

ULRR

Observations of communication between dancer and musician in the Cape Breton community

Item Type	Meetings and Proceedings
Authors	Melin, Mats H.
Citation	Dance Research Forum Ireland's 2nd International Conference Proceedings: Mediating Movement;
Publisher	Dance Research Forum Ireland
Download date	2026-03-07 18:43:23
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/1.0/
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/10344/4194

Observations of Communication between Dancer and Musician in the Cape Breton Community

Mats Melin, University of Limerick, Ireland

This paper concentrates on one particular event that I am studying as part of my PhD research. The observations are based on my own ongoing fieldwork, discussions with dancers and musicians and my personal experience as a dancer in this context. This paper was based around the visual context of five dance video clips, contrasting and comparing their content. Therefore, it was necessary to modify the original text for this printed version.

My ‘field’ in this particular case is the dance venues of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, in maritime east coast Canada. In Cape Breton, you will find many descendants of Gaelic speaking Scottish Highlanders, Basque, French, English and to some extent Irish settlers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Rhodes in Flett 1986, 1996 and Feintuch 2004), who carry on a music and dance tradition that has developed uniquely to this place. The dance venues in this predominantly Catholic community are, in particular, the parish and fire halls, but also community centres, festival venues, pubs, restaurants and often dancing occurs in the home. The dancers and musicians featured in the following video clips come predominantly from rural west coast Inverness County in Cape Breton Island.

The instrument of choice for dancing is the fiddle, with a distinct and locally evolved piano - and sometimes also guitar - accompaniment. To a much lesser extent, pipe music and Gaelic song also feature as accompaniment for dancing. The significant role of the fiddle tradition in Cape Breton Island has been researched and analysed in detail by, for example, Doherty (1996), Graham (2006) and Feintuch (2004).

In the parish, fire, and community halls of Inverness County regular social or “Square Dances” are held. An often significant part of the evenings social dancing happens when the crowd takes a rest, as the floor is cleared for a number of individuals who will share their steps as solo dancers with the community. The Cape Breton community seldom, if ever, see step dancing in isolation from the music (MacGillivray 1988 & 1998; Dunlay 1996; Doherty 1996 & 2001; Feintuch 2004). This last statement would link the Cape Breton ‘field’ to the theory that music and dance is a part of, or is, culture and issues relating to the anthropological definitions of what ‘culture’ is as discussed by, for example, ethnomusicologists Nettl (2005), and Rice (1997), and anthropologist Royce (2002).

My observations in this paper are on only two aspects of this type of performance and only in the particular context of these particular clips – which are the communication and relationship between musician, dancer and audience and a few examples of different relationships between music and dance structures.

Before looking more in detail at the relationship between these dancers and the musicians who play for them, and asking if it is the case that with their embodied

knowledge, they dance the music and musick the dance, to use Christopher Small's (1998) term regarding the *action or culture of making music*, we will watch Rodney MacDonald share his steps as an example of the Cape Breton percussive step dance tradition -

Clip 1 – Rodney has a very fluid and musical style. He does not break his steps down into equally long segments, or dance the same movements repeated equally on each foot, but rather follows the rhythm of the particular tune played and tunes into any variation of the tune provided by the fiddler. He has a “close-to-the-floor” style and good timing according to the locals. He is a popular fiddler in his own right and therefore has deep knowledge of the local music repertoire. Rodney belongs to an extended family of musicians and dancers from the Mabou Coal Mines area of Inverness County.

From this clip we can observe deep connections between music and dance and musician and dancer at work in the Cape Breton context. In researching these connections we must note Hungarian research into the field as summarized by Lázló Felföldi (*Connections Between Dance and Dance Music* 2001):

“In order to uncover dance and music connections, we must pay attention to all the factors serving music and dance expression and how these factors participate in their connections. We must take into consideration that dance and music are special phenomena that take place in time and space, thereby creating communication between the dancer and the musician and between the performers and the audience, while operating within socio-cultural context, using kinetic, visual, acoustic and proxemic channels.” (Felföldi, 2001:160)

Furthermore Felföldi points out that when researching these connections it is music and dance as a process rather than product we analyse. “Differentiation of textual and contextual elements is important. Also useful are concepts of *langue* and *parole*, synchrony and diachrony, and *etic* and *emic* distinctions.” (2001:161). Hungarian dance researcher György Martin used for example morphological analysis to “acquire a deep insight into mechanisms of dance and music connections.” (Felföldi, 2001:161).

