

Johann Gottfried Herder's Folksong Project as a Pioneering Involvement in Intangible Cultural Heritage: Between Universalism and Nationalism

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Johann Gottfried Herder's *Volkslieder* (1778-79) has been regarded as one of the very first systematic collections of folksong, although they differ from subsequent similar collections in the absence of musical scores. It tells us that songs, especially the folk or popular ones, are the most classical and, at the same time, representative case of the "intangible culture."

This paper will examine the entire aspect of Herder's folksong project and elucidate the origin and initial formation of the modern interest in intangible culture. Comparing the editions of Herder's *Volkslieder* including posthumous ones from a present-day text-critical point of view, it will delineate factors to bear in mind anytime when we collect, record and represent intangible cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

With his *Volkslieder* (*Folksongs*, in English), published in two volumes between 1778 and 1779, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) established the modern tradition of folksong collection¹. We can also find in it a pioneering interest in and zeal for the "intangible cultural heritage" in today's meaning. It recorded the texts of 163 songs from 22 languages in Herder's own translation. But it did not record any musical scores at all unlike similar folksong collections of the 19th and 20th centuries, which would be appearing under Herder's strong influence.

Certainly, it should not be overlooked by a broader historical perspective that Herder's publication of *Volkslieder* and his coinage and vigorous usage of the concept *Volk* laid a foundation of the modern German identity and, even in a roundabout way, opened the path to the 19th century German nationalism; but we ought to add a careful reservation at once because we can not identify Herder's so-called "nationalism" with that of later ages, and because his *Volkslieder* was circulated and read among the 19th-century German people in an odd, distorted edition which could hardly convey the original idea. Hence this paper has two aims. First, it gives the outline of Herder's folksong project and uncovers the crucial essence of his concepts of *Volk* and *Volkslied*, and secondly, by comparing all the significant editions of *Volkslieder*, it tries to draw a lesson from it concerning what is important for all of us when we collect, record and represent intangible cultural heritages today. The German word *Volk*, whose exact English equivalent I could hardly find, is the very key to the following chapters.

2. Herder's Folksong Project

We can detect at least two facts that incited Herder's commitment to folksong. For one thing, like his German contemporaries, he was deeply inspired by the old Gaelic *Ossian* songs. A Scottish writer

¹ Johann Gottfried Herder. *Volkslieder*. 2 Parts. Leipzig: Weygand, 1778-1779. The modern reprint is contained as a part of the volume three of his newest collected writings. Johann Gottfried Herder. "Volkslieder." in: *Werke*. Vol. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990, pp. 69-428.

and poet James Macpherson (1736-1796) initiated the revival movement of *Ossian* songs by translating them into the modern English language and publishing them in his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760)². Herder enthusiastically examined the German translations of Macpherson's book. For another thing, more importantly, Herder encountered and totally fascinated with the Latvian folksongs, called *Dainas*, when he stayed in Riga from 1764 to 1769 as a Lutheran clergyman³. That encounter prompted him to unearth the "living remainders of old, wild song, rhythm, dance"⁴ by his hands also in Germany, his home country.

In the 1770s, Herder started to collect and examine the folksongs, both oral and written ones, left among the German-speaking peoples. In 1773 he finally planned the publication of his first folksong collection, although it aborted with unpublished manuscripts and materials, which the later scholars have called *Alte Volkslieder* (*Old Folksongs*).

After a few years interruption, in 1777, Herder restarted the project and this time succeeded in outcome in the following years: the publication of *Volkslieder* in two volumes. We would call them the first, or the original edition in the following discussion.

Yet the story did not end then. Herder's folksong project has a significant posthumous history. Four years after the author's death, in 1807, *Volkslieder* was revised and republished under the new title *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*⁵. It was edited by Johannes von Müller (1752-1809), one of the author's friends, in the assistant of Caroline Herder (1750-1809), the author's widow. Circulating as the *Vulgataausgabe* (popular edition), this second edition met a huge number of readers in the 19th-century Germany until the editors of the critical edition of Herders works brought the public attention again to the importance of first edition in the 1880s.

