

Musical fingerprints of the North-East Scotland fiddle style

Paul Anderson

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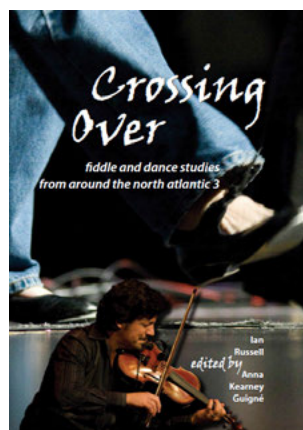
Crossing Over

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 3

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Paul Anderson is a professional Scots fiddler from Tarland in Aberdeenshire who specialises in the unique fiddle tradition of the North-East of Scotland. His tutoring lineage through Douglas Lawrence can be traced directly back to the legendary fiddler, Niel Gow. Paul was AHRC research fellow at the Elphinstone Institute of the University of Aberdeen (2005–2008), where he compiled and edited *The Elphinstone Collection*, a collection of mainly unpublished North-East fiddle repertoire.

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PAUL ANDERSON

Introduction

The fiddle style of the North-East region of Scotland, which broadly speaking covers the area between Dundee in the South and Morayshire in the north, is one of the most recognisable and spirited fiddle styles in Scotland.¹ Defining what actually makes the North-East style 'North-East' in character and clearly different from other notable styles such as 'Shetland' and 'Highland' is actually rather difficult to do and I am fairly sure that if the question was asked of any old 'North-East' player, 'What makes your fiddling North-East in character?', they would probably struggle to articulate its characteristics, just as surely as they could listen to a dozen fiddlers from different areas and pick out the North-Easter quickly and easily.

One problem in trying to define the unique characteristics of any fiddle style is that many of the subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – nuances and techniques which in aggregate make up the type, can also be found to varying degrees in other fiddle styles. It is, however, the combination of these particular techniques and the way in which they are played which define the genuine North-East fiddler. As a participant observer, a North-East fiddler, born, bred and trained, and actively involved in the tradition for more than twenty years, I will now attempt to characterise and dissect this musical fingerprint.

As I have observed, these musical fingerprints, and their use, vary not only from district to district within the North-East, but also to a large extent from player to player, with each player very definitely having a distinctive voice. That said, although individual fiddlers bring their unique touch to the performance of any tune, a number of identifiable characteristics stand out: unisons, the 'up-driven bow', long and short notes, 'snap bowing', grace notes and ornamentation, and finally the syncopated triplet. It is these features which combine to characterise the style.²

Unisons

The playing of unisons is one of the most immediately noticeable features of the North-East fiddle style. Although it is used sparingly by fiddlers of other districts, most in the North-East employ the technique in many different kinds of

performances. It is an essential component of the North-East musician's sense of how a tune should sound.

The unison is most readily found within the playing of strathspeys, but it can also be heard to a lesser degree within the playing of slow airs, marches, jigs, hornpipes, and reels. It is executed by playing either the open E, A or D string, while playing the fourth finger on the string below (a unison cannot be played on the G string as there is no string below). Thus, when playing the open E string, a fourth finger will be played on the A string below it. This, however, is only part of the technique, as a third finger grace note must be inserted before the unison proper. The grace note must also be sounded in unison with the open string, which creates a fairly strident discord but, like all grace notes, it must be played swiftly. The unison and the slide can be a difficult technique for young or inexperienced fiddlers, as the fourth finger is the shortest, weakest finger and is also the least used by traditional fiddlers in general. As a result, sliding onto pitch is a common problem.

The challenge of playing unisons is widely acknowledged. Douglas Lawrence, one of the North-East's most respected fiddlers, told me that 'grace notes should be played like lightning!'³ Pipe Major Iain Grant, an authority on the military tradition, similarly declares, in the context of piping, 'Your finger should be like a whip'.⁴

It is this playing of the discordant grace note just prior to the unison proper which gives the technique its distinctive fire and attack. Crucially, there is no extra pressure applied to the bow when playing the unison, but rather the accent is achieved by the combination of the grace note, the unison and the speed of the bow, which will be moving at pace. Unisons give Scottish fiddling an accent which was termed by many of the older players in Aberdeenshire as 'gurr', and which can be clearly heard in the strathspey playing of well-known exponents of the North-East style.