The Community Dance

The focus point for this close-knit dancing community in this case is a Square dance evening. Typically held every night of the week in different halls around the County during the summer months but only weekly in a few places around the Island during the rest of the year. The dance halls feature many of the aspects that make up what sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989, 1991) calls ‘third places’. Third places are places where the community meet to socialise but which is not the home or the work place. It is a place to share and reaffirm knowledge, relationships and so on. Many participants are related by blood or by marriage.

Dances are informal - nobody ever formally starts or ends the proceedings, no one ever introduces the musicians featured on the night and nobody ever tells people to form sets or when solo dancing will take place. In fact it is the music that indicates

what is about to happen. This works as the crowd is well informed; they are all insiders to the tradition and thus share emic knowledge of the proceedings.

A square dance typically starts either at 9 or 10 pm and finishes around 1 am. A number of sets (commonly 5 or 6) consisting of jigs and reel figures are danced before the solo dancing occurs and the night is finished with a last square set. Each community has their own set and only one, the local one, is danced throughout the night. Occasionally a waltz will break up the night and sometimes, depending on the crowd and their mood solo dancing will or will not take place.

Turning now to the solo dance event itself - we should note that not all dancers in this dancing community solo dance, but there is a certain group of people who does and are encouraged (almost expected) to get up and share their steps.

The solo dance sequence always starts with the fiddler striking up a strathspey and the first dancer will come onto the floor to dance a short sequence of strathspey steps and then go into a reel often followed by a number of other dancers who generally dance only to reels.

Musicians often know what particular tunes the dancers prefer to dance to and will often include their favourites. The complex relationship between individual musicians, in particular fiddlers, their individual styles of playing, family affinity and their place and status within the community plays a very significant part in this context and their relationship with the dance.

Some musicians on the Island are regarded as listening players others as particularly good dance players and some straddle both ideals. With regards to the dance players it is the 'drive' in the music and their ability to get the tempo right for individual dancers that is essential. Certain fiddle techniques, such as cuts and upstrokes, are used to create this trademark drive in the music. Fiddler Glenn Graham states that "to complement dancing, bowing is very rhythmic, often one bow stroke being applied in one direction for one note. Upstrokes are often as powerful as down strokes with a variety of pressures being exerted on the bow for dynamics and accents. A type of reel called the strathspey features a characteristic stuttering rhythm called the Scotch snap ...[which] provides an accent similar to that found in Gaelic song and pipe music" (Graham, 2006:126). The Cape Breton music repertoire is predominantly geared towards dancing.

The observation I would like to highlight here is that there is particular knowledge at play here, with a special relationship or connection between music and dance in the Cape Breton community and in particular between this group of "dance' musicians and "solo step dancers".

Another observation is that I have not come across, nor heard of, a single musician (lead or accompanist) that cannot step dance. Some are excellent solo step dancers, as for example Rodney MacDonald, while most are known or referred to as "good step dancers".

Likewise, turning it around, almost all those that solo dance either play music (mainly fiddle) or sing, whether they admit to it publicly or not. A majority of these

individuals thus embody the role of musician and dancer in one. There is a certain cross over point of individuals that are expert at both, while others prefer to do one or the other even if they have the ability to do both. This gives them a particularly deep knowledge of both music and dance structure, and of the local tune repertoire and it strengthens the relationship and connection between these individuals as they perform.

This relationship is not just true of the tune players but of the accompanists too. A piano player (also a dancer and a fiddler) informed me that dance rhythms influence her playing and that she is often inspired by rhythmical sequences and the sound produced by a performing dancer (Melin 2008).

Another observation is that Cape Breton dance fiddlers move a lot, they often stamp their foot or feet quite heavily in time with the music, they sway forward and back and they lean forward towards the dancers. There is a movement communication constantly at play here.

