

Practicing Craft in Context:
An Analysis of Contra Dance Fiddling Practices

by

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Preface

Contra fiddlers don't talk about practicing a whole lot, and when they do, it's often with frustration and regret. The premise of this project is that talking, sharing strategies, and sharing experiences can transform practice from an overwhelming and isolating activity to a satisfying and social one. While this document serves only as a study, the interviews that gave birth to this analysis were conversational and often musical. I hope that fiddling visits of this type will continue, not just for me, but for any curious practitioners seeking advice.

Sometimes looking at really good fiddlers, you wonder. Why does music seem so much *easier* for some people? Did they ever have a hard time with *anything*? Why can't *I* play like that? Why doesn't anybody tell me how to just *do* it? The answers to these questions are not short and simple, nor are they readily available. Many contra dance fiddlers come from musical families, musical childhoods, and other musical environments like jazz bands and school orchestras, but these experiences alone do not guarantee a successful fiddling experience. Neither does a "natural touch" or a "good ear" without proper application.

Practice is only one piece of the learning process, but it is an important one. Many fiddlers are not taught to practice, just encouraged to. "Even back then when I had a lot of instruction, I didn't have a lot of guidance on how to practice. Here's what you're supposed to do, so just practice it a lot. I think that's what a lot of people get," (Kaynor, Interview 2009). The intricacies of practice remain mysterious. "It seems so big, you need a little foothold to get a handle on it." I hope that what follows

will provide this “little foothold” – make various kinds of practicing both visible and accessible.

Me and my knowledge

I have experimented with many of the available learning contexts and practices during my ten years learning to play. Through jamming, playing small dances, listening and watching at events, and playing alone in my room, I have worked on both skills and connections into the community so that I sporadically have the opportunity to play dances around the New England area.

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Thanks most of all to you, dear reader, for sharing my interest in practice. I hope that what follows will spark you to practice, talk about practice, and enjoy practice.

Introduction

Literature Review

The practice discourse

Self-discipline

Much of the practice discourse lives in lessons, conversations, and musical groups - this oral transcript is large and (surprisingly) untapped. Luckily, the internet provides a written transcript for one side of the practice discourse, the side that focuses on efficiency, getting the most out of your time and effort. Perhaps this has to do with the commercialization of practice, on the internet and the beyond, as people work to analyze how a practitioner can get the most bang for their buck (Practice Tips, 2009). Generally, practice is presented as a mechanical activity geared towards the goal of perfection, even to the point of pain. “No pain, no gain” and “practice makes perfect” are common mantras (How to Play, 2009). With an emphasis on structure, efficiency and measurable progress, this discourse approaches practice with a self-discipline framework.

Self-therapy

In reaction to this description of practice, another discourse about practice emerges - the narrative of practice as a highly personal and emotionally fulfilling process. “I wish to encourage musicians to trust their experience of their own bodies and minds...” (Bruser 1997: 4). Madeline’s steps to a successful practice include stretching, settling in, tuning in to your heart, and using your body in a natural and comfortable way. Similarly, Burton Kaplan’s “Practicing for Artistic Success”

highlights the personal artistry of practice and how it interacts with technique. “To practice effectively the musician must be in touch with his or her intuitive artistic impulses and at the same time stand outside the process as a coach” (Kaplan 2004: 7). This discourse values awareness, personal growth and artistry and presents a model of practice as self-therapy rather than self-discipline.

The second type of discourse actively critiques the first, laying out the negative effects of the self-discipline mentality on practice. According to Kaplan, practicing often induces “impatience, frustration, boredom, conscience, and guilt” (Kaplan 2004: 7). “Among some musicians, practicing has a dirty name, implying grim, resentful toiling at dull tasks,” (Judy 1990: 111). The self-therapy discourse asserts that practice does not have to feel this way, but could instead be approached as an “overflow of joy and curiosity from a fulfilling life” (Kaplan 2004: 1). Embedded within this criticism are strategies for overcoming the cycles of guilt and fear often associated with practice, giving Kaplan, Judy, and Bruser the material to write inspirational practice books. For example, “Music for the Joy of it,” by Stephanie Judy, offers encouragement, wise words, and strategies to amateur musicians who face a particular set of practice difficulties in fitting music into their lifestyle comfortably and effectively (Judy 1990).

The fiddle education discourse

Inside academia, not much attention has been directed towards fiddling but outside the academic world, there is a sea of information on fiddling and learning to play. Much like the oral discourse about self-discipline, these resources are aimed at

efficiency and simplicity. Various essays, books, and videos, like “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Playing the Fiddle,” are available so that anybody can be “self-taught” (Klein 2008). These resources do not form a significant part of contra fiddle education. First, while they are encouraging and offer a lot of *content* to practice, they do not provide *ways* to practice. Second, videos and books may not approximate the actual musical experience well enough to effect learning. Perhaps as a result, these types of resources are rarely valued as legitimate forms of education by fiddlers.

The next most-discussed topic in fiddle education discourse is tune learning. Jeff Todd Titon’s “Old-time Kentucky Fiddle Music” is a tune reference book which also focuses on history, recordings, biography, and geography to lay out trends in fiddle style. The closest he comes to addressing practice is that “learning by ear improves with practice,” which is then realized through listening and watching other fiddlers closely (Titon 2001: 24). Listening and watching are often paired in discussions of fiddle learning, and these activities do form an important step in the practice process (Phillips 1994: 7). The details of how practicing actually works do not become a major part of Titon’s discussion, nor of the fiddle education discourse in general. Instead, the implication is that fiddlers “just do it.” My analysis will take a magnifying glass to a process that is so often referenced, but so rarely examined.

Many contra fiddlers enter the scene from other traditional musics, where fiddle learning can be described as “another language and immersion is the best way to learn” (Hebert 2009). For many musicians, fiddling contains new words, new sounds, and new syntax. But what constitutes “immersion” in a scattered affinity group of people with day-jobs and many hobbies? Some fiddlers practice for a whole

day at a time, but others will go weeks without playing. Listening is one way to approximate this immersion and, as I will discuss further, is a type of practicing that can prove quite effective. Like learning a new language, learning to hear with a fiddler's perspective can be a drastic adjustment. "Fiddle pedagogy asks that you hear all the layered parts of a phrase, melody, beat placement, left and right-hand ornaments, dynamics, chord changes, and other moving lines – and then try to reproduce exactly what you hear." (Hebert 2009). Hebert emphasizes the importance of jam sessions as listening opportunities and momentary immersions into the sound of fiddling.

In Old-time music, immersion is best approximated at large festivals during the summer months. In his work on Old-time fiddling festivals, Woolf focuses more on performance and play than practice, with particular emphasis on social customs and dynamics of festivals and particularly jams (Woolf 1990). My work will take his emphasis on the social side of the fiddling and tie it in directly with musical success, analyzing how social-musical skills¹ impact a fiddler's ability to get gigs and handle them well.

Similarly, Thomas Turino's "Music as Social Life" defines a new type of art, participatory art, which he applies to Old-time jamming as well as contra dancing, and contra music. "Participatory music and dance is more about the social relations being realized through the performance than about producing art that can somehow be abstracted from those social relations" (Turino 2008: 35). Turino's ideas illuminate

¹ In brief, social musical skills includes listening and responding to other musicians so that the interaction is constructive and creative both socially and musically. More specifics will follow in Chapter 1.

the significant social impetus behind joining the contra dance scene as a musician or a dancer. However, they fail to fully address the complex influences that affect the contra scene, including the modern contra dance touring band, the influx of classical musicians, and the diversity of dance types around the country. All of these issues shape definitions of art and performance as social activities, but also professional disciplined endeavors.

Though nothing much has been written about practicing, what seems to fascinate scholars the most is the diversity of fiddling contexts, from contra dances, to contests, to festivals. It's no coincidence that this is the closest people have come to analyzing fiddle practice because, at least for contra music, the context and practice are closely linked. My work will examine the connections between context and practice, between musical and social musical success, and between discourse and action.

My intervention

The research (for details see Appendix B)

Over the course of six months, August 2009 to February 2010, I interviewed fifteen contra fiddlers and spoke in depth with several more. Choosing who to talk to was a complicated process guided by accessibility, geography, and my connections in the community. For the most part, the fiddlers I spoke with are at the dance-playing level. Some are professionals while others play smaller local dances. Identifying beginning contra fiddlers is a tricky task because most fiddlers start playing contra dances after an introduction through some other fiddle genre, mainly Irish, French-

Canadian, or Old-time music.² My overall approach is to present “successful” fiddlers, fiddlers who play dances and enjoy playing dances, in order to highlight common aspects of their practicing history.

I met with fiddlers in homes, barns, offices, and coffee shops, and asked them how they define practicing, how they approach it, and how they feel about it. In order to gain additional information about fiddlers’ learning experiences and practice habits, I sent out a basic questionnaire early in the interview process. I also inquired if fiddlers would be willing to keep a practice journal including their thoughts, practice routines, and recordings of their playing. Special thanks to Paul, Ethan, Amelia, Rachel, and Rebecca for trying the practice journal with me. Early on, I also did a self-interview and a practice journal as a thinking exercise for myself, in order to identify issues that might be relevant for other fiddlers.

The participants in this research provided a wide variety of thoughts about practice issues. The information here provides only the very essentials of these discussions because attitudes are as fluid, complex, and varied as practice itself.

Limitations and strengths

My integration in the Massachusetts contra dance community and my work as a dance fiddler give me an insider perspective on how practicing works, as well as a personal experience as a point of reference. I limit the information in this paper to my understanding of other fiddlers’ perspective, rather than writing directly from my own

² Most contra fiddlers play multiple genres of music and participate in various traditional music communities. The complications of these influences are too vast to give proper attention in the scope of this paper. However, I will occasionally make reference to an outside influence or a path to contra fiddle if it appears to have a distinct impact on an individual’s practicing.

narrative. Another major strength of this research is the breadth of the interviews, including fiddlers of several generations, geographic areas, and backgrounds. With more time, a more contentious and probably more interesting pool of ideas would certainly be discovered.

I hope that this project is only the beginning of continued research on the workings of contra fiddle practice. A few notable pieces are missing. To start, more comparison, to other genres and other instruments, would illuminate the truly distinctive elements of contra fiddle practice. Band practice dynamics deserve an entire dissertation, and so does the interplay of performance, play, and practice. The biggest missing piece in this research is the voice of beginners. Many of these “successful” fiddlers can share their current practice habits, but what works for them now may not have worked for them in their beginner days. To keep my mind on the beginner experience, I spent time observing and talking with beginners formally and informally, and remembering my own beginner days. Fiddle teachers who I spoke with have an especially helpful sense for the beginner perspective and how to support learners in the early stages. The future direction of this research should center on finding more ways to identify and support contra fiddle beginners.

Framing issues

Articulation and action

Participants’ articulation is limited by memory, bias, self-consciousness, and subjectivity. An underlying approach of this analysis will be comparing fiddlers’ articulations of processes with their enaction of those processes. Part 1 focuses on

articulation, fiddlers' descriptions of practice and the issues that surround its definition; Part 2 examines action, how those definitions function in context.

Should and do

Many fiddlers suffer from a practicing guilt complex that inhibits positive practice experiences. Internal dialogues along the lines of "I don't practice enough, therefore I suck, therefore I don't want to practice because it's depressing" perpetuate a cycle of negative feelings, not practicing, and ever-diminishing enjoyment of the music (until a fun gig or jam session interrupts the pattern). These negative feelings towards practicing often arise from fiddlers' actions not measuring up to their ambitions. Practice *should* proceed a certain way, but practitioners often *do* it differently than their ideal. Realistically, what fiddlers *do* can be fairly effective, so perhaps a broader definition of practice can validate these real practice experiences.

Social and individual

Contra dance is a highly social scene with community-building at the center (Hast 1994). Yet fiddling has deep associations with individuality as well, with virtuosity, leadership, and self-sufficiency. The interplay of the social and the individual shapes practice at every level - practice strategies, practice contexts, and practice philosophies. I will examine social and individual influences on practice by presenting the process as an activity directed towards acquiring both musical and social-musical skills.

Talent and authenticity

The traditional fiddle narrative skips practicing altogether. When asked how he learned to play, Clyde Davenport is reported to have said “I didn’t learn at all.” French-Canadian fiddler Jean Carignan “picked up” the fiddle at age five and was a virtuoso by age nine. While these fiddlers grew up in traditional music communities, their type of story still resonates with modern communities of music-makers.

These narratives give birth to two types of authentic learning models; a fiddler is either brought up under the tutelage of a reputable mentor or is a “self-taught” “natural” at music.³ Many genres of fiddling are treated like a craft, passed down from master to apprentice, with accompanying prestige and legitimacy. The other option is the “natural” fiddler who seems to be able to imitate anything with accuracy and expression. Despite the simplicity and dubiousness of these ideas, these learning models shape fiddlers’ descriptions and beliefs about their playing and practicing. In action, only very few fiddlers are “naturals” who never have to practice⁴ and only a few more really study in a truly focused “apprenticeship.” My research shows that most fiddlers utilize a variety of learning environments in different ratios and with different degrees of intentional management.

³ These labels are somewhat foolish. Nobody is self-taught; everything is inspired by something from the environment. Yet everybody is self-taught; everything in your playing was chosen and incorporated by you alone.

⁴ The “self-taught” myth has some basis in truth of course. In my research, I have come across a few exceptional circumstances where relatively little “practicing” seems to have magical results. These anomalies are primarily due to narrow or outlying definitions of “practice” as 1) “learning new tunes” or as 2) practicing alone. In addition, what fiddlers remember and what they can articulate after 20 years of playing sometimes places severe limits on the type of information they can and will share. Determining how much of a fiddler’s story is based on their desired authenticity and how much is defined by memory is not my primary aim, but provides an interesting level underneath the presentation of this research.

Background

The contra scene

Contra dancing is an evolving tradition growing out of social dance traditions in England and American going back hundreds of years (Hast 1994). Today in New England, contra dancing is a thriving intergenerational scene, taking place at local community centers, churches, and large dance halls. Contra dances vary in size and character around the US and the world but the largest communities are in New England and California, with smaller scenes scattered around the US.

Most dance events begin around 8 o'clock and end around 11 with a brief intermission half-way through. Each dance is taught by the caller, then danced to music for about ten to fifteen minutes. Dance events vary in size from thirty or forty dancers in a small hall to hundreds of dancers at a large regular dance or festival.⁵

Dora Hast's dissertation "Music, dance and community: contra dance in New England" provides a detailed analysis of the contra dance scene as a complex community, addressing issues of identity, performance, and transformation. Especially relevant to the discussion of practice is her section entitled "Problematics of community" which describes tensions within the community surrounding hierarchy, gender roles, and sexuality. While some might paint contra dance as an alternative lifestyle that defies capitalism and consumerism, even forming its own type of social activism, Hast reminds us of the complications and tensions within the

⁵ For more information on the dance form, see Appendix C. To get a sense of what the dancing looks like, visit Video 1 at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnVoYXPCpXA&feature=related>. You can see two groups of dancers, two sets, and observe how the same dance pattern repeats every 32 bars as each couple moves on to interact with a new couple. The music is "chunky" to match with the short phrases, especially in the second half of each dance where dancers balance several times, step in and out of the circle.

community that defy simplicity and sometimes even liberalism (Turino 2008, Hast 1994).

The music consists of a large proportion of Irish, French-Canadian, and Old-time tunes with New England, Cape Breton, and Scottish tunes represented in a slightly smaller proportion. Contemporary written tunes are also an important piece of the repertoire. Instrumentation almost always includes a fiddle and a rhythm instrument, guitar and/or piano. In recent years, guitar has become a more common rhythm instrument than in the past. Flute, accordion, mandolin, drums, clarinet, whistles, saxophone, or banjo can round out the band, providing extra melodic and rhythmic support. Most bands consist of three to five musicians.

Many contra fiddlers participate in other fiddle and non-fiddle musics, and may consider themselves “fiddlers,” “New England fiddlers,” just “musicians,” or may identify themselves through the several genres they play. Fiddlers arrive on the scene in all manner of ways. Some find contra dancing through these bordering genres of fiddle-music, many start as contra dancers, some get into it at a fiddle camp or with a fiddle teacher or a friend. Few fiddlers start out with the explicit goal of playing exclusively for contra fiddling but find their way through personal connections, attending events, listening to recordings, and playing with others. The learning process is one you “can’t go to school for” – it’s closely integrated into the community.

Contra music is tailored to the dance, so all tunes match one time through a dance which is the equivalent of 32 bars.⁶ Jigs and reels are played primarily, but marches and polkas have been re-emerging as popular dance tunes in the last few years.⁷ A waltz is usually necessary to end each half of the dance and sometimes a couple dance, a schottische or hambo,⁸ will begin the second half.

A varied and large repertoire is necessary to properly match each individual dance. Most bands will play two to four tunes for each dance, choosing tunes with effective transitions that all suit the dance well. For example, a dance with balances (a figure involving some loud stepping for the dancers) might inspire musicians to play more “chunky” tunes, with shorter phrases to accent where the balances occur.⁹ A dance with only flowing figures would work better with smooth tunes, maybe Irish reels or jigs. Repertoire is usually decided at the last minute, based on the caller’s request just before teaching the dance. Some bands will put tunes together into sets during practice sessions, then choose sets based on the caller’s dance choice. Other bands will put together sets on the spot while the caller is teaching, using tune lists to find common repertoire.¹⁰

Fiddlers often, but not always, take the role of the diplomat in interacting with the caller. In addition to matching tunes to the caller’s request (I’d like slinky jigs for this one), sometimes tempos need to be adjusted as well. The band usually decides the number of tunes they will play, with some input from the caller on how long the

⁶ In 4/4 time with the fastest notes represented by eighth notes – this is the most common way to write tunes down. Sometimes tunes are transcribed with the fastest notes represented by sixteenth notes in 4/4 time or by sixteenth notes in 2/4 time.

⁷ Recording #2 is a tune with Breton origins, played with a march-like feel.

⁸ A hambo is a Scandinavian couple dance in triple time. A Schottische is a couple dance in duple time danced with a step-hop, found in various Northern traditions.

⁹ See Video 1 for an example.

¹⁰ “Set” in this context refers to a group of tunes played for a dance.

dance will last. Then, the caller will signal two or three times before he or she wants to end the dance. At that point, the diplomat must make sure the band members have all seen the signal and are prepared to create a final build-up.

Dynamics, texture changes, and tune transitions are commonly employed to create an “emotional arc” for a dance. Thus, it is useful for musicians to be able to create harmonies and back up other players as well as vary their dynamics and expressive mood.

In addition to repertoire, expressiveness, and diplomacy, expectations for quality contra fiddling include general danceability, specific matching to dances, and blending with other musicians. Blending with others is made possible through sensitive listening and imitation, chord knowledge, and rhythmic support. Other elements which are deemed by some to be important include intonation, improvisation, tone, risk-taking, and tastefulness. In the general category of small ensemble music-making, memorization, harmonization, transposition and playing by ear also become important (Judy 1990: 80-81). Much of the discussion of practicing centers around these skills and how to approach them on an individual level.

Tune learning

Most of this research will focus on the development of particular skills, at home, at lessons, dances, and jams. Repertoire operates in a secondary and rather consistent manner throughout, as skills are practiced through the acquisition and maintenance of tunes. This section will be devoted to introducing the general structure of tune learning which appears in all of these fiddling contexts.¹¹ For the most part, learning tunes involves a few key procedures: listening,¹² singing along, trying, and adjusting. These processes often follow in the order above, but can also be initiated simultaneously, depending on the learning context and fiddler's comfort level.

Listening is the most method for “absorbing” or “ingraining” the tune in the mind – the first step towards thoroughly learning a tune. Listening involves several approaches. A fiddler first orients themselves to the key, rhythm, and structure of the tune, then makes comparisons to other tunes to discover the relevant tune patterns, while paying close attention to “catch phrases” or irregularities that make the tune distinct.

The next step involves creating a mental image and audio track for the tune. For some, this construct is more visual, seeing the shape the tune makes or watching another fiddler's fingers; for some, it's more sound-based, actually hearing the tune in your “inner ear.” If the tune is flying by at tempo, it can be helpful to slow down the tune mentally or focus in on one elusive moment. Listening like this can be assisted

¹¹ For supplementary information, please see Appendix D.

¹² Stacy Philips says about learning to fiddle “Watch, listen, and practice.” Judy also combines watching and listening as a cohesive process of imitation. Thus, listening here should be read in a broad sense to mean experiencing the music.

by mental singing along, and mental images. Singing along often operates so deeply in fiddlers' listening that it can occur somewhat unintentionally, as a special attuned way of listening in to a tune, or in a more intentional way, actually singing along or following the tune in a mind's eye.

“My ears know a lot of tunes” (Lay, Interview 2009). Often, tunes sneak into a musician's mind through dances, jams, or recordings, helping the fiddler reach a level of familiarity with the tune so that they “know” mentally without having ever tried it on the fiddle. Depending on the person, this “knowing” can be detailed, including the key, precise ornaments and pitches, or more free-form, consisting of a general tune shape that will only materialize fully with the instrument present.

