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French-Canadian Music & Song for the Mountain Dulcimer

by Marc Mathieu



Traditional folk music and song, regardless of their cultural origin, are deeply rooted in the common people.

German folklorist Johann Gottfried Herder once wrote that each nation is an organic unit with its own unique culture, and in order to survive and grow, this culture should be cultivated. He further believed that the national soul of a people is expressed best in folksong. With its large ethnic diversity, Canada is very fortunate to possess a miscellany of folk music that is so culturally varied.

Some history... Since colonization began in the 16th century, traditional folk music of European origin has been present in Canada. Already, musical life during these early days of colonial Canada was diversified, as French and British settlers each transplanted their own music and songs along the shores of the St-Lawrence River and the adjacent Atlantic coastline and islands. Eventually, these same songs followed the brave and adventurous explorers, *coureurs des bois* (trappers) and fur traders as they traveled west and north into the forested areas of central Canada.

Although the lyrics of many folk songs still exist today in their original form, several texts were modified and, in many cases, rewritten to reflect the local conditions that these courageous pioneers encountered daily. After all, traditional songs are oral documents that encompass every aspect of life and living. These lyrical alterations are a definite indication of genuine "folk character."

So now back to French-Canadian music & song.

In the early settlements of New France, the first generation of French-Canadians maintained the traditional culture which had been part of their heritage. Their folk songs, many of which were in the purest medieval tradition, helped preserve memories of the homeland, made their daily chores go by faster, and also provided some rhythm for dancing. As we will see later on, explorers adapted medieval dance songs to sing in chorus (often inventing new verses as they went along), to keep time as they paddled their large voyageur canoes, at the same time giving themselves the courage they needed to persevere through hardships, loneliness and weariness.

In many cases, due to baggage restrictions, newcomers weren't allowed to tote their musical instruments as they boarded their ships; therefore, "primitive" percussion, such as a drum, hand clapping, foot stomping, spoons or bones, was the only accompaniment available. Dancing was sometimes accompanied by *mouth reels* in which instrumental sounds were imitated by the mouth. The more fortunate might have had a Jew's harp, and in the very best of cases, a fiddle - which was in those days the most common instrument. Still today, the fiddle is the instrument most closely associated with French-Canadian music.

In the mid-to-late 1800s, German settlers introduced two new melodic instruments: the diatonic harmonica, and later the button accordion, quickly became favorite instruments among French-Canadian musicians. Before long, fiddle, accordion and harmonica formed a new and long lasting friendship...

As Irish and Scottish settlers arrived in the new land during the middle of the nineteenth century, the "contagious" rhythms of their own traditional music were soon adopted by the French-Canadians. While retaining most of its distinctive traits, the instrumental music once played by the French-Canadians, was taking on a new form as these culturally "different" rhythms, began to blend into a diverse, dynamic and essentially functional music meant to accompany traditional dances such as the cotillions, quadrilles, jigs and rondes. The French-Canadian fiddling style of the Atlantic provinces, is a perfect example of such a *hybrid*. Although the song titles and lyrics are in French, the fiddling styles demonstrate a strong Celtic influence.

Hence the well-suited and humorous observation by William Dunlop, a Canadian physician of Scottish origin, who once said: "If a Frenchman has a fiddle, sleep ceases to be a necessity of life".

For a long time, the distinctive rhythmic character and lilt of many traditional French-Canadian songs have inspired observers and listeners alike. Another distinction is the rhythmic "vitality and momentum" resulting from the special way in which the syllables of the text match the duration of the tunes.

French immigrants successfully retained specific repertoires and ideas about music making. Both of these elements can still be found in certain parts of this country today. It is interesting to note that several songs considered to be native of a certain francophone region of Canada were commonly and unknowingly sung with variants in other parts of French Canada. (particularly Québec, Northern Ontario and certain regions of the Maritimes)

Canadian "songcatcher" Marius Barbeau (1883-1969) whose collection of wax cylinder recordings is preserved in a Canadian museum, has estimated that he collected well over 10,000 French folk songs and their variants throughout francophone Canada. Many of these, especially some of the ancient ones, have since been forgotten in France (where the songs of oral tradition had originated), even though there still appears to be fairly strong stylistic connections between some circa 1500s French songs and French-Canadian folk songs still sung today.

The ancient French zither, known as the *Épinette des Vosges*, more than likely accompanied singers back in France, as they sang some of the very same airs imported by the first settlers on their Trans-Atlantic journey to the New World. Since I have not personally come across any written account of the following during my research, I often wonder if at some time, some of these compact instruments were ever "smuggled" onto a ship en route to New France, and for some unknown reasons, eventually became "extinct" shortly after their arrival on this side of the ocean. There is no doubt in my mind, that if this rather simple instrument would have survived through Canada's early colonization, French *Épinette* players would have adapted their playing skills to the new musical styles that emerged as a result of the influences by various ethnic groups.