The unison is usually notated as follows:



However, in reality, it should be played with the open string played in tandem with the third finger grace note, thus:



Hector MacAndrew (1903–1980), the noted fiddler from Fyvie who so impressed Yehudi Menuhin at Blair Castle,⁵ recalled that older fiddlers used to say, 'use your cranny, that's what the old fellas used to say, use the unisons.' (The fourth finger is called the 'cranny' in the North-East of Scotland.)

Long notes and short notes

One of the most important aspects of playing in the traditional Scottish style and one also common to the piping tradition is the emphasis on the long notes while also ensuring that the short notes are extremely short. This feature is exemplified most characteristically in the 'Scotch snap', or 'snap bowing': a dotted quaver followed by a semi-quaver and the reverse. It should be noted that, although the short notes are very short, they must be crisply and cleanly played. These long-short patterns are usually written thus,



but when playing in the North-East style these dotted notes must be much longer in practice than they appear on the page and the short notes must be correspondingly shorter. Indeed the feature is more accurately reflected by double dotting:



These patterns are most notably found in the playing of strathspeys, but can also be found in hornpipes, marches, jigs, and slow airs.

This extreme differentiation between the long and short notes may seem like a fairly small detail but, in practice, it gives the music a good deal more tension and greater rhythmic attack. As Douglas Lawrence once commented, 'There are no unimportant notes'.⁶ Even when playing slow airs these rhythmic patterns should also be emphasised, though they will not have the attack and accent so central to the playing of strathspeys. Instead, they should flow smoothly and lyrically while still strongly differentiating the notes' duration.

Snap bowing

Snap bowing or the 'Scotch/Scots snap', as some call it, is the most instantly recognisable Scottish rhythmic fingerprint. As such, is an essential element of the strathspey's rhythmic structure. It consists of a semi-quaver followed by a dotted quaver. The semi-quaver is very short yet crisply and cleanly played followed by the dotted quaver which is elongated to make what is essentially a double dotted note. Although there are exceptions, on the whole snap bowing will use separate bow strokes; the short down bow is played near the tip with the long up bow driven from the tip to the heel. It is typically written like this,



but should really be played more like this:



The up-driven bow

Following on from the snap, the up-driven bow is a technique which is prominent in the Scottish fiddle tradition, again found mostly in the playing of dance strathspeys and slow strathspeys. The slow strathspey differs from its dance equivalent in that, rather than being a tune which is performed for dancing, it is really an instrumental piece performed for listening, rather like a song or a slow air. It is played in common time and, although it has the same stylistic qualities and bowing techniques as are found in dance strathspeys, it will also have the emotional input found in a slow air. It must be played in a lyrical manner at medium tempo.

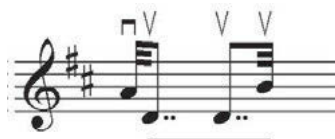
Like the strathspey in which it is executed, the up-driven bow's origins are ancient and shrouded in mystery. Credit for its development is generally given to Niel Gow (1727–1807), who was famed for the power of his up stroke,⁷ though there is a possibility that it was in use prior to Gow's lifetime. The up-driven bow is used because it gives a lift, power, and drive that cannot be achieved by bowing in any other way; if it does not convey these qualities, this difficult-to-master technique is better left unused. Basically, the up-driven bow is a refinement of the Scots snap which, in itself, is traditionally one of the most distinctive features of Scottish dance music.

The up-driven bow consists of a four note group: a semi-quaver followed by two dotted quavers finishing with another semi-quaver. (It should be noted that in the Scots fiddle tradition, and particularly in the North-East style, the dotted quavers will actually be double dotted while the semi quavers will be demi-semi quavers.)

