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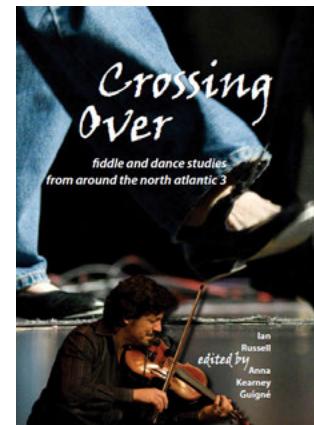
Crossing Over

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 3

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Step dancing to hip hop? Reconsidering the interrelationship between music and dance in the Ottawa Valley step dancing community

SHERRY JOHNSON

Ottawa Valley step dancing originated in the lumber camps of the Ottawa Valley, bordering both the provinces of Ontario and Quebec in Canada, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is an amalgamation of Irish, Scottish, English, French-Canadian, and Aboriginal styles of solo percussive dance. The style has been further influenced in the twentieth century by American tap dancing and clogging. The most important context for contemporary Ottawa Valley step dancing is the competition circuit, a series of fiddle and step dancing contests that occur throughout the province of Ontario each weekend from May to September. I have been participating in this 'circuit' of competitions with my family, as a fiddler, step dancer, teacher, and judge, for over thirty years.

I was at a contest last summer when a visiting percussive dance teacher and scholar from the USA asked me how long I thought it would be before Ottawa Valley step dancers in Ontario got tired of dancing to fiddle music and would start to dance to more popular musics. This question was based on his own experience of competitive clogging, which is now often danced to country, pop, rock 'n roll, and even hip hop. Although at the time I thought I knew the answer to his question – 'never' – it caused me to think more deeply about the relationship between fiddling and step dancing in the Ontario contest community, and prompted me to talk with a number of fiddlers and dancers about the nature of this relationship.

The dance and fiddle styles in Ontario have developed in close association with one another. Along with old-time social dancing, the two were, and often still are, performed together at house parties and old-time dances. A number of well-known fiddlers also step danced, and that practice has only increased as the popularity of contests as a primary context for both fiddling and step dancing in the province has grown. The majority of contests include both fiddling and step dancing, and even people who start with just one often end up inspired by their friends at the contests and learn the other. Since the early 1980s the majority of contestants in Ontario contests both play fiddle and step dance. So the discussion that follows is set in the context of this particular relationship between fiddling and step dancing. I do not suggest, however, that this relationship is unique. There

are other traditions across Canada and beyond in which fiddling and step dancing have a similar close relationship, Cape Breton being, perhaps, the other most notable example of this tendency.¹ But it is significant that this is not the case in the American competitive clogging context with which the visiting teacher mentioned earlier was most familiar.

The most obvious consequence of having participants who both fiddle and step dance is that the dancers know and love the music to which they are performing. Dancers who also fiddle can describe more clearly to the fiddler what they want in terms of music that will enhance their routines. At the same time, fiddlers who also dance know what inspires and drives them as dancers and no doubt play the same way for their dancers. They listen to fiddle music for pleasure, seek out new tunes and styles, and share these with their contest friends. That is not to say, of course, that the teenagers are not also listening to the latest popular music, but if they are involved in the contest circuit for even a couple of years, it is because they love the music.

Young fiddlers and step dancers – teenagers – are always on the lookout for new, interesting tunes that will challenge their own abilities and catch the listener's interest. Everyone wants tunes that are just a little different than everyone else's, but not so different that they would not be considered old-time. In part, I think it is this constant search for something new, always within rather strict although not immovable boundaries, that prevents Ottawa Valley step dancers from going beyond fiddle tunes for their music. There are a plethora of new tunes, some borrowed from other traditions and perhaps modified slightly, and others newly composed by the fiddlers within the circuit themselves.

While my initial response to the question of dancing to other kinds of music was 'never', I am ready to accede to a very tentative 'maybe'. Ironically, just a couple of weeks after I was asked the question that sparked this reflection, one of my adult beginning students brought in a CD of hip hop music and wanted to use it for her lesson. I put it on. The tempo was perfect for her ability and she clearly enjoyed dancing to this piece, her favourite song at the time, but the rhythms of the steps just did not fit with the rhythms of the music. There was no lift or drive to the music, and therefore none in her dancing. To me, it felt wrong. To her, a beginner dancer and without having grown up listening to fiddle music, it felt fine. What should I do? The teacher in me understands the importance of making lessons relevant to students and meeting them where they are. If she finds more meaning in dancing to hip hop, then maybe I should just be happy that she's practising and dancing, and say no more. But the dancer in me, and I must admit, to some extent also the preservationist (in that I want dancers to know and be able to perform the roots of the style before they join the innovators who are so important to the style's survival), found it hard to condone dancing that lacked the very drive and power that is so characteristic of Ottawa Valley step dancing. In the end I compromised – I thought quite generously – and told her that if she did the majority of her practising to fiddle music, I would not mind if she went through her routine once per practice session

