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“You Never Think to Lose The ‘Nyah’ . . .”: Retention and Change in a Fiddler’s Tradition*

Patrick HUTCHINSON

Music always appears in a social setting, and the musician playing traditional music in an urban environment is at the centre of an especially complex configuration of socio-cultural and musical currents. There is the tension within his or her particular tradition between the dynamic and the conservative, that is, between the idiosyncratic musical practice of the individual and the stylistic norms maintained by the community of players and listeners. Additionally, there is the enormous variety of musical styles that surrounds and inundates the ears of the city-dweller. In its home setting, the varieties of resolution of this tension depend on the degree of insularity of, and the value placed on, novelty or stability in that tradition, both of which vary with time and place. With an immigrant tradition, this insularity is, of course, particularly open to erosion.

Given exposure to a multiplicity of musical styles, a musician has the *possibility*, at least, of expanding his musical practice to include the stylistic and physical means (e.g., ‘given’ musical forms and instruments) of other traditions. In the city, one is rarely tied uniquely to one social group, and so there may be a concomitant diminution of the influence of the smaller traditional group over the individual, and an appeal to a wider audience. At the other extreme, the musician may be forced to question the appropriateness of con-

*This paper is a revised version of one read at the 1986 Annual Meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. I am indebted to Prof. Carole Carpenter and Prof. Bob Witmer for their invaluable criticism, and of course, to Mr. Denis Moroney of Montreal, with whom I had the pleasure of talking and “swapping a few grace-notes” in 1984 and 1985. The information and quotations in this paper are drawn from those conversations.

tinuing his or her tradition at all. This paper attempts to situate the individual musical response of one particular fiddle-player in relation to these many variables.

Denis Moroney was born in Feakle, a village in East Clare, Ireland, in 1910. He worked on his father's farm until he left for Canada in 1930. Music seems to have been a very common part of his life in Ireland—Denis remembers singing ballads and airs while working out in the fields until his voice broke, which means he must have been fairly young. He started going to dances and house-parties in his teens, took up the concertina and, from his own account, was a quite highly regarded musician. He switched to fiddle after three or four years, by which time he already had a good repertoire of tunes which he translated onto the fiddle, apparently very quickly, indeed: "I had the fiddle for seven days and I played for seven square-dances on it!" Musicians for barn-dances and house-parties in the wintertime were in great demand:

You played for the dancing, and you used to never be in the same house two nights in a row for three months, and sleep in a different bed every night, travel all over the country, you know. And in the fall of the year you'd get invitations and you'd set up your schedule. There was no money in it, but there was a lot of booze and a lot of fun.

In a rural setting such as the one in which Denis grew up, community identity was explicit in much of the seasonal agricultural work, which required the co-operation of the local community. In winter, however, when these activities were temporarily in abeyance, this community identity was expressed through the shared celebration of its traditional music, dance and song, where the history, aesthetics and emotional life of the community were embodied. The musicians in such communities had, therefore, an important social function.

Denis moved to an industrialized North American city—Montreal—in 1930, when he was twenty years old. There was, and is, an Irish community in Montreal, and there were occasional dances held, but coming from many different parts of Ireland, the community identity of the Irish in Montreal was not as strong as that of the typical rural Irish village. As a result, the social legitimization for Denis' playing, which has been so strong in Ireland, did not exist, and he does not seem to have found, or sought, an audience outside of the Irish community. The lack of an appreciative audience was not the only reason for his fiddling taking a backseat—it was accompanied by a drastic revaluation of time, dictated by the economic necessity of adapting to work that was not linked to the land and to the

seasons. Denis' skills as a farm-labourer in animal husbandry, butchering and 'cattle-doctoring', not to mention knowing how to cut hair and sharpen a razor, were as inappropriate in Montreal as his fiddling:

But when you get into the city you get into other kinds of jobs, the city and the country, it's two different things. You did whatever you could - shovel snow, work on the streets, anything. There were no jobs in those days. You couldn't buy a job, it's not like today. I was lucky I bumped into a few people that helped me out.

Denis went on to study engineering, and was a plant and maintenance engineer until he retired.

