

INSTRUMENTAL FOLK MUSIC OF QUEBEC; AN INTRODUCTION*

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Four years ago I came to Québec for a year-long independent study of Québécois instrumental folk music on a research scholarship from the Thomas J. Watson Foundation. I can well recollect with what naive optimism I embarked upon that year of travels. Having only a hazy notion of the field of study and of the study of the field, I enjoyed the blissfully foreshortened perspective of a greenhorn pioneer and foresaw myself blazing a trail into the province, surveying and exploring the field, and reporting home triumphantly, all within a year's space. Once in the field, I rapidly became aware that the territory whose exploration I had undertaken was vast, fertile, diverse, and virtually unexplored. By 1979 I arrived at a comparatively sober but more realistic assessment of the nature of my undertaking and have settled down to charting out a small region. The purpose of this article, however, is to present an introduction to Québec's instrumental folk music as a whole. The information I will communicate is necessarily summary, general, and essentially descriptive. The following discussion is organized into three subject areas: the study of instrumental folk music in Québec, the historical background of the tradition, and distinguishing features of the repertoire.

Study

Scholarly study of Québec's instrumental folk music tradition got off to an early and auspicious start in 1919 when Marius Barbeau produced a ten-page article on the subject with information on repertoire and performance practice, as well as several musical transcriptions.¹ Unfortunately, instrumental folk music studies come to a dead halt then and there; we must jump ahead more than fifty years in order to find another scholarly publication on the subject. There is no single explanation for the lack of scholarly attention to instrumental folk music in Québec. However, it seems clear that an important contributing factor is the past tendency of folklorists in Québec as elsewhere towards a preoccupation with the formal and/or textual content of folklore. Within this perspective, instrumental folk music is primarily perceived of as a repertoire of sonal, non-verbal objects, whose study parameters are limited to musical transcription and analysis. Most folklorists in Québec have lacked the special training to undertake such work. Folklorists

possessing the necessary background have generally been drawn to the realm of folksong, whose literary content provides wider possibilities to communicate with the general folklore studies community. Consequently, the folkloristic study of Québécois traditional music has been limited, up until just recently, to the amassment of archival materials. Nonetheless, study materials do exist. Over the last twenty years, a handful of interested cinematographers, musicologists, recording entrepreneurs, and record collectors have produced some noteworthy popular and scholarly studies.

History

“Le quatre (février) le premier bal du Canada s’est fait chez le sieur Chartier. Dieu veuille que cela ne tire point en conséquence.”² In 1647 the Superior of the Pères Jésuites in Québec City gloomily reports the occurrence of the first ball in New France. I open my discussion of the history of Québec’s instrumental folk-music tradition with this quotation because it is informative, interesting, and typical in terms of its content, tenor, and source. Also, in trying to develop a coherent summary of almost four centuries of folk-music history without recourse to an authoritative text, I have personally experienced a state of foreboding similar to that described by the Father Superior in the quotation. Present sources for and studies of Québec’s folk-music past are patchy and sometimes conflicting. Nevertheless, it is possible to sketch a general profile.

The instrument most closely associated with Québécois folk music is the violin. This instrument emerges in Italy and France around 1550³, and from its earliest days, it seems to have been inextricably associated with the accompaniment of dancing. By the end of the seventeenth century, the violin was fast becoming the favored popular dance accompaniment instrument at all levels of society from Ireland to France, and in the British colonies of North America as well.⁴

We know from contemporary accounts that ballets, balls, and dances took place in New France as early as 1645.⁵ Unfortunately, documents from this period seldom make more than passing reference to musical life. This is due in part to the fact that the most important source of information for popular music and dance in seventeenth-century New France is the disapproving voice of the clergy. According to one disgusted French visitor, the Baron de la Hontan, not only did Québec City clergymen excommunicate dancers and masquers, they personally tracked down the culprits, “comme on poursuivroit un Loup.”⁷ Clerical opposition notwithstanding, dancing survives and flourishes in eighteenth-century New France.

