Musical Performance at the Festival: Developing Criteria

By Thomas Vennum, Jr. and Nicholas Spitzer

Since its inception in 1967, the annual Festival of American Folklife has had musical performance at the core of its programming. While crafts, foodways and other facets of folklife continue to be integral parts of the Festival, musical performance unquestionably attracts the immediate attention of the casual passersby and draws the largest crowds. Recognizing its essential role, we have often enhanced its prominence within the program through such events as evening concerts and dance parties. At this year's 20th anniversary of the Festival, a special music stage offers a retrospective—a cross-section of the musical styles and performers presented at the Festival in previous years. This would seem an apt time to review the criteria of choice, which have shaped our musical programs over the years.

Music in one form or another provides enjoyment for nearly everyone. Most people develop their musical tastes early in life. Some perform it with varying degrees of talent; only a handful study its technical or historical side seriously. People generally restrict themselves to their subjective reactions of liking or disliking a particular performance or style. And while most of us *like* the music with which we are familiar, rarely do we think about it beyond its entertainment value to recognize symbolic meanings of music in ritual contexts and celebrations or its use in expressing collective identities. This deeper role music often plays is important to stress, particularly in today's world where the mass media so often shape the public's musical opinions. Most Americans are constantly exposed to only those musical styles selected, created and manipulated by the recording, radio, and television industries. Because of this, many unmarketable musical traditions have been eclipsed or allowed to become extinct, *not* because they lacked validity or richness, but simply because they were largely outside the commercial system.

One aim, then, of the Office of Folklife Programs is to enhance the public's musical understanding by presenting neglected performance traditions which, in turn, can encourage their appreciation "back home." The Smithsonian is in a unique position to do this under its general mandate for "the increase and diffusion of knowledge." Thus it is with considerable care that we research and select the performance traditions to be offered and the persons to present these traditions and performers to the public. When we do this successfully, audiences become more receptive to enjoying new

tastes and are encouraged to pursue traditions beyond those offered on radio and television.

What criteria does the Office of Folklife Programs use in identifying folk music? The debate over what constitutes some "authentic" folk music is a continuing one. Organizers of early folk festivals, in seeking out what they felt to be true folk music, sometimes chose to focus upon stylized interpretations of folk traditions by well-meaning "folk-pop" performers outside the culture. Others selected only archaic traditions which reflected their own restricted, somewhat romantic view. Folk singers to them, for example, were only to be found in some relatively isolated rural area. The notion that a folk music tradition might be viable in the midst of a large city was foreign to some, and they tended to ignore the many urban ethnic musics whose richness we have since come to recognize at our Festivals such as Greek-American, Italian-American, and Polish-American among others. The debate was given focus by the emminent American musicologist Charles Seeger in the 1960s when he pioneered an attempt to describe all musical activity by dividing it into four categories, which he called "music idioms": tribal, professional, folk, and popular. Seeger readily admitted that these were not sharply defined categories, that there were hybrid, grey areas between them; still, much of what he wrote at the time is a useful starting point for anyone considering the problem.

Seeger was principally concerned with the social dimension of music in culture, who its audience was, and the mode of training of the tradition bearers. Some of his arguments are important here, as the criteria we apply have in part evolved from them. The professional (e.g., "classical") idiom Seeger sees as lying outside the mainstream of musical activity; its composers are constantly striving for stylistic innovation, and their products are mainly based on theoretical and notational systems. At the other end of the spectrum is tribal music, which he considers to be principally functional music, where the performers are their own audience—an entire village, for example, singing ceremonial songs for a bountiful harvest. Though passed down orally, tribal music is intended to remain consistent over time. This tradition is consequently the most conservative of the four idioms.

In Seeger's view, folk music, originally associated with ethnic and regional groups as part of a national culture, is also conservative by nature. Based essentially (although not exclusively) on oral tradition, fewer of its genres involve a communal performance standard, in that its repertoire tends to be maintained through generations of certain families or is borne by only a handful of individuals in a community who perform informally. Like professional and popular music, the audience as receivers of the music is separated from the performers, but unlike professional and popular music, commercial mechanisms are not traditionally involved (symphony orchestra tickets, television sponsors, recording royalties). Like tribal music, folk music intends to conform to a tradition, but less exactingly so than tribal music; it permits some innovation, but *within* the general style of the tradition, so that change is limited and slow.