After his arrival in Canada, he played only sporadically over a period of thirty years, and the relegation of his fiddling to the status of frivolous pursuit by economic demands is evident in some of his remarks:

I didn't play for thirty years to speak of. I didn't own a fiddle. I was too damn busy. What you have to do, you know, you have to decide what you're going, how you're going to make a living. That's what I done. I didn't bum around playing the fiddle, you know.

It is important to point out here that Denis' giving up the fiddle was not simply a part of the common pattern of giving up the pursuits of youth as one matures—he was, after all, only twenty when he emigrated—but rather a result of his interaction with the particular network of social contacts (which afford the musician the opportunities to continue playing) that was in place in Montreal when he arrived. Had he arrived in Montreal in the last ten years or so, as I did, he would have found a different network, one that extended beyond the Irish community, and within which there were more opportunities, including remunerative ones, to play.

Those times that he did play in this thirty-year period were usually occasioned by encounters with other musicians, rather than the dances which had formed the larger part of his musical activities in Ireland. His fiddling thus became a medium for shared reminiscences of Ireland and, presumably to some extent, a personal affirmation of his Irish identity in a then predominantly English city in a French province:

Of course for me it's great. . .it has that rhythm and that 'jizz' to it. What's in Irish music it's very hard to say. You know, if you come from Ireland, naturally you like it, and if I hear some of it on the radio, my ears are cocked up, you know, perk up to listen to it 'cause I was brought up with it.

Two of the consequences of Denis' emigration—the demands on his time for adjusting to new economic circumstances and the lack

of social legitimization for his playing—can be seen to have had a direct effect on his music-making: he played less often, and when he did play, he played for listening rather than for dancing.

Mainstream Irish traditional music has undergone a similar, if more gradual change with the decline of dancing, with a resulting change of emphasis in instrumental music towards the development of technique in solo playing—melodic variation, use of ornamentation, and so on. These more virtuoso aspects of instrumental playing were of course always present, to a greater or lesser degree, in the playing of some individuals, but were of secondary importance when playing for dancing, where the most important thing was good rhythmic unison:

In the old days it was everybody dug in and sawed away, and everybody was doing the same thing. They used to play them the same when I was young, the tunes, the same tune. . .if you made anything, if you played it different, well you'd mean to say you didn't know how to play—you were making a mistake. In the old days they'd play a tune, and that was it.

Denis made it clear, however, that playing for dancing and playing for listening did differ:

If you were playing just for listening, it's a little bit different than playing for dancing, you know, you play it more for effect, and it's nice to be able to play it for effect and then jack it up if you have to. To gear it up a bit. . . a little bit of change-up if you wanted to swing it round. It is obvious that the playing techniques necessary to be able to do "a little bit of change-up" did not magically appear as soon as dancing declined; rather they were part and parcel of the fiddler's technique. Within the context of playing for dancing such techniques took the drudgery out of playing the same tune over and over. With the change in context to that of music for listening, they became more the primary material of the fiddler. Denis learned to play this way by ear; It seems to be instinctive up to a point: I learned it from doing, hearing somebody else do it. It was monkey-see, monkey-do and, er, you do it and, er, you get the knack of doing it.

Denis maintains that the way he plays was typical of East Clare fiddling. In Ireland, he reminded me, access to other fiddling styles was limited by how far you could go in a day on a horse or a bicycle. This geographically-based isolation within rural Ireland became, when he emigrated, the larger geographical and cultural isolation of an Irishman in Montreal, at least as far as personal encounters with other musicians went. Irish musicians in Montreal were few and far between, and he was never really exposed to or influenced by Québécois fiddling, which fact Denis attributes to his never having learned to speak French. This latter can also be seen to be a consequence of the particular social situation in place at the time of his arrival—the social

divisions between anglophone and francophone in Montreal are much less rigid today, and in my experience, at least, lack of linguistic competence appears to present no barrier to communication among musicians playing traditional music.