It would be very appropriate and interesting at this point, to note the similarities shared between the *Épinette des Vosges* and one of its descendants the *Mountain Dulcimer*!



The way that it is often played across the lap, the diatonic fretboard, the frequent use of a noter and the dronal qualities are identical to the way the traditional mountain dulcimer is played.

Consequently, the mountain dulcimer would be the perfect substitute! Being such a versatile instrument by nature, this Appalachian instrument fits quite nicely into the unique characteristics of French-Canadian music. Whether it's a ballad, a dance tune or a fast fiddle tune, they are all playable on the MD. Tunes

frequently played on other diatonic instruments such as the button accordion and harmonica can very easily be adapted to the mountain dulcimer.

The traditional French-Canadian song that I chose to feature is a very typical example of a voyageur paddling song... ie: a medieval song "adapted for the job." As in most cases, the leader sung the first line, then it was repeated by the rest of the paddlers. The chorus was usually sung in unison. One can easily see how this type of singing would help energize and enliven these (often) exhausted canoemen as they traveled for up to several months along Canada's many waterways.

Since the days of the first settlers, a great variety of refrains has been introduced and have coexisted. It is therefore not surprising to learn that over the years, in French Canada alone, close to one hundred variants of this song have been written down or recorded on cylinders, discs, or tapes. Different versions have also been located in the northeastern United States and in France. Were one to compare the structure of the refrains of both the early and more modern versions, similarities could be observed, with the exception of the modern lyrics, which do not seem to correspond to those of the refrains of the Renaissance variants. If we glance through the vast repertoire of a dyed-in-the-wool, traditional French-Canadian folk singer, it would not be surprising to realize that it would contain many different versions of this song, but the chorus that I'm presenting is definitely the most recognizable.

The refrain in this particular case, which roughly translates to: "**It's with our oars that we move along the river. It's our oars that get us there,**" is completely out of place with the story of a young man riding his horse from the French town of Rochelle. A simplified version of the storyline goes as follows:

As I was riding from Rochelle, I met three charming young ladies. - **REFRAIN** -
I did not choose, but I did ask the prettiest, to ride with me on my horse. - **REFRAIN** -
We travelled for one hundred leagues without speaking a word. - Epinette des Vosges **REFRAIN** -
When she told me that she was thirsty, I led her to a fountain. - **REFRAIN** -
Once at the fountain, she refused to take a drink. - **REFRAIN** -
I then took her to her father's home where she drank several glasses, as she toasted to the health of her parents, her siblings and to the love of her life. - **REFRAIN** -

Conclusion

I couldn't have chosen a much better song to so perfectly illustrate how this form of "blend" represents how the French-Canadians preserved ancient songs by adapting them to the tasks of their environment. Depending on the particular paddling requirements, the tempo would be set, with a strong emphasis placed on the beats corresponding to the strokes of the paddles. Travelling upstream on a swift river would certainly be quite demanding; therefore, one could expect to have to sing quite vigorously compared to an opposite scenario of coasting leisurely on a calm lake at sunset.

That said, one need not necessarily play this piece at the suggested tempo indicated on the tablature sheet. Please feel free to play it at a comfortable pace that matches your mood or playing level. After all, this tune has been interpreted and recorded by a variety of French-Canadian vocalists and musicians in the form of party and campfire songs, fiddle tunes, children's songs and even lullabies, just to name a few. I recently came across a unique rendition performed by a French- Canadian jazz ensemble!

Over the past 400 years, "C'est l'Aviron" has been enjoyed by many generations, and the ongoing appreciation for this precious traditional music "gem", introduced to this land by our French speaking ancestors, will undeniably continue well into the future. So enjoy learning and playing this song that helped Canada develop into the vast country it is today. It's a great pleasure for me to share it with all of you ! ... **Marc**

Listen to Marc Mathieu sing and play "[C'est l'Aviron.](#)"

Listen to Marc play an instrumental version in [DAD tuning.](#)

C'est l'Aviron qui Nous Mène

Traditional French Canadian Paddling Song

Lively

MD tab by Marc Mathieu © 2004

♩=112 D (A) (Bm) D G D (A) (Bm) D

M'en re - ve - nant de la jo - lie Ro - chel - le , M'en re - ve - nant de

D 0-0-0-2-0-0-0-0-3-0-0-0-0-2-0
 A 3-3-2-1-3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3-2-1-3
 E 2-2-1-0-4-4-4-4-5-4-2-2-1-0-4

G D (A)

la jo - lie Ro - chel - le , J'ai ren - con - tré trois jo - lies de - moi - sel - les.

