

Rob interviewing Carl Smith on Eastern European Folk Music

Music playing.....

Rob: And, as we play out the music from eastern Europe, I welcome you back to our second in our series of talks about European folk music with composer and conductor Carl Smith. Hi, Carl.

Carl: Hello, Rob.

Rob: Just remind us of our talk last time, we talked about classical music and we began to talk about folk music. Tell me what the differences are.

Carl: Well, the main characteristics of folk music is that it's transmitted through an oral tradition, it's not written down and the music was often related to local, or regional or sometimes national culture, and very often it will commemorate historical or personal events. There will be stories, or fables that are told in song. Some folk songs are political, songs of freedom, or songs of recognition and folk music has many forms, many moods. Music for work, for love, for the cradle, for drinking, playing, for mourning, special celebrations such as weddings, and most importantly, music for dance. And the songs have been performed by custom over a long period of time, usually over several generations.

Rob: Now we're going to take a little tour around Europe and look at different styles of folk music, traditional music. We're going to start in the east, in east Europe. Can you tell us a little bit about what to expect, what we're going to hear in folk music from the eastern European region.

Carl: Well, the eastern European region is a particularly intense part of the world musically and culturally. And the fiery passion and intensity of these peoples I think translated equally highly into the emotional, passionate and invigorating music. The music was inspired by ancient musical traditions. The Turks, the Slavs, the Mayas, the Romani and the Jews. To give you an example the Turks brought influences of a middle eastern flavour to the music, whereas the Jewish influences were motives that would have been used in the synagogue in the prayers in the synagogue. And the Romani people with their nomadic existence, they carried and spread these musical traditions throughout eastern Europe, combining these styles and influences, so there is a whole mélange of different styles.

Rob: It's a melting pot, in a way.

Carl: Absolutely, yes.

Rob: You can't really talk about particular countries because it's regional really, isn't it?

Carl: Yes, very much so. And because as I said, particularly with the Romani people as they moved around then they picked up various elements from different regions, different cultures and spread them around throughout the whole of eastern Europe.



Rob: And so this folk music was played informally.

Carl: Very much so, yes.

Rob: In and around the village?

Carl: Yes. And some folk tunes are very, very simple. Perhaps a single, unaccompanied melody, some just by one person or maybe several people as a chant. Perhaps without any harmony, and without any accompaniment apart from sometimes a percussion instrument to give a little bit of rhythm to it. And other songs are polyphonic which means they might be two or more melodies sung or played all at the same time so quite complex music.

Rob: And it's very distinctive.

Carl: It is.

Rob: So, tell us a little bit about how it's distinguished from other sorts of music.

Carl: Well, there are three elements that I think that make eastern European folk music quite distinctive. And the first element is really the scales, the notes used and the pitch of the notes. Sometimes to our western ears this eastern European music can sometimes sound slightly off-key.

Rob: Can you give us an example?

Carl: Well, the reason for that is much of the music uses a different arrangement of scales and notes from those that we are normally used to hearing. So, most western music is based on this sort of scale.

(Music playing scales....)

But, very commonly, you will find a five-note scale, which is known as a pentatonic scale and this is very common in far eastern music, places like China and Japan, but it is also very commonly found in the eastern European music, and the notes of the scale are like this.

(Music playing scales....)

So, if I just play around with those a little bit...

(Music playing)

.... immediately that sounds a little bit far eastern, doesn't it?

Rob: Mmm, yes indeed.

Carl: Sometimes those five notes mean that more notes are filled in between them so it sounds more like this...

(Music playing)

... and then there is a further variation the Romanian melodies use a slightly different scale which is like this ...

(Music playing)

... and then there's the pitch of the notes. When playing, or singing the musicians deliberately squeeze the notes so that the notes tend to slide into each other. And to western ears, this can make the music sound a little off-key. I'm not suggesting this is a bad thing, this is simply part of the musical tradition.

Rob: But the rhythms I suppose are going to be different as well, aren't they?

Carl: Yes. Very much so. The rhythms again ... most western music traditionally uses quite regular rhythms made up of two, three or four beat phrases. To give you two very simple examples, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" ...

(Music playing) one, two, three, four

... and "Happy Birthday" ...

(Music playing)

... while eastern European music in contrast uses irregular rhythms and strong emphasis on different beats in the melody. So here is a simple Hungarian melody that is actually very much like "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" but the rhythmic feel is very different...

(Music playing)

... and very often a very common accompaniment is a drone. We're used to a drone type of accompaniment for example with Scottish bagpipes or Celtic bagpipes where the drones will play long, continuous notes like this ...

(Music playing)

... but a lot of eastern European music the drones have a more rhythmic feel to them, something like this. This is a melody from Macedonia.

(Music playing)

Rob: Let's talk about some of the instruments that are typical for this region. This eastern European region. We know that they play the accordion, we're very familiar with that here in France, they use violins.

Carl: Yes.

Rob: They also use bagpipes as you mentioned.

Carl: Yes.

Rob: Or something like bagpipes.



Carl: Yes.

Rob: What other kinds of instruments do they use?

Carl: Well, many of the instruments are similar to western instruments but they are sometimes played, and tuned in a very different way from what we would normally be used to. So, for example, clarinets in western music we're used to one or two different types of clarinet, but there are many, many different types of clarinets. Some of them instead of having a single tube, some of them have two tubes so that a drone and a melody can be played at the same time on the same instrument. The same thing with flutes and pipes.

Rob: I've seen pan pipes very much featured.

Carl: Yes. Yes, the pipes originally would have originated from simple shepherds 'pipes and unlike the modern flute which is played traverse mostly they are blown from the end, like a recorder, and again, some of these pipes have two sets of pipes so that the player can either play two tunes at once, or play a melody on one pipe and a drone on the second pipe so in effect he or she is accompanying himself just on one single instrument.

Rob: Does the instruments that you mention, the cymbalum, the instruments that are struck?

Carl: Yes. The cymbalum is a stringed instrument which is a little bit like a table harp or a zither, but rather than being plucked like a zither, the strings are struck with padded mallets and it gives a lovely ringing sound, which is quite different from a plucked or a bowed instrument.

(Music playing)

Rob: And the drums also are a little different, aren't they?

Carl: Yes. There are several types of drums. One is called a doumbek which is a goblet-shaped hand drum and it is made of metal or clay, or sometimes of wood and it gives a very, very distinctive crisp sound. And the other one that is very common is the tupan which is a two-headed drum and it is one of the oldest and most characteristic instruments of the region.

(Music playing)

Rob: This eastern European style of traditional music has influenced a lot of classical composers in fact, hasn't it?

Carl: Yes, it has. Many classical composers of eastern Europe have been inspired by the folk music of their region. So, for example people like Dvořák, Smetana, Chopin, Liszt, Bartók adapted and incorporated eastern European folk songs into many of their works. Hungarian composers like Franz Lehár and Emmerich Kálmán for example, they brought traditional musical styles into their stage works which were enormously popular throughout the world in the early 20th century.



Rob: This is a huge subject, Carl, and I really feel bad about having to speed up through this. We are going to move on to another region next talk. But for the moment, thanks very much indeed for your explanation of what's going on in eastern Europe.

Carl: Thank you, Rob.