

Fiddle is a Rhythm Instrument¹

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My teaching method is based on the basic premise that we need a progressive system for teaching fiddle in Canada, from scratch to advanced, based specifically on the principles of the tradition(s) themselves. This seems straightforward, but in a county as diverse as Canada, with so many distinct styles of playing, it is anything but. Even if we can establish the important values and principles of the tradition(s) we are working with, we are left with major questions of how we can best help students develop those techniques, and over what period of time. Like many of us here, I have been wrestling with those questions in some form as long as I've been teaching. It helped greatly that I learned as an adult, and therefore have a sometimes excruciatingly clear memory of what I went through myself, trying to persuade every reluctant muscle of my body to do or not do certain things in order to get the sounds I was hearing. I went to classical teachers because that's all there was at the time, but I was always more involved with other traditions – jazz, various styles of Celtic-based North American fiddling (including Aboriginal styles), country, klezmer, Balkan, Greek and African musics as well as improvisation. For the purposes of this paper, I will confine myself to the “Celtic-Canadian” traditions that form the bulk of my teaching practice. “Celtic-Canadian” can mean many different things, and, in fact, the most common Celtic style where I live (Toronto, the largest city on the continent) is actually Irish, and more than one style of Irish music at that. But I want my students to look beyond the borders of their hometown, to get a feel for the continent as a whole, for how fiddling developed from one end to the other. I want them to understand enough about how the various Canadian styles overlap and differ that they could go anywhere in Canada and be flexible enough and musical enough to adapt to whatever the local dialect is.

While it is beyond the scope here to give a comprehensive picture of the entire Canadian fiddling landscape, I will present a bird's-eye view. Starting in the east, we have Newfoundland (pretty much a world unto itself stylistically), Cape Breton Scottish style, which extends into Prince Edward Island and other pockets of Scottish settlement, and several somewhat distinct French-Canadian and Aboriginal styles (In-

uit, First Nations and Métis). All of these, save Newfoundland, are largely based on Scottish tradition but some have evolved significantly away from source.² Then there is an older layer of mixed Anglo/Scottish/Irish/American repertoire that has tended to dominate English-speaking areas of the continent (other than those already mentioned) and which has evolved significantly in the 20th century into what is now known generally as “Old Time” music. This is the style of competitions and clubs, a style that owes a great deal to the playing of one man, who, by some quirk of fate in the early 20th century, was the first to have a national radio and television show, Mr. Don Messer. Further complicating this landscape are newer infusions of Irish, Scottish, American, and Canadian styles into new areas as a result of both commercialization and revival movements. The whole thing is now like a sort of stew where we still have chunks of recognizable original ingredients, which are gradually breaking down more and more the longer it cooks.

Whew!!! So, keeping all this in my mind, where do we start? Is there at least something all these styles have in common, some aspects we can agree on as basic principles of traditional fiddling in Canada? The fact that most of the older styles are Scottish-based helps, but current Irish practice throws a bit of a monkey wrench in, creating interesting conflicts. At least, we have one core idea above all, which is that the fiddle is a rhythm instrument first and foremost. Most other ideas can be related back to that. I don't mean to oversimplify, or to deny the melodic intricacy of the traditions in any way. But traditionally, most tunes are an expression of a particular rhythmic groove to which people dance, and there are a limited number of these grooves in the tradition. I think of these grooves as the heart and soul of the music. This idea is not new, but my attempt to apply it in the various styles we think of as Canadian is somewhat unusual. The wealth of stylistic detail – all the body/muscle work, the bowing, the left hand, the modes and arpeggio patterns, the double-stringing, the ear work – required me to find some way of relating all technical challenges to a bigger picture, and rhythm provided the backdrop I needed. Another way of looking at it is that, as fiddlers, we are creating certain rhythmic

characters, like actors in a play: Mr. Cape Breton Jig, Miss Ontario Two-step. The voices of these characters are the voices of our culture.

