

The Young Tradition: A Rare Evening of Joy

Roger Goodman

Sometimes, though rarely, a situation occurs or something happens which is so completely joyous, that absolutely every unpleasant thought leaves one's head. Just such a situation occurred at The Young Tradition concert on Sunday night. Never, in all my four and one half years at Oberlin, have I enjoyed a concert more. The Young Tradition consists of two males, Peter (Tenor) and Roy (Bass-Baritone) and one female, Heather (Soprano). The three pour forth a torrent of magnificently ethnic English and Irish folk songs. The songs are taken from all traditions — the sea, the land; the fishmonger, the funeral, the hunt, religion, and even the popular old dialogue-argument.

As I listened to the sounds, I was taken back to my first Calleaugh. Calleaugh (pronounced kay-lee) is very similar to the Hootenanny of the American tradition, but is of Irish descent. My first Calleaugh took place in Dublin, and I may as well have been there Sunday night instead of in the main lounge of Oberlin. Having lived in England for two years, I know this music well. As I listened to The Young

Tradition, I saw the Downs in Sussex, the Liverpool ship yards, the Devonshire coast, the ugliness of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. I even saw old fish-wives singing drunkenly and lovingly in the East End Pubs in London. The Young Traditions sing real music; they sing music of the people and of the nation. English music is not patriotic and pompous as some may think (Rule Britannia?), but rather it is rough and earthy, and full of love for the land. It is music that, once heard, can never be forgotten.

English folk-music has not changed terribly much over the centuries. The influence of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is still evident in its harmonic structure. What little use of 3rds and 6ths is very quiet, creating an open, hollow sound when combined with parallel 5ths and 4ths, unisons and octaves. The Young Tradition reinforced this sound by having the two men sing the open intervals, and Heather sing the harmony with the 3rd and 6th. This is an extremely flexible sound; it can be used to bring the greatest joy or an infinite sadness.

All throughout the concert, it was extremely obvious that the three performers were totally aware of the traditions connected with each particular song. They changed their accents to suit each song's origin. If the song was of a coarse nature, their voices became harsh and rough; if it was gentle, they sang smoothly. Each of the voices had its own peculiar quality to it. Heather's was pure like Jean Ritchie's, but far more fluid and beautiful. Peter had a marvelous bite and edge to his, and, of course, there was his extremely well-used wobble which enhanced everything he sang. I found Roy's sound the most pleasant of all. It was rich and nasal at the same time, and was exactly "proper" sound for their type of music. He had that whine (or crack) which is so peculiar to English-Irish singing.

The first half of the concert was stronger than the second. This could have been due to the vocal fatigue which all three members admitted to. The first half ended with a well done group of shanties. They were

as I heard them on the docks in Liverpool, and on the fishing boats in Dublin. The beautiful whine was in the three parts, and there was that constant drive and pulse. This changed according to the different shanties, since each shanty accompanies a different task on board ship; some are slow and steady, and some are lively and lilting. There was the common linking and connecting of phrases, so that the audience did not know if there would be a pause or if the song would go right on to the next verse without a breath. And there were spontaneous shouts of complete ecstasy and joy in what they were singing, with a musical purpose of providing strong accents on major beats. This group of songs was certainly the high point of the first half.

Though the second half was weaker, it was still amazingly good. It was in this half that Young Tradition showed really fine handling of tricky rhythmic patterns, and they displayed an extremely acute sense of timing. All three took breaths at the same time, and waited for the same length of time before going on to the next line. No one started before anyone else, and yet their eyes were usually closed. Since they could not see each other, they displayed an even more remarkable rapport. It was also in this half that the modal variation in the harmony became strong. The relationship between modality and tonality is a thing peculiar to the English-Irish tradition of folk music.

The song "John Barleycorn," for instance, was very tonal, while the magnificently beautiful "Lyke Wake Dirge" was modal. The song "Two Magicians" showed many things which are typical of this type of music. First, the audience joined in the chorus. Then, the elision of the phrases and true understanding of the prosody. There was also a strong, constant pulse. Roy contributed to this pulse when he made most of the one syllable words into two syllable words. For instance, "grave" became "guh-rave." This, plus the swallowing of some of the words, strengthens the implied pulse. Heather, too, enforced the accent by singing in places where one felt a natural pause, and where, in fact, the other singers did pause. This provided a rather primitive but beautiful counterpoint, something heard only in folk music of England and Ireland. I have heard many folk singers attempt to reproduce this effect, but none have done it with the relaxed confidence and ability of the The Young Tradition.

Also, in the second half, we were given a chance to notice that Roy has an incredible ear. The three started to sing "Wondrous Love" and suddenly Roy said to stop after the first note. They were ever so slightly out of tune. So slight, in fact, that my ear, which has been trained to hear such things, hardly noticed it at all. Roy, who

has had no musical training whatsoever, noticed it immediately, and would not let the others sing until they were perfectly in tune with each other. This is especially important for a group that sings without accompaniment.

Certainly, there was a musical quality to the performance which lacks in the true singing of the English and Irish People, but this quality was so subtle that it was hardly noticed. Roy, Peter, and Heather kept a certain amount of roughness and harshness to their sound in order to reproduce an authentic performance of the music of their country. One can listen to Alfred Deller singing these songs and hear the difference immediately. Deller turns them into art songs, and thus destroys them. These are not art songs. They are songs of mud and rain, sun and wind, wheat and barley, stout and ale, harsh and coarse language, and most of all THEY ARE SONGS OF A BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE. This is how The Young Tradition sang them, sometimes harsh and course, sometimes soft and gentle, other times outwardly joyful and sometimes intensely tragic.

I hope that The Young Tradition returns soon to the United States, and that the tradition which they are carrying on will continue after they are gone, for, the music of the English and Irish peoples is the music of the earth.