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The transmission of style in Scottish fiddling

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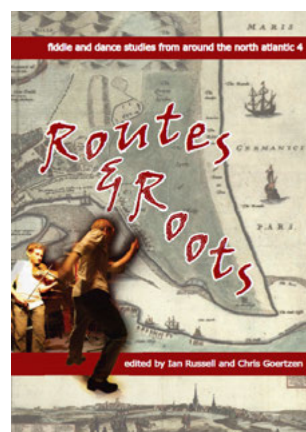

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The transmission of style in Scottish fiddling[1]

EMMA NIXON

This paper concerns the study of the transmission of stylistic performance elements in Scottish fiddle music. The study arises from the oral/aural tradition of such transmission and presents fieldwork methods to identify stylistic elements of Scottish fiddling and to investigate some dimensions of transmission of these elements.

An initial question for this study, regarding Scottish fiddle style, arose from a general insistence by tutors at workshops and summer schools that there are no rules in the application of stylistic elements such as bowing features and ornamentation. However, there are accepted sounds ('that sounds right/wrong to my ear') that are acknowledged and categorised as more Scottish. If this is so, then it follows that there are rules or guidelines or accepted norms for the use of such features. A number of authors, for example Joyner[2] and Hobsbawm,[3] have stressed the behavioural, rule-based nature of traditions. Traditional music-making in every culture can be seen as an evolving social construct which encompasses a rule-based set of practices.

Great variety can be observed in the traditional music of Scotland, which can be attributed to language, and social and geographical factors.[4] However, there are particular structural, melodic, and rhythmic features which make the music recognisably Scottish.[5] Some of these features include the use of double-tonic, changing modality, wide-gapped scales, bipartite form, and the Scotch or Scots snap.[6] These characteristics were not necessarily Scottish in origin, and are not generally exclusive to Scottish music. However, the repeated use of combinations of these features has rendered them as signs of 'Scottishness'. Additionally, there is a distinctive ornamentation evident in performances of Scottish traditional music which is also subject to a set of conventionalised practices.

In Scotland, the fiddle has played a significant role in social and cultural life since the seventeenth century, with fiddlers playing at most important social gatherings, such as weddings, funerals, and fairs, as well as local dances, ceilidhs, and family gatherings.[7] Much musical transmission occurred in informal domestic settings in a process of enculturation or through a master-apprentice system.[8]

Players continue to be encouraged to immerse themselves in the sounds of a particular style, and absorb the features of the idiom through a combination of

listening and copying[9] as a means 'to get into the character of Scottish music.'[10] Georgina Boyes recommends using source recordings as they capture 'subtleties of tune and rhythm which defy notation'.[11]

Written collections of Scottish music began appearing early in the eighteenth century and included tunes that had previously been transmitted aurally.[12] However, there has been little notation to guide the player in ornamentation and this has continued to be a feature of Scottish fiddle music that is generally transmitted aurally.

J. Scott Skinner's *A Guide to Bowing* is an obvious example of right-hand techniques from the early twentieth century; James Hunter, Alastair J. Hardie, Christine Martin, and David Johnson have all included, throughout their more recent publications, descriptions and examples of left-hand ornaments as well as bowing patterns; Paul Anderson has thoroughly examined the ornaments of the North-East Scottish style; and Stuart Eydmann has analysed the distinctive feature called the birl.[13] Common left-hand techniques addressed in these collections include trills, grace notes, and vibrato, whereas right-hand techniques are bowed triplets (birls), double stopping, slurring, and methods of playing the Scotch snap.

The ornaments and bowings of Scottish fiddle styles may not be codified linguistically or in notation, but may still be used to authenticate particular interpretations. Although individual style, through the personalised use of stylistic elements, is promoted through workshops, it is contrary to the concept of authenticated style. One outcome of the *fèis* movement in Scotland has been the development of stylistic norms.[14] The so-called *fèis* style promotes and legitimises some ways of playing, while others are delegitimised or marginalised. Judgement of 'authenticity of execution', or the ability to accurately recreate a legitimised style, is then sanctioned.[15] Performers playing in legitimised styles are then given the authority to act as vehicles for the tradition and are entrusted with the responsibility of sharing and passing that tradition on.[16] It follows that workshops conducted in what is considered an authentic way, that is, using aural transmission and immersion, also have the capacity to legitimise ways of playing.

One purpose of this study was to establish the extent to which ornamentation and bowing techniques and applications are transmitted not only aurally but also orally in formal teaching workshops which are becoming increasingly popular. Six commonly used traditional ornaments as well as slurs and general bowing techniques were selected to be studied. I have defined the six specific ornaments, slurs, and general bowing techniques as they have been used in this study.

