

# HOW 'TRADITIONAL' DO YOU WANT TO SOUND?

## Deconstructing Notions of Traditionalism in Cape Breton Fiddling

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### Abstract

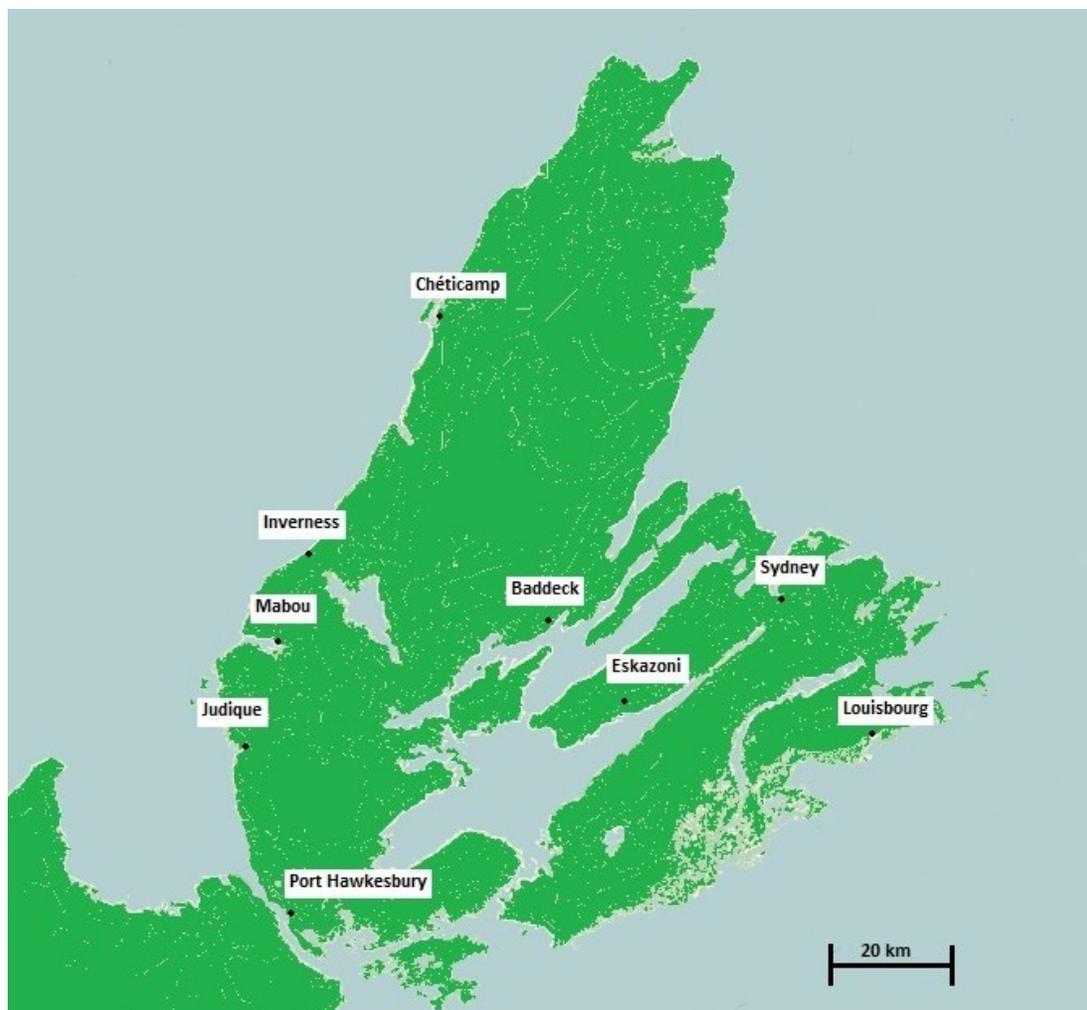
While traditionalism is highly valued among Cape Breton fiddlers today, commercialisation and experimentation are also prominent in today's scene. Innovation or traditionalism can be seen in terms of repertoire, musical arrangements, and accompaniment. Musicians are not passive products of their cultural environments, but rather shape their style based on their own personal tastes and values. If an individual is an ardent traditionalist, this is as much a conscious decision as becoming a modern innovator. These categories are neither absolute nor mutually exclusive; players can exist in both musical paradigms, having at times conflicting traditionalist and innovative musical personas that change according to performance contexts. Negotiating when to engage in which style of music-making can be important, since subverting established conventions while performing in some contexts may be inappropriate, but acceptable in others. This can be particularly relevant with respect to accompaniment, as accompanists contextualise the fiddler, often having the power to make a performance either traditional and conservative or unorthodox and experimental.