The violin was probably the principal instrumental accompaniment for the dances of New France colonists at all levels of society. The dance forms in vogue throughout western Europe, the British

colonies, and New France during the eighteenth-century were the result of exchange and cross-breeding between English and French repertoires which began in the late 1600s.⁸ However, with respect to the dance music itself, an anomaly occurred in the New World. Whereas the United States was predominately colonized by the English and Québec by the French, the traditional instrumental music repertoires of Anglo America and French Canada appear to have been primarily influenced by Scottish and Irish traditions. Alan Jabbour, a scholar of American fiddling, suggests by way of explanation that groups with strong musical traditions may be expected to exert an influence out of proportion to their numerical strength but he also warns against seeking simple solutions to the alchemies of culture.⁹ With respect to Québec, the background surrounding the implantation of the surviving instrumental folk music repertoire is, for the moment, largely unknown.

Up until the latter 1800s, Québécois instrumental folk music appears to have been essentially a fiddling tradition fundamentally associated with the accompaniment of dancing and the festive celebration of ties of family and community. The eminently public and social nature of the fiddler's art developed and flourished in the small, close-knit farming communities which characterized Québec society in this period. Available documentation also suggests the occasional use of the Jew's harp and the tambour as rhythmic and percussive instruments. As well, *turlutage* (tune liting) seems to have been a common standby when the fiddle was unavailable.

In the latter 1800s two new melodic instruments make their appearance in the Québécois folk-music tradition. The diatonic harmonica and the button accordion are early nineteenth-century German innovations which enjoyed widespread popularity in Europe and North America in the mid-to-late 1800s. The harmonica ultimately becomes a durable element of many folk-music traditions across the United States and Canada. The diatonic accordion virtually disappears from general circulation in North America but develops a durable and important role in Cajun, Creole, and French-Canadian folk music. In the late nineteenth-century, the piano begins to make its appearance in village parishes throughout the province and has subsequently become a popular accompaniment instrument for traditional Québécois music. In more recent decades, the role of the piano has been augmented and to some extent supplanted by the guitar, bass, and drum set.

As previously stated, the fundamental role of instrumental folk music in Québec is historically associated with the accompaniment of dancing. With respect to the dances themselves, the record of the past remains shrouded until the latter eighteenth-century. Presently available sources indicate that by the late 1700s the popular forms of western Europe were equally in vogue in Québec, at least in the cities. For example, the memoirs of a French immigrant landed in

Montréal around 1770 provide the following description of dancing in that city:

Jamais je n'ai connu nation aimant plus à danser que les Canadiens; ils ont encore les contre-danses françaises et les minuets, qu'ils entremellent de danses angloises.¹⁰

The fashionable dances of early nineteenth-century continental Europe found favor in urban Québec as they found favor throughout the cities of the United States and Canada. Some of these dances and their music which filtered out to the surrounding countryside were gradually adopted into the existing repertoires. However, insofar as the written record and the testimony of the living tradition may be trusted as accurate reflections of the historical past, the popular dances and dance musics of the latter nineteenth-century do not appear to have passed into traditional circulation in Québec.

The portrait of instrumental Québec folk music in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is far from clear. With respect to repertoire, no single factor can readily explain the apparent failure of traditional dancers and musicians to keep abreast of popular trends. A possible and probable contributing element is the fact that the music, instrumentation, and choreography of these dances (the polkas, galops, schottisches, mazurkas and etc., which called for couples rather than group formations) resemble less and less those of the earlier popular genres. It also seems possible that the outpacing of the traditional dance and dance music repertoires by popular trends is to some degree an outgrowth of the more fundamental developing loss of currency which was experienced by the traditional society of Québec as a whole during the latter nineteenth century. As the 1800s progress, the economic unit of the family farm becomes less and less viable with economic and commercial developments taking place elsewhere in Canada and the United States. By the second half of the century, the marginality of farming within the established structures is increasingly manifest, and alternative economic opportunities are attracting a steadily-growing outflow from rural Québec towards urban centers and farflung pioneer outposts within and without the province.

The years from 1900 to 1940 mark a period of intense socio-cultural change in Québec. The single most important contributing factor is the development and gradual primacy of the urban-industrial society within the province. During this period, traditional dance and dance music undergo the same processes which have affected traditional agrarian societies throughout the Western world over the last century. Dancers and musicians disperse, old recreations give way to modern entertainments, and the values and activities formerly associated with instrumental folk music survive only among the families and communities who preserve the old ways of living.

