

Folk music.

This concept has been defined and developed in multiple ways by collectors, scholars and practitioners, within different geographical locations and in different historical periods. Widely used in Europe and the Americas, it has been used both covertly and overtly in the construction and negation of identities in relation to class, nation or ethnicity and continues to be the source of controversy and heated debate. At its root lie questions about the identity and identification of the 'folk', the delimitation of musical repertoires, how these repertoires are transmitted and the assessment of sounds.

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1. [Definitions and scope.](#)

Volkslied ('folksong') as a term was coined by the German cultural philosopher, theologian and writer [JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER](#) (1744–1803) and established by his publication 'Stimmen der Völker in Liedern', *Volkslieder* (1778–9). Among its characteristics, he posited the necessity of its production by 'communal composition' and an aesthetic of 'dignity'. German scholars have extensively debated the ontological status of the concept, its characteristics and delimitations, and the effectiveness of its replacement by the term 'traditional' (see [GERMANY, §II](#)).

From the late 19th century onwards, the concept became increasingly crucial to the debates on nationalism. Those seeking to identify or create their own national musics, ranging from individual composers and collectors to totalitarian regimes, used folk as a synonym for nation, interpreting the concept to fit their needs (see below, ¶ 5). Across Europe, the folk were initially identified as peasants and rural artisans. The Merrie England movement and the Irish and Scottish Gaelic Revivals of the 1880s were fuelled by notions of a lost golden age of innocence symbolized by the music of the peasantry and song airs, song texts and dance tunes of rural working people were idealised in contrast to the artiness of lite society or vulgar products of the industrial poor. Although preoccupied with the collection and classification of rural music, the Hungarian composer, pianist and collector [Bla Bartk](#) included urban popular forms within the rubric of folk music. For the English folksong collector [CECIL SHARP](#) and for others in the first British Folk Music Revival, folk music was perceived as only produced by artisan and labouring rural people. Sharp argued that continuity, variation and selection were the three vital components of folksongs and that anonymous composition and oral transmission were defining elements (1907) (see [ETHNOMUSICOLOGY, §II, 2\(IV\)](#) and [ENGLAND, §II](#)). Broadside ballads did not fit happily into this definition since they were published and sold in urban contexts for popular consumption. They were, however, embraced as 'folk music' by the folk music revivals of both North America and Britain.

The [ENGLISH FOLK DANCE AND SONG SOCIETY](#) was formed in 1932 by the amalgamation of the Folk-Song Society and the English Folk Dance Society (the latter founded by Sharp in 1911). The International Folk Music Council (IFMC), founded in 1947, attempted a definition of 'folk music' at its conference in São Paulo (1955) that incorporated Sharp's three criteria and the notions of 'tradition' and 'oral transmission'. Folk music was 'the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission'. The concept embraced only music that had evolved within a community uninfluenced by 'popular' and 'art' music. The IFMC dispensed with Sharp's ideas about anonymous composition, rather folk music might originate with an individual composer but must have been absorbed subsequently into the unwritten living tradition of a

community. The definition did not cover composed popular music that had 'been taken over ready-made by a community' and remained unchanged as it was the re-fashioning and re-creation of the music by the community that gave it its 'folk' character.

Although at the time Sharp had defined folk music, he used it as coterminous with traditional music, the IFMC changed its name in 1981 to the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) in response to concerns about the concept folk. The identification of folksong and folkdance (in Ireland Irish song or Irish dance) by collectors of the early years of the century was reassessed in the later years of the 20th century, noting that the terms promoted often heavily edited and reconstructed items, through music publishers, live concert performance and state education systems (e.g. Harker, 1985). From the 1960s onwards, North American increasingly extended the meaning of folk music to include the musics of ethnic and racial communities.

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2. Studies.

The study of folk music, developed differently in different countries, has been influenced by historical contexts and intellectual perspectives. During the 18th and 19th centuries the emphasis across Europe and in America was on folksong texts, which were analysed as literature and therefore the province of literary studies; in some areas, such as Germany, this perspective remains strong. During the 20th century, folksong and folk music became a subject within [ETHNOMUSICOLOGY](#), folklore and folklife studies, sociology, and popular music studies.

