

Revival of 'crooked' fiddle tunes in the performance  
of contemporary Quebec traditional music

*Jean Duval*

Excerpted from:

Ón gCos go Cluas

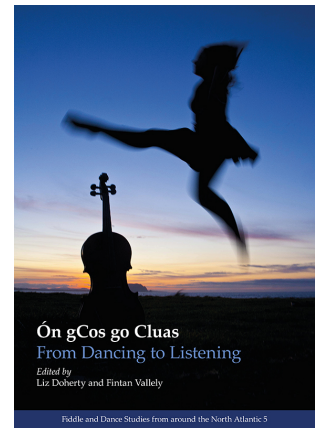
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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## 6

# A typology for the study of the old and the new asymmetrical ('crooked') tunes in the traditional music of Quebec

JEAN DUVAL

The instrumental music of Quebec shares several traits with other music traditions such as old-time music in both Canada and the USA and traditional music in Great Britain and Ireland. A characteristic strongly associated with the music of Quebec that helps to distinguish it from these other traditions, however, is the frequent performance by many musicians of asymmetrical tunes – so-called 'crooked' tunes – up to the present day. Asymmetrical tunes are played, or were played, in other musics to various extents as previously shown in several NAFCo papers and articles.<sup>1</sup> But, the performance of crooked tunes in Quebec was, and still is, very much alive, forming an essential and continuous part of the traditional music soundscape, probably to a greater degree than in other music traditions. This article will first present a broad picture of asymmetrical tunes in Quebec. Then, with references to the work of other researchers, I will explain the typology that I developed to describe the asymmetrical musical system associated with them. I will also show how this tradition has been brought up to date in the last thirty years through the composition of new tunes, and, in conclusion, how asymmetries are used to create variations and improvisations.

### **Traditional asymmetrical tunes in Quebec**

Symmetry is the norm in North Atlantic dance music, where tunes have an even structure of multiples of eight or sixteen beats in each part, each part being played twice. In Quebec, many tunes are played in this 'straight' way, but may also have asymmetrical versions, and some exist only in crooked versions. Moreover, some old musicians do not have a fixed version of a tune and will vary its 'crookedness' from one iteration of the tune to the next. Many asymmetrical tunes have only one extra beat at some point in the tune, but others diverge more radically from the 'straight' model. Figure 1 shows a tune that clearly illustrates that we are dealing here with a particular musical 'dialect' with its own unspoken syntax. The tune, 'Le Bedeau de l'Enfer' (The verger of hell), was played by Henry Landry on a 1974 recording. In such a tune, bar lines serve only to indicate subsections of a part.

Le bedeau de l'enfer

Henri Landry 1974



**Figure 1** An example of a Québécois tune diverging greatly from the straight model: 'Le Bedeau de l'Enfer', as played by fiddler Henri Landry in 1974.

The prevalence of asymmetrical tunes varies depending on period, musician, region of Quebec and performance context. For example, in commercial recordings from the 1920s to the 1940s, more than a third of the tunes exhibit some kind of crookedness. After World War II, asymmetrical tunes became progressively less frequent on commercial recordings, probably under the influence of Canadian and American mass media and the staging of folk dances. Recordings from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s of the most prominent professional performers – such as fiddler Jean Carignan and accordionist Philippe Bruneau – contain very few crooked tunes. However, asymmetrical tunes never totally vanished from the Quebec soundscape, and my analysis of LP recordings of traditional musicians from different regions of Quebec made in the 1970s showed that, on average, 60% of their repertoire comprised crooked tunes. Starting in the 1980s, revivalist groups like *La Bottine Souriante* and *Le Rêve du Diable* often included asymmetrical tunes in their repertoire. Nowadays, most traditional Quebec music bands play some, and often many, crooked tunes, either traditional or of their own composition. For example, the proportion of asymmetrical tunes in the recordings of the band *Le Vent du Nord* has been continuously increasing, going from 10% to 45% of the tunes on their numerous CDs over a ten-year period. The context also has importance. Asymmetrical tunes are more likely to be played in intimate or listening contexts, or in sessions, rather than when providing music for country dancing or playing in a fiddle contest or a 'gala folklorique'. Dueck has also made this observation in the case of Métis fiddle music.<sup>2</sup>