Trying the tune physically with the instrument brings a new level of understanding to the music. Several fiddlers explain that learning and recalling tunes is primarily about finger patterns for them. “I think about my left hand fingers, there's a shape and sort of a color depending on the key” (Mason, Interview 2009). During the trying process, fiddlers often apply patterns they know from other tunes or use chord knowledge to reconstruct a version of the tune.

Fiddlers are constantly adjusting as they play, both to correct mistakes and experiment with variations. A tune is not just a series of notes than can be captured with written music, so the adjusting process is integral for a fiddler to properly learn the whole piece of music complete with a certain stylistic leaning, ornamentation, and rhythmic sensibility. Reading music does provide a “skeleton” for the tune and plays a small role in inspiring fiddlers to learn new tunes as they thumb through tune books

during practice.¹³ Music can also be helpful for remembering a tune learned elsewhere.

The final step to the process of tune learning, in a practical sense, is demonstrating recall.¹⁴ For many fiddlers, a visual representation triggers an audio representation. Additionally, the visual-physical connection mentioned previously is so strong that, at times, a fiddler may not remember the tune in their mind, but upon listening to it find themselves with a “finger twitch” where their muscle memory does have the tune in store. The “catch phrases” noticed early on in the tune learning process may also function as memory tools for bringing the tune back.

Recall is sometimes imperfect, and fiddlers have different standards for what constitutes recalling something well enough. In many sessions, fiddlers seem apologetic about their personal versions of tunes which they feel came about from inaccuracies in their tune learning process. Yet fiddlers continue to play the tune, hearing it in a new way sometimes, adjusting their playing to other musicians, and creating an evolving version that gets passed on and passed around. Many fiddlers keep tune lists to remind themselves of the tunes they know, and to work well with others. Filing systems including tune names, tune beginnings, and keys can be especially helpful for recall.

The more tunes a fiddler learns, the more they develop the ability to learn more tunes. Familiarity with tune patterns, both structural and specific phrase

¹³ Some tune collections even include symbols for common bowing patterns and ornamentations, like Stacy Philips’ “Traditional American Fiddle Tunes.”

¹⁴ In more artistic sense, many fiddlers would argue that a tune is “never finished” or “finished” after considerable work developing “a sound for it” in different contexts.

patterns,¹⁵ builds a tune instinct that helps a fiddler learn tunes faster as they move forward.

Tune learning is ultimately an avenue for skill learning. In order to improve as a fiddler, developing effective tune learning methods is primary. Listening, singing along, trying, and adjusting bring the tune into the repertoire while forcing the player to make decisions about how to realize the tune on the instrument.

¹⁵ See the Appendix D for examples of structural patterns and specific phrase patterns.

Part 1 Chapter 1: Defining Practice

“Well, there’s practice... and then there’s practice” (Lizotte, Interview 2009).

Practicing can be fun or painful, isolating or social, productive or frustrating. Because practicing is such a highly individualized path, the objective of this research is to sort out the shared musical and social experiences that define practicing for contra fiddlers. In order to preserve a broad perspective and allow space for multiple angles on the topic, I will define practicing as any intentional self-directed process of applying ideas and techniques in order to improve musicianship.

To separate practicing from general learning, the “intentional” and “applied” pieces of the definition are key. Many activities might improve someone’s playing, but to qualify as practicing, intentional and active management of the environment is required. In a jam session for example, a fiddler might absorb tunes and enjoy the scene (learning) or play along with the group while focusing on putting a new idea into action (practicing).

Practice methods are driven by practice goals, encompassing everything from “to be the best fiddler I can be” (Larkin, Interview 2009) to “To be better at identifying, following, and memorizing complex chord changes and substitutions by ear” (Hazard-Watkins, Questionnaire 2009). Goals guide individuals’ practice styles, routines, and strategies. In action, definitions of practice operate in a fluid manner to order each individual’s priorities and then their actions.

Practice Goals

Improvement / upkeep of technique:

Improvement is the general urge to “get better” and upkeep is the process of maintaining and refining those acquired skills. “In practicing, I’m trying to gain mastery of the instrument” (Larkin, Interview 2009). “You’re good enough to be doing what you’re doing – but you want to get better at it, sort of an amorphous goal” (Mason, Interview 2009). Improvement and upkeep feed directly back into getting gigs: “staying enough in shape and in touch with the tunes to continue to be hired.” Despite being “amorphous,” the urge for improvement seems to be the single biggest motivator for the people I spoke with, perhaps because it opens the doors to more and more musical possibilities. “If I practiced I’d get better, and there’s a lot of things I could do with music” (Larkin, Interview 2009).

Getting and succeeding at gigs:

Fiddling for dancers can be immensely rewarding, the applause, the shouts, the movements on the dance floor. Playing gigs is not only a chance to share music with others, perform for an adoring audience, and have peak musical experiences, but also has a financial incentive. Thus the gig experience is a desirable one from a learning perspective as well as a recreational and professional one.

Playing with others:

Being able to play gigs, participate in jams and join in the social-musical community surrounding contra dances is often cited as a reason for learning to fiddle.

In the joking around, shared space, time, food and music, relationships and networks can build around the music that continue beyond it.

Creativity:

Creativity means making new material: tunes, improvisations, variations, an aesthetic. For contra fiddlers, the desire to create distinct, appealing, and danceable music is fundamental to their enjoyment of the music and success as a fiddler.

Emotional expression:

Practicing does involve self-expression at times, but whether this emoting is a goal of the practice or a byproduct depends entirely upon the player's explicit intentions. "I want to play my heart out!" (Larkin, Interview 2009). Practicing can also be seen in terms of emotional release. "My main goal is to feel good, physically good and emotionally good" (Kaynor, Interview 2009).

The social and the musical

While not an explicitly articulated goal, for many fiddlers the development of musical and social-musical skills is the ultimate aim. Turino says of "participatory art" that "musical-dance skills is primary; other aspects such as personality, the ability to work together... also become clear criteria for selecting individuals for the ensemble" (Turino 2008: 30). Turino's description hints at the presence of skills that are not just musical or just social, but some combination thereof. I will define these as social-musical skills, social skills used navigate musical environments.

Musical skills include intonation, solid rhythm, tune knowledge, tune instinct, improvisation, and style.¹⁶ These tools then support the development of social-musical skills, including the ability to listen sensitively, respond appropriately and effectively integrate oneself into a group, both during music playing and around music playing (Judy 1990: 196). These skills provide a foundation for successfully navigating dance floors, jams, stages, house parties and other environments where networking, building friendships, and making music are a priority. Practice has a broader goal than just acquiring technique – it is geared towards integrating oneself into a community. This broader goal may require a broader definition, one which includes social practicing contexts. “Playing with others requires a number of special skills, most of which you can’t practice anywhere but in a group” (Judy 1990: 196). Social skills outside actual music playing, such as integrating easily into conversations, listening well to others, and articulating opinions tactfully, are also important.

Practice: Definitions in Operation

Three definitions for practice emerge from musicians thoughts about the topic. These are not solely attached to any individual or philosophy, rather they are displayed to varying extents in everyone’s thoughts about practice. Several could be functioning at any particular moment. Each definition is goal-driven, as practicers seek to get gigs, improve their technique, express themselves, develop creativity, and play with others.

¹⁶ For details on these fiddle skills, see Appendix A.

Practicing as attention

Practicing is a state of mind where the individual is focused on a specific skill, task, or concept. Attention can converge inward on tone, ornaments, and precision or outward on blending with and responding to other musicians. This view emphasizes the importance of intentionality in defining practice.

Inward attention

“It’s a kind of a mindset, a focused attention, and there’s lots of different ways to do it. You can practice without your instrument, closing your eyes and imagining playing the piece...” (Tracy, Interview 2009).

Practicing is a frame of mind where an individual’s entire focus is directed towards playing and playing well. As suggested above, one possibility is practicing mentally without practicing technically.¹⁷ Mental practicing can take place in a variety of contexts and allows for fluidity between practicing and playing, depending on the practitioner’s level of focus and “what ears I’m listening with” (McCallum, Interview 2009). Part of this attentiveness includes “planning ahead, analyzing, crafting, and listening” (Lea, Interview 2009).

“Practicing is actually playing your instrument in a focused manner when you have time to work on a specific problem or technique issue and focus in on something,” (Schneckenburger, Interview 2009).

Technical practicing, with the instrument in hand, is geared towards solving problems by “working on obnoxious parts,” or generally improving skills. While any

¹⁷ Mental practicing, or “imaging,” can be an effective practice strategy. See Part 2 Chapter 1 for details.

kind of playing does inform musicianship in some way, several fiddlers make the point that effective, and therefore real, practicing occurs only when there is time to fix a mistake.

The inwardly focusing individual practice session is by far the most visible and most discussed practice context, perhaps due to the influence of conservatories and classical and jazz pedagogy. Lissa, a New England Conservatory graduate, sees this as her main form of practicing and approaches jamming and performing with a different mental focus. Other fiddlers practice while performing, actively using gigs to develop skill and repertoire.

Outward attention

Outward attention is required for working with other musicians and playing for dancers but whether this can operate as practice is up for debate. Most agree that fiddle education often takes place when playing with other musicians, in rehearsals, sessions, and at dances, but are these experiences self-directed and applied?

Experimentation is seen as an important part of the practicing process,¹⁸ and many environments that encourage outward attention also encourage experimentation. Band rehearsals provide opportunities for trying things out, “not caring how it sounds, just trying everything” (White, Interview 2009). Gigs create space where a fiddler can fool around with improvisations and back-up riffs to fit in with the musical environment.

Playing with other musicians also helps to develop social-musical skills including everything from listening, blending, and playing back-up to choosing tunes

¹⁸ The practice process, as viewed by contra fiddlers, will be described in detail in Part 2 Chapter 1.

and giving and receiving feedback. With practice, an individual can become familiar with different players' styles. "I know where she (a bandmate) is going and I can follow that" (White, Interview 2009). Amelia describes it below:

"Once you get to the point where you're not focused on what *you're* doing and you're focused on what *they're* doing, then it comes back and changes what *you're* doing – it's really subtle," (Mason, Interview 2009).

This type of outward listening and focus has a high degree of intentionality - a fiddler has to actively "tune in" to another player in order to "really play *with* them," (Mason, Interview 2009). Once a fiddler achieves this type of focus, other events just seem to fall into place, like the subtle variations described above.

Outward attention can also focus on receiving feedback from dancers. "If it's not good music, they're a little offset. Or if they seem more energetic and happy you're probably doing something right" (Larkin, Interview 2009). Because this is "instant feedback," a quick glance out to the hall accurately assesses the situation. Just "checking in" does not constitute practicing, but moments spent thinking about the dancers and adjusting playing appropriately certainly could. As always, the level of intentionality is the defining factor – some fiddlers might adjust without thinking about it, others might make a direct effort to slow down, make their rhythm crisper, or even switch tunes to better suit the dancers.

The back and forth

While inward attention allows a practitioner to narrow in on specific musical elements, outward attention provides for the practice of social-musical skills.

Attention is not a black and white process of course: a fiddler's focus can move intentionally and unintentionally in and out and in between, sometimes drifting away from the music completely. "Of course there were also plenty of times I wasn't thinking at all, just playing and daydreaming or mindlessly watching the dancers," (McCallum, Interview 2009). On the other extreme, focus can move completely inward even while playing a dance, directed on specific tasks like "trying to put more mid-bowstroke rhythm in the southern Old-time tunes" (McCallum, Interview 2009). Playing alone, a practicer can approximate pieces of the outward attention process by playing along to a recording. In this way, inward and outward attentions are somewhat translatable among different contexts, though some contexts might support one or the other more effectively.

Practicing as improving on weaknesses

Many fiddlers see practicing as a type of playing where an individual examines weaknesses and works on areas of improvement. In my conversations with fiddlers, two main frames for this practicing emerged. One approach is based on skills, the other on repertoire. Each approach feeds into the other. Learning a tune brings in new techniques; focusing on a particular skill can develop a personal version of a tune. A fiddler might see their practicing as oriented towards "getting control of the instrument" (skills-based), but still focus their practice around learning new tunes (repertoire).

Skills-based practicing

Improvement at intonation, rhythm, style, and tone as well as improvisation, risk-taking, and blending with other musicians is the driving force behind skills-based practicing. These goals are somewhat divisible into musical and social-musical skills, and inward and outward attention. A fiddler needs the tools, intonation, rhythm, style, and tone, to be able to respond well to other musicians, take risks, and create interesting improvisations.

For each skill, there are specific techniques which a fiddler can focus on directly, and for each technique, strategies for effective practicing. The distance here between the details of practice and the evaluation of skills makes skills-based practicing difficult to manage. For example, working on rhythm (skill), means utilizing a bowing pattern (technique) slowly, repeatedly, or in variations (strategy). All these pieces are directed towards the “amorphous” goal of getting better. Because it can be tricky both to navigate and articulate skills-based practice, many fiddlers re-route their practice management through repertoire, working on specific tunes to develop progress on those specific tunes.¹⁹ One approach is to use tunes “primarily to see how to enhance [the tune] using whatever technique we’ve been working on,” (Lizotte, Interview 2009). The opposite is also possible: working on tunes to develop progress on specific techniques. “I’ll realize, I’m not doing very well shifting, or getting lazy, so I’ll work on the skill then play all the tunes I know that have that skill in them” (Tracy, Interview 2009).

¹⁹ As discussed in Tune Learning, fiddlers’ articulations might surround repertoire while their actual practice habits center on skills.

“I’ve been very focused on skills recently because I realize how little I have” (Lizotte, Interview 2009). Especially for the less experienced, skills-based approaches are the key to practicing for improvement, employing a variety of strategies to integrate new skills and maintain old ones.

Repertoire-based practicing

The repertoire-based perspective, “practicing (as) the process of learning new tunes” (Miller, Interview 2009), is mostly an approach for advanced fiddlers who feel secure in their style and command of the instrument. This approach to practicing centers on creativity as a goal.

New tunes can act as a developing force on personal aesthetic where achieving a more inventive and interesting sound is a powerful motivator. Since new tunes contain new patterns and techniques, learning repertoire is a way to accumulate creative tools. A tune might inspire a different bowing or use of an ornament which could then be implemented in other tunes. Creativity in terms of expression is important too, as each tune can say something new or offer a new way to express through the instrument.

Another major motivation for learning new repertoire is preparing to play with other musicians. Many beginning fiddlers make an effort to learn the most commonly played tunes for their area or social network. This allows them to play out with others at jams and dances, which is both rewarding and educational. For more experienced players, new repertoire is a way of increasing shared repertoire with favorite bandmates and musician friends.

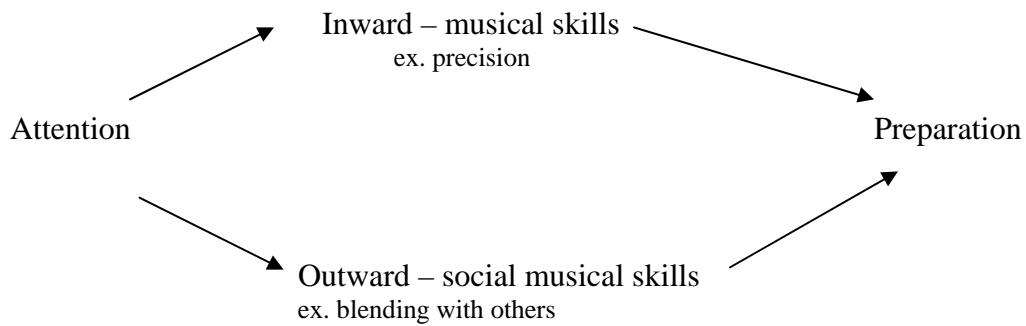
Practicing as preparation

While all practice is fairly goal-oriented, gig preparation propels practice towards specific materials to learn. “Okay I have a concert coming up, have material I have to go through.” Sub-goals can include getting tunes “ship-shape” or “polishing,” figuring out which tunes are the strongest, and readying a tune list for action. If a fiddler works with a band, gig preparation can involve close passage work from in band arrangements, or even doing the arranging oneself.

Preparing specifically for a gig, rehearsal, or jam session is practicing for improvement with a concrete goal in mind. For this type of practice, I will point to philosopher Erving Goffman’s three versions of practice, all oriented towards the goal of a specific performance. “Task trials, rehearsals, and plannings together can be seen as varieties of practicing” (Goffman 1974: 61). For contra fiddle, plannings can include anything from memorizing a cool riff in the car to sitting down and working out band arrangements. A rehearsal is an individual or band practice session focused on material for an upcoming gig. Task trials provide an apt category for gigging and jamming, times when “you finally really know if it works” because the music is properly contextualized.

Closing

In some sense, all practicing is directed towards preparation. Attention, divided into inner and outward, helps a practicer develop musical and social musical skills, respectively. Then, improvement of these skills becomes preparation when applied to a specific purpose.



These definitions are highly functional, relating directly to fiddlers’ goals, and highly interconnected, relating directly to each other. They are like different camera angles on the same scene – the individual practicer integrating themselves into a larger community of practice.

Why practicers might define the process so differently leads back to issues of authenticity, articulation, and action. Whether a fiddler subscribes more to the natural fiddler model or the apprenticeship model for authentic learning shapes how they view practice contexts. For example, the context of practicing alone dismisses the significance of social-musical skills altogether and limits practice to the top pathway. A player with a natural fiddler perspective might see practicing alone as unnecessary (even as a weakness) while a player influenced by the apprenticeship model might value alone practice for providing a space for discipline and hard work. Embedded in these definitions is a tension between what a fiddler feels they should do, and what they actually do. While many fiddlers feel they should spend more time playing alone, focusing inward on specific musical elements, fiddlers most often use some combination of the inward and outward pathways to prepare themselves, musically and social-musically, for upcoming events.

Part 1 Chapter 2: Performance, practice, and play

In framing this research, I hope to present as precisely as possible the various insider views on what constitutes practice, play, and performance. Generally, fiddlers' pathways into the contra scene and their participation in other musics shape their understanding of contra fiddle practice in relation to standards they have previously encountered. Ideas about classical practice, performance, and play have a particularly influential effect which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

The influence of concerts

Many contra fiddlers participate in a folk-fiddle concert scene, including bluegrass, Newgrass, Old-time, and other combinations of Anglo-influenced traditional musics. Contrasting concert practicing and dance practicing reveals important background for fiddlers' notions of performance, mainly the idea that dances are a more forgiving performance space that requires less, or different, practicing. A concert context can be more closely approximated in alone practice,²⁰ since tunes and arrangements can be played through similar to the arrangements in which they would be performed. A contra dance performance cannot be approximated as easily. Rodney Miller points to "the naivety of sitting in your room and playing something and then going out and plugging it in [at a dance]" (Miller, Interview 2009). Specifically, "[band] arrangements for a dance are extremely different than for a concert. A lot of things have to be magnified and extended for a dance which you

²⁰ "Alone practice" is the term I will use to refer to individual's practicing by themselves. Personal practice and individual practice can both refer to a person's larger framework for practice, incorporating different contexts.

can do in a more subtle way at a concert,” (Schneckenburger, Interview 2009). The subtleties one might practice for a concert are often lost at a dance, between bad sound, the noise of the dancers and the voice of the caller. Instead of demonstrating subtlety, dance arrangements are directed towards creating a long “emotional arc,” an element which is difficult to practice without dancers or other musicians present.

Dance practicing requires attention to repertoire and big picture skills rather than subtleties in playing and arrangement. Rodney advises “knowing your repertoire well” in order to best cater to the caller’s and dancers’ needs, implying that an effective practice session for a dance would consist of playing through tunes until they feel solid. Additionally, practice as a “calisthenics” for fiddle skills suits dance playing well because a fiddler can prepare and refine their tools which they will then put to use in context. Repertoire and skills can be practiced outside alone sessions, too, in contexts closer to the dance itself, even during the dance itself.

The influence of other traditional musics

Some fiddlers join the contra scene from connected genres of traditional music where performance, play, and practice take on shifting meanings. Levels of articulation complicate the definition of these terms. “Jammers playing Old-time music in a circle may be thought of as performing for each other... [but] among my fellow musicians, I do not usually refer to my playing as ‘performing’” (Woolf 1990: 182). Similarly, in Irish traditional music, sessions often operate as a mid-ground between performance and play, where musicians seek to impress each other and listeners, but also to share tunes and enjoy good company. Irish musicians would not

refer to the jam as a “performance,” but they might still identify elements of performance in the environment. Definitions of play, performance, and practice often go unarticulated, or are articulated with certain sensibilities specific to the tradition. In Old-time music, “play” refers to playing dances and sessions, while “perform” requires an audience and a stage. In contra music, “play” or “perform” are used to describe music for a dance, but only “play” applies to band rehearsals and jam sessions. In Old-time, Irish, and contra music, “practice” indicates any music-playing which does not fit into categories of performance or play.

Play

In the contra scene “play” carries connotations of pleasure, spontaneity, informality and a back and forth among group members. “Play is often used by Americans to describe a kind of activity, freed from the need to be productive” (Woolf, 2003). “Play” signifies both the pejorative “fiddling around” that creates nothing substantial and also the “freedom” from needing to create anything lasting. While playing contra dances is not often particularly profitable, a commercial element is still evident. Yet there is this desire to deny (or acknowledge humorously) the monetary gain while preserving the idea that playing is pure joy, like “getting paid to eat ice cream” (Paid to eat Ice Cream, 2001). “Play” also carries associations with expressive creativity and fulfillment. “That’s one of the things that defines me as a musician, is that what’s useful in terms of work is also a huge sense of in the moment pleasure” (Kaynor, Interview 2009).

