

# Introduction: Music in Newfoundland and Labrador

BEVERLEY DIAMOND and GLENN COLTON

THE STUDY OF MUSIC IN Newfoundland and Labrador has come a long way since the pioneering song collections of Maud Karpeles, Elisabeth Greenleaf, and Gerald S. Doyle in the early decades of the last century.<sup>1</sup> With the post-Confederation development of programs in folklore and music at Memorial University of Newfoundland and the establishment of a Centre for Newfoundland Studies at the same institution, the past several decades have witnessed an explosion in scholarship pertaining to the province's music traditions,<sup>2</sup> a trend that promises to continue with newly founded graduate programs in ethnomusicology and continuing fascination with the province's music worldwide.

Yet in certain respects, music in Newfoundland and Labrador has only recently begun to attract the scholarly attention long accorded the musical traditions of mainland Canada and the United States. The historical studies of authors such as Louise Whiteway,<sup>3</sup> Sr. Kathleen Rex,<sup>4</sup> and Paul Woodford<sup>5</sup> sparked renewed interest in the province's long-standing traditions of formalized music, a heritage largely ignored until the late twentieth century, and while the life stories of many of the province's finest musicians are still waiting to be told, there has been a modest increase in focused biographical studies in recent years (among them the compelling tales of opera diva Georgina Stirling and fiddling legend Émile Benoit).<sup>6</sup> Even recent Canadian Idol contestant Rex Goudie has had his young life chronicled in print, a striking illustration of just how dramatically the intellectual climate has changed in a relatively short period.<sup>7</sup>

First Nations music, sacred music, secular art music, jazz, and popular music remain underrepresented in the literature, although the fresh treatment of several of these topics in this volume may give cause for guarded optimism. Slowly but unmistakably, stereotypes of the past are being cast off and the musical world is awak-

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ening to the reality of a Newfoundland and Labrador music scene of remarkable diversity and imagination. As the first issue of *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* devoted exclusively to music, one of the aims of the present volume is to underscore the extent of this diversity while at the same time presenting new approaches to the study of one of the richest repositories of traditional music in the western world. As Cory Thorne reminds us, “it’s not all about the jigs and reels,”<sup>8</sup> although, we might add, the jigs and reels are pretty amazing.

### SCOPE

In response to our call for papers, we were delighted to receive articles that represented a wide range of scholarly styles and approaches. Among the papers are close, intertextual readings of musical texts (Gordon, Rosenberg, Hewson and Diamond, Smith, Chafe), media studies (Guigné, Klassen, Osborne, Colton, Borlase), oral history (Flynn), performance ethnography (Thorne, Tulk, Gordon, Rosenberg, Osborne, Narváez, Best), and sociocultural analysis (Colton, Thorne, Chafe, Narváez, among others). Most research presented here relied to a greater or lesser extent on fieldwork and ethnography.

We consciously include work that is cast in different writing styles. Most papers use the full apparatus that we associate with scholarship: careful documentation of sources, crafting of themes, and development of issues with careful substantiation of each point. Others are personal reflections, often with a degree of auto-ethnography, a valuable tool to enable understanding of the author’s social positioning.

The papers are grouped roughly according to genre, but ordered so that the reader can doubtless detect certain narrative “threads.” The subject of Newfoundland and Labrador identity is central in the opening two papers: Colton’s “Imagining Nation: Music and Identity in Pre-Confederation Newfoundland” focuses on the developing tradition of patriotic music, while Thorne’s “Gone to the Mainland and Back Home Again: A Critical Approach to Region, Politics, and Identity in Contemporary Newfoundland Song” introduces two contrasting diasporic communities.

The next five papers concern traditional music, two on song and three on fiddling. Both Rosenberg’s detailed account of a song he labels an “icon” and Guigné’s study of the mutually constitutive relationship between two collectors indicate the interactivity of print and oral sources and suggest the ideologies underlying song collection. The three fiddling articles are nicely complementary, diverse in approach and focus. Smith explores the discourses of asymmetrical tunes. Flynn presents one fiddler whose career bridges genre worlds, as well as community and commercial realms of music-making. Osborne similarly demonstrates that tradition is not separate from commoditized practices as she examines the role of recordings in two outport communities. Klassen’s “I Am VOWR: Living Radio in

Newfoundland,” in turn, documents the fascinating story of one of the idiosyncratic broadcasters in Newfoundland and Labrador history.

A convergence of identities as well as the intersection of oral and print traditions is explored in Hewson and Diamond’s “Santu’s Song” and Gordon’s “Found in Translation: The Inuit Voice in Moravian Music.” A third paper pertaining to First Nations traditions, Tulk’s “Cultural Revitalization and Mi’kmaq Music-Making: Three Newfoundland Drum Groups” offers a glimpse into a scarcely documented musical culture.

