Winds Of The North II:
Canadian Wind Band Works on Folk Music Themes

The tradition of using folk music as the basis of wind band compositions originated early in the 20th century with the seminal works of the composers Holst, Vaughan Williams, and Grainger. Since then, composers of many countries have followed their example. A significant portion of the wind band music played the world over draws on folk music themes. The Canadian repertoire is no exception. A large proportion of works written for this medium, at all levels of difficulty, draw on Canadian folk melodies, and a smaller number also employ those of other countries.

Three Canadian provinces – Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Quebec – are particularly rich in folk songs. Since France and England colonized the country from east to west, these three provinces were the sites of the earliest European settlements in Canada. France had a community at Port Royal, Nova Scotia in 1605, and established Quebec City in 1608 and Montreal in 1642. In 1710 the British conquered Nova Scotia, and established Halifax as their stronghold in North America in 1749. European presence in Newfoundland is older still. The Vikings had a short-lived village at L’Anse-aux-Meadows around 1000, Basques whalers had a seasonal whaling port at Red Bay by 1540, and the first permanent British settlement was founded in 1623. Considering the long history of European colonies in these provinces, it should not be surprising that they would have the best developed folk traditions. The musical customs of the aboriginal peoples have until recently been ignored; however, many of these traditions are now being recovered, and this paper will include works based on native Canadian themes.

While all the provinces have their own folk traditions, the melodies from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Quebec are very well known throughout the country, and are standard fare in elementary music classrooms, around the campfires of youth summer camps, and at family gatherings. Arrangements of these familiar tunes have also been common in the repertoire of school bands, although, because of the small domestic publishing industry, rather few have been available in published form. Arrangements in manuscript have been available through the Canadian Music Centre, or via word of mouth from conductor to conductor. Professional and military bands also have their stock of more complex arrangements, many of which were published by Canadian and American firms. Recently, with the advent of desktop printing, a number of publishing concerns have been established, and these companies have made the acquisition of such arrangements easier than ever before, especially at the lower levels of difficulty.

Patriotic occasions often showcase popular folk music. One particularly important national occasion in Canada was the Centennial year, 1967. This year-long celebration of Canadian statehood stimulated an extraordinary number of folk-influenced band works, several of which appear in this study. These compositions frequently highlighted a tune from each of the ten provinces, but works focusing on a particular region were also common. While these pieces vary widely in quality, the best of them are fine contributions to the repertoire and deserve to be better known both outside and within Canada. Folk influenced music remains very popular with performers and audiences, and, as the established repertoire shows, can be highly imaginative and musically satisfying. The works
selected for review in this article present a cross section of outstanding compositions in three different formats that illustrate the range of approaches taken to this material by Canadian composers.

**Settings of a Single Folk Song**

In his arrangements of *Land of the Silver Birch* and *Donkey Riding*, Donald Coakley applied standard developmental techniques to motives from the tune to create fantasies that are interesting musically and make fine use of the color possibilities of the young band.

*Land of the Silver Birch* may be the quintessential Canadian folk song. The text is full of distinctively Canadian wilderness imagery, and the melody is supposedly Native Canadian, collected by 17th-century Jesuit missionaries from the woodland tribes around the Great Lakes in central Canada. However, if the tune ever was aboriginal, the Jesuits “corrected” it to conform to European concepts of harmony and rhythm, although its simplicity and the predominance of fifths might suggest a distant Native origin. In his setting for first year players, Coakley’s imaginative approach to motivic development produced a musically rewarding arrangement of a tune familiar to all Canadian young people.

*Donkey Riding* is a boisterous work song from the British Isles. It was associated with the “donkey engines” — small steam engines used to load cargo on ships. It came to Canada via the port of Quebec and was adopted by lumberjacks in the Ottawa Valley who used similar engines. The Canadian words have specific geographical references, but the tune is little changed from its British antecedents. Compositionally similar to Land...Birch, this bright, energetic arrangement is intended for more experienced players.
As Coakley’s works described above, it is possible to find compositional similarities among the folk music settings of Newfoundland composer Jim Duff. Duff has apparently familiarized himself with Percy Grainger's approach to working with folk materials, since, like Grainger’s, his settings often present several verses of a tune during which the counterpoint becomes progressively more complex, and the harmony more chromatic.

