

Step-Dancing in the Dark: A Personal Reflection

Glenn Patterson, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Social and intellectual isolation describe my experience preparing for comprehensive exams. Interactions with other humans were limited to brief exchanges with housemates during morning breakfast rituals or with classmates and colleagues during study breaks at the office. In either case, I struggled to deeply relate to others, my mental space consumed by the bibliography I was slowly working my way through. On a November night in 2014, I was once again treading the seldom-used gravel path between two modest houses – a bungalow and a two-storey – in one of St. John’s’s post-war residential neighbourhoods, Churchill Park. The path provides an entry to a city park, which, in earlier hours and depending on the season, hosts the local softball league and the city’s farmers’ market. On the schedule I had been keeping, though, I was fairly sure I would have the path to myself once again. A shortcut between home and my student office at the eastern edge of campus, it was a path my feet had come to know increasingly well, with twice-daily crossings most days of the week for the past three months of “comps” prep. Two strategically placed boulders mark the ends of the entry section of path squeezed between the houses, presumably to discourage those contemplating non-pedestrian usage.

As I approached the first boulder, I was in deep communion with a fiddler, 17 years deceased, whose home recordings had been my chief source of musical listening and learning since 2010. As his music rushed from my smartphone into my earbud headphones, I felt a strange tension building in both my legs, from thigh to knee. I was drawn into the fiddler’s compelling groove on the classic (and in other instances, clichéd) “Turkey in the Straw”, fueled with hypnotic Acadian-style off-beat syncopations and open-string drones of the violin’s *ADAE scordatura*. With the faint afterglow of a nearby street light behind, gravel crunching underfoot, music in ear, and a dark and empty park just ahead, I couldn’t resist the urge and let out a few steps to the music.

“Steps” might be a generous description of what happened. In reality, it was a convoluted and poorly-timed leg flailing, a sort of simultaneous confusion of a hop and a kick. I’m not sure why I thought I would succeed – I had certainly never tried to step dance before. Maybe it was because most of the older step dancers I’ve met through my research claim they never really tried to learn, that step dance just came to them somehow. Maybe a similar fortune could befall me? Had there been watching eyes in the park

that evening, they might have feared I was in the grips of excruciating leg spasms. But had there been watching eyes, I might never have taken that first step/stumble.

Unsuccessful execution aside, this particular moment highlights for me a profound but unarticulated desire I had to find a new and refreshing way of relating to fiddle music and to this fiddler’s music in particular. I’ve never studied a single musician’s style and repertoire as intensely as Erskine Morris’s. Had I never encountered Erskine’s music through the help of his son, Montreal-based guitarist Brian Morris, the five-year trajectory from dissatisfied engineer/amateur and weekend folklorist in Montreal to a PhD student preparing for “comps” in St. John’s would never have happened. According to Brian, his father’s music was especially cherished by Gaspesian step dancers during private visits and countless house parties. Erskine’s playing reached peak intensity when he was being egged on by a couple of step dancers (Morris 2011). Both rhythmically and structurally, Erskine Morris’s music seems to be foremost step dance music (Patterson 2015a). And yet after five years of exploring his music, this means of relating to his music was basically foreign to me. In the beginning, I related to Erskine’s music foremost as a musician, drawn to its formal aspects – laser-precise bowings and foot percussion, and the juxtaposition of disjointed off-beat syncopations with forward drive, a basic rhythmic conception quite distant from the Southern (U.S.) fiddling I had come to know and learn previously. Meeting fellow musicians, dancers, and admirers of Erskine Morris’s music in his local and diasporic Gaspesian communities allowed me to increasingly relate to his music socially, learning about larger local histories, migration patterns, and the challenges of a minority language community trying to assert itself and its culture at the far reaches of eastern Quebec.¹ Relating socially to this music was only intensified as I began PhD studies in ethnomusicology at Memorial in 2012, where classes and readings underscored how musical culture and expression is deeply shaped by cultural, social, and political contexts. I’m not sure if mine is a typical experience for musicians-turned-ethnomusicologists, but my relationship with playing music was quickly and radically transformed. Playing music became less a space for the development of my musicianship and musical appreciation (in a more technical, self-contained sense) and increasingly a space for haphazardly churning over research problems. Whenever I

played, the recently acquired academic inner monologue only intensified. I wasn't entirely happy about this. I felt like I was losing touch with my musician-self, something core to my identity since early adolescence. That night on the gravel path, when my experience with music had become almost entirely intellectual, more about reading and detached contemplation than about performance and personal experience, something gave way.

I'm not sure of the exact chronology, but it was either that night or the night following that I told myself that I was going to learn to step dance. I went online, and found and ordered April Verch's recently released instructional DVD, *Ottawa Valley Step-dancing, Volume 1* [for download](#). An integral part of my study breaks during evenings and weekends at the office became working through the first seven lessons. These cover a series of sequences involving three *shuffles* (a two-eighth and quarter-note rhythm produced with the toe of one foot) and two single footsteps (variously executed, e.g., "cross step", "toe step", etc.), to the *single shuffle* (a triplet rhythm variant achieved by adding a hop with the other foot before the basic shuffle). I've been a fan of April Verch since discovering her through YouTube several years ago. I was drawn both to her formidable fiddle and step dance talents – sometimes executed simultaneously – as well as to her (pardon the stereotype) friendly Ottawa-Valley charisma and constant smile. Her virtual presence was a much-needed antidote to the long days of solitude during which my mind grappled with multi-clausal sentences weaving detached and lengthy intellectual arguments. During those short study breaks, I was having a bit of fun, actually using my whole body, and learning something new, musical, and non-cerebral. However, as the exam dates approached and break times became shorter and fewer, this new hobby was left on the sidelines, awaiting the New Year, when I would have more free time.

I found myself in my old hometown of Montreal for a few months the following spring, and realized that I should avail myself of all the great Québécois step dance talent in proximity. I was there preparing for an extended fieldwork stay in the Gaspé, where access to step dance instruction would be difficult and I would be living alone in the woods (in Erskine Morris's childhood home, in fact), with my research defining my life. I knew I would benefit from a physical outlet from the academic inner monologue. Step-dancing, I had realized during my April Verch virtual practice sessions, was both fun and something at which I was so novice that its mere physical execution would preclude simultaneous academic reasoning. After sharing a gig with the Québécois trad band Réveillons! in Montreal in April 2015, I reached out

to their percussionist (also a renowned step dancer and caller), Jean-François Berthiaume, for lessons in Québécois *gigue* (step dance). We had first met four years ago, when he was invited to a festival in Douglastown, Gaspé, where I had participated since 2010 (the same community where I do much of my fieldwork). Part of the deal we made was that in exchange for step dance lessons, I would share the music I had been learning from Gaspesian musicians with his girlfriend, who was learning fiddle. I found Jean-François's concept of cultural sharing and reciprocity, where musical culture is equitably exchanged as a non-economic good, highly appealing to my values as a musician and teacher (see also Titon 2015).

Despite all the strengths of April Verch's instructional DVD, there are some inherent advantages of one-on-one lessons. Obviously you get feedback on your progress, especially on matters of technique. Jean-François also has a very keen sense of pacing, never teaching me more than one or two steps per lesson, insisting that I get a firm grasp on each step before learning new, more complicated steps. With a DVD it's all too easy to let the next lesson roll without really having spent the time to incorporate a new step into muscle memory. While working exclusively with the DVD, I didn't fully appreciate the importance of having a solid command over the basic shuffle step and how much you can do with just this step interspersed with quarter-note foot stomps.² This is something I became aware of through Jean-François's pedagogical pacing, where I was given a full week to work just on these two steps. As an aside, this leads me to what I feel is an important critique of Verch's instruction: she doesn't distinguish between executing steps at half- and full-time in the first seven lessons (although later in the DVD, when teaching more complicated sequences, she doubles the execution speed without comment). When demonstrating her six introductory sequences (three shuffles followed by variations of two footsteps) in the dance-along segments with music, the steps are all done at half tempo in relation to the music. While I certainly recognize the value of practicing slowly, this detail is something worth mentioning to students because it is a very different way of physically relating to the music's meter.³ When I came back to Jean-François and showed my progress with the shuffle and foot stomps, he commented that while my technique was good, I wasn't placing the basic shuffle appropriately in the music. And in fact, the feeling I had when working earlier with Verch's DVD was that it neither felt, sounded, nor looked like I was step-dancing, but rather that I was just sort of walking to the music. My movements didn't seem to interlock with and respond to the music, and I failed to see why the basic shuffle

fle-step could be something so core (as Verch mentions) to step dance beyond a purely didactic role.

Getting the feeling that I was “actually” step-dancing, however, wasn’t something that came about simply by doubling the speed of the basic shuffle. Key to Jean-François’s pedagogy is developing the flexibility to execute and repeat any “step” at any moment in a sequence of steps.⁴ He emphasized this flexibility in our first lesson and had me concocting various permutations of shuffles, foot stomps, and quarter-note pauses. Unlike most step dance pedagogues (e.g., Verch or Julie Fitzgerald), these shorter, more basic movements – rather than memorized 8- or 16-beat sequences of these same movements – constitute a “step” in Jean-François’s pedagogy. For him, step-dancing is foremost about directly responding to the music in the moment rather than executing longer, choreographed sequences, which he considers “predictable” and leading to a less personal step dance style. He described the difference through analogy: his “steps” are likened to individual words, which students use to construct their own sentences according to their needs rather than repeating the same repertoire of stock phrases.

Lorsque j'enseigne la gigue j'aime à simplifier. Donc on apprend les mots et ensuite chaque élève peut faire les phrases qu'ils veulent. Si je résume, j'aime que l'étudiant apprenne de nouveau mot, mais je ne veux pas lui mettre des phrases en bouche. Pourquoi? Je crois que chaque gigueur à des choses à dire et je ne veux surtout pas que les gigueurs disent tous la même chose.

When teaching *gigue* I like to simplify things. So, we learn the words and then each student can make the sentences that they want. To summarize: I want the student to learn new words but I don’t want to put sentences in their mouth. Why? I think each *gigueur* has something to say and I especially don’t want *gigueurs* to all say the same thing. (Email communication, September 23, 2015).

At what point does the student transition from repeating either “words” or “sentences” to the feeling of actually step-dancing that I mentioned above? As Jean-François declared in one of our lessons, « *si on s’amuse, ça c’est la gigue* » (“if you are having fun, that’s *gigue*”). I don’t think this insight is either simplistic or hollow. He situated his pedagogy and this remark as part of his response to what he considered the unfortunate “professionalization” of step dance, where the form has largely lost its quotidian dimensions and widespread appeal, and instead become the provenance of qualified “expert” practitioners (some

of whom he thinks have been dismissive of older, “amateur” step dancers). With just a couple of basic steps at your command, Jean-François believes you have everything you need to be a lifelong practitioner. The competitive elevation of step dance, for Jean-François, caused a loss of confidence among amateur practitioners, in turn contributing to the tradition’s decline in Québécois society.

During the week following my first lesson with Jean-François, I had an extended session in the basement of the building where I was staying, finding it an ideal venue to escape the oppressive humidity in my tiny apartment and avoid disturbing my neighbours. I found a small plywood board among the junk piles and a small space with an even surface between a puddle and a collection of broken fridges. I perched my smartphone precariously on a fuse box and practiced for the better part of an hour to Erskine Morris’s fiddling, using an app to slow down the music. My feet had become more comfortable with the permutations of basic shuffles, foot stomps, and pauses I had planned out on paper when, suddenly, my feet began instinctively responding to the music, unconsciously improvising new patterns to Erskine’s intense syncopations. It wasn’t anything complicated, but fundamentally, it was my spontaneous and felt response to the unfolding music. I felt both joy and exhilaration. I was feeding off of the music to which I had devoted myself for five years as a musician and scholar in an entirely new way, not just intellectually but also (forgive the clichéd dichotomy) bodily. I emailed Jean-François immediately after my session and, in my imperfect but earnest French, wrote:

Je viens d'avoir un session au sous-sol, le meilleur endroit pour chauffer les pieds pendant une heure quand il fait humide dehors. J'ai fait un exercice d'improviser sur une tounne d'Erskine jouait sur mon smartphone et j'ai commencé à sentir un nouveau feeling vers la musique -- difficile à décrire en mots mais vraiment émouvant et les nouvelles rythmes sortaient de mes pieds sans y réfléchir. Je me sens très inspiré et j'ai hâte d'avoir la prochaine leçon dès que possible.

I just came from a practice session in the basement, the best place to warm up your feet for an hour when it’s humid outside. I made an exercise of improvising on one of Erskine’s tunes that was playing on my smartphone, and I began to experience a new feeling towards the music – difficult to describe in words but very moving and new rhythms were coming from my feet without thinking about it. I’m feeling very inspired and I’m excited to have another lesson as soon as possible. (Email communication, May 29, 2015)

Thinking about it now, it was similar to the feeling I had when first learning fiddle and banjo after having been a guitarist for ten years. It's the thrill you can get as a novice learner when things first start coming together and you glimpse the possibilities for new musical expression. During my high school years, when guitar was my only instrument and I was learning a variety of disparate styles in the solitude of my room, I still remember the excitement felt when first exploring new expressive territories, whether a new genre, technique, mode, or jazz chord construction. After I became interested in traditional fiddle music in my 20s, however, I devoted myself to exactly two regional styles (and only one at a time). Here, my experience learning music became less an exploration of new realms and more a process of refinement, improving my command of a set of core stylistic techniques and very particular regional repertoires. Ten years later, in the damp and cool basement, as my feet began instinctively responding to the late Erskine Morris's music, I felt powerfully reconnected with my musician-self. This was the root of my musical identity, something developed during my high school years as an amateur musician driven foremost by an intrigue for new musical ideas and styles. It was an identity that I had lost touch with during ten years of increasing specialization and professionalization.

It is entirely possible that learning a new instrument or genre could have produced a similar experience. In my case, though, I think step dance was both especially effective and affective. It pushed me to relate to music I already deeply cherished in an entirely new way, without relying on existing intellectual knowledge of harmony, melody, or transferable instrumental techniques. At my disposal were simply an internalized sense of pulse and a rhythmic vocabulary from five years of dedicated listening to Erskine Morris's music. What I needed to figure out was how to transfer this intuition from fingers, hands, and arms to legs and feet. The sheer newness of the experience, both physically and intellectually, with music that was already such a deep and transformative part of my life was part of the power of those moments where my feet first began making sense of Erskine's music and I reconnected with my amateur musician-self.

As Jean-François taught me one or two new steps in each of the three subsequent lessons before I left for Gaspé, this feeling was renewed at those moments in the lesson where he (and on one occasion his visiting father) would pick up the accordion, and I was pushed to use what I had just learned to respond to the music. I find the half-dozen or so basic steps that he taught (which variously produce both quarter- and eighth-note rhythms) surprising in the amount of ex-

pression – rhythmic, tactile, and aesthetic – they offer. I've been somewhat cautious in my approach to learning step dance. I want to consciously delimit the role it plays in my life as I finish my degree. I have no ambitions to excel at the art form per se. Rather, as much as possible, I would like it to be something I practice for its own sake, something to work on, struggle with, and explore casually as an intrigued amateur with no self-imposed stress. I hope to continue step dance as a simple way to connect to and express a core part of myself that I find destabilized by the increasing professionalization of music in my life. I find Jean-François's pedagogy and philosophy a good fit for what I want to get out of step dance, developing my flexibility and command over a small set of fairly simple steps in order to explore a familiar music differently and in the moment. It's what I do for 10 to 20 minutes most mornings before breakfast. It gives me an easy vehicle for novel musical expression and physical exercise, one that that brings a sense of focus to my whole moving body, and perhaps most importantly, allows me to take a break from my researcher-self for a few minutes before I go about my days figuring out how to finish the nebulous task that is a PhD dissertation.

References

- Duval, Jean. 2012. *Porteurs de pays à l'air libre : jeu et enjeux des pièces asymétriques dans la musique traditionnelle du Québec*. Musique, Université de Montréal, Montreal.
- Fitzgerald, Julie. N.d. *Everything You Need to Know About Ottawa-Valley Step-dancing* [cited September 23 2015]. Available from <http://juliefitzgerald.ca/wp-content/uploads/What-is-Ottawa-Valley-Step-Dancing.pdf>.
- Patterson, Glenn. 2013. The Gaspé Sound: Fiddle Music from Two Anglo-Gaspesian Villages. *Canadian Folk Music* 47 (4): 14-24.
- . 2014. La vie culturelle des Anglo-Gaspétiens à Montréal et ses environs depuis la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. *Bulletin Mnémo* 15 (1): 1-6.
- . 2015. Fiddle Music and the Constitution of Musical Affect on (and away from) the Gaspé Coast: Interpreting Musical Affordance, Motion, and Emotion through Turino's Peircian Framework. *MUSICultures*. 42 (2): 19-54.

Titon, Jeff Todd. 2015. Caring with People Making Music. In *Exhibiting Music: CSTM Pre-Conference Workshop*. North Sydney, NS.

Interviews and Personal Communication

Berthiaume, Jean-François. 2015. Email with author. Saint-Eustache, QC. September 23.

Morris, Brian. 2011. Interview with author. Montreal, QC. July 11.

Patterson, Glenn. 2015b. Email to Jean-François Berthiaume. Montréal, QC. May 29.

Other Resources

Pierre Chartrand. 2004. Le quiproquo de la gigue au Québec. *Bulletin Mnémo* vol. 9, no. 1 et 2. Available from :
<http://www.mnemo.qc.ca/spip/bulletin-mnemo/article/le-quiproquo-de-la-gigue-au-quebec>.

April Verch:
<http://aprilverch.com/site/2013/11/ottawa-valley-step-dancing-vol-1/>

Jean-François Berthiaume: <http://calleur.ca>

Julie Fitzgerald:
<http://juliefitzgerald.ca/wp-content/uploads/What-is-Ottawa-Valley-Step-Dancing.pdf>

Erskine Morris: *Old-Time Fiddle Music from the Gaspé Coast*: <http://gaspefiddle.blogspot.com>

Thanks/Merci

Un gros merci à Jean-François Berthiaume pour sa générosité avec ses talents et avec sa connaissance de la musique et de la danse traditionnelle du Québec.

Notes

¹ See Patterson (2013, 2014) for an exploration of Erskine Morris's fiddle style and the community in which it was cultivated.

² I'm still working on the shuffle several months in, finding it quite difficult to execute cleanly at full reel tempo.

³ To practice the shuffle slowly while ensuring that your feet relate to the pulse of the music in the traditional sense, I would suggest using an app or software to significantly

slow down the music to about 50 or 60% (or wherever your feet can cleanly and comfortably execute the shuffle). Verch's solution differs in that she slows the music down slightly (to about 75% of full tempo) while simultaneously halving the speed of execution of the steps (so that they occupy twice as much space in the meter). Once I realized the difference and only slowed down the music, I quickly began feeling like I was starting to step dance rather than doing a kind of synchronized "walking" to the music.

⁴ This flexibility strikes me as especially important when dancing to French Canadian music, where many tunes are "crooked" and stock choreographed 8- or 16-beat step figures get you into trouble – see Duval 2012.

