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Summary of introductory report

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ON THE METHOD OF COMPARATIVE MELODIC RESEARCH

1. The different aspects of the subject and the
----- corresponding methods -----

The life-history of melodies is the subject of comparative melodic research. It offers various aspects and forms of approach, and research has consequently developed in different directions and has employed a variety of methods. These are differentiated not only by nomenclature but by the emphasis laid upon special aspects of the subject-matter.

In this sense, the typological, morphological, genetic and geographico-historical aspects of research are interconnected. The concept 'comparative melodic research', as we employ it, comprises these lines of thought, but 'comparative' is not intended in the general sense as inferring every kind of perception, but rather, in a specialized sense. Moreover, not only do the variants of a melody and the different melodies of a single type form the subject of comparison, but also the complete melodic heritage of dissimilar races and continents.

2. From toying with vague similarities to scientific method

Comparative melodic research is still a young branch of science; it must endeavour to recognize and to overcome all the deficiencies which still hamper it and which are especially apparent in its early stages, for example, in the work of Wilhelm Tappert and Oskar Fleischer.

The unproductive suspicion which is fostered by prejudice rather than by scientific arguments against comparative melodic research should, however, be suppressed.

Despite all imperfections, considerable progress has been made since the turn of the century, both in the editing of variable melodies which are current in many versions, and in the arranging of the records according to tunes and types in archives as well as in several monographs and basic surveys.

For the further development of comparative melodic research it is necessary to clarify and unify its definitions. An attempt must be

made to acquire that supra-national common possession: a technical language adequate to the demands of genuine science.

Much can be learned from the comparative sciences of language, law and religion as well as from comparative research on fairy tales and other branches of folklore. But methods must be adapted to the individuality of the subject: to the life-history of music and its melodies.

It will be the task of the meeting at Freiburg to go further in this direction. My introductory report aims at surveying the range of questions and at provoking discussion.

3. Growth and decline, variation and transformation

It has often been emphasized that genuine folk-tunes orally transmitted always undergo change. As Riehl said, they are 'keine ein für alle Male fertige, sondern ewig werdende Gebilde' (never completed but ever growing forms); the very reverse of compositions written down definitively. But although this holds good for only one aspect of the life-history of melodies, it is important to explore all these aspects combined.

a) The great persistence of many melodies in pure oral tradition is no less remarkable than their variability. More constant, persistent, static melodies exist side by side with others more variable, fluid and unstable.

b) Apart from mutilated corruption (Zersingen), descriptions of modification have hitherto dealt only with comparatively unimportant changes such as are confined to mere variants and are consequently not concerned with the identical form of melodies. More vital are those changes which allow one melody to grow out of another. Transformation, amalgamation and extension are not less essential than variation.

c) Transformation, for instance, can result from transposing passages of a melody to a higher or a lower pitch. It can also be produced by changing the tonal centre (cf. our example III and IV) (tonale Um-zentrierung). Many major tunes originate in modes: the tonality may have risen from D-Dorian to G major (e.g. the first line from d/abc' /bag to d/ggac' /bag).

d) Our examples will demonstrate the important development of 'new' melodies by means of extension, transposition and combination. The taking over of a segment of a given melody and its continuation in a fresh direction will be considered, too. It may be assumed that the evolutionary tendency or growth from a lower organism to a higher was also operative in the life-history of melodic forms. National treasures of melodies seem for the most part to have originated in this way.

e) These, and other observations shed light upon the ideas of the Brothers Grimm concerning the origin of folk-song. The trite opinion, that every melody has its known, individual author betokens a misunderstanding of those aspects in the life-history of folk-song which are intimately connected with its origin and evolution in the natural world.

4. The single melody and the general forms

a) A 'melody' should not be regarded as a series of pure sounds or even as an abstract scheme of notes. Rhythm and tonal structure are constituents over and above the rise and fall of the melodic line, and the outward musical form of the melody is completed by the movements of the voice and the soul.

b) An archive may be said to possess 300,000 folk-songs, but it would be more accurate to say records, for many are only different versions of the same notes. But the differences in performance and conception, which are not variants in the accepted meaning, become increasingly important in folk-music research. For instance, people from England, France, Poland or Bavaria, the Rhineland, Westphalia may sing the same melody; the written version may even be fixed, but the performance will differ in tone-colour, tempo, temperament, emotional character and other respects. Such differences are not necessarily less important than variants; they are only different in kind.