D 0-0-0-0-3-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-1
 A 3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3-5-0-0-0-0-0-3-0
 E 4-4-4-4-5-4-4-4-4-7-4-4-5-4-3-2-1

Refrain

D A D

C'est l'a - vi - ron qui nous mè - ne, mè - ne mè - ne, c'est l'a - vi - ron qui nous

D 0-0-0-0-0-0-1-1-1-1-1-0-0-0-0-0-0
 A 0-0-0-0-0-0-2-2-2-2-2-0-0-0-0-0-0
 E 0-0-1-2-1-0-0-1-2-3-1-0-0-1-2-1-0

A D

mène en haut.

D 1-0
 A 2-0
 E 1-0

C'est l'Aviron qui Nous Mène

Refrain: C'est l'aviron qui nous mène, mène, mène.
 C'est l'aviron qui nous mène en haut.

1. M'en revenant de la jolie Rochelle, (bis)
 J'ai rencontré trois jolies demoiselles. **Refrain**
2. J'ai rencontré trois jolies demoiselles, (bis)
 J'ai point choisi, mais j'ai pris la plus belle. **Refrain**

3. J'ai point choisi, mais j'ai pris la plus belle, (bis)
J'l'a fis monter derrière moi, sur ma selle. **Refrain**
4. J'l'a fis monter derrière moi, sur ma selle, (bis)
J'y fis cent lieues sans parler avec elle. **Refrain**
5. J'y fis cent lieues sans parler avec elle, (bis)
Au bout d'cent lieues, elle me d'mandit à boire. **Refrain**
6. Au bout d'cent lieues, elle me d'mandit à boire, (bis)
Je l'ai menée auprès d'une fontaine. **Refrain**
7. Je l'ai menée auprès d'une fontaine, (bis)
Quand elle fut là, elle ne voulut point boire. **Refrain**
8. Quand elle fut là, elle ne voulut point boire, (bis)
Je l'ai menée au logis de son père. **Refrain**
9. Je l'ai menée au logis de son père, (bis)
Quand elle fut là, elle buvait à pleins verres. **Refrain**
10. Quand elle fut là, elle buvait à pleins verres, (bis)
À la santé de son père et sa mère. **Refrain**
11. À la santé de son père et sa mère, (bis)
À la santé de ses soeurs et ses frères. **Refrain**
12. À la santé de ses soeurs et ses frères, (bis)
À la santé d'celui que son coeur aime. **Refrain**

About the author

Since the early 1960s, the "Moose Capital of Canada" - Hearst, Ontario, has been the home of French-Canadian-born **Marc Mathieu**. From the age of 12 years old, music has always been an important element in his life after learning to play guitar and later on, banjo. During his high school years, he played rhythm guitar at local gigs with the garage band he had co-founded with friends. When he first saw and heard a mountain dulcimer being demonstrated on TV in 1994, it was love at first sight! Approximately two months later, Marc was strumming familiar tunes on his very own Kansas-built mountain dulcimer. With no other known dulcimer players within hundreds of miles, he taught himself to play and later began composing some lively instrumental tunes. One of his original pieces, "Playin' Hockey on the Pond", was recently featured in the Feb-May 2006 issue of *Dulcimer Players News*. You can hear this piece by visiting www.dulcitunes.com/dpnselect.php

His enthusiasm to learn more about mountain dulcimer playing techniques and repertoire eventually inspired him to attend such festivals as August Dulcimer Daze (Vermont) in 2001 and Western Carolina University Mountain Dulcimer Week (Cullowhee, NC) in 2002. Other participants enjoyed listening to him as he demonstrated some of his original compositions and other musical pieces unfamiliar to these regions of the United States. Ever since, Marc has been attending these events and is very honored to have been invited by the organizers, to teach Canadian music workshops at both these gatherings.

During the past two years, he developed an interest in collecting both, traditional English and French-Canadian folk songs and instrumentals, for the purpose of creating mountain dulcimer tablature using music notation software on his computer. With these available resources, Marc's mission is to promote Canadian folk music and song, making it more accessible to the mountain dulcimer community, and at the same time, encouraging enjoyment and an appreciation for its emotional characteristics and unifying musical qualities.

Canadian folklorist Edith Fowke (1913-1996) once said: "I'm an ordinary person, and what ordinary people do is important". Marc could not agree more with her - and feels exactly the same!

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