In the USA, state folklore societies were founded in the early years of the 20th century dedicated to collecting folksongs from the Old World, especially Child ballads. A large number of regional textual collections were made until the 1950s including an eclectic range of items: imported and native narratives, lyric songs, parlour songs, game songs, instrumental music and Negro songs (Myers, 1993). John A. Lomax (1867-1948), born in Texas, collected songs from cowboys, miners, stage drivers, freighters and hunters and later, with his son Alan (*b* 1915), 'Negro' songs (see [LOMAX](#) family). In 1933, the two 'discovered' the black American blues singer and guitarist Leadbelly (1885–1949) and recorded much of his repertory for the Archive of American Folk Song of the Library of Congress (founded in 1928).

Members of the [SOCIETY FOR ETHNOMUSICOLOGY](#), founded in Philadelphia in 1955, included a strong contingent of socio-cultural anthropologists who related the structure of all musics to social organization and who had turned their attention to problems of social change rather than stability as in Sharp's homogeneous model. Efforts continued, however, to delimit 'folk music'. Bruno Nettl (1965) distinguished between the styles and repertoires of 'folk music', existing in societies that had urban professional musics sometimes called 'art' or 'classical' music, and 'tribal music' or, as he perceived it, the music of non-literate cultures. Nettl assumed an evolutionary perspective with 'folk' and 'tribal' musics as part of an earlier stage of musical development and the communal creation of folk music.

Cecil Sharp's definition of folk music began to come under sustained attack. The interaction of orally-transmitted music with broadsides, songsheets and manuscript or printed texts in Britain and North America became an issue. The implied notion of a bounded homogeneous and unchanging community was in line with blossoming functionalist academic models of Sharp's time. In the first half of the 20th century in Europe, folksongs were identified and classified using functionalist models, such as being part of annual- or life-cycle rituals or work songs. Within anthropology, tribes were similarly analysed using functionalist models, which were soon to be recognized as being restricted in value. The Romanian folklorist [CONSTANTIN BRĂILOIU](#) scathingly identified folk music theories of the past as romantic (1958; 1959), and the static models of functionalism and structuralism in Western academic disciplines were augmented in the second half of the 20th century by post-structuralist, interpretive and postmodern perspectives. In China a recent functionalist definition has linked folk music among different ethnic groups to local sexual customs (Yang Mu, 1998).

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3. Folk revivals.