The first note of the group is a down bow, which is then smartly followed by three up bows (the first two notes should be a good example of 'snap bowing'). These three up-bowed notes should be driven to the heel of the bow, using its entire length. In addition, the bow must be smartly lifted between the second and third up bow, giving a crisp and clean staccato. The up-driven bow is notated as follows:



However, with the double dotting of the dotted quavers, it would actually be played like this:



Double stopping

Double stopping and the use of drones are common to many different fiddle styles and traditions and this is also true in North-East Scotland. Both techniques involve the playing of two strings at the same time but, while drones involve a note played on either the E, A, or D strings with the open string being played below it, the double stop can utilise many fingering combinations. For example, the third finger on the A string (D sharp) can be played with the second finger on the D string (F sharp), giving a D major chord. It appears like this on the page:



However, while double stopping and drones can be an almost constant feature of some fiddle styles, they should be used more sparingly in the North-East style, where they are used to give extra character, extra 'fire' to a tune.

Typically when tunes are committed to the page, such nuances are excluded. William Marshall's strathspey 'Craigellachie Brig', for example, is usually noted thus:



A more accurate depiction of how it might be played by the fiddlers of the North-East of Scotland, with the addition of the double stops, drones and double dotted notes, is as follows:



Like with 'The Laird o' Drumblair', often written:



This is how it would be notated with the drones, double dotted notes, double stop and unison included:



These chords, although played sparingly, give strathspey playing much of its character. There are, of course, no hard and fast rules on the use of double stops, so it is very much down to the individual to decide where and when chords should be applied.

Grace notes and ornamentation

Grace notes are an important part of any traditional fiddler's armoury and, unlike the piping tradition, in which ornaments are very strictly adhered to, ornamentation in the fiddle tradition is very much down to the individual's personal taste. As mentioned before, in relation to the playing of long and short notes, grace notes must be crisply and cleanly played; a slow and untidy example is worse than none at all. Grace notes are an essential part of giving accent and life to the music, and while they are played much as they are in any other region, taken in combination with the other techniques discussed, they are very much part of the overall style.

Typical ornamentations found in the North-East fiddle style are the single grace note, the double grace note and the 'turn', as follows:



This can also be interpreted on paper like this,



The syncopated triplet

The playing of the syncopated triplet, in place of the ordinary variety, is something of a North-East speciality and can be used to great effect in the performance of strathspeys, though it should be used sparingly to give a lift to the music and provide variation. The full bow should be employed in its execution. As Hector MacAndrew remarked: 'Syncopated triplets are obvious by their absence, now. They give you lift and lilt'.⁸

Normal triplets are played as follows:



Syncopated triplets, however, are played thus:



Conclusion – a dialect of the fiddle

Most of these observations have been related to the clearly definable, technical aspects of North-East fiddle style such as unisons and the up-driven bow, but I strongly believe that there is also something more elusive and difficult to define which shapes all distinctive fiddle styles, and that is their connection with local dialect. The language and accents musicians hear will have a subtle yet profound impact on their playing. A fiddler from Boston, Debbie Billmers, once commented to me, ‘North-East people talk in strathspeys;’⁹ she could clearly hear the rhythm and the accent of the strathspey in the regional dialect. I believe that the refinement of the strathspey in the North-East of Scotland is therefore no accident, any more than is the character of Highland and Island, or Shetland, or Donegal, music. Gregory Dorchak has noted the importance of the Gaelic language to Cape Breton fiddle style,¹⁰ and I firmly believe that language has played a similarly significant role in the development of North-East style.

Musical notation is a poor carrier of stylistic markers, as is written language, which points to the necessity of learning from other players and learning by ear. That is not to say that staff notation does not have its place, but rather that nuances of style and character are best learned by using and training the ear, just as we learn language from other speakers. Only then can a ‘musical dialect’ be absorbed properly and incorporated into one’s own playing style. Individually, many of these rhythmic and melodic features may be found in the fiddle traditions of other regions and nations. Taken together, however, these details of style may be said to add up to a regional musical fingerprint, a series of criteria any one of which may hint at a player’s origin, but which, taken together, reveal a musical dialect and the fiddler as a North-East player as surely as does his or her spoken language.