Ornamentation refers to the embellishment or decoration of a tune, such that the pitch and rhythm of that tune are generally not distorted or interrupted. Fiddle ornaments tend to be categorised into two types: left-hand techniques, which are pitched embellishments, and include unisons, various grace notes, and cuts; and right-hand, or bowed techniques, which are tonal and/ or rhythmic embellishments and include the Scotch snap, birls, and chords. Additionally, slurs and other bowing techniques can be used to further elaborate tunes. I have created the following

descriptions for use in this study as there are no definitive definitions, or consistent use of names of these features, in use among Scottish fiddlers.[17]

Unison occurs when two notes of the same pitch are played simultaneously. To achieve this, the fiddler must play an 'open' or unfingered string at the same time as fingering the same pitch on the adjacent lower pitched string.

A grace note is a short note played immediately before the tune note. It is usually the pitch immediately below the tune note and the two notes are generally played with one bow stroke (slur).

The cut is another ornament played in a single bow stroke or slur. After the tune note is played, another finger flicks on and off the string extremely quickly, producing a slight glitch in the original note, rather than an extra definite pitched note.

The Scotch or Scots snap is a rhythmic feature used predominantly in strathspeys. The rhythm consists of four notes which are usually written as semiquaver-quaver-quaver-semiquaver (short long long short); the semiquavers are generally shortened and the quavers lengthened when played.

The birl, or bowed triplet, is an ornament consisting of three notes of the same pitch played very fast, with very short bow strokes. The last note tends to be longer than the first two. Occasionally, a birl consists of three different notes, although the bow strokes remain the same.

Chords are the result of bowing two strings simultaneously. They are sometimes referred to as double stops, indicating the playing of two strings. The most common chords occur when one string is fingered and the other is open or unfingered.

Playing more than one note in a single bow stroke is a slur. The use of slurs results in smooth articulation. By varying single bowed and slurred notes, a variety of articulation and emphasis can be achieved.

General bowing includes nuances of bow weight, speed, and distance that effect the sound quality. For example, use of greater weight and distance travelled along the bow results in a louder sound. Varying the combination of weight, speed, and distance results in textural variety of the sound, and can be used to create tonal variety in a tune. The notation of the ornaments and bowing is also inconsistent and problematic, partly because established musical notation is inadequate to describe this style and partly because of the performance variations that exist both within and between individual players.

Fieldwork

During 2007 and 2008 I collected data as a participant observer in short one-off workshops at festivals in Scotland. Recordings of workshops were made and analysed by tabulating the occurrence of each of the stylistic elements.

In addition to identifying the stylistic elements data was kept on the timing to the nearest second from the start of each recording of the occurrence of each of the elements. Further, the format of the occurrence including whether it was played

in context (embedded), isolated for demonstration or practice purposes (explicit), or commented on orally (verbal explanation).

Results of the transcription were verified by an independent musician by re-tabulating samples from the recording of each workshop. This project identified differences in both definition and naming of ornaments when verification of data was undertaken. Discussion between the researcher and the verifier showed that agreement using written and verbal definitions was difficult to achieve and that practical demonstration of ornaments followed by discussion was the final arbiter.[18] Further reasons for discrepancies in results could be attributed to individual experiential differences relating to listening and interpretation.[19] Although discrepancies in interpretation were reconciled in the main, it is believed that the method could have been improved by developing a consensus view. While numbers of occurrences differed for some of the ornaments, the relationship between embedded and explicit occurrences was constant for both observers. Thus, one of the main findings of the results, the predominance of embedded examples over explicit examples, remains sound.

Results

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the selected elements across the variety of music played in the workshops. A total of 1528 played occurrences of the stylistic features were counted across the three workshops. Of these, 275 or 18% were explicit demonstrations by the instructor where the ornament or bowing technique was repeated for emphasis or class practice purposes; 68 or less than 5% were the subject for verbal discussion or explanation by the instructor. The remainder of occurrences were embedded in the playing of the tutor, generally in the context of a complete tune or phrase.