The traditional settings of Québec's instrumental folk music tradition have all but disappeared in the last fifty years, but the continuing appeal of the music is manifest in many forms. From the 1920s to the 1950s, literally thousands of 78 rpm commercial recordings of traditional dance music were produced in the province and a small number of commercial recordings are still being released. Commercial radio for many years sponsored barn dance-type programs, featuring live music and recordings by popular Québécois folk instrumentalists. Up until recent decades there were commercially successful "old time" dance halls in many cities, towns, and villages throughout the province and a few of these enterprises are still operating. Commercial television series featuring Québécois folk music and dance continue to draw large and devoted listening audiences, at least among the older generation. The music and to some extent the dances continue to be preserved as part of celebrations surrounding a few calendar holidays and family anniversaries, at least in certain rural milieus.

In the early 1970s, Québec experienced a short-lived urban folk revival. For five or six years, principally in Montréal, enthusiastic young novice musicians and a few older veterans played to large and equally enthusiastic young audiences. However, the appeal of the music seems to have been primarily political and ideological and the widespread enthusiasm soon sputtered out. At the same time, a second less visible but more durable revival also was taking place. In 1975, the *Association des Violoneux du Québec*, a non-profit traditional music organization, was formed. Its members are primarily middle-aged amateur fiddlers who were already playing music before the organization was formed. Now in its seventh year, with a membership of over 900,¹¹ the A.V.Q. organizes and oversees contests and galas, holds monthly meetings, organizes informal music sessions, and publishes a monthly newsletter. The shopping center, the *brasserie*, the television studio, the golden age dance, the re-finished basement with the piano in the corner, these are the traditional music milieus of modern-day Québec. We are witness to a fascinating, disturbing, and eloquent example of the survival of a folk art whose traditional contexts and functions have disappeared, but for whom a need remains.

Repertoire

There is no simple approach to a discussion of Québec's instrumental repertoire. The significance of tune titles and of dance genres in Québec are generally ephemeral in time and space, and a classification system based on musical structures has yet to be developed. In the absence of a single coherent reference, I have decided to present my information in terms of four slightly sketchy categories: tune titles, dance genres, metric structures, and sources.

The way in which players classify their repertoire is one of the

least stable elements in Québec's folk-music tradition. There are perhaps several thousand tunes in current circulation, and the confusing array of floating terminology seems, at first glance, hopelessly anarchic. However, a closer look reveals that while the choice of title is usually an individual affair, this choice generally corresponds to one of four references: These references are: 1) an abstract association with the notion of dancing; 2) a general association with a particular dance genre; 3) a specific association with a particular dance or part of a dance; and 4) a purely local or personal reference. In addition, for a small percentage of the repertoire, titles seem to be more or less stable.

Simonne Voyer's study of traditional dance music is presently in press. As I have only a rudimentary knowledge of traditional dance, my remarks will be summary. According to contemporary accounts, French and English country dances, contredances, cotillions, and minuets were the fashionable dances in Québec in the late 1700s. Some of the dance and music repertoires associated with these genres have survived to the present day, with the exception of the minuet, which seems to have disappeared from circulation by the turn of this century. By the early 1800s, the repertoire of dance and dance music in Québec included jigs and reels, and the British Isles tunes associated with these dances continues to form the largest part of the present-day musical repertoire. The quadrille, a fixed series of five or six figures, was a popular and fashionable dance on both sides of the Atlantic in the first half of the nineteenth century. At present, various forms of the quadrille as well as a certain number of the period compositions associated with this dance survive in Québec.

Step-dancing (commonly referred to in Québec as *la gigue*) has been in traditional circulation in a variety of forms in many regions of British and French North America at least since the early nineteenth century. In Québec, the step dance continues to appear both as a solo form and, in some regions, as an integral part of group dancing. Other popular or once-popular regional step dance forms of Québec include a pantomime dance frequently referred to as "La danse du barbier" and a small number of sword dance-style forms employing accessories such as garters or brooms. The music employed for these forms includes a variety of reel-type tunes. In addition, a small body of melodies which employ ternary and/or binary meters has come to the specifically associated with the solo and pantomime step dances.