At the initial phase, as *Alte Volkslieder* shows, Herder's project was restricted to the songs of the "German" peoples in the broadest sense of the word, including English, Scottish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Nordic and so on. *Alte Volkslieder* contains 55 songs from 11 languages. But at the second stage, seen in the first edition of *Volkslieder*, the project was so globalized as to embrace 163 songs from 22 languages, reaching to the south, Roman peoples (Spanish, Italian, French, and so on) and extending beyond Europe (Peruvian, Kamchatka, Malagasy, and so on). All songs were translated into the modern German language under the author's supervision. While making full use of existing translations and retranslations, Herder translated songs from no less than 8 languages by himself. At the final step, in the second, posthumous edition of *Volkslieder*, the compilation was enlarged to covering 172 songs from 25 languages (Fig. 1).

² James Macpherson. *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language*. Edinburgh: G. Hamilton & J. Balfour, 1760.

³ Johann Gottfried Herder. "Über die neuere deutsche Literatur. Zwote Sammlung von Fragmenten." (1766) in: *Werke*. Vol. 1. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985, p. 285.

⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder. "Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker." (1773) in: *Werke*. Vol. 2. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993, pp. 457-458.

⁵ *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*. Gesammelt, geordnet, zum Theil übersetzt durch Johann Gottfried von Herder. Neu herausgegeben durch Johann von Müller. Tübingen: Cotta, 1807.

Language	<i>Alte Volkslieder</i> (Unpublished, 1773/74)	<i>Volkslieder</i> (1778/79)	<i>Stimmen der Völker in Liedern</i> (Posthumous, 1807)
German	15	37	31
English	19	37	32
Scottish	7	14	13
Wendish	1	1	1
Lithuanian	2	8	8
Latvian	2	2	2
Estonian	1	3	5
Lappish	2	2	2
Greenlandic	1	1	1
Scaldic	2	5	5
Nordic	3	5	5
Spanish	0	18	20
Morlach	0	4	4
Danish	0	4	4
Greek	0	5	5
French	0	5	7
Medieval Latin	0	3	3
Gaelic	0	3	3
Bohemian	0	1	2
Peruvian	0	1	2
Italian	0	3	3
Latin	0	1	1
Tatarian (Kamchatka)	0	0	1
Sicilian	0	0	2
Malagasy	0	0	10
Total	55 songs (in 11 languages)	163 songs (in 22 languages)	172 songs (in 25 languages)

Fig. 1 - Comparison of the three editions of *Volkslieder*

3. Posthumous Revision of *Volkslieder*

Stimmen der Völker in Liedern, the second edition of *Volkslieder*, consists of six books (Fig. 2). They correspond respectively to the six ethnic groups: High North peoples, South peoples, Northwest peoples, Nordic peoples, German people in the narrow sense, and the “Wilds,” that means, the “Wild” peoples. It is informative to compare the two editions of *Volkslieder* in respect to the addition and deletion of the songs, and then their arrangements. Johannes von Müller, the editor of the second edition, picked up 26 songs from Herder's manuscripts into the second edition: 10 songs from Malagasy, 2 from Sicilian, and 1 from Kamchatka. On the other hand, he deleted 16 songs from Herder's original selection. More remarkable cases occurred with the German and the English songs. The former lessened from 37 to 31; the latter from 37 to 32.

We can reasonably suppose, on the one hand, that Müller's addition of Malagasy, Sicilian and Kamchatka songs aimed to maximize the “exotic effects” of the folksong collection. Similarly, on the other hand, his deletion clearly shows how he redefined the “folksong” in a totally different manner from Herder. The songs deleted in the second edition are classified in the five categories:

- 1) Herder's original composition in folksong style (6 songs)
- 2) Herder's “free translation” of original folksong (3 songs)
- 3) Imperfect or fragmental song (2 songs)
- 4) Untraceable song about which Herder gave no further sources and references (2 songs)
- 5) Quotation from other authors (2 songs from Shakespeare and 1 song from Goethe)

Book	Category	Language		<i>Volkslieder</i> (First edition)
1	High North	Greenlandic	1	1
		Lappish	2	2
		Estonian	5	3
		Latvian	2	2
		Lithuanian	8	8
		Tatarian (Kamchatka)	1	0
		Wendish	1	1
		Morlach	4	4
2	South	Greek	5	5
		Latin	1	1
		Sicilian	2	0
		Italian	3	3
		Spanish	20	18
		French	7	5
3	Northwest	Gaelic	3	3
		Scottish	13	14
		English	32	37
		Medieval Latin	3	3
4	Nordic	Scaldic	5	5
		Nordic	5	5
		Danish	4	4
5	German	German	31	37
		Bohemian	2	1
6	The Wilds	Malagasy	10	0
		Peruvian	2	1
Total			172 songs (in 25 langages)	163 songs (in 22 languages)

Fig. 2 - Construction of *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1807)

Müller's criteria is very clear. Even often in conflict with the author himself, he applied an original definition of "folksong" that shows a preference for the historical authenticity and the ethnographical value.