New folk music revivals swept through Europe in the last decades of the 20th century, each with their own powerful structuring ethos and complex of musical and social interaction. An understanding of the concept 'folk music' was crucial to each. Some were influenced by the American Folk Revival which, like the British one, 'appealed primarily to individuals who celebrated traditions not their own' (Jackson, 1993). The US Folk Music Revival came out of the social and economic setting of the 1940s in which many young people believed that the parent generation had gravely mismanaged the world. Figures such as Pete, Mike and Peggy Seeger, and Alan Lomax, promoted engagement by college students and intellectuals in the ideals of populist folksong. 'Folksingers', who became 'stars' in urban contexts resurrected old styles but also created new songs with personal or political texts. By contrast, urban-based folk music enthusiasts remained a minority in Norway's Folk Music Revival which centred on the National Fiddlers' Association and concentrated on innovative, often virtuoso, approaches to performing folk music (Goertzen, 1997). Scholars disagree about whether there were two 20th-century folk music revivals in Britain or whether they constitute two phases of the same revival. The first period had its origins in the 19th century when collections were published by middle-class enthusiasts with antiquarian and musical interests (see [ENGLAND, §II](#); [BALLAD, §I, 2](#); [LUCY E. BROADWOOD](#); [FRANK KIDSON](#); [SABINE BARING-GOULD](#)). Important initial architects of the second or post World War II revival, inspired by the American labour movement and the skiffle music of Lonnie Donegan, were the dramatist, songwriter and collector [EWAN MACCOLL](#) and singer and collector [A.L. LLOYD](#), both of whom came from a background of left-wing socialism and radical Marxism. The driving ethos was to give importance to the music and values of working people and to make a stand against the perceived vacuousness and capitalism of pop music and its associated industry. Largely because of Lloyd, 'folk music' came to be perceived as emanating from not only the rural but also the industrial worker. During the 1960s, the term folk came closer to its American usage of singer-songwriters, such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Caroline Hester and Judy Collins, who accompanied themselves on acoustic guitars and performed some traditional material. Soon it was used indiscriminately by the media to include any acoustic music. As the [FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL](#) began to develop, a distinction was made by the participants between 'contemporary folk music' and 'traditional folk music'. Contemporary songs, including protest songs or songs about social issues, usually accompanied by acoustic guitars, were performed in clubs such as the Troubadour in London; traditional songs and melodies, either unaccompanied or accompanied by instruments such as fiddles, melodeons, concertinas, tin whistles and pipes, were performed in 'traditional' clubs. The first traditional club, the Singer's Club in London, was followed shortly after by a host of others including the Fighting Cocks in Surrey (see [ROD STRADLING](#)); the Nottingham Traditional Music Club and the 'Sovereign' in Leeds (see [BOB PEGG](#), [CAROLE PEGG](#)). Neo-traditional performers, who hunted out 'traditional' performers in order to learn from them and who shared their values, included singers such as Anne Briggs, Shirley Collins and Louis Killen, and groups such as the Watersons (see [NORMA WATERSON](#)), Webbs Wonders and The Old Swan Band. Traditional music venues tried to reverse the aesthetics of the pop star syndrome and often arranged seating to enable singing in the round in order to avoid the division between audience and performer. For neo-traditionalists, the definition of 'traditional' embraced all items in the repertoires of traditional singers, including music-hall songs. As the movement developed, both contemporary and traditional folk clubs began to develop traditions of their own. The Critics Group, based at the Singer's Club, were a company of revival singers trained in vocal techniques and mannerisms considered to be intrinsic to a traditional style, such as singing nasally with the hand cupped over one ear, and incorporated techniques from European traditional singers. Similarly, [MARTIN CARTHY](#) introduced new techniques for the acoustic guitar: sensitive finger-picking and open-string tunings that enabled drones to be produced. Soon each traditional folk club had its imitators of MacColl and Lloyd and every contemporary club had its own Martin Carthy. The sounds produced began to be an issue.

See also [FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL](#).

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4. Sound-ideals.

The organization of musical sound is one of the ways through which shared meanings are articulated. Values are not only represented in the social organization of musical performance but also in musical sounds themselves. One of the criticisms raised about the early collectors of folk music has been that their 'sound-ideals' did not coincide with those of their 'source' singers or musicians; their musicological value systems were those of the Western classical tradition. Across Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, collectors tended to be leading composers of the day who largely considered their archives as a source of ideas for 'serious composition'. For instance, Bartók created huge archives in Hungary which were a source of inspiration for his music, and in England the Folk-Song Society was founded (1898) by [CHARLES VILLIERS STANFORD](#), professor of music at Cambridge and of composition and orchestral playing at the Royal College of Music, and Welsh composer Joseph Parry. Committee members later included Vaughan Williams, Holst, Grainger and Butterworth.

Folk musics of the world had differing interactions with the sounds of classical and religious musics. They have been characterized as having regional qualities, such as the vocal polyphony of southern and eastern Europe and the parallel 2nds of Bosnia. The identification of such traits depends upon the agreed repertoires of folk music.

