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Chris Goertzen

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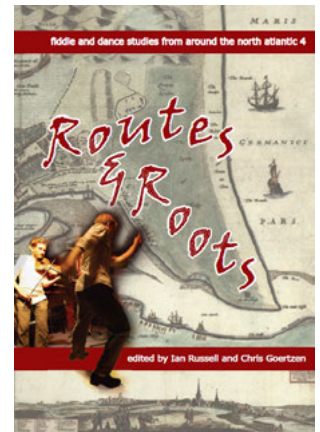
Routes and Roots

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 4

Edited by Ian Russell and Chris Goertzen

First published in 2012 by The Elphinstone
Institute, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert
Building, King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN 0-9545682-7-3



About the author:

Chris Goertzen, who teaches at the University of Southern Mississippi, is the author of *Fiddling for Norway: Revival and Identity* (1997), *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests* (2008), and *Made in Mexico: Tradition, Tourism, and Political Ferment in Oaxaca* (2010), and co-author of *Alice Person: Good Medicine and Good Music* (2009). He is now studying the history of American fiddle styles.

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Texas contest fiddling: what modern variation technique tells us

CHRIS GOERTZEN

Texas fiddling is virtuosic both technically and musically, and has gradually captured the imaginations of legions of American fiddlers. Indeed, if we could magically total up the man hours spent cultivating the various fiddle styles of North America during the last few decades, this would be revealed as the dominant style. Though clearly originating in Texas, this elaborate approach to fiddling has spread through much of the United States, and it and its younger regional variations are often casually grouped together under the name 'contest style'. It has attracted converts and aroused resentment where it has supplemented or, indeed, supplanted older styles. The youngest of the major American fiddle styles, and the least wedded to dance, it is the most display-oriented, listening-oriented style. Audience members tap their feet, savour contestant face-offs, and cheer. And the fiddlers themselves, although they join fiddlers in all of the international fiddle contest systems in believing that jamming in the parking lot is much more important than what happens on stage, do really seem to dig in and truly enjoy competing. What marks the winners? In addition to mastering bowing technique, timing and tone, the better fiddlers weave speedy but intricate structures of variations. This essay concerns how that variation technique works on a broad level, and also how analyzing these rapid-fire expositions reveals fiddlers' beliefs concerning what constitutes the essences of given tunes.

I will illustrate my points through reference to performances from the Texas State Fiddlers' Championship, 22–25 April 2010 (official name that year: 'Texas State Championship Fiddlers' Frolics & Songwriters Serenade').¹ The annual contest takes place in Hallettsville, a town of two-to-three thousand midway between Houston and San Antonio. Most American fiddle contests are fundraisers for small-town Chambers of Commerce or benevolent organizations. The Hallettsville Knights of Columbus, a quasi-masonic group with much the same membership as the local business community, hosts this one. The Hallettsville Knights built and expanded their meeting hall with the funds generated by this and related events; they host an annual domino championship, a buck-hunting contest – participants compare the

antler spans of their prey and buy dinner – and a polka and sausage festival (which includes what is advertised as a polka mass – I don't know *exactly* what that entails, and don't want to find out, lest the reality not be as colorful as what my imagination conjures). The fiddle contest weekend in late April also includes subsidiary fundraisers. There is a crawfish feast, a song-writing contest, a craft fair, a modest carnival, and a big BBQ contest involving big fleets of cast iron smokers (large grills on wheels, constituting trailers pulled behind the cooks' trucks). But the weekend's anchor remains the fiddle contest. The senior fiddlers play Friday evening (along with a category for trick fiddling), the kids' bracket and the out-of-state competition both take place on Saturday, and a guitar accompaniment contest and a hall of fame induction fill Sunday morning. Then comes the climax, the State Championship, in which Texas fiddlers – validated as Texans by their driver's licenses – aged between 16 and 64 compete on Sunday from noon until about 6 pm.

