

Sharing the Voices: Métis Songs of the Northern Plains

Nancy Browne, University of Regina
Lynn Whidden, Brandon University

Introduction

All Métis, or mixed bloods, have Aboriginal and non-native ancestry and the songs of the northern plains Métis reflect this diverse heritage. This paper describes a Métis song collection project which located and published songs for use in schools. Several additional projects have followed.

Genesis of the Project

Several music educators in Saskatchewan had identified the need for more resources for teaching music of our region and this concern was brought to the Board of Directors of Saskatchewan Music Educators Association. A committee was formed to respond to the need, with Dr. Nancy Browne was Chair. The committee met to discuss possible ways of proceeding and it was decided that we might try to obtain external funding to do field and archival collection. A preliminary search of local libraries had found a handful of songs, only some of which were suitable for school-aged children.

Using this information as an indication of need, Nancy wrote a research proposal for the Canadian Studies Branch of the Secretary of State. This was funded with some additional support from the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association. Most of the funds were designated for the hiring of an ethnomusicologist to collect and select songs. We prepared a job description, conducted a search and interviewed three well-qualified candidates. In 1987, Dr. Lynn Whidden was offered the position and this has led to an ongoing collaborative relationship. We initially hoped the project might take one year, but with the abundance of novel material and the time required to transcribe and translate, it took three years.

Once the transcription was complete, Nancy and Lynn spent a memorable evening sorting and classifying songs as we began to prepare the collection for a publisher. We approached the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, a Métis research and publishing center.

We were pleased when Gabriel Dumont Institute agreed to publish the collection — containing over seventy songs. The Project Director (Nancy) and the Ethnomusicologist (Lynn) were continually working to produce a collection of songs which was sensitive to Métis people and their culture. The history of the Métis people is told in the songs which are sung in different languages and music styles. The book *Métis Songs: Visiting was the Métis Way* includes songs in French,

English, Cree, and Michif (the Métis language) and is a landmark collection. It is a substantial achievement, especially challenging due to the need to travel and communicate across Saskatchewan and the usual politics of working in an organization.

The published book marked the end of the large song collection project, but a number of smaller projects and related projects continue to make contributions as resources for teachers and their students.

A Métis Suite

One project growing out of the song collection is "A Métis-Suite." The suite is based on seven Métis songs which tell the story of "la nouvelle nation" on the Canadian prairies.

The suite, arranged by Dr. Lynn Whidden, begins with a Native powwow song, "Chanson Cri" and is followed by an ancient French folk song, "Embarquement de la fille." These two songs portray the roots of Métis culture while "La Montagne Tortue" shows the meeting of Native and non-native. It is a song sung in the Michif language, a mixture of plains Cree verbs and French nouns. The song recounts how the Métis hunted bison in the Turtle Mountains, returning with meat in their carts, and pounding it into pemmican for use as a portable food supply for the fur traders.

By the 19th century the Métis had settled along the Red River; each narrow farm facing the river Quebec-style. The Métis were well known for their all-night social gatherings. Songs such as "Marie Rouvin" were played on fiddles, sometimes hand made from maple and birchbark. The drumming of the fiddler's foot provided the percussion. On more serious occasions, families would join hands around the dinner table and sing table songs such as "Mes amis, si tendres amants."

Dancing was, and continues to be, a combination of Native footwork with Scots-Irish and French set patterns. To this day many families jealously guard their own steps to the "Red River Jig," a tune interwoven throughout the suite.

With the influx of settlers, such as Lord Selkirk's Protestant Scots, the Métis culture and lifestyle was threatened. While the 1870 resistance (Cotes de la Rivière Rouge) led to the creation of the Province of Manitoba, it was also the impetus for many Métis to leave the Red River area. By 1885, their lands and traditions were once again threatened as settlers spread further west. The Métis with their leaders, Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, resisted but were overwhelmed by Canadian government forces. St. Germaine's song, "The Métis," describes the defeat at Batoche, execution of Louis Riel, and subsequent dispersion of the Métis community. Almost a hundred years later, in 1982, the Métis were formally recognized by the Canadian government as an Aboriginal people.

A Métis Suite is available in audio cassette and video cassette format.

Reference List

Saskatchewan Music Educator's Association. (1993). *Métis Songs: Visiting was the Métis Way*. Available from Gabriel DuMont Institute, 121 Broadway Avenue E., Regina, SK.

Whidden, Lynn. (1995). A Métis Suite (video and audio cassette). Winnipeg: Métis Resource Centre.