### Keywords

Accompaniment, Cape Breton fiddling, music, repertoire, tradition

### Introduction

Cape Breton traditional musicians often occupy a place of ambiguity between vernacular and professional contexts. On a vernacular level, the tradition is tied to community events such as house parties, weddings, and square dances. Musicians learn from and share with other players as tradition bearers. On a professional level, they are part of the commercial music industry that focuses on recordings and large-scale performances, a context in which a certain amount of musical experimentation is often expected. As a musician and studio producer in the Cape Breton traditional music scene, I have found that the question, "How 'traditional' do you want to sound?" is of the utmost importance to musicians. Their answers demonstrate an awareness of traditional and commercial influences, revealing a conscious decision to orient themselves in regard to these differing styles. My ethnographic fieldwork for this article featured extensive participant observation and personal interviews with musicians involved with the Cape Breton traditional music scene.



Map 1: Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada

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A number of scholars have discussed Cape Breton fiddling in vernacular or professional contexts (Doherty, 1996; Feintuch, 2004; Graham, 2006; Hennessey, 2008), but generally frame these contexts as unrelated. While commercial and vernacular contexts are certainly distinct, they are not entirely separate from one another either. Both worlds share many of the same actors; a musician may play on an international stage on one day and at a square dance the next. As such, many musicians learn to negotiate playing in both contexts, as well as the grey area between these extremes. This is a situation shared by many Celtic and folk musicians today. For instance, although Irish traditional music and Celtic music share a number of commonalities, Celtic music is primarily commercial in nature, while Irish traditional music is more accurately defined within a community context (Reiss, 2003). As such, Celtic music appropriates vernacular traditions that are refashioned in a globalised manner (Chapman, 1994).

A key aspect in defining the appropriateness of a performance is repertoire and accompaniment. In this way, a Cape Breton fiddle performance can change significantly according to context, having the power to frame the performer in different ways, be it as professional or as tradition bearer.

### A 'contemporary' style

If we are to discuss what is and is not 'traditional' (a distinction that is fluid in and of itself), we must first have a working definition of the tradition. The nature of tradition is much more complex than merely the preservation of cultural heritage. Folklorist Henry Glassie writes:

*If tradition is a people's creation out of their own past, its character is not stasis but continuity; its opposite is not change but oppression, the intrusion of a power that thwarts the course of development (2003: 177).*

Speaking specifically about Cape Breton fiddling, Burt Feintuch comments:

*Where some see continuity, others see old ways disintegrating as the music expands. Some see artistic growth and invention; others declaim that the music is deteriorating as it manifests contemporary musical ideas. No one seems to disagree, though, with the premise that the music is more robust than ever (2004: 74).*

What is and is not acceptable within the tradition is contested. In truth, there are a number of different definitions of the tradition. Some define the fiddling tradition in terms of ethnicity: as Scottish, or perhaps as a borrowed version thereof. Some consider it a new product of Cape Breton. Others define the tradition in terms of the Gaelic language, which associates the music with a very specific type of Scottishness and song traditions. The fiddling tradition is sometimes defined primarily as a dance tradition, relating it to both function and performance context. Scottish, Gaelic, and dance definitions are not necessarily at odds with each other; however, they each make subtle distinctions between group, region, ethnicity, and cultural capital.

All of these definitions have legitimacy, revealing the diversity that can be found within the tradition; there is not one history of Cape Breton fiddling but rather many histories. Michel de Certeau asserts that the writing of history is a subjective process; a history is shaped by the institutions that write it, cultural biases, and methodology (1988). As such, all of these perspectives demonstrate significant aspects of the tradition. Cape Breton fiddling is a multi-ethnic tradition, but is particularly influenced by the island's Scottish heritage.

To view contemporary and traditional fiddling styles as binaries, however, is an oversimplification. Although terms like 'traditional' and 'contemporary' imply such a divide, this is somewhat inaccurate. Instead, it is not unusual for musicians to be comfortable in both worlds. In this sense, they are not at odds with each other, but are instead two differing styles within a larger tradition. Similarly, dance scholar Pat Ballantyne maintains that 'newer style' Cape Breton step dancers may perform in a way that is significantly different from old style dancers, but,

*there is just as much of a desire for dancers to identify with the traditions of Cape Breton step dance and to retain what they feel are the most important characteristic aspects of those traditions (2008: 142).*

Unsurprisingly, the fiddling tradition shares much of these same interactions between styles as step dance. Musician, producer, and co-owner of a prominent Cape Breton recording studio (Lakewind Sound Studios), Fred Lavery offers, “A lot of fiddlers come in and they say, ‘I want to do something a little different, but not *too* different.’ <laughs> Not out there *too* far” (Interview with author, 21 January 2011).

