he emphasized that he had not discovered a "distinctive illusion", but rather that he himself had heard in the Baltic region "vivid remnants of these ancient, untamed songs". More and more, in the years that followed, concrete information accompanied his poetical hypotheses. Herder would have liked to verify certain ideas that excited him, but he adjusted to facts as they stood. He was, of course, a writer and original thinker, but a scholar as well; in addition, he was a literary historian, an "historian of mankind", of human culture, and a keen student of his time: "I began early to gather up a history of lyric songs". Today's scholars should not do any injustice to this many-sided man—the founding father of folksong study—by considering him merely an imaginative inventor. He was also a scientist. He wrote no academic monograph with formal pronouncements on the folksong. Additionally, he belongs to those thinkers whose strong point lay more in their abundance of ideas than in logic's flow of thought. Yet should we not actually employ the cliché 'contradictory' when speaking of his concept of folksong? Does Herder perhaps not reveal more aspects rather than the formulas of small minds?

1). In its fundamental tone, his conception belongs to the discussion of the relations between nature and art. Before Herder coined the expression "folksong", he spoke of nature's poetry, and similar expressions that are related to it. He wished to present "to lovers of poetry and genuine natural song an entire collection of such folksongs". He became fascinated, as did Montaigne, Goethe, and others, by the possible existence of songs which could be seen not as any artistic product, but as a kind of natural growth, appearing to him as naively simple, wild and rough. Such songs are without artifice, and often rhyme poorly, yet precisely because of this they are more vivid than smoothly regulated verses. These songs are intended to be listened to and sung; they are not for reading, and for this reason they are more alive to our senses and more comprehensible to the masses than are poems that are "made for paper". They are in no way standardized, therefore "all folksongs on this earth are altered; no province sings its own without variation". In their oral transmission, as in their origin, the Natura naturans seems to be at work; and it is "Nature's spirit which gives voice in them". In the century of Rousseau, therefore, they provided an antipode to the "artificial modes of our century", to our "paper civilization", which mankind appeared to succumb to. However, they provide no contrast to those works in which both art and human culture combine, as in those of Homer and Shakespeare. But Herder little pursued the question of what degree even art and human culture were active elements in the folksong; he consciously sought in them "more of nature than art".
2). In his notion of the folksong, Herder primarily has in mind the contrast to literary poems of the arty manuscript, which is really analogous to the contrast in his metaphor of the flowers of field and of art. It fascinated him that such songs were not read, but that they were sung with live voices, that they were orally transmitted and thereby altered, that they were a concrete part of real life, and that they were, thus, not polished in either form or rhythm. But there existed the secondary question about their distribution in society. The varied interpretations of the word ‘folk’ played a role here, and in this fashion, Herder’s basic concept took on various overtones of meaning.

a) Herder believed he could still discover folksongs in his sense of the word, especially the most rough-hewn ones, among “primitive” peoples. He therefore presupposes that they existed in the early age of human development. There was no doubt, he felt, that the “song”, in the beginning, was completely folksy, i.e., simple, easy, and filled with the natural objects in the primitive people’s lives. He wanted to throw light on the origins of song by drawing comparisons with today’s primitive people, by comparing, for example, the ancient war songs of Greek antiquity with those of modern Indians, or the roots of Greek comedy with the Indians’ mask ritual.

b) Folksongs are sung among rural folk and other lower classes of people who also possess a cultivated art. Herder employs the expression “basic life-force of a nation” — as a fluid or humour, in the old, biological sense — invoking the nautical image of the unstable motion of water on a ship’s deck. But he distinguishes between “a true folksong” and one marked by “the more recent, sweet-sentimental tone of the streets”.

c) Along with songs that “spring from the large circle of the folk”, Herder grants merit to folksongs written by educated authors—Goethe, for example—in so far as such songs contain the above mentioned qualities, and are not “arty”.

3). Folksongs are “a lively voice of peoples; yes, of mankind itself,” mankind in the sense of the ethnically varied nature of man. Herder’s title Volkslieder is not intended primarily in its national significance, unlike the title of his posthumous Stimmen der Völker in Liedern.

4). According to Herder, folksongs provide the germ and the substance for great art. “The most noble and vivid of Greek literary art grew from this source”, and the same was true of Shakespeare. He himself took an active part in making this idea fertile in Goethe’s epoch, and he looked forward to a similar development in Eastern Europe; in Chopin, Mussorgsky, Smetana, Bartók, and others, Herder’s idea was fructified.