Playing with other people and playing for enjoyment are clearly important pieces of contra fiddle practice, and yet many fiddlers feel that what they *should* do is focus on technique during dedicated individual practice hours. While the “should” is usually individual, the active practice of contra fiddle is often social. The should/do conflict can be somewhat resolved with a more open mind-set about what qualifies as performance, practice, and play. Practicing can happen during a performance, playing around can happen during practicing, and so on and so forth.

The concept of play illuminates a tension between discipline and pleasure. While both are deemed to be important in music-making as a profession, they are often seen as mutually exclusive within an activity. While both performance and practice can be enjoyable, discipline is seen as distinctly un-enjoyable. For example, several fiddlers mention playing dances as an important educational experience, but one which does not constitute practice because the “messing around” that happens during a dance or jam session involves a more carefree and less diligent mindset than a practice mindset. Messing around is commonly connected to interactions among musicians and so it requires outward attention. Making musical jokes and improvisations involves risk-taking, listening, and experimenting. Similarly, “faking it,”²¹ while often associated with a lack of discipline, can be a highly directed process of prioritizing the fundamentals in an attempt to match or create a better sound. The perceived tension between discipline and pleasure operates primarily on the level of articulation, defining play, practice, and performance.

²¹ “Faking it” means playing something beyond the level of comfort, not playing it perfectly, but getting along alright.

Activities which might seem lacking in discipline can in fact be directed and intentional, and quite practice-like. If the function of play is to enjoy the music, then practice can be play and play can be practice. Defining activities by their function allows for elements of performance, play, and practice to coexist such that “messaging around” can be both performance, play, and practice.

Performance: in the contra scene²²

Madeline Bruser describes traditional practice in the classical realm as “repetitive and regimented,” but these adjectives apply equally well to contra dance performance. Musicians will play a particular tune anywhere from five to twenty times during one dance, following strict constraints for tempo and tune structure, and similar restrictions apply, a little more flexibly, to jam sessions. Some elements of contra fiddling, namely improvisation and rhythmic projection,²³ are difficult to practice at home but become highly developed by performance, implying that performing is a unique opportunity to hone these skills with the help of other musicians and the excitement of performing:

“One should never underestimate the power of adrenalin found in public performance in terms of inventiveness and 'freshness' of playing... adrenalin flowing from playing with a particular set of musicians and responding to their musical ideas, and that which flows from 'being on the spot' in front of an audience, in this case, dancers” (Miller, email 2010).

²² For a general sense of what a contra fiddle performance sounds like, refer to Recording 1. The tune is “Celina,” a French-Canadian G tune, which will be played for about five minutes before switching into another tune, and then another. The tempo is about 118, well within the 112-116 range for average contra dance tempos. Improvisation, in the form of solos and trading phrases begins to build around 1:40. For a more detailed description, see Appendix E.

²³ Rhythmic projection is the ability to send out a strong rhythm to the dancers and infect them with the music.

On the other hand, the restrictions of the performance setting make many practice strategies impractical or impossible, such as going back to work on a brief passage of a tune. Whether these performance contexts, constitute some version of practicing will be a central issue of this chapter.

Practice and performance: defined by opposition

According to Goffman, “practicing provides us with a meaning for the real thing, namely that which is no longer practicing” (Goffman 1974: 62), thus drawing a distinction between practice as preparation and performance as real experience. Although these terms are commonly defined in opposition, the question of where to draw the line between practice and performance, if there is a line, is a complicated one since so many performance contexts develop skills and so many practice contexts involve performing for oneself or others.

One fundamental definition for the word “practice” is the “repeated performance of an activity” (“Practice, n. 1.” 2010). Therefore the basic execution of a tune appropriate to the context constitutes practice. Practicing individually requires no audience but the musician herself, and “performance” here refers just to the execution of the task for the listening practicer. If the context includes a separate audience, the associations with “performance” become even stronger. At a jam session, there is an audience of musicians and sometimes listeners, thus “performance” suggests some kind of show for that audience, no matter how casual or studied casual that show might appear. Goffman’s “varieties of practice” can be seen as similar levels of *performance*. “Task trials” could accurately describe jam sessions

in public spaces where a fiddler has the opportunity to enact professional behavior without the consequences of playing for dancers. “Rehearsals” could apply to band rehearsals and jams where low-stress levels of performing for and with other musicians create a space for self-directed, but also group-oriented, learning. “Plannings” can even occur during performances, when thinking ahead to prepare mentally for the next action.

Therefore, the implication that “real experience” and practicing cannot co-occur does not apply to contra fiddling, where the standard opposition between performance and practice breaks down in a participatory community context. If these activities are defined by their function instead, performance, practice, and play can coexist more readily, and even supplement one another as effective learning contexts. For these purposes, “performance” will include any activity where music is created to be heard, “play” will include any activity where music is created to be enjoyed by the players, and “practice” will include any activity where music is created to then be improved upon.

Definitions of Practice, Layers of Performance

Attention: practice and performance

For many fiddlers, the function of the activity defines the approach. “I guess what I do in practice and at a gig are different. In practicing I’m trying to gain mastery of the instrument at the gig I’m trying to play my heart out” (Larkin, Interview 2009). Most fiddlers agree that “the more you play the better, whether it’s gigs or practicing,” but some will also maintain that “there’s no substitute for

practicing, it's a real different kind of a mindset." Additionally, an awareness of technique often accompanies a performance mindset. "I'm concentrating on getting it right (at a dance), as though I was practicing" (O'Donnell, Interview 2009). For most players, attention will shift all over the place:

"Some of the things I thought of while playing at various times: trying not to swallow or lose notes... [other practice-like thoughts]... Of course there were also plenty of times I wasn't thinking at all, just playing and daydreaming or mindlessly watching the dancers," (McCallum, Interview 2009).

Performances then provide the opportunity for practice, without necessarily qualifying spaces solely for that purpose.

Gig preparation: practice and performance

If practice is the process of preparing for gigs, then each performance is essentially a task trial for all future performances. Many fiddlers see individual or band practice time as a chance to work out some idea they haven't properly realized yet, like building on music theory to create an improvisation, variation, or back-up. Playing for a dance is a type of actual application too, a chance to see if something actually works in context. While formal rehearsal and gigging might ordinarily be separated as practicing and performing activities, in the contra dance context, both show aspects of practice in terms of the real implementation of concepts and strategies with the goal of preparing for the next moment, or the next gig.

Practice: improvement

Performances at dances often reinforce the visibility of weaknesses and areas for improvement when stage fright and the many distracting and exciting factors at a dance make it difficult to stay casual. In this way, playing for contra dances provides

a space for improving on “real experience,” or social-musical, skills which can only be approximated in the practice room.

Practice and performance: a few case studies

These examples demonstrate how performance can function as a unique practice space.

1. *“Playing with another is the best possible thing” (Lizotte, Interview 2009)*

From specifics of bowing patterns to more intuitive types of phrasing and expression, most important fiddle skills can be actively acquired from a “watch and learn” approach. “Watch and learn” might be better translated into “learn and then practice” as many fiddlers consider the watching phase to be learning, and the applying-learning phase to be practicing. While the tools can be practiced individually, good intonation for example, contra dance performance provides the opportunity for the practice of skills in context. This type of experience is invaluable, as a learning fiddler gets to watch up close as another player works in the environment.

2. *“Just playing a lot” (Schneckenburger, Interview 2009)*

Playing for a contra dance is in some ways less stressful than playing a concert or recital, but still requires a lot of the performer in terms of endurance – “physical endurance, technical endurance, mental focus” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009). Without physical endurance, pain takes over and playing is no fun; without technical endurance, the music becomes sloppy and undanceable; without the

endurance of focus, mistakes can confuse hordes of dancers about what they are supposed to do next. Playing with other musicians allows a fiddler to rely on others for cover and support, but also increases a fiddler's responsibilities because they must work with others to blend well, choose tunes, and set tempos. The ability to interact positively with musicians, callers, and dancers for several hours demonstrates another kind of endurance - social endurance.

Physical and technical endurance can be approached in practice by strategizing about different postures and playing for long periods of time. Mental focus and social endurance, though, can really only be practiced while playing a dance. The fiddler is required to keep the beat and the place in the tune, and pick up cues from dancers, callers, and other musicians – maintaining all this for hours at a time. In alone practicing, the closest one can get is mental practicing or imaginary practicing, described by David Kaynor. “I can imagine how I want to sound in that situation, mentally practice sounding good in that situation, and that’s good, because a lot of times I don’t get to practice being in that situation until I get there” (Kaynor, Interview 2009).

2. *“Improvising is an attitude” (Hazzard-Watkins, Interview 2009)*

At dances, playing one tune ten to twenty times through tends to make improvisation a necessity for preserving the musician's sanity, and likewise the dancers'. Some fiddlers might improvise an entire solo over the chord changes of the tune, others might create slight variations within the tune each time through. “Improvising is an attitude more than a skill, I mean, there are associated skills too...

basic knowledge of chord theory, basic technical facility” (Hazzard-Watkins, Interview 2009). While many fiddlers have ideas about how to practice improvising, by working on these associated skills, few actually practice it privately to a great extent, perhaps because the strategies seem too time-consuming, intimidating, or difficult. “I know what I would have to do to do that [practice improvising], but I guess I’m not prepared to do that. It would be working on blues scales, working on arpeggios, and then playing through the chord changes of different tunes and just being comfortable with the chords in those,” (Lea, Interview 2009).

So how do these fiddlers deliver improvisations so effectively on the dance floor without clear practice hours allotted for improvising outside the performance setting? “I feel like it [improvisation] is an incredibly hard thing to practice, as opposed to doing it at a gig.” “Doing it at a gig” is placed in contrast to practicing here, and yet performance seems to be the only place where improvisation can be effectively practiced. If performance creates a space for improvisation practice, presumably musicians will articulate self-direction and intentionality in their descriptions of these experiences. On first glance, “it came out at dances” demonstrates the passivity with which many fiddlers view their acquisition of improvising skills. A closer examination reveals directed thought processes and problem solving strategies that indicate that, on the contrary, many fiddlers learn to improvise by actively applying ideas and adjusting their playing. “Part of improv is like climbing out on a limb or digging yourself into a hole – how well you get out is how successful you are. You have to put yourself in danger and then cope with it, just do it” (Miller, Interview 2009). This strategy simultaneously relies on the

environment, the fast-moving music driving dancers on the floor, and on the musician's attitude, the "just do it" approach. Because a fiddler can intentionally choose to improvise, to take that risk, to solve the problem of getting back to the tune, improvising in a performance setting can operate as a practice process.

Here is a revealing outside description of a fiddler learning to improvise. This is Anna Patton describing watching her musical partner Ethan begin improvising at dances:

"It sounded like there was a point where you just decided to go for it and maybe you didn't actually get the chords right and didn't know what you were doing, but you got bold very fast and just played a lot of notes and then they turned more and more into sounding like solos" (Patton, Interview 2009).

Having "associated skills" in place really allows this process to take off, but so does having the boldness to make mistakes. That boldness is cultivated by the support of other musicians. "I'm not much of an improviser, but what little I can do is because I'd play dances with people I was comfortable with and feel brave enough to get away from the tune" (Mason, Interview 2009). Many musicians pick up improvisations from imitating colleagues or responding to them, and each of these little experimentations represents an intentional moment of learning.²⁴

Conclusion

Definitions of performance, play, and practice organize which fiddle environments can become practice contexts. Broad and fluid definitions of these activities allow for most fiddle environments to be utilized in several ways. In Part 2,

²⁴ For examples of improvisation in action, refer to Recording #1. Listen for the musicians responding and imitating each other, trading fours starting at 1:40. Improvising over chord changes and "messing around" with the melody are both demonstrated in Recording #3 right from the beginning.

discussions of context will directly address how jams, camps, dances, workshops, and social-musical relationships have the potential to function as practice, sometimes alongside performance and play.

In “Music as Social Life,” Turino introduces the category of “participatory art” which provides a fourth option for describing the activity of performing for contra dances. He divides “performance art” into “participatory” and “presentational,” and places contra dance music squarely in the “participatory” category. His terms, like mine, are defined by function. “Participatory art” functions around bringing people together while “presentational art” functions to display art for an audience (Turino 2008: 35). In terms of practice, Turino implies that participatory music requires only social practice, and sometimes even no practice at all. His example, a zydeco band he plays with, works on “tightening beginnings and endings” in practice but not much else (Turino 2008: 55). Contra fiddle practice, while highly social, also utilizes alone practice to refine details, craft rhythm and groove, and acquire repertoire. Contra fiddle straddles the categories of participatory and presentational music – with a dual goal of making music that feels and sounds good to the players and to their audience.

Turino’s definition of participatory art as intended for group entertainment overlaps closely with Victor Turner’s definition of “leisure,” or “the freedom to play” within a particular structure (Turino 2008: 39, Hast 1994: 106). “Because they [play activities] are optional, voluntary, they are part of an individual’s freedom, of his growing self mastery, even self transcendence” (Hast 1994: 107). Contra fiddle provides a structure within which much “play” of this sort can occur and provides

opportunities for personal growth through personal freedom. However, the professional element of the music separates the activity from traditional ideas of leisure as completely guided by ideas of “freedom and self-mastery.”

Tensions between performance and practice extend to categories of participatory and presentational, and leisure and work. Placing contra dance performing at the center of these issues reveals how just one context can suit every description. Playing dances can be a “peak experience” emotionally for a fiddler (play), which also helps them to develop skills (practice), while providing music for dancers (performance). Contra performance functions around the well-being of the community (participatory) and around creating “artful and interesting” music (presentational) (Hast 1994: 116-118, Turino 2008: 55). Gigging is both fulfilling personally (leisure) and financially (work). Rather than categories with some overlap, these concepts should be viewed as descriptors which can co-occur in different ratios in a given context based on their function.

Part 1 Chapter 3: Classical influences of practice

Of the fourteen fiddlers that contributed in depth to this research, nine had experiences with classical music during childhood which proved to be formative in terms of their musical trajectory and philosophy. Although the audience for concerts and classical recordings may be decreasing, Western classical music remains a clear standard for music for the amateur musician community who are part of the contra scene. Classical training is highly institutionalized as a common musical experience in schools, studios, and conservatories, but contra fiddle education happens in less visible places and less conspicuous ways (Hast 1994: 264). While contra fiddle learning practices are formally structured in some senses, they are often discovered spontaneously and initiated individually. “I didn’t go to school for what I do in my real job either” (O’Donnell, Interview 2009). Contra fiddle is positioned outside the classical standard and fiddlers must struggle to define their art by its difference.

Contra fiddle and classical music are generally performed, transmitted, and practiced differently resulting in a separate set of priorities reflecting the values of each genre. When a classical musician begins learning fiddle music, they selectively maintain some techniques, while shedding others and gaining new techniques altogether. Because there are several dramatic differences in values of classical music and contra fiddle it is all too easy to associate classical music with discipline, rigidity, and boredom and fiddling with spontaneity, freedom, and excitement. These “evils” of classical music are greatly overrated and, like the allure of fiddling, rely on the individual musicians representing each genre. However, stereotypes of both sides strongly affect fiddlers’ practice behaviors and attitudes. When a musician shifts from

classical to fiddle, the transition illuminates ways in which these tensions operate and illustrates the power of ideas about classical musicianship operating on fiddle training.

Differences between the fiddle and the violin

Values

The aesthetic, performance, and transmission of contra fiddle are all aligned with the general values of the music which place rhythm and timing at the forefront. Fiddle tempos are strictly between 108 beats per minute and 120 beats per minute to match the dance. The structure around expression also differs. Instead of rubato, vibrato, and dynamics on the phrasal level, which one might hear in classical music, the emotional expression in fiddling comes from the power of a rock-solid internal beat, rhythmic dependability,²⁵ and the variations built on top of that. In contra fiddling, rhythm becomes a major expressive force, projecting movement and phrasing to dancers. “Rhythm is king” (Tracy, Interview 2009).

Aesthetic

Broadly speaking, fiddle and violin aesthetics differ mainly in the categories of tone, rhythm, and structure. In contra fiddle, there is a palette of tones that includes scratchy and rough sounds along sweet ones while classical violinists tend to seek a palette of more pure tones. Contra fiddle rhythm is created by playing quick notes a

²⁵ All tunes are the same length for contra dances, 32 bars with an AABB format. The dancers can depend on a phrase ending happening in the eighth bar of each section.

little unevenly to produce a sense of a backbeat²⁶ but in classical music, the length of notes serves specific phrase purposes. Finally, contra fiddlers are encouraged to improvise on a skeleton form, while classical violinists work to achieve a refined version of a piece. While aspects of technique and psychology do transfer from classical music, it is less clear to me if/how the aesthetic does. In some ways, the contra fiddle aesthetic is quite reactionary towards classical music while technique and psychology can be used to a fiddler's advantage.²⁷

Performance

The differences in performance contexts set the practice agenda: prioritizing certain skills, defining the approach to repertoire, and developing an overall learning model appropriate to the musical genre. In performance contexts, big picture contrasts become apparent such as "the violin sings, the fiddle dances." While classical music is performed to move the emotions of a seated and listening audience, contra fiddle is performed to move the bodies and souls of an interactive audience; while classical music holds up a more lyrical ideal of sound, contra fiddle holds up a more rhythmic one. This is not to say that classical music is never rhythmic nor that fiddle is never lyrical, but rather that the set of values in each genre is balanced differently.

Transmission

²⁶ See Appendix D for an example in written notation.

²⁷ To hear the details of the fiddle aesthetic, refer to Recording 1. Notice the uneven weights given to every other fastest notes, and the primacy of hitting the tune rhythmically. In Recording 2, listen for the darkness in fiddle tone, and the flutes variations around the traditional melody. These are most apparent in the third time through the tune, around 1:12. For more information on the recordings, please see Appendix E.

Contra fiddle repertoire and skills can be transferred in a variety of contexts which are primarily aural. While learning by ear is a major part of much early classical instruction, the repertoire is always preserved in written form and passed on that way. For contra fiddle, the written music acts only as a skeleton or a reminder of the tune. Instead, repertoire is fluidly preserved by fiddlers' minds and recordings.

The carry-over process

The transition from classical to contra fiddle is often the result of the urge to seek something with more “playfulness, experimentation, personal investment and ownership” (Hazzard-Watkins, Interview 2009). “More advanced classical players get to make their own decisions – I never got there. My teacher would give me bowings and phrasings – no experimentation” (McCallum, Interview 2009). In this type of situation, fiddling offers a route to self-expression that is more accessible, social and entertaining. Similarly for Klezmer converts, the music offers a new avenue for the instrument, drawing in classical musicians precisely because of what is new and different. (Slobin 2000: 47). For many fiddlers, a negative experience with classical music guided them to find social and personal fulfillment in fiddle music, but for others, a transformative experience with classical music or a committed violin teacher served as the impetus for diverse musical pathways. Though some do cross over completely, others still maintain some connections to classical music. Some have found that returning to classical is even more enjoyable after spending time away.

Carry-over is the process of acquiring a new set of values, skills, and strategies while maintaining and shedding particular old ones. Fiddlers react in two

main ways when faced with this challenge. For less experienced listeners tuning in to the new genre, fiddle music can seem simple and easy to understand and replicate. “I didn’t realize how much I didn’t know” (McCallum, Interview 2009). Similarly, when Itzhak Perlman first began to play Klezmer music, he was found to express “surprise and discomfiture” at the skills of Klezmer artists (Slobin 200: 42-43). For a more experienced listener who decides to give fiddling a shot for themselves, the complexities of the music can be intimidating. “There was no way on earth I would ever make it sound like that! You know, typical” (Tracy, Interview 2009). Carry-over also involves a change in practice as the learning contra fiddler joins new activities like dancing and jamming. The sociable nature of contra fiddle can be a real attraction to someone who “doesn’t want to spend all those hours alone” working to achieve classical standards (Hast 1994: 203).

How carry-over affects technique

The most dramatic perspective shift is learning to view the fiddle as a rhythm instrument and treating it as such. “Pretty early on, I knew I needed to be danceable” (McCallum, Interview 2009). Whether it’s called “rhythm,” “danceability” or “groove,” learning to let go and find an intuitive rhythmic center can be challenging for musicians trained in a rigid version of classical music. “My early technical transition was about finding a groove and that served me well” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009). “Fiddlers use the bow and left hand ornaments to drum a new rhythm over the melody,” (Hebert 2002). In terms of technique, the bow becomes the

most integral piece of successful fiddling with intonation and finger dexterity a close second.