	Unison	Grace	Cut	Snap	Birl	Slur	Chord	Bowing	Total
Embedded	13	201	105	141	22	712	52	7	1253
Explicit/ Demonstration	4 (24%)	60 (23%)	113 (52%)	37 (21%)	26 (54%)	19 (3%)	11 (17%)	5 (42%)	275 (18%)
Total played occurrences	17 100%	261 100%	218 100%	178 100%	48 100%	731 100%	63 100%	12 100%	1528 100%
Verbal Explanation	1 (6%)	14 (5%)	15 (7%)	14 (8%)	7 (15%)	3 (>1%)	5 (8%)	9 (75%)	68 (4%)

Figure 1 Distribution of the Presentation of Selected Elements across Three Workshops

Figure 2 shows the distribution of played stylistic elements across all of the music played in the three workshops. Slurs (731 played occurrences) were the most common element used, accounting for almost half of the played examples (47.8%). Of course, these are often used as part of a number of other elements, accounting for the high rate of occurrence. It is not surprising that the snap is well represented

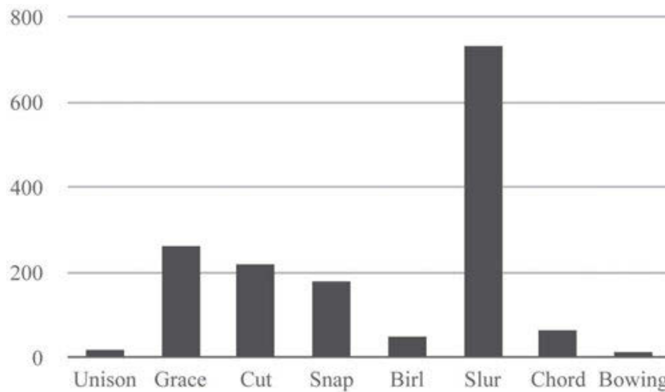

Figure 2 Number of Played Occurrences Across Three Workshops

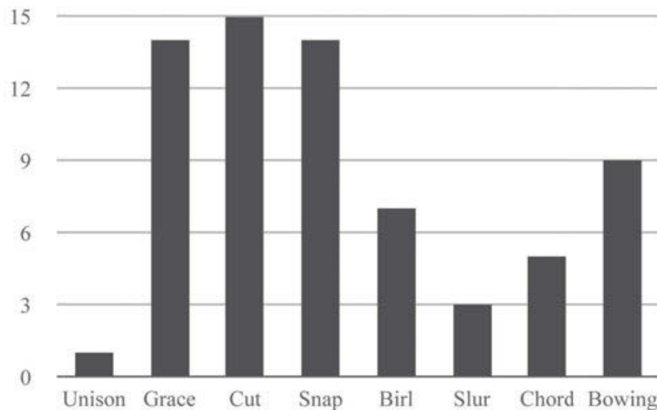

Figure 3 Number of Verbal Explanations Across Three Workshops

(178 played occurrences), as one of the workshops was devoted to strathspey playing. While the birl is a distinctive feature of Scottish fiddling, it occurred less (48 occurrences) in the playing of the tutors in these particular workshops than the left hand techniques of cuts (218 occurrences) and graces (261 occurrences).

The distribution for verbal explanations of elements is shown in Figure 3. These range from less than 1% (for unison notes) of total played occurrences of that feature to 75 percent (bowing) with only two features attracting explanation more than 8% of the total played occurrences of that feature: the birl (15%) and general bowing (75%). Within all of the verbal explanations, cuts, snaps, and grace notes were most frequently the subject of discussion while unisons, slurs, and chords were the least discussed.

The largest discrepancy between total played examples and total verbal explanation was for general bowing, where this was the least played but relatively more discussed. Slurs were the most played element but the second lowest element commented on. More than half of the verbal explanations were of cuts, snaps, and birls, while these elements accounted for about a third of the played examples.

The ornamental feature occurring least in both playing and verbal explanation was the unison. Slurs were proportionally the least demonstrated (3%) or commented on (>1%). The cut was the most demonstrated ornament in the combined workshops (113 times), which was 52% of the total number of occurrences (218) during the workshops. Also, more verbal explanations were given for the cut (15) than for any other ornament. However, the cut ranked only third in use overall or fourth in embedded use of the ornaments represented in this combined sample of playing. The birl was demonstrated more than the cut proportionally to its occurrence in the original music, although it occurred much less overall.

Discussion

An important finding from this study was the small amount of verbal explanation or teaching devoted to ornamentation and particularly to bowing, relative to the number of occurrences of such features in the pieces played in the workshops. Examples of specific comments are presented in Figure 4. The approaches to the verbal instructions reflected positive encouragement, for example, '[I'll play it] quite steady so you can start to hear the patterns'. Comments ranged from specific practice instruction , 'It's one of those things that just needs a bit of slow practice in between playing the tunes up to speed', to a less formal method of learning by osmosis.