Currently the Cape Breton step-dancing tradition is mainly improvisational. It has lost a former connection between certain choreographed steps (read “dances”) and particular melodies. Frank Rhodes, in 1957, noted down a number of Dancing Master taught dances, such as the “Flowers of Edinburgh” (Dannsa nam Fleurs), where the movements were choreographed to fit a particular tune and in a particular structural and sequential order (Rhodes in Flett 1986 & 1996). These dances are no longer performed and have mainly been forgotten. However, some current dancers dance fairly set routines but which are not related to any particular tune.

The local community commonly refer to Cape Breton step dancing as a “close to the floor” style of dance. Dancers trademarks are neatness and lightness, good rhythm and a fairly limited amount of spatial movement.

Today, the connection between music and dance is by genre, in this case particularly 4/4 tunes of the Strathspey and Reel kind. Musicians use a wide variety of old traditional “Scottish” tunes, newly and locally composed tunes as well as tunes borrowed from neighbouring traditions such as the Irish and French Acadian. Tunes that are used vary in length from older pipe tune repertoire tunes where each part is 4 bars long (AABB = 16 bars) to more modern tunes where the parts are 8-bars long (AABB = 32 bars) Sometimes both these are played as ABAB. There are 3 and 4 parted tunes as well as tunes where the parts are of unequal length. The number of repeats and order of the tunes is never set and the musicians are free to change tune at any moment.

The video clips shown in this presentation are of dancers that perform within what their peers refer to as “within the tradition or style of Cape Breton step dance”. Even though they have different ways of segmenting their particular sequence of steps - symmetrical, asymmetrical, with the music, across the music, fully improvising or dancing a routine etc. The following observations form part my research into defining the core movement repertoire of Cape Breton Step dancing. Is it the use of certain core movement material (some of which seems to carry special meaning to the local crowd, and they use words such as ‘older’ or ‘heel work’ to indicate these) in

combination with deep knowledge of tune and music structure and tune repertoire, and how these interact *that defines the tradition?*

The setting for the following examples is a Square Dance in Mabou Community Hall from an event specifically set up in 2000 by the Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University to record dancers and their styles. These clips can all be found on the video –The Beauty of the Dance –, which was produced by Sheldon MacInnes of the Beaton Institute. All participants – musicians, dancers and audience - are local, many are related and all would be insiders to the tradition.

Clip 2

Willie Fraser, the oldest (in his early 80s when this was filmed) and possibly one of the most highly regarded step dancers in Inverness County. Self taught (some steps came to him in dreams, he claims). Even in his younger days, he was regarded as a neat, musical and close to the floor dancer. He is dancing to a strathspey composed and named after him, indicating the knowledge of the musician and his recognition of the dancer. His motifs are fairly limited in number and short (mainly 1 bar long) but used very effectively. He does not change motif with the music and is not always symmetric in his use of motifs between right and left side. Willie Fraser is a known Gaelic singer and teaches his steps through the medium of Gaelic dance songs – “if you can’t sing the tune you can’t dance it” he said at a workshop once.

Clip 3

Mary Janet MacDonald was taught dancing at home by her mother and sister. She is well respected as a dancer and teacher by the local community. Her dancing is very musical, light and close to the floor in style. She combines single bar and double bar motifs and some 4 bar motifs in her performances and her dancing is always symmetric, dancing the same number of steps on the right as on the left. Mary Janet has a solid repertoire of steps, which she is known for and which she has taught to many people around the island and the world. She used to wear “clickers” or taps on her shoes but stopped using them as the local priest felt they were not traditional. She said that when she was younger she did not dance as symmetrically as now. She still improvises each performance.

Clip 4

Sheena Boucher represents a trend among younger dancers to perform a mix of older short motifs (1 and 2-bar long) but who predominantly uses 4-bar and 8-bar long motifs that are repeated symmetrically. Her style is close to the floor but her movements are quite sharp and include movements borrowed from the Scottish Highland Dance tradition such as “crab walks” and “Charleston” movements out of the character dance – the Sailors’ Hornpipe. She also uses sliding forward, which could possibly be inspired by elements of Irish dance? Often her steps fit the tunes well which seems to indicate that she is not dancing a routine but making qualified choices of motifs to fit the particular tune that is being provided. Some of these movements would probably not be regarded by the traditionalists in the community as being part of the “step dancing tradition”.

