

Fiddle Teaching in Vancouver

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Last month I visited a local pub with a musical reputation, and what I saw there that night got me thinking about music and how we teach and transmit it. The pub was the Wolf and Hound, on West Broadway, and I visited it on a Monday night. It was like many I had entered before – a modern building, but full of fake and real British Isles pubbery – Guinness posters, large lit ads for beers common in Britain but rare here, ornate lights, the bar itself long and solid, and backdropped by a wall containing any numbers of pub chotchkies. So far, so normal: such pubs are becoming increasingly common in the lower mainland of BC.

But I also found on entering some sixty fiddlers. They ranged in age from perhaps seven to perhaps sixty. They were all playing, and all playing the same tune. This was the Monday night session for fiddlers, organized by Michael Pratt. Michael was front and centre, as were several of his teachers. He is the owner of Celtic Woolens, a store close by that sells handmade Irish and Scottish woolen ware. He is also a fiddler and a fiddle teacher, and the store doubles as a studio for those interested in fiddle, bouzouki, mandolin, bhodran, whistle or voice

lessons. He employs several teachers to help him in these tasks, and each Monday night he runs this session, from seven to eleven.

The night started slowly. The earliest tunes of the evening are the easiest and slowest, but as the night wears on, the tempo picks up; the youngest children leave and more experienced fiddlers arrive. The evening is punctuated by song, a break, as it were, for the fiddlers. By eleven the pace is fast and furious, and every fiddler left is getting a good workout.

What struck me about the evening was its unique character. I have no idea if this is a standard model for teaching in Ireland, but it seems to me that it must be profoundly effective. Firstly, as a fiddler you sit with your peers. You are all fiddlers, but the ones you'll sit next to or near are those that most approximately match your own level of skill or ability. Second, your bum note does not stand out – only you can hear it, so you are not overcome by feelings of worthlessness (I bring to mind now my initial excursions into the violin at the age of ten, and the feelings those experiences still engender). Third, you come when you want to, and leave when the pace is too fast, and only you are the judge of that. Fourth, and perhaps most important, you are a part of a community, in a community place (the best kind of place for this – a pub, be it ever so gimcrack). And you are playing the music of your chosen community. There are no note readers here (though I am sure many, if not all, of the players can read), and so one could imagine that this is how the music was first made, where ears count more than eyes.

I left at eleven, and they weren't finished. I was turning over in my mind how what I had just witnessed could be used for song itself. I failed to find an answer then or indeed now. Singing is a social activity too, and there are occasions (which I've shared with Michael himself many years ago), where a hundred singers getting on the outside of a shanty was the most moving experience in the world. I know singers who first became singers after joining such a wonderful songfest and for whom it is still a root experience. As a singer I seek out such times, whether at festivals or parties, or actually hauling on a rope. But alas, they are few and far between, and cannot be arranged beforehand as Michael's fiddle session nights can be. More's the pity!