All good Texas fiddlers know the same twenty or so tunes very, very well. True, many of these fiddlers also enjoy playing at least a handful of less well-known tunes, and the best fiddlers have extraordinarily large repertoires under their fingers. However, as suspense builds late on Sunday afternoon, the champions do not dig deep in their memories for rarities. Instead, they home in on the surprisingly small group of tunes that have grown over the history of Texas fiddling to be the very richest in total musical content. These fiddlers agree on roughly how to play the initial presentations of the two main strains of these tunes, and they also agree on the main procedures fuelling their shared exuberant and detailed variation technique. Each fiddler/arranger works securely within several levels of context – first, concerning how the variation proceeds for all core tunes and second, typical variation behaviour for the specific tune in question. Over the history of Texas fiddling, this pair of factors gradually grew in importance, becoming as much a part of the style and of specific tune's identities as is how the two main strains are played the first time in given performances. What separates merely competent from truly good and in turn good from excellent performances is what happens *after* each strain has been performed the first pair of times, that is, how the fiddler balances conventions of variation technique with freedoms s/he takes with those norms to express regional, personal, and spur-of-the-moment takes on a tune. Near the very end of the state contest, the panel of judges asks the three finalists to remain on stage and to play tunes in given genres; that is, all three will play, for example, a rag, then all three will play, for example, a waltz, and so on. Each fiddler chooses which tune within the specified genre to perform, and there are plenty of times that at least two of the three fiddlers will select the same tune. Audiences love this, because the face-offs are especially direct, and most of the tunes chosen issue from that tiny batch of content-rich ones.

Texas fiddling techniques of building performances were not brand new when they were first distributed through the mass media – that is, in the 'hillbilly' recordings starting in 1922 – but have mushroomed since. The two tunes featured in this essay, both among the handful most frequently played in the finals of Texas

fiddle contests, were indeed first recorded back then. The Texas fiddler who got into a studio first was also the one recorded most in those early years. Alexander Camel Robertson, nicknamed 'Eck', grew up in a family full of fiddlers in Texas near the Oklahoma border. He became a medicine show and vaudeville musician (and piano tuner). He made some recordings with a friend in 1922 in New York; these were the very first 'hillbilly' recordings, thus the earliest Country Music. He made another set in Dallas in 1929, near the *end* of that one decade during which fiddling had a major presence on national radio (Country Music was changing).² Though off the national stage after that, he remained well-known in the fiddle subculture, and played in contests most of his life; we have a last set of recordings from a session at a contest but off the stage from the 1960s.³

'Eck' Robertson's tunes as documented in the 1920s reveal a repertoire in dramatic flux. Some of those performances remain old style: he repeated the two strains unchanged in the usual pattern (AABBAABB etc.) until time was up, which for much of fiddle history meant until a dance ended, but here meant until the 78 rpm record side was full. But he, like other seminal Texas fiddlers, sought more musical content than un- or modestly-varied alternating of strains offered. He patched a few tunes into medleys, and in others explored an early form of Texas variation. Both practices mark his 'Sally Johnson', one of the most common Texas fiddle tunes today; he placed it in a simple medley – two tunes back-to-back – and varied it too; see Figure 1.

The strains I labelled A and B start in different ranges, as do the main strains in most tunes in most fiddle repertoires. After twice through A and twice through B, Robertson varies A in the earliest typical way of doing so in Texas style – he thins the rhythm. He will go on to do roughly the same thing with the B strain. Another neat thing happens in that second pair of B strains – some minor melodic variation, a factor to become pervasive in later Texas fiddling. And Eck also introduces a strain I labelled C. Remember that the A and B strains contrasted in initial tessitura, with the A strain on the D string and above, with the B strain sitting higher. This third, C strain busies itself down on the G string. Noticing the rhythm of the C strain, and the initial double stop on a third, one could argue that C grew from A. All of these factors matter for later Texas fiddling. Almost every common tune behaves like 'Sally Johnson' in several ways. Main strains exploit contrasting pitch ranges. There are both minor and dramatic variations. Rhythmic thinning, that is, stretching notes or double stops, remains an important variation technique. Significantly, the central variation techniques *do not* transform a tune all the way from a simple, two-strain pulsation into an actual medley. Instead, each strain that on initial hearing cannot be classified as a straightforward variation of one of the basic two will have *something* to do with one of those two principal – and thus seminal – strains.