Duff’s *Newfoundland Folk Song* uses a generic title for a setting of *She’s Like the Swallow* – one of the most beautiful Newfoundland folk songs, and a favorite of composers writing in many genres. This exquisite song of unrequited love is sung to several slightly different tunes. For his easy arrangement, Duff chose one of the simpler versions, a straightforward dorian melody. While the melody is presented unadorned throughout, the accompaniment incorporates chromatically inflected harmony, several countermelodies and textural devices such as harmonic pyramids. A hint of arch form provides a satisfying sense of musical resolution.

Duff’s arrangement of *Petty Harbour Bait Skiff* employs a less familiar but equally attractive song. Like all seafaring societies, Newfoundland has many folk songs about disaster at sea. This particular song, a ballad of some thirteen verses, is credited to John Grace and tells the story of a small boat used to catch bait for fishing vessels that foundered off Petty Harbour, Newfoundland, on June 10, 1852 (Fowke and MacMillan, 1973, pp. 195-6). The tune is unusual in its numerous wide melodic skips and its substantial compass. Duff’s arrangement sets three verses, each in a different key and progressing in contrapuntal and harmonic complexity. Exposed solos, chromatic harmony and independence of line require careful rehearsal, but the ultimate result is a highly enjoyable performance piece.
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Harry Freedman is one of Canada’s most important composers. A wind player himself (oboe/English horn), he has always been interested in the band and in the education of young wind performers. In the early 1970s he was involved in a “Composer in the Classroom” project in the Toronto schools, and during that project he produced arrangements of two Quebec folk songs (*Blanche comme la neige* and *À la Claire fontaine*) especially for middle school bands. These two arrangements present a level of creative imagination and musical sophistication that is rare in music at this level of difficulty. Both works focus on the lyrical side of band performance, and, since Freedman believed that every player should have an interesting part, are transparently scored and full of contrapuntal textures. Quiet dynamics are featured. While the tunes are love songs, the composer seemed little interested in the text, essentially using the melody as a pitch set from which motives are drawn to construct imitative textures and accompanimental figures. *Blanche…neige* is the longest and most complex, with a number of differently constructed imitative passages and counterpoint consisting of different phrases of the tune set against each other. *À…fontaine* is among the best known of all Canadian folk songs and is frequently selected by composers writing in all genres. One of the oldest French Canadian songs, it dates back to the earliest French settlements in Nova Scotia. It will reappear in several of the works reviewed later in this article. Freedman’s setting is remarkable in many ways. It is tonally grounded in E-flat, but the accompaniment is built from a series of harmonic seconds rendering it essentially atonal. Since the melody is presented very simply and marked “as soft as possible,” and the percussion are asked to improvise very quietly, performance requires careful listening by every member of the ensemble. The resulting soundscape is highly colored and is some of the gentlest music ever written for band.

Jack Sirulnikoff’s *Variations on a Rollicking Tune* is based on the flamboyant dance tune, *I’s the B’y that Builds the Boat* – one of the best known of all Newfoundland folk songs. The song has dozens of verses. Since the words are chosen for sound rather than meaning, most of the text makes little sense, although some phrases are instructions to dancers. In Newfoundland, singers at dances are expected to make up their own verses to this melody, many of which are decidedly crude and/or bawdy. In his *Variations*, Sirulnikoff picked up on the irreverent nature of the song and made his arrangement into a fine example of musical humor by featuring a solo woodblock in the Introduction, making for abrupt changes of texture and incorporating amusing twists in the surface rhythm.
The variations incorporate primarily changes of meter, but also make use of solo textures contrasted with full band, and ornamentation. In variation one, the tune is stated in brief motives tossed around the band, resulting in uneven phrase lengths. Solo textures are also featured, and Sirulnikoff designed some impressive contrary motion counterpoint. The second variation is a quick waltz, while the third is a duple meter march with the melody heavily ornamented. Variation four combines the march with the original triple meter tune. A da capo al coda brings the work to a rousing conclusion.