II. The concept of the folksong before Herder.

Herder’s notion of what folksong was appears different from what Klusen implies he had in mind. Was he, however, not the “inventor” of the concept, as, indeed, of the word Volkslied itself, which was a fusion of “popular song” or “songs of the folk”? In Levy’s view, there is “the unquestionable fact that
the notion of the folksong simply did not exist before Herder. For to speak so before the idea existed, that the poetry of art and of the people arise from different origins, is a contradiction in itself.\textsuperscript{31} It is a \textit{fable convenue}, which is true neither in fact nor its arguments. It would reveal a lack of historical discipline to look only for those concepts that completely agreed with those of Herder. It would be more appropriate and fruitful to ask the question whether there existed general concepts or expressions that shared common ground with Herder's notion of the folksong. Since antiquity, there have been certain expressions for songs which were not considered worthy of the upper reaches of society, but were sung, rather, by the lower classes or by the public in general.\textsuperscript{32}

1. The names of rural folksongs as, for instance, \textit{carmen pastorale}, \textit{Purengesangk}, \textit{Reuterliedlein}, often do not signify any specific professional group, but instead - \textit{pars pro toto} - that of a considerably larger circle of the population. Even today, the songs of rural folk are often designated as peasant songs. Just as one has made a distinction up to today between the rustic and urban type of song, Conrad von Zabern contrasts the "peasant manner" or "rusticitas" to the urban style, the "\textit{urbaniter cantare}". He has thoroughly characterized this coarse, rough-hewn style which, although named \textit{rusticitas} for the peasants, is not specifically for their class.\textsuperscript{33}

2. Furthermore certain coupled words signified peoples' songs were widespread in the country as a whole, or else in other larger population areas. Such are the melismatic songs known as \textit{jubili pastoraiores agrestesque}, which were heard not only among shepherds and peasants. In defining the \textit{Villanella}, Praetorius describes it as: "A little song sung by peasants and craftsmen"\textsuperscript{34}, by which he intends to point out not only the special qualities of these two classes, and the same is true for his chapter heading: "Of those songs created by workers and peasants".\textsuperscript{35}

3. Other designations serve to characterize the wide distribution of a song among the general public, as, for example, \textit{carmen vulgatissimum}, \textit{notissimum canti\textit{uum}}, and, according to Francisco Salinas in 1577, \textit{cantilenae vulgatissimae, notissimae, usitatissimae}.\textsuperscript{36} These correspond to expressions such as \textit{vulgo canebantur, undique concinentium}, and \textit{tota cantabitur urbe}.\textsuperscript{37}

4. The expression \textit{carmen patrium}\textsuperscript{38} demonstrates elements of native speech as well as of indigenous traditions. Bernhard of Clairvaux mentions spiritual songs as being characteristic of a people when he singles out the \textit{propr\textit{ia cantica}} of the Germans.\textsuperscript{40} Around the year 1300, Guido of St. Denis speaks of peoples' songs and their varied styles: "\textit{cantilenas et alios cantus publicos et civiles, quot per orbis circulum idiomatun uel linguaram sunt genera, seu gentium nationes, alius siquidem modus cantandi apud germanos seu teutonicos et alios barbaros, alius apud italos, alius apud hispanos, atque alius apud gallos renones sive parisios qui franci dicuntur, et sic de reliquis . . .}"\textsuperscript{41} [There are as many different songs (\textit{cantilenas}) and other public and private melodies as there are kinds of languages and tongues in the whole world or nations on earth. Indeed, one kind of singing is peculiar to the
Germans or Teutons and other barbarians, another kind to the Italians, a further one to the Iberians, and still another to the Celts, Gauls or Parisians, who are called Franconians, and the same is true of the rest.

5. Folksongs have frequently been placed under a heading of common characteristics, as Herder later was to do with the adjectives wild, rough, and unsophisticated. These are *carmen incultum*, *inconditum*, *incomptum*, *rude*, *robustum*, *incultum et hirtum*, *cantus plebisonus*, sometimes also *carmen barbarum*, as, for instance, the *barbara et antiquissima carmina*, the collection which, according to Einhard, was gathered by Charlemagne.

6. Nearest to words such as “popular song”, “Volkslied”, and “Volkslied”, are *carmen vulgare*, *cantica poetarum vulgarium*, *laicorum cantus*, *odaec laicae*, *cantus vulgaris sive popularis*. Yet *carmen vulgare* often indicates only a song in the native language, as in the Hussitic collection of quotations for the use of the native tongue in the church service *De Cantu Vulgari*. Johannes de Grocheo names *vulgaris musica* the *musica simplex vel civilis pro illiteratis* and labels everything in this way which is not *musica composita*, *regularis*, *mensurata*, or else *ecclesiastica*. He places *vulgaris* with courtly music, and in this manner emphasizes the contrast between artified and non-artified.

