

Folk music – what is it?



Together in folk music – Sinnika Langeland (song and Finnish Kantele), Erik Berben (five-row button accordion) and Mari Eggen ('normal' fiddle).

Folk music is, as with all other music, first and foremost notes from the human voice and musical instruments. But it is also a symbol of belonging and identity. Many players of this music have grown up in a local environment where it is natural to sing, play the fiddle or *langeleik*, or dance *springar* or *gangar*. Norwegian folk music is essentially the music of the country people.

As in many countries on the 'margins' of Europe, Norwegian traditional music has survived as an unbroken oral tradition. In the central European countries where the music traditions surrounding the court and the bourgeoisie were dominant, the music of the peasant was limited in its reach. The Court music of the Renaissance, Baroque music and, later, Classical music, are associated first and foremost with countries such as Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, France, England and The Netherlands. It is mostly in Ireland, Scotland, Norway, Sweden, the whole range of the Eastern-European countries and down through the Balkans that we find traditional music with an unbroken chain of tradition. Nevertheless, areas with living folk music traditions can be found in Sicily and Italy, the Austrian mountain areas, the provinces of France and Spain, and several other places in central Europe.

The different styles of folk music are closely linked to specific areas and, to some extent, nations, but they are the result of musical and cultural currents, which have travelled from one part of the world to another. These days, folk music can be used as a bridge-builder between people from different parts of the world. In earlier times in the Polynesian Islands, when the leaders of one island wanted to

visit the leaders of another, they would send away a canoe with flute players a week in advance – so they could tune their flutes in accordance with those of the local flautists. They then learnt each other's melodies, friendship was established, and the main delegation was ready to come.

The definition of what folk music is, is a never-ending discussion. But one can conclude that the concept has certain criteria:

- the music has been passed in the tradition, mainly orally.
- the music is, to a large extent, dependent upon the individual player's arrangement and performance and therefore, over time, undergoes a change, which creates variation.
- the group of people who, in a society, are tradition bearers, is decisive in how the music is formed and further develops.

Traditional music is an expression that can also be used about folk music. The expression, "folk music", arose during the romantic period in the latter half of the 1800s, in a time of awakening awareness of one's own culture and nation. Norwegians in the towns became proud of their farm culture. They came to discover folk music's qualities. Players from the countryside were sources of inspiration for composers, such as Edvard Grieg and Johan Halvorsen. This resurgence came after a time when folk music in many rural areas had been hard hit by the religious revivals, which had branded fiddle-playing and dancing as sinful.

In the 1800s, the rural fiddle players hardly used the expression *folk music*, but maybe spoke about playing a tune on their fiddle. The term "*slått*" (tune) is a particularly old one, and is derived from a time when the strings were struck or plucked, without the use of the bow.

Usually, the composer or author of the old tunes, *viser* and *stev* isn't known. Therefore, it is often said that the tune is *etter*, or after, a particular person. The person who the tune or text has been learnt from is called a *kilde* (a source). Therefore, we say, for example, "Springar etter Ola Mosafinn".

The plucked instrument, the lyre, came to Europe from the Middle East in the sixth century, and also found its way as far as to Norway. The idea of using a bow on the strings came to Europe from the Muslim areas around 1000 AD, and this kind of bowed lyre also came to Norway in the Middle Ages. Perhaps these earlier instruments are precursors of our traditional stringed instruments such as the *langeleik* and the *hardingfele*, or Hardanger fiddle? After we became more knowledgeable about the traditional culture in Central Asia, there are indications that the relationship between Norwegian folk music and the folk music from Central Asia is greater than previously presumed.

Many might think that folk music and the various dance rhythms are something they know little about. But if you know "*Musevisa*", or "*Å, jeg vet en seter*", then you know what a reinlender is, and if you want to know what a *halling* is, then you just need to whistle "*Pål sine høner*". You will realise what a *spingar* is if you hum a bit of "*Per spelman*", "*Kjerringa med staven*" or "*Ola Glomstulen*".