



The Folk Process - Embrace the Change by Laurie Riley

“But you’re playing it wrong!” “That’s how I learned it from so-and-so.” “Well, it really goes like this.” how often have you heard that? Probably quite a lot. In classical music it is, of course, important to play a piece exactly as it was written. But in many other styles, “right” is much more flexible.

It’s not just that you can arrange a tune in a different style, such as making a Celtic tune into a jazz tune, or a march into a tango, but in keeping with certain traditional styles, the chords and/or the arrangement can be up to you, sometimes the melody is subject to a certain amount of interpretation, and lyrics can vary. A tune may appear in differing iterations from player to player or region to region. (In fact, songwriter Si Kahn often sings different lyrics to his own songs, changing one or two words, or whole phrases, but not necessarily the meanings.)

In traditional music, the wish for tunes and arrangements to be exact and immutable is common among newcomers who don’t realize that the folk process is part of the genre. As long as slightly differing versions can be played together in sessions, there’s really no problem. If the differences are too great, someone gets to sit out the tune, or introduce their version.

So – what exactly is the folk process? It is the tendency of melodies and lyrics to change, a lot or a little, as they are passed from person to person and generation to generation. It’s that simple.

An example most people might recognize is The Bonnie Swan, sung by Loreena McKinnit. She didn’t compose the lyrics; she adapted them. This tale (the drowning of a young girl by her jealous sister and the subsequent making of a fiddle or a harp out of her hair and bones) has been told and retold in song since Medieval times. I first heard it as a very simple song called Oh the Wind and Rain, sung by Margaret MacArthur, and later recorded another version (learned from Jean Farnworth) on my first album *MistCoveredMountains*. There are probably hundreds of versions of this song.

Another example is the Irish tune Star of the County Down, which is played as a march (4/4) or as a waltz (3/4), and can be either an instrumental or a song (the style of the lyrics doesn’t sound as old as the tune probably is, IMHO).

Michael Cooney once did an entire 45-minute set tracing the etymology of the song Goin' Fishin' (if I recall correctly it was popularized by Country Joe and the Fish). It was fascinating to hear not only how the lyrics and the melody had changed over time, but how the meaning of the song had morphed. One older version went: "Say you're goin' fishin' all of the time, well I'm a-goin' fishin' too. Bet your life your sweet wife can catch more fish than you!"... and it wasn't literally about fishing at all, as was the watered-down popular version.

When it comes to arrangements, the folk process is even more evident. You can find any given melody with any number of different arrangements, or create your own (traditional and folk music are the music of the people, and we are the people). The only limitation would be that if you play it in a session, it has to be jam-able (in the commonly used key and time signature for that tune, and with predictable chords). In performance, however, you have free reign.

Keys in which tunes are played are also somewhat flexible. Most traditional tunes have a specific key by mass agreement, because it's easier for session groups to not have to decide on a key every time the tune is played, and/or because some instruments commonly used in these genres are best played in those keys. But if you play solo or with a performance group, you can play in whatever keys you wish.

Since the folk process occurs when people remember a piece differently from the way they heard it played (or they change a piece for whatever reason), the use of notation and tablature prevent the folk process. In the big picture, this is neither good nor bad. Personally, I enjoy hearing different versions of tunes and songs, but it's also fun to know exactly how something was played a hundred or more years ago.

(There's a new trend in some sessions to use notation and/or tablature. As I mentioned in a previous post, that's because these days, musicians don't have as much opportunity to learn the way traditional musicians did in the past – by hearing it so much that we absorb everything about it - and therefore notation and tablature have become extremely helpful for the less experienced. But someone should explain that just because there is notation or tablature doesn't make it the law, that providing it is a courtesy and not a requirement, and that using it should be optional.)

Because of the folk process, tunes tend to morph regionally. One region's version isn't better or worse than another's, just different. When in another region, it's a good idea to make an effort to play it their way, but sharing your own region's version can be interesting as well.

In these respects, therefore, traditional and folk music differ greatly from classical music and other genres in which change is not acceptable. We must recognize that every genre has its own rules and we can't apply one's rules to another.

The folk process is also somewhat influenced by mis-heard lyrics. Google “Mondegreens” if you want a good giggle.

The upshot of all this is: relax. If a tune isn’t being played the way you’re familiar with it, just enjoy it the way it is. It can be fun to learn several versions of a tune or song, and it’s always a good idea to accept other musicians’ ways of playing their repertoire. Most importantly, remember that change, informality, and improvising are traditional. Embrace the folk process!

[Laurie Riley](#) - Reprinted with permission from [Laurie Riley's Music Blog](#)