A group of papers on popular music follow. Best explores the nascent hip-hop scene in St. John’s and Grand Falls, demonstrating a number of regionally specific practices in a genre that has not usually been associated with Newfoundland and Labrador. Chafe unfolds the intertextual references in repertoire that some might argue is centrally representative of the province’s identity (but of whom?), teasing out themes of “revolution” and “humour.” With a folklorist’s ear/eye for vernacular narrative, Narváez offers a snapshot of a fascinating moment in which music and politics intersected.

Two additional shorter submissions are included. Borlase offers a fascinating retrospective on the life of an object: the Labrador song anthology that he compiled and published decades ago. His story bears comparison with Guigné’s account of earlier collectors or Osborne’s study of recorded media and oral tradition. Finally, Dunsmore compiles a useful list of recent recordings by the province’s numerous choirs, many of them award-winning.

The diverse papers in this issue demonstrate that “Newfoundland music” cannot be essentialized; it is not one thing, neither one genre, ethnic practice, nor style. Nonetheless, a single volume cannot cover all of the richness of music in Newfoundland and Labrador. There are many topics not addressed, including composition and innovation, country music and bluegrass, or the music of many non-European immigrant groups, to name a few. Furthermore, while the authors in this issue worked in a number of locales — on the island of Newfoundland, in Labrador, and in “diasporic” mainland communities of Newfoundlanders — there are many regional traditions that get no attention here.

## MAJOR THEMES

A number of papers connected thematically in exciting ways that we could not have entirely anticipated. These themes include the concept of “culture as emergent,” the role of music in nationalist projects, the significance of individual agency, the relationship among various types of media, and the place of Newfoundland and Labrador culture *vis-à-vis* the rest of Canada and the global community.

“Culture as emergent” is a phrase that has prevailed across disciplines for at least several decades. It is useful in that it conveys not only the ongoing develop-

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ment of social practices but the way in which values are discursively negotiated by individuals. While many traditions often associated with Newfoundland and Labrador might seem to have emerged some time ago and to have considerable stability — traditional fiddling, narrative song, Moravian hymns in Inuit communities, or the pervasive combination of country and folk styles in outport popular music come to mind — the culture-as-emergent theme is relevant in many of the studies here. First, with regard to Inuit, Métis, and First Nations, the complex intertribal and international family histories of Aboriginal people in the province are only now being sorted out. Periods of cultural denial that emanated from various forms of systemic racism, and many official narratives of decline or extinction that have often hampered Aboriginal groups in their efforts to represent their modernity are no longer tenable. In their place are exciting projects of reclamation, including many aspects of traditional knowledge, language, and song. Tulk sensitively documents a moment in this reclamation and cultural invigoration. She gets well past notions that culture is somehow “invented” in modern circumstances to examine the ways in which borrowed traditions map onto older local forms and practices. The moments of creative energy such as the period Tulk describes are exactly the important moments to heed if we are to understand how culture is emergent.

Similarly, when Thorne looks at diasporic Newfoundlanders and the ways they selectively recreate a sense of Newfoundland and Labrador identity in new locales, the value of a culture-as-emergent approach is again demonstrated. The very crises of identity, enforced changes of context, are the exact points where the forging of community through music is often the most useful. In the case of Newfoundlanders who left the province for work-related or other reasons, Thorne demonstrates, however, how locally variable attitudes toward what he describes as kitsch may ultimately impact community development.

Hip-hop culture as studied by Best is another domain where a culture-as-emergent approach is fruitful. This genre that has moved from its African American root communities has captured the imagination of youth the world over. Best studies how Newfoundlanders have recently localized the traditions of rap, MCing, and breakdancing through choices of dialect, subject matter, and references to place. A fourth example of a culture-as-emergent approach is Narváez’s short piece on the political uses of a song by the popular band Great Big Sea. As a folklorist, he pays attention both to evidence and opinion, the latter a mainstay of interpretive work and a significant component of culture-as-emergent research.

The role of music in articulating nationalist sentiment and indeed in nation-building is central to the papers by Colton, Chafe, and Thorne. They pay attention to different time periods. Colton explores nineteenth-century and pre-Confederation (early twentieth-century) popular music; Chafe looks at “narratives” of national identity, ones that implicate music; and Thorne studies recent diasporic communities formed when Newfoundlanders moved to find work or to accompany American partners to other homes. They each approach the study of nationalist pro-

jects differently: Colton by reviewing historical discourses, including decision making concerning the provincial anthem (among other repertoire); Chafe by focusing on song texts and media to discover how the narratives of “music as revolution” or “music as goofy” are constructed and used; and Thorne by assembling identity artifacts (including music) that ex-pats use to construct a sense of place away from home. Also related to the theme of nationalism and nation-building are the papers on traditional song. Just as Colton tells us that a piece such as “The Banks of Newfoundland” is an icon of the nation for many Newfoundlanders, so Rosenberg considers “She’s Like the Swallow” as an icon, implicitly supporting the position that (a) we have songs we regard as identity icons and (b) their various articulations teach us why and how icons are configured as they are. He leads us to ask “for whom” is a specific song an icon. Similarly, Guigné’s exploration of the dialogic relationship between Kenneth Peacock and Gerald S. Doyle demonstrates how an insider and a mainlander co-created a musical canon that arguably represents Newfoundland. The production of “icons” begins to be unpacked.