Repertoire and accompaniment are key elements in contextualising a performance as ‘traditional’ or ‘modern.’ While notions of traditionalism are relative to accepted norms of a given context, this distinction can be much more subtle than one might think. Traditionally a duo consisting of a fiddler and piano accompanist, a ‘modern’ Cape Breton fiddle performance can sometimes be identified by rock band instrumentation like that supporting Ashley MacIsaac or Natalie MacMaster.<sup>1</sup> However, this ‘modern’ style is often performed with acoustic instruments as well. In this way, a modern performance is not merely determined by instrumentation, but also by the harmonic gestures and accompaniment patterns employed by such bands.

### Repertoire and tradition

The concept of tradition is strongly evoked with regard to repertoire, and the discussion of what tunes are ‘traditional’ addresses the varying nature of compositional style. This is closely tied to the context of the performance; for example, there are expectations of traditionalism at a dance, while a festival performance or commercial recording may be expected to be more cutting-edge. This is illustrated in Neil Rosenberg’s study of Canadian old-time fiddler, Don Messer, which demonstrates how Messer’s repertoire was carefully manipulated according to context; this ranged from recordings, to radio and television performances, to tune books (2002).

This negotiation of traditionalism through repertoire was evident at a performance with which I was involved during my fieldwork. Having been booked to perform on a BBC radio show, a fiddler and I had prepared a set list that would showcase her current repertoire, particularly her own more progressive compositions. This fiddler, Chrissy Crowley, is from a renowned fiddling family, and is known for her increasing departures from traditional Cape Breton fiddle arrangements. She often couples her compositions with arrangements that deliberately juxtapose her contemporary style with that which traditional fiddle enthusiasts would expect. Upon arriving at the BBC recording venue, Crowley was told that there was an expectation of a ‘traditional’ performance. She quickly dropped the majority of her own compositions, replacing them with standard tunes played by most other musicians, even though these standard tunes would not give an accurate representation of her repertoire as a contemporary composer. Although her usual repertoire is less conventional, by nature of her being a fiddler and tradition bearer, her own tunes are also part of the tradition. The decision to omit these compositions demonstrates her awareness of her position within the tradition and what she deemed to be appropriate or ‘traditional’ in this context. Instead of using the performance as an opportunity for commercial exposure, she aligned herself with consciously staged traditionalism simply through the tunes that she chose to play.

Repertoire can also be particularly important in shaping performances that are more commonplace. Fiddler Andrea Beaton explains how context affects her repertoire choice:

*I am definitely careful about what tunes I play at dances. Sometimes when I’m away playing, some of the choices I make are less dance tunes and more, maybe familiar to people away... or maybe, it depends on*

*who's accompanying me too. (...) I kind of adjust for the atmosphere* (Personal communication, 20 June 2012).

Both Crowley's and Beaton's careful considerations of repertoire demonstrate the interplay that takes place between performance context and repertoire. That is to say, the ways in which musicians conceptualise specific places, performance contexts, or even the tradition as a whole can directly affect their repertoire in a given situation. In addition, repertoire choice can also be indicative of audience expectations in particular settings. Such decisions can reflect what the performer understands as expected and appropriate for particular contexts, or at the very least, what he or she *believes* the audience expects.

It is worth noting that although recent compositions are not 'traditional' in the sense that they are not centuries old and part of the Cape Breton fiddle canon, a substantial amount of current repertoire is made of relatively recent compositions. In this way, one might have 'traditional' tunes in the sense that they are old, often pipe tunes or Gaelic songs, but one might also have 'traditional'-style tunes, which might be recently written. The fact that the distinction between the two is not readily apparent reveals the consistency of the melodic structures and idioms in the tradition.

While contemporary, progressive compositions may be more easily identified as 'untraditional,' they still rely on traditional musical elements enough to be identified as belonging to the tradition. What marks them as distinct, however, is their lack of predictability; these compositions subvert normative compositional practices. Fiddler Colin Grant offers, "It's hard to tell if we're being *deliberately* unconventional, or simply not following conventions" (Interview with author, 8 June 2012). Compositions in this style often include uncommon chord substitutions, extensive syncopation, irregular metres, and idioms atypical of the tradition. Their lack of predictability often requires rehearsal, as they may be less intuitive for other performers than more standard tunes.