More noteworthy is Müller's alteration of the order of songs. As already mentioned, the second edition is divided into six parts corresponding to the six ethnic groups. But, in Herder's original edition, songs were not ordered by such national or linguistic categories. There all songs were arranged more freely by their thematic connections and poetic associations independent of their roots. We can even perceive Herder's "poetic expression" in that arrangement. Only within such an intermingled arrangement, he believed, he could deliver the quintessence of folksong: the voice of the common, ordinary people.

4. Herder's Conceptions of *Volk* and *Volkslied*

As seen in the previous chapter, the arrangement of songs in the first edition of *Volkslieder*, which

prefers thematic connections and poetic associations to the ethnic or linguistic distinction, faithfully reflects Herder's original concept of *Volk*. In Herder's view, the *Volk* is the people who has natural mind and pure humanity. In a manuscript of *Alte Volkslieder*, he expresses that the *Volk* was originally one and same regardless of their nationalities.

"Without doubt, also the Gallic, English and still more the more Nordic *folk* was simply *folk*! *Folk*, as the German *folk*! (Ohne Zweifel war auch das Gallische, Englische und noch mehr das Nordische *Volk* bloß *Volk*! *Volk*, wie das Deutsche *Volk*!)"⁶

It is noteworthy to understand that the word *Volk* in such usage is an uncountable noun and has no plural form. Derived from an old Germanic term which signifies "mass of army," the German word *Volk* is originally uncountable. But in the course of the long history, the noun *Volk* gradually became used as countable with the plural form: *Völker*. The former, uncountable noun, is linked up with the German adjectives such as *volksmäßig* (folk-like), *populär* (popular) or *gemein* (common), while the latter, countable, with *national* (national) or *ethnisch* (ethnic). But Herder reconciled the both meanings of *Volk*, uncountable and countable, into one concept as he coined the word *Volkslied*: he discovered that "older, more popular, more lively" (*älter, volksmäßiger, lebendiger*) songs were still surviving among the "old, and wild nations" (*alte, und wilde Völker*) as the nordic peoples⁷.

In a draft of dedication, which the author wrote late in his life in preparation for the future revision of *Volkslieder*, Herder makes clear the aim of publication as following:

"To thee I consecrate the *voice of the common people*, of the dispersed *humanity*, their hidden pain, their mocked grief. (Euch weih' ich die *Stimme des Volks*, der zerstreuten *Menschheit*, ihren verhöhlten Schmerz, ihren verspotteten Gram.)"⁸

In this quotation, Herder paraphrases the word *Volk* as the "dispersed humanity." This word could never be in plural as far as it bears such a specific connotation in the context of general humanism. And even in the case where the word itself could be spelled in the plural form, as *Völker*, their *voice* is, nevertheless, one and same, and so it is conceived only in a singular form. In the fifth volume of *Adrastea* (1804), Herder states how the forthcoming, revised edition of *Volkslieder* should be.

"[The forthcoming edition of *Folksongs*] explains, as a *lively voice of the peoples, of humanity indeed, itself*, how they expressed themselves softly and awfully, cheerfully and mournfully, playfully and seriously, here and there in every kind of situations, everywhere instructively for us. ([...] erklärt, als eine *lebendige Stimme der Völker, ja der Menschheit, selbst* [...], wie sie in allerlei Zuständen sich mild und grausam, fröhlich und traurig, scherzhaft und ernst, hie und da hören ließ, allenthalben für

⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder. "Alte Volkslieder." (1774) in: *Werke*. Vol. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990, pp. 17-18. My translation.

⁷ Herder. "Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker." p. 476, p. 478.