Guigné’s study also alerts us to the significance of individual agency, another important theme in this issue. Many of the individuals featured in articles in this volume, however, are arguably not the usual suspects. Rather than choosing acclaimed fiddling stars Émile Benoit or Rufus Guinchard, for instance, Flynn focuses on the steady contributions of sideman Don Randell, while both Smith and Osborne look to a variety of locally known fiddlers in small communities. Similarly, Gordon uncovers the work of little-known Inuit organists on the Labrador coast in addition to the Moravian missionaries, and Hewson and Diamond revisit what is known about a Beothuk woman, Santu Toney, whose claim to fame was a single recording made by the prominent American anthropologist Frank Speck. Narváez comes close to satirizing a prominent politician’s misuse of a music reference. While he would hardly admit it, Borlase himself is the individual who had central agency in the story of the Labrador songbook that has been so widely used and appreciated. One might argue that this group of music scholars has a certain anti-heroic bent while simultaneously arguing for the significance of individuals.

Taken as a corpus, the articles in this volume speak to the differences and relationships among the media that have an impact on the transmission of music in the province. Radio is a primary focus for Klassen but also implicated in articles by Chafe, Best, and Thorne. Osborne assesses audio recordings. The mediation of print is central for Colton, Rosenberg, Chafe, and Guigné, while Gordon explores hand-written manuscripts, and Smith and Hewson/Diamond comment on the ideologies that underpin transcription, another means of visualizing sound. Visual iconography on artifacts ranging from posters to T-shirts are considered by Thorne and Chafe. The variety of media raises questions about the different social implications of each. An image draws viewers to one place, while an audio source can fill a space and move through barriers. The intersensory modalities of images that represent sound (whether published scores, manuscripts, or transcriptions) each have

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their own biases, their own ways of manipulating attention to one dimension or another, and their own partial capacity to convey aural performance. The disjunctures between the oral/aural and what we might call sound objects (print, recordings, artifacts) is a challenging dimension of all music scholarship.

A final theme is the relationship of music in Newfoundland and Labrador to other parts of Canada and beyond, a theme anticipated by Rosenberg (1994) some years ago. In some articles, such as Thorne's, this is a central theme. In other cases (Guigné, Narváez, Hewson and Diamond), the play between Newfoundland-based individuals and mainlanders is a major component of the story. The full investigation of Newfoundland and Labrador's inter-relatedness with the rest of Canada and beyond, however, remains understudied and would make a great topic for a future anthology.

It is hoped that the range of topics, methodologies, and multi-disciplinary format of the present volume may spark further discovery and rediscovery of the central place of music as a living expression of Newfoundland and Labrador culture.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Maud Karpeles, *Folk Songs from Newfoundland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971); Elisabeth (Bristol) Greenleaf, *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland*, with a new foreword by Neil V. Rosenberg and Anna Kearney Guigné (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland, Folklore and Language Publications, 2004); and Gerald S. Doyle, *Old Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland* (1927, 1940, 1955, 1966; St. John's: Gerald S. Doyle Limited, 1978).

<sup>2</sup>Eighteen of the theses in the graduate program in Folklore at Memorial University concern music cultures of one sort or another.

<sup>3</sup>Louise Whiteway, "History of the Arts in Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Government Bulletin* (January-March 1953), 3-16.

<sup>4</sup>Sr. Kathleen Rex, "A History of Music Education in Newfoundland," M. Mus. thesis, Catholic University of America, 1977.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Woodford, "*We Love the Place, O Lord*": *A History of the Written Musical Tradition of Newfoundland and Labrador to 1949* (St. John's: Creative, 1988).

<sup>6</sup>See Amy Louise Peyton, *Nightingale of the North* (St. John's: Jespersion, 1983); and Colin Quigley, *Music from the Heart: Compositions of a Folk Fiddler* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995). *Nightingale*, a dramatized interpretation of Stirling's life by Robert Chafe and Jillian Keiley, was premiered in the summer of 2006 in conjunction with the Magnetic North Theatre Festival and Sound Symposium XIII.

<sup>7</sup>Kim Kielley, *Rex Goudie: Idolized* (St. John's: Creative, 2006).

<sup>8</sup>See Cory Thorne, this volume.

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