A similar shift in values and skills surrounds the idea of tone. During an early stage of transition, many fiddlers feel that their tone is “suffering.” Like fiddlers, classical players employ a palette of colors and tones, not just one ideal. However, much elementary classical education focuses on “good tone” with less room for personal innovation. The transition to fiddle music presents a wider variety of options and a listener can like one person’s tone better than another’s based on personal preferences for texture, darkness, and clarity. As the carry-over experience continues, most fiddlers discover ways to achieve and utilize these different tones. “I have a type of tone I’d use for English,²⁸ a tone for fiddle tunes, and within that there’s variety” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009). Like rhythm, tone leads back to bowing and the variations in pressure and speed that shape the fiddle’s sound. “For a French-Canadian tune I’d choke up on the bow closer to the frog and play in a more choppy fashion, shorter bows and more separate bows” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009).

Throughout the transition, musicians find that they lose skills both intentionally and unintentionally. Many fiddlers mourn the loss of higher positions,²⁹ consistent intonation, and being able to play more “pretty” styles. These skills could certainly be put to good use in fiddling, but because they are not prioritized, they tend to weaken. On the other hand, certain skills, such as constant vibrato and playing quick notes evenly, need to be shed for violin players to sound like fiddlers.

²⁸ “English” here refers to “English Country Dance,” a related form of social dance which is more lyrical and elegant overall than contra dance.

²⁹ Higher positions refers to the technique of moving the left hand up the strings, towards the bridge, to play higher notes.

How carry-over affects psychology

The process of moving into fiddle music instigates a clash of ideas about what sounds good and what makes things sound good. Musicians form new concepts and attitudes about the comparative values of fiddling and classical music. These attitudes are shaped by common stereotypes about both musics which I will examine, specifically in relation to the complexities they bring to practice philosophy. Whether or not the following ideas are true is entirely subjective. Their substance lies in their power to influence, and even re-define, contra fiddle practice.

Fiddling is easier than violin

“Some critics dismissively label traditional music as “easier” than classical music, but in fact it has its own artistry and subtleties that make it as devilishly difficult to master as any violin concerto” (Talbert 2007: 11). This statement models the position of fiddle music as a traditional folk form in a music world dominated by classical forms.³⁰ Traditional music is seen as easier than classical music because the learning model is more spread out and less visible: sources are aural and fluid, learning contexts often look like play contexts, and tests of learning are often informal and social. “Fiddle pedagogy asks that you hear all the layered parts of a phrase, melody, beat placement, left and right-hand ornaments, dynamics, chord changes, and other moving lines – and then try to reproduce exactly what you hear.”

³⁰ Classical music in no way “dominates” the global music scene or even local community music scenes, but there is a large amount of overlap between amateur classical players and folk music aficionados. Within this larger scene of middle-class music-making, classical music is the dominant force.

(Hebert 2002). In contra fiddling, learning to listen, imitate minute details, and achieve rhythmic projection appear to be the most daunting projects. In classical music, however, the “hard” stuff usually refers to more technical challenges such as mastering quick passages, double-stops, or harmonics.

Fiddlers use two main strategies to deal with the notion that fiddling is easy. One strategy is to illuminate the “artistry and subtleties that make it devilishly difficult to master,” and to impose strict discipline on practice to validate these techniques. Another common strategy is to enjoy the stereotype, framing “easy” as “accessible, informal, and fun.” Avoiding the trivialization of fiddle music while maintaining its accessibility is a constant struggle, one that often leads to conflicting feelings about practice, and especially discipline.

Fiddling is less disciplined than violin

A common understanding of discipline in classical practice is that it includes ongoing repetition, will-power and reaching for perfection. As discussed in the previous chapter, contra performance *is* fairly disciplined. Still, some fiddlers take pride in defining the music as less disciplined because this mentality validates spontaneous creativity over hard work and makes way for the notion of “natural” talent. In addition to the discipline of the actual performance, practice management offers an interesting comparison. While many classical professionals devote multiple hours each day to practice, rehearsal and performance, most professional fiddlers have little time for alone practice. They fit in time between gigs, by jamming with friends, and by performing many nights a week. Amateur classical musicians, rather

than professionals, are most often the ones who find themselves taking up fiddling, perhaps because their practice discipline is more similar. They are comfortable playing small concerts, making music together in homes and at conferences and camps, practicing individually for enjoyment and preparation.³¹

Fiddling is more fun than violin

Discipline is both desired and reviled – it’s “good for you” but it’s not always easy or enjoyable. The idea that there is less discipline in fiddling implies that fiddling is more enjoyable. This perspective is exaggerated by a widespread experience of classical music marked by an un-inspiring teacher working towards perfection rather than personal expression. As musicians grow older, they often discover the joys of personal interpretation and group communication through orchestras and chamber music, or while trying fiddle music. On the other side, “some fiddlers have negative energy about classical music... the way they learned it, so rigid or whatever. But I know a lot of laid-back, awesome, versatile classical players,” (Panitch, Interview 2009).

Practice myths

In each genre, the prioritization of values and skills acts as a powerful shaping force on practice philosophies and strategies. The perceptions described above often serve as the vehicle for these forces. In addition, Burton Kaplan identifies six of these

³¹ “Music for the Joy of It” was written with amateur musicians as a target audience. Much of the practice philosophy is quite relevant to contra fiddle practice, emphasizing the similarities between classical amateurs and fiddlers.

“myths of practicing” from the classical music world which shape ideas about fiddle practicing as well:

“Myths of practicing:

- 1) Practice every day, even when you don't feel like it
- 2) Continue to practice even when you are frustrated, eventually it will pay off
- 3) Practice slowly
- 4) Repeat a lot
- 5) Use the metronome to improve your rhythm
- 6) Isolate parts to improve them” (Kaplan 2004: 15)

Kaplan analyzes how these “shoulds,” when taken simply at face value, can in fact lead to frustrating and ineffective practice habits for classical musicians. As “myths,” these concepts have a basis in truth but are often exaggerated or taken in unproductive directions. For “practice every day,” Kaplan says “though there is some truth to this direction, it is equally true that extreme regularity is numbing... sometimes when we don't feel like practicing there may be a good reason not to,” (Kaplan 2004: 15). The vagueness of these myths makes it hard for musicians to proceed with the “complex decision-making process involved in effective music practice” (Kaplan 2004: 14).

Kaplan also points to an important distinction between practice management and practice strategies. Management includes issues like motivation, practice rituals, and stress while practice strategies describe the specifics of techniques for how to improve. While some of the myths take the form of various practice strategies, they all contain implicit ideas about the nature of practice management. Practice should be highly structured and require great patience and discipline. Strategies should be designed to work primarily on the physical elements of music-making, as opposed to the emotional or intellectual ones. Many fiddlers articulate these “shoulds” but their “dos” are quite different. Contra fiddle practice demonstrates spontaneity in structure,

motivated by desire for emotional and intellectual fulfillment.³² These practice myths present ideals that are unsuitable for contra fiddle and play a part in suppressing more diverse notions about what practice can be and what it can do.

Fiddler Profile: Becky Tracy, from Interview 2009

Becky Tracy started with classical music and then began playing fiddle music, after a lifetime of listening and participating in the contra dance community. “You wouldn’t know it, but I was a dance fiend!” She has played in the contra scene for upwards of 20 years in popular bands such as Wild Asparagus and Nightingale. She teaches, too, and acts as an inspiring role model for many amateur and professional fiddlers.

Becky’s childhood practicing of classical music was motivated by her mother’s discipline (“I practiced because Mom had a stick ready”) but now her fiddle practicing is motivated by the pure joy of playing. “If I get an hour’s practice, I’m bouncing around, I’m so happy.” Becky’s management of her practicing dismisses the idea that practicing should happen every day despite frustration, because, as a gigging musician, practicing is a rare and special experience. Alongside this joy comes a certain regret about not being more disciplined. “I feel sort of haphazard... I know what I’d have to do, but I don’t do it.” This common refrain demonstrates how the classical emphasis on structured discipline has permeated fiddle practicing as an oft-impractical objective. When touring, a fiddler will be playing for at least three hours at a gig each day anyway. “The ratio of performance to practice is flipped on its head from if you’re a classical musician” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009). Since performances can operate as middle grounds for practicing, individual practicing

³² Certainly some classical practice also demonstrates these qualities. These “shoulds” may generally be inapplicable for classical musicians as well as fiddlers, who often express a similar desire for self-therapy rather than self-discipline in practicing.

often falls by the wayside. All the same, many fiddlers suffer from the feeling that they are not practicing enough, or structuring their practice enough.

Many of Becky's specific strategies for working on material correspond with popular classical music strategies, and seem to be effective for her. "Some things that are the same is how I work through something that isn't sitting right, isolating a passage, slowing it down, repeating it several times correctly, speeding it up to see if I have it." (Becky, email). While some strategies do transfer from one kind of practice to the other, some classical practice approaches do not apply as well, if at all, to Becky's fiddle practice:

"Another difference for me is that I spend way less time warming up (playing contra fiddle), and in a very different way i.e. by playing through tunes slowly, playing a few scales/arpeggios (sometimes), but no warming up exercise/etude. (not that this is good)" (Tracy, Email, 2010).

While many fiddlers remember etudes and classical exercises, very few actually use them in fiddle practice. The awareness of these classical forms often leads to feelings of reluctance and negative self-judgments. Another "main difference in my own personal practice for fiddling versus classical is how I acquire the music. Listening versus reading." The approach to repertoire, a natural part of any musical practice, is quite different, which highlights the effect of context once again. Because of the performance practice and fluid nature of fiddle tunes, listening is absolutely necessary for learning a tune beyond what's provided by sheet music. As in Becky's experience, much of the time listening, while beneficial, is overlooked in classical education.

Conclusion

Discipline, structure, efficiency, and physicality are emphasized in many musical genres and perspectives on practice besides classical music. Regardless of origin, these ideas operate on fiddle practice to shape psychology and technique. Believing a superhuman version of discipline can lead to depressing and unproductive practice, then no practice at all, then guilt about not practicing, then more desire for discipline. This particular cycle has a clear effect on fiddle practice – decreasing alone practice and destroying enjoyment of that practice. In action, most fiddlers go through phases where creating fulfilling practice is more and less difficult, but many fiddlers do not practice alone significantly. Instead they practice in a variety of contexts, including homes, dances, jams, lessons, and playing with friends. The concept that fiddling is less artistic than violin playing also pushes fiddlers into a more social type of practice. Fiddlers, as craftsmen rather than artists, can act as community members and community leaders outside the box created for the lonely artist. As such, fiddlers can practice through sharing music with others, when teaching, and even when performing, that is, through social practices as well as individual ones.

The truth behind classic standards for practice becomes less significant alongside their power in shaping how practice actually works. The fiddler's task is to pull out the productive pieces of classical ideas and use them to the greatest advantage. Ultimately, is it useful for a fiddler to take classical lessons? “Absolutely!” (Tracy, Interview 2009). “Just do whatever sparks you to enjoy the music” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009).

Part 2: Introduction

From Theory to Context: Practice in Practice

In Part 2, the focus will be context – how the environment shapes the practice process for individuals. Various environments will be analyzed, including alone practice, one-on-one relationships, dances, jams, camps, and workshops. Each environment will be examined in terms of its potential as a practice space, and then in terms of its actual effectiveness as such.

Articulation and action

Articulation and action become especially important in terms of how fiddlers' definitions and their actual operation of practice contexts sometimes diverge. While Part 1 focuses on definition and philosophy of fiddle practice, articulation, Part 2 examines what fiddlers actually do, action. In particular, many fiddlers view musical contexts primarily as tune learning environments, but in action, fiddlers use repertoire acquisition as a pathway for the skill development. Thus, fiddlers' articulation of where and how they learn tunes is an indicator of where and how they learn the skills to play those tunes. While players often credit other players for tunes, skills are rarely attributed as specifically to a teacher, musician friend or other environment (Hast 1994: 265). In learning contexts, much more than tunes is actually practiced - new bowings are discovered, ornaments refined, and variations created based on new material.

A similar disconnect between articulation and action is present among Old-time players in terms of their definitions of performing and playing. "Among my

fellow musicians, I do not usually refer to my playing in a jam as ‘performing’ and I have never encountered players talking about performing in jam sessions” (Woolf 1990: 182). Woolf proceeds to argue for jam sessions as a type of communal performance although he understands that Old-time musicians do not view jam sessions in that way. Similarly, I will discuss tune learning as a channel for skills practice even though most fiddlers might articulate the two as separate endeavors.

Social and individual

Discussions of practice definition have demonstrated the significance of social-musical skills to fiddling success. Three of the practice environments discussed here are social and one is individual. Fiddlers balance their use of these contexts in different ways, to develop skills through inward self-analysis and outward interaction with others. Since contra dance and contra music are highly social forms, the ultimate goal of practice is to successfully integrate into the community. Practice contexts provide ways to integrate. Most musicians have followed some social pathway into the music, regardless of what time in life they choose to begin (Hast 1994: 179).

Talent and authenticity

While fiddlers sometimes limit their definition of practice to playing the instrument alone, other activities contribute to legitimacy as a community member and fiddler. Jamming, attending dances and camps, and working with others in teacher or mentor relationships are seen as vital in helping a fiddler really “get” how the music works. Authenticity and networking become closely linked. A fiddler who

attends events, plays out, and makes connections in the scene becomes a visible part of the community and then an authentic member. While alone practicing can develop virtuosic skills, social practicing contexts help a fiddler to gain general authenticity.

Strategizing for practice

Much of what is interesting about practice is how differently fiddlers approach various musical environments, strategizing their learning by defining practice, play, and performance in particular ways. A fiddler might not see a jam as a practice context if they feel as though they are performing for fellow musicians. Another fiddler might see a jam as the ideal practice context because they are enjoying playing, learning new tunes, and picking up skills from the other players – improving their playing without the boredom and strain of disciplined individual work. The following practice contexts should be viewed as opportunities for practice which fiddlers can strategize to their greatest advantage in whatever ratio suits them best. Within these contexts, social, musical, and social-musical skills become highly interrelated as practitioners can work on almost any combination of skills depending on their environment.

Part 2 Chapter 1: Alone Practice

This chapter will lay out the foundations for practice strategies which work in multiple contexts to develop repertoire and skills. The clearest path to describing these methods is to look at how fiddlers approach their alone practice time. Alone practicing is here defined, by exclusion, as practicing without other musicians around.

The practice process

Contra fiddle practicing is the process of applying input to playing, with the goal of improvement. There are several concurrent levels to the process: listening, analyzing, and applying.

Listening

The goal of listening is to create a mental ideal of the music by choosing and combining aspects from the environment, be that a recording, teacher, or memory of a tune. The mental ideal runs alongside the actual playing of the tune in the practicer's mind, sometimes eclipsing the actual sound completely. If the practicer is playing their instrument, listening must balance the actual sound created by the practicer with the mental ideal so that both can be heard and compared. Listening in closely, a practicer can discover new techniques to add to their palette, or techniques to exaggerate. In a way, this turns the practice process into a cycle where some actions lead to new ideals to incorporate into listening.

Analyzing

Comparing the mental ideal and actual sound of the practicer makes clear which aspects of the practicer's playing need to be improved, revealing moments where actual playing falls short of the mental ideal. Analysis also includes choosing outside knowledge and techniques that might be applicable to improving a practicer's sound. General awareness of and reflection on musicianship both play an important part in analysis (Judy 1990: 114). Musicians who establish goals and evaluate their progress in an explicit manner are practicing a big picture analysis.

Applying

Applying is the process of putting the mental ideal into action and adjusting playing to meet the ideal. Experimenting is an important piece of applying technique, trying one bowing pattern, then another, until a favorite is found for example. The application of knowledge and skill requires real as each tune and circumstance involves a different challenge and the practicer "explores new frontiers."

The strategies listed in the next section are all particular approaches to listening, analyzing, and applying. These three pieces of the process can also stand alone as strategies for supporting learning. Listening to recordings, attending concerts, and dancing all feed into a player's mental ideal through the absorption of musical material. Analyzing, again while listening in various contexts, develops a player's personal preferences for style. Finally, applying new ideas and techniques in the imagination allow a player to try out possibilities, even without an instrument present. In combination, these steps form a modeling process where the learner works

to model their playing after an ideal.³³ While specific musical examples are given, the practice process and many of the individual strategies that follow can also apply to the development of social-musical skills in general terms. Playing a lot with others, playing around, and imaging, especially, can help a musician increase their sensitivity and responsiveness to others.

Play a lot

“Play things over and over” (Lea, Interview 2009). Repetition is a huge part of any practice, serving several purposes at once. Playing a lot is particularly effective for gaining comfort with the instrument and preparing to have a healthy endurance at dances, festivals, and other fiddling environments where long bouts of music playing are expected. This strategy resonates with the definition of practice as “calisthenics,” as a literal form of exercise (McCallum, Interview 2009). Repeating a phrase or tune is a physical activity and, if done correctly, will develop a positive muscle memory. Doing repetition correctly requires that an individual recognize bad habits, mistakes, or “flubs” and adjust to eliminate them going forward. Repetition is not a static process, but rather a continual evolution.

Much of what feels discouraging about practicing is the amount of repetition that seems necessary to reach the rewards of sounding good or knowing a tune, but repetition as a process does not have to be boring. It can be both meditative and creative. Meditative repetition, or “getting into a groove,” is a powerful way to develop tune instincts, especially rhythmic ones. Playing a tune a repeatedly can

³³ See Appendix A for more information.

increase awareness of the rhythms inherent in the tune. Then, recognizing and accenting these rhythmic patterns and feeling them in relation to the internal beat can help get a groove going over time.

Play around

Many fiddlers will describe their practice as “just playing around” which eliminates the expectations of discipline that often come with practice. Trying out new tunes, playing through old tunes, or experimenting with a technique are all ways of developing personal style and skills in a less formal and focused way. One kind of playing around is creative repetition: adjusting and varying the tune each time through. If repetition gets boring, then pushing through for a little longer often forces the player to come up with something new to keep themselves challenged and engaged. Many fiddlers cite this process as the way they started learning to improvising – “I got so bored, I started fooling around.” “Personal practicing [alone practicing] allows a unique level of self-examination of musical technique/ideas that often leads to exploring new frontiers in terms of melodic/rhythmic riffs” (Miller, email 2010).

Play slowly

“Walk before you run” (Larkin, Interview 2009). Two common ways to practice with slow playing include using a metronome (see below) and playing tunes in slow motion to work on details. Playing slowly allows a fiddler to notice the subtleties which usually fly by at a fast speed. Then, the slow speed allows a fiddler

to workshop the little pieces at a comfortable pace. While the practice process can happen haphazardly at faster tempos, for most fiddlers playing slowly provides the time to listen, analyze, and apply most thoroughly

Play with a beat

“Play slowly and rhythmically” (Lea, Interview 2009). Fiddling is a rhythmic sport so practicing rhythm is crucial. Playing with a beat can take several forms. Using a metronome is beneficial but only if it develops internal rhythm. Instead of adjusting to the click each time, a practicer should use the metronome to test and improve their own inner beat (Kaplan 2004: 69-71). Fiddlers often express an inner beat by tapping or stomping a foot while playing, and that, too, can be used to work a tune at different speeds. Like playing slowly, playing with a beat increases the practicer’s awareness of tough parts of the tune and of their tendency to push forward or lean back in the tempo. This increased awareness allows for more refined adjustment and rhythmic work. “Having rhythmic integrity in your playing is THE absolute necessary technique and form of expression to draw people in and make them tap their toe.” (Tracy, Email 2010). “Rhythmic integrity” is the end goal – a solid unstoppable groove.

Small passage work

“It’s only as strong as the weakest link” (Lea, Interview 2009). Repetition, slow playing, and playing with a beat allow a practicer to discover weak links in a tune or in general playing habits. The next objective is working on those parts so they

are as strong as the rest of the piece. “Find the hardest part and just do that bit until it’s really kickass and then expand from there” (Schneckenburger, Interview 2009). Ethan’s practice journal describes a common kind of “tough part.” In the tune “Popcorn” there is a bowed string crossing where a left-hand finger has to switch strings, all during a tricky bowing ornament. To demonstrate his work on this, he plays the part a few times to compare how he wants it to sound and how it ends up coming out (ideal and reality). Then he plays the whole tune including the tricky passage. Ethan says “I spent some time working on bowed triplets and fingering in Popcorn, and making sure that the ornaments don’t get in the way of the steadiness of the groove.” The small passage work solidifies the ornament and integrating the passage into the tune works to solidify the rhythmic sense of the whole tune.³⁴

A common strategy for working small passages is to isolate the part that is troublesome, play only that part, stop and play it again. When the passage is sounding as desired, reintegrating it into the tune can be difficult because anticipation of the passage can shift attention away from the tune as a whole. A common strategy is to add notes one at a time to the beginning and end of the isolated piece. Adding only a note at a time takes both discipline and concentration because the process breaks up the usual patterns of tune playing. However, this approach prepares for the entry and exit from the tough section while heightening a player’s awareness of the notes around the passage, leading to a deeper understanding of the structure of the tune.

A second strategy for working small passages is dotted rhythm variations. Instead of playing the notes evenly in fiddle styling, this strategy requires taking

³⁴ To listen, see Recording 4.

groups of four and layering all the possible rhythms on top of that.³⁵ Working all the possible combinations of notes close to one another makes the original rhythm more flowing, more accurate, and easier to play.

Patterns and drills

“You can make up an exercise for anything you’re working on”

(Schneckenburger, Interview 2009). Devising exercises outside of actual tunes is a strategy that some fiddlers use to develop particular techniques in isolation. “If I need to focus on my pinky on the bow-hand, I’ll make up exercises that cross strings so I have to really focus on balancing the bow” (Schneckenburger, Interview 2009).