As was stated earlier, the fashionable couple dances of the latter nineteenth century did not as a rule pass into traditional circulation. The waltz, which currently plays an important role in the surviving traditional dance and dance-music milieus, may be an exception, although the notable absence of this form in the repertoires of older musicians whom I have interviewed leads me to suspect that the traditional circulation of the waltz and its tune stock dates to a

more recent era. The same condition probably also applies to the polka, whose popularity is less prevalent but certainly widespread in Québécois traditional dance and dance music circles.

The Paul Jones and the farandole, two "mixer" dances frequently employed in the current traditional dance milieus of Québec, are probably of fairly modern importation. Their associated music is an indifferent mixture of reel-type tunes, popular and folk song airs, and jigs. In the Paul Jones, these genres are customarily alternated with waltzes and frequently terminated with a tune and couple dance called "La Raspa" (my spelling), whose melody is often popularly referred to in English-speaking North America as "The Mexican Hat Dance." Sambas, cha-chas, and various other twentieth-century social dances have also become an integral part of the dance program at functions where the traditional repertoires are still preserved, and many dance musicians of the present generation include a stock of the associated forms in their tune repertoires.

As well as the tunes destined for the dance, the repertoire of Québécois fiddlers has long included a number of descriptive and fancy tunes usually treated as showpieces. The repertoire of military-style marches which has been in circulation primarily among accordion players in Québec since the early decades of this century also seems to be essentially treated as listening music.

The available documentary record indicates that the metric form most closely associated with traditional Québécois instrumental music is the 4/4 (or 2/4) meter of the British Isles reel genre. British Isles reels and their derivations continue to form the largest part of the repertoires of most traditional musicians. Some metrically related tune classes such as hornpipes and clogs have been absorbed into the reel mold, through adaptations of tempo and rhythmic divisions. The term "reel" (my spelling) is commonly employed by players as a generic term for duple meter tunes.

The 6/8 jig form, frequently referred to by players as a "six-huit," is also represented in the Québécois instrumental folk music repertoire. The popularity of this form is due at least in part to the enduring appeal of the quadrille, whose suite parts customarily include both 6/8 and 4/4 meter tunes. The refashioning into "reels," and the tendency to lengthen out the first and third eighth note of each three-note group at the expense of the second eighth note are two fairly widespread practices associated with the 6/8 form, at least in the repertoires of some players of past generations.

The 3/4 waltz, as earlier mentioned, is standard repertorial fare in the tune stocks of recent generations, and 3/2 (or 6/4) meter tunes also appear in the repertoires of some Québécois traditional musicians, particularly fiddlers of the older generation. In addition, a predilection for the combination of 6/4 and 4/4 meters seems to be a fairly common phenomenon among Québécois traditional in-

strumentalists as a whole. Neither the 3/2 nor the combined-meter forms correspond to specific generic appellations, scholarly or otherwise.

In terms of source, a few clarifications are in order. I wish to underline the fact that the repertorial pool of the instrumental tradition in Québec is both diverse and dynamic. Much of the repertoire stems from the earlier stock of Scots/Irish dance tunes. It should be noted however that these tunes have been imported into Québec from other points in Canada and the States as well as from their countries of origins. The Québécois instrumental tradition also includes indigenous compositions imported from the Anglo-American and Anglo-Canadian dance-tune repertoires, and there is also some evidence for the survival of a small number of French dance tunes. The present-day repertoire also includes a number of local compositions, and composition continues to be a widespread practice among players. Another important tune source is the commercial music industry. Jean Carignan, Philippe Bruneau, and other provincially popular traditional instrumentalists have rounded out their repertoires with eclectic selections ranging from fastidious replications of the recordings of early twentieth-century virtuoso Irish and Scottish traditional recording artists to vaudeville novelty numbers and Bavarian waltzes. Their own recordings have in turn widely disseminated these tunes. Many traditional players of recent generations acquire new repertoire from television and radio programs featuring this music, and the influence of phonograph recordings on the present day repertoire and styles is considerable. It is important to note that the Québec instrumental folk-music tradition seems from its earliest days up until recent times to depend entirely on aural transmission for the acquisition of repertorial materials. There is little evidence for the existence of locally published tune collections and even today few players read music.