Commenting on Grant's modern compositional style, fiddler and multi-instrumentalist J.P. Cormier explains,

*(Colin Grant) is going to contemporise the way we think of composition. Because he's making tunes right now that are just frigging amazing. And they're staying true to this art form. That's what's so scary about him. He can write a tune and it sounds brand new. It sounds contemporary, but you can hear all the influences of this (the roots of the tradition) in what he's playing* (Interview with author, 8 June 2012).

Cormier's comments further exemplify both the separation and connection between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' compositions. The tunes by Grant that Cormier discusses are typically played in non-traditional settings—particularly with the Celtic rock group Sprag Session—yet these newer, less idiomatic compositions are still identified by fellow musicians as belonging to the Cape Breton fiddling tradition.

This distinction between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' composition illustrates Thomas Turino's framework of the "live performance fields" of music making: participatory and presentational music (2008). He describes participatory music making as primarily a social activity, with little distinction between the performer and audience. Participatory music is designed to be predictable, requiring little to no rehearsal so as to encourage music making amongst a wide range of individuals. Presentational music, on the other hand, makes a clear distinction between performer and audience, is less predictable and highly arranged. It takes little imagination to equate participatory music with 'traditional' fiddling performance at a house party and presentational music with a 'contemporary' performance on the international stage. There is, of course, a considerable grey area between these two extremes. While Turino's framework distinguishes between these

two fields, it is important to keep in mind that he did not intend for these categories to be absolute or mutually exclusive, and describes them as existing on a continuum, with performances often including aspects of both fields (2008: 87-88). In the context of Cape Breton fiddling, this is frequently the case. Even the most informal and ‘participatory’ of performances can still be understood as a formal presentation of one’s skill and prowess to fellow tradition bearers. Conversely, even the most formal concert performance implicitly includes a degree of participation, albeit considerably less than other contexts.

### Negotiating and framing a performance

While repertoire is a significant aspect of traditionalism, much of what is ‘traditional’ or ‘contemporary’ about a performance is also determined by accompaniment. For example, an accompaniment that relies extensively on ideas taken from modern jazz or funk frames a performance very differently than do the walking bass lines and chord progressions of more ‘traditional’ accompaniment. A significant part of ‘contemporary’ accompaniment practices is linked to both European traditional music and commercial recordings. Perhaps the first example of such an accompaniment style was found on Jerry Holland’s landmark recording, *Master Cape Breton Fiddler* (1982), which is acknowledged as the first recording for which Cape Breton fiddling was formally arranged. A significant influence on this album was the traditional Irish bands Planxty and The Bothy Band. This more static style of modal harmony—which relies on pedal points—was used extensively on this recording, and is very similar to much of the ‘modern’ accompaniment that exists today. Hilda Chiasson, the piano player on *Master Cape Breton Fiddler*, shared her experience of encountering such a carefully arranged version of the fiddling tradition:

*Jerry’s second album was the first one that I worked on, and that was the first time I ever used chord charts. Three days before the record was made, Dave MacIsaac and Jerry sat down and wrote out the charts, and I was a pile of nerves. But we went through it pretty well with no problems* (cited in MacGillivray, 1988: 174).

Formal arrangements became more common in the 1990s among musicians such as the Barra MacNeils, the Rankin Family, Ashley MacIsaac, and Natalie MacMaster. This trend has continued over the past decade, with instrumental groups such as Slainte Mhath, Beolach and, more recently, Sprag Session further exploring the arranging possibilities within a band setting. Although Doherty suggests that the “band format” may be the result of Cape Breton traditional musicians submitting to pressures of commercialism (1996: 255-256), popular and traditional music are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories. Individual agency and artistic expression should not be overlooked. For instance, ethnomusicologist and music theorist Jeffrey Hennessey asserts that the accompaniment “grooves” used in Cape Breton fiddling have much in common with rock grooves, making them naturally compatible (2008).

It is evident that accompaniment and arrangement are closely linked; although the arrangements of a commercial recording are carefully planned, accompaniment in a live context can be understood as improvised arranging. Moreover, particularly influential recordings become inspiration for future performances within the musical community, making the various musical gestures and elements of the arrangements source material for live accompaniment.