A melody acquires another character on becoming the tune of various songs and dances. The actual succession of notes may sound the same in a secular text and its religious contrafactum, but as a segment of another totality the tune takes on fresh characteristics. Anyone who sings the song sensitively adapts the melody to the fresh context in dynamics, tempo and emotional character.

c) In modern melodies, and particularly in those that are ancient and exotic, forms are used that are more universal than a tune. In order to designate them it is inadvisable to employ generalizations, such as 'Makam', or other terms that are valid only in one sphere of culture. It would be better to choose the expression: Type of melody, which should be distinguished on the one hand from the tune (e.g. a song tune), and on the other, from style and kind (e.g. melodic style of French romances c. 1800 or of Austro-Bavarian 'Ländler').

An example of a type of melody is shown by the symmetrical quatrains (vierzeilige Strophenweise) that Béla Bartók considered a new style c. 1800, but which in reality had been spread over Europe since the late Middle Ages. Several characteristics are united here: 1) the constituent indications or principal components are the distribution of the arc of melody over four lines: keynote - octave - keynote,

and 2) the symmetrical structure of the four lines: a a⁵ b a. The foregoing type, together with other types in which the sequence occurs only at the second, third or fourth, constitute a cycle of types: a a^x b a.

d) Two kinds of melodic type can be distinguished: 1) typical melodic forms or patterns that determine the course of the melody, and 2), an amalgam of melodic phrases within one key, in which the same elements occur in alternative succession.

e) There are still other kinds of melodic common property; for instance, introductory and cadential flourishes or the formulae of archaic recitative.

5. Similarity and relationship

a) Genuine melodic types are connected by tradition. Being historically essential forms that have lived in the soul of the people they differ from the headings in catalogues of melodies such as are based on an artificial principle of classification: e.g. melodies with the same number of lines and syllables. On the other hand, they differ from genetic series in which one melody may grow out of another but the essential quality is not preserved. In this classification, similar melodies are connected, even if they are not mutually related. In the genetic series, however, many melodies are related in origin without being actually similar.

b) A careful distinction must be made as to whether melodies correspond only in fortuitous note-groupings or in the quality of their shape (Gestaltqualität); whether only in clichés or in individual features. In 'oblique comparison' (schiefer Vergleich), two successions of notes are wrongly placed one over the other so that it is not the rhythmic centre of gravity and the melodic structure that correspond, but only the apparently similar groups of notes.

c) Similarity alone is still no proof of relationship. Other criteria must be considered: whether the melodies belong to the same text or custom, and how far there are historical connections between the localities in question.

d) There are various kinds of 'relationship': those of type, style, origin, etc.

6. Constitutive factors in the evolution of melodic forms

It is not sufficient to enquire the reasons for 'corruption' (Zersingen) and to seek them in universal psychological 'laws' (such as oblivion, association, etc.). It is more apt to explain the life-history of melodic forms in their other aspects, their development by the people and the change from one type to another, etc.

Important considerations include the varying musical gifts and the individuality of the singers, who are by no means all of one kind. The distinctive style of various communities may be manifested by each singer. The folk-character of, say, Czechs and Scotsmen makes itself felt in the alteration of melodies, and the selection, regularizing and propagation of the variants, the melodies, types and styles are determined by the community.

Many other factors remain: the form of the melody (significant forms are less liable to metamorphosis than are irregular transitional forms); contemporary currents and influences from the upper cultural strata etc. In individual instances, one single factor is not effective; rather is it the co-operation and the interplay of forces between the several factors that must be considered.

7. The evolution of melodic forms as a whole

With a view to disclosing the life-history of a melody, a type or a genus as a whole, an account of its propagation will serve as the most important foundation. It should, therefore, be one of the main tasks of our research to arrange the melodies according to their relationship.

But even from the aspect of propagation, inferences regarding the history of a melody should not be drawn by means of unhistorical criteria such as the fact that a type must have originated in the district from which the largest number of records are known. Striking conclusions result if survivals are preserved exclusively in remote districts which are far distant from one another and have had no connexion during the recent past.

It is true only in certain cases that the most perfect version must have been the original of the tune and that it was composed by a trained musician. This, and other systems of thought are too restricted in themselves. The various aspects must be summed up and delimited according to their own validity. Many correspondences are not based on cultural migrations but on plurality of origin; for instance, on some of the elemental ideas of humanity found in children's songs.

Comparative melodic research must be carried on in close contact with the history of music. Not only must it consult the early written sources as important evidence, but it must be allied with the other methods of historical research.