Arguments about sound-ideals within the second British Folk Revival centred on the shape, speed and decorations of melodies, the uses of harmonization rather than drones, and the timbres produced. Sharp had recognized that English folksong tunes did not fit into the classical music sound-ideal of western European tempered scales and suggested that they were built on non-harmonic principles, used Dorian, Aeolian and Mixolydian modal systems, had varying tonality, frequently used extra wide intervals and so on. In order to introduce folksongs into schools, lyrics had to be bowdlerized and melodies adapted for piano accompaniments but Sharp preserved the characteristics of the traditional tunes and lyrics in his own notes. A few other enlightened collectors preserved the actual sounds produced by folksingers by using the new invention, the cylinder phonograph. In 1906, Percy Grainger recorded several outstanding singers, including [JOSEPH TAYLOR](#) of north Lincolnshire, whose singing of *Brigg Fair* inspired Delius' *English Rhapsody*. As recording technologies improved, there was more widespread access to the sounds produced by traditional singers themselves. During the 1920s in America, record producers issued African and Anglo folksong (especially race and hillbilly later to be replaced by blues, soul, and country music styles). In 1939, Moses Asch (1905-86) founded Asch Records (later Folkways) releasing recordings of Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie (Myers, 1993).

During the 1930s and 40s in England, the BBC began to build up a sound archive of folksingers and musicians from different parts of the British Isles. For instance, in 1939 A.L. Lloyd recorded the singing of Jumbo Brightwell of Little Glemham, East Suffolk, and in 1946 and 1948 the fiddler Sam Bennett of Ilmington, Warwickshire, was recorded playing *Jockey to the Fair*, *Shepherd's Hey*, *Step and Fetch Her* and a broomdance tune. Great excitement was aroused by the 'discovery' of the traditional singer [HARRY FRED COX](#) of Catfield, Norfolk, and more recordings were made in the 'Eel's Foot' in East Suffolk by [E.J. MOERAN](#).

During the 1950s, Alan Lomax collaborated with local scholars in publishing the results of extensive field collecting on the Columbia World Library series. With respect to England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Spain, these recordings were largely from tapes made by Lomax and his local associates. In England he worked with folksong collector Peter Kennedy making recordings of traditional singers from East Suffolk that were included in the Folk Song of Britain record series, issued by the American label Caedmon in 1961 and re-issued by the English company [TOPIC](#). In Bulgaria, France, Romania and Yugoslavia, the contents were assembled by specialists who drew on archival sources. Lomax subsequently made available supplementary field material from Italy (Folkways), Scotland (Tradition) and Spain (Westminster). These recordings formed the basis of Lomax's Cantometrics project (Lomax, 1968). In 1955 Kennedy made the film *Here's a Health to the Barley Mow* of singers, musicians and stepdancers at the Blaxhall 'Ship', East Suffolk (cf C.A. Pegg's video film, *Tune-up at the Ship*, 1985). Also during the 1950s and early 60s, recordings were made in Norfolk for the seminal album of *English Country Music*, including Walter Bulwer (fiddle and mandolin-banjo), Billy Cooper (hammer dulcimer), Reg Hall (melodeon and fiddle), Daisy Bulwer (piano), Mervyn Plunkett (tambourine, drum) and Russell Wortley (pipe-and-tabor), initially issued by Reg Hall and Bob Davenport (1962).

Having increasing access to such recordings during the early years of the second Folk Song Revival, the difference between the sweet sounds of contemporary folksingers and those of what came to be termed traditional singers became obvious as did the differences between the traditional sounds of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. During the 1970s, the growing interest in traditional music and song was reflected in the output of the two specialist record labels in England, Topic and Leader. In 1972, Leader transferred Grainger's original cylinder recordings to disc and released a compilation album.

Meanwhile the [FOLK-ROCK](#) movement of the early 1970s exacerbated the raging debate about sounds, with [STEELEYE SPAN](#) choosing to accompany traditional folk lyrics with Mid-Atlantic sounds using a fiddle style that was akin to Scottish and Irish styles in its ornamentation and speed, and [MR FOX](#) backing their own traditionally-inspired lyrics with harsher and slower English vocal and instrumental sounds. These two strands continued to develop with various bands organized by [ASHLEY HUTCHINGS](#) following the route of English sounds and different spin-offs of Steeleye Span pursuing less traditional or regional sounds. The journal *Traditional Music* gained ground during the late 1970s eventually metamorphosing into the electronic journal *Musical Traditions* in the early 21st century.

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5. Political and ideological issues.

