



Rob interviewing Carl Smith on Spanish Folk Music

Rob: Welcome back to our tour of Europe looking at the different folk music from different areas. Up to now we've been in eastern Europe, we've been on the Iberian Peninsula, we've been in the central area, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and now we're going back out to the fringes of Europe to the Nordic areas. And I'm with music maker, chef d'orchestre and composer Carl Smith. Hi, Carl.

Carl: Hello, Rob.

Rob: Tell us about the history of the music in the Nordic areas. We're talking about Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, that area.

Carl: Folk music traditions in the Nordic countries go back many hundreds, even thousands of years. Some of the traditional instruments used in Nordic folk music are very similar to instruments found in China that are thousands of years old. So, it's likely that they have common origins despite Stockholm and Beijing being some 4,000 miles apart.

Rob: That's extraordinary, isn't it? So there has been real movement way back in history.

Carl: Thousands of years ago, yeah.

Rob: So, it's the instruments that are similar, is it?

Carl: Yes, and the musical styles, the folk music of Scandinavia actually shares similarities with the eastern European music that we discussed in an earlier talk. The use of musical scales, different musical scales, and quarter notes gives the folk music a very exotic sound to our modern western ears. Scandinavian folk music styles have found their way into the 20th, and 21st century music from the region. And for example, the genre of heavy metal music has been strongly influenced by Scandinavian folk scales, the rhythmic patterns and even the singing styles.

Rob: That's extraordinary.

Carl: And the Icelandic singer and composer, Björk incorporated ancient Icelandic techniques into her modern electronic music. And also Scandinavian folk music influences have long been used by film composers and one such example is the score for Disney's 'Frozen.'

Rob: Right. Well, that is appropriate for the area we're talking about, isn't it?

Carl: Yes.

Rob: There's a great tradition in singing, isn't there in this area?



Carl: Yes. Vocal music is extremely popular in the Nordic countries and some of the oldest pieces of folk music in Sweden and Norway are songs. One example is called kulning, and this is an unaccompanied type of song typically sung by women and originally for the purpose of herding sheep, goats and cows and these herding calls are known for their haunting quality, and they feature quarter tones which means very small changes of pitch and half tones which gives the songs a distinctive character not usually found in western, classical popular music. And to western ears these songs sometimes have a very bluesy sound, and what is distinctive about these songs is the singer sings in a very high-pitched register so that the sound will carry across the vast fields and the vast plains.

Rob: It is similar to the yodelling that we heard last time ...

Carl: Yes.

Rob: ... which is also for communication over long distances.

Carl: Yes. And the composer Edvard Grieg incorporated kulning melodies into some of his works including his famous Peer Gynt Suite.

Rob: Let's hear an example of that kulning.

Carl: This song is a farewell to the cows.

Rob: Right, it's not asking where are they?

(Music playing)

Rob: They are lucky cows I would say to have such lovely music. Kulning is one sort of singing, a song, but there are other types of songs in the tradition of the Nordic region.

Carl: Yes, there are. Another popular type of folk song that dates from the Middle Ages is called a stev.

Rob: S.T.E.V.

Carl: S.T.E.V. And the stev consists of short, four-line stanzas with a strong sense of rhythm and a rhyming scheme to the lyrics.

Rob: Let's hear some of that.

(Music playing)

Rob: If you didn't tell me where that was from, I might have guessed it was from Scotland or the Orkneys, or something like that.

Carl: Yes, yes.

Rob: There is something very cold about it, very atmospheric.



Carl: Yes, indeed.

Rob: You're going to tell us about another kind of singing style.

Carl: Yes. Now the ballad in Scandinavian folk music, the ballad, unlike the stev, are very long, narrative songs which are known for their poetic and story-telling qualities. These songs tell a story in many verses and they often have a simple accompaniment on an accordion, a piano or a guitar. Or very often they are sung unaccompanied.

(Music playing)

Rob: It's important also for the people of the area to sing together, isn't it?

Carl: Oh yes, very important. Group singing and community sing-a-longs are a huge part of Swedish musical culture. Ballads and other folk tunes are often sung during community sing-a-longs and there's a regular sing-a-long show on Swedish television.

Rob: Even now?

