

IN MEMORIAM

MAUD KARPELES (1885-1976)

Dr. Maud Karpeles died on October 1, 1976. For some years she had suffered from recurrent illness and it was a miracle to see her indomitable spirit carrying her through long periods of ill health. But the well-being of the Council was forever in her mind.

I myself got to know Miss Karpeles in September, 1947, at the foundation meeting of the I.F.M.C. in London, and I remained in touch with her through my service on the Executive Board during the first three decades of its existence. During the years that I lived in England I had the privilege of meeting Maud Karpeles often and of getting to know well her concerns and cares for the Council, but I have no first-hand knowledge of the early circumstances that shaped her personality. To do justice to Maud Karpeles, I can do no better than to quote one of her friends, the late Frank Howes, on the events that decided her career and thus ultimately led to the establishment of an international organization of musicians and scholars.

“In 1909, while attending the Shakespeare festival at Stratford-on-Avon, she and her sister Helen (afterwards Mrs. Douglas Kennedy) encountered the Morris dance being taught and demonstrated at a summer school by Cecil Sharp. This was the beginning of an association which lasted till Sharp’s death in 1924 and led to a lifetime of collecting and studying songs and dances, writing books and serving in national and international organizations. At the end of 1911 Sharp founded the English Folk Dance Society and the two Karpeles sisters became key figures in its organization. At the outbreak of war in 1914 Sharp went to the USA to assist Granville Barker in a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with English traditional music. While there he studied Anglo-American folk music in the Appalachian Mountains. Maud Karpeles joined him there as amanuensis and from 1916 to 1918 they spent 46 weeks among scattered and almost inaccessible communities and collected 1612 tunes representing some 500 different songs. Some of these were published by Sharp with his own piano accompaniments; two volumes of tunes and texts were later edited by Karpeles and published in 1932.

“After Sharp’s death Karpeles served with Vaughan Williams as advisor to Douglas Kennedy, the newly appointed director of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. In 1935 she organized an international folkdance festival in London promoted by the English Folk Dance and Song Society.”

Eighteen nations took part at this conference. Miss Karpeles was the soul and spirit and skillful organizer that made this international gathering in 1935 such an inspiring success. The experience must have convinced Maud Karpeles of the desirability and the feasibility of a permanent I.F.M.C. to promote the study and survival of folk music. At the time of the foundation of the Council she herself described its purpose in deceptively modest terms; it was “to pool the resources and experiences of individual workers and national bodies.”

Miss Karpeles was aware of the arguments that raged about the concept of folk music. She quoted Goethe’s saying that “we are always invoking the name of folk song without knowing quite clearly what we mean by it.” But for her the issue was not quite as vague; she herself had no doubt that it was a living process that had to be experienced in order to be known. At its conference in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1954, the I.F.M.C. set out guidelines to an understanding of the

Council's interests. Dr. Karpeles reiterated the beliefs expressed in the guidelines as recently as 1972 in her book, *An Introduction to English Folk Song*, namely that three forces were at work in folk music: continuity, variation, and selection by the community. But these three forces were not used by her as fascinating topics for academic examination. For her, folk music and dance were living phenomena that had to be sung, played, and danced, and it was only in the living practice that selection could occur. Moreover, this process of selection implied the test of time. This was perhaps the most important article of faith for Maud Karpeles.

The Council had many opportunities at its twenty-three meetings to practice what it preached. That performances sometimes fell short of the professed ideal cannot surprise, and Maud Karpeles could express herself very clearly when she thought that a performance or a general folk music policy made a mockery of what she understood the living folk expression to be and she had little patience with pretentiousness. When during one of the earlier conferences a folk music scholar in the audience described a folk dance spectacle as "cette masquerade" his criticism may well have coincided with Maud Karpeles' own opinion, but she was too urbane, too considerate a person to condemn so patronizingly. Incidentally, there were occasions when this by now classical remark could have been applied to academic efforts with equal justification, but here, too, Maud's wisdom prevented her from hurting the straying sheep. Maud found no pleasure and could see no useful purpose in confrontation. She was a truly civil and civilized person.