### Previous work on the typology of asymmetrical tunes

Few thorough studies leading to a typology of crooked tunes have been conducted, in Quebec or elsewhere. In Anne Lederman's (1988) report on her extensive study of the

repertoire of Métis fiddlers in Manitoba, she describes the frequent peculiar forms of the Métis tunes, such as an odd number of repetitions of parts, the lengthening of endings and the division of phrases into groups of three, five or seven beats.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrating the influence of native music and French-Canadian fiddlers on Métis music, she also put into perspective the importance of what she refers to as ‘asymmetric phrasing’ (crookedness) in the entire Métis repertoire. It occurred in more than half of the 450 tunes she collected. More recently, Christina Smith (2007) wrote an article on her research into the crooked tunes of Newfoundland traditional music.<sup>4</sup> From the abundant archival material available at Memorial University, she described and named the main types of crookedness she observed, which consisted mostly of extra beats at the beginning (oh), in the middle (median jog) or at the end (jog) of the parts of tunes. Nikos Pappas (2007) also proposed a typology of crooked tunes for the old-time music of Kentucky in a paper presented at the ICTM conference in Vienna, 2007.<sup>5</sup> He was mostly interested in explaining crookedness in this tradition through syncretism with Afro-American and early European music. However, none of these studies on North American crooked tunes has led to a systematic approach to the topic. More recently, Rockwell (2011) proposed a new way of examining crooked tunes based on his study of the song repertoire of the Carter family from the USA.<sup>6</sup> He considers crookedness not as an objective characteristic, but as one related to the isochrony, or lack thereof, of the musical layers perceived by musicians. Yet this novel approach, although very inclusive and respectful of oral traditions, does not help achieve a precise nomenclature of the elements of crookedness.

In Quebec, the small amount of work done on asymmetrical tunes prior to the present study has consisted mostly of music transcriptions done for research purposes, or for collections destined for musicians. In her MA thesis on fiddler Louis Boudreault from the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, Lisa Ornstein (1985) made general comments and a few descriptions of the crookedness found in this outstanding performer’s repertoire, underlining the freedom of form in his music and the occasional difficulty of adequately transcribing his tunes.<sup>7</sup> Quebec City fiddlers and multi-instrumentalists Liette Remon and Guy Bouchard (1996 and 1997) compiled two small collections titled *25 Airs Tordus du Québec* (25 crooked tunes from Quebec).<sup>8</sup> Their aim was to highlight, with no scholarly intention, the richness of this aspect of Quebec’s music tradition. In the introduction to the first volume, they briefly described certain types of crookedness such as metric alternation. Terms used by Lederman (1988), Smith (2007) and Pappas (2007) to describe the various forms of crookedness are not systematised and are often insufficient to describe the full scope of crookedness that is found in Québécois music. The typology that I present and use here will, I hope, enrich our appreciation and knowledge of this living tradition, and it may also prove useful for examining asymmetry in other music traditions.<sup>9</sup>

### **Describing asymmetries with a new typology**

To understand the ‘language’ of Quebec asymmetrical tunes, I listened to and analysed 342 crooked tunes that are available on a website developed by the Canadian Government named ‘Virtual Gramophone’.<sup>10</sup> These are digitised 78rpm records covering the period from 1920 to 1940. By comparing crooked and straight versions of a tune, I developed a typology

and a terminology appropriate to the description of crookedness in tunes. When there was no straight version of a tune, I inferred the element of asymmetry by deciding what could be deleted or added and still make musical sense of a tune. Everything diverging from the 'square' model of 8 or 16 beats per part (or 12 or 24 beats for triple-meter tunes), where parts are played twice each, that is AABB for a two-part tune, was considered as asymmetrical.

