



Mark Slobin
Folk Music: A Very Short Introduction
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Who hasn't eight dollars? *Folk Music: A Very Short Introduction* is one of those books which must be recommended reading for students, researchers, and enthusiasts of all kinds of music. Slobin, former president of the Society for Ethnomusicology and one of North America's most widely experienced ethnomusicologists, presents in scholarly lucid and stimulating fashion the world of folk music from a range of different angles, discusses music from every corner of the globe, and throws open the doors on folk music as a remarkably diverse and ever-changing music. He draws on his own experience from his first fieldwork in Afghanistan in 1967 and his later work on the heritage of the Eastern European Jews.

Through six sturdy chapters various issues and perspectives salient to the study, knowledge, and experience of folk music are touched upon. In the first paragraph Slobin elegantly finds his way around defining folk music: "This Very Short Introduction ... will not offer anything like a definition of "folk music," relying instead on the principle of "we know it when we hear it." Understandings of the term have varied so widely over space and time that no single summary sentence can pin it down" (p. 1). With his inclusive approach and focus on the people who perform, listen, invent, and feel the music in everyday life, Slobin partakes in making folk music and musical scholarship matter profoundly – also beyond the sphere of musicology and folk music connoisseurship.

The second chapter is devoted to 'actual folk music ... songs that speak directly to people's reasons for singing' (p. 21), addressing close to universal experiences and anxieties of de-territorialization and separation of those who must leave their loved ones for reasons of war, work or refugee status. One of Slobin's own recordings from 1968, a *falak* from Badakhshan in northeastern Afghanistan illustrates the point. *Falak* means heavens or fate in the local Persian dialect spoken in Afghanistan, and for the ethnic Tajik, life is a constant struggle against this fate. In the actual *falak*, which 'basically stays in the anguished lost-love mode' (p. 22), the references to displacement and nostalgia takes on an almost prophetic character, as Afghanistan in 1978, ten years after the recording, suffered from invasions, occupations, shifts of political power, and the majority of the population moving in and out of refugee camps through more than thirty years. Slobin pays considerable attention to the details of the meaning of the text, the instruments, the melody and sound of the song, articulation, and performance practice.

Chapter three addresses the intervening in folk music life of the intelligentsia, the 'ill-assorted group of ... the educated elite of thinkers, scholars, artists, and upper-class amateurs' (p. 51). Slobin defines two important trends in the early nineteenth century as central for this intervention: identity-seeking and institution-building which were coupled by two major agendas of the time: nationalism and universalism. Germany, 'fragmented into dozens of little states until 1860, needed a common purpose in the quest for unity, to be founded on the *volk*, a complex compound of sentiments and semantics. Nationalists across Europe eagerly touted folk music as the "spirit" of the hard-to-define concept the "nation"' (p. 52).

The English amateur antiquarian William Thomas coined the term 'folklore' in 1846, replacing terms like 'popular antiquities' and made possible words like 'folk song' and 'folk

music', as well as the founding of the first scholarly institutions such as the American Folklore Society in 1888. The disciplines of linguistics, anthropology, and music became the ancestors of today's ethnomusicology.

Chapter four addresses how folk music has been collected and circulated in writing, recording and other formats. The basic philosophy of the early twentieth century of collecting was to make standardized samples as 'clean' as possible for 'quick comparison across a huge range of objects' (p. 69). Over time collectors became more sensitive and sophisticated in their way of approaching, gathering, and interpreting what they heard and observed. One thing is scholars' recordings, another how the music has been picked up and circulated in everyday life, and how performers have continually popularized and re-folklorized folk tunes.

In chapter five, focus is directed at movements and stars within folk music. Folk music is central to regional pride and ethnic and individual identity, to resistance, political uprisings, and movement-formation. Music 'channels strong sentiments, thus circulating into many kinds of movements, conservative and progressive, religious and radical ... Homesickness and protest, lovesickness and religious fervor can flow through the repertoire of a single singer or community at a particular moment without contradiction' (p. 87). In North America, such songs have been rising to the surface during slavery in the 1840s, in the social turbulence of the 1930s and 1950s. Into the heart of folk music practice goes a quotation of social activist and singer-song writer Pete Seeger, worth repeating: 'like hymns and patriotic songs, union songs are songs with a message ... unlike most hymns and patriotic songs, union songs are usually composed by amateurs to suit a particular occasion, and have a short life. More often than not, they are simply new words to an older melody' (p. 88).

In the final chapter, Slobin offers a short survey of three basic categories that characterize much twenty-first century folk music: *The Circuit* describes the organization, initiatives, education, networking, advocacy, and development of the folk music 'field'. 'It's a long way from earlier circuits, such as Woody Guthrie's dustbowl odyssey and Pete Seeger's union halls' (p. 109) to the extremely formalization of the folk music circuit, such as the World Music Expo (WOMEX). *The System* describes another set of networks covering a dense layer of influential 'official' transnational organizations, aiming in high-flown rhetoric to 'safeguard' and 'protect' traditional music. For UNESCO, the operative term is intangible cultural heritage, which it defined in 2003: 'the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage' (p. 112). *As for the Tourist*, Slobin points to important aspects of responsibility and agendas of tourists, agents, and the locals alike, questions of otherness, heritage, and staged authenticity.

The book is exciting, even entertaining, reading, for example where Slobin describes the bossy, maximum control approach to field recording of song catcher Francis Densmore (the picture of her firm posture while recording an Indian chief singing is well-known): 'She was blunt about who was in charge: "The singer must never be allowed to think that he is in charge of the work. A strict hold must be kept on them."' (p. 68). References are placed at the back of the book, easy enough to locate. Suggestions for further reading and a list of internet resources help the reader to look further into the world of folk music.

Out of the many *Very Short Introductions*, five volumes so far are on music, the others being Nicholas Cook on music (vol. 2), Philip Bohlman on world music (vol. 65), Kathryn Kalinak on film music (vol. 231), and Thomas Forrest Kelly on early music (vol. 265). The strength of all of them is that they do in fact open up for the vast soundscapes that the world's societies are producing and participating in. Yet, one wonders what music will be

introduced in the very short form the next time. Introductions to heavy metal or rap music are badly needed.

Condensing the vast and variegated world of folk music to a limited number of very small pages is not an easy task. But this only pays credit to Slobin's format. This small introduction to folk music is nothing less than a masterpiece, a joy to read as it invites for further thinking and studying, and it fits nicely into almost any pocket.

Tore Tvarnø Lind