This short survey is in need of amplification. It would be well to examine where names like *carmen* and *Lied* have the intrinsic meaning “folksong”, and various sources in other languages should also be investigated. But even from the above examples it is clear that since antiquity there have existed certain general concepts of song in the lower classes and of the popular song as a whole that were widespread and designated. Their partial convergence with certain phases and motives in Herder’s conception of the folksong is obvious. Expressions such as *carmen vulgare* come, then, closest to Herder’s basic notion, especially if they appear within the same system of reference, namely that of Nature and Art.

Herder himself, in the very quotation which he places at the beginning of his collection, alludes to the origin of his ideas. The most significant of them in this respect is the famous sentence in which Montaigne contrasts “la poésie populaire et purement naturelle” with “poésie parfaite selon l’art”. He praises the charm of the former. It has been said that “if such a purposeful, esthetic judgment of taste that employs the words “arty” and “natural” would have sufficed to produce such an effective concept, then Montaigne would have been its creator. But its impetus ceased from the beginning.” Montaigne in no way, however, introduced this descriptive element as a novel creation. He apparently was following traditional thinking, namely, the dialectic between art and nature with which both poetry and rhetoric have abounded since ancient days. In his very important Handbook of Rhetoric in Literature, Heinrich Lausberg shows that this rhetoric was at one time a favorite theme, and that even in Quintilian there occurs an evaluation of
artless speech in contrast to artful rhetoric. The later appreciation of folk poetry from this point on is readily understandable, in Montaigne, for example, as well as in Molière's *Misanthrope*. Often cited and commented on were verses from the *Ars Poetica* of Horace (p. 408 ff.) in which that famous Roman touches on the question of whether good songs make their appearance through nature or through art. Quintilian asks if rhetoric is an art, and also alludes to the folksong in this way. He goes on to say that architecture need not be an art, since primitive men build unartistic huts, and the same holds true of music to the extent that all people dance and sing (*cantatur et saltatur per omnes gentes aliquo modo*).

The *Ars Musica*, too, would need such a philosophical foundation: what art really is, and, consequently, what artless song might be if it is not art. The roots of this query reach far back into antiquity. Thus, Augustine rather explicitly engages himself with the polarity of art versus nature. In the following passage, he comes close to Herder's own trend of thought even if it remains without the latter's revaluation: "... quis bonus cantator, etiamsi musicae sit imperitus, non ipso sensu naturali et rhythmum et melos perceptum memoria custodiat in canendo, quo quid fieri numerosius potest? si nescit indoctus, sed tamen facit operante natura". [What good singer, even if he is not steeped in musical theory, while performing can not bring to bear naturally from out of his experience (memoria) a rhythm and melody once learned, and what could be more musical (numerosius) than this? Even though the untutored does not know, he can follow his natural instincts...]. This viewpoint moves still further in Herder's direction if one regards a term like *cantus vulgi* as a musical classification, or speaks of the individual worth of the artless folksong.

Adam of Fulda does not oppose music as an art with the *cantus*, but proceeds from a rather general notion of music that includes the *cantus vulgi*. He separates these into *naturalis* (by which he means the humana and mundana) and *artificialis*. The latter is again divided into the classifications *instrumentalis* and *vocalis*, and then, once more, into *regulata* and *usualis*. Now, the folksong is provided with a place in a system, as an art of natural song without rules, as with Herder: "Vocalis usualis est emissio vocis carens principiis, per quae regi debet, ut est cantus vulgi, qui non solum hominibus, sed etiam brutis adaequari possit ex instinctu naturae". [Ordinary singing involves letting loose without using the rules by which it should be regulated. Such is folksong (cantus vulgi), which can be made not only by humans but also by animals through the operation of natural instinct]. Other authors think along similar lines, as, for instance, Johannes Volckmar with his division of vocal music in: "artificialis quae per regulas musicae graditum" and "usualis, quae musicalibus regulis caret, ut cantus laycorum". [Art music, which follows the rules of music... ordinary music, which makes no use of the rules of music, as folkmusic].

