

***"If you want to win, you've got to play it like a man."  
Music, Gender, and Value in Ontario fiddle Contests<sup>1</sup>***

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**Abstract:** Competitive fiddling contests in Ontario are considered from the perspectives of the individual experience of the author and nine women fiddlers. Asymmetries between men and women fiddlers are discussed in relation to current ideas of music, gender, and value.

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Much of the gender-based research in ethnomusicology has focused on describing women's music-making, compensating for the fact that, for many years, women's musical activities have been overlooked in and omitted from accounts of musical cultures. More recently, however, feminist scholarship in the discipline has moved beyond description to examine more explicitly the relationship between women's activities and gender relationships as a whole (Koskoff, 1987; Sugarman, 1997). This paper provides a rich series of women fiddlers' experiences, while examining in more detail the relationship between music, gender, and value in the Ontario fiddle contest circuit.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is based on interviews with nine women fiddlers, now living in southwestern and eastern Ontario and Alberta, with an age range from eleven to mid-forties, who have in the past or still do participate in the Ontario contest circuit each summer. Their fiddle playing experience ranges from two years to forty-two years. Besides playing competitively, some play full-time or part-time in bands, teach privately, and judge at fiddle contests. All of them said that they could not imagine their lives without fiddling, whether as a career or as a hobby. One voice that I am conscious of missing is that of Eleanor Townsend, the first woman to win the Canadian Open Fiddle Contest in 1977, and the only woman to hold that title until 1998. Eleanor died in a house fire just weeks before I began this research. Several women mentioned in their interviews that she would have been the best person with whom to speak.

I include myself as a participant in this study because of my seventeen years of experience in the circuit, first as a step dancer, and also later as a fiddler. I have known many of the participants in this research since I entered the circuit. I have competed against them, jammed with them, played piano accompaniment for them, and even took fiddle lessons from one. Depending on their ages and geographic locations, I know some of them better than others, which provided a particular challenge to me as a researcher. Because I could ask more specific questions and follow-up, and more fully contextualize the experiences of the women with whom I have a longer or closer acquaintance, I struggled against privileging the voices of these women. In the end,

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<sup>2</sup> The "circuit" is a series of fiddle and step dancing contests held each weekend, somewhere in Ontario, between the long weekend in May (Perth, ON) and Labour Day weekend (Pembroke, ON).

rather than erase the differences, I attempted to make explicit my relationship with each participant where I felt it affected the telling of their stories.

I constructed an interview guide that explored the participants' personal histories in fiddling, their experiences in learning, teaching, competing, and judging, and their reflections on gender. I revised it slightly for each individual, focusing on personal experiences of which I was aware, and also presenting ideas that had been raised in previous interviews, to see if they resonated with any of the others. I found the guide to be most useful for the younger participants who were less comfortable with free-flowing dialogue and who seemed to expect concrete questions to which they could respond. With the older women, particularly the women I knew well, the interviews progressed more as conversation, and I checked the interview guide only near the end to make sure we had covered all the major topics. In most cases, the guide served more as a preparatory tool, to organize my own thoughts before an interview, rather than providing a structure to our exchange.

Although we discussed a variety of topics in our interviews, I foregrounded gender issues. The participants knew that I was only interviewing other female fiddlers at that point, and that I was interested in their experiences as "women fiddlers." By highlighting issues of gender, I am not able to address "in what circumstances and by what means gender ... emerged as an important issue," a concern that Diamond (in press) points out is largely omitted from current feminist research; however, I am able to examine the variety of ways that gender was conceptualized by these women as they reflected on their experiences.

There were two issues that seemed particularly resonant with several participants, and with me: the separation of men's and women's performance spheres, and the gendered discourse of fiddle style. As I considered how the women had spoken about each of these issues, I began to see that they are both largely concerned with value and prestige. Koskoff (1987) states that "in all known societies, men's actions receive higher value and prestige than those of women" (14). In this paper I demonstrate how, first, the circumstances under which women (are allowed to) win at competitions, and second, the way we talk about winning fiddle styles, give more value to men's fiddling than to women's fiddling, and ultimately reinforce gender asymmetries within the fiddle circuit.