Maud Karpeles was born in London on 12 November, 1885. She came from a family with wide international connections. Perhaps it was through such a background that she learned to move so easily through international crises within and without the Council, and to maintain warm friendships with such a wide variety of personalities as only an international organization of folk musicians and scholars could bring together. It almost became an unwritten rule for members of the Council who happened to pass through London to make a point of visiting her or at least of calling her by telephone. Her sociability and never-boring conversation kept her well in touch with events. When I returned to London last week, in December, 1976, I was haunted by the thought that I must see her and discuss the latest news and problems, and it was hard to accept that this was no longer possible.

When one talked to Maud Karpeles one could see that the affairs of the Council were a heavy burden for her and although she readily shared her worries, she rarely followed advice, but she was a good loser if the Executive Board failed to vote in support of her view. She had a wonderful sense of humor and a good eye for the ridiculous, and life did provide food for both occasionally.

Maud Karpeles never lost herself in paper work and organization for organization's sake, although she was superbly skilled in both, as we all know from the years when she was the first Honorary Secretary of the Council. Her letters, memoranda, and minutes were models of clarity and of a natural courtesy. As the editor of the *Journal* for many years, she certainly acted as if she concurred with Bertrand Russell's advice, "it is more important that you are resourceful in the language that you know than to draw on specialist vocabulary."

Frank Howes, in the essay from which I quoted above, omitted mentioning an aspect of Maud's personality that she often liked to stress in the years I knew

her, namely, that however deeply folk dance may have touched her aesthetic sensibility, she had discovered her love of it in a practical way at a time when she was searching for material in her social work in London's East End. She found it to be ideal for her work and never changed her opinion. In 1975 she formally proposed "that future conferences should include folk music in education, that folk music was distinct from other forms of music such as pop music and art music." At least, that is how her urgent appeal was recorded in the sober language of the minutes.

Yet Maud Karpeles never meant to treat folk music as a means towards an educational end alone. In fact, in private she often told me how much folksinging and dancing had always meant to her and that she remembered with very great pleasure an occasion when a blind man in a village audience said to her, "you are a very fine dancer." Maud's comment that he could hardly be a judge of her dancing brought the reply, "but I heard your feet moving and your bells ringing."

The story of her very active and full life will no doubt be well researched in the future and her biography would bear witness to the part that she played during an important phase of twentieth-century music life. Maud Karpeles herself mentioned to me that she wanted to write her memoirs and I hope that her plans were well advanced. In the meantime, the *Journal* and later the *Yearbook* of the I.F.M.C. reflect Dr. Karpeles' achievement. The minutes of the meetings often give an insight into what was uppermost in her mind. I remember a moment, two years ago, when she admonished the Executive Board in solemn terms that there was too great a cleavage between the scientific and humanistic aspects of the Council's work; and that the *raison d'être* of the I.F.M.C. was humanistic as well as scientific; that folk music could and should be transplanted and enjoyed in its own right in different milieux; and that a revival of folk music was vital. This quotation from the minutes hardly conveys the solemnity of her appeal, but the Executive Board responded to it warmly and unanimously.

She maintained an active interest until her death, not only because the Council was a way of life for her, but because she took the office of the Council's Honorary President seriously. She attended the Board meeting in Warsaw, in 1976, and on her return, shortly before her death, reported that she was well pleased, and wrote, "on the whole a good meeting though I did not approve of everything that was decided," and of the newly nominated President, "I think he will be good."

Her love of music was not limited to folk music, and her large circle of friends included scholars, composers, and performers of all kinds. In 1961 she received the Order of the British Empire; in the same year she received the honorary doctorate from Laval University, Quebec, and in 1972, an honorary doctorate from the Memorial University of Newfoundland.

The night before she died, she had dined with friends and enjoyed the sociability that was such a striking part of her being.

With her death, the Council suffered a tragic loss, not simply because she is remembered as its founder, but because she has been the soul and the spirit from its inception and remained in that role until the very end. One might even say that the Council was shaped in her image.

Indeed, the Council is a living memorial to Maud Karpeles — based as it is on her emphasis on folk music as a living experience.

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