

Introduction to Step-Dancing in Canada

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This issue of *Canadian Folk Music* comes out of a chat over a cup of tea at the CSTM meeting in Montreal in 2009. Kristin Walsh Harris had many years of step dance training coupled with an academic background in folklore and dance, and the desire to explore the links between the Irish and Newfoundland step dance styles that she loved. Sherry Johnson had grown up step-dancing in the Ottawa Valley tradition, and was eager to follow up on some preliminary research she'd conducted for her dissertation on Ontario fiddle contests. Heather Sparling had moved to Cape Breton Island, and was interested in pursuing some links between her work on *puirt-a-beul* and Cape Breton step-dancing. Each of us was frustrated by particular gaps in the scholarship on percussive dance in Canada, including our individual styles from Cape Breton, Newfoundland, and the Ottawa Valley, their antecedent forms in Scotland, Ireland, and England, and particularly work that looked across all of these styles.

Fast-forward seven years, and a SSHRC Insight Development Grant has enabled us to begin to address some of those gaps. Our three years of independent and collaborative work has resulted in fieldwork at home and abroad, conference presentations, workshops, community gatherings, archival initiatives, and this issue of *Canadian Folk Music*. In addition to some of our own findings, several dancers and scholars (most of us identify as both) have contributed a diverse array of informal studies, interview passages, works-in-progress, and other musings and observations about various forms of percussive dance in Canada. Even within such diversity, a remarkable number of similar themes emerged from the articles in this issue. We introduce some of them here, not to draw parallels or comparisons, but rather to identify some points of overlap and divergence for you to consider as you delve into this thought-provoking collection of articles.

People often talk about “Canadian step-dancing” to differentiate it from, for example, more widely recognized forms such as American clogging or Irish *Riverdance*-style performance. In fact, there is no single pan-Canadian style of step-dancing. Created by different immigration histories and varying types and degrees of contact amongst cultures, a number of different styles of step-dancing have developed and adapted over the years across Canada including in Newfoundland, Cape Breton, Acadia, Quebec, the

Ottawa Valley, the Prairies, and the North. While dancers may choose to learn more than one kind of step-dancing, styles remain strongly associated with particular regional areas and/or cultural groups. In this edition of the magazine, we include articles by scholars and dancers who study and practice a range of percussive dance styles in