Although Denis has used written sources, such as *O'Neill's Music of Ireland*,¹ since he started playing, and continues to do so, this use has been for the purpose of the expansion of repertoire. It is obvious from his playing that the standardization of rhythm, pitch and scale so common until recently in transcriptions of Irish music, as well as the inaccuracies of O'Neill's notation of ornaments, are largely ignored. When the tune is 'learned' from notation, the notes on the staff provide just a bare skeleton. It is the style of the player—the pitch inflections, the use of ornaments, dynamics and melodic variation, and the nuances of rhythm and phrasing—that puts the flesh on the bones and makes it *sound* distinctively Irish, and (more accurately) distinctively 'Denis Moroney'. Denis learned to play this way by ear, and the audible quality of this playing style (what we might call an internalized sound ideal) he refers to as the 'nyah':

...they reckoned that if you learned from paper you couldn't play, you couldn't get the 'nyah' and the accents you see, these nuances, these shaded notes, sliding graces. They felt this was all something you couldn't write, you couldn't put it on paper.

They're modal tunes, a heck of a lot up there, modal. I've tried some tunes that I tried to tell somebody, you know, it's ... in the book it's B flat, but you know after you smarten up it's not in B flat, it's in the B flat mode.

Denis is familiar to some extent with the language of classical music theory:

...all about rhythms and harmonies and all these things, you know, there's lots of things in music. I've read up a bit about it, you know, the, all the different chords and so on, you know, the fourths and the fifths and the thirds and the minors and the majors and what have you.

He has also read more technical descriptions of what goes into the style of Irish music (such as those of Miles Krassen in his revision of *O'Neill's*)² but it is a mode of discourse that has not 'taken'. He prefers to talk directly about the sounds in question, often using onomatopoeia. A hornpipe with a long series of 'triplets', for example, is "one of those things that had all this doodly-doodly", which

1. Originally published in Chicago, 1903.

2. *O'Neill's Music of Ireland. New and revised by Miles Krassen.* New York, Oak Publications, 1970.

is quite an accurate rendition of the rhythm involved. In a similar fashion, he refers to the intricacies of Uilleann piper Patsy Tuohey's staccato ornaments as "bedaddlin'." His appraisals of other fiddlers' playing are expressed in non-technical, down-to-earth language:

[Sean Maguire] never played a bad note in his life unless he was loaded. It was a sharp was a sharp and a flat was a flat . . . he was very correct. There may be the odd note that's not quite perfect, but he goes all over the fingerboard, all over the strings, up, positions, five or six, pyro- what do you call it, pyrotechnic.

[Kevin Burke] is the smooth one.

[Michael Coleman] was pretty strict and precise.

[Jean Carignan] can handle a fiddle, he can really knock hell out of it.

[Leo Brown] was a pretty good man with a fiddle.

[Jim McKillop] done a great job on that.

For Dennis some of the qualities which constitute good fiddling, and which we can abstract from these comments, such as smoothness, strictness, correctness and precision, derive from the demands of playing for dancing, and there is also the idea of the fiddler as craftsman. His concern with the *sound* of the music is again evident in his comments about the man he considered his mentor in Ireland, Johnny Allen:

He was a very precise and very sweet player, there was nothing harsh or noisy about it, and when he played you could hear it a mile away across the valley of an evening when it was quiet, it used to carry. He knew how to get the sing-song out of it, he used to make it sing.

His description of the playing of the young Ottawa Valley fiddler, Denis Lanctot, neatly sums up his ideal conception of playing technique and is an equally apt description of his own fiddling:

A good mixture, the right amount, he knows how to ornament and he knows when to lay off and play it, and he changes up a bit too, you know, he doesn't play it always exactly the same.

His comments on jazz highlight the difference between the amounts and kinds of improvisation in jazz and Irish music:

Well, yeah, you know, jazz, some of the jazz-players, you know, well they take you round by Pointe-aux-Trembles and they bring you back by Victoria Bridge, you know, but they always bring you back home. They wander away with all this improvisation, and I don't like it too much. I like to be in touch with the tune a little more than that, you know.