Up until the mid-eighties, it was common for Ontario fiddle contests to have a class for women only, called the Ladies class, which was separate from the age-specific categories and the Open class. Kendra Norris explained her understanding of how the Ladies class originated:

See, way, way back when women didn't play the fiddle, the men played the fiddle. The women were allowed to play the piano for them, to accompany them, but the fiddle player was always a man. The women were allowed to play the piano, but that was all. Well, then eventually things started to change, but of course, compared to some people who had been playing fiddle for a long, long time, and had passed on that tradition to the males, the women didn't stand a hope in heck of competing. And so there was the Ladies Open, which was open to any ladies, and then there was the

Championship class, the Open class, and that was for the men. (Norris 1999)

Karen Reed, who often competed in the Ladies class in the seventies, noted:

Obviously the Ladies class was there as a very special thing. Women weren't good enough to be in the Open. So that's the way people thought back then. So the Ladies Open was the equivalent of the Men's Open, but not. They didn't call it the Men's Open, they just called it the Open. But women tended to stick with the Ladies thing because that's just the way it went. (Reed 1999)

While the positive effect of a Ladies class may have been to encourage more women to compete in an environment where they had a better chance of winning (Kathy O'Neill pointed out that there were never many competitors in the Ladies class), the use of these category titles clearly marginalized women fiddlers. The more inclusive class, the Championship or Open class, was really only intended to be "open" for men. Men were of "championship" calibre, and women were encouraged to compete in a class better suited to their abilities. Drawing on Koskoff's (1987) discussion of the separation between male and female performance spheres, the Ladies class can also be understood to provide women with a socially acceptable position from which to perform in the midst of a male-dominated environment.

Kathy O'Neill, who was most active in the circuit in the seventies and early eighties, emphasized that the Ladies class was much less prestigious than the Open, reflected, on one level, in the much lower prize money for the class:

The Ladies class in those days was treated much like a twelve and under or an eight and under, that kind of thing now. Like a lot of competitions I can remember, even the eighteen and under money was better prize money than what a Ladies competition was. The top money that I've ever, ever made, winning a Ladies class, was \$150. And that was even in the days when there was \$1000 first prize for the Open. (O'Neill 1999)

When I asked her if she had ever felt any resentment at the lower prize money, she replied,

Nothing ever was discussed that way. It was just another class. It wasn't something that was even taken that serious really, at the very beginning. Because I can remember one year I competed, and it was in the late 70s, in Pembroke, Ontario, and I made the top ten [in Open] in Pembroke, and I was given \$100 for placing like, I don't know whether I was eighth, ninth, or tenth. You know, I was low man on the totem pole. But I still had made as good money as if I had won the Ladies class. So, you know, you had to play it for whichever angle worked best for you.... That time I made the top ten with all the guys in Pembroke was way better than ever winning a Ladies class.... The perception at that time was that it was a step up to go from the Ladies class to the Open class. (O'Neill 1999)

Although Kendra, who also won her share of Ladies classes, said that she never felt, "Oh well, if I'd been in the Open class, I wouldn't have won. You know, it was *only* the Ladies class" (Norris 1999), she, too, sees the Open class as a higher level of competition:

When I was in the Open class, I mean, when I was in my prime, I didn't worry about playing Ladies class. I just went for the gusto. And then after I was married, once I was teaching school full-time, working, having babies, I didn't have the time to practise. It was time to step down. I was able to still be a competitive player, but I was in a category where it was okay that I would practise once or twice a week, instead of once or twice a day, everyday. (Norris 1999)

She described the disappearance of most Ladies classes by the mid-eighties:

Because the number of ladies was not horribly significant, and of course, by that time [many of us] were playing Open class anyways, there wasn't the need for the Ladies class, the same. So they decided they might as well take that prize money, and instead of having it be segregated, obviously prejudicial, that they would make it into an Intermediate class, for those people between nineteen and usually forty-five. Then there was a class for them to go in, if they really weren't Open class caliber. So that's when you started to see the Ladies class converted. It wasn't that it was eliminated, as such, it was just changed to be more encompassing. (Norris 1999)

Karen agreed that "it became recognized that all's equal, and let us get into these other classes, and they didn't have to put the prize money up for a special class when women were going into these other ones" (Reed 1999).

Because I only started to fiddle at age fifteen, and was never really competitive in the eighteen and under class, dominated by fiddlers who had been playing since they were five or six, I remember being pleased when there was a Ladies class at a competition. This gave me a class with fewer competitors, of mixed caliber, and at least a chance at some prize money. I felt more comfortable and confident in the Ladies class than in the eighteen and under, in which I was always embarrassed to play. By the time I had turned nineteen and could enter the Intermediate class, which also accommodated a wide range of playing abilities, although often more competitors, the Ladies class had disappeared, and I did not miss it.