Notes

¹ For background on Scottish music in general, see John Purser, *Scotland’s Music: A History of the Traditional and Classical Music of Scotland from Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Edinburgh and London: Mainstream with BBC Scotland, 1992) and Francis Collinson, *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966/1970). For more detailed analysis of Scottish fiddle styles, see Katherine Campbell, *The Fiddle in Scottish Culture: Aspects of the Tradition* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007). For a look at particular players, see Moyra Cowie, *The Life and Times of William Marshall 1748–1833: Composer of Scottish Traditional Fiddle Music, Clock Maker and Butler to the 4th Duke of Gordon* (Elgin: the author, 1999), Mary Anne Alburger, *Scottish Fiddlers and their Music* (London: Gollancz, 1983; Hardie Press 1996), James Scott Skinner, *My Life and Adventures* (Aberdeen: City of Aberdeen in association with Wallace Music, 1994), and Mary Anne Alburger, ‘J. Scott Skinner and George Riddell’, in Patrick Shuldham-Shaw, Emily B. Lyle, and Katherine Campbell (eds), *The Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection*, vol. 8 (Aberdeen and Edinburgh: Mercat Press for the University of Aberdeen in association with the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 2002), 588–89. Paul Anderson, *The Elphinstone Collection: Fiddle tunes from North-East Scotland compiled by Paul Anderson*, with CD (Upper Breakish: Taigh na Teud, 2009) features unpublished North-East fiddle music, including the entire known repertoire of Tarland’s Peter Milne. Helen Jackson

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discusses the context of Gow's tradition in *Niel Gow's Inver* (Perth: Perth & Kinross Libraries, 2000).

² Examples of Anderson's playing can be found on Paul Anderson, *Home and Beauty*, Greentrax CDTRAX340, Cockenzie, East Lothian, 2009; for a fiddle masterclass in North-East style, see www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/masterclass [accessed 24 June 2010].

³ Told to me repeatedly during lessons given by Douglas Lawrence, and see *Hector MacAndrew - Legend Of The Scots Fiddle*, Greentrax CDTRAX335, Cockenzie, East Lothian, 2009) for a selection of tunes played in an informal home setting.

⁴ P/M Iain Grant was my bagpipe tutor for a short period during my childhood.

⁵ Jim Gilchrist, 'Bowling before a new audience', living.scotsman.com/music/Bowling-before-a-new-audience.2324542.jp [accessed 17 June 2010]; *Mr Menuhin's Welcome to Blair Castle*, BBC Scotland television programme (from a personal video in my collection).

⁶ This was stressed during lessons given by my former teacher, Douglas Lawrence.

⁷ For information on Niel Gow, see Rev. Dr Macknight (attrib.), 'A Brief Biographical Account of Neil Gow' *The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*, 71 (Jan. 1809), frontispiece and 3–5, and Alastair Duncan, 'Niel Gow', www.folkmusic.net/htmlfiles/inart441.htm [accessed 17 June 2010].

⁸ *Mr Menuhin's Welcome to Blair Castle*, 1974, and for some discussion of 'lilt' in the Shetland tradition, see Peter Cooke, *The Fiddle Tradition of the Shetland Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 117–18.

⁹ See Paul Anderson, 'Folk who speak in Strathspeys', www.leopardmag.co.uk/feats/110/folk-who-speak-in-strathspeys [accessed 17 June 2010].

¹⁰ Gregory Dorchak, 'The Formation of Authenticity within Folk Tradition: A Case Study of Cape Breton Fiddling', *Driving the Bow: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic* 2, ed. by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger, Elphinstone Institute Occasional Publications, no. 6 (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, 2008), pp. 153–65.