These remarks about the value of the artless song are to be connected with the idea reaching back to antiquity that music is, according to Boethius, a
proprium humanitatis,\textsuperscript{59} and that this activity is revealed in the God-given musicality of children, laymen, and minstrels. Without ever having learned music as an art, such people often sing simple melodies correctly and well. Herder’s view of the folksong as a voice of the people has its roots precisely here. The artless folksong is evaluated in the same way by Aribo Scholasticus and by Frutolf, the Bamberg Benedictine monk, in the Eleventh Century. Aribo says: “Nobis admodum consanguineam et naturalem esse musicam praecipue possimus ex hoc perpendere, quod quique histriones totius musice artis [non] expertes quaslibet laicas irreprehensibiliter jubilant odas, in varia tonorum semitoniorumque positione nihil offendentes, ad finalem chordam legitime currentes”\textsuperscript{60} [We are enabled to ascertain that music is certainly natural and innate to us especially from the fact that even all those performers [not] experienced in the entire art of music sing faultlessly all kinds of folksongs (odas laicas), making no mistake in the placing of the tones and semitones, returning properly to the final note]. With his point of departure in Boethius, Frutolf considers it evident: “ita nobis musicam naturaliter esse conjunctam, ut ea nec si velimus quidem carere possimus. Huic opinioni et illud opitulari videtur quod etiam saeculares cantilenae absque omni artificialis musicae scientia legitimo tonorum et intervallorum cursu dulciter proferuntur, et cum earum confictores modorum diversas proprietates et differentiarum ac intervallorum varietates, consonantiarum quoque proportiones nesciant, sola natura dictante, sic congrue eas modulantur, ut legitime currentibus nihil horum deesse videatur”\textsuperscript{61} [that we possess music so naturally that even if we wished to be without it, we couldn’t. This argument appears to be strengthened on all sides by virtue of the fact that folksongs (saeculares cantilenas) are performed sweetly without any knowledge of art music, applying the proper succession of tones and intervals; and since the performers of these tunes – unaware as they are of the different properties of the modes, of the varieties of endings (differentiarum) and intervals, as well as of the proportions even of the consonants, but guided only by nature – are still able to sing them correctly, so that nothing of these seems properly to be lacking in their performance (currentibus)].

Herder’s concept of the folksong is richer and far more significant than these older notions. Unlike them, Herder’s idea stepped into history and lent the name of Volkslied study as a branch of knowledge. Yet neither his fundamental tone, nor its overtones, were entirely new. In actual fact, Herder did not “invent” the concept Volkslied at all.

FOOTNOTES


4. For this and quotations to follow see Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Suphan, Bd. 25, pp. 324, 8, 318, 328, 331 f.


9. This quote and the two following in *Werke*, Bd. 25, pp. 6, 7, 12.


12. Concerning the results in Westfalen in 1771, see *Briefe*, p. 93.


15. Bd. 25, p. 545.

16. Bd. 9, p. 534.

17. Bd. 5, pp. 164, 181, 189; Bd. 25, pp. 12, 315; Bd. 9, p. 531, and other.


20. Bd. 5, p. 540, 545, and other.


22. Bd. 5, p. 164; Bd. 25, p. 81.

23. Bd. 25, p. 313.

24. Bd. 25, p. 84.


27. Bd. 9, p. 531.

28. See also above, and Bd. 5, p. 186; Bd. 25, p. 323.

29. Bd. 24, p. 266; see also Bd. 25, pp. 314 and 645.

30. Bd. 25, p. 314 ff., p. 8; Bd. 9, pp. 527, 530 f. and other.


32. I am grateful to Dr. W. Frobenius and Dr. F. Reckow for pointing out some of these examples.

34. *Syntagma* III, p. 33.
38. S. Wille, pp. 131, 139, 245.
39. In Wille, for example, pp. 47, 136, 579.
42. Examples in Wille, pp. 105, 107; *Thesaurus Linguae Lat.* III, p. 471 f.
45. See the incomplete presentation in F. M. Böhme, *Altdeutsches Liederbuch* (Leipzig, 1877), p. XXII f., which has been copied by other authors.
47. Janota, pp. 46, 117 f.
54. See also the section about *musica vulgaris et artificialis* in my book *Europäische Volksmusik u. Abendländische Tonkunst* (Kassel, 1957), pp. 86-94.
55. See also the examples in Wille, p. 605 ff.
56. Ord. 2, 19, 49; Wille, p. 606.
57. *GS* III, p. 333; refer also to his complaint about the mishandling of the art of music through “vulgares laici, qui nec artem nec litteras noverunt” (p. 348).
60. p. 46.

Translated from the German by Prof. Robert Raphael.
Latin translations by Prof. Luther A. Dittmer.