I divided the types of asymmetry into three main categories: morphological, syntactical and 'pulsative'. These correspond to the three hierarchical layers of a tune, namely: the tune with its different parts, the musical strain of a part with its different segments, and the pulsation. The second level in the typology is the process used: lengthening, shortening, a combination of both, permutation, or alternation. In the category of syntactical asymmetries, a third level is considered, namely the position of the asymmetry in a part. The asymmetry can be qualified as: 'caudal',<sup>11</sup> when it occurs beyond the final note of an 8 or 16-beat strain; 'final', when it comes at the end of the strain; 'medial', when it is found toward the end of a half-strain; 'initial', when it is at the beginning; or 'intermediary', when it is present anywhere else in a part. An overall view of the typology and a description of each type of asymmetry are presented in the table in Figure 1. A fourth level, not presented in the table, can also be considered for syntactical asymmetries obtained by lengthening. It is useful to describe the way that an added beat can be played, either by holding a note, by repeating it (what is called *monnayage* in French), by playing a motif leading to the rest of the musical phrase, or by otherwise filling in (for example, playing an arpeggio).

Morphological asymmetries deal with the overall arrangement of the parts of a tune. They include:

- a special order of parts when tunes have three or more parts, for example, ABAC rather than ABC;
- trebling, whereby a part is played three times rather than twice; and
- metrical alternation, where a tune alternates between duple and triple meter in its different parts.

Syntactical asymmetries are the most common and the most diverse. They are all the result of a lengthening and/or a shortening of a part, when compared with a straight version of a tune (or a hypothetical square model). Often, there will be an extra beat added at the beginning, middle or at, especially, the end of a part. Tunes in duple meter with 12-beat rather than 8-beat structures are sometimes observed, as is rhythmical imparity, where a part with 16 beats will be divided into phrases of 9+7 beats rather than 8+8 beats. Stuttering, iteration, pause and *aparté*<sup>12</sup> are cases of elongation occurring in places other than at the beginning, middle or end of a part. Pulsative asymmetries are very rare, and are essentially restricted to cases where there is a half-beat jump in a tune, at least in Québécois traditional music.

### **Frequency of types of asymmetry**

Although the typology presented here was developed from an analysis of recordings published on the Virtual Gramophone, it can be used to examine tunes of more recent periods, and even tunes recently composed by Québécois traditional musicians. Figure 2 presents a compilation of the different types of asymmetry observed in the tunes

## *Ón gCos go Cluas – From Dancing to Listening*

Main Category	Process used	Position	Type of asymmetry	Description or example
Morphological	Lengthening		Trebling	Playing a part three times instead of twice
	Permutation		Special order	Playing parts in the order ABACAD instead of ABCD, for example
	Alternation		Metrical alternation	Having part A in duple meter and part B in triple meter, for example
Syntactical	Lengthening	Caudal	Tail	Adding a motif ending on the tonic after ending on the tonic
			Forced resolution	Adding a one-beat motif ending on the tonic after ending on another degree
			Double ending	Adding a long motif ending on the tonic after ending on another degree
		Final	Paragoge	Playing the final note of a strain for a longer duration
		Cadential	Extension on 4	Lengthening the cadential motif for a longer duration on the fourth degree
			Extension on 5	Lengthening the cadential motif for a longer duration on the fifth degree
			Scaling extension	Replacing the cadential motif by a descending scale leading to the final note
		Medial	Paragoge	Lengthening the final note of a half-strain
			Forced resolution	Adding a one-beat motif ending on the tonic after ending on another degree
		Intermediary	Iteration	Immediate repeat of a two- or three-beat motif
			Stuttering	Immediate repeat of a one-beat motif
			Pause	Holding of a note elsewhere than at the beginning, middle or end of a strain
		Initial	Anacrusis	Inserting a long motif only once in a strain
				Adding a motif before the normal beginning of a strain
	Shortening	Final	Apocope	Shortening the duration of the final note
			Final shortening	Shortening a strain by not playing the final note at all
		Cadential	Cadential shortening	Compressing the cadential notes into a shorter duration motif
		Medial	Apocope	Shortening the duration of the final note of a half-strain
		Intermediary	Intermed. Shortening	Cutting out notes elsewhere than at the beginning, middle or end of a strain
			Amalgram	Compressing notes into a shorter duration motif
		Beginning	Initial shortening	Compressing or not playing notes at the beginning of a strain
Lengthening & Shortening			Rhythmical imparity	Dividing the strain into two unequal parts (e.g. 9+ 7)
Pulsative	Shortening		Half-beat jump	Cutting out notes so that the regular pulsation is displaced