⁸ Johann Gottfried Herder. "Zueignung der Volkslieder" (1804) in: *Werke*. Vol. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990, p. 429. My translation.

uns belehrend.)”⁹

Thus, the two meanings of the German noun *Volk*, common and ethnic, were overlapped in Herder’s conception of *Volkslied*. Herder believed that all folksongs convey a *common* feeling of *ordinary* people, the essence of humanity, although they might be always expressed by a particular *national* language. In other words, he tried to synthesize the ethnicity and cultural variety into a unified humanity by means of his folksong project. His *Volkslieder* thus can be seen a synthesis of the anthropological universalism and the nationalistic passion. Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) should recognize it, when he explained Herder’s “peculiar brand of universalism” as follows:

“Whatever may have been the evolution of Fichte or Friedrich Schlegel, Herder’s form of nationalism remained unaltered throughout his life. His national feeling was not political and never became so, nor did he abandon or modify the peculiar brand of universalism with which he had begun, whether or not the two tendencies [= universalism and nationalism] were consistent (the least of his concerns), throughout his long and voluminous intellectual activity.”¹⁰

As Berlin emphasizes, universalism and nationalism were marvelously consonant in Herder’s thought. Appreciation of the universal humanity and the nationalistic sympathy were not in serious conflict for him. We should detect therein a manifestation of “cosmopolitan nationalism,” which flourished in the age of Enlightenment and would be completely swept away after the French Revolution.

5. Recontextualization of *Volkslieder* in the Nineteenth-Century Nationalism

But Müller, who edited and published the second edition of *Volkslieder* in 1807, did not understand the true implication of Herder’s “peculiar” type of nationalism at all, and thus retitled it against the author’s original intention. As we have seen, Herder was always conceiving and talking of the *voice* of the peoples in the singular form. In the quotations we have examined in the previous chapter, he referred to *eine lebendige Stimme der Völker* (a lively voice of the peoples) and *die Stimme des Volks* (the voice of the common people). Although he carefully picked up the author’s words for the title of the new edition, Müller totally modified the original idea by spelling them in the plural forms: *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (The voices of the peoples in songs). This “pluralistic” reinterpretation by Müller necessarily led to a new categorization of songs ordered by language in the second edition. Herder discovered the universal humanity, *the voice of the common people*, hidden in folksongs behind the outward cultural and ethnic variety. But Müller could not share that fundamental insight with the author. Carl Christian Redlich (1832-1900), the editor of the critical editions of Herder’s works, wrote in 1885 as follows:

⁹ Johann Gottfried Herder. “Adrastea” (1801-1804) in: *Werke*. Vol. 10. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2000, p. 804. My translation.

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin. *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1976, p. 157.

“The Müller’s edition has replaced the aesthetic arrangement of the original edition with an only outwardly imported order by nations. (...) This attempt must be described as completely unsuccessful and kept away from repeating. (Die Müllersche Ausgabe hat die ästhetische Anordnung der Originalausgabe durch eine sehr äußerlich durchgeführte Ordnung nach Nationen ersetzt. (...) Dieser Versuch muß als vollständig mißlungen bezeichnet werden und von der Wiederholung abschrecken.)”¹¹

He pointed out that Müller’s edition of *Volkslieder* should be considered “completely unsuccessful” mainly because of its “order by nations.” But we can not ascribe this failure to Müller’s personal capability or lack of understanding. We should remember that *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* fully satisfied the readers’ interest and it was enthusiastically accepted by them for several decades. It suggests to us that Herder’s enlightened idea of “cosmopolitan nationalism” would be intelligible or, at least, unfamiliar to the readers who lived in the post-Napoleonic War period. They should rather be accustomed to the pluralized concepts of the *peoples* (*Völker*) and their *voices* (*Stimmen*).

Therefore, especially from the historical point of view, it is reasonable to consider that Müller’s revision is “successful” in its own way. Arbitrary addition and deletion of the songs, enhancement of exoticism, preference for the historical authenticity, rearrangement of songs by ethnic groups, essential modification of the original title, all of them were elaborately planned and executed in order to heighten the interest of German readers in folksongs. In fact, Herder’s *Volkslieder* could not be so popular and influential without the second edition.

Our ethnomusicologists are expected to draw a practical lesson out of this story: if they hope to collect, compile, and represent intangible cultural heritages, they should not only care about their inherent qualities and bare materials, but also about the ways of classifying, ordering and entitling them.

Thus we can conclude that Herder’s folksong project is remarkable still today not merely because it is a pioneering enterprise of the modern folksong collection, but also because it also suggests to us how essential the modes of representation are for intangible cultural heritages.

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¹¹ Carl Christian Redlich. “Einleitung.” in: Johann Gottfried Herder. *Sämtliche Werke*. Vol. 25. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1885, pp. ix-x.