

## Connecting Cultures

*Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger*

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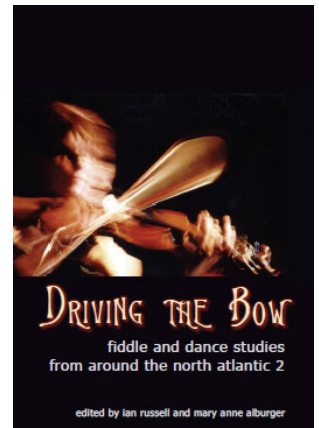
### Driving the Bow

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 2

*Edited by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger*

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## Connecting cultures

IAN RUSSELL and MARY ANNE ALBURGER

This volume represents what has become a fascinating journey, and one that may prove to have lasting qualities. In 2001 and 2006 the North Atlantic Fiddle Convention (NAFCo) was held in Aberdeen, Scotland. A third convention takes place this year in St. John's, Newfoundland, with two further conventions planned for 2010 and 2012. The current volume, the second in the series, is the direct result of the 2006 convention, its theme being 'Connecting Cultures', the fundamental vision behind the conception of NAFCo. Of course, the cultures that were connected were not simply those of nationality, ethnicity, or community, but also those of academia and performance. How often at a scholarly gathering dedicated to folk, ethnic, or traditional music, have the participants burst out of their academic straitjackets, deserted their ivory towers, and shared with others, late into the night, the music that has encouraged them to pursue a lifetime of study? And how often at a folk or world music festival have participants debated into the small hours the merits and demerits of a particularly innovatory act in terms of authenticity and traditionality? This thinking helped to forge the idea behind NAFCo, thereby bringing together two sides of the same coin, those who practise fiddle music, and those who preach it. In every way this has proved to be a successful formula in terms of all aspects of cultural and intellectual exchange, not the least of which has been the emergence and recognition of the performer-scholars and the important contributions that they have made to our understanding of the subject's complexities.

The 2006 keynote speaker, Alan Jabbour, whose finely crafted lecture is presented here, exemplifies the stance of the performer-scholar. He persuasively argues for a conception of North American fiddle music, using his case study of the Upper South, that places it in historical terms as 'a cousin to', rather than 'a descendant of', related fiddle traditions in the Old World. Exploring stylistic markers of form (tune contour) and style (syncopation), he discusses the cultural connections that he believes have been responsible. Cultural complexity is not an area that daunts our second performer-scholar, Gaila Kirdienė, whose thorough examination of two West Lithuanian traditions not only brings out stylistic connections with maritime traditions, including Scandinavian, but also shows the eastern European continental

influences that spread, for example, from Poland. Her study assesses the impact of ensembles and amateur groups, as well as more classical semi-professional string orchestras, in the development of the two traditions.

From historical perspectives of fiddle cultures, our next three studies detail the contributions of three notable players, together with the social milieus of which they were a part. Katherine Campbell's account of George Riddell (1853–1942), a shoemaker from a small North-East Scottish coastal town and a keen song and tune collector, shows how traditional music permeated formalised community groups (here Freemasonry), and moved between musical contexts, specifically the local fife band and its marching music. Undoubtedly less formal, but equally significant in terms of fraternities, is the institution of morris dancing, in the context of the English South-West Midlands, where fruit grower Sam Bennett (1865–1951) played for the Ilmington Morris Men, as well as performing social dance music. Elaine Bradtke approaches her study through Bennett's playing, with information given by folk music collectors (in notation and in field recordings), and in comparison with two other contemporary morris dance musicians. Eoghan Neff is able to draw more extensively on field recordings for his study of the remarkable fiddler, John Doherty (1895–1986), who was a (Gypsy) Traveller, and an itinerant whitesmith, from Donegal in the north of Ireland. Neff's analysis of Doherty's stylistic creativity in crossing the boundaries of melodic structure causes him to question the rigidity of current Irish musicians' interpretations of the received aesthetic conventions.

The questioning of revivalist, post-revivalist, and re-constructionists' representations of the musical traditions they endeavour to promote is a theme taken up by Karin Eriksson in a Swedish context. Her subject is the neglect shown to the dance/musical form known as *engelska* ('English'), generally thought to relate to the English country dance of the seventeenth century, with eighteenth-century French influences, danced to music that connects to the Scottish and English reel. Mats Nilsson also takes up the theme of *engelska* in contemporary Swedish folk dance, which he situates alongside the whirling *polska*, and the nineteenth century couple dances, the polka and the waltz. His conclusions point towards the inappropriateness of national or political boundaries in categorising folk dance.

Catherine A. Shoupe's exploration of Scottish dance music examines in depth a concern voiced elsewhere in this volume, the dichotomy between dance music played for dancing and dance music played for listening, in terms of choreometrics, dynamics, and fitness for the purpose, and considers how this divide is being bridged. Faced with a similar dilemma, performer-scholar Matt Cranitch turns his attention to contemporary Irish folk music, where he detects a diminution of rhythmic distinctiveness, resulting from young fiddlers (and their teachers) never having had the experience of playing for dancing. In a detailed discussion he identifies an insatiable appetite for new repertoire, and inadequate articulation with the bow, to be the root of the problem. Pat Ballantyne similarly reflects on a dichotomy, between old-style and new-style Cape Breton step dancing. She identifies innovations in the dance in response to changing aesthetics, both in terms of fiddle

playing and audience expectations, that exist alongside a fundamental respect for the more rooted 'close to the floor' style.

The strong identification with the 'old' and mixed feelings for the 'new' in fiddle traditions is a theme taken up by George Ruckert in his sensitive step into the world of the remarkable septuagenarian Cape Breton fiddler and tune writer John Campbell. The reader is given an insight into the profound changes that have taken place in Cape Breton fiddle music, particularly through the introduction of amplification and the development of complex piano accompaniments. Of one thing John is certain, however, that, when it comes to the dance, 'You've got to drive 'er', hence the title for this collection. This affectionate portrait is followed by a younger man's perspective on the thorny question of authenticity in Cape Breton fiddle style. Gregory J. Dorchak argues that a dynamic notion of authenticity that responds to the performer and audience community's evolving aesthetics is preferable to one that restricts evolution through the imposition of rigid standards.

It is appropriate that the volume concludes with two studies of contemporary fiddling from contrasting Canadian environments. The first, by Sherry Johnson, explores the competitive scene in Ontario, both as an insider, as a former competitor, and judge, and as outsider researcher, assessing how creativity and individuality is manifested in tags, intros, ornamentation, bowing, and melodic variation. Elisa Sereno-Janz's article, set in Calgary, portrays a constructed world of fiddle playing that is neither competitive nor judgemental, where players from different backgrounds, of varying abilities, and across the generations, perform together, in an informal string orchestra, playing arrangements of folk music alongside baroque favourites by Bach, Corelli, and Telemann. Such experiments in ensemble playing are clearly designed to break down real and imagined musical and social barriers.

All of our contributors demonstrate the great value of informed debate that connects performers and scholars across national, regional, and local cultures. Questions of cultural politics and authenticity have been discussed, alongside those of aesthetics in both fiddle music and dance. The individual performer's creativity has been recognised and analysed, and the contesting forces of continuity and change debated in the arena of musical tradition. If rhythm is acknowledged as the defining feature of different fiddle styles around the North Atlantic, then it is appropriate that the significance of the bow is brought into focus, for, as Matt Cranitch observes, bowing is not merely about sounding the notes correctly, rather it articulates with sensitivity and power the essential function and meaning of the music.

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