

Gender Consciousness Among Women Fiddlers in Ontario Fiddle Contests

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Sherry presented this fine paper at the Society's Conference in Calgary during October, and we immediately snapped it up for the Bulletin. Sherry is a student in Ethnomusicology at York; we hope to see her name in future issues of both the Bulletin and the Journal!

The tension was palpable as the winners of the 1998 Canadian Open Fiddle Championship in Shelburne, Ontario were announced:

The grand prize winner, in the Open class of the 1998 old-time fiddle contest is April Verch. [*Loud applause, screaming, whistling.*] Congratulations. I'll hold that trophy. You're going to have your hands full with money.... Jean passes over the cheque for fifteen hundred dollars to this year's contest winner, April Verch. [*More loud applause, several high pitched screams. Someone yells, "That a girl!"*]

Listening from home to the live CBC broadcast, I was surprised to hear no mention that April Verch was only the second woman to win the Canadian championship. Her predecessor, Eleanor Townsend, had long been known in the fiddle community and through the media as "the only woman to win Shelburne." It had taken 21 years for a second woman to achieve this title, and yet this fact slipped by unnoticed on the radio.

For whom is the winner's gender of importance? What difference does it make in the lives of both women and men fiddlers? How do women fiddlers' experiences differ from men's? What sort of gender structure is created/reflected in Ontario fiddle contests? How is that changing? These are the questions, prompted by April's win at Shelburne in 1998, that have guided my current research on gender issues in Ontario fiddle contests.

This paper is based on interviews with nine women fiddlers, now living in southwestern and eastern Ontario and Alberta, with an age range from 11 to mid-40s, who have in the past or still do participate in the Ontario fiddle and step dance contest circuit each summer. Their fiddle playing experience ranges from two years to 42 years. Besides playing competitively, some play full-time or part-time in bands, teach privately, and judge at fiddle contests. All of them said they couldn't imagine their lives without fiddling, whether as a career or as a hobby. One voice that I am conscious of missing is that of Eleanor Townsend, the first woman to win the Canadian Open Fiddle Contest in 1977, and the only woman to hold that title until 1998. Eleanor died in a house fire just weeks before I began this research. Several women mentioned in their interviews that she would have been the best person with whom to speak.

I include myself as a participant in this study because of my 17 years of experience in the circuit, first as a step dancer, and also later as a fiddler. I have known many of the participants in this research since I entered the circuit. I have competed against them, jammed with them, played piano accompaniment for them, and even taken fiddle lessons from one. Depending on their ages and geographic locations, I know some of them better than others, which provided a particular challenge to me as a researcher. Because I could ask more specific questions and more fully contextualize the experiences of the women with whom I have a longer or closer acquaintance, I struggled against privileging the voices of these women. In the end, rather than erase the differences, I attempted to make explicit to the reader my relationship with each participant where I felt it affected the telling of their stories.

Although we discussed a variety of topics in our interviews, I foregrounded gender issues. The participants knew that I was only interviewing other female fiddlers at that point, and that I was interested in their experiences as "women fiddlers." By highlighting issues of gender, I am not able to address "in what circumstances and by what means gender ... emerged as an important issue," a question that Beverley Diamond (1999) points out is largely omitted from current feminist research; however, I am able to examine the variety of ways that gender is conceptualized by these women as they reflect on their experiences within the Ontario fiddle contest circuit.

Many of the women told me that they had not previously thought much about gender issues in fiddling, and a couple seemed either uninterested or unsure in that part of the interview. Even those who were particularly interested in the issue now said that they had never thought about it while they were active in the circuit. For example, Kathy O'Neill, who was most active in the Ontario fiddle circuit in the 70s and early 80s, remembered,

You know, nobody ever talked that much about it. Now I always considered myself a fiddle player. I never considered myself a girl fiddle player. I mean, I was never told I was a girl fiddle player. So that might very well have had something to do with it.

Karen Reed, active about the same time, had a similar reaction: "Gender issue was never something on my mind. I was who I was, and I was there to have fun, and I had fun with everybody that were friends of mine." Looking back on her experiences now, after having completed a degree in Women's Studies, Karen reflected on certain incidents with a different perspective:

But during [the time that I was competing] what I found was a definite old boy's school attitude towards fiddle contests. You know, if you walked into a room, "Oh, you're good for a girl." Even in the 12 and under, "Oh, do you think you're going to be able to beat your brothers?" And, "not bad for a girl." Those kinds of comments came up an awful lot, even as there were more and more females. And there was a period of time when there was Chuck Joyce, Raymond Shryer, myself, in the top three a lot. So we'd kind of battle it out, and I would have people come to me and say, "You know, I think that you're not placing high or winning because you're female." ... My dad told me years ago, and I'm sure he was joking, but in his days, probably this all kind of comes back to the same thing, he would say, "Wink at the judges." "Gee, maybe wear your skirt a little higher." You know, stuff like that.

All but the youngest of my consultants characterized the fiddle competition circuit as "male-dominated." For example, Kelli Trotter said,

Since it's always been considered a guy thing, and for me, coming from a family of three girls, I think Dad thought it was really cool that I was a fiddle player because he never had a son to play the fiddle. So, for me, playing [fiddle] wasn't a real girl thing.