Bowing and intonation skills work particularly well within this strategy. For new bowings or bowing clarity in general, a fiddler can work each note of the scale with a rhythmic pattern. Similarly for intonation, a fiddler can put multiple bows to each note in a tune to refine the pitch. They might also pull out patterns of notes from a tune and practice those as exercises in a constant repetitive rhythm. Patterns and drills are used rarely among the fiddlers in this research. Most fiddlers prefer to practice techniques within tunes because “it’s more fun” and “more musical.” On the other hand, exercises can potentially help a practitioner focus in on particular techniques without the distractions of tune phrasing.

³⁵ See Appendix D for an example.

Imaging³⁶

“I also do a fair amount of mental practicing which can take place if I have a fiddle in my hand or not,” (Kaynor, Interview 2009). Imaging involves explicitly using the mental ideal, creating images and sound images of a desired version of the music. There are multiples ways to approach imaging each with their merits. Without playing the instrument, singing along and imagining can help clarify which parts of a tune are troublesome, allowing a practicer to improve them mentally before improving them physically. “One of the advantages of imaginary practice is that I’m not bound by my ordinary technical limitations,” (Kaynor, Interview 2009). The ability to imagine sounding better, sounding great, sounding beautiful, makes those possibilities more real. Imaging can also be initiated during playing, as a practicer listens in to a mental ideal and strives to bring their own playing closer to that. Imaging combined with listening allows a practicer to compare different versions of a tune in order to develop their own style through thoughtful imitation.

Practice management

Setting aside time for personal practice is quite difficult for most contra fiddlers. For many, practicing is at least the third or fourth priority, following a job, family, playing gigs, going to school, or hanging out with friends. The common conceptions of practice as a disciplined painful process contribute to a reluctance to

³⁶ Judy describes visualization as “unpracticing” – a type of practice substitute when practice is not feasible for some reason or another. In this category, she also includes conducting, reading about music, listening to music, and doing small-muscle exercises. The concept of “unpracticing” allows the musician to avoid the pressures associated with practicing, while still developing their musical skills. (Judy 1990: 102-103).

practice alone, even when time is available. Most practice for contra fiddlers tends to be fairly casual. Many fiddlers spend time thumbing through books and playing random tunes, learning a new favorite tune from a recording, playing through tunes that feel good, and occasionally focusing in on a technique or tune in a more tightly structured way. While some fiddlers avoid alone practicing, others embrace the joy of practicing and incorporate it as often as possible as a fun part of their day. Much of individual practice attitudes then are shaped by the process itself, how enjoyable and productive it may or may not feel.

Most fiddlers express the desire to be more structured in regards to their alone practice. Some suggestions from Kaplan and Judy include setting aside time and space, establishing rituals, starting with the easy and enjoyable, and planning ahead to prioritize what needs the most work (Judy 1990: 37, 97, Kaplan 2004: 51). Both also advocate following moods and inclinations rather than forcing something that feels painful or boring. Judy also recommends keeping a practice journal, for motivational purposes. Fiddlers who kept a practice journal for the purpose of this research commented that it helped them remember to practice and practice more thoughtfully. A recording log kept over a significant period of time can also increase self-awareness and provide a concrete measure for personal progress, motivating further practice.

Conclusion

Alone practice is severely limited since contra music is so context-dependent. Like calisthenics, alone practice can stretch and develop a fiddler's skills with the

purpose of putting them to use for real at a dance, but this is only a part of what's necessary to successfully play a dance in a noisy crowded hall while interacting with other musicians and the caller. Despite this major limitation, alone practice is often viewed as the only legitimate form of practice. Musicians feel they *should* practice alone, but what they *do* is practice in a variety of ways both social and individual.

Using the processes and strategies from personal practicing, contra fiddlers utilize a variety of environments to develop skills and repertoire. Jamming and playing dances involve “playing around,” “playing a lot,” and “playing with a beat,” while attending dances involves “imaging,” in order to listen and analyze. Jamming and playing dances can also exemplify creative and meditative repetition, as the tunes go by many times in a row and players can adjust and vary their playing each time while getting in a groove. Lessons and one-on-one relationships develop all these, as well as patterns and drills and small passage work under the guidance of some mentor figure. Strategizing for practice, using strategies and processes in various ratios in different contexts - *this* is the authentic contra fiddle practice.

Part 2 Chapter 2: Teachers, Mentors, Role Models, Buddies

“I really like playing with people who are better than me” (Larkin, Interview 2009). It’s universally agreed upon that playing with people at a higher level of skill and musicality helps a beginner to improve. This means getting a teacher, seeking out a mentor, identifying a role model, or working with a musical friend.³⁷ Listening up close to a musician you admire, then adding in a physical playing component, creates a practice space where a learner can imitate and compare, to improve playing skills.

This section is organized by the level of social interaction in the relationship between the practicer and supporter. Role models are viewed from afar through recordings and dances, teachers meet with students in a formal setting of a lesson, mentors provide social and musical support and knowledge, and buddies offer an equal exchange. Though organized along a spectrum, these relationships do not operate in an orderly fashion. Rather, any number and type of supportive relationships can occur for one individual. Likewise, a practice supporter can act simultaneously as a role model, teacher, mentor and buddy, or any combination thereof.

Role models

In the role modeling process, a learner seeks to emulate another musician or adapt aspects of their playing. A huge part of many one-on-one relationships, role modeling can also occur outside these interpersonal contexts as learners hear expert players on recordings and at dances.

³⁷ Musical buddies do not have to be better than the practicer. A practicer can practice their own rhythmic stability, intonation, and sensitivity by working to carry a less skilled player along.

“Before I knew Becky personally, her playing influenced me tremendously through early Wild Asparagus and Nightingale recordings. I have always admired her impeccable groove, her taste in tunes, her precision, and her economy of effort,” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009).

From a beloved recording, a practicing fiddler pulls out the values they admire and then attempts to apply those to their own playing. Often this involves learning tunes directly from that recording and practicing a desired aesthetic through a particular repertoire.

Role models also operate powerfully through the dance context. Sitting near the band when taking a break from dancing, a learner can observe everything from how a fiddler moves their wrist to how they interact with the caller. While dancing, a learner can experience which techniques, tunes, and textures make dancing feel good, in order to try them with the instrument later on. Although the role model experience does not involve physically playing the instrument, many fiddlers consider it practice because both the listening and analyzing parts of the practice process are involved.

Teachers

The lesson

“It’s [playing with a teacher is] definitely a legitimate form of practice” (Tracy, Interview 2009). From observer, listener, and dancer, the learning fiddler moves into a more formal role as a student during lessons. Lessons are the most structured social relationships where a teacher and a student meet for a specified amount of time to identify goals, learn tunes, and play together. Beginning fiddlers might take one or two lessons with a teacher to increase their motivation and tools set, or they might commit to a more regular schedule. One-time lessons can happen at

camps and festivals while regular lessons require some geographic proximity between teacher and student. When playing in a lesson, a learning fiddler gets to try things with an expert who can correct mistakes while providing encouragement. In this way, a lesson can become an especially efficient form of practicing. Bad habits and mistakes can be eliminated and new techniques and repertoire integrated, all under expert supervision.

This research was lucky enough to include three teacher-student pairings of the regular lesson variety: Becky Tracy and Rebecca Lay, Rodney Miller and Paul Lizotte, Lissa Schneckenburger and Amelia Mason. Although each relationship is different, a few common types of support seem to occur in each of these lesson pairs:

Structure, provided by the teacher, can consist of anything from tunes to practice each week to specific assignments such as transcriptions. The lesson itself can operate as practice time that is structured by a knowing and objective outside ear in terms of time, musical material, and practice strategies.

Modeling occurs when a teacher exemplifies the qualities the student hopes to acquire through practice. Through listening and imitating, the modeling process helps students recognize their weaknesses and appreciate the values they are working towards (Judy 1990: 52). “You play, your teacher plays, you go ‘oh shit!’ The point is, you come to the realization of how limited your musical thinking is and how broad a range of possibilities is now open to you” (Lizotte, Interview 2009). Essentially, the teacher’s playing creates a mental ideal for the student to strive for.

Motivation results from the combination of a structure to work within (lesson time or practice assignments) and an ideal to work towards (the model of the teacher).

Students also feel a personal commitment to doing well for the teacher. “I didn’t want to fail her” (Mason, Interview 2009).

Additionally, teachers provide information about:

1) Ways to play comfortably / posture

Lissa and Becky both cite “life changing” teachers who altered their way of playing the instrument, making the experience more comfortable, efficient, and effective (Tracy, Interview 2009; Schneckenburger, Interview 2009).

2) Specific techniques (especially rhythm)

Paul, Rebecca Lay, and Amelia all focus on rhythm in different ways in their lessons. Rebecca and Paul both learn specific bowing patterns and techniques to achieve a particular kind of rhythm, Irish style and Rodney style respectively. In lessons, Amelia learned rhythmic backup techniques and basic chord knowledge through transcribing parts from recordings and working together with her teacher, Lissa.

3) Tunes and styles

Teachers are an important resource for knowledge of tunes, music history, and style. Rebecca Lay is particularly interested in learning Irish tunes, so Becky is teaching her Irish repertoire and through that, Irish style; Paul wants to sound more like Rodney, so he is learning Rodney’s bow techniques and ideas about improvising. As seen in practice contexts in general, repertoire acts as a channel for skills development.

As well as offering information to practice, in the lesson and at home, many teachers provide ways to practice that information. There are two main forms of this practicing support. First, teachers pass on practice strategies, such as slowing a tune down, playing it with a metronome, and speeding it up gradually. Teachers will also give specific assignments to students that will structure their practice time around certain skills or objectives such as learning the fiddle part in a recording. Judy identifies “discipline, modeling, and guidance” as the three supports a teacher can offer an amateur practicer, and broadly speaking, these can apply to fiddle lessons as well (Judy 1990: 53).

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the lesson scenario depends on the relationship between the teacher and the student, so a student must work to identify a good match for their needs in terms of their specific interests in the music and their learning style. Each person should feel comfortable with the other, as music and learning both involve admitting weaknesses. “I don’t think you can progress very far without a teacher because you just can’t see your weaknesses, it’s a little bubble-world and most of the people listening to you are not really critical listeners” (Lizotte, Interview 2009). Performing at a lesson can be more intimidating than playing at a dance, when the ears and eyes of a respected musician are trained entirely on the student. In a sense, a lesson operates as a task trial for a dance where an attentive listener prepares the fiddler for the experience of playing for many (somewhat less attentive) listeners.

“Lessons can be a way of playing with others, just letting go in order to get there, like a jam session. And you can’t half-ass the way you can at a session because your teacher is watching you,” (Tracy, Interview 2009). Playing for fun at the end of a lesson is a fairly common practice and helps students relax and express themselves while still under pressure to concentrate and put forth their best effort. In this sense, the lesson provides an effective middle ground practice zone between performance and play.

Mentors

The mentor relationship

About half of the fiddlers who participated in this research had taken a significant number of formal fiddle lessons. Several gained technical control from classical lessons in childhood. Then there were some that could say they never had a teacher. On first glance, one is tempted to say these fiddlers are “self-taught,” even that they are more talented or better learners than the others, but zooming out to view the whole picture reveals a world of support outside the traditional lesson model.

A mentor, an informal musical supporter of a learning fiddler, can provide much of the same information and support as a teacher but in different environments including camps, dances, workshops, and jams. A mentor might be an intermittent presence in a learner’s life but can still exert a powerful influence both musically and socially. Another clear distinction between the mentor and the teacher is the level of professionalism in the relationship as it begins. A student asks a teacher to work with

them, and then pays them for their time. A mentee can seek out a mentor or be sought out by that person and the exchange is in tunes and conversation.

Effectiveness

A mentor will play recreationally with a beginning fiddler, sharing tunes and knowledge in a more casual manner than a teacher might. Through talking fiddle philosophy or offering musical suggestions, a mentor can guide a learning fiddler in deciding what aspects of fiddling are the most important, what to practice, and how to practice. Playing with a mentor can constitute a type of practice in itself as the learner is listening to and imitating an admired player. Much like a lesson, the learner has the opportunity to actively apply techniques, tunes, and sounds they hear their mentor do. There is also the opportunity to ask questions and clarify how something is done.

When a mentor plays socially with their mentee, they imply that the learner's education and musicianship are valuable. Mentors can provide additional social support, inviting their mentees to sit in or play dances with them and sharing advice about how to get gigs and become better integrated into the community. Guiding learners in the social skills involved in jamming and gigging is no insignificant task, and working with a mentor can be a safe space to practice social skills as well as musical ones.

Profile of a mentor: David Kaynor

“David took me under his wing” (McCallum, Interview 2009)

"David Kaynor, that's what he does, is mentor people... I want to be that open and friendly as I get to a point where I'm more experienced around beginners ... the person jamming in the hall." (Panitch, Interview 2009)

"He'll talk about what he's working on or thinking about" (McCallum, Interview 2009)

"It's [fiddling] not just good for me, it's good for everyone. I was just at a dance where there was a great Old-time band, just wonderful, and I thought to myself, boy the world would be a better place if *this* was what people associated with American culture" (David)

"It never came across as teaching, but you learn a lot from playing with somebody – it's inherent that you imitate them." (McCallum, Interview 2009)

"My resume reads like an itinerant performer's, but I see myself mainly as a teacher and facilitator. (Kaynor, David A. 2009)

Emily: "Did he give you any practice advice?"

Lissa: "He just told me to do it, go practice!" (Schneckenburger, Interview 2009)

Buddies:

Emily: “Who are your biggest fiddle influences?”

Jonah: “Perhaps most of all the musicians that I play with casually” (Sidman, Interview 2010)

The buddy relationship

The contra scene initiates many smaller communities of musicians who hang out together, play music together, and learn from each other. Get-togethers among learning musicians can take the form of formal rehearsals, house parties or weekly tune sharings and can operate along a spectrum of public to private. David Kaynor’s house session is well-known as a pleasant event where a fiddler can get connected to the scene, but many other sessions operate on a more private structure where small groups of musicians will arrange sessions just amongst themselves. Within these social gatherings, a type of practice forms where musicians emulate each other’s styles, give each other ideas about chords or ornaments, and implement the practice process in a social setting – listening, analyzing, and applying.

The distinctive element of a buddy relationship is that no one person is the only source of knowledge, rather “We have a great back and forth” (Panitch, Interview 2009). Buddies do not have to be stellar musicians, have a huge repertoire, play a particular style, or act as experts. Instead, a buddy is someone with some knowledge of fiddle music with whom a fiddler can connect socially as well as musically.

Effectiveness

The influence of musical buddies, especially in terms of motivation, cannot be overstated. Many learning fiddlers spend most of their time with other musicians in a buddy relationship of some sort. A rhythm buddy can provide rhythmic stability and inspiration while a melody buddy might offer more in terms of repertoire or stylistic techniques. While practitioners might not articulate this as time spent practicing, the same processes are at work. The histories of many fiddlers demonstrate just how significant a musical buddy can be as first step into the music and also as a source for knowledge. “My playing changed a lot in that time because of that collaboration, a lot of the skills I rely on most now, are things I developed with Anna” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009).³⁸

Conclusion

Schneckenburger, Questionnaire 2009: “Who are your biggest fiddle influences?”

- “Greg Boardman (great at introducing me to a greater social network of fiddlers, and showing off the music in it's proper social context)
- David Kaynor (hired me for my first away from home gigs, was extremely supportive of my music even from a young age, and taught me a lot about harmony fiddling and playing for dances)”

At first glance, the support of David Kaynor and Greg Boardman appear very similar. However, Lissa took lessons with Greg and only played gigs with David,

³⁸ Anna is a clarinet player, so a melody musical buddy. An interesting influence to examine in future research would be the how playing with different instruments impacts a fiddler’s style.

revealing how mentoring and teaching overlap and work together; a “teacher” can mentor and a “mentor” can teach.

Relationships with role models, teachers, mentors, and buddies provide contexts where a learning fiddler can initiate practice processes and strategies in the company of other musicians. These relationships, in any combination, form a support system that can move a fiddler towards successful contra playing. In every relationship, modeling is at work in some form, presenting an ideal for a tune, for a sound, or for general musicianship.

Fiddler Profile: Ethan Hazzard-Watkins, Interview 2009

Ethan Hazzard-Watkins has experienced all four types of support, and now plays contra dances around the country with several bands. Here are a few of his fiddle influences:

Van - his sense of fun, experimentation, and goofiness, coupled with excellent technical playing and openness to new ideas and varied styles. *(A teacher)*

Becky Tracy - her playing influenced me tremendously through early Wild Asparagus and Nightingale recordings. *(A role model)*

Mary Lea - Mary has been a tremendous mentor for the past six or seven years, and I've learned a great deal from her by having opportunities to perform with her and by learning tunes from her. *(A mentor.)*

Anna Patton – I have been more influenced by Anna than by any other fiddler.

(A buddy)

In Ethan's descriptions, one can see how the job descriptions for different types of practice supporters overlap and align with one another, all providing motivation and influences on personal style.

The relationships between learners and supporters are most visible in terms of how tunes move around among members of the community. Somebody might learn something from a lesson, teach it to a friend, who shares it with a mentor, who plays it at a dance, who inspires somebody else to put it on a recording where somebody else might pick it up and continue to pass it on. Thus the level of articulation of these relationships often surrounds tune learning, because repertoire acts as a channel for both tune knowledge and techniques.

Similarly, many fiddlers will not explicitly describe these one-on-one relationships as practice contexts even though behaviors and narratives about these relationships exemplify practice processes and strategies. In addition to the musical benefits of playing with others, relationships with community members help a fiddler network, giving them connections and tools with which to integrate themselves into the community. Because these relationships make fiddling rewarding musically and socially, practice supporters can form some of the most effective practice contexts in terms of inspiring and motivating fiddlers to learn and improve.

Part 2 Chapter 3: Jams, Camps, Workshops, Festivals

“I think of camps as the modern day substitute for having a fiddler as a next-door neighbor on a porch or something. You get a chance just to interact with the same people all day every day, learners and teachers.” (Panitch, Interview 2009)

“Camps, workshops, jams – it helps with shyness. You get to know people, and find out they are just as vulnerable as you are” (O’Donnell, Interview 2009).

Fiddle camps of all varieties can re-create the “fiddler next door” experience through workshops, jams, and general community activity. The first main benefit is purely social, getting the chance to meet more like-minded fiddle fans and make connections in the community. Additionally, the role modeling that occurs during these group experiences is much like one-on-one role modeling described in the previous chapter, giving learning fiddlers fuel and support for their fiddling. Specifically in group contexts, the learner can surf along the wave created by the more experienced players, often at tempo. Surfing helps a fiddler feel more confident while pushing them to play better, along with the group. Judy describes it as the combination of a good safety net and a real challenge (Judy 1990: 55). Thus, jams, camps, workshops, and festivals support confidence, skill development, and networking, several important objectives of contra fiddle practice.

Workshops/Classes

Workshops and classes are the most distinctly hierarchical context for group learning. Like traditional classrooms, a teacher figure imparts knowledge, usually in the form of repertoire. Teachers are often well-respected fiddlers from the broader community and their popularity adds incentives for students to attend. Workshops

often focus on a particular aspect of fiddle playing or type of repertoire – creating harmonies, working on Irish style, or learning bowing patterns for example.

Workshops are an important piece of all festivals and camps. Students may attend consecutive classes or just one or two, as they choose. Some workshops will specifically target a particular skill-level, but others will be open to all musicians, or all fiddlers.

Teachers generally make an effort to pace themselves so that the slowest and fastest learner will both get something out of the class. Most teachers use a combination of talking and playing to get ideas across. Some teachers talk more than others, sharing historical and cultural contexts for tunes, telling stories and jokes. Students speak less often, to ask a clarifying question, bring in past experience, or make a request for a tune or technique. While group playing is involved, the learning process is fairly individualistic with each student striving to grasp the concept or tune on their own (unless the focus of the workshop is on some aspect of playing with others).

Tune learning:

The value of workshops, according to the participants in this research, is learning new repertoire. Repertoire is mostly presented by ear, though some teachers will distribute written copies of tunes at the end of the class to assist students with recall. Teachers will usually start by introducing the name of the tune, telling a brief story about where the tune comes from, and then playing the tune a few times up to speed. The next step is usually in call and answer format as the teacher leads students

through each phrase of the tune, waiting until each phrase is comfortable before moving to the next one. Some teachers will verbally point out tricky passages or “catch phrases,” even naming notes from time to time. Other teachers emphasize the importance of the student finding the notes on their own by ear. Occasionally, a teacher will gesture towards the chord structure of the tune, or scalar and arpeggiated passages, also help students understand the workings of the tune. Depending on the teacher’s approach, bowings will be taught as part of the tune, given as suggestions, or left up to the individual student.

For the student, the tune learning process in a workshop is highly structured with specific spaces for playing and listening organized by the teacher. While the focus of each student is on their own playing, the group playing provides a standard for intonation and rhythm that keeps students at the same pace and (more or less) the same pitch. Both the teacher and the group each provide a tune ideal for the practitioner to work towards.