or lesson to her own music. Of course, I could not monitor the compromise, but gradually she stopped bringing her hip hop CD to lessons, replacing it with CDs by Leahy and Great Big Sea. I am hoping that she, too, realized that her hip hop music was not enhancing her dancing, that it did not *feel* the same as when she was dancing to fiddle music. Unfortunately, I never got to ask her. She abruptly moved from Toronto and we quickly lost touch.

More support for a response of ‘maybe’ can be found in the few examples of experienced dancers who have choreographed routines to musical theatre pieces, country songs, and hip hop for novelty classes or talent shows. Dressed in music-inspired costumes and using more arm and hand movements than is typical in step dancing, these routines have a more tap-like quality, although they do indeed use the basic building blocks of Ottawa Valley step dancing. What strikes me most, again, is that a driving rhythm does not seem to be of vital importance in these routines. So, while they are interesting and enjoyable to watch, I do not believe they will ever become the norm for step dancing in Ontario. Given this, my response to the initial question is now just slightly softer than ‘never’.

Thinking about whether or not Ottawa Valley step dancing could be performed well to other music led me to consider more carefully the historical relationship between step dancing and fiddling in Ontario. Anecdotal accounts of early Ottawa Valley step dancing suggest that dancers did not have routines the way we do now. The fiddler started to play and the dancer danced in response to whatever the fiddler was playing. Indeed, the dancing was considered to be a rhythmic accompaniment to the fiddle and therefore the dancer played with and off of the rhythm of the fiddle:

In the old days, we just danced. The fiddle played, we danced. Rhythm. Me, I started dancing on radio. You didn’t have to [have] the legs wrapped around the neck. The floor is where your rhythm is. Nobody could see you. So you work on your rhythm. That’s dancing [...] When I’m dancing alone, there’s no routine. I travelled with Don Messer ten years across country. Never had a routine when you’re dancing alone because it depends on the piece of music that [the fiddler is] gonna play for you. You don’t do the same thing for another piece because that music is different. The accent and the drive is in different places, so it doesn’t work.²

People learned to step dance by watching and listening to the rhythms of other dancers and imitating them; sometimes they might ask neighbours or family members who were particularly well-known as dancers to ‘show’ them a few things.

When, in the 1950s, some of these model dancers started to teach more formally – that is, take on individual students, set up regular lesson times, and most importantly, take money in exchange for lessons – some of them developed more formal ways of putting the rhythms together into steps and then putting the steps together into routines. Because these routines were pre-choreographed to showcase

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a wide variety of rhythms and techniques, they became the preferred format for competitions.

By the time I started competing in the mid-1970s, house fiddlers – fiddlers hired by the contest to play for all of the dancers – were common. By attending contests every weekend throughout the summer, we soon became familiar with these house fiddlers. We knew which ones played fast and which ones played slow, which ones were likely to stop too early or keep going past the standard length of a routine, and we started to develop preferences for particular fiddlers based on their styles. We had our favourites, but my siblings and I always danced to the house fiddler provided by the contest. It was considered the sign of a good dancer that he or she was able to dance to any fiddler and to any set of tunes, and so we almost always left the choice of tunes up to the fiddler. The steps, then, had very little connection to the music, since the steps could, conceivably, be danced to any tune of the correct time signature.

What I did not realise at the time, and only learned when I started my research, is that some of the dancers, who were good friends with some of the house fiddlers, would sit down with the house fiddler at the beginning of the season and choose tunes that seemed to go best with their particular routines. In fact, it turns out that one of the house fiddlers would tell his favourite dancers what tunes to dance to or not. A former open class dancer from this time period told me,

He knew what tunes were good for dancing. In fact I can remember very vividly saying to him at one point when I was competing, ‘Can you play this particular tune for me for a reel?’ And he said to me, ‘No’. ‘No,’ he said, ‘you don’t dance well to that tune.’ Now I couldn’t have told you what the name of the tunes were that he played for me, but I knew if it was the right tune because it just felt right. And it had the right lilt and it had the right drive behind it.³

Unfortunately there is very little film or video footage of step dancing from this time period. It would be interesting to compare dancers who were dancing to chosen tunes and dancers who were dancing to whatever the fiddler decided to play. Would I be able to tell which dancers chose their own tunes to which to dance? Would those tunes, in fact, *enhance* the steps?