Topics	**Comments**
Aural transmission/ learning	'[I'll play it] quite steady so you can start to hear the patterns.'
Ornaments	'This tune's just bursting with details there […] I'll just throw them all at you and see what sticks.'
Personal use of ornaments	'If you feel that any of these are not right, or are in the wrong place, feel free to just experiment yourself.'
Use of ornaments	'it's up to yourselves what you feel is appropriate'
Experiment with interpretations	'experiment at home with your own interpretations'

Figure 4 Examples of Comments Made by Workshop Tutors on Various Topics

The relatively small amount of verbal discussion of ornaments could also be related to the observation and absorption approach of the aural tradition, and the incorporation of this approach in the teaching technique of the workshop tutors observed. Reliance on aural transmission by the tutors may not be a conscious decision and there may be a number of different associated reasons as to why the tutors relied more on aural transmission of stylistic elements. The tutors, being experienced players, may not be consciously aware of all of the stylistic features in their own playing; stylistic interpretation can become second nature to those experts

who have been immersed in a musical tradition. As a result, tutors do not discuss what they are not noticing. Alternatively, tutors may not have a language available for explanations of performance style, particularly if they were not exposed to such linguistic descriptions themselves. Tutors referred more frequently to freedom of interpretation through personalised ornament and bowing choices with comments such as 'It's up to yourselves what you feel is appropriate' in regard to the use of ornaments.

Other considerations include the points that ornamentation is not generally documented in published collections of Scottish fiddle music, and its use may vary over time depending on fashion and the playing style of particular fiddlers. Tutors tacitly supported such points in their avoidance of a prescriptive approach.

This project identified differences in both definition and naming of ornaments when verification of data was undertaken. Discussion between the researcher and the verifier showed that agreement using written and verbal definitions was difficult to achieve and that practical demonstration of ornaments followed by discussion was the final arbiter.[20] Further reasons for discrepancies in results could be attributed to individual experiential differences relating to listening and interpretation.[21]

While numbers of occurrences differed for some of the ornaments, the relationship between embedded and explicit occurrences was constant for both observers. Thus, one of the main findings of the results, the predominance of embedded examples over explicit examples, remains sound.

Implications

The revival of Scottish traditional music has led to an enthusiasm for preservation of the art of Scottish fiddling. By definition, traditional methods of learning the essential sounds and ornaments of Scottish fiddle are transmitted aurally and orally, but mainly through aural methods. Indeed, the Scottish fiddle sound is one that must involve aural training and replication. Because of the favoured use of aural methods of transmission over written text, there is the potential for evolution and change in style.

Findings from this study have implications for teaching Scottish fiddle. It is evident that in the context of fiddle workshops, teaching ornaments is not often made explicit thus emphasising the aural aspects of the transmission. In contexts where there is limited access to fiddle tuition or to authentic aural experiences, the training experience could benefit from more explicit examples and perhaps also from verbal discussion of the features. Additionally, according to current educational practice, different learning styles of the student should be taken into account by the teacher.[22]

The wide variation in teaching styles is one aspect of this study which lends itself to further research. It was clear in this study that not all of the variation in explicit training was associated with the music chosen, but in large part was associated with teacher style.

The use of a written system for ornaments has been, and continues to be debated. Arguments for and against can be raised on many levels, including traditional, political, cultural, and artistic. The question for this research is, 'Can a study of this type contribute to the debate?' This study has certainly highlighted the differences in nomenclature and definition that exist within Scottish fiddle tradition. One advantage of written or verbal codification of stylistic elements could be the increased ease of communication about these elements. However, 'the way music is taught and transmitted is an integral part of the musical culture' and is unlikely to change suddenly.[23] It is likely that any move to codified nomenclature and definitions of stylistic practices would meet strong resistance, as it could be seen as a way of legitimising some naming systems and, therefore, by extension, the associated playing styles. Also, because the music and its transmission are inextricably linked,[24] a change in the means of transmission may result in unforeseen changes to the music.

A number of issues are highlighted by this study. Firstly, traditional Scottish music is, at formalised workshops at least, predominantly taught in what is considered the traditional imitative way. This study suggests that attitudes of tutors and players may also contribute to the transmission of style in ways which can be further explored. Secondly, there is scope to develop a consensus view of definitions, techniques, and sounds that make up the styles of Scottish fiddling while remaining sensitive to the various traditions of naming and producing those styles.

Notes

[1] Study for this paper was undertaken at Newcastle University (UK) towards a Master of Music. I acknowledge the supervision of Dr Vic Gammon. I also acknowledge the contribution of workshop providers and tutors to the data collection phase of the study.

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[11] Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 212.

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[17] For examples of differences in descriptions and notation, see the Scottish pages of the *Fiddling Around* website and the tutor books by Hardie and Martin; Chris Haigh, 'Scottish Fiddle', <http://www.fiddlingaround.co.uk/scotland/> [accessed 29 June 2008]; Hardie, *Caledonian Companion*; Martin, *Traditional Scottish Fiddling*.

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