Denis himself attributes the resilience of his own playing style to his having learned it by ear. When I asked him about the effect on his playing of a thirty-year gap, and about his starting to play again regularly, he replied:

It was just before the sixties, I played a little bit, I'd play at the odd dance-hall and rasp away, you know. You don't lose it all, especially if you picked it up young and by ear, it stays with you more than if you learn, anything that you learn from the paper you've got to watch it or you lose it.

No, well, you never think to lose the 'nyah', the twang, it's like a brogue, it's hard to lose, and you have a way of playing the fiddle they had a 'nyah' to it, you see, and that's the 'nyah' that, that the fellow doesn't seem to be able to lose.

But for me a style of playing is just like an accent. With accents you could tell within a ten-mile distance where he was from, each one has their own drawl, their own accent, and the Irish fiddling used to be the very same way, because in the old days people didn't get around that much, the transportation wasn't there, you only had a bicycle or a horse, so they never went into the next county, they all had their own thing going, and every county was different.

Denis' generation was probably the last to display this geographic specificity of style, as a result of the increased access for musicians in their formative years to regionally diverse stylistic orientations through records, radio, T.V., and increased personal mobility.

Denis has consciously adopted the odd stylistic nuance from the playing of other fiddlers and can point these out, but apart from such instances, his playing style appears to have remained largely unchanged. I happened by chance to hear an (unannounced) recording of him playing on the radio, and recognized his playing immediately. As the recording was made fifteen to twenty years ago, and if, as appeared to me to be the case, his playing has not changed in the interim (a period in which Irish music recordings and radio and T.V. shows have proliferated as never before, and of which Denis has been an avid consumer) then I think it is highly probably that the way he plays now is indeed very close to the way he played in County Clare in the Twenties.³

The main aspect of Denis' fiddling that has changed with increased access to recordings of other musicians, is, predictably, his repertoire. Having played a set learned from a recording of the Sligo fiddler, Michael Coleman, he observed:

I never played that when I was a kid, no. I didn't have that tune. The likes of "Lord Gordon's Reel", I didn't have that either when I was young, you know, you'd have a bunch of the old standard tunes, and, er, a couple of dozen tunes that you played. And then you hear a lot of players, a vari-

3. Rather than include highly detailed transcriptions in this paper, I would refer interested readers to the tapes of my interviews, which are on file in the Ontario Folklore-Folklife Archive, c/o Prof. Carole Carpenter, 222 Winters College, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Downsview, Ontario.

ety of people, you know, they're searching to find something different, you know, they get sick and tired of playing the same old tune.

With the advent of recording technology, not only did the repertoire broaden, but new trends in performance practice were introduced, such as playing medleys of tunes, and mixing metres in the same set. The latter would have been unthinkable when playing for a dance. These trends became common practice with the change from music for dancing to music for listening. As Denis put it:

. . .once they're playing it for records and entertainment and so on, they're putting a little bit of variety into it. They're better able to orchestrate it today. Today, well the different instruments that they have, well, more variety of instruments in Irish music, like the bouzouki, and you can even go and have an oboe or anything, a saxophone. They're much better than they used to be. . .some of this Irish music today, it sounds really good. And they mix the tempos, the 9/8 and the 6/8, and they can turn round and play a jig and then bang away in reel time. And they're able to put a bit of a dramatic flair to it, well, The Chieftains, of course, are a bit of an example, their music has been used for fillums.

The influence of non-Irish music on Denis' playing has been minimal, both in terms of repertoire and of sound ideal. He told me that sometimes when he was alone he would attempt to play something other than Irish music. One example that he did play for me was in response to a request for a slow air, when he played John Denver's "Annie's Song", which he had learned from the playing of the Irish classical flautist, James Galway. Denis played the piece with the same 'nyah' as his Irish repertoire.

In conclusion, then, if we look briefly at fiddling from an abstract point of view, we can talk about it as an event involving a performer, a playing style, a text and a context. I have suggested here that in Denis' case the *playing style* has remained largely unchanged *in spite* of three of the consequences of his emigration, that is firstly, the removal of the social legitimization for his playing, secondly, the demands on his time of adjusting to a new economic situation, and thirdly, the increased access and exposure to other musical styles. *Text* and *context*, however, have changed *because* of these same factors.

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