**Figure 2** Typologies of asymmetries and their description.

available on the Virtual Gramophone and in two dozen recent compositions. The types of syntactical asymmetries have been grouped according to their position in a part, on

Main category	Types of asymmetry	Frequency (in percentage of the number of asymmetries)		
		Virtual Gramophone (342 tunes)	12 Compositions 1980-2000	12 Compositions since 2000
Morphological	Trebling	8	0	7
	Special order	4	0	0
	Metrical alternation	3	0	7
Syntactical	Final lengthening	22	40	31
	Medial lengthening	14	10	6
	Initial lengthening	2	0	0
	Stuttering/iteration	9	0	14
	Other lengthening	8	15	0
	Final shortening	16	15	10
	Medial shortening	7	0	0
	Initial shortening	1	0	0
	Rhythmical imparity	2	0	3
	12-beat structure	3	5	17
	All other types	2	15	0

**Figure 3** Types of asymmetry and their comparative frequency on the Virtual Gramophone recordings and in tunes composed in the 1980-2000 period and subsequently.

the one hand for ease of comparison between samples, and on the other, because it is sometimes hard to ascribe with precision the type of asymmetry when no straight version of a tune exists for comparison purposes. Since I noted different trends in the compositions of young musicians from year 2000 on, the data was divided into two different periods.

On the Virtual Gramophone recordings, as the third column of Figure 2 shows, the types of asymmetries occurring in tunes are very diverse, with some being more frequent than others. By far the most common type of asymmetry is lengthening at the end of a part. This may be by means of a paragoge (the elongation of the final note itself); a cadential extension (whereby the passage leading to the final note is expanded); or through the addition of a tail, which is a recurring coda. Shortening at the end, especially by means of an apocope that makes the final note of a part shorter, is also quite frequent, as is lengthening in the middle of a part. Morphological asymmetries such as trebling and a special order of the parts represent 11% of the nearly 1,000 occurrences of crookedness found in the 342 tunes of the Virtual Gramophone (since there is often more than one asymmetry in a single tune). ‘Stuttering’ occurs when a group of notes worth a single beat is repeated. ‘Iteration’ is the same idea as stuttering, but with a group of notes equivalent to two beats (or three beats in a triple-meter tune). ‘Shortening’ in the middle happens in 7% of the cases and other types of asymmetries are comparatively more rare.

Having established a portrait of crooked tunes from the past, let us now look at elements of crookedness found in the compositions of various Québécois traditional musicians since 1980. The fourth column of the table in Figure 3 presents the various types of asymmetries found in twelve compositions of the period 1980 to 2000. Most are the product of musicians who are now in their forties and fifties; some of them grew up in the tradition, while others could be termed revivalists. The first observation is that the types of asymmetry are much less diverse than those observed in the recordings of the Virtual Gramophone. Of course, the sample size is much smaller than that taken from the Virtual Gramophone. Globally, the types of asymmetries are of a very simple kind in the compositions of this period. Lengthening at the end still constitutes the main type of crookedness, and its frequency

La Grande Faucheuse no.1



Figure 4 Example of an asymmetrical tune composed in the 1980s: ‘La Grande Faucheuse’ by fiddler Michel Faubert.

is doubled compared with the proportion found in the past, and cadential extensions are frequently used. A typical composition of this period is the reel titled ‘La Grande Faucheuse’ by fiddler, storyteller and singer Michel Faubert (Figure 4). Boxes in the transcription of this tune indicate how the middle and end of each part are elongated, mostly through cadential extensions.

The last column of Figure 3 shows the elements of crookedness found in a dozen compositions by musicians who are currently in their twenties and thirties. Most are fiddlers in well-known Quebec traditional bands such as Le Vent du Nord, Genticorum, De Temps Antan, and Les Chauffeurs à Pieds. The first observation is that types of asymmetries in their tunes are more varied than in the previous group. Although lengthening at the end of part is still the main way of making a tune asymmetrical, they introduce stuttering and iteration. They tend to use very long phrases, often 12, 24 or more beats per section. They also use morphological asymmetries such as trebling. To illustrate the type of crooked tunes these young musicians are composing, Figure 5 presents the ‘Reel des Faux-Billets’ by Antoine Gauthier, fiddler in the band Les Chauffeurs à Pieds. Bar lines are deliberately not used in the transcription of the tune. Although it is difficult to ascribe the asymmetry to specific elements in such a tune, boxes indicate segments which are more likely to explain the deviation from a 16-beat part, namely a stuttering and a tail in the A part, and an iteration and an apocope in the B part.

