Noting the Tunes of Seventeenth-Century Broadside Ballads: The English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA)

Patricia Fumerton and Eric Nebeker

The English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA), http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu, hosted at the University of California-Santa Barbara, was founded in 2003 to render pre-1700 English broadside ballads fully accessible as texts, art, songs, and cultural records. EBBA focuses especially on the broadside ballads of the seventeenth century because that period was the "heyday" of the genre.[1] In their heyday, ballads were printed on one side of large sheets of paper (hence "broad"-side) mostly in swirling, decorative, black-letter (or what we today call "Gothic") typeface, embellished with many woodcuts and other ornamentation, and labeled with a tune title printed just below the song title. These alluring multimedia artifacts addressed multifarious topics—often from more than one perspective—to catch the interest of a wide audience.[2]

But such ballads were also the cheapest form of printed materials in the period—costing on average just a penny at the beginning of the seventeenth century and dropping to half a penny by its end—so as to ensure their affordability to all but the indigent. As cheap entertainment, they were then rather ephemeral items, printed quickly on poor quality sheets that would often be folded and carried about by their purchasers or pasted up on a wall as a poor man's decoration. Such cheap, transferable wares would frequently be re-used as disposable "waste" paper to reinforce book bindings or as kindling, toilet paper, and so forth. Any broadsides that were pasted up would soon be painted or plastered over. Because of their transience, comparably few of the millions of copies printed have survived, and those that still remain are dispersed across the United Kingdom and the United States, carefully guarded by the libraries and museums that hold them.

Most websites, even the admirable Bodleian Library's ballad database (http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk), represent only a small sampling of the total number of extant seventeenth-century broadside ballads—estimated by EBBA to be roughly 10,000-11,000 items. EBBA's goal, however, is to make accessible all holdings of these early broadside ballads through a single site, where they are extensively catalogued and accessible by both simple and advanced search functions. Furthermore, unlike any other site that includes printed ballads, we offer high-quality color photography and different viewings of the originals: as album sheet

---

[1] By "heyday," we mean the period during which the key features of the broadside ballad listed above (text, art, song, culture) were most accentuated.

[2] See further http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/heyday-of-the-broadside-ballad.

facsimiles (the form in which ballads were often collected—trimmed and cut apart before being pasted onto album paper), as ballad sheet facsimiles (closer to how they would have looked when they came off the press, which sometimes requires the EBBA team to reassemble the cut-apart pieces), as facsimile transcriptions (with the often difficult-to-read original typeface replaced by easy-to-read modern Times Roman, while retaining as closely as possible the formatting and ornamentation of the original), as TEI/XML text (with the metadata and words of the ballad marked up by transferable digital code), and as MARC records (for library use). Finally, again like no other website, EBBA provides recordings of all extant tunes for the ballads.[3]

As of this writing, EBBA has fully digitized 6,000 pre-1700 English broadside ballads. It has been difficult at times to decide whether or not to include items in our archive. Among our many deciding factors are: does the one-page poem recall the features of other more clearly recognizable ballads (often self-titled as "ballad") and—very importantly despite the existence of broadside ballads as multimedia artifacts—is the poem meant to be sung? Though EBBA is devoted to archiving the printed, that is, published, ballad, and thus what the great folklorist Francis James Child, in an 1872 letter to Professor Sven Gruntvig, derogatively called "veritable dung-hills" (Hustvedt 1930:254, in reference to the Pepys and Roxburghe printed ballad collections), we at EBBA, like contemporaries of the seventeenth century, highly value printed ballads as songs. And just as Child in fact consulted and included texts from broadside ballads in his famous edition of "traditional" and purely "oral" ballads—as Mary Ellen Brown has shown (2010:65, 67)—so we at EBBA embrace the oral tradition as an integral and inter-medial part of what constitutes the printed broadside ballad.

A team of singers at EBBA is led by an ethnomusicologist trained in researching tunes, who consults foremost Claude M. Simpson's highly reputed *The Broadside Ballad and Its Music.*[4] Simpson (1966:xv) estimates that "Some two thousand tune names are associated with broadsides, and from what we know of the way in which tunes acquired multiple titles, it seems fair to assume that about a thousand different airs are implied." The actual survival numbers?: "Of these," Simpson continues, "over four hundred have survived" (xv).

