Rob interviewing Carl Smith on German Folk Music

Rob: Hello, and welcome back to our tour of European folk music. And once again I am with music maker, composer and chef d'orchestre Carl Smith. Hello, Carl.

Carl: Hello, Rob.

Rob: Where are you taking us as if we didn't know from the opening music. Where are you taking us this time?

Carl: Well, today we are going to look at the folk music of Germany and also Austria and Switzerland.

Rob: What's really interesting about this particular area is there's been a very different reaction, a very different response to the folk music.

Carl: Yes, there has and the tradition of folk music in Germany is really it's quite a complicated subject. In our previous talks we explored folk music traditions as music of the people, that's not normally written down, but it has been handed down orally and evolved from generation to generation. And, as we have learned, the folk music has been influenced by many different peoples that have moved and settled throughout Europe but most particularly Poles, Jews, Romanies. In the region that we now know as Germany, early volksmusik traditions, melodies and lyrics were handed down through the generations in a very similar fashion. So little exists in any written form. From about 1300 there was a tradition of travelling singer-songwriters, a bit like troubadours, travelling minstrels if you like. This tradition began to emerge and this music was known as volkslied, which literally means *songs of the people.* But it was much more middle-class and even a courtly style of music and this music was developed into singing schools, which was adopted by the professional craftsmens 'guilds and made into singing competitions which were known as meistergesang and this more formal style of communal singing lead and developed gradually to the great choral music traditions that were particularly popular in Germany and in England, very much so in the 19th century. So the real folk music we've been talking about didn't really happen in quite the same way.

Rob: And the attitude to this melting pot of influence is it didn't always go down very well, from what I understand.

Carl: No indeed. In the 1930s with the rise of national socialism the traditional folk music and especially anything Jewish, or Romany or Polish in origin, was repressed and banned by the Nazis to the extent that in many parts of Germany these musical traditions have now disappeared altogether. And it gets worse than that because the national socialists, the Nazis, they took the term volkslied, volk meaning *people,* and lied meaning *songs*, so

songs of the people. They took that term and adopted it themselves into a very different and a much darker connotation. So the word *volk*, meaning people, was used extensively in Nazi propaganda as a way of aligning the Germans, all Germans with a fascist world view and increasingly, as we know, unwanted and undesirable sections of society were progressively excluded, and even of course, exterminated. So the Nazi versions of volkslied were highly nationalistic. They drew on German folk lore and they were used very much for political manipulation. The singing of volkslied was practiced extensively in the Hitler Youth, in the SS and throughout the armed forces when marching in military order. And it gets worse, because even after the end of the Second World War, traditional folk music was also effectively banned in the GDR, the east German states, so folk songs of that time became again political songs sung in private by underground movements who were resisting the oppression of the east German regime. So, consequently today the terms volksmusik and volkslied still have a very negative connotation for many people.

Rob: That's an interesting thing because up to now it's been a very positive thing. People look back to it with nostalgia, don't they? But this isn't quite the case in Germany.

Carl: No. Because the very early folk music traditions have disappeared, been repressed, been banned, there is now very little left of those traditions in many parts of Germany.

Rob: There are exceptions though.

Carl: Oh yes, there are. Yes. Since 1960 there has been something of a revival of traditional folk music but really this has been overshadowed by other forms of popular music. But in the 19th century, the volksmusik began to develop into popular light music in the style of folk music. This was known as volkstümlicherlager.

Rob: Lovely pronunciation, Carl.

Carl: Very frequently, these were drinking songs and they were sung in the taverns, in the beer halls, at outdoor events and parties. And these were typically accompanied by accordion, clarinet and different brass instruments.

Rob: This is what we heard at the start of the program.

Carl: Indeed.

Rob: We'll hear a little bit more in a second.

Carl: Very stylised adaptation of folk music if you like. And this type of music is sometimes popularly known, in English anyway, as the oompah band and that's a reference to the distinctive sound of the tuba or the base brass instrument, whatever it is, that happens to be playing in the band. And this stylised version of folk music still remains

very popular today, and it's regularly played on German TV and radio, and in every beer festival.

Rob: Let's hear a little bit more of that.

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Rob: Germany is a very different place down south, isn't it? In the Alpine region, things are different there. We can hear some traditional forms of music in that area, can't we?

Carl: Yes, that's true. Folk music traditions are much more notable in the Alpine regions, in southern Germany, namely Bavaria and also Austria and Switzerland. And one of the best-known styles is based on yodelling. Yodelling is one of the oldest forms of communication in the Alpine regions. Originally it was used to call to each other over long distances. And it's a form of singing which involves repeated and rapid changes of pitch between low chest notes and very high-pitched head notes known as falsetto. And the switching, the very fast rapid switching between the low pitch and the high pitch can attract listeners from far away as it echoes through the mountains. Yodelling was taken to the United States by German immigrants to Pennsylvania in the early 1800s and today there are yodellers in many parts of the world.

Rob: Let's hear some of that. And this is the pure stuff.

Carl: It is, this is true yodelling but put into a musical form.

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Rob: Tell us a little bit about the musical instruments that are played in the Alps.

Carl: Well, another form of communication in the Alpine regions is the Alpen horn

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Carl: And these are very long straight wooden horns. They vary in length from about one and a half meters to four and a half meters and they produce a range of notes designed to travel again, long distances through the mountains.

Rob: These are the ones that you can see sometimes represented in icons of Alpine regions, isn't it? The horns are resting several meters away from the player.

Carl: That's right. And they are often known as the Swiss Alp Horn, or Swiss Alpen Horn. And the very longest of these horns plays very deep, very resonant notes and when played in a group they have a haunting resonance that's quite distinct.

Rob: We need to hear some of that.

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Rob: That's quite a difficult instrument to play.

Carl: Very difficult. It's very unwieldy of course because they're so long and it's very difficult to get a controlled pitch and controlled sound, and so to play these horns in harmony and for it to have a very musical sound is very, very difficult indeed.

Rob: We're listening to experts here.

Carl: Yes, absolutely.

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Rob: Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about the more urban form of folk music that you've discovered.

Carl: A very popular type of folk music is known as Schrammelmusik, which literally translates as scratch music but in fact the name comes from two brothers. Joseph and Johann Schrammel who were Viennese violinists in the 19th century and they used to travel around the Viennese cafés from café to café and play music and their music was often used for dancing, such as l'enflap, waltzes and polkas. And Schrammelmusik is usually played by a small band or an orchestra consisting of maybe one or two violins, a clarinet, an accordion, and a contra guitar. I have two examples, the first one has two violins, an accordion and a contra guitar.

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Carl: The contra guitar is a kind of guitar developed in Vienna in the mid-nineteenth century and in addition to the usual guitar neck with six strings and a fret board, it has a second fretless neck with up to nine base strings. So the guitarist can play a base line as well as the usual guitar sounds at the same time.

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Carl: Another instrument that's frequently used in Schrammelmusik is a zither, or a table harp. And composers such as Johannes Brahms and particularly Johannes Strauss often used Schrammelmusik styles in their compositions. And the second example has a zither, contra guitar and accordion.

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Rob: Well, we've had a great trip around the central European area, Germany, Austria and Switzerland with Carl. Thank you very much indeed, Carl.

Carl: Thank you.

Rob: And we'll move on to another area next time.

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