Popular music, notes Seeger, is seen by musicologists and folklorists as a large repository controlled in part by non-musical com-

mercial interests, absorbing as the market demands from the other three idioms in the production and distribution of newly created products which, though widely disseminated, are often soon forgotten and easily replaced.

As part of its general commitment to cultural conservation, the Office of Folklife Programs is less oriented toward the consciously innovative musical traditions represented by Seeger's professional and popular idioms. Instead, our programming has included performances from the folk and tribal idioms. In acknowledging Seeger's grey areas, we are aware of the problem of rigid definitions. Usually, however, it is more a matter of degree than substance. Among the Pima and Tohono O'odham (formerly called Papago) Indians of Arizona, for example, are several musical traditions—among them their ceremonial music, which can properly be considered tribal; their secular pan-Indian powwow dance music, which in essence functions as folk music; and a hybrid style of music called "Chicken Scratch," or *waila,* which uses non-Indian musical instruments (saxophone, accordion, traps), rhythms, melodies and song forms reflecting a melange of cultural influences—Mexican, German, Bohemian—but a performance style which has distinctively Indian qualities to it. In effect, for these peoples, such music functions today as their "popular" social Saturday night dance music in local nightspots. Still, Chicken Scratch has been repeatedly featured at a number of "folk" festivals, including the Smithsonian's. This is cited as an example because it suggests that there are no hidebound rules in selecting performance traditions. Chicken Scratch is accepted as appropriate, being considered a relatively "new" folk tradition, perhaps less than a century old, and uniquely restricted to one group of people, and certainly worthy of exposure in a national forum, as it demonstrates well how synthesizing forces have operated to reflect the cultural history of a certain region.

The problem of recognizing musical traditions as being truly "folk" is admittedly complex. Beginning with the folk music revival in the 1950s many people began consciously to apply themselves to learning what they perceived as archaic and "authentic" American rural traditions. This revival has never fully tapered off, as many today continue to take up the dulcimer, banjo or blues guitar. Additionally, since then, revival interest has been sparked in various ethnic traditions, so that, regardless of one's own ancestry, a love of Irish music might induce, say, a German-American to take up the pennywhistle and learn Irish jigs, housewives to study the Japanese *koto,* or university students to play in the music department's Balinese *gamelan.* This ability to cross cultures musically has occurred largely in this century, as "bi-musicality" has emerged through cultural contact, the media and study of ethnomusicology. A number of gifted performers have become outstanding carriers of traditions into which they were not born.

While Seeger's criteria were a useful starting point, we continue to develop criteria for recognizing appropriate tradition bearers to present at the Festival. Expanding upon Seeger's criteria to include increasingly layered and reflexive communication and aesthetic systems, we broaden our search for appropriate folk performers. Questions we address are increasingly less involved with the particular

idiom or category a performer falls into. Instead, we pay attention to the degree a particular tradition is reflective of the value and aesthetic systems *controlled* by its home community. What impact have these culture bearers had with their home audiences? Are the roots of certain popular styles today still alive, have they mingled with other styles, and where do we find them? For instance, the many commercial white blues bands so popular today owe the very essence of their style to those often relatively unknown Black Delta bottleneck guitar and piano performers who moved into northern cities. Many of them are still viable musicians and appropriate to perform at the Festival of American Folklife.

A few examples show the sort of selection decisions we would make (in some cases have made), were we presented with options from within a given culture, country, or state. We would opt for: Japanese *min'yo* (folk) performers over *koto* ensembles (classical); Indian *sarangi* players (folk) instead of *sitar* performers (classical); mountain string bands from Appalachia in place of commercial bluegrass groups; unaccompanied Anglo-American ballad singers (oral tradition) rather than guitar-accompanied quasi-operatic ballad singers who have learned "Barbara Allen" from sheet music; a Swiss farmer's orchestra (folk) over a Swiss men's civic chorus featuring yodelling (professional, arranged, directed); a Black country or city blues guitarist before a pop rhythm and blues performer.

Clearly, then, each performance tradition must be carefully considered on its own, but within a wider context of world music traditions. Only this way can the Festival hope to provide the equal time badly needed by many musics if they are to survive what folklorist Alan Lomax has called the "cultural grey-out" which threatens the many-hued pluralism of world music.