This delightful, short work, intended for younger bands (second or third year), is robust and exciting and successfully captures the exuberance associated with this folk song.

*Tyendinaga* by Clifford Crawley, which is based on the Iroquois lullaby *Ho, Ho, Watanay*, takes its name from a Native Canadian town in Eastern Ontario. The lovely, gentle theme is presented by solo flute and solo clarinet over a simple accompaniment of held chords in modal harmony and a series of brief timpani solos.

Variation one is in a fast tempo and uses a version of the theme altered rhythmically to incorporate syncopation. This variation has numerous simple meter changes. The second variation is slow and lyrical, with a new melody generated from the notes of the theme. This new melody is developed at considerable length, mostly through changes in orchestration. Variation three is fast, but heavy and war-like with a number of solo drum figures. Another new melody, a derivative of the syncopated melody in variation one, appears here. Also appearing are many meter changes that are often in complex relationship to each other (i.e., 4/4 and 10/8). The fourth variation is another lyrical section. It presents two new melodies: one derived from the melody in variation two; the other is closely related to the theme.
but with octave displacements of some notes. Variation five opens with a fanfare then recalls the unadorned theme and all of its variants from the entire composition.

Although based on an Iroquois melody, this piece does not sound aboriginal. At times the counterpoint is quite dissonant, but overall the work uses traditional modal harmony. It presents many rhythmical challenges, as well as rapid changes of style from gentle and lyrical to powerful and war-like. All of these factors result in a fascinating work with a relentless and captivating forward energy.

**Medleys**

In folk based wind works of all countries the medley is a popular form. Undoubtedly, composers find this format a satisfying means of presenting a number of favorite tunes in a context that permits a great deal of contrast. The Canadian repertoire includes a number of works constructed as medleys that either present a tune from each province or a series of tunes from a particular province or region. Many of these works were intended for school bands, and are considered to be good teaching tools since they utilize modulations, changes of meter, and contrasts of style.

Donald Coakley’s *Canadian Folk Rhapsody* uses four tunes selected to “interact successfully in one composition.” The melodies chosen are mostly in triple meter and are from different regions of the country. The work is focused around *Flunky Jim*, a song written in Saskatchewan during the Great Depression, which describes a young man’s plans for new clothing paid for by collecting the bounty on gophers. A fanfare figure derived from this tune is an important unifying device.

Contrasting with this vigorous song is a lovely setting of *À la claire fontaine* in two verses, the second of which is a variation created through ornamentation of the melody. The third song is *Squid Jigging Ground*, a fishing song from Newfoundland. This is a lively tune with a humorous text that makes fun of politicians and wealthy people. *En roulant ma boule* is a very old French song that originated in medieval times. An energetic dance tune, very popular in Quebec, it is essentially a children’s fairy tale.

The folk songs chosen by Coakley balance and compliment each other very well, making his *Rhapsody* an enjoyable work with considerable musical variety.

Howard Cable founded a professional concert band in Toronto in the early 1950s. Most of his arrangements of folk melodies were written for, and first
performed by that band, and were published in Chappell’s Army Journal. Since he was writing for accomplished players, these works are very challenging with frequent modulations (often to keys not generally used in band music), range extremes, and difficult technical passagework.3

Quebec Folk Fantasy employs some ten songs, some of which are familiar while others are less known. Sections based on each tune flow smoothly one to the next through skilful modulations and transitions based on fragments of the tunes themselves. This level of compositional integration, along with outstanding scoring, has made this work a favorite of Canadian band directors.

The title, Snake Fence Country (A Rural Holiday) refers to pioneer rail fences built in a zigzag pattern, which once were common sights in many parts of Canada and the United States. This piece is modeled on a country dance where the musicians would present a continuous flow of songs to keep the dancers on the floor. The three dance melodies used here, Buffalo Gals, Red River Valley, and Turkey in the Straw, all have a distinctly rural flavor and have both Canadian and American origins. This bright, cheerful music is challenging to play, but exciting listening for performers and audience alike.

