

Ontario's French Musical Heritage

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The traditional folk music scene in Canada has long been enriched by the participation of numerous cultural groups, each bringing its own particular mix of rhythms and tunes to the national medley. One of the most important ingredients of this musical stew has always been the French-Canadian stock—that mix of French, North American and Celtic influences currently performed by such québécois groups as *La Bottine souriante*, *Les Charbonniers de l'enfer*, *Matapat*, and *Hommage à nos aînés*. The Quebec traditional music scene is nothing if not lively and innovative, constantly expanding and taking under its broad umbrella everything from folk and jazz to rock and world beat music. The Acadians have brought their own particular flavours to the French-Canadian mix and—quite apart from providing one of the strands out of which Cajun music grew—have been experiencing their own cultural revival in the past few decades, starting with Edith Butler and 1755, right down to groups like *Suroît* and *Barachois*.

One francophone voice mostly absent from this choir has been the one from Ontario. And yet, the Franco-Ontarian community is the largest French-Canadian group outside of Quebec: though comprising only 5 percent of Ontario's total population, there are roughly half a million French-speaking people in the province, outnumbering the total Acadian population nearly ten to one. Why then have we heard so

little traditional music coming out of French Ontario? The roots of this tradition are long and deep. French voyageurs and missionaries criss-crossed the province throughout the seventeenth century. The first permanent European settlement in what is now Ontario was the French colony at Le Détroit, founded at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the Great Lakes were part of New France. Three hundred years later, a small French community still clings to its language and customs on the Canadian side of the Detroit River. The vast bulk of the Franco-Ontarian population arrived later, throughout the nineteenth century: first in the Ottawa and eastern Ontario region from the 1830s on, and then, starting in the 1880s, in the North Bay-Sudbury-Sault Sainte-Marie area. Highway 11, from Cochrane to Hearst, was settled even later in the twentieth century. There are also important concentrations of francophones in the Midland-Penetanguishene area—some descendants of eighteenth-century voyageurs, others having arrived to farm the land in the nineteenth century—and others in the St. Catherine's and Welland area, having come mostly to work in the manufacturing sector in the early twentieth century.

This rough sketch does not take into account the large numbers of francophone workers who migrated all over southern Ontario throughout the twentieth century and the new wave of French-speaking immigrants from Africa, Haiti and the Middle East who now make up an important part of the Franco-Ontarian community. But it serves to point out the long and deep roots Franco-Ontarians have in almost every part of the province. Each of these groups has brought its own customs and traditions and each of these evolved in its own way in the various environments in which they took root. Franco-Ontarian musical traditions are every bit as rich and vibrant as those of any other francophone group in North America. Which brings us back to the question: why have we heard so little of this tradition?

Various reasons can be given. One could ask, what chance does this music have of being heard in an overwhelmingly anglophone and culturally diverse province such as Ontario? Ontario is a big province – big in numbers, big in area. The Francophone population is relatively large, but it is widely dispersed and in a minority position almost everywhere in the province. The market is not big enough. Then there is the

Quebec factor: to many, the Franco-Ontarian community is merely an extension of Québécois culture. Its members share the same roots, the same musical traditions. Why bother with Franco-Ontarian music when there is such a wealth of traditional music coming out of Quebec?

This attitude affects the Franco-Ontarian community itself. For a long time, Franco-Ontarians have felt uncomfortable with their own musical traditions. These were fine for family gatherings or for holiday singalongs. But on the whole, Franco-Ontarian music has never been perceived in its own community as something for public consumption. Seeking to free themselves from stereotypical views of the backwoods habitant, many Franco-Ontarians choose to maintain a healthy distance between their day-to-day social functions and public manifestations of their cultural heritage. There are signs that this is changing, but there is still a long way to go before traditional French folk songs can be appreciated in and of themselves as a musical genre. There is indeed a lively and exciting pop music scene in Ontario, with a wide variety of artists working in the rock, pop, country, jazz and world music genres.¹ But the attention paid to traditional music is disconcertingly small.

Most French traditional music is still made and enjoyed – in true folk fashion – in small family and community gatherings. This is not something we would wish to lose. And yet, such a vital and diverse cultural resource deserves to be better known and to take its place among Canada's many musical traditions.

If popular culture has failed to take note of traditional French songs in Ontario, it is not because of a lack of resources. Researchers have collected and archived an impressive amount of material from every area of Francophone settlement throughout the province. Germain Lemieux is undoubtedly the greatest name among the researchers who have travelled the highways and byways of the province looking for songs. Starting in the 1940s and continuing well into the 1970s, Father Lemieux combed the area from Mattawa to Sault Sainte-Marie, collecting in the process more than 3,000 songs. The entire collection (recordings and transcriptions) is preserved at Sudbury's Franco-Ontarian Folklore Centre (which the good father incidentally founded). Another important folk music resource in Sudbury is the Folklore Archive of the Department of Folklore and Ethnology at the University of Sudbury, where I currently teach. Students in this program have for the past twenty-five years been conducting fieldwork as part of their studies, collecting material on a wide variety of subjects—oral traditions, folk medicine, popular religion, material culture. At latest count,

about 10,000 song versions are dispersed throughout our more than 1,500 collections. We are currently in the process of identifying and cataloguing the songs in this amazing repertoire.

The Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau houses Marius Barbeau's collections, which include a number of songs collected in the Ottawa area, as well as the more recent collection of Lucien Ouellet, who gathered several hundred songs on both sides of the Ottawa River. Jean-Pierre Pichette also collected in Northern Ontario, most notably with singer Donat Paradis, who sang for him over 120 songs. The last area of the province to be surveyed is the oldest. When I started my research in the Detroit River French communities in the late 1980s, no other folklorist had shown an interest in this region. Through exploring old manuscripts and interviewing nearly 100 informants, I was able to document over 1,700 traditional French folksongs in this oldest yet most culturally assimilated part of French Ontario. This collection is also currently housed at the University of Sudbury folklore archive.

We hope with this issue to introduce our readers to this rich cultural heritage. Aside from this introductory overview, we wish to present a few specific portraits relating to French traditional music in Ontario. Jean-Pierre Pichette, who currently holds a Canada Research Chair at Université Sainte-Anne in Nova Scotia, was for twenty-five years head of the Folklore and Ethnology Department at the University of Sudbury. He has prepared for this issue a biographical sketch of Father Germain Lemieux – the man, his work and his legacy. I will present a few notes on my research in the Detroit River area and attempt to give an overview of the oldest European repertoire in Ontario. For a more contemporary (and livelier) view, I have asked Jean-Marc Lalonde to give us a report on the contemporary *musique traditionnelle* scene in Ontario, which may at long last be poised for the kind of breakthrough that has already occurred in Quebec and the Maritimes. Jean-Marc currently performs with the up and coming group *Ligue du bonheur*. As a member of this, a former member of *Deux saisons*, (one of French Ontario's most successful traditional bands), and past president of APCM (Ontario's premier association of francophone musicians), Jean-Marc is ideally qualified to give us an appreciation of the past and future scene. On behalf of my collaborators, I wish you many happy discoveries.

¹ For an idea of the number and diversity of Francophone artists recording in Ontario, visit the APCM website (Association des professionnels de la chanson et de la musique: <http://www.apcm.ca/fr/>).