Karen Reed explained,

[Male dominance in fiddling] tends to be an overall concept, because it's a novelty. "Oh, look at that. There's more women coming into the competition." "Oh, look, lots of girls in that class." And you hear those comments, and that's a big thing. That's some kind of a special thing that's happening in the fiddle scene, and I guess it certainly is because it used to be male-dominated, but why should it be said in such a way that it almost sounds like it's not possible.

She, however, sees the attitudes that maintain the male dominance of the circuit to be changing:

I think that gender in competition is no different than any other movements that women have made in other sectors of society. So I think it's been kind of a progression, and now with respect to attitudes, I think you're still going to find attitudes with some people. But it's certainly come a long way, and it's not really looked at the same. I think it's now down to certain

people, you know, certain individuals instead of [being more pervasive].

Kendra Norris, who began competing in the late seventies and continues to be active in the circuit, often finds herself the only woman in the 19-49 class:

Definitely being the only woman up on stage, I will almost always say, "Oh look, this is Kendra and her harem." They're never quite sure what I mean by that, but it's just a political statement that I make. I am aware, very often, if I'm the only one.

The ratio of male competitors to female competitors was the most common way that the women with whom I spoke expressed their perception of the circuit as being male-dominated. There was no agreement, however, on how the ratio of male to female fiddlers is changing. While Kelli, Karen, and Michelle, all former Open class competitors, see an increase in the number of female fiddlers competing today, April, Terri-Lynn, and Deanna, current and future Open class competitors, specify that the increase is only found in the younger classes, 8 and under and 12 and under. They identify the Open class as still predominantly male, naming only one young woman who played in it regularly last year. Although Kendra first stated that there were more women competing now than when she began in the late 70s, after she began to name her former fellow competitors, she could remember almost an equal number of males and females, leading her to conclude that perhaps the ratio used to be more balanced. Of course, it could be that she remembered more females because they are the ones with whom she interacted more closely.

Kathy and Kendra, both married with children, attribute the fewer number of female competitors in the circuit to women's responsibilities in raising a family. For example, Kendra said,

Well, it certainly has restricted how much time I have to commit to [fiddling], now, as a married woman, with family and job and career. I think it's more of a challenge because I'm female, because of that inner guilt, you know. I really should be spending time with my family, I really should be at home, I really should be, that guilt.... I think that has a lot to do with why the women aren't as topnotch. Now April Verch is doing incredibly well. Crystal Plohman is still into music bigtime, is still able to do that kind of thing. Both of those girls aren't married, you know. Their jobs are music. It's not that music is an extra, or an extra-curricular activity so to speak. Music is their profession, and so maybe they have more time to do it too.

Kathy expressed similar sentiments:

After I married, I couldn't balance it faithfully. You know, I had to go one or the other. Like Eleanor [Townsend] chose that to be her livelihood, and that made a big difference. But just to dabble in it once in

while.... Like I can remember when I had given birth in 83 to my first daughter, and I had committed to judge Stratford and Thedford, I think it was that year. And it was impossible. My husband was trying to change a little girl's diapers. And you can't take a little baby into a man's washroom. I think it just wasn't so attractive for women.... And then in later years, I just decided I couldn't keep the band going, and keep my lessons going, and travel and have children. It was too much.

Their comments support the observation that the number of women competitors decreases as they become older.

Karen Reed looked historically to the fiddle's association with "unwomanly conduct": dancing, drinking, and debauchery.

I think as time went on, into the 1800s, the type of women that did play music, played piano. That fit. You learned how to [play] the parlour songs. Fiddling had a different connotation to it altogether. Like the dainty girl on the piano, playing for the suitors, as opposed to the rugged fiddle player that's doing the hoedowns while everybody's being swept around the floor.

In Ken Perlman's (1996) introduction to a collection of fiddle tunes from Prince Edward Island, he describes how, "in the old days," it was not proper for a woman to play the fiddle at dances, the most predominant context for fiddle playing at the time. He describes the supporting role of women as accompanists on piano or pump organ as "an extension of the division of labour of older, rural communities" (p. 14). Chris Goertzen (1997) also connects gender and fiddling in Norway to historically sex-divided patterns of labour:

Men worked mightily, mostly outdoors, but seasonal weather patterns and other factors on farms and at sea determined that much work would be in great bursts of energy, all-out efforts that were short After such strenuous work there was leisure to recover—and perhaps to fiddle. Women, on the other hand, worked steadily in the home for long hours, and couldn't get away for the weekend here and there that was so important for fiddlers to remain in contact with one another. (21-22)

While these historic patterns of labour may no longer be the reason behind gender roles in fiddle contests, the roles still largely exist: the majority of fiddlers and MCs are males, and the majority of piano accompanists and step dancers are females. While it would be interesting to consider these roles in terms of various manifestations of power, this was not a salient issue for any of my consultants.