The Ottawa School Board commissioned William McCauley’s Canadian Folk Song Fantasy in 1967 as a Centennial Project. It employs some twenty tunes, including at least one from each province, but many more are hinted at in accompanimental figures. Many, but not all, are named in the score. McCauley has provided lovely countermelodies, effective motivic development, clever canonic textures, and, at times, a profusion of meter changes. Other forms of counterpoint also appear, with as many as three complete songs presented simultaneously. The compositional technique employed in this work is considerably more sophisticated than is normally seen in a medley. This is one of the outstanding musical products of the Canadian Centennial, which has, unfortunately, fallen out of the performance repertoire.

Jack Sirulnikoff’s Nova Scotia Fantasy was another Centennial project, written in 1967. This arrangement is focussed around the most popular of all Nova Scotia folk songs, Farewell to Nova Scotia. This exquisite aeolian tune is virtually the provincial anthem and is much loved outside the province as well.4 Its history is obscure, but probably was adapted from an old British sailing song (Fowke/Johnston 1954, 45).

The sun was setting in the west, the birds were singing on ev’ry tree. All nature seemed inclined for rest, but still there was no rest for me. Farewell to Nova Scotia the sea bound coast! Let your mountains dark and dreary be, For when I am far away on the briny ocean tossed Will you ever heave a sigh and a wish for me?
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Around this song as a core Sirulnikoff has strung three other tunes. The dance tune *Sally Round the Corner* is presented in fragmentary form as an introduction. Later the sea chanty *Captain Conrod* appears in two verses. The second is a striking variation based on augmentation of the individual notes of the melody. A generic Acadian fiddle tune brings the work back to *Farewell...Scotia*. Intended for younger bands, this work maintains interest through appealing, contrasted melodies and effective compositional technique.

As noted earlier, Harry Freedman is one of Canada’s most accomplished composers. His *Laurentian Moods* is an early work commissioned by the band at Barrie Collegiate High School, Barrie, Ontario (a small city just north of Toronto), for their performance at the 1962 World’s Fair in Seattle, Washington. As the title suggests – the Laurentians are a mountain range north of Montreal – the melodies are Quebec folk songs. While all sections are bridged, this work is closer to a suite than a medley. Each tune is developed to a much greater degree than in any of the works previously reviewed. The scoring is very transparent and the harmony is imaginative with polychords, quintal and quartal sonorities, and complex chords created by the contrapuntal movement of voices. Two of the tunes selected are familiar (*À la claire fontaine* and *En roulant ma boule*), the other two are less well known. Each tune is subjected to substantial development in highly creative ways. For example, the tune *Là-bas, sur les montagnes* is presented initially as a canon at the fifth, then unison in the low voices accompanied only by a three-voice chromatic chorale played by trumpets with harmon mutes – a texture that even today sounds startlingly innovative.

Freedman’s *Laurentian Moods* is an outstanding work that remains little known. Apparently, the transparent scoring intimidated band directors used to thicker, “safer” orchestrations. Today, however, this is no longer a reason to ignore this fine composition.

**Suites**

While the medley allows composers to present a variety of tunes within a single work, the suite permits the development of a few tunes to a much greater degree. As the established repertoire demonstrates, suites have long been a popular way of bringing folk materials to the band literature.

Arnold MacLaughlan’s *French Canadian Suite* is a popular work in three movements, and is intended for first or second year bands. Each movement is brief and based on a simplified version of a well-known folk tune from Quebec. However, while the music is deliberately simple, it retains the modal harmony, unusual phrase lengths and humor of the original tunes. The first movement employs the tune *Joli Tambour* and, since it tells of a drummer boy returning from war, is a triple meter march, filled with drumming figures that MacLaughlan emphasizes in both melody and accompaniment. By contrast the second movement, *C’est la belle Françoise*, is a gentle love song with a curious elision of the third and fourth phrases, creating a seven bar period. The final movement is another march, based on *À St. Malo, beau port de mer*. Since St. Malo was the port from which many of the first French settlers departed for Canada, this tune has an important place in Canadian history. MacLaughlan’s setting is filled with humorous touches – silent bars, surprising changes of scoring and an abrupt ending. This suite is an excellent teaching resource for first or second year players,
but is also well constructed musically, providing the young band with an interesting and rewarding performance piece.