Effectiveness

Despite their presence at almost every festival, weekend, or camp, workshops vary in quality because musicians are hired first for performances at these events and then expected to lead workshops as well. Workshops and classes can be useful for increasing repertoire and picking up specific stylings from an admired fiddler. However, many contra fiddlers say they learn more in other, less formal contexts. Workshops and classes might move too slowly for some fiddlers, making it difficult to get the tune as a whole. “The classes, with the repetition, they play a phrase and I

play a phrase. I tend to zone out a lot and I will learn it for that period of time but it's short-term memory," (Panitch, Interview 2009). For some though, the slow pace and clear structure of workshops is beneficial for beginning to learn by ear. "It's [techniques and subtleties are] all easier to see and hear, more at workshops. At first I hated that, it was so tedious, but now I'm better at picking up tunes by ear," (Lizotte, Interview 2009). There's a popular conception that workshops are "good for you" even if they are not always fun.

Fiddlers rarely mention appreciation of verbal teaching in terms of technique. Some fiddlers point out that many fiddle teachers "can't articulate what they're doing anyway" – so the talking element of the workshops becomes less useful. Hearing an admired musician speak can be inspiring and interesting, but is only sometimes applicable to practice. Workshops can be motivating, but they also require patience and intense concentration for very specific rewards. Some prefer contexts where they have more control over the playing structure and more freedom in their learning style. "I knew I would get enough fiddle in the evening and around meals, probably even the tunes they learned in class" (Panitch, Interview 2009). "After a certain point, I have found going to sessions and jams more useful. There, I can quickly size up a tune, figure out its patterns, and find the melodic line" (Lizotte, Interview 2009).

Jams

"I perceive the contra-jam to be a modern innovation" (Newman, Email 2010). Most sessions, even those involving all contra players, tend to be oriented around a genre of choice, such as Irish, French-Canadian, Scandinavian, or Old-time.

At these jams, musicians might play crooked tunes or tunes in different tunings³⁹ – tunes that are probably unsuitable for a contra dance. While a “pure” contra jam is hard to pin down, jams including related genres are resources for tunes and techniques which contra fiddlers can then apply in the contra dance context. For now, “contra jam” will be defined as any jam at which a contra player can develop relevant skills.

Social codes

“I have a little spiel, how I teach people about this. We have a discussion of what’s cool and what’s not cool. People like to ask a lot of questions, ‘how do I know if I can fit in?’ ‘is it okay to fit in?’” (Schneckenburger, Interview 2009)

Often these rules are unspoken so breaking into a jam takes careful attention and sensitivity to social and musical cues. Jams might be scheduled or spontaneous, they might be a group of friends or just friendly musicians, at camp they can include staff and campers, just campers or just staff. “Fitting in” is the ultimate goal and a fiddler’s role in the jam session might vary depending on their relationships with the other musicians and the size of the jam. Lissa’s students are extraordinarily privileged that she will discuss with them “what’s cool and what’s not cool,” in these different contexts, giving them some tools to figure out how to navigate the jam scenario.

“I like a select and small group of people, too many people - out of control,” (Larkin, Interview 2009). In a session among a few friends, a preferred playing context for many fiddlers, everyone takes turns choosing tunes. The process is especially fluid if the group has a large common repertoire. The tunes might be

³⁹ Some popular Old-time tunings include AEAE, ADAE, and AEAC#. Standard tuning is GDAE.

somewhat obscure, learned from commonly beloved recordings, teachers, or friends. There's a certain "in" sensibility in conversation as well as the tunes. While not necessarily "private," jams like this require sensitivity and modesty to join successfully, as well as a large repertoire.⁴⁰

Jams can vary in size from two to twenty or more. On the larger end, jams usually include more common tunes or simple tunes that are easy to pick up. The priority is inclusiveness, rather than personal connections with friends or playing special tunes. Slow jams are particularly geared towards beginners. Tunes are played under tempo giving beginners the opportunity to play at a comfortable speed and even lead tunes.⁴¹ While sometimes "out of control," big jams are a great place for beginners to surf along at tempo and to experiment, knowing they will be covered by other musicians.

Like gigs, jams include elements of practice alongside elements of performance. Woolf describes Old-time festival jams as "communal performance" where "the drama... is based... in the attempt to act harmoniously and creatively" (Woolf 1990: 87, 59-60). In contra jams, too, there is a level of performing with and for others with the objective of working together to create something beautiful and achieve a feeling of togetherness, even "communitas."

Tune learning

⁴⁰ For more advice on joining jams, see Appendix C.

⁴¹ "Leading tunes" usually consists of the player asking if anyone knows the tune, determining if the tune is a good fit for the group, starting the tune at an appropriate tempo, and stopping the tune when they judge it has been played to everyone's satisfaction.

Jam sessions aid tune learning in a variety of ways: phrase-by-phrase learning, learning on the fly, increasing familiarity, and developing style. In some jam sessions, tune learning happens somewhat officially when one musician presents a tune for others to learn. The musicians may just play the tune for a long time, at a slower tempo or up to speed, until everyone feels like they “have it.” Some players will break a tune down into phrases as needed.

“Then there’s the process of learning tunes on the fly...Figuring out what’s the first information you need when listening to a tune - key and form, start listening for the rhythms of it... From there, you have this base knowledge and then you have to find landmark notes or puzzle pieces you can latch onto and learn.” (Schneckenburger, Interview 2009)⁴²

Jams provide a space to practice all of the steps in tune learning: listening, applying, adjusting, and recall. When learning on the fly, all four steps are simultaneous. A fiddler listens to orient themselves to the key, form, rhythm, and shape while trying phrases or chords on the fiddle, while continually adjusting their playing to fit what they are hearing and holding new information in their mind each time through the tune. Learning tunes and knowing tunes is not an all-or-nothing matter. A fiddler might play along with a tune at a jam session but not “know” it – not be able to replicate it to their own satisfaction at another time. A fiddler might claim to have “heard” a tune, meaning that the tune is familiar but they could not start it on their own. If a fiddler has “learned” a tune, they most likely can start the tune in a session and feel fairly confident in their version of how it goes. Tune absorption in a general sense can also begin in a session where listening and playing along increase a tune’s familiarity. Becoming familiar with the tune improves the chances that it will get incorporated fully at some point in the future.

⁴² For an example of “learning on the fly,” see Appendix D.

Bringing a tune into the repertoire is not just about getting the notes and rhythms right, it's also about devising a personal version of the tune that sounds good and feels good to play. A jam session provides the opportunity to hear multiple versions of a tune with particular nuances and details to pick and choose from. "You learn it, you play it at a dance, you jam on it, you develop a sound for it, then eventually you have it" (Mason, Interview 2009). Jamming is a special type of processing which is important for the overall "development" of the tune. According to several fiddlers, some tunes are never finished but learners can reach a stage of "having it" through working it in different contexts.

Effectiveness

Jamming presents the opportunity for multiple forms of practice, but in action, how much do fiddlers actively strategize for practice during jams? Several obstacles make jamming less accessible and therefore less likely to operate regularly as a practice context. Arranging a positive session can be difficult. Many fiddlers mention "session killers" or "meanies" who choose difficult or obscure tunes or don't leave room for everyone to participate. "[Jams] can be really frustrating, if you don't know the repertoire and can't pick it up," (Hazzard-Watkins, Interview 2009). For the most part, these types of interactions are limited to public sessions. Choosing a session at a suitable level of musicianship can present another obstacle. Depending on the social relationships among the players, a certain range of ability is required for everyone to enjoy playing together, feel appropriately challenged, and learn from each other. Some sessions are practice contexts for a few members but not for all, depending on

their level of musicianship, intentions going into the session, and type of concentration and behavior during the session.

Despite these difficulties, my research discovered an overwhelming appreciation for jamming as a practice space. Many fiddlers feel they should go to sessions, much as they feel they should go to dances, and should get a teacher. Like these other situations, they usually find jams to be beneficial after some time. “I don’t know how conscious it was, if I just hoped I’d have fun next time” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009). Playing regularly at jams increases a learner’s repertoire and tune instincts.⁴³ Jams are also important sites for social connections, and music appreciation. Playing with others is such an integral part of successfully enjoying and presenting contra music that jamming provides a perfect task trail. As Amelia puts it, jam “energy” is “translatable” to the dance stage (Mason, Interview 2009).

Camps and festivals: the overall experience

The social musical environment

Generally, camps run for weekends or weeks and focus on a variety of topics, from specific genres of fiddling to contra dance and related dance forms. Most camps have between fifty and two hundred campers at a time, while festivals are much larger with thousands of people in attendance. When most fiddlers talk about camps and festivals, they talk about motivation, excitement, and inspiration. Being in an enclosed space surrounded by people with the same goals and similar musicianship

⁴³ Tune instinct skill created by knowledge of patterns and familiarity with a broad amount of tunes, demonstrated in a fiddler’s ability to follow along with new tunes. See Appendix C for transcriptions of some structural tune patterns and phrase patterns.

drives an individual to want to achieve. “It inspired me to practice... you did fiddle all day, in a class with young people who were better than you” (Mason, Interview 2009). Constantly seeing and hearing new possibilities for fiddling, whether it’s from an older mentor or a virtuosic younger player, pushes the individual to want to sound better, play more, and practice more. In these environments, jamming goes on informally in hallways, stairwells, and empty rooms, and also formally, in slow-jams or jams focusing on a particular genre of tunes scheduled into the day. Jamming is a part of a larger whole. Musicians eat together, dance together, talk with each other and generally socialize for long periods of time in limited spaces.

At camps, much jamming takes place later in the evenings and can be accompanied by extreme sleepiness and sometimes the influence of alcohol. At festivals, jamming can be almost constant and musicians might “jam-hop” or join different groups of players during the day. Because playing opportunities are so constant in some of these environments, a fiddler can play all day or at least for huge chunks of the day if desired. Immersion is a common approach to learning cited in much of the fiddle educational discourse (see Introduction). At camps and festivals, the immersive atmosphere motivates and cultivates practicing because musicians can continually absorb and apply the information around them. An important aspect of immersion is the acquisition of tune knowledge. Over a weekend or a week surrounded by the music, many tunes will become more familiar and many tunes will actually enter an individual’s repertoire. “I find that just by listening a lot, or if you’re at a festival, you might pick something up” (Miller, Interview 2009). “Picking up” tunes can happen almost constantly in camp and festival environments, where fiddlers

are always trying to play along with others, learn tune skeletons, and become familiar with new tunes.

Effectiveness

A variety of factors are at work, including everything from the festival attendees to the weather, but for the most part, immersion and motivation through jamming work to build networking, confidence, and skills for learning fiddlers.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Jams, camps, and workshops provide varied opportunities for practicing music, social and social-musical skills. Strategizing to use and view these contexts as practice allows for a broader definition of practice and learning and a more realistic one. Many fiddlers spend more time jamming than practicing individually and elements of the practice process can be found throughout these social playing contexts. As in alone practicing, many steps of the process are concurrent. A jammer might listen and analyze the playing of a friend or mentor while trying to apply some of those new ideas to their own playing. Playing around, playing a lot, playing with a beat, and even playing slowly, can happen in jams and workshops, fostering experimentation, muscle memory, pattern learning, and rhythmic stability.

In particular, the surfing process provides a new version of modeling that is effective for group situations. The ideal for the learner to work towards is represented in the group's playing, and the learner can play along, catching whatever notes,

⁴⁴ For a list of camps, festivals and their various characters, see Appendix C.

patterns, and stylings they can at tempo. Surfing is a fast sport, and beginners are bound to fall off from time to time. The group playing, like the wave, continues forward uninterrupted (assuming the learner is a sensitive player and does not overwhelm the session with loud or aggressive playing). Like modeling, surfing is a practice process because the learner must constantly listen, assess their own playing in comparison to the ideal, and apply new techniques to adjust. Just as one-on-one relationships can be effective motivators by showing learners what they have the potential to do, these group playing contexts push a fiddler to improve so they can enjoy the thrill of playing with others on a more advanced level.

Part 2 Chapter 4: Contra Dances

Dance events demonstrate contra music functioning in its complete context. Therefore they provide the opportunity for a learner to fully experience the social and musical sides of contra fiddle, and practice social and musical skills. There are several ways in which the dance environment can constitute or support development of these skills. Socializing happens during the intermission and throughout the evening on the dance floor and along the sides.⁴⁵ Dancing is a special form of socializing, set apart by the physical contact and pre-planned structure of interaction. Moving more into the musical realm, sitting in and playing behind the hired band provide an effective middle ground for practicing many necessary skills without the accompanying performance pressures. Finally, playing dances as the hired musician offer a unique opportunity for practice – the ultimate task trial.

Socializing

Emily: “What do you like about contra dance music?”

Shirley: “Being involved in a community of people is an important part of it. You develop all these relationships with people over the years and it’s a really neat way to know people...” (White, Interview 2009).

Talking, dancing, and making music together creates a functional community through individual relationships and collective activities. Shirley brings up a vital aspect of dance socialization: feeling a connection. If a fiddler knows and cares about their audience, they will be more eager to play dances and play well. “It [performing

⁴⁵ In Video 2, notice the dancers sitting on the side and chatting with one another. Social interaction is founded on the dancing, but extends well beyond it. On the dance floor, observe the dancers getting into the music, smiling at each other, and relating to one another as they execute the figures.

at a dance] works a lot better if I say “I love these people. I just want to give them everything I’ve got” (Larkin, Interview 2009).

Some fiddlers go to dances because they know they are supposed to and eventually the community spirit grabs ahold of them. “Somewhere along the line, I started really having fun, I got to know the people more, so I did enjoy it a lot more, and do it [dance] for its own sake.” (Panitch, Interview 2009). For other fiddlers, the dance scene is much less a part of their social circle, but even these musicians have spent significant amounts of time at dances or involved in related musical communities. “I’m not into the social dancing scene” (Mason, Interview 2009). While contra dancing is not Amelia’s favorite way of hanging out with friends, she has still spent years dancing, working at Pinewoods Camp,⁴⁶ and participating in English ritual dance activities. Her experiences have resulted in connections with individuals, visibility, and an enjoyment of playing for the community. “It’s really fun to be able to play... and have people respond” (Mason, Interview 2009).

Attending dances helps a fiddler to feel more comfortable in the scene as they gain an understanding of how to navigate the dance floor before learning to navigate the stage. Making personal connections increases a fiddler’s visibility and familiarity in the scene, which improves their ability to get gigs. Networking also presents opportunities to practice communicating about the music and the dancing, and communicating in general. Essentially, socialization can be approached as the practice of social skills.

⁴⁶ Pinewoods Camp hosts a variety of traditional music and dance weeks during the summer. More of a description can be found in Appendix C.

Dancing

Social connection: on the dance floor

Emily: “How do you get started meeting people and becoming a part of the community? Dancing, jams, festivals?”

Shirley: “I would say all of the above. I think it’s all important, going to the dances especially. I think there’s some act of dancing together and looking into people’s eyes, you get to know them a little bit,” (White, Interview 2009).

The dancing itself brings people together in physical contact, holding hands and making eye contact as they move through the dance figures. Dancing together builds familiarity and comfort through physical connections. This type of socializing brings people most directly into feeling like a part of the community.

Motivation: loving the dancing, loving the music

Loving dancing often transfers to loving the music, so dancing inspires many musicians to start fiddling in the first place. The music is most appealing when working in context, and for some people, the music is what makes the experience great. “What appealed to me most about the dancing was the music” (Mason, Interview 2009). “I started dancing three nights a week, loving the music more and more” (Larkin, Interview 2009)

Understanding the music: the gut level

The experience of simultaneous listening and dancing helps a fiddler connect to the music on a deep level. Playing and dancing can bring about the same exhilarating emotional experience, which is described as both “transformative” and a “peak” experience in Hast’s dissertation (Hast 1994: 116-118). “Absolutely I feel

emotionally moved. When I play good music, when I hear good music. When I'm dancing to good music.” (Larkin, Interview 2009). Dancing becomes a way of feeling that from the other side and understanding what works on the gut level. “I think the way dancing has influenced my playing is it’s more in the gut and not in my head. It’s a physical, visceral kind of thing” (Tracy, Interview 2009). Experiencing the music in context motivates a fiddler by helping them to feel what they could create for others. The excitement of a great dance makes a learning fiddler think “I want to do *that!*”

Understanding the music: the intellectual level

“There’s different ways of approaching playing, some people are very intellectual about it and they have interesting ways of playing” (Tracy, Interview 2009). On the intellectual level, listening while dancing allows the learning fiddler to observe contra music in action with a critical ear. “It’s like in the world of violin making, if the violinmaker doesn’t play at all, it’s a handicap. So if you’re playing dance fiddle, you should understand the dance” (Miller, Interview 2009). While Rodney is not a regular dancer, he knows how to dance and he has done it. Just as the North Bennet Street school for violin-making requires students to take violin lessons, Rodney has a sufficient understanding of the dance to craft his music accordingly without being an avid dancer himself. This understanding develops through several types of listening. First, listening and analyzing role models for their “danceability” helps a learning fiddler define what skills go into making the music “feel good to dance to.” Paying attention specifically to tunes, transitions, and band dynamics provides ideas to try at home. “You can listen for specific tunes and tricks.”

“Listening for what really doesn’t work” is also important. “There have been times when I’ve been dancing that it felt almost as if the music was too darn slick” (Larkin, Interview 2009). Amy’s dancing experiences play into her decision to create more of a rollicking, playful personal style. Critique is a way of discovering personal preferences, and through that, aesthetic.

Beyond danceability and aesthetic, there is the art of matching tunes to the dances the callers choose. While dancing, a practitioner can analyze whether a particular tune or method of playing works well for various dance figures.⁴⁷ Within matching tunes for dances there are two additional layers: matching the dance figures and creating an appropriate feel for the dance as a whole.⁴⁸

Sitting in

Moving from the dance floor to the stage is a transition with a common middle step – sitting in with a band. Sitting in usually involves sitting just behind the band members and playing along with the tunes they choose without a microphone. Sometimes bands will advertise “sit-ins welcome” or they will invite particular friends, mentors, or mentees to join them. The sit-in’s job is to remain unobtrusive: “I was sitting in the back, messing around, trying not to look conspicuous” (Hazard-

⁴⁷ For details, compare Video 1 and Video 2. In Video 1, the dance has shorter phrases and the tunes are French-Canadian tunes with clear chunks of 4 bars (Saut de Lapin and Reel de Montebello). In Video 2, balances are less frequent and more flowing figures take up most of the dance, such as a ladies chain, do-si-do, star and so on so the tune is more fluid with longer phrases.

⁴⁸ For example, in Video 2, the musicians accent the balances and provide flowing music for flowing figures (layer 1). They also use a tune and a drone (starting around 0:37) to create a driving feel for the dance as a whole. To create a “driving” or “flowing” set, the band has chosen an Irish tune, Splendid Isolation, and played it accompanied with a drone – a classic move for creating this kind of feel for a dance

Watkins, Interview 2009). In some ways, sitting in is a task trial for playing a gig. With no microphone or decision-making responsibility, the sit-in still gets to practice playing up to tempo, playing tunes they may or may not know, playing transitions with the band, and playing directly for dancers. All of these experiences are important aspects of the real performing experience as well. The sit-in can observe band dynamics up close, watching how band members choose tunes, decide when to switch, and build their sets for maximum drama. Watching the music in context and actively playing along incorporates both modeling (from Chapter 2) and surfing (from Chapter 3). In other words, sitting in gives the learner the ideal created by an admired player and space to play along with that. The learning fiddler can surf along at tempo, while incorporating techniques and expressions they observe in the other players.

While sitting in, a learning fiddler also receives encouragement through interactions with professional fiddlers, inspiring further practice. “They turned around and said ‘what tunes do you want to play?’ That always stuck in my mind, them being supportive,” (Hazard-Watkins, Interview 2009). By indicating that a fiddler is good to request or offer tunes, the band can validate the efforts of a learner. Likewise, confidence is inspired by observing the weaknesses of professional fiddlers. “You get to watch the musicians with each other, and how much they plan beforehand. Some have lists of all the tunes they know, some just suggest things. It made me more comfortable when I noticed musicians trying the beginning of a tune while the caller was teaching. Not everyone knows everything!” (Panitch, Interview 2009)

Playing gigs

“In terms of practicing that, I think there’s just doing it. There’s no substitute for just playing a lot of dances. Starting-out musicians should be prepared to do any gig no matter how poorly it plays or how far they have to drive. That experience makes it totally worth it,” (Hazzard-Watkins, Interview 2009).

Playing gigs can constitute a type of practice and a particularly useful one, as discussed in detail in “Part 1 Chapter 2: Performance, Practice, and Play.” For advice on how to get gigs, Ethan provides a starter-kit online with a heavy emphasis on making social connections. An important tip I wish to highlight in the context of this research is: “Your attitude and demeanor are at least as important as your musicianship to the organizers' and audience's impression of your skill” (Hazzard-Watkins 2010). Ethan directly articulates the importance of social skills in getting gigs, and having them proceed successfully. Playing gigs, attending dances, and socializing are all great ways to develop personable “attitudes and demeanors” that will facilitate social and musical success. The processes of successful social integration are far beyond the scope of this paper, belonging perhaps in the realm of sociology. Suffice it to say for now that behaving in a friendly and sensitive manner (social skills), and playing music that way too (social-musical skills), tends to work in a fiddler’s favor.