Although these gendered roles now seem hopelessly traditional from my perspective as an urban, university-educated woman in the 1990s, they are in fact comfortable and merit little attention in the context of the fiddle competition circuit. Michelle Charlton, a former Open class competitor and current

teacher and judge, attributes the maintenance of gender roles to the traditional culture of the circuit:

Because it's been such a male-dominating circuit ... and I think that that stems from the traditional, ideal role of male fiddlers. I don't know if the old-time music ties in with the traditional ways of the male being the dominant person in the family, and the female being the mom and taking care of the family. I don't know if those ways carried out through the small towns, and if they did, then that's sort of reflected in the outcome of the contests.

Michelle recounted her reaction to finding out that she had been the first female judge at the Shelburne contest in the mid-1990s:

Ken Gamble turned around, "Well, Michelle," he said, "I'm hoping that you're pleased to know that you are the first female judge that we've ever hired." And he meant that as a compliment. But I sat there and sort of thought, "Well, what the hell? What are you saying? Why is that an issue? I shouldn't be the first. I should be one of many, and it shouldn't matter whether you're male or female, or make a note of that." But I think because they're of the older generation, the people who are running the contests....

Karen Reed expressed the difficulty of having a feminist consciousness in the midst of a "very, very, very traditional culture." She points out that many of the people at contests are older and from a rural background. Both audience and competitors are almost exclusively white and of European descent. This demographic fits with the location of most fiddle contests in small towns, and the familial connection to fiddling and step dancing of many regulars on the circuit, both competitors and audience.

Although the youngest participants in this research did not articulate the contest circuit as male-dominated, they were quick to point out the importance of having the support of other girls in their fiddle classes. Eleven-year old Krista Rozein, who described her best friends at fiddle contests as girls who play the fiddle and/or step dance, said, "It just makes me more comfortable having girls play the fiddle instead of all the time being boys," and 15-year old Deanna Dolstra added, "So with the girls, you've got to kind of stick together. We just try and keep each other up, cause it's hard when there's all guys there."

All of my participants brought up the importance of female role models in opening the fiddle circuit to women. Krista Rozein said, "I don't know how fiddle came to be, but maybe boys started it and then boys kept joining, and maybe one girl joined in when there was a whole bunch of boys, and maybe just girls started to play then." Kathy O'Neill compared women in fiddling competitions to women playing hockey, and Karen compared us to women police officers:

It's like maybe a door opens and it starts to happen. People don't think about it until the door's open. But

once a few people cracked the door open, parents come along, and they've got daughters that go, and they want to play, and, okay, this is something girls do.

Deanna, Kendra, Kathy, Terri-Lynn, and Kelli all singled out Eleanor Townsend as a significant role model in their lives, although for everyone except Kathy, she was one in a long list of other male role models. The younger fiddlers also mentioned more recent woman fiddlers in the Open class as significant role models. For example, both Deanna and Terri-Lynn identified April Verch as a role model. Terri-Lynn said,

So you have to find these females that are out there, and those have got to be your idols. They have to be somebody you can look up to, and there's not a lot of them. So that's probably why a lot of the younger ones start with step dancing, and then once they're in it for a while and see how much they would like [fiddling], that's when they start, "Oh well, maybe I could do this too." April Verch, [she's one] of the idols that people are looking up to now, as far as females go. You have to look at them and say, "Wow, if they can do it...." then.

Michelle, Kelli, and April all acknowledged their own position as a role model for younger female players. Michelle said,

Kendra and Karen and I, and yourself, and whoever, at that particular time, set an example for the up and coming kids in thinking, "Yeah, if you're a girl, you can play the fiddle. You don't have to be a boy." One of the nicest compliments that I ever got was from April Verch when she said, "You know, you don't understand how much I used to listen to you when I was in the 12 and under," and she said, "I'd tape you and listen to your tunes, and try and play like you."

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And to me that was one of the nicest things somebody could ever do or say, using me as a role model, and now look at how far she's gotten, and she's probably setting examples for all sorts of young ladies.

As I was leaving Kelli's house after our interview, she mentioned that one of her favourite memories is the letters that April Verch used to write to her, when April was still in the 12 and under class, telling Kelli how much she listened to her playing, enjoyed learning tunes Kelli had written, and how important Kelli was as a female role model for her. Now April takes seriously her own position as a role model:

I do [see myself as a role model], 'cause a lot of little kids kind of look up to me. You know, you can feel that. And sometimes I do feel, not pressured, but I do hold myself responsible to make sure I'm a good role model. I don't think that I should just take the liberty of not being one.

Most often beginning as step dancers, or because their fathers played, these nine women have created a place for themselves within the contest circuit, despite their perceptions of it as male-dominated. In this process, they have changed and are changing the face of old-time fiddling in Ontario. One measure of this change may be the differing reactions to Eleanor's and April's first prize finishes at the Canadian championships in 1977 and 1998 respectively. The emphasis on Eleanor as the first woman to win the title, as compared to no mention of gender when April won, could be interpreted as a decreased sensitivity to women's achievements in the fiddle circuit. It could also be interpreted as an indication that women's achievements no longer need to be pointed out as exceptional. It will be interesting to follow how both female and male fiddlers' perceptions of the traditional, male-dominated fiddle contest circuit change as we move into the 21st century.