Carl: Even now, yes, it's hugely popular. Since the 1970s this program has been broadcast. It features thousands of Swedes taking part and then more than a million viewers sing a long at home.

Rob: And these are traditional songs, are they?

Carl: Yes, oh yes.

Rob: It's not pop lyrics?

Carl: No, no. These ballads and folk tunes that we've been talking about.

Rob: How about the instruments that the people of the Nordic areas play. Are they different to what they're used to seeing?

Carl: There are some fascinating instruments and some of them are ... again, go back thousands of years. One example of the earliest evidence of musical instruments goes back to the Bronze Age and natural horns called lurs have been discovered in bogs across Denmark and throughout Sweden and Norway and northern Germany. And the lur is a long horn, perhaps more than a meter in length without any finger holes.

Rob: And it's brass?

Carl: It's brass, or bronze I should say really, and they can be straight, or curved and the curved variety is easier to carry and the lur was sometimes used as a wartime instrument, a battle horn if you like.

(Music playing ... clanging)

Carl: And in the Icelandic sagas lurs were said to be used to signal troops and to frighten off enemies.

(Music playing ... horns)

Rob: What did we hear at the beginning, then?

Carl: Well, in this particular recording the player starts by striking the bell of the horn and it sounds rather like a cymbal being played before he starts to blow the horn and produce the notes.

Rob: That's a very striking sound.

Carl: It is.

Rob: If I was an enemy I would be running away. You have another example to play us.

Carl: Yes, the buckhorn is another early Nordic instrument and it was used for calling in the herds of cows, sheep or goats as opposed to the kulning, for example, or to scare off possible predators. It's made from the horn of a ram, or a goat.

Rob: So, it's not that long.

Carl: No, it's just a curved goat's horn with finger holes drilled into it. And it makes it possible to play melodies, and from such a simply constructed instrument it has a very sophisticated sound and it is still used in music today and composers incorporate this buckhorn into compositions. It's used for example in the score for Disney's 'Frozen.' One of these instruments is actually played as part of the score.

(Music playing)

Rob: That's a very sophisticated sound for such a simple instrument.

Carl: It's quite incredible that such a beautiful tone, the tuning of it, can be produced from purely an animal horn with holes drilled into it.

Rob: What about the stringed instruments? Are they found as well in the northern areas then?

Carl: Stringed instruments are hugely popular. Violins, fiddles. Fiddles come in many, many varieties but one distinctive variant is the Norwegian hardanger fiddle. This instrument has eight or nine strings whereas a typical violin has four. And it's made of thinner wood than a typical violin, and the top four strings are played like a violin while the others resonate sympathetically. And another instrument that is related to the fiddle is the Swedish nyckelharpa. The nyckelharpa looks similar to a hurdy-gurdy, it's violin-like in shape, it's played with a bow, a very primitive sort of bow, a twig really with horse hair attached to it. And the instrument has wooden keys to change the pitch of the strings, and

a modern version of the nyckelharpa has 16 strings, three of them are used for melody, one for a drone and then 12 resonate sympathetically and then it's played with 37 wooden keys.

Rob: It sounds very complicated.

Carl: It is, but it's quite an interesting instrument, it has quite a Medieval sound to it.

Rob: Let's hear that.

(Music playing)

Rob: Now, these people of the north spend a lot of time in the dark, don't they?

Carl: They do.

Rob: But when the sun comes out, they know how to party.

Carl: It's time for a party, yes. And very, very popular are the folk music festivals that are held at mid-summer. The winters, as we said, they're long, they're cold and dark, so the mid-summer is the most popular holiday of the year and it's celebrated at the summer solstice being the halfway point for the warm season in the cool climate. I have a recording from the mid-summer festival and this includes fiddles, the nyckelharpa, the dulcimer, the guitar, the double base and the accordion.

Rob: So, all the instruments that you've just been talking about.

Carl: It's a joyous sound, very much for dancing, celebrating and having a good party.

Rob: I think that's a great way to end this particular episode of our trip around Europe. Again, Carl, thanks so much for all the work you're doing and highlighting all these wonderful pieces of music, and we'll look forward to hearing what you have to tell us next time.

Carl: Thank you very much, Rob.

(Music playing)