The most interesting reaction to the idea of a Ladies class came from the younger women with whom I spoke. For the most part, they had never competed in a Ladies class, and the youngest, eleven-year old Krista Rozein, did not even know they had existed. April Verch introduced the topic of the Ladies class into our interview with this comment: "I was really surprised when I was thinking, you know, there used to be a Ladies class. That just sucks. It's stupid" (Verch 1999), and Deanna Dolstra replied to my question about the Ladies class, by saying,

I guess [the Ladies class]'s kind of a sexist question, because you can have a Man's class just as well as a Ladies class. Maybe that was there to help

the ladies win, so the men won't be in the class, I guess. I don't know why they had that class. That was kind of weird. (Dolstra 1999)

All nine women agreed that there is now no need for a Ladies class, pointing out that women play the fiddle just as well as men, and that they are, in fact, winning against the men. One might assume that with the disappearance of Ladies classes in the mid-to late eighties, women would be integrated into the other classes, winning and losing against the men on equal ground. Although the women with whom I spoke agreed that gender should not be an issue in winning at fiddle contests today, the reality, of course, is much more complicated and multi-layered.

First of all, gender does seem to be an issue at some of the big contests, particularly where there is a title involved, but only when the winner is a woman. The most obvious example is the discourse surrounding Eleanor Townsend, long known in the Canadian fiddle community and through the media as "the only woman to win Shelburne," the Canadian fiddle championships. This fact was still emphasized twenty-one years after she won the title, in various newspaper and television reports of her death on December 31, 1998. Kendra Norris was at the Shelburne contest the year Eleanor won, and remembers "them making such a big thing about, 'Oh, she's the first female, first woman to ever win Shelburne'" (Norris 1999).

Michelle Charleton, who placed second at Shelburne in 1988 and 1989, said that although she approached Shelburne as a personal achievement, rather than wanting to be the second Canadian woman champion, the media picked up on the story and produced a television special on the Shelburne contest, focusing particularly on her "quest" to be the second woman champion:

I don't know if it was the Rotary Club, I don't know if it was the CBC, that took note of this and thought, "Oh, here's a little story we can create, and get the crowds in, and create a little bit of an excitement." I'm thinking, "Well, what excitement? They're using me here, you know?" At the time I didn't think I was being used, but then after, when I look back at it and reflect upon it, I think, "Okay, yeah, I was being used." They were looking for an attraction to bring more people in to see if I was going to place first. (Charleton 1999)

One effect, then, of making gender an issue when women win at fiddle contests is marking the event as noteworthy, out of the ordinary, or in Karen Reed's words, "almost as if it isn't possible." It does not acknowledge that women are routinely placing high or winning in Open classes, and have been since the seventies. After Michelle placed second again in 1989, the media attention seemed to die away, to the point where there was no "official" mention of April Verch being the second woman to win the Canadian championship in 1998. This could be interpreted either as a lack of sensitivity to women's achievements in the fiddle circuit, or an indication that women's achievements no longer need to be pointed out as exceptional.

Karen Reed also reflected on the achievements of both Eleanor and April at Shelburne:

[Eleanor] stuck with the contests until she won it, and never went back. She won it once and it was this big thing that she was the first one, and nobody ever won it until this year, April Verch. And somebody in the audience yelled, "It's about time," and I was thinking, "Okay, well [April] hasn't been competing that long, so does that mean it's about time another woman won?" That's what I got out of that conversation, and yet she deserved it. She played well, had nothing to do with gender. That night when I listened to that contest, and I was there, it was like, "Okay, if she doesn't win, something's wrong with this." Just close your eyes, listen to them play, and it doesn't matter whether you're male or female, the best player's the one that should win, and gender should never take a place in judging. (Reed 1999)

Kathy expressed similar sentiments:

In all due respect to April, I think she needs to be judged for the fiddle player she is, not because she's a she or a he. That's how I like to look at it. I think the sooner people get over this she/he business, and just judge the fiddle player for the fiddle player, then the better off we're going to be. (O'Neill 1999)

Of course gender should not play a role in judging, but as many of these women pointed out, judging is a subjective activity. Since gender does affect the circuit in various ways and at various levels, there is really no way of knowing how gender does affect judging in any particular circumstance. Perhaps even more important than the reality, though, is how participants perceive gender to affect judging. Certainly, the insistence by these women that gender should not play a role, leads me to believe that at some time they believe that it did.