Conclusion

Practice of social, musical, and social-musical skills can be initiated in several contexts within the dance event. Specifically, modeling and surfing, versions of the practice process, can both apply to sitting in. In a more general sense, watching and

learning from other community members can be a social skills version of modeling, as the learner observes and imitates successful behaviors to integrate into the group. Likewise, joining in the communal activity of dancing can be a social skills version of surfing, as the learner gains a sense of how the experience works through getting carried along with others.⁴⁹ Listening, analyzing, and applying work on many levels as emotions, physicality, and intellect can all play a role in sitting in, dancing, and socializing.

“I started going to dances because people told me to” (Panitch, Interview 2009). While “go dancing” is common advice given to a learning fiddler, the reasons for dancing often go unarticulated as though the fiddler must go questing for themselves. Through dancing, listening, sitting in and playing gigs, attending dances gives a fiddler opportunities to practice the social and musical skills necessary to develop as a fiddler and performer and bonds them to the community.

⁴⁹ My expertise in the realm of behavior is not extensive enough to be more specific. Perhaps this would be an interesting route for future research.

Conclusion

Closing discussion: the purpose of contra fiddle music

Beyond the framing issues presented so far lies a larger discussion about the role of artistry and functionality in contra music. The nature of practice, as a goal-oriented activity, is inherently tied into the purpose of the music. The purpose of the music is a dual one – to provide pleasing aesthetic and a rhythmic grounding for the dancers as listeners and movers. In this manner, contra fiddle is often described as a craft, an activity with goals of aesthetic and usefulness. At a dance, dancers' attention can shift from listening intellectually, to feeling it on the gut level, to experiencing both aspects at once. Musicians' attention and intention can move about in a similar manner, focusing on projecting rhythm or creating an improvisation, getting into a groove or seeking a lyrical line to add emotional power. The two goals of contra fiddle resonate well with ideas of “trade” and “art,” illuminating the complexities that go into producing a true “craft.”

Contra fiddle as a trade

The first use of “trade” recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary is a “Course, way, or manner of life; course of action; mode of procedure, method” (Trade, n. 2010). The word evolves from “way of life” to “livelihood” as money enters the picture. For contra fiddlers, playing gigs can partake of both meanings. Beyond the basic definition, trades are often understood to be “services people need,” such as carpentry, house painting, and construction. Contra music is required for the dancing to occur, so in some sense, the music is a service too. Similar to house

painting, much learning takes place “on the job,” through experiential practice. Finally, the activity is directly related to its purpose and craftsmanship is required to create a suitable product. A cupboard is designed based on what it has to store, where it will be placed, and how it will be opened and shut. Similarly, contra music is created around making people dance, making them feel joy and nostalgia, and matching specific dance figures.

“And there is a ‘craft’ to knowing what tunes work best with what dances and how to enhance the dance through emphasis in the tune. That’s the part of the craft I keep going to Debby [Knight] and Rodney for. They’re masters of this ‘trade’ and passing on that knowledge” (Lizotte, Email 2010).

Paul Lizotte is an apprentice of Rodney Miller. His words demonstrating how the transfer of tunes and style can in fact be quite similar to passing on a trade from teacher to apprentice.

Functionality

Within the perception of contra fiddle as a trade or service, function plays a dominant role. A cupboard would be useless without a bottom shelf to hold up the kitchen dishes. Similarly, the most functional piece of dance playing is projecting rhythm to dancers, giving them lift, and keeping them moving. Fiddlers constantly puzzle over ways to practice rhythm and use the term “dance-oriented,” to describe their ideal style of playing:

Emily: “What does dance oriented mean?”

Amelia: “The bowing should be there, should be tailored... I wanna hear style in it.” (Mason, Interview 2009)

The passage above demonstrates one of many moments in an interview when a question about style led directly to a comment about bowing. Among many fiddlers, rhythm is viewed as the most important skill to acquire, to the point that some fiddlers equate rhythm with style. As bowing is the vehicle for rhythm, bowing practice permeates and, at times, overwhelms practice contexts and strategies. In Rebecca McCallum's practice journal, five out of six of her goals for one day relate to rhythm and five out of six goals relate to technique (McCallum, Journal 2009). This skills-based practicing, an approach used by most contra fiddlers, expresses an emphasis on the function of the music.

Contra fiddle as art

In addition to the service of making people dance, fiddlers strive to create something distinctly aesthetic about the music. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, art is "Skill in an activity regarded as governed by aesthetic as well as organizational principles" (Art, n. 1, 2010). Today's contra dance music has a definite aesthetic and organization. While the aesthetic does change from person to person and generation to generation, the organization of the music is fairly strict. In practice, some fiddlers work on band arrangements and individual versions of tunes, much as a visual artist might work on finding their "voice".⁵⁰ Additionally, art involves "the expression or application of creative skill and imagination... producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power," (Art, n. 1, 2010). That contra fiddle practice requires creative skill and imagination is clear in fiddlers' emphasis on improvisation and style. "There is "art" to the contra fiddle. Dave

⁵⁰ Other players just crank out the tunes, and dancers love this too.

Langford brings a lot of art (improvisation) to his playing- as does Rodney,” (Lizotte, Email 2009).

The second question to address is whether contra fiddle is “appreciated primarily for beauty or emotional power” or for facilitating a social experience. For the purposes of this analysis, I have mostly been concerned with contra music played at dances. In fact, contra music sometimes moves onto the concert stage, and many musicians find this type of music *less* moving and *less* artistic.

“As much as I enjoy the originality of many contra dance bands, I at the same time very frequently feel that (a certain) quality of traditional music is absent, and so I rarely find myself particularly moved by contra dance music [on its own]” (Sidman, Questionnaire, 2010).

Many agree that contra music sounds incomplete in recordings and concerts, perhaps missing a level of tradition. Certainly, the music has a long history of its own traditions, which include integrating other musics into the dance context. Does something get lost in translation? Quality is not lost during a dance as long as the music is actively inspiring dancers, but when transferred to a recording, some of the excitement is left behind. If contra fiddle is not as moving when played in concert, there must be something powerfully artistic about the very function of playing for dancers. The social experience itself forms the “beauty and emotional power” created by the music.

Artistry

My earlier analysis of performance demonstrated how contra fiddle includes elements of both presentational and participatory art. Of concert music, Turino says “Since presentational performers do not feel the responsibility to make music that will

provide a comfortable basis for others to join in, they have greater artistic freedom to use creative contrasts of many types” (Turino 2008: 56). “Creative contrasts” in dance tempo are rare, but in terms of texture and dynamic, it’s these dramatic moments that bring everyone together with a sense of “communitas” (Hast 1994: 116). To some, “nonverbal communication” is its own form of art, and the connections built during a dance are not only social, but artistic (Hast 1994: 119). “Participatory music and dance is more about the social relations being realized through the performance than about producing art that can somehow be abstracted from those social relations” (Turino 2008: 35). Here Turino accurately describes the function of contra music as a participatory art: contra fiddle is more about creating a communal experience for dancers and musicians than it is about making an art product to be enjoyed in isolation.

According to Turino, the artistic level of participatory music is shaped primarily by the participants’ need for sustained interest and any artistry that occurs is purely to entertain the participants themselves. For contra fiddle, the purpose is to engage dancers. “If the main goal and effect of the music are to get everyone dancing, it is a participatory performance that simply involves different functional roles – instrumentalists, singers, and dancers” (Turino 2008:52). Contra music is certainly performed to “get everyone dancing” but also to make that dancing experience exhilarating, emotional, and interesting. Dancers are not just participants, through dancing, shouting, and stomping, but also consumers of the music in much the same way a seated audience is. Turino’s distinction between audience and participant breaks down at a contra dance, where the dancers qualify as both. As the line between

audience and participant becomes blurred, so does the distinction between presentational and participatory qualities. For the musicians, this means that presentational features, such as individual virtuosity and varied textures, are included alongside participatory qualities, such as repetition (Turino 2008: 59). Fiddlers are performers and participants too, seeking to please a listening audience and encourage participation in the social activity.

At a dance, the proportion of the music that exemplifies presentational and participatory features can vary widely based on the context. From small local dances played by local bands to giant dances holding more than three hundred people, the type of music shifts to address a changing purpose. The prominence of larger dances allows contra musicians to travel and play dances around the country, and the dynamic of the tour places more of an emphasis on aesthetics, as bands find themselves competing to impress their audiences and stand out as extraordinary. Local dances, especially those played by local musicians and community bands, place a higher value on inclusiveness and making the dances work.⁵¹

If the purpose of the music is to engage dancers, a fiddler must provide music both for the audience and for the participant in each dancer. Thus, the goal of contra fiddle has two components – creating beautiful interesting music for the ear and producing rhythmically contagious music for the body. These goals play out in definitions of successful fiddling where rhythm is primary and style a close second. Once again, craft comes closest to describing this activity because it centers around

⁵¹ Turino's analysis of contra music focuses only on this second type of dance, which could explain why he sees it as more of a participatory form.

aesthetic as well as direct usefulness – and this is the term used most often to describe contra fiddle.

Practicing for a craft: research highlights

With the perspective of contra fiddle as a craft, many of the main points of larger discussions fall into place. Contra fiddle actually serves several different audience and participant groups: dancers, callers, and other musicians. Musical skills, such as creating an aesthetic and having solid rhythm, engage the dancers. Social skills, such as listening attentively to somebody else's opinion, improve relations with the caller. Social musical skills, such as supportively harmonizing with another player, develop good relationships with other musicians. Practice is skills-based and works to improve all of these. Therefore, a broad definition of practice is required, one that encompasses dancing (social), jamming (social musical), and playing alone (musical) for example.

In these various contexts, versions of the practice process can be initiated by musicians if they choose to attentively listen, analyze, and apply. Fiddlers strategize different environments as practice in a ratio that suits them best. Social contexts provide opportunities for group types of practice. For example, in one-on-one relationships, a practicer seeks to model their own playing after another's. Similarly, practicers playing along with a group or individual, at tempo, can surf along the wave created by the other player(s) while initiating new techniques and ideas to the best of their ability. In all these types of practice, there is an ideal to be achieved in terms of

style and rhythm, exemplified by another player, a recording, and/or an imagined version of the tune.

While Part 1 focused on the definition and philosophy of fiddle practice, Part 2 examined fiddle practice in action. Fiddlers often articulate practicing as an individual endeavor, but practicing really operates as a combination of social and isolated contexts for most players. Both types of practice are necessary in order to refine the craft. Like building a cupboard, many of the pieces can be developed in the workshop, but they can only create a coherent whole when put in place. Then, the cupboard creates a useful and aesthetically pleasing addition to a kitchen. In this manner, practicing while playing dances gives fiddlers a unique opportunity to put both functionality and artistry into action.

The craft of contra fiddle is no easy road - as Rebecca says “It’s a never-ending battle!” (Lay, Interview 2009). But because contra music serves a dual purpose, the rewards are doubly great. A fiddler not only creates beauty but plays an active role in producing communal experiences.

Dear Reader:

Learning and reflecting about fiddlers' practice stories has opened up new ways of talking about practicing and new ways of going about it in terms of my own musicianship. My own guilt about not practicing *enough*, not practicing *right*, and sometimes not practicing *at all*, has been slowly dissipating as I find that so many fiddlers I admire share the same frustrations. Beginning to see many types of playing as practice has raised my awareness of my playing at jams, gigs, and festivals.

I hope that the ideas here can help you, too, find ways to redefine practice as a practical and enjoyable experience. Most importantly, I encourage you to use the ideas here to strategize your learning in whatever way works best for you. Take these contexts, definitions, and strategies as possibilities to experiment with. As James Galway once said "Nobody ever became a great musician by reading a book. All great musicians got that way by listening to music, playing music, and talking music with fellow musicians." (Judy 1990: 46). Go listen! Go play! Go talk! Go practice!

Appendix

- A. Terms
- B. The research
- C. Resources for interested practitioners
- D. Tune learning: supplementary information
- E. Notes on recordings and videos

Appendix A: Terminology

Terminology
Band set ups
Jam session terms
Contra fiddle skills

Terminology

Alone practice - when a practicer works individually without the active presence of others. Not to be confused with individual practice which just refers to a particular individual's approach to playing the fiddle.

Balance – a dance figure where dancers step forward and back once in rhythm. Often accompanied by stomping or heavy stepping.

Bowhold – the position of the right hand holding the bow. Bowholds can vary in terms of the shape of the hand and where the hand actually holds the bow. Some fiddlers “choke up” on the bow, holding the bow more towards the middle than the end.

Bowing pattern – a set succession of bow strokes that accent a tune in a particular way. Bowing patterns are often a useful starting point for contra fiddlers, but are rarely used purely and continuously. A contra fiddler might learn an Irish bowing pattern, then apply it at some times and not others, within a tune, within a set, within a dance evening.

Caller – the dance leader. The caller walks dancers through the dance patterns then calls out the figures as the dance continues with music. Callers will also teach tricky figures if there are beginners at the event.

Contra dance – the title for a type of American social dancing. The word originally comes from “contre-danse” which refers to two lines of men and women facing each other. For more details on contra dance, see “Background: The Contra scene” and the resources section in Appendix C.

Dance

1. A contra dance event, usually in the evening, but sometimes during the afternoon at a festival or special occasion.
2. One particular contra dance, a set of dance figures, executed by the dancers to music.

Danceability – the effectiveness of the music for dancing. Danceability means the music has lift, groove, and phrasing so that dancers can follow the tune and enjoy moving to the music.

Feel – a particular emotional theme for a dance. Examples include “driving,” “slinky,” “chunky,” and “upbeat.” Musicians often associate certain tunes or genres with these descriptors and try to match them to the dance itself or the caller’s request.

Groove – a rhythmic quality of trance-like steadiness. Getting into a groove drives the dance forward continually. Sometimes, specific grooves are employed, such as a repetitive bass or melodic line.

Jig – a tune with groups of three notes (in 6/8 time). Second most common type of tune played for contra dances.

Mentor - a musician who provides support, knowledge and advice to a learner. Often a mentor is a more experienced player than the learner. He or she can interact socially and musically with the learner in a variety of environments including camps, dances, workshops, and jams.

Modeling - any practice process in which a learner works to model their playing after an ideal. The ideal can be presented in the form of a teacher, mentor, role model or buddy, or in the form of the jam session’s version of a tune. Recordings can also provide ideals to imitate and player’s can create their own imaginary ideals as well.

Participatory art - “A special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role” (Turino 2008: 26).

Presentational art - “Refers to situations where one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music or dancing” (Turino 2008:26).

Reel – a tune with groups of four notes (4/4 time). First most common type of tune played for contra dances.

Role model - a musician who demonstrates an ideal quality or qualities that a learner seeks to imitate.

Set

1. A group of two to four tunes played for a single dance at an evening of contra dancing. 2. Refers to a line of contra dancers in formation, with a partner and another couple.

Surfing - a practice process in which a learner plays along with a group or individual, at tempo, and initiates new techniques and ideas to the best of his/her ability.

Teacher - a musician who provides support, knowledge, and advice during lessons.

Social musical skills – listening and responding to other musicians so that the interaction is constructive and creative both socially and musically. Social musical skills involve using social skills to effectively navigate musical environments.

Imitation – playing back a tune or technique after hearing it. Imitation becomes easier when a fiddler is familiar with fiddle stylings and tunes, so the practice process of listening, analyzing, and applying can help to develop this skill.

Back-up – supporting another musician as they play the melody. Common types of fiddle back-up include harmonizing, drones, rhythmic bowing on chord notes, strumming the fiddle, and doing the chop (a harsh rhythmic sound created using the frog end of the bow near the bridge).

Lift – a rhythmic quality that makes dancers want to lift their feet. Achieving lift remains mysterious but has to do with subtle dynamic shifts between notes that weight some parts of the phrases heavier and others lighter. This is the musical quality that makes dancers “want to fly” (Hast 1994: 110)

Intonation – the skill of playing pitches in tune. For the most part, intonation for contra fiddling is measured by well-tempered pitches adjust slightly towards making the fiddle ring well. In some tunes and some styles, a “blue note” between the major and minor third of the scale is used.

Tune instinct - a skill created by knowledge of patterns and familiarity with a broad amount of tunes, demonstrated in a fiddler’s ability to follow along with new tunes. See Appendix C for transcriptions of some structural tune patterns and phrase patterns.

Improvisation – spontaneous musical composition. Improvisation in contra fiddling is mostly melody-based, but there is some improv built off of chord changes as well. Improvisation is a way to vary the music, create interest and drama.

Taste – a refined aesthetic. For much fiddling, taste has to do with restraint and subtlety. Taste is completely subjective and what is deemed tasteful by one fiddler might be seen as boring or melodramatic by another.

Communitas – a sense of togetherness. This term was originally coined by Victor Turner. Communitas occurs at contra dances during moments of “transformation” when dancers and musicians may feel exhilarated by their experience with the group (Hast 1994: 116).

A few different band set-ups

Band – a group of 2-5 musicians who practice and perform together in a structured manner. Makes up the majority of bands that play at large New England dances.
Example: Notorious, Rumblestrip, Wild Asparagus

Pick up band – a group of musicians who come together to play a dance more informally, without serious advanced practice. There might be a band leader or organizer who invites particular musicians to join. Once again, 2-5 musicians.
Example: Amy Larkin and friends,

Community band – a local band providing music for a community dance regularly, and usually exclusively. Community bands tend to be large, with a few band leaders who are more experienced. Community bands may practice together.
Example: Roaring Jelly

Open band – a community band with a more open invitation to newcomers.
Example: the Glen Echo Open Band

Megaband – refers to a group of musicians whose goal is to have the largest number of players possible, often popular at festivals or camps.
Example: the Portland Megaband, the Wesleyan Megaband

Sit-ins

May be invited (formally or informally) to join a hired band. Usually un-miked, seated behind the hired players. Often sit-ins are less experienced, and play along as a way to have fun and improve their playing. Sit-in bands vary in format. Sometimes the paid players will bring sheet music and prepare tune lists beforehand, but at other times, sit-ins will just have to follow along at the last minute.

Jam session terms

Jam session - a group of musicians playing tunes together for fun.

Open jam - a group that people are encouraged to join. Some jams are more open than others. Qualifications usually involve a combination of friendship networks and musical ability.

Closed jam - a private group. Newcomers are not encouraged to join.

Buddy - a musician friend who plays with a practicer and participates in an exchange of tunes, musical ideas, and skills.

Buddy session - a very small jam, 2-3 musicians playing together. The players are musical buddies. They understand each other's playing well and have a large common repertoire.

Leading a tune - usually consists of the player asking if anyone knows the tune, determining if the tune is a good fit for the group, starting the tune at an appropriate tempo, and stopping the tune when they judge it has been played to everyone's satisfaction.

Slow-jam - a session where tunes are all played at a relaxed tempo. Slow-jams are an excellent place for beginners to practice tune learning and development of musical and social musical skills.

Appendix B: the research

The participants
The practice journal
Sample interview and follow-up questions
The questionnaire

The participants

Although I spoke with many other instrumentalists and players of related genres of music, here is a complete list of the contra fiddlers who I made contact with.

Hazzard-Watkins, Ethan

Fiddle experience: 15 years

Age range: 20-30

Location of fiddle action: Brattleboro, VT

Influences: Van Kaynor, Becky Tracy, Mary Lea, Anna Patton

Kaynor, David

Fiddle experience: 36 years

Age range: 50-70

Location of fiddle action: the Northeast, the Pacific Northwest

Influences: Peter Sutherland, George Wilson, cousins Cammy and Van Kaynor, Lissa Schneckenburger, and my students!

