

**APPALACHIAN MUSIC FELLOWSHIP
FINAL ACTIVITY REPORT
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Overview

During my fellowship period I spent a lot of time listening to and watching fiddle performances by West Virginia fiddlers, Ernie Carpenter and Melvin Wine. My intention was to select a few tunes by each to transcribe in their entirety to create study scores of the performances. During the course of my work I learned a great deal about these fiddlers as well as the process of transcribing fiddle tunes. My previous experience with transcribing music has largely involved jazz, and it was my experience with jazz transcriptions as a tool for analysis that led me to pursue this project. Transcriptions have been used in the field of jazz to allow scholars to subject the works of Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane to the same analytical processes as they have the works of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. It is my hope and desire that transcribing fiddle tune performances will do the same for this body of work.

There are many who believe that transcription is an attempt to mold traditional music to the rules of Western classical music rather than allowing it to exist on its own. This is certainly an issue with which I had to struggle when making decisions regarding key signatures, time signatures, notational duration, and even pitch. Most of the tunes I transcribed *sounded* like they were in the keys of E \flat or A \flat , yet it was more likely that the key in which the performers intended to play was actually a half-step higher (E and A) because those fit better into standard tunings.

In keeping with the fiddle tune transcriptions I had previously studied, I chose to transcribe the tunes in 2/4 time primarily using quarter and eighth notes, although some transcribers chose to use eighth and sixteenth notes or 4/4 time. I also found myself spending a great deal of time trying to lock in on particular pitches in later repetitions of the tune to determine if they were in fact the same pitches as played earlier or if there had been some sort of key or modality change. I generally concluded that they were the same, only slightly sharp or flat. In each of these instances, I had to make decisions about how to define the songs I was hearing in terms that are somewhat artificial.

Some transcriptions exist as a way to reproduce a performance or learn a song. While the transcriptions I produced for this project can be used in those ways, their intended purpose is to provide a tool to enable scholars to visualize elements of the performance – parallel phrases, pitch collections, melodic patterns and contours, etc. – that may go unnoticed simply by hearing the music. For example, as a non-fiddler I could hear the similarities between the different strains of “Jimmy Johnson” and that both fiddlers were approaching the tune in different ways, but it was not until I had completed the transcription that I was able to determine how the strains were related and how each man structured his performance.

The Project

The first challenge I faced was selecting the tunes on which to focus my attention during this month. I already knew that both Carpenter and Wine had a performance of “Sourwood Mountain” in the collection, so I had already planned to transcribe those. I discovered each also had a performance of “Jimmy Johnson” in the collection, so I decided it would be beneficial and informative to include those as well. For additional transcriptions I chose Carpenter’s

performances of “Shelvin’ Rock” and “Cripple Creek” and Wine’s performances of “Hey Aunt Katie There’s a Bug on Me” and “Chicken Reel”.

I assumed from my previous experience in transcribing jazz recordings that the process should go fairly quickly, perhaps giving me time to transcribe more tunes, but I soon discovered that was not the case. I found transcribing fiddle tunes to be more challenging than transcribing jazz for a number of reasons. First, there is a greater sense of concrete pitch in jazz than in fiddle music. In other words, in jazz the pitch A ♭ will almost always sound the same when the same performer plays it on the same instrument (with the exception of performance techniques like pitch bends). As described above, I found that is not always the case with traditional fiddle music.

Second, most jazz is more rhythmically regular than fiddle tune performances tend to be. In jazz, the beat is generally directed by the bass and drums, which provide a steady rhythmic underpinning against which the rhythms of the melody can be compared. However, the accompanying banjo or guitar of these fiddle tune recordings follows the irregularities of the fiddler’s beats and rhythms rather than providing that same continuity. This made some of the rhythms in the fiddle performances difficult to determine with certainty.