A variety of reasons may explain the differences in the diversity and prevalence of certain types of crookedness between these two generations of composers. Musicians now in their forties and fifties were widely exposed to the straight music that dominated the commercial recordings they heard in their youth. At the time they started, playing tunes deviating even by a single beat was a bold gesture, in certain contexts at least. It could be said that those who liked crooked tunes had to fight to legitimise them and bring them back into mainstream of Québécois traditional music. The more recent composers, on the other hand, have not had to fight for this acceptance. Although they have had little or no contact with older traditional musicians, they have had much easier access to a large amount of



archival recordings such as those on the Virtual Gramophone and also field recordings of various kinds. They are obviously looking for rarer elements of asymmetry in an effort to distinguish themselves or put forward what may be seen as elements more particular to the Québécois musical identity. They adopt large frames in which their creativity has fewer restraints, while still respecting the 'dialect' of crookedness heard in older traditional material.

**Reel des faux billets**

A=17+19; B=17+18 Antoine Gauthier

The musical score for 'Reel des faux billets' is presented in four staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/4 time signature. It contains a triplet of eighth notes marked 'stuttering'. The second staff continues the melody and ends with a flourish marked 'tail'. The third staff features a repeated eighth-note pattern marked 'iteration'. The fourth staff concludes with a cadence marked 'apocope' with two variations indicated by '1' and '2'. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

**Figure 5** Example of an asymmetrical tune composed since 2000: 'Reel des Faux-Billets' by fiddler Antoine Gauthier.

### **Asymmetrical variation and improvisation**

There was a tradition in the past in Quebec of creating asymmetrical variations of certain well-known tunes. Of course, these performances were for listening more than for dancing; this practice is now nearly extinct, and even crooked versions of tunes and tunes existing only in crooked versions are nowadays mostly played always the same way. Two good examples of this old art of variation are the versions of the 'Monymusk' recorded by two well-known musicians from the past, fiddler Isidore Soucy and accordionist Tommy Duchesne. The two versions (both of which can be heard on the Virtual Gramophone) have many parts and they modulate. Soucy's version presents elements of crookedness such as stuttering, tails and cadential extensions, while Duchesne's is much more rhythmic, even with a transformation into triple meter in one of the parts. This art of variation using asymmetry in abundance is not used today. When musicians create variations, they tend to do it using either what I would term the 'Irish way' (by adding ornamentation or slightly changing the melodic contour), or the 'Québécois way' (by playing with rhythmical patterns and arpeggiated motifs); the symmetrical frame of the tune is strictly respected and not malleable as it was for some musicians in the past.

Another lost art is that of improvising crooked variations on a tune, using the basic melodic ideas of a tune as material to create a kind of patchwork suggesting its essence. One of my informants, fiddler Jean Desgagnés from the Saguenay region of Quebec, explained to me how both his father and another well-known fiddler of the past in the region regularly improvised on certain tunes. Here is a summary translation of the comments he made on this topic:

## Ón gCos go Cluas – From Dancing to Listening

My dad used to tell me that a tune like ‘Le Talencourt’ is almost improvisation in itself. ‘Le Talencourt’ was an opportunity to say: ‘Show me what you can do’ . . . ‘Le Talencourt’ was not a dancing piece. Forget it [...] [improvisation on tunes was done] to tease, to challenge, to be able to say afterward: ‘You really screwed that one up’. Then people would start laughing. [My dad would challenge his friend]: ‘Can’t you improvise?’ and all kinds of similar capers [...] My dad and Xavier Dallaire were good at it. It was beautiful to hear them do it.

Unlike Jean Desgagnés, I have never witnessed this traditional way of improvising in recent decades. I have several times witnessed young fiddlers, often highly trained musicians, taking turns at improvising on a standard tune during a session using mostly jazz ideas, departing wildly from the melody although never altering the straight structure of the tune in doing so. This is a far cry from the traditional way, where one fiddler would essentially play with the syntax of a tune. Both traditional variations and improvisation using asymmetries have probably disappeared because of the modern prevalence of group playing rather than solo playing, the hegemony of standard versions of tunes, and the omnipresent harmonic accompaniment provided by guitars and pianos. Or it could be that they have simply fallen out of favour.