How to actually sing the tune once it is discovered by the ethnomusicologist is without question a challenge. Consensus among the EBBA music team was that, with few exceptions, the ballads should be sung a capella. As James Carr explains,[5]

> Our primary purpose is to help people connect the ballad with the tune, and a solo voice gives an unadorned version of the melody, clearly illustrating the connection between words and music. While instrumental accompaniment was appropriate in the seventeenth century in many contexts, particularly in the theatrical ballads and jigs of the period, the ballad tradition is a singer's tradition, and we wanted to highlight the art of unaccompanied balladry. By keeping our presentations simple and unadorned we seek to make the ballads as intelligible as possible.

---

[3] For a description of all the site's offerings see http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/features.

[4] See further http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/recording-the-ballads and http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/ballad-music-sources.

[5] http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/recording-the-ballads

The addition of the recorded tunes to ballad texts and images is valuable for both scholar and student as well as the general public who simply enjoy listening to ballads being sung. But it further enhances EBBA as an invaluable research tool for anyone studying the music of late sixteenth- through eighteenth-century England. Currently, those wanting to hear ballad texts and tunes together have to find the ballad and its tune in separate sources, and then put the two together themselves. For most music scholars this is not a particularly difficult process, but it is laborious and time-consuming. Our ethnomusicologist estimates that it takes about two and one-half hours to find the correct tune for a ballad, learn it, and record it. By providing on a single site both text and tune, whenever extant, EBBA saves thousands of hours of research time for others and provides instant accessibility for use in research and the classroom.

Perhaps the greatest benefit for musicologists and ethnomusicologists, however, is EBBA's usefulness as a teaching tool. EBBA provides teachers with a site to which they can send their students for accurate tunes that are dependable and consistent in quality, and it allows those listening to the song to change quickly over to the "facsimile transcription" if any words or phrases are unclear. By connecting the ballads with their tunes, EBBA also encourages more students and scholars to use this extremely important archive as a resource for the greater understanding of the music and culture of the time. This educational aspect is especially heightened as the real-time tunes lengthen the experience of the ballad—an average ballad song lasts eight to twelve minutes, unlike today's typical song of three to four minutes. The song slows down time and invites the audience to inhabit the experience of the ballad in a way neither the text nor the art alone can. Without the ballad tune, the ballad experience is literally diminished.

EBBA's practice of recording as many ballads as possible often reveals intriguing disjunctions between the tunes as we know them through historical records and their oral expression. Indeed our singers frequently encounter ballads that uneasily join a melody to their words. Sometimes such difficulties are the result of an uneasy fit between melodic rhythm and poetic rhythm, perhaps an unsurprising consequence of many balladeers with varying writing abilities fitting many different ballads to a single tune. On occasion the stanza length doesn't match the melody length. "Corydon and Cloris Or, The Wanton Sheepherdess" (http:// ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30444/recording), for example, gives direction for singing the ballad to "a pleasant Play-house new Tune: Or, Amorett and Phillis." The tune standardly titled "Amoret and Phyllis" provides a melody that would take nine lines rather than the eight lines of this ballad's stanza. This case may not be very problematic; EBBA's singers simply repeated the last line of the ballad to fit the melody. However, because ballads are generally strophic—that is, they apply the same melody to different lyrics for each stanza—differences in melody and stanza length can create formal discontinuities between the ballads' printed and oral manifestations. In the case of "An excellent new Ditty: OR, Which proveth that women the best Warriers be, For they made the Devill from earth for to flee," the melody needs to be extended over two stanzas (http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30071/recording).[6] In reading this ballad, the stanzas form conceptual units that drive the narrative forward. The ballad begins with a stanza setting the stage for its story:

_____

[6] This recording also serves as an example of the awkward fit between text and melody.

> Old Beelzebub merry
> disposed to be,
> To earth hee did hurry,
> some pastime to see;
> A Landlord he proved,
> and Leases would let,
> To all them that loved
> a long life to get.