I asked April to reflect on her experiences at Shelburne:

I think it was particularly hard at Shelburne. Eleanor had only won it, and nobody was ready for another female. I played around there for a few years, second and third, and it didn't seem to matter.... People were starting to say, "What kind of chance do you have? They're not going to let another woman win it." And then it would come time, and people would be like, "Well I think it's time. Now you're going to win." And that would make me feel bad too, because people were saying, "Well, it's time for a woman to win, so that's why [you won] it, you're the only one in there." (Verch 1999)

April achieved one of the highest honours in Canadian fiddle playing, and yet she was left to wonder whether the only reason she won is because she is a woman. I wonder how many male winners at Shelburne have ever questioned their achievement on the grounds of gender? From my discussions with April, I sense that on a personal level she is confident in her own ability to compete against anybody in the Open class on the basis of her fiddling playing; however, on the level of public discourse, her achievement is devalued by connecting it to gender. A second negative effect, then, of emphasizing gender when a woman wins is the devaluing of her skill and ability as a fiddler, making it seem as if gender is a significant factor in the win. Even though women fiddlers are now competing with men in gender neutral classes, the gender ideology of the circuit

reinforces the power differential between men and women, less explicitly, and more subversively, than when the two were separated into different classes.

And yet, the effect of emphasis on gender is not wholly negative. Certainly for young female fiddlers, Eleanor, April, Michelle, and the many other women fiddlers who have done well in Open class competition, have become role models of excellence and achievement in the fiddle circuit, as is evident in the following quote from fifteen-year old Deanna Dolstra:

It really helps because it means a girl can still win over all those guys, and they can be just as good or better. It really helps for Eleanor to be in there. It really helps us younger generation to better ourselves, and with April, we're really proud of her. (Dolstra 1999)

Perhaps the difference, then, is who is making an issue of women winning in the Open class, and for what purpose.

The second issue that I examine in relation to music, gender, and value is that of a gendered discourse of fiddle style. Kendra Norris opened our interview by saying,

I thought of something before you got here, and I wanted to be sure and say, I can remember as a kid my father saying to me, "If you want to win, you've got to play it like a man." And that bothered me to no end, because it seemed like you had to go up there and play it with so much power and strength. Now maybe that's confidence, but, to me, I internalized that as it had to be loud and it had to be strong. (Norris 1999)

While Kendra associated "playing it like a man" with power, strength, and confidence, both April and Michelle associated the phrase with aggression. April said, "Lots of people say that I play more like a guy because guys are sort of more aggressive, I guess" (Verch 1999), and Michelle remembered, "There weren't as many female players, so if you were a female player, you had to really play, my dad would say, you had to play like a man, with a little aggression" (Charleton 1999). Karen Reed, who has often been told she plays like a man, reflected on the phrase in the context of April's playing at Shelburne in 1998:

I don't know if it's aggressive, or just the dynamics. It's a strong playing ability. April Verch has strength behind her playing. She sounds confident. That could be one of them. She's got a definite confidentability when she's playing. She sounds like she's in control. She knows exactly what she's going to do with every note, and women aren't looked upon as real confident. You listen to her and you know she's in control of what she's doing. Is that a male thing? Are women just flighty and bubbleheaded, and when they play they just kind of half play? I don't know, I don't think so. Some women might, but some men do too. (Reed 1999)

In this quote, Karen introduces a dichotomy between the perception of male playing as strong and confident versus female playing as flighty and bubbleheaded. April set up a

slightly different opposition between "aggressive" male playing and "wimpy" female playing:

But I can't really think of a girl in my mind that plays wimpy either. So they say that, but at the same time, who are you comparing us to? Maybe women are just as aggressive. Yeah, I can't really think of anyone that's wimpy, really at all. Maybe we would be, but because we compete against [males], we conform ourselves to be like that, you know, because we have to compete with them. Maybe we're trying to make up for something, and so that's why we all play like that. Maybe it's just expected that we shouldn't be as aggressive, and so people say, "Well, you play like a guy." But really that's just the way we play. That's the way fiddlers play. That's just a fiddle thing. (Verch 1999)

In both cases, the characteristics attributed to a masculine style (strength, power, confidence, and aggression) are considered also to be characteristics of good fiddling, and are obviously more highly valued than fiddling that is weak or unconfident. Although I do not remember being told to "play like a man," much of my sheet music from those early years of lessons has DRIVER MCKIVER written on it in huge block letters, Karen's reminder to me to drive the tune, or play it with strength and power.