I transcribed two performances of 'Sally Johnson' from April 2010s Texas State Championship. One is by Mia Orosco, then sixteen years old, in her first year in the adult competition bracket.⁴ She is a diminutive, soft-spoken, and rather elegant young woman. When she mounts the stage, her guitar accompanists loom

A

5

9

B

13

17

A'

21

25

B

29

33

B'

37

41

C

45

C repeats exactly; then Eck plays "Billy in the Low Ground."

Figure 1 'Sally Johnson', as recorded by 'Eck' Robertson (1922)

over her. Prior to the start of the music, this appears to be an ominous mismatch, but her playing is aggressive and her sound robust. Like lots of kids who fiddle really well, she belongs to a family that has made fiddling a family priority. Many fiddle-oriented families come to these contests. The children are often home schooled – as indeed, Mia has been– in a politically and religiously conservative atmosphere. The parents seek out wholesome family activities, and are pleased to note that teenagers immersed in music have little time to get into trouble.

Like dozens of the stronger young fiddlers, Orosco began playing the violin with formal lessons in the Suzuki Method. Many Suzuki teachers in the USA are

The image displays a musical score for a fiddle piece, consisting of ten staves of music. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 2/4. The score is divided into several sections, each labeled with a letter or measure number. The first staff starts at measure 1 and ends at measure 6. The second staff starts at measure 7 and ends at measure 12. The third staff starts at measure 13 and ends at measure 18. The fourth staff starts at measure 19 and ends at measure 24. The fifth staff starts at measure 25 and ends at measure 30. The sixth staff starts at measure 31 and ends at measure 36. The seventh staff starts at measure 37 and ends at measure 42. The eighth staff starts at measure 43 and ends at measure 48. The ninth staff starts at measure 49 and ends at measure 54. The tenth staff starts at measure 55 and ends at measure 60. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings. The labels 'A', 'B', 'A''', 'A'', and 'C8va' are placed above the staves to indicate different sections or variations. The measure numbers are placed at the beginning of each staff.

inclined to employ simple versions of fiddle tunes in a patronizing way, as a brief, useful repertorial waystation punctuating a student's unswerving march towards emulating Paganini. But some youngsters stay in the fiddle world, bringing with them the flexible bow arm and overall search for relaxed and effective technique characteristic of the Suzuki Method, but in every other way taking a one-way trip to fiddling.

Mia Orosco's 'Sally Johnson' appears as Figure 2. Her version is more detailed in every way than is Eck Robertson's. Of course, many aspects of her technique are not made visible in the transcription; the printed page does not notice that her playing is authentic and highly nuanced in terms of intonation, rhythm, and attack (that is, in the aspects of fiddling that classical violinists converting late to or temporarily slumming in contest fiddling seldom get right). And the variations are right on target for modern Texas fiddling. First, her dose of variation represents a

A, exactly as first notated; A', exactly as previously notated; B, exactly as the first B strain notated; B, exactly as the second B strain notated. Her performance ends with a version of the traditional 'shave and a haircut' tag.

Figure 2 'Sally Johnson', as played by Mia Orosco (Texas, 2010)

ration typical for modern times. Far fewer measures are exact repetitions of earlier measures than we see in older Texas playing. The strains that Robertson played are all echoed in Orosco's performance, and the possibility that strain C evolved over the decades from strain A receives further buttressing by the fact that she also plays a strain appropriately labelled C8va (that is, C up an octave) right after the A strain and with the same opening rhythm. In fact, even a cursory glance down the left-hand side of the transcription reveals many held thirds. That idea and the shape of the cadence stick out – those are the topics this tune has come to be 'about'. The prominent thirds and persistent phrase-ending formula in Eck Robertson's version suggested this destiny for 'Sally Johnson', but modern versions like Mia's offer explicit confirmation.

About an hour later at this same contest, a veteran fiddler named Wes Westmoreland III also played a version of 'Sally Johnson'. Westmoreland would go on to win the event for the fifth time. He is a stout, smiling, witty guy, in his early forties as of this writing. He played for ten years with Mel Tillis's Country Western band in Branson, Missouri, and now is a pharmacist who moonlights as a fiddler. His upbringing as a fiddler was more traditional, eschewing music reading and other factors common in today's training of younger fiddlers. He learned primarily through immersion

as a young man in the practical jokes/drinking/otherwise-testosterone-fuelled fiddlers' environment typical of his generation.⁵ His 'Sally Johnson' appears as Figure 3.