Larkin, Amy

Fiddle experience: 42 years

Age range: 50-70

Location of fiddle action: Cape Cod, MA

Influences: Ruthie Dornfeld, Randy Miller, Kevin Burke, Mary Lea, Larry Unger, Peter Barnes, Bob McQuillen, Becky Ashenden, Kerry Elkin, Liz Carroll, Martin Hayes, Nathalie MacMaster, Alasdair Fraser

Lay, Rebecca

Fiddle experience: 5 years

Age range: 20-30

Location of fiddle action: Brattleboro, VT

Influences: Becky Tracy, Lissa Schneckenburger, David Kaynor

Lea, Mary

Fiddle experience: 56 years

Age range: 50-70

Location of fiddle action: Brattleboro, VT

Influences: Ruthie Dornfeld, Rodney Miller, Liz Carroll, Frankie Gavin, Kevin Burke, Jerry Holland, Buddy MacMaster, Andy Woolf, Jerry Milnes, Lisa Ornstein, Pete Sutherland

Lizotte, Paul

Fiddle experience: 13 years

Age range: 50-70

Location of fiddle action: New Hampshire

Influences: Carol Bittenson, Rodney Miller, Eric Favreau, Mary Lea, Becky Tracy

Mason, Amelia

Fiddle experience: 12 years

Age range: 20-30

Location of fiddle action: New England

Influences: Lissa Schneckenburger, Laura Risk, Laura Cortese, Becky Tracy, Tommy Peoples, Liz Carroll, Sam Amidon, Alasdair Fraser, Dave Langford

McCallum, Rebecca

Fiddle experience: 16-18 years

Age range: 30-50

Location of fiddle action: Middletown CT, formerly Rochester NY

Influences: Nightingale, Uncle Gizmo, David Kaynor, bandmates from the Groovemongers, Becky Tracy, Andre Brunet, Amy Larkin, Lissa Schneckenburger, Liz Carroll, French-Canadian tunes

O'Donnell, Vince

Fiddle experience: about 40 years

Age range: 50-70

Location of fiddle action: Boston, MA

Influences: Dudley Laufman, Barbara McOwen, Alasdair Fraser, Donna Hebert, Andy Woolf, Mary Lea, Dave Titus

Panitch, Rachel

Fiddle experience: 21 years

Age range: 20-30

Location of fiddle action: Providence RI

Influences: Becky Tracy, Alasdair Fraser, the Mammals, Martin Hayes, Lissa Schneckenburger

Schneckenburger, Lissa

Fiddle experience: 24 years

Age range: 20-30

Location of fiddle action: Brattleboro, formerly Boston, New York City, and Maine

Influences: Greg Boardman, Alasdair Fraser, David Kaynor

Sidman, Jonah

Fiddle experience: 8 years

Age range: 20-30

Location of fiddle action: Boston

Influences: Kevin Burke, Tommy Peoples, friends, Old-time and Irish music

Tracy, Becky

Fiddle experience: about 20 years

Age range: 30-50

Location of fiddle action: Brattleboro, VT

Influences: Brendan Mulvihill, Eugene O'Donnel, Lisa Ornstein

White, Shirley

Fiddle experience: 38 years

Age range: 30-50

Location of fiddle action: Western Massachusetts

Influences: Ruthie Dornfeld, John Carty, Sean Maguire, Marie Rankin, Tara Nevins, Benton Flippen, Stefan Amidon

The practice journal

Thanks to the fiddlers who completed practice journals: Ethan, Amelia, Paul, Rachel, and Rebecca McCallum. Although the journals were not quoted extensively, listening and reading about practice up close helped to inform much of my analysis, especially in terms of observing the tension between what fiddlers *want* to do and what they *actually* do. Each practice journal was different because the prompt was built loosely to allow fiddlers to take ownership and complete it in a comfortable and helpful way for their own practice.

Here is the prompt:

“Dear Practice Journalist:

Thank you for agreeing to join me in documenting how your practicing works.

Each journal has three categories:

- 1) Things I worked on today
- 2) Thoughts from today (on goals, skills, tunes, motivation, etc.)
- 3) How did it go?

Please also include the date and how long you practiced for.

The questions are intentionally built a little loosely – for example, 1) can include specific tunes you practiced and/or certain skills you’re working on. Feel free to answer these questions in a way that matches your approach to practicing.

In the journal, please record any time you play your instrument with the intention of improving your fiddling. Depending on your approach, this could include playing for dances, playing in sessions, playing with friends, etc.

Whenever possible, you should make a short recording of a tune or passage once through that demonstrates something you’re working on and briefly describe in the journal where you are with the tune (I’m really frustrated because __, I feel like I’ve made progress __, this is where I want to go with this tune __).”

Sample interview and follow-up questions

Each interview was quite different depending on my relationship with the interviewee, their answers on the preliminary questionnaire (see below for an example), the environment where we spoke, and the interests of the interviewee. Often, I would email and call fiddlers with follow-up questions.

Here are a few examples of questions I asked:

1. What are the most important skills for being a good contra fiddler?
2. Who is one of your favorite fiddlers to dance to, what do you like about their playing?
3. Do you have any practice strategies that work especially well for you?
4. What are you thinking about while you play a dance?
5. How did you learn to practice? Did anyone give you practice advice?

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was the first piece of the research. I asked fiddlers to complete this before the interview so I would have a good sense of what to ask them about. I received twelve questionnaires to work from. Questionnaires provided an important window into how fiddlers defined practicing and sparked many interview questions specific to the individual fiddler.

Here is the questionnaire:

Questionnaire: Contra Dance Fiddling – learning and practicing

Please take your time with these questions and let me know if you need clarification or have any questions for me. I really appreciate your input on this project – thank you!

Background

- 1) How long have you been playing the fiddle?
- 2) Where did you learn (are you learning) to play the fiddle?
- 3) Who are your biggest fiddle influences and what do you like about these players?
- 4) Did/do you play other kinds of fiddle? How do you think this influences your approach to contra dance fiddling?

Practice

- 1) Has your practicing changed over the years, and if so, how?
- 2) What does a typical practice session look like for you? Do you have specific practice strategies or objectives in your individual sessions?
- 3) What are some ways you approach learning a new tune? What resources (recordings, teaching videos, books, personal notes) do you use? What works well for you and why?
- 4) How much and how often do you practice each week?

Contra dance fiddling

- 1) What are your biggest goals for your dance fiddling?
- 2) Playing for a dance is so different from practicing by yourself, in terms of the environment. Do you have any strategies for practicing to perform?
- 3) If you could give a beginning dance fiddler interested in playing for dances one piece of advice about how to practice effectively, what would you tell them?
- 4) Are there particular issues that interest you in your practicing or in thinking about contra dance fiddling in general? If you were me, what would you want to know more about?

Appendix C: Resources

About contra dancing
About camps
About festivals
Social codes at jams
Fiddle teachers
About practicing
Dotted rhythm variations

About contra dancing

“What is contra dance?” www.sbcds.org/contradance/whatis

To find contra dances in your area, try the following links:

The Dance Database: www.tedcrane.com/DanceDB

The Dance Gypsy: www.thedancegypsy.com

Contra Dance links: www.contradancelinks.com

If you are looking for dances at which you can sit in or join the band, keep an eye out for “open band,” “community band,” and “sit-ins welcome.” Depending on the organization, you may need to contact someone first, or you may be able to just show up with your instrument at the last minute.

Dissertation by Dorothea Hast, 1994: *Music, Dance, and Community: Contra Dance in New England*.

This dissertation lays out much of the history and social scene around contra dancing in the Pioneer Valley. A few especially interesting issues are addressed, including the role of gender and sexuality expression on the dance floor.

“Paid to Eat Ice Cream,” “The Other Way Back, Dancing with Dudley” and “Together in Time: A Story of New England Music and Dance”

These film documentaries focus on important figures in the contra dance scene. Footage of interviews and dances are interspersed with old photographs and historical context.

Contra dance and its relation to New England traditional music: www.lissafiddle.com

About camps

CDSS dance and music camps (Pinewoods, Buffalo Gap, Timber Ridge)

CDSS holds American weeks (Old-time and contra dance music) and English & American weeks (English country dance music as well as Old-time and contra). They also run family programming. Depending on the venue, CDSS camps can be excellent for dancing and meeting people, but sometimes limited in terms of jamming opportunities. Music workshops are always part of the programming.

Ashokan Fiddle and Dance camp

Ashokan hosts a Northern Week which focuses on New England, French-Canadian, Swedish, and English music accompanied by contra dancing. Northern Week classes can get pretty specific, with fiddle classes and guitar classes in particular styles. The dancing is secondary to the music.

John C. Campbell Folk School

The Folk School is geared more towards music than dance. Participants sign up for a course, rather than a themed week. Courses include “dance band,” “intermediate fiddle,” “make your own banjo” and so on. (Rachel)

Valley of the Moon

Valley of the Moon Scottish Fiddle School is a music camp run by Scottish fiddle legend Alasdair Fraser for a week every summer in the Santa Cruz mountains. Fiddlers of all ages and levels of musical experience take workshops in Scottish fiddling and related styles. Fraser has a strong social presence at camp and infuses the camp with a sense of community spirit and fun. This atmosphere provides a supportive environment for students of all levels who will likely be challenged both by the expectations of their teachers and the abilities of their peers. (from Amelia)

Maine Fiddle Camp

Maine Fiddle Camp hosts two weeks of camp each August. Families are welcome and workshops are offered at several levels, with an emphasis more on the music than the dance. Concerts, dances, and other community gatherings, by campers and staff, form a regular part of the schedule. Repertoire and staff often focus on traditional music from and in Maine.

About festivals

NEFFA (The New England Folk Festival Association)

Currently located in Mansfield Massachusetts each April, NEFFA is a volunteer-run weekend festival hosting dance events, workshops, concerts, and jams in a variety of folk and traditional genres. The festival also has many opportunities for sit-ins to join the “Festival Orchestra,” a giant band led by a few experienced players who provide music for large contra dance sessions.

The Flurry

In Saratoga Springs each February, the Flurry has the usual combination of dances, workshops, concerts, and jams for a weekend. Music usually features a French-Canadian band, a swing band, a Cajun or Zydeco band, and several contra dance bands.

The Downeast Festival

The Downeast Festival in Topsham, Maine, provides jamming, workshops, family activities, and dances for a weekend in the spring.

Old Songs Festival

In Altamont, New York, Old Songs Festival is fairly performance-oriented, featuring a long and varied list of performers each year. Workshops also form a large part of the schedule.

Lake Eden Arts Festival, North Carolina (LEAF)

With lots of activities for kids, families, and adults, LEAF has a broad reach in terms of traditional genres, incorporating music, dance, and crafts from around the world.

Falcon Ridge Folk Festival

In the Berkshires of Massachusetts, Falcon Ridge provides a weekend of folk music concerts and several kinds of social dancing.

About social codes at jams

The Ten Commandments of Jamming

http://members.shaw.ca/john_tribe/jammingcommandme.html

From the British Columbia Old-time fiddlers' association, this page takes a light-hearted approach to describing the very basics of session routines.

Chris Smith on How to Start and Run an Irish Slow Session

<http://members.cox.net/eskin/sessiondynamics.html>

The Irish session is a common place for contra fiddlers to spend time learning repertoire and style. This description of how to successfully navigate the social dynamics of an open session demonstrates some of complexities of jam sessions including players of different abilities and mindsets and gives good advice on how *not* to act at a jam session.

Teachers

David Kaynor, Montague Massachusetts. davidkaynor@mac.com

Becky Tracy, Brattleboro Vermont. fiddler@sover.net

Lissa Schneckenburger, Brattleboro Vermont. lissafiddle@gmail.com

Mary Lea, Brattleboro Vermont. marylea@sover.net

Rodney Miller, Antrim New Hampshire. miller@mcttelecom.com

Carol Bittenson, Boston, Massachusetts. carol@bittenson.com

Van Kaynor, Amherst Massachusetts. vankaynor@gmail.com

Ethan Hazzard-Watkins, Brattleboro Vermont. ethan@ethanhw.com

These are only a few of the fiddle teachers in the New England area. For more ideas, attend a local contra dance and see if you like what you hear!

About practicing

Music for the Joy of it

by Stephanie Judy

Advice for amateurs. Some thoughts on playing by ear and motivation as well as many inspiring quotes and ideas from amateurs throughout history. This book is the most applicable to fiddle music players, because of the focus on amateurs. The other two books about practicing are directed more towards classical playing professionals.

The Art of Practicing: a Guide to Making Music from the Heart

by Madeline Bruser

Presents a ten-step approach for running an effective practice session. Also includes advice on how to incorporate spontaneity, expressiveness, and generally feeling good.

Practicing for Artistic Success: the Musician's Guide to Self-empowerment

by Burton Kaplan

Focuses on practice management techniques and provides advice on memorization, imaging, using the metronome effectively, and developing good intonation. Kaplan uses a broad definition of practice and identifies twelve different types of practicing.

A Practice Strategy: Dotted rhythm variations

An alone practice technique used to workshop small passages that are tricky. This strategy works all the possible note connections at faster and slower speeds to improve the flow from one note to another.

Example: Wissahickon Drive, by Liz Carroll (first two measures only)

Original

The original notation consists of two measures of music in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 4/4 time signature. The first measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The second measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4.

Variation 1

Variation 1 consists of two measures of music in treble clef, key of D major, and 4/4 time signature. The first measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The second measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4.

Variation 2

Variation 2 consists of two measures of music in treble clef, key of D major, and 6/8 time signature. The first measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The second measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4.

Variation 3

Variation 3 consists of two measures of music in treble clef, key of D major, and 4/4 time signature. The first measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The second measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4.

Variation 4

Variation 4 consists of two measures of music in treble clef, key of D major, and 6/8 time signature. The first measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The second measure contains a sequence of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4.

Variation 5

Appendix D: Tune Learning Supplements

Tune patterns
The tune learning process

Tune patterns

Fiddlers learn to “pick up” tunes by becoming familiar with two types of tune patterns: structural patterns and specific phrase patterns.

Structural patterns involve the arrangement of phrases in the tune. Almost all tunes played for contra dances follow an AABB form, so one phrase of eight bars repeated and then another.⁵²

Within that, common A-parts and B-parts look like this: abac, abab,
The most common tune pattern is: abab abac dedf dedf (Wissahickon Drive, St. Joseph’s)

Another common tune pattern is: abac abac deac deac (Road to Rio)

Variations on that include: abac abac dedf dega (Farrel O’Gara’s)

abac abac dedf gbac (Trip to Durrow)

abcd abcd efed efed (Garret Bary’s)

“b” and “c” parts, as well as “e” and “f” parts, tend to be similar, so much so that “c” is often “b-prime.” Often the earlier phrase (b, e) will end unresolved, not ending on the tonic note. The later phrase (c, f) will be similarly structured to the earlier one, but will resolve on the tonic note, or at least to a tonic chord.

Specific phrase patterns are specific phrases that occur in many tunes. Phrase endings are an especially common specific phrase pattern. Many specific phrase patterns are pentatonic, scalar, or arpeggiated. Specific phrase patterns of certain kinds are more common in different traditional fiddle genres.

Beware of these written versions of tunes – these are *not* the tunes. They are just skeletons of the tunes. To hear or learn a tune, try a recording or ideally, a dance.

⁵² For this analysis, upper-case letters refer to 8-bar phrases, the parts of the tune, and lower-case letters refer to 4-bar phrases.

Structural pattern examples

Saint Joseph's Reel: abac abac dedf dedf (from thesession.org)

The musical notation for Saint Joseph's Reel is presented in four staves. The first staff contains two measures labeled 'a' and 'b'. The second staff contains two measures labeled 'a' and 'c'. The third staff contains two measures labeled 'd' and 'e'. The fourth staff contains two measures labeled 'd' and 'f'. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Road to Rio: abac abac dedf deac (from thesession.org)

The musical notation for Road to Rio is presented in four staves. The first staff contains two measures labeled 'a' and 'b'. The second staff contains two measures labeled 'a' and 'c'. The third staff contains two measures labeled 'd' and 'e'. The fourth staff contains two measures labeled 'a' and 'b'. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Specific phrase pattern example

Opening Phrases: Road to Rio (above) and Wissahickon Drive (below)

The musical notation compares the opening phrases of Road to Rio (top staff) and Wissahickon Drive (bottom staff). Both phrases start with the same four-note intervallic pattern: a whole step up, a half step up, a whole step up, and a half step up. The key signature for Road to Rio is one sharp (F#), while for Wissahickon Drive it is two sharps (F# and C#). The time signature is 4/4.

Although the tunes are in different keys, the pattern of the first four notes in the first measure is the same in terms of intervals. Starting on the fifth scale degree, going up a whole step to the sixth, then skipping to the tonic and the second degree, this is a common pentatonic pattern found in many fiddle tunes.

The tune learning process

Recording 5 is an example of a fiddler (myself) “picking up” a tune. By the end, I have the skeleton of the tune and many of the details (ornaments, special endings, etc). I have not yet crafted a satisfactory version of my own, but I “know” the tune generally. In the recording, you will hear Josh Van Vliet on guitar and Rebecca McCallum as the leading fiddler, teaching me the tune.

The first time through the tune, I listened. The second time through, I got the general shape, when it moves up and down, and hit a few notes and phrases. The third time, I was able to nail the opening and closing pieces and the fourth time, I filled in the gaps. On the transcription below, the first number indicates which time through the tune the measure or phrase was attempted successfully and the second number indicates whether it was the first repetition in the AABB form or the second. 3(1) in measure 1 means the third time through, during the first A part.

Split Rock, by Kevin Burke, as learned from Rebecca McCallum
Tune structure: abcd abcd efed efed

The image shows a musical transcription of the tune 'Split Rock' in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The transcription is divided into four staves, each representing a different time through the learning process. Annotations above the notes indicate when a measure or phrase was successfully learned and whether it was the first or second repetition. The first staff shows the initial attempts at measures 1, 2, 3, and 4. The second staff shows the second attempt at measures 1, 2, 3, and 4. The third staff shows the third attempt at measures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. The fourth staff shows the fourth attempt at measures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. The tune structure is noted as abcd abcd efed efed.

As the transcription of the process shows, the B part came much faster than the A part, perhaps because it is more generically major and therefore more familiar. The patterns in the B part are also more repetitive, resulting in less material to learn overall (only “e” and “f” are new material).

Measure four of the A part proved especially difficult. My attention kept bypassing this place in order to hit more clear landmarks until the fourth time when I actively tuned into that measure. In particular, phrase beginnings and endings jumped out earlier on and were easier to grasp.

Appendix E: Recordings and video notes

Recordings 1-5

Videos 1-2

These descriptions are to give the reader a deeper understanding of the music. The recordings of dances are somewhat muddled and so the listener can get a real sense of the dance hall complete with the caller's voice, the dancers talking and moving, uneven amplification and poor sound quality.

Recording 1

Recorded Spring 2007, at the Grange in Greenfield, Massachusetts

Performers: Dave Langford (fiddle), Peter Seigel (mandolin), Peter Barnes (guitar)

The first sound that stands out is a ta-ka-tam rhythm tapped by Dave's feet. This comes from the French-Canadian fiddle tradition and has become a popular way of adding rhythmic drive to tunes at contra dances. The tune, "Celina," is a French-Canadian one so the foot-tapping is especially apt.

The fiddle and mandolin start on the melody together and then each take one time through the melody with the other person backing them up. When Dave takes his solo, for example, Peter (Seigel) plays an ascending line of longer notes starting around 1:20. Then, they move into a form of trading smaller pieces of the melody. Improvisation and variation become more apparent as each musician plays around with the tune, making up their own line or accenting the tune in different ways.

The voice of the caller can be clearly heard in the background. There's a balance at the top of the B1 which is accented by the tune and the musician's playing of the tune.

Recording 2

Recording Spring 2007, at the Scout House in Concord, Massachusetts

Performers: Dave Cantieni (flute), Mary Lea (fiddle), Jack O'Connor (mandolin), Peter Barnes (piano), Cal Howard (bass)

The recording starts with "four potatoes," an opening four beats which set the tempo for the dance. The tune, "the Wren," is of Breton origin but often adopted by Irish players. The tune has more of a march sensibility to it, which can be used for dance figures like "down the hall" where dancers march in a line together.

The first time and second time through the tune, the flute and fiddle share the lead, playing slightly different versions of the tune, especially at the phrase endings. The third time (1:10) the fiddle takes more of a lead with the flute backing up. The flute sometimes lands on the melody, sometimes plays long notes or short phrases around it, sometimes harmonies. The mandolin provides texture and chords throughout.

Recording 3

Extension of Recording 1

Recorded Spring 2007, at the Grange in Greenfield, Massachusetts

Performers: Dave Langford (fiddle), Peter Seigel (mandolin), Peter Barnes (guitar)

This clip demonstrates some exemplary improvising. First, the mandolin player plays one phrase of the tune alternating with one phrase of improvisation. When the fiddle takes the lead, he mixes up new versions of the tune (less notey version) with improvisations in a more loosely structured manner. Both players join in a swingy variation of the B part of the tune for the last time through and improvise to end up an octave above the original melody.

Improvisation mainly stems from the melody, through variation. There are moments when the playing gets pretty far from the recognizable tune but still fits stylistically and chord-wise.

Recording 4

Recorded September 2009, Brattleboro Vermont

Player: Ethan Hazzard-Watkins

Ethan talks about his practicing of the tune “Popcorn” and demonstrates his strategies for approaching a small passage. See Part 2 - Chapter 1 for more information.

Recording 5

Recorded March 2010, Middletown Connecticut.

Players: Rebecca McCallum, Emily Troll, Josh Van Vliet

Rebecca McCallum teaches Emily Troll a new tune at tempo, with back-up provided by Josh Van Vliet. See Appendix D: Tune Supplements for more information.

Video 1: Contra 1 Part 1 - Concord Scout House 2007-12-20

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnVoYXPCpXA&feature=related>

The Scout House is a popular venue for contra dances in Concord, Massachusetts. The hall houses at least two dances a week, sometimes three. This dance features the band Magic Foot with Brendan Taaffe on guitar, Colin Lindsay on fiddle, Chris Stevens on accordion, and Stefan Amidon on percussion. The band intentionally plays chunky tunes to match the balance figures (when the dancers stomp into the circle and out).

Video 2: VT Contra Dance

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9L0dz3qmsc>.

This video demonstrates a more flowy dance, accompanied by a driving tune. The music is by Elixir: Anna Patton, Ethan Hazzard-Watkins, Jesse Hazzard-Watkins, Nils Fredland and Owen Morrison

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