In the mid-1990s a trend began amongst the most advanced competitive Ottawa Valley step dancers of choreographing routines to particular tunes. These dancers chose their tunes first, and in fact, a particular version of a tune as played on a CD, usually by one of their favourite fiddlers from the contest community, and choreographed their routine to that music. In many cases, the dancers tried to match the rhythms of the fiddle tune exactly. So instead of choreographing steps with complete freedom within that 4- or 8-bar structure, the dancers started with a particular rhythm and had to figure out what to do with their feet to create that rhythm. In one way, this process was easier, as one element of step creation – rhythm – was eliminated; however, in another way, it was more difficult because tunes are

repeated for a competitive Ottawa Valley step dancing routine. Although the clog is only played once through, A A B B, the jig is played once and a half, A A B B A A. The reel is played three times, usually changing tunes for the last 32 bars. So we have A A B B A A B B for one reel and then A A B B for the second. Notice, for example, that the A part is played four times in the jig and the first reel. The dancer then will have to come up with four visually different ways to create that particular rhythm. Of course, for many of these tunes, there is melodic repetition within each larger section. So, if the dancer is dancing to, say, 'The Old Man and the Old Woman' as the first reel, he or she would have to find eight visually different ways to create the same syncopated rhythm of the B section (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 'The Old Man and the Old Woman'

After so carefully constructing their routines, it was important that the dancers had the exact same music every time they performed. They often chose a fiddler at the beginning of the season, ideally the one who had made the CD to which they had choreographed their routine, and danced to her or him at every contest. The fiddler would put the same ornaments and variations in the tune at the same place each time in order to maintain the symmetry between the rhythm of the dance and the music.

In the last few years there has been a movement away from an exact matching of rhythm. Dancers are still choreographing their routines to particular pieces of music, but they are playing with rhythm a little more freely. In a way, they are returning to the earlier practice of playing with and off of the rhythm of the fiddle. The crucial difference being that previously dancers were improvising the rhythms in response to the playing of the fiddle. Now these routines are pre-choreographed to particular tunes that must be played the same way each time in order to effectively show off the dance rhythms.

Before I give the idea that contests have turned this dynamic, creative tradition into a static, mechanical, even dead, performance, I hasten to add that I do not believe this to be the case. Contests are not solely about what happens on the contest stage; in fact, the stage is only a very small part of what Ontario fiddling and step dancing contests are about. The lifeblood of contests is what happens off the stage: in the practice rooms and in the campground. Here dancers and fiddlers try out new techniques, steps and tunes, often working collaboratively to teach and critique and encourage each other. Many performances are improvised, with the

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dancers and fiddlers playing with variations and ornaments to motivate and inspire each other. That this is not done on stage, where a \$500 or \$1000 or, in some cases, even a \$1500 prize and title is at stake, is not surprising. For me, it is most important that dancers have the ability and the opportunity to practice, within their primary performance context, this creative, generative aspect of the tradition that maintains this intimate connection between the feet and the fiddle.

While it may sound like the relationship between fiddling and step dancing was least important during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when we were dancing to any fiddler and any set of tunes, I do not believe this is so. No matter how closely the routine is constructed to either match or play with the rhythm of the steps or not, there is a qualitative difference between those dancers who dance *to* the music and those dancers who dance *with* it. Cathy-Lynn Yorke-Slader, a top open class dancer in the late 1970s and early 1980s, called it ‘feeling’ the music. She told me:

When I was competing, a lot of judges would comment on how they felt that I *felt* the music when I was dancing, that I was dancing as *part* of the music and not just that this music was playing behind me and I was doing steps.⁴

Long-time dance teacher, Buster Brown, calls it interpretation. As a judge he would take off marks for timing when he felt that the dancer was not *feeling* the music. He explained it to disgruntled dancers this way:

Alright you weren’t blatant on timing, but you weren’t *feeling* your music, you were hedging. You were either a little ahead, you were a little behind. No, you weren’t blatantly *off* time, but you were not *on* time, you were not *feeling* the music, and that’s what I call interpretation.⁵

Another important step dancing teacher in the Ottawa Valley, Gilles Roy, is quite critical of young dancers today who, he feels, don’t dance with the music:

Step dancing anymore, as far as I’m concerned, don’t exist. They’ve got a lot of good athletes out there, but there’s no dancers. Dancers should dance to the music. That’s it. Nobody dances to the music. When they start and they’ve got that speed in their mind, and it’s a hundred miles an hour, let me tell you, they have got to razzle-dazzle the crowd ‘cause they can’t dance and it’s the only way out. And then the fiddler could drop dead of a heart attack and they wouldn’t even know it [...] What the hell, time changes and everything else. You gotta go with it. But I’m a traditional Canadian step dancer. You got to be able to put the accent and the drive same as like the fiddle is doing. And you gotta rock with the music and you’re bouncing and now you’re talking about a step dancer. There’s a lot of feeling comes from the heart.⁶

It may be tempting to dismiss his comments as that of an old man who has been left behind as the dancing has progressed, but I found that a number of people of all ages expressed the same sentiments, only less colourfully.

Like Buster and Gilles, the relationship between the dancing and the music is one of the ways that, as a judge, I find it easiest to separate the competent dancers from the great dancers. Except for some beginners, most dancers are in time with the beat of the music and can execute their steps with accuracy. But a great dancer is dancing *with* the music, as part of the music. Gilles makes the distinction between timing and rhythm. Being on time means dancing with the beat of the music. Dancing in rhythm means that all the clicks of the feet in between the beats are even or sounded in relation to the fiddle. For Gilles, the real test for a dancer is to dance to 'crooked tunes', tunes that are not always played in full eight-bar phrases. He told me that he makes his advanced dancers do that, even though such tunes are not part of the Ottawa Valley repertoire:

You just gotta feel it on your skin when it's coming. You gotta listen to the music. It's as simple as that. You don't listen to the music, you're dead. You can tell on the guy's last note where he's going. You can, you can hear it.⁷

Both Gilles and Buster point to their teacher, and the legendary 'father of Ottawa Valley step dancing', Donnie Gilchrist, as one who really felt the music:

Donnie Gilchrist danced twice from the heart, didn't know a thing about music. You'd play, he'd get on that stage and dance. Didn't matter what. Didn't tell the fiddlers, 'Hey, I want a certain tune, so many bars.' 'Play. Anything you want. I'll dance.' That is a dancer.⁸

And Buster said, '[Donnie Gilchrist] was a great dancer. He could just get up and feel the music, interpret with his feet, you know, and it would never be the same thing twice'.⁹ Unfortunately, there is little film or video footage of Donnie's dancing, and that of older dancers, that is accessible to younger generations of Ottawa Valley step dancers.

There is a surprising lack of literature that focuses specifically on the interrelationship between music and dance, rather than overemphasizing one to the detriment of the other.¹⁰ I believe that a detailed examination of the interrelationship between fiddling and step dancing in the small, close-knit community of Ontario fiddle and step dancing contests could contribute significantly to this literature. As I extend my research from this paper, I will examine how this relationship is understood and performed by fiddlers and step dancers: both those who do only one or the other, and those who do both. How does knowing how to step dance affect how one plays the fiddle? How does knowing how to fiddle affect how one step dances? Furthermore, I will observe how fiddlers and step dancers relate to each other and the community, both socially and on-stage. What do fiddlers need

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to know about dancing in order to play well for dancers? What do step dancers need to know about fiddling in order to dance well to the music? What elements of fiddling and step dancing are valued by the community, and how do they relate? Examining the relationship between these two modes of expressive culture will provide an alternative way of understanding each of them and their role in continual construction of both individual and community identity. How long will it be until Ottawa Valley step dancers in Ontario get tired of dancing to fiddle music and start to dance to more popular musics? When the relationship between fiddling and step dancing within the community becomes less important, perhaps, but I hope this will never happen.

Notes

¹ Frances MacEachen, 'Step Dancing in Cape Breton', in *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. by Selma Jeanne Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), V, 696–99 (p. 698).

² Gilles Roy, interview by author, recorded 27 August 2001, Carleton Place, Ontario.

³ Cathy Lynn Yorke-Slader, interview by author, recorded 25 November 2001, Stittsville, Ontario.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Buster Brown, interview by author, recorded 30 August 2001, Arnprior, Ontario.

⁶ Gilles Roy, interview.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Buster Brown interview.

¹⁰ László Felföldi, 'Connections Between Dance and Dance Music: Summary of Hungarian Research', *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 33 (2001), 159–65 (p. 163).