Westmoreland's performance of 'Sally Johnson' both parallels and differs from Orosco's version. The two master fiddlers present basically the same strains (deployed in pairs, of course), in addition to variations that are also rather similar in both nature and in the order in which they are played. Indeed, what these versions *share* we see in dozens of performances: this material held in common constitutes the somewhat fluid but certainly stable and recognizable identity of the modern 'Sally Johnson'. What are the differences? Westmoreland places less emphasis on the interval of a third (though still plenty). There is more incidental variation (and thus fewer measures precisely duplicating previous ones), yet tighter formal construction

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The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Sally Johnson' in G major, 2/4 time. The score is written on eight staves of music. The first staff (measures 61-66) features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a measure marked 'A'. The second staff (measures 67-72) continues the melody with another triplet and a measure marked 'A'. The third staff (measures 73-78) shows a variation of the melody with a measure marked 'A'. The fourth staff (measures 79-84) includes a measure marked 'A', short, indicating a shorter duration for that note. The fifth staff (measures 85-90) introduces a new section marked 'B'. The sixth staff (measures 91-96) features a section marked 'B'' with a more complex rhythmic pattern. The seventh staff (measures 97-102) returns to a section marked 'B'. The eighth staff (measures 103-108) concludes the piece with a final melodic phrase and a measure marked 'plays a tag to finish performance'.

Figure 3 'Sally Johnson', as played by Wes Westmoreland (Texas, 2010)

containing more neat symmetries. For instance, the first four strains, A A' B B', form a group because A and B both start with mostly short notes, then A' and B' start with held notes. Next, the first six strains form a broad ternary ABA, and the first ten strains a rondo. At that point, we witness something of a mirror effect: after that return to the basic A strain at about the golden mean in the performance, we 'retreat' through A'' to B' to B. Westmoreland shapes performances in ways congruent with this one all the time, both broadly – as discussed here – and in intimate details.⁶ In conversation, he denies deliberately carving out these internal symmetries, and *our* noticing them has to be a matter of painstaking, after-the-fact analysis. But whether he is conscious of these formal nuances or not, they are an important part of what makes his playing powerful, part of why he won first place and Orosco won fourth in April of 2010. This formal shaping is a procedure that mature Texas fiddlers do more and better than younger ones and that Westmoreland does especially well.



Figure 4 'The Miller of Drone', as published by Niel Gow (1802)



Figure 5 'Grey Eagle', as published by George H. Coes (1876)

The other tune chosen for analysis in this essay is a bit harder to parse. 'Grey Eagle', unlike 'Sally Johnson', is among the American fiddle tunes with a lengthy history in print. It was and still is called 'The Miller of Drone' in Scottish fiddling (both at home and as exported to Scottish-derived communities across the Atlantic). In the 1830s, a horse race in Kentucky donated the current title of the main American incarnation of the tune: one horse was named Grey Eagle, and the other Wagner (hence 'Wagoner's Hornpipe', another common Texas fiddle tune).⁷ The following examples illustrate the long history of the tune: 'The Miller of Drone' from Niel Gow (the likely composer; that version dates from 1802),⁸ then 'Grey Eagle' from nineteenth-century blackface minstrel fiddling (from a collection assembled by George H. Coes),⁹ from early Texas fiddling, and from a senior old-time fiddler I heard in the early 1980s, Irving Berge. The fiddler in that early Texas recording, Samuel Peacock, played with his brothers in Smith's Garage Fiddle Band. Peacock was a prosperous barber – Smith's Garage, owned by a local sheriff, sponsored the band on Fort Worth radio. This is from the late 1920s.¹⁰

Old-time versions had added the A strain up an octave. In fact, that general idea was already around in Scotland in the late eighteenth century – think of 'Lord MacDonald's Reel', which lives on both as itself in Scotland (both in Scotland proper

Strains played in this order: A8va A8va B B A A B A8va A8va C C D D C C A8va A8va E E A8va