Leaving slow airs aside, I think of the dance rhythms of Celtic-based traditions, broadly, as four:

1. “2/4s” – in Canada, this includes “straight” marches (duple subdivision, not triple), polkas, 2-steps, and reels – any type of tune where the beat divides evenly into 2, then 4.
2. Jigs – single, double, or slip (triple subdivision of the beat).
3. Waltzes – 3 beats to a “bar”, dancers step on each beat. We have two different ways of subdividing waltz meter in Canada – duple (confined mainly to Quebec) and triple (the rest of the country). The latter is actually a 9/8 metre but is almost never written that way.
4. Hornpipes / strathspeys / 12/8 marches / foxtrots / swing tunes – essentially in 12/8, in a “long-short” pattern, with 2 main beats per bar.

These four basic grooves are played at somewhat different speeds and with radically different bowings in different styles, but that comes later in the learning process. First of all, I want students to just get a good groove on open strings, gradually moving into simple tunes. I want them to be able to get around the instrument in these four basic rhythms – always playing to an underlying beat and gradually learning to do more and more things within that beat. While at first we learn simple tunes drawn from all areas of the country in the four rhythms, at a certain intermediate stage, we choose a style to work with for some time in order to get the bowings, ornaments, the basic feel and the sound for that style. I think of rhythm as being like a basket that we drop the notes into, or a room, a space, that affects everything that goes on within it, or, again, a person, a character, who may have new things to say every day, but is always who he/she is underneath.

The beauty of starting with rhythm on open strings and referring everything back to it is that it gets people feeling good the first time they put bow to string. In fairly short order, they can play along on one note with more advanced players. As they put fingers on, their fingers learn to land in time to the established rhythm. As they start to learn to slur, or go faster, every new bow and finger pattern (including scales and arpeggios) is learned within the grooves. We keep going back to old tunes to add in new things – bowings, ornamentation, extra notes. By the second year or

so, they can start to learn to accent on off-beats, which is where dance grooves start to come alive.³ Students build up their tune repertoire progressively, always moving from rhythms into tunes so they can get their bow arm relaxed and get their best sound on one note before getting distracted by the tune. This way, tunes are always a function of the groove.

Well, it’s a lovely principle. We all know it’s not quite that easy in practice. There’s so much to think about on the violin: the two halves of your body are doing entirely different things, light here, heavy here, relax this muscle, make this one work harder. Over years of teaching, though, I gradually realized I could divide technical stuff pretty much into five basic areas: 1) The Bow, 2) The Fingers, 3) Scales, Modes, and Arpeggios, 4) Developing Rhythm, 5) Developing Your Ear. Everything can be built up progressively in each of those five areas, and I feel that it is important to be working on all five areas all the time. So not only do we need a progressive set of practice techniques for each of the five areas, but repertoire must also be chosen with all five in mind.

Since, for me, traditional fiddling is about playing what you hear and not what you see, I don’t use music for the most part. We sing a lot, we draw tunes out in the air, and we learn how to transfer those sound shapes that we’re drawing onto the fiddle. I love reading music and can’t remember a time when I couldn’t, but many of the rhythms of Celtic-based fiddle traditions in Canada are simply not accurately notatable, or, at least, not in a way that anyone would want to read them. Nor can the page tell you how much bow to use or how much to lean in, how to get the right accents, or even the right basic sound. I do think people should read, eventually, but only after the various rhythmic “personalities” have taken up permanent residence in one’s body; then the “golf clubs” (to quote an African musician of my acquaintance) on the page will be assigned to the appropriate character, or hung on the wall of the right room, so to speak.

I believe that teaching this way creates better musicians in many ways, musicians with good internal rhythm, with a healthy, relaxed technique based on understanding how your body works, with the ability to listen to the people around you and adapt what you are doing to the circumstances, and with the ability to play what one hears.

Notes

¹ This article was originally printed in Russell, Ian and Chris Goertzen. 2012. *Routes and Roots: Fiddle and Dance Studies From Around the North Atlantic 4*. Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland.

² See Lederman, "Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba: Origins, Structure and the Question of Syncretism," in *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*

(1988) 8/2:205-230. Rpt. In *Canadian Folk Music Journal* (1991) 19:40-60.

³ I believe that in most, if not all, dance musics throughout the world, there is a basic beat that everyone steps to, but also important off-beat accents that inspire people to move their bodies.