Andre Jutras’s little suite *Three Folk Miniatures* draws on French Canadian folk songs, and is one of the best known of all Canadian band works. Intended for younger bands (second or third year), this music is well designed to challenge and attract performers at this level of development. In the two fast movements (movements one and three), the tunes are presented in fragmentary form and in several verses, each in a different style. The contrasting slow movement presents the lovely *Isabeau, s’y promene* in two full verses. The first verse is a simple melody and accompaniment, while the second presents the tune in parallel fourths over a pedal creating a striking archaic sound, singularly appropriate for this very old song.

Much of the attractiveness of this suite comes from driving syncopated rhythms in the accompaniments and rich harmonies involving the imaginative use of polychords. The scoring is colorful with interesting parts for all players.

In 1967, the Canadian Music Educators Association commissioned the prominent film composer Robert Fleming to write a work for band as a Centennial project. Fleming’s *Four Fantasias on Canadian Folk Themes* was the result. In this work, the composer took a somewhat unusual approach. Three of the four movements are essentially sets of variations on a single tune, while the fourth is a short medley. The first movement, *Out of our Indian Heritage*, employs an Iroquois melody that has no specific title. Fleming delays the introduction of the complete melody until halfway through the movement, choosing instead to state the initial motive and then subject it to extensive development through fragmentation of its rhythmic structure. When the complete melody finally appears, it is developed in a similar manner.

*Out of Old Quebec* is the only movement to employ several tunes as a medley focused around the high-spirited dance tune, *J’entend le Moulin*. All transitions throughout the movement recall motives from this tune, although the other tunes (*C’est l’aviron, À la claire fontaine* and *Frère Jacques*) receive considerable development, often with humorous intent.
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Out of Newfoundland uses only the exquisite She’s Like the Swallow in an extensive set of variations scored for woodwinds only and employing key changes and alterations in orchestration for variety. The finale, Out of the Prairies, is based on an old prairie homesteader’s song, The Little Old Sod Shanty, again set as variations and leading to an enthusiastic hoedown that completes the work.

Fleming’s Fantasias are admittedly not innovative musically, but constitute highly pleasing music with substantial variety in texture and timbre. This well constructed composition is presently “lost” in the collection of the Canadian Music Centre.

The next two compositions to be discussed are written by Canadian composers, but draw on the folk traditions of other countries.

Derek Healey is one of Canada’s most respected composers. His One Midsummer’s Morning is in six movements, each based on an English folk song. The composer has indicated that Grainger’s Lincolnshire Posy inspired the work and a number of aspects of this composition recall Grainger’s approach.

One…Morning is the most adventurous and challenging work addressed in this article. Healey employs senza misura sections, many meter changes and layering to create very complex textures. Percussion and piano have an important role. Several items need special mention. In the second movement, The Banks of Sweet Primrose, Healey superimposes ten precisely quoted bird calls, undoubtedly an evocation of early morning in the English countryside, over the melody, which is played primarily by solo trombone. Coordinating the unmeasured bird calls with the measured music of the rest of the ensemble requires fine players and an accomplished conductor.

High Germany, the third movement, opens with a soli trumpet trio using harmon mutes, and playing imitatively at soft dynamics. The effect of distant trumpet fanfares is compelling. The tune throughout this movement is assigned to baritone saxophone exclusively and will certainly tax player’s range and technique. The accompaniment increases in volume and textural density until it reaches a climax as complex as any in Lincolnshire Posy. A quiet coda recalling the trumpet fanfare of the beginning rounds off the movement with a hint of arch form.

In contrast to the preceding movement, movement four, Strawberry Fair, is brisk and very lightly scored. Short phrases of the melody move rapidly around the band.

The final movement, Stropshire Rounds, has surprisingly little canonic activity. At its beginning four repeated sections, each four bars long, are presented,
and then are reiterated over and over in sequence, but with altered scoring and increasing contrapuntal complexity. The work concludes with a massive climax.

A Midsummer’s Morning is unusual in the Canadian folk-influenced repertoire because of its innovative approach and complexity. A landmark composition in this literature, this work will challenge the most advanced bands.