Figure 6 'Grey Eagle', as recorded by Samuel Peacock (1929)

Exact form not remembered; tape a victim of Mississippi weather

Figure 7 'Grey Eagle', as played by Irving Berge (Illinois, 1983)

and in Scottish communities across the water) and as 'Leather Britches' in both old-time southern fiddling and Texas fiddling. The octave A of 'Grey Eagle' is striking, and Peacock starts with it. He follows that with a strain recognizable as the historic B strain, and then the historic A strain. And more strains follow, maybe coming out of A or B, but these probable links are not as clear as connections within the 'Sally Johnson' complex. Some 'Grey Eagle' strains have harmonic underpinnings more

like A or more like B, but the alliances are not strong. Notably, only A (including octave A of course), and B have the musical heft of main strains. What can a modern version tell us? I transcribed one by Bubba Hopkins (that is, Zirl Hopkins, III) at the same contest, about an hour before Orosco would first be on deck. Bubba won second prize at this contest, a coup for one so young: he is a recent college graduate and a fiddle teacher, closer to Orosco than to Westmoreland in age and in background.¹¹ Like Orosco, he fiddles well in Texas style and also plays classical violin; they constitute rare examples of being successfully bilingual in that pair of musical dialects.

The version in Figure 8 is flashy and fun, but far from straightforward in terms of form. My take on it is this: the A strain of 'Grey Eagle' is a sweeping arpeggio,

The musical score for 'Grey Eagle' is presented in ten staves, numbered 67 to 122. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 2/4. The score includes several chords labeled with letters: E (measure 73), F (measure 79), G (measure 85), H (measures 97 and 103), and A8va (measures 109 and 115). The notation includes various fiddle techniques such as triplets (indicated by '3' and slurs) and arpeggios (indicated by slurs and 'A8va'). The melody is primarily eighth-note based with some sixteenth-note runs.

Figure 8 'Grey Eagle', as played by Bubba Hopkins (Texas, 2010)

and B starts by outlining a chord, too. Bubba emphasizes that: most of what happens outside of A and B proper involves broad arpeggios or other chord outlining. Listening to dozens of other modern Texas versions of 'Grey Eagle' confirms this as typical. Bubba's 'Grey Eagle' fits the mainstream; those are exactly the factors that 'Grey Eagle' is about. Now, this permeation with arpeggios was not the only thing that *could* have happened to the tune in Texas; it was not musically or historically inevitable. In the opening measure of 'The Miller of Drone' and of most versions of 'Grey Eagle', the note *f* sticks out. In another history of the tune – in another cumulative set of choices – that sixth degree of the scale could have attracted more

attention. Exactly that does happen in another common Texas tune. In 'Billy in the Low Ground's' ancestors, and in early recordings of 'Billy', including ones in nascent Texas style, the sixth degree sticks out in the melody, but is harmonized with the subdominant. That is, we are in the key of C, and one hears lots of F chords. But in the tune's evolution in Texas fiddling, the prominent note 'a', the sixth degree, soon inspired accompaniment with an A minor chord instead of an F major chord, and 'Billy in the Low Ground's' typical cluster of variations emphasizes that.¹²

To summarize: In modern Texas fiddling, 'Sally Johnson' is mostly 'about' the major third sitting on the tonic, 'Grey Eagle' mostly explores arpeggios, and 'Billy in the Low Ground' emphasizes the harmonic axis joining C Major with its relative minor, A Minor. Each of the most common tunes in Texas fiddling could be characterized similarly. All of them start with two distinctive strains; all add parts, some of which obviously stem from the opening two strains, others the sources of which remain less clear. In most cases, the added parts are not meaty enough to stand alone. Instead, they are variations in one or another meaning of that word. That is, the arrays of variations associated with each of the main Texas tunes do take off from and elaborately emphasize something about the opening strains. An aficionado of Texas fiddling can be presented with 10-15 seconds of music excerpted from anywhere within a performance of 'Sally Johnson', or 'Sally Goodin', or 'Billy in the Low Ground', or 'Tom and Jerry', and recognize the tune. Wes, Mia, Bubba, and every accomplished Texas fiddler play all of these hit tunes, and their versions are both wonderfully personal and group nicely within the broadly accepted identity of each tune. Each performance is thus a little like one of an Indian raga – some parts remain fairly fixed, while other parts are elaborated in ways associated with the style, or with the tune, or with the performer, yet unique to the specific performance.