Kendra also set up a stereotypical opposition between masculine and feminine fiddle styles, but describes the feminine style in more positive terms, such as soft, gentle, and subtle:

April won this past year, and if you didn't know it was a woman playing, you wouldn't have been able to tell. But I think she is still playing more like a man, than the men are playing with the sort of stereotypical gentleness of the woman. Some of them are. Some of those guys are allowing much more of those subtleties to enter into their playing, primarily in their waltzes, but also in their jigs and their reels. I think if you listen very carefully, there are maybe more dynamics than just solid "bull in the china shop," charge from beginning to end, at the same volume level. But I think, even yet, the women are still trying to play like men, as opposed to the men letting the softer, gentler side in. I don't know of anybody in the contests that plays that way. (Norris 1999)

Although Kendra described both the masculine and feminine styles in positive terms, she acknowledged that because it is the consistently winning style, the masculine style is more valued within the circuit. She was quick to point out, however, that these are just stereotypes, and that fiddle style really is, or should be, about personal expression:

I want that ability to express myself, and I find the waltzes are how I do it. Now there are other females I know that do very well on the jigs and reels and they like that kind of thing, and that's all wonderful. So I guess it's kind of personal that way, what you like and what you don't... I've always been sort of a softy for the waltzes, the schmaltzy stuff, and I think I play it as my best tune, but because I put not only the strength, the confidence into it, but also ease off and give it that gentleness that the waltz needs. But then that's where I seem to lack with the jig and the reel, that drive, that "play it



like a man" kind of thing, the drive that seems to be needed for the reel in particular.... I just don't play that way. I *can*. If I had to, I would, but that wouldn't be me playing then. That would be me trying to copy somebody, trying to play like the boys. But it would not be my preference. It would not be my style, what I would do naturally. (Norris 1999)

Karen Reed agreed that "it's a character. Fiddling's expression, and it's whatever you're feeling, and it shouldn't be put in some sort of gender category" (Reed 1999).

While the "play it like a man" phrase found least resonance with three of my four youngest participants, it is far from disappearing from circuit discourse. Both Kendra and Kathy use the phrase in their fiddle teaching to encourage their students to develop strong, confident playing styles. Kendra said,

And I joke about that now, and I say that to my students, "My father always told me...." (we laugh) Somehow they seem to understand what I mean when I say that, and I get the desired effect out of them. I don't know why, whether it's just that imagery of the man, the strength, the solid, confident kind of thing, or what. I don't know, but that seems to be what is the difference, in some cases, between an average player and a contest winner, that there is that confidence, that there is that sense of strength playing. (Norris 1999)

Kathy interprets the phrase differently, removing it, in her mind, from its gendered connotations:

"You have to play like a man." I tell that to my girl students as well. And it's a terrible thing because I don't think they mean play like a man, a female, a male thing. That was a compliment, to play like a man. It was nothing negative. I never, ever took it as a sexist remark. I always took it as a compliment. It, to me, meant, "You're playing strong, you're playing confident, and you're playing like a winner." (O'Neill 1999)

Whether or not such masculine or feminine fiddle styles actually exist in practice, our use of these gendered binarisms perpetuates the perception that they do, ultimately maintaining gender asymmetries within the circuit by giving value to that which is associated with a masculine style. This is perhaps one example of how "asymmetrical power relations, as gender relations often are, [are] reproduced from one generation to the next, even with the willing complicity of those who are subordinate" (Sugarman 1997, 31).

These preliminary observations about gender and value must be understood within the context of the very traditional and conservative culture of the Ontario fiddle circuit. Gender ideology is internalized and rarely, if ever, acknowledged explicitly. Several of the women who I have interviewed so far said they had never thought about gender issues before in fiddling, and while some of them seemed uncomfortable or uninterested in the parts of the interview that focused explicitly on gender, others had obviously been thinking about it a lot between when I first contacted them by telephone and our interview. All of them commented on how much they enjoyed talking about their

experiences and expressed surprise that anyone was interested. For me, the sharing of their stories has been the most rewarding aspect of this research.

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