The devil speaks in the next stanza, making his offer of eternal life to all "long tailes and curtailes." From here, the ballad mostly details those who come to take advantage of Beelzebub's offer, devoting a stanza to each group until the "poore women" who "cry fish and Oysters" show up and make such a ruckus that the devil flees in fear of his life. The stanzas, then, plod evenly along toward the conclusion of the ballad. By extending across stanzas, however, the melody pairs up the stanzas. Sometimes such pairing works well, as in the opening stanzas when we are introduced to "Old Beelzebub" and then hear him speak his offer. Other times, though, the melody can seem like a misplaced semicolon joining two unrelated independent clauses. The melody's pairing of the first and second stanzas of the ballad's second part appears arbitrary, for instance. In the context of a ballad in which everyone mentioned is ridiculed and ethically challenged, shoemakers and tailors do not have a special relationship to usurers. Thus the long melody creates what one might call a repeated "twinning" experience for listeners, as it prompts them continually to consider possible relationships between paired stanzas.

In other cases, the discrepancies between the tune and the text can suggest a tune's complicated history and the ambiguity of the evidence on which we must rely to recover these melodies. For example, the same tune name may be given for ballads with different stanza lengths, as is the case with ballads to the tune of "Cook Lorrel." As we traditionally know this tune, "Cook Lorrel" is a short melody, the equivalent of four tetrameter lines of poetry. The metrical scheme of "The Plow-mans Prophesie" fits this version of the tune very well (http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/21959/recording). But several other ballads to "Cook Lorrel" do not. "Bill of Fare" (http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30021/album) and "The Ingenious Braggadocia" (http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30695/album) both have eight-line stanzas. "A Strange Banquet"—a ballad that Ben Jonson wrote for his masque *The Gypsies Metamorphos'd*, and which may have provided the melody with its most recognizable name, "Cook Laurel"—is four lines with a fifth line providing a refrain. Perhaps the refrain is meant to be repeated and thus to round out the stanzas to eight lines as do some of the other ballads to this tune, but Jonson's original ballad did not have the refrain, and so it is difficult to be sure. (Indeed, the short melody is well suited to the form of Jonson's ballad in which each stanza tells of another dish at the Devil's cannibalistic supper.) The variations in stanza lengths, when the tune is re-used in other ballads, may well suggest alternative versions of the tune "Cook Laurel" that have been lost to us and should remind us that "standard tunes"[7] were not as standardized as

---

[7] This term follows from Simpson's notion, adopted by EBBA, that many variations of tunes and tune titles should be subsumed under one tune/title of which they are variants.

we scholars might like.

Finally, while a single melody might dress up several different ballad texts, the inverse could also often be true. Whether named or not, several different melodies might fit a single ballad. "Corydon and Cloris Or, The Wanton Sheepherdess," mentioned above, for example, could also be easily sung to two other melodies: "Chloris, Full of Harmless Thoughts" and "Hey, Boys, Up Go We." "A Bill of Fare" and "Ingenious Braggadocia," also mentioned above, furthermore, can be sung just as well, perhaps even better, to "Packington's Pound." To complicate the issue, popular songs such as "Packington's Pound" and "Greensleeves" could themselves circulate in various forms, and, as we have seen, even the names of the tunes could change from ballad to ballad—all adding to the complex relationship between printed and sung ballads.[8]

In sum, EBBA provides an oral dimension sorely missing in the other venues by which people can access broadside ballads, and at the same time exposes what may seem to the contemporary world as chaotic or whimsical musical practices. EBBA thus provides a multitude of new ways to think about orality and song in relation to the printed broadside ballad of seventeenth-century England. Experienced in their heyday as multimedia artifacts, including text and art, broadside ballads were also in many telling ways premierly valued as song.

University of California, Santa Barbara

References

Brown 2010   Mary Ellen Brown. "Child's Ballads and the Broadside Conundrum." In *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500-1800*. Ed. by Patricia Fumerton, Anita Guerrini, and Kris McAbee. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. pp. 57-72.

Hustvedt 1930   Sigurd B. Hustvedt, ed. *Ballad Books and Ballad Men: Raids and Rescues in Britain, America, and the Scandinavian North since 1800*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Simpson 1966   Claude Simpson. *The British Broadside Ballad and Its Music*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

---

[8] To see some of the various names of "Greensleeves," visit our Advanced Search page (http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/search_combined/), scroll down to the "Standardized Tune Title" drop-down menu, and select Greensleeves from the list. From the results page—all for the tune "Greensleeves"—you can also listen to "A merry new Ballad, both pleasant and sweete, In praise of the Black-Smith" and "A new Yorkshyre Song, Intituled: Yorke, Yorke, for my monie" to hear different versions of the "Greensleeves" tune.

This page is intentionally left blank.