'Folk music' as cultural construct, used for a variety of political agendas including nationalism, communism, fascism and colonialism, is the subject of ongoing research and debate. From the late 18th century, the concept was linked to a variety of nationalist endeavours as compilations of folksongs began to proliferate (see [EUROPE, §2](#)). These were consolidatory, educational and aspirational. Kolberg's folksong compilations (1857; 1865), for instance, made during the period of partition between Russia, Austria and Prussia (1772–1914), were collected from the pre-partition Polish borders. Throughout the 19th century, folksongs were often published together with new songs inspired by the 'spirit of the people', often with piano accompaniment, with the aim of creating national music and forming national taste. In the early 20th century, Bartók (1931) attempted to define the essence of the Magyar musical style and thereby to distinguish Hungarian peasant music from that of the Gypsies with which it had been previously associated. In England, Sharp hoped to eventually found a 'National School of English Music' by the introduction of English folksongs into schools.

In the Middle East and Central Asia, nationalist projects included the codification of classical and folk idioms supported by the appropriate publications and institutions, conservatories and traditional music archives. The sharp division between art (*san'at*) and 'folk' (*halk*) music by the founders of the Turkish Republic (established 1923) served to separate the new nation from its Ottoman past (see [CENTRAL ASIA, §1](#)). State run media have used folk musics as a means of creating the nation. In India, for instance, the state television network, Doordarhan was used.

An important strategy in creating socialist international and national identities under the former Soviet system was the identification of folk or peoples music. In the former Soviet Central Asia, as across Eastern Europe, aspects of indigenous folk music were combined with the sound-ideals of Russian classical music and disseminated through theatres, colleges and schools. Bartks methods of musical folklore involving the collection of folksongs and customs and the use of evolutionary perspectives were compatible with Soviet ideology. Reaching for the supposed pinnacle of social and cultural development, the sizes and tunings of indigenous instruments were changed so that as national instruments they could play in orchestras together with European instruments; traditional melodies were retained but adapted and folksong was redefined as composed song that comprised lyrics in praise of their happy modern lives (cf. Pegg, 2001).

Folk music was also used as an ideological tool by other totalitarian systems. In common with Soviet communism, folksongs under Chinese communism comprise newly-composed texts with State approved lyrics sung to already existing tunes (see [CHINA, §IV, 2](#)). And in order to ensure the racial superiority of Aryan music in Nazi Germany, folk music was grouped together with choral music in the Reich's Chamber of Music and controlled by the German Singers' Union (Deutscher Sängerbund) (Levi, 1994).

The extent to which the use of folk music outside of Europe and America is a colonialist construction needs to be further explored. Recently, scholars have been challenging the idea that music can be classified into discrete categories of folk in juxtaposition with classical/art music (e.g. for South Asia, see Allen, 1998; Groesbeck, 1999). There is no equivalent indigenous concept to folk music in sub-Saharan Africa and it is rarely used in the Pacific. The folk-art (or popular music distinction) is also recognized as a recent importation into the Arab world (see [ARAB MUSIC, §II](#)).

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6. New Grove usage.

For European countries, the dictionary distinguishes between 'art' music (i.e. European classical and sacred musics), 'folk' or 'traditional' music and 'popular' music. However, the perspectives of contributors express different national intellectual and disciplinary traditions. 'Folk music' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'traditional' music: to distinguish it from art or popular musics (as in Europe, for instance, see [ENGLAND, §II](#)); to distinguish between indigenous rural and urban traditions (as in the Middle East); and to distinguish 'community music-making' from 'popular music' intended for mass dissemination or marketing (for instance, see [CUBA](#)). It has been used in sometimes essentialist and sometimes very loose ways. The definition of Jewish 'folk music' includes composed song (see [JEWISH MUSIC, §IV](#); [ISRAEL, §II](#)). Since the 1980s and 1990s, a continuum has developed including World music, World Beat and Roots musics. Operating in a global context, these range from fusions of local folk music with Western pop sounds to the selection and elevation of indigenous folk musics on to the world stage.

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