Clip 5

Helen and Dawn MacDonald. Here we have a set routine danced by a duo. It is quite common that siblings or relations perform in pairs and that they have a made up routine. Again the steps are a combination of short and long motifs, but the dancing includes synchronisation not only with the movements but also between the dancers. Here the tunes seem to take a secondary role as the routine is set. Both are musicians in the tradition as well.

All these clips exemplify the complexity of my research area. Meeting some verbalised, but more unspoken rules, all these clips represent different facets of the same Cape Breton step dancing tradition. Each individual's style and choice of combining steps and motifs to the informed choice of tunes provided, all passes as part of the same genre. It shows that the tradition is constantly developing and changing but that certain significant aspects change very little but are used differently by each individual dancer within a communally accepted framework as the tradition moves along time. The clips also illustrate the close interaction with the musicians, and their choices of tunes for each of the dancers performing. Furthermore the general interaction of the participating community as a whole is evident. It may well be appropriate to say that many, if not all, of these particular individuals featured in the clips shown are in individual degrees dancing the music & musicking the dance.

Bibliography

- Beaton Institute, C. B. U. (2000). *The Beauty of the Dance*. S. MacInnes. Sydney, Beaton Institute. Video.
- Doherty, E. A. (1996). The Paradox of the periphery : evolution of the Cape Breton fiddle tradition c1928-1995. *Irish World Music Centre*. Limerick, University of Limerick. Ph.D.: 1 v ((various pagings)) : ill.
- Doherty, E. A. (2001). Bringing it All Back Home? Issues surrounding Cape Breton Fiddle Music in Scotland. *North Atlantic Fiddle Convention*. Aberdeen.
- Doherty, L. E. A. (1994). *The Music of Cape Breton : an Irish Perspective*, The Irish Traditional Music Society, University College Cork.
- Dunlay, K. and D. Greenberg (1996). *Traditional Celtic Violin Music of Cape Breton, containing Strathspeys, Reels, Jigs, etc., transcribed from the playing of some outstanding exponents of the traditional style of Highland Scottish Fiddling as cultivated in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia*, Toronto, DunGreen Music.
- Feintuch, B. (2004). *The Conditions for Cape Breton Fiddle Music: The Social and Economic Setting of a Regional Soundscape*, *Ethnomusicology* 48 (1).
- Felföldi, L. (2001). *Connections Between Dance and Dance Music: Summary of Hungarian Research*, *Yearbook for Traditional Music*: 159-165.

- Flett, J. F. and T. M. Flett. (1986). *Traditional Dancing in Scotland / with an appendix 'Dancing in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia,'* by F. Rhodes. London, Routledge & Keegan Paul.
- Flett, J. F. and T. M. Flett (1996). *Traditional Step-dancing in Scotland / J.F. and T.M. Flett. With an appendix: Step-dancing in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia* by F. Rhodes. Edinburgh, Scottish Cultural Press.
- Graham, G. (2006). *The Cape Breton Fiddle. Making and Maintaining Tradition*, Sydney, NS, Canada, Cape Breton University Press.
- Hornsby, S. (1992). *Nineteenth-century Cape Breton: a Historical Geography*, Montreal, Buffalo, McGill-Queen's University Press.
- MacGillivray, A. (1988). *A Cape Breton Ceilidh*, Sea-Cape Music Ltd. Cape Breton.
- MacGillivray, A. (1998). *The Cape Breton Fiddler*, Sydney, Sea-Cape Music Ltd.
- Nettl, B. (1983). *The Study of Ethnomusicology: 29 Issues and Concepts*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press.
- Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*, New York, Paragon House.
- Oldenburg, R. (1991). *The Great Good Place*, New York, Marlowe & Company.
- Rice, T. (1997). *Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology, Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, Barz and Cooley. New York, Oxford University Press: 101-120.
- Royce, A. P. (2002). *The Anthropology of Dance*, Alton : Dance.
- Small, C. (1998). *Musicking : the meanings of performing and listening*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press.