Fiddlers have the power of framing a performance through repertoire but the accompanist has the power to contextualise the performance. This reminds us that context can be as important in the construction of meaning as the text itself. For example, the meaning of serious exchange can be reframed entirely as

tongue-in-cheek with a wink or a smile. In the Cape Breton fiddling tradition, there is a clear hierarchy. This can be seen semiotically: while fiddles appear as prominent signifiers of Cape Breton music and culture, the piano does not take on a comparable status despite the importance of piano accompaniment in the tradition. This is also mirrored in attitudes held by some musicians that the piano should take a purely supporting role, never distracting from the fiddle. The fiddler often has complete control over tempo and repertoire choice, something quite significant when one considers that it is rare, if not unheard of, to rehearse for most local fiddling gigs.

In this way, we can see that although fiddlers and accompanists may appear to be unequal, this hierarchy is not permanently fixed; there is still interplay and exchange between them. Michel Foucault reminds us that power is something that is rarely entirely asymmetrical; power relations are frequently fluid and unstable, which makes the negotiation of power a key aspect of much interaction (1997: 292). Fiddler Chrissy Crowley discusses the negotiation that takes place between fiddler and accompanist:

*Anytime that it's just a Chrissy Crowley show ... I let Jason (Roach)<sup>2</sup> do whatever the heck he wants, and I love him for it.... But if we're at a dance ... and Jason starts bringing out the funk... I'll be like, "Put the funk in a box. And get rid of it" (Interview with author, 16 October 2010).*

Her description underscores the role of accompaniment in framing a performance, and more importantly, how the acceptability of performance style can vary significantly according to context. Crowley continues,

*(One time) Jason kept playing a particular blues chord, and I said, "Ok. Fine." So they turned that very traditional Irishy reel into a blues reel. <laughs> And it was pretty awesome. Any theatre setting here, or church setting... concert setting... people, they'll let you get away with a little bit of that. As long as you get one trad set in to prove your traditional worthiness (Interview with author, 16 October 2010).*

In these cases, we see that the pianist is thought of less as an accompanist and more as a 'collaborator' of equal importance who can offer musical suggestions. Colin Grant discusses this in relation to his own performances:

*Where Jason (Roach) chooses to take more of a role, he's received some backlash from people that enjoy traditional music, saying he's playing too loud, he's playing too heavy, he's overwhelming the fiddler. Well, he overwhelms some fiddlers, but some people say that they wouldn't go to hear Jason play with another fiddler. They would come and hear us together because I have also chosen to play with my piano player, which only seems natural to me—to respond to his dynamics, his choice of chords, and to his overall feel of a tune.... I choose to do that because it's more interesting for me and it lets the music take on a whole new personality that might not have been achieved if I had been driving the bus and letting my piano player take a back seat role (Interview with author, 27 August 2011).*

Although repertoire can have significant cultural meaning, accompaniment too has comparable significance. As a predominantly duo tradition in which the fiddler often determines repertoire mid-performance, the accompanist also exerts some control. This dynamic relationship between text and context can be actively shaped in real time, with a wide range of potential outcomes and meanings. When a performance is planned to some extent, there is not only greater predictability in overall meaning of the performance, but power relations between musicians become more stable, with less need for negotiation.

## Conclusion

Academics study culture critically; established beliefs and narratives are evaluated and analysed, unearthing biases and power relations not previously evident. The nature of tradition in a modern context is one such topic that is frequently addressed. Although we may intuitively feel that tradition is highly predictable and largely unchanging, tradition is not a survival or artefact but rather an ongoing process. Discourses surrounding tradition may or may not recognise this, and can also raise questions about where the boundaries of a given tradition lie. In the case of Cape Breton fiddling, we see how notions of tradition change according to context, negotiating repertoire and accompaniment. The distinction between what is 'traditional' and 'contemporary' is associated with a number of binary oppositions: the global and the local, the professional and the vernacular, the presentational and the participatory. All of these categories, however, are fluid; while they may overlap considerably, they are not interchangeable. Just as a performance can rarely be entirely presentational, presentational performances need not be professional in nature. As such, Cape Breton fiddlers negotiate these issues with each performance, thereby engaging in a dialogue of what constitutes traditionalism in each context.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ashley MacIsaac and Natalie MacMaster are Cape Breton fiddlers who were known for rock band accompaniment in the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> Jason Roach is a prominent piano player in the Cape Breton traditional music scene today. Known as an energetic and sometimes controversial musician, his playing is significantly influenced by his background in jazz performance.

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