

Traditional Piano Accompaniment in Cape Breton

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My most recent research is on accompaniment practices in the fiddle tradition of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. In particular, I am looking at the piano style that developed here, as it is something which has become almost uniquely associated with the Island's dance and fiddle traditions. It is interesting, in part, because fiddle traditions in places like Ireland, Newfoundland, Appalachia, Texas, and so on, tend to prefer accompaniment from plucked stringed instruments. In some cases, especially in Irish traditional sessions, accompaniment is not even considered essential; the layering of melodic instruments (fiddle, bouzouki, accordion, small pipes, banjo) is enough to thicken the texture.

In Cape Breton, the adoption of the piano as an accompanying instrument seems to date back to the 1910s, and by the 1940s and '50s, the instrument was virtually obligatory at any house ceilidh or square dance. This was made possible by the expansion of the Canadian piano industry – primarily an Ontario and Quebec industry, though a couple of factories sprang up in Nova Scotia – which made affordable pianos, often purchased on installment plans, available in small communities. Indeed, there are many Cape Breton recreation halls, church halls, and homes that still have these Canadian-made pianos, under names like Heintzman, Mann, Nordheimer, Mason and Risch, and Bell.

Before the piano, we have evidence that the pump organ or reed organ was used to accompany the fiddle during the 1890s through the 1920s, the period when the instrument was in vogue. Prior to this, evidence for accompaniment is sketchy, and it has been generally assumed that the fiddle tradition was unaccompanied. However, very early recordings of Cape Breton fiddling suggests that spoons and clappers may have been used for some time, and recordings exist of a very old practice of playing drones using knitting needles, which were tapped on the open strings and body of a second fiddle.

The characteristic style of piano playing which is now associated with Cape Breton fiddling took some decades to develop. Unlike the fiddle style and repertoire, it is not likely that the accompaniment style derives in any way from Scottish or Irish sources. Though some tune books by Niel and Nathaniel Gow and J. Scott Skinner suggest simple, quarter note accompaniments for cello or harpsichord, these do not seem to have had much influence on Cape Breton piano playing. The tight connection between Boston

and Cape Breton – a popular destination for Cape Bretoners seeking work from the late 1800s – may have provided one avenue of influence. Many early Irish-American fiddle recordings came from New England, and these were often unidiomatically accompanied by session pianists playing in a rhythmically driving bass/chord style known as “stride”. The earliest 78-rpm recordings of Cape Breton fiddling (1928-36) feature pianists playing in this style.

Another possibility is that the pump organ, which was most conveniently played in an up-down bass-chord style as the player pumped the pedals, led to this rhythmic feel. Several Cape Breton pianists, such as Marie MacLellan, had early experience learning on organs.

By the 1950s, the stride style of accompaniment had been firmly established, and a new generation of pianist began to put their mark on the style. Mary Jessie MacDonald, raised in New Waterford, the daughter of esteemed fiddler “Little” Mary MacDonald, started experimenting with moving or walking bass lines. She was inspired by a local swing orchestra, and was fascinated by the idea of changing bass notes on each beat. Maybelle Chisholm of Margaree also began experimenting with bass lines, and added in syncopated chording and “rips” (glissandi), producing a rollicking, exuberant style of accompaniment. Doug MacPhee, of New Waterford, mastered the ability to play the fiddle tunes in the right hand, with idiomatic ornaments, and merged this with a powerful left hand accompaniment technique, mixing striding, walking bass, and block chords in a very flexible texture.

By the 1970s and '80s, the Cape Breton piano style was fully established, with younger players like John Morris Rankin, Hilda Chiasson, Sheumas MacNeil, and Tracey Dares extending the style and adding chord substitutions and occasional tensions (7ths, 9ths). Many fiddlers, like Natalie MacMaster, Howie MacDonald, Brenda Stubbart, and Kimberley Fraser, are also accomplished piano accompanists, and this underscores how fully embedded the piano has become in the Cape Breton fiddle tradition.

My research into these accompaniment practices involves interviews with pianists, fiddlers, and local experts in Celtic music. With the help of student researchers, I have been transcribing and analyzing a wide swath of piano accompaniments, ranging from the 78-rpm recordings of the 1930s right up to the most recent releases. Generally, I try to get a sample

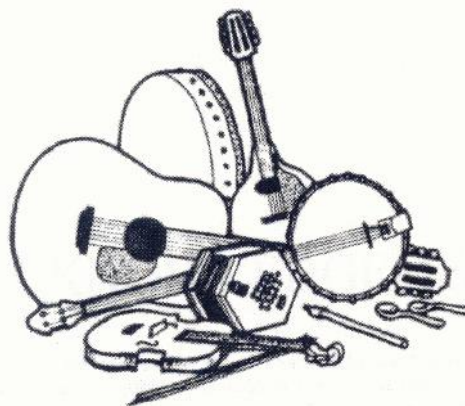
of a pianist accompanying a strathspey (a slow-to-medium 4/4 tune with heavily dotted rhythms), a reel (a fast 4/4 tune with even eighth notes), and a jig (a fast 6/8 tune) to get a sense of the style across the three most characteristic rhythmic feels in Cape Breton instrumental music. I have also gathered a great deal of archival material, including newspaper excerpts from as far back as 1901, correspondence between Cape Breton musicians, record companies, and other agencies, scores and transcriptions of fiddle music involving accompaniment, and archival recordings of performances, house parties, and old radio interviews.

There have been a few surprises along the way. For example, the harmonic basis of the style has always been triads, with only the occasional and judicious use of seventh chords. Yet one of the earliest pianists to be recorded in this style, Betty Maillet, who recorded with Alex Gillis and revered tradition-bearer Angus Chisholm, used sevenths or thirteenthths in every nearly chord she played. It was also a surprise to learn that Marie MacLellan began accompanying fiddlers on a guitar – played in Hawaiian-style tuning with a slide! – before guitars were widely used for fiddle accompaniment in Cape Breton.

As I gather more material, a number of issues are developing. Musicological questions about the relationship between the accompaniment and fiddle melody are unfolding. For example, what is the relationship between the rhythm of the piano accompaniment, especially syncopated accents, and the accents of the fiddling and step-dancing? How much do the melodic bass lines of pianists relate to the fiddle melody versus the chosen harmonic progression, and how much are these improvised components simply pianists' preferred patterns? Harmonically, I have found that there are certain chord choices that pianists like but that sometimes annoy fiddlers. The flat-VI (i.e., an F major chord in an A minor tune) is one example, and I've been discussing this with pianists and fiddlers to understand why there are disagreements about certain progressions.

As for broader social and historical matters, the tension between innovation and conservatism within the tradition is one aspect in which the piano style plays a role. Stylistic lineages are becoming apparent, with certain key players acting as exemplars for younger pianists. It has become apparent that the piano style contains a mix of popular culture elements and locally-developed practices, but the most common perception of Cape Breton piano is one of a very regional and local style. While the piano accompanies a fiddle repertoire which is overwhelmingly associated with Scottish roots, the participation of pianists from Scottish, Acadian, mainland Nova Scotian,

Irish-American, and other backgrounds has forged a style that helped to give Cape Breton fiddling in the 20th Century a distinct sound and flavor.



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