Conclusion

The major incentive for the initial presentation of this paper as well as for its subsequent editing has been the desire to make Québécois instrumental folk music, the field and its study, more accessible to the general folklore studies community. To this same end, I hope to have ready for publication in the coming year a bibliography of study materials related to the subject. I feel somewhat ambivalent about the remote, superficial, and rather incomplete vision presented in this article. I hope that the reader will bear in mind that this introduction to traditional instrumental music in Québec is only an aerial photograph of the field and is primarily intended to be an invitation to exploration at a closer range. This exploration is presently being pursued by a handful of scholars such as Carmelle Bégin, Jean-Pierre Joyal, and myself. For the moment, however, the lack of wider participation in the study of Québec's

instrumental folk-music tradition remains a formidable obstacle to the development of a deeper understanding and appreciation of this rich but little-known Canadian folkways.

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FOOTNOTES

- * Adaptation of a paper presented at the Séminaire sur les traditions françaises au Québec, at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, on April 9, 1981. The author wishes to express her thanks to Mr. Robert Bouthillier for his kind encouragement and considerable critical and editorial aid in the preparation of this paper for publication.
- 1 Marius Barbeau, *Veillées du bon vieux temps à la bibliothèque Saint-Sulpice les 18 mars et 24 avril 1919*, Québec: Ducharme, 1920.
- 2 *Le Journal des P.P. Jésuites* (ed. Laverdière and Casgrain) cited in Willy Amtmann, *Music in Canada 1600-1800*, Cambridge, Ontario: Habitex Books, 1975, pp. 146-47.
- 3 David Boyden, *The History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761 and its Relationship to the Violin Music*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 30.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 54-56.
- 5 *Le Journal des P.P. Jésuites* (ed. Laverdière and Casgrain), cited in Willy Amtmann, *La Musique au Québec*, Montréal: Éditions de l'Homme, 1976, p. 23.
- 7 Louis Armand, Baron de la Hontan, *Nouveaux voyages de M. le baron de la Hontan dans l'Amérique septentrionale 1703-4*, cited in Amtmann, *ibid.*, p. 20.
- 8 Jean-Michel Guilcher, *La contredanse et les renouvellements de la danse française*, Paris: Mouton & Co., 1969, pp. 13-19.
- 9 Alan Jabbour, *American Fiddle Tunes*, Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1971, p. 1.
- 10 *Mémoires (privées) de P. de Sales Laterrière et de ses traverses* cited in Marius Barbeau, *Veillées du bon vieux temps à la bibliothèque Saint-Sulpice les 18 mars et 24 avril 1919*, Québec: Ducharme, 1920, pp. 83-84.
- 11 Roch Carbonneau, "Les activités de l'A.V.Q.: une affaire de gros sous?" *L'Association des violoneux du Québec* (12 déc. 1980), p. 2.

Résumé: *Dans son article intitulé "Instrumental Folk Music of Quebec: An Introduction", Lisa Ornstein nous présente un bilan historique, dresse une bibliographie de ce qui existe de publications et d'articles dans ce domaine et souligne les régions qui sont encore à étudier. De plus, elle discute des différents types de musiques instrumentales et des répertoires des musiciens actuels dans le but de rendre plus accessible à la recherche la musique instrumentale traditionnelle au Québec.*

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The National Museums of Canada announces that, effective immediately, McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, and Les Éditions France-Amérique, Montréal, are the exclusive distributors of National Museums of Canada (NMC) publications in Canada. These two firms were selected by competitive process earlier this year.

Over 300 NMC publications will be carried by the two publishers, who will be responsible for sales, promotion, warehousing and order fulfillment in Canada. Éditions France-Amérique will also be responsible for sales of French-language and bilingual titles outside Canada. The University of Chicago Press will continue to handle marketing and distribution of English-language and bilingual publications outside Canada.