In conclusion, it is clear that asymmetrical tunes are still an important part of the Quebec soundscape, not only because crooked tunes or crooked versions of tunes continue to be played, but also because many asymmetrical tunes continue to be composed by musicians of all ages. Overall, recent composers use the same types of asymmetries as those found in older tunes. For young traditional musicians composing in the twenty-first century, crookedness represents an open framework in which they can express their creativity while still sounding traditional. I think that the next step for many Québécois musicians will be to re-appropriate the art of variation and improvisation using elements of the asymmetrical dialect I have described, an art that once was also part of the tradition alongside composition. I hope that the typology and terminology that I have developed to describe asymmetries in tunes through my research will help this particular language at the heart of Québécois music culture to persist and evolve.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alan Jabbour, ‘Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier’, in *Driving the Bow: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 2*, ed. by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, 2008), pp. 4–13; Eoghan Neff, ‘The Fiddle in a Tune: John Doherty and the Donegal Fiddle Tradition’, in Russell and Alburger, *Driving the Bow*, pp. 74–87; Sarah Quick, ‘Two Models in the World of Métis Fiddling: John Arcand and Andy Dejarlis’, in *Crossing Over: Fiddle and Dance Studies from Around the North Atlantic 3*, ed. by Ian Russell and Anna Kearny Guigné (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, 2010), pp. 114–129; Anne Lederman, ‘Aboriginal Fiddling in the North: The Two Traditions’, in Russell and Guigné, *Crossing Over*, pp. 130–147; Samantha Breslin, ‘Putting Down Roots: Playing Irish and Newfoundland Music in St. John’s’,

DUVAL *A typology for the study of asymmetrical ('crooked') tunes in Quebec*

in *Routes & Roots; Fiddle and Dance Studies from Around the North Atlantic 4*, ed. by Ian Russell and Chris Goertzen (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, 2012), pp. 157–175.

<sup>2</sup> Byron Dueck, 'Public and Intimate Sociability in First Nations and Métis Fiddling', *Ethnomusicology*, 51, no. 1 (2007), 30–63.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Lederman, 'Old Indian and Metis Fiddling in Manitoba: Origins, Structure, and Questions of Syncretism', *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 7, no. 2 (1988), 205–230.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Smith, 'Crooked as the Road to Branch: Asymmetry in Newfoundland Dance Music', *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 22, no. 1 (2007), 1719–1726.

<sup>5</sup> Nikos Pappas, 'This is one of the most crooked tunes I ever did hear. But once you understand it, then it's alright to play: Crookedness in Oldtime American Fiddle Tunes Repertoires', paper presented at the International Council for Traditional Music conference in Vienna, July 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Joti Rockwell, 'Time on the Crooked Road: Isochrony, Meter, and Disruption in Old-Time Country and Bluegrass Music', *Ethnomusicology*, 55, no. 1 (2011), 55–76.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Ornstein, 'A Life of Music: History and Repertoire of Louis Boudreault, Traditional Fiddler from Chicoutimi, Quebec' (unpublished master's thesis, Université Laval, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Liette Remon and Guy Bouchard, *Airs tordus du Québec* (Val-Bélair, QC: Trente sous zéro, 1996); Liette Remon and Guy Bouchard, *Airs tordus du Québec, Volume 2* (Val-Bélair, Québec: Trente sous zéro, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> In my doctoral research, I used this typology to examine asymmetries in other music traditions as well, namely those of England, France, Ireland, Norway, Scotland, Sweden, and various areas of North America. See Jean Duval, 'Porteurs de pays à l'air libre: Jeu et enjeux des pièces asymétriques dans la musique traditionnelle du Québec' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Montreal, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> 'Virtual Gramophone: Canadian Historical Sound Recordings', *Library and Archives Canada* ([www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/gramophone](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/gramophone)).

<sup>11</sup> Literally, 'at or near the end'.

<sup>12</sup> Literally, 'side conversation'.