One of the accusations regularly levelled against Texas contest fiddling is that 'it all sounds alike'. Yes, there is a stylistic wash that distinguishes Texas fiddling from older styles, and that constitutes a high percentage of what one hears. And this surface is as deep into a given performance of a given tune as many ears travel on first hearing – the long bows, the Texas Swing chords on the guitars, the general nature of variation. But many criticisms averring that multiple putatively contrasting things actually sound or smell or taste alike are temporary symptoms of an early stage in acquaintance. This is not to say that education and intimacy automatically yield affection – my own repeated experiences with college songs, with liver and onions, with the family of conditions called the flu, and with politicians, still leave me cold. But I have come to like Texas fiddling. It is adventurous, exciting for the fiddlers and for experienced audiences. And it is musically rich, with a variation technique that both impresses as such and as it produces a set of sonic historically-informed documents. Each solid performance is a cumulative interpretation and elaboration of some essence of a tune, an interpretation reaching back in time, a route to the roots of Texas fiddling.

Notes

¹ For more information on this exciting and important contest, consult <<http://www.fiddlersfrolics.com>> [accessed 23 July 2011].

² Eck Robertson's 1922 and 1929 recordings are available on *Eck Robertson: Old-Time Texas Fiddler*, County Records, CO-3515-CD, 1999.

³ *Eck Robertson: Famous Cowboy Fiddler, Talking Machine and Radio Artist*, County LP 202, 1989 [recorded 1963].

⁴ Like many prominent younger fiddlers, Orosco maintains a website including biographical information as well as links to several of her performances: <<http://miaorosco.com/MiaOrosco.com/Welcome.html>> [accessed 23 July 2011].

⁵ Westmoreland is in the Texas Fiddlers Hall of Fame, known officially as the Fiddlers' Frolics Hall of Fame. The information posted there – a nice biography and photograph – is available at <<http://www.fiddlersfrolics.com/wes-westmoreland.html>> [accessed 23 July 2011].

⁶ For a close analysis of one performance by Westmoreland of another of the top Texas fiddle tunes, 'Dusty Miller', see Chris Goertzen, 'Texas Contest Fiddling: Moving the Focus of Contrast and Change to Inner Variations', in *Crossing Over: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 3*, ed. by Ian Russell and Anna Kearney Guigné (Aberdeen: The Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, in association with the Department of Folklore, MMaP and the School of Music, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2010), pp. 239–49. Goertzen also discusses Westmoreland's fiddling in several spots in *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008). That book closes with a transcription of a lengthy interview with Westmoreland.

⁷ 'Grey Eagle' is most thoroughly treated by Andrew Kuntz in his encyclopaedic *The Fiddler's Companion*, copyrighted when this author consulted it 1996–2010 (probably to be kept current for some time after 2010 by Kuntz; it is an online reference source). The section on 'Grey Eagle' is available at <http://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers/GREET_GRUM.htm> [accessed 23 July 2011].

⁸ Nathaniel Gow, *Part Second of the Complete Repository of Original Scots Tunes, Strathspeys, Jigs, and Dances* (Edinburgh: Gow and Shepherd, [1802]), p. 25.

⁹ George H. Coes, *George H. Coes' Album of Music for the Violin* (Boston: Goullard, 1876), p. 58.

¹⁰ See *Texas Fiddle Bands, Volume 1, 1925–30*, Document Records DOCD-8038, 1999, cut 11. I thank Paul F. Wells for drawing my attention to this recording.

¹¹ See Hopkins's website <<http://www.hopkinsmusic.net/>> [accessed 23 July 2011]. He is an endearing extrovert with great promise as both fiddler and teacher.

¹² Transcriptions of 'Billy in the Low Ground' are available in Chris Goertzen, 'The Transformation of American Contest Fiddling', *The Journal of Musicology*, 6, no. 1 (1988), 107–29.