

## *Music from the Heart: Compositions of a Folk Fiddler.* Colin Quigley.

Gordon E. Smith

Volume 16, Number 1, Spring 2000

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds16\\_1rv05](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds16_1rv05)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Smith, G. E. (2000). Review of [*Music from the Heart: Compositions of a Folk Fiddler.* Colin Quigley.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 16(1), 98–100.

*Music from the Heart: Compositions of a Folk Fiddler.* Colin Quigley. Athens, Georgia & London, UK: The University of Georgia Press, xiii, 273 p., ill., notes, bibliographical essay, index, 1995, cloth, US\$35.00. ISBN 0-8203-1637-7

## GORDON E. SMITH

THIS BOOK is an informed and engaging study of one of Newfoundland's most revered musicians, fiddler Emile Benoit (1912-1992). Written by Colin Quigley, a graduate of the folklore program at Memorial University (M.A.) and the University of California (Ph.D in folklore and mythology), the book is the result of Quigley's extensive fieldwork with Benoit dating from 1978. *Music from the Heart* is one of an emerging corpus of monographs in folklore and ethnomusicology in which individual experience is taken as a framework for the examination of creativity. Whereas considerable information about musical and social features of fiddling traditions can be learned from various published and unpublished sources, there is little known about the individual fiddlers who are the representatives and disseminators of these traditions. Drawn from models in ethnography, folklore, and ethnomusicology, Quigley's portrait of Emile Benoit blends analysis of the "generative processes" (composition) in his music making with the shifting social, political, and individual factors of Benoit's experience as a musician. Within these contexts, Benoit is considered as a representative as well as a creator of Newfoundland identity.

*Music from the Heart* has five chapters with extensive endnotes demonstrating Quigley's knowledge of a wide range of pertinent literature. This is also borne out

in the book's bibliography and the accompanying bibliographic essay in which Quigley reviews research and publications on fiddling traditions, as well as creativity, tradition, and the folk performer. As Quigley points out in the book's preface, this study emerged from his relationship with Benoit, whom he first met in the summer of 1978 when he drove across Newfoundland from St. John's to Benoit's home on the Port-au-Port peninsula. The reflexive nature of this relationship is a fundamental theme in the book. In Quigley's words: "At the heart of this study is a student-teacher relationship that grew into one of mutual exploration as Emile responded to my questions about his creative process." (22) "The Research Relationship" is discussed in the first chapter ("My Son, I had a Hard Life Story: Emile Benoit, the Man and the Musician"), as is Benoit's "life story", which Quigley relates through an effective combination of his own and Benoit's words. Here, for example, we are told of Benoit's large family, his start in music, and his wide ranging other interests (e.g., veterinarian, folk medicine). In addition, Quigley observes that Benoit's musical identity was shaped by, and established within, his local tradition before the arrival of outside influences transmitted through various media. He also notes that Benoit sometimes "performed" his life stories, expressing personal experiences through music. Quigley emphasizes how, for Benoit, performing and composing were connected: "Emile's role as a composer developed as an extension of his activities as a performer." (18)

In the second chapter entitled "'There's a Spirit in the Violin' A Musical Worldview," Quigley discusses ideas of music making as they relate to other dimensions of personality, life experience, and social identity. Benoit's distinctions of style and classification — Irish, Scottish, Canadian, American, French, and Newfoundland — are considered, as are meanings of music in individual, local, and comparative perspectives. For Benoit, fiddling could be a metaphor for conversation, dreams, or the supernatural. This contextual discussion is the backdrop for the following two chapters, (3) "Catching Rhymes: Compositional Processes" and (4) "Fingers and Bow: Repertoire and Style" in which Quigley analyzes aspects of Benoit's compositional practice and style. These are core chapters of the study in that it is here that Quigley provides a detailed, convincing examination of the musical thought processes of a creator in a traditional idiom, thereby redressing the lacunae of such studies referred to in the preface (x). Quigley points out that Benoit's compositional process is quite distinct from his performances. Composing is not a haphazard exercise, but rather is characterized by Quigley as a creative process based on "aural composition". Conceiving music without the aid of musical notation, Benoit would develop a musical idea "... through a combination of experimentation, evaluation, and modification in a cyclic process to produce a fixed melody." (67) He would then rehearse the piece to fix it in his memory, title it, and perform it. Depending on audience reaction, Benoit would modify it, retain it in his repertoire by occasionally calling it up from memory and playing it, or abandon it. In chapter 3, Quigley also discusses Benoit's compositional processes within the

context of related areas (e.g., tune family concept), invoking the work of Samuel Bayard, Bertrand Bronson, and more recently, James Cowdery and Jeff Titon. Chapter 4 contains a selection of Benoit's compositions transcribed by Quigley, along with his analyses of their musical style formulated on considerations of Benoit's creative processes. Such analysis based on links between composition and the style of the sound product is rare and insightful, and is one of the fine features of the book.

In the book's final chapter, "So That My Story Will Live On: Fiddle Performance from House and Hall to Stage and Screen", Quigley examines Benoit's musical experience from the emergent perspectives of local, traditional performing contexts, hall and house "times", and dances, through the folk revival movement in Newfoundland dating from the 1960s, fuelled by the influence of mass media North American culture. Concomitant with this were government efforts to promote Newfoundland identity through "highly visible forms of expressive culture, especially music and song." (202) This is reflected in the diversification of Benoit's performance contexts to include clubs, stage, lecture-demonstration, radio, television, and film. As Quigley points out, because of his versatility and love of music and performing, Benoit adapted his repertoire and manner of performance to these new situations, becoming one of Newfoundland's most well-known exponents of cultural identity.

In much of *Music from the Heart*, Quigley integrates his own commentary with that of Benoit through the inclusion of excerpts from his and others' field tapes. These are carefully referenced, and Quigley has made a complete list of archival sources which appears at the end of the bibliography. Also of interest are the many photographs throughout the book. In addition to these textual features, as well as points mentioned above, *Music from the Heart* stands out as a study in which the author has inverted ways of viewing individual musical experience: "This perspective on the relationship of creator to tradition has been reversed in this study by focussing instead on how a particular musician used his tradition for intentionally innovative expression within the context of a changing musical milieu." (207) With this innovative perspective and its combination of musical and contextual analyses, Quigley's book is a convincing addition to folklore and ethnomusicological studies centered around individual musical experience, as well as to the burgeoning literature on Newfoundland.