Tibor Polgar emigrated from Hungary to Canada in 1964, and taught for many years at the University of Toronto. He has written several fine works for band, including the five-movement suite, Notes on Hungary. The composer indicates that the work draws on freely treated Hungarian folk melodies, and the five movements contrast nicely with each other. The initial movement, Sunrise, begins very quietly with a multitude of bird calls. Solo textures are used extensively until the climax at the end. The subsequent movement, Children Playing, is based on a very simple, lighthearted tune. It modulates several times and incorporates busy woodwind passagework and gypsy figuration. By contrast, A Song of Homesickness is, not surprisingly, rather sombre and at times quite dissonant. The Gypsy Song is at times flippant and at others rather clumsy. Apparently, the gypsies are playing the clown. The ending is very fast, leading to a gypsy cadence. The final movement, In the Soldier’s Camp, is based on what the composer calls a “recruiting song” or verbunkos. The opening is very atmospheric with quiet, antiphonal trumpet calls and drum cadences. This music morphs into a fiery dance. The melody, in five-bar phrases, is characterized by Lombard rhythms (Scotch Snaps), which are associated with Hungarian speech patterns.

Overall this suite is challenging but playable, and its rather exotic soundscape makes it an interesting addition to the repertoire.

The Canadian wind band repertoire on folk music themes is substantial in both quantity and quality. Because of audience appeal, band conductors often program such compositions. However, many of the best pieces remain unpublished and therefore not easily available, especially to school or community bands, which rarely rent music even from the Canadian Music Centre (CMC). Hopefully, articles such as this will encourage conductors to explore the rich collection of the CMC, and ultimately lead to publication of many deserving compositions.

Keith Kinder is Associate Professor of Music in the School of the Arts at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario (Canada), where he conducts the McMaster Chamber Orchestra and the McMaster Concert Band, and he is responsible for the Music Education program. He holds degrees from the University of Western Ontario, Northwestern University, and the University of Colorado.
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References


Sources

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CP Comprint; 67 Gananoque Dr.; Mississauga; Ontario; Canada; L5N 1V6; Phone/Fax: 905-826-5542; Web-site: www3.sympatico.ca/comprint

ENP Eighth Note Publications; 25 Robinson St.; Markham; Ontario; Canada; L3P 1N5; Phone: 905-471-4450; Fax: 905-471-5507; Web-site: www.enpmusic.com

JM Jaymar Music Ltd.; P.O. Box 2191; London; Ontario; Canada; N6A 4E3; Phone: 519-672-7369; Fax: 519-672-0016; Web-site: www.jaymar.com
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Endnotes

1 Interestingly, the founder of this settlement was Sir George Calvert, who later established the city of Baltimore.

2 In English Canada, French Canadian folk tunes are sung in both English translation and in the original French.

3 Readers are referred to the author’s article “Winds of the North”: Canadian Wind Band Music – A Representative View in WASBE Journal, Vol. 9 (2002), 40–58, for a review of Cable’s most popular work in this style, Newfoundland Rhapsody.

4 A fine arrangement of this tune by Nova Scotia composer, Peter Riddle, used to be available and was, not surprisingly, popular with bands in Nova Scotia. Unfortunately, the publisher, Gordon V. Thompson of Toronto, has been out of business for some time and the arrangement does not appear to be currently available from any source.

5 Apparently, even the conductor of the commissioning ensemble thought the work was “too orchestral” in concept and discouraged other band directors from performing it. (This information was conveyed to the author by the composer himself). Today, this observation would be considered a recommendation, not a criticism.

6 Readers are referred to the author’s article “Winds of the North”: Canadian Wind Band Music – A Representative View in WASBE Journal, Vol. 9 (2002), 40–58, for a review of Morley Calvert, Suite on Canadian Folk Songs, John Herberman’s The Fisher Who Died in His Bed and Malcolm Forsyth’s Songs from the Qu’Appelle Valley.

7 Other fine works by Polgar are Two Symphonic Dances (in Spanish Style) for solo trumpet and band, and Fanfare of Pride and Joy for band and 18 trumpets(!). Both of these pieces are available from the Canadian Music Centre.