Third, the quality of the fiddle tune recordings was not as high as the jazz recordings with which I had previously worked. The fiddle recordings were made live on stage rather than in a recording studio, and while they are good-quality live recordings, the type and placement of the microphones made them less than ideal for creating precise transcriptions. In this setting, standard unidirectional microphones were used for the purpose of amplifying the sound for those in attendance to hear. With this type of microphone, however, if the performer changes position, there is the potential for some distortion or loss of sound, meaning that the resulting recording will not be as clear as it would be if a multidirectional microphone had been used. These sound issues meant I had to spend a great deal of time repeatedly listening to segments of the fiddle tune recordings in order to determine what was being played.

Conclusion

Time did not allow me to perform the depth of analysis I had hoped to accomplish during the fellowship period, but overall I am pleased with the work I was able to complete. I decided early on that since it was better to focus on creating the highest quality transcriptions I could, I would have to accept creating fewer transcriptions than I initially intended. I was also pleased to have the opportunity to view performances of many of the tunes I was addressing because much of a performance cannot be captured through sound recording alone. Based on my exposure to other fiddlers, I was surprised by how consistent Carpenter and Wine’s performances were. I expected to find more variations among the repetitions of the tune within each player’s performance, but they were surprisingly similar.

I will continue examining the styles of Carpenter and Wine by working with these transcriptions as well as creating additional ones. When I finish, I will seek to publish my work in a musicological journal in order to draw attention to both the music and to the possibilities of this methodology. I will also integrate these musicians into my teaching by using them as classroom examples alongside classical and jazz masters and distributing some of my transcriptions along with the sheet music I already include.

Tune Transcriptions

These transcriptions and commentaries are based on audio and video recordings of Ernie Carpenter and Melvin Wine performing at the Berea College Celebration of Traditional Music at various times 1987 - 1994. Both fiddlers are accompanied on banjo Gerald Milnes. Because the transcriptions are intended to capture a particular performance, the keys given for the tunes are the sounding keys and may differ from the keys intended by the performers.

Ernie Carpenter

Fiddler Ernie Carpenter (1909-1997) was born in Braxton County, West Virginia and was a fifth-generation fiddler. His great-great grandfather, Jeremiah, was one of the first white settlers of the Elk River area. During a conflict with nearby Native American tribes, Jeremiah took his family into hiding into the rock caves and overhanging shelf rocks along Camp Run, a tributary of Laurel Creek, which is a tributary of the Elk River. Ernie's great grandfather, Solomon "Old Solly" Carpenter, was born while the family was in hiding, and family tradition claims that Jeremiah created the tune "Shelvin' Rock" to commemorate this event. Grandfather William "Squirrely Bill" Carpenter was Ernie's connection to these earlier generations and was the source of most of Ernie's tunes and stories. Besides his family, Carpenter was also influenced by other fiddlers in Braxton County and neighboring Webster County, such as "Uncle Jack" McElwain, Wallace Pritchard, and George Hammons.

Many of Carpenter's tunes memorialize important events in the history of his family and other early settlers of central West Virginia. He guarded his tunes like treasures, rarely allowing them to be recorded or teaching outsiders to play them. However he enjoyed sharing the stories that accompanied his songs when he performed. Ernie Carpenter was honored with numerous accolades, including West Virginia's highest folklife honor, the Vandalia Award, in 1988.

Ernie Carpenter's Performance Style

Based on the performances I viewed, Carpenter seemed to block out everything around him when he played, looking down throughout most of the performance of each song. He did look up when telling the stories, but when he began the tunes he seemed to block out everything else and focus solely on playing. His posture and body language seemed to contradict his passion for the music, as he sat hunched over in his chair with little expression or motion. He tended to begin each tune by checking the tuning then rehearsing the melody in an unmetered style before starting. He ended the tunes with a ritard, or slowing down, at the end of the final phrase to signal completion.

I found it interesting that Carpenter held his bow so high up the shaft. This technique is often used by people, particularly children, whose arms are not long enough to be able to play while holding the bow in the standard position. I suspect Carpenter may have done this to enable him to play rapidly with greater precision.

Selected Ernie Carpenter Tunes

Sourwood Mountain

Sourwood Mountain is an old tune that has been played and recorded by a number of fiddlers. One of the first mentions of the tune as a fiddle tune comes from the Elk River area in

1880. Carpenter's performance is in the key of E ♭. Structurally, the tune is in the two-section, or binary, form common to many dance tunes, such as reels and breakdowns. Of particular note in this performance is Carpenter's tendency to extend phrases and sections. The first time through the tune, Carpenter extends the end of the first phrase of the second strain slightly (only really noticeable because it throws Milnes off briefly). The second time through the tune, he plays the first strain three times rather than two. Carpenter ends his performance by playing only the first strain. (10-31-87 / AC-OR-005-373)

Jimmy Johnson

Jimmy Johnson is a tune that Carpenter says has "been around a hundred years or more." It is a tune Ernie learned from his father, Shelt Carpenter, and is a common one among West Virginia fiddlers. It is a three-strain tune, with each strain repeating similar melodic material at different pitch levels. Carpenter performs the tune in the key of A ♭, but begins the first strain on E ♭. The second, or high strain, focuses on the A ♭ a fourth higher than where the first strain began. The third strain drops two octaves to the A ♭ below middle C and the fourth strain is a repeat of the second strain played an octave lower than the original. Structurally, Carpenter's performance can be diagrammed as ABCB'. (10-31-87 / AC-OR-005-367)

Shelvin' Rock

Carpenter explains that *"this tune was written by my great-great grandfather. He was born under a rock in Indian times—they was hiding out from the Indians. The Indians had come [sic] down and killed my great-great uncle, and they had to go to these rock caves and hide out. And my great-great grandfather was born under that rock, and he wrote this tune I'm gonna play. And when he was asked what the name of it was, he said he was gonna call it the Shelvin' Rock."*

Milnes notes in his book *Play of a Fiddle*¹ that Shelvin' Rock is a floating tune title and is used for at least one other tune in Braxton County. He suspects that Jeremiah borrowed the title for his tune because it fit the event he wanted to commemorate. This version of Shelvin' Rock, performed in the key of D ♭, consists of three strains in an AABC pattern. The strains are asymmetrical, with lengths of 8, 12, and 10 bars respectively. Carpenter's performance takes some liberties with the third strain. The first, sixth, and eighth statements of the tune repeat the third strain, creating an AABCC pattern, while the final statement of the tune omits that strain and ends after the second strain. (10-31-87 / AC-OR-005-372)

Cripple Creek

Cripple Creek is another binary form tune with a low strain and a high strain. The performance is rather straightforward. Carpenter plays the tune in the key of A ♭ and omits the second strain for the last statement of the tune.

He explains, *"this tune was written probably a hundred and fifty years ago. . . . Clay County, West Virginia, was a great place for square dancing. They had a big square dance one night up on this creek, and they got a little too much to drink and got into a free-for-all and one fellow got his leg broke [sic]. And the fellow played the fiddle that night . . . and he wrote this tune and he*

¹ Gerald Milnes, *Play of a Fiddle: Traditional Music, Dance, and Folklore in West Virginia*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1999.

called it 'Cripple Creek.' (10-31-87 / AC-OR-005-373)

Melvin Wine

Melvin Wine (1909-2003) was born in Burnside, West Virginia. His father, Bob Wine, was a fiddler and his mother, Elizabeth, sang ballads and hymns. He learned to fiddle through what he called the "Appalachian Suzuki method," which meant that even though he was forbidden to touch his father's fiddle, he would sneak it out while his father was away. He taught himself to play "Bonaparte's Retreat" and eventually performed it for his father who then taught Melvin to play tunes he had learned from Melvin's grandfather, Nelson, and great grandfather "Smithy". From that time, Melvin's style was developed under the close supervision of his father. Other area fiddlers Wine credits as sources for many of his tunes include Sam Hacker, Jack Blake, John Cogar, Milt Perkins, Jilly Grace, Tom Dillon, and "Uncle Jack" McElwain.

In 1930 Melvin married Etta Singleton, a banjo and guitar player and square dance caller. On into the 1930s, Melvin and his brother Clarence played in local restaurants and bars and did a three-month stint at a Fairmont, West Virginia, radio station. He later worked in coal mines for several years before becoming a farmer.

As a fiddler he was widely respected for his versatility of style, deft bow work, and immense repertoire. He was the most frequent winner of the West Virginia State Folk Festival Fiddling Contest in Glenville, West Virginia, for more than two decades. He was the first recipient of the Vandalia Award, West Virginia's highest folklife honor in 1981. He also received a NEA National Heritage Fellowship in 1991.

Melvin Wine's Performance Style

Based on the performances I viewed, Wine was a more animated performer than Carpenter. Wine sat more upright, smiled, and tapped his feet along with his playing. These performances do not incorporate much storytelling from Wine, but I suspect that other performances included this as it is a standard part of old-time fiddle tradition. Like Carpenter, Wine tended to begin each tune by checking the tuning, but unlike Carpenter, Wine immediately started the tune rather than rehearsing it first. Wine ended his tunes by stopping suddenly at the end of a strain rather than signaling his ending by slowing down. Wine held his bow closer to a standard position than did Carpenter; neither man seemed to employ unusual bowing techniques during these performances.

Selected Melvin Wine Tunes

Sourwood Mountain

Sourwood Mountain is an old tune that has been played and recorded by a number of fiddlers. One of the first mentions of the tune as a fiddle tune comes from around the Elk River in 1880. Wine's performance is in the key of E ♭. Structurally, the tune is in the two-section, or binary, form common to many dance tunes, such as reels and breakdowns. Wine begins his performance in an unusual manner by playing the high strain first. His last statement of the tune ends after the first strain, giving the impression that he has reversed the order of the two.

This variation is what makes his performance different from Carpenter's. Their interpretations of the individual strains are very similar; the only real difference in the two performances is the order in which they play those strains and the resulting effect. Wine begins

with the second strain and ends with the first, giving the impression that he has ended at the end of the tune because the listener has been accustomed to hearing the strains in that order. Carpenter begins and ends with the first strain, giving the impression that he has ended in the middle of the tune because the listener has been accustomed to hearing something else following the first strain. Both of these approaches (ending at the end and repeating the first strain before ending) are common in fiddle music. What is less common is reversing the order of the strains. It would be useful to find other recordings of Melvin Wine playing “Sourwood Mountain” to discover if this alteration was a performance decision or if he perhaps learned the tune this way. (10-89 / AC-OR-005-435)

Jimmy Johnson

Jimmy Johnson is another tune dating from the 1800s that is common among West Virginia fiddlers. The tune itself is a three-strain tune with each strain largely repeating similar melodic material at different pitch levels. Wine’s performance is in the key of A ♭, but begins with the first strain on E ♭ and drops down to A ♭ for the second strain. His third strain is the same as the first, only an octave lower, and the last strain is the high strain, starting on A ♭ a fourth above the E ♭ of the opening strain. Structurally, his performance can be diagrammed ABA’C.

Wine’s performance sounds more varied than Carpenter’s because of the order in which the strains are performed. In the larger scale of the entire performance, Wine’s alternation of the B and C strains between statements of the A strain give it more of a rondo sound and make the tune sound more continuous by blurring the line between each repetition. Carpenter’s performance seems to treat the C strain as an irregular addition to a binary tune, which serves to punctuate each repetition of the tune. (10-89 / AC-OR-005-435)

Hey Aunt Katie There’s a Bug on Me

Hey Aunt Katie There’s a Bug on Me is a polka, and as such, has two different key areas. The opening strain is in the key of A ♭ and the second strain is in D ♭. This tune is a good demonstration of Wine’s precision bow work as he tends to re-articulate or arpeggiate what were likely sustained notes in the original tune. Examples of this include the repeated notes in the first strain, which sound like they could be quarter notes but are re-articulated into eighth notes, and the ascending eighth note patterns in the middle of the second strain, which roughly corresponds to the four repeated quarter notes in the first strain. (10-89 / AC-OR-005-420)

Chicken Reel

Chicken Reel was published as a novelty tune around 1910. It is unclear whether or not the tune was actually a folk melody before it was published or whether the composer compiled it from separate folk strains. It follows the binary form common to breakdowns and reels. Wine’s performance is in A ♭ and as with the performance of “Sourwood Mountain,” he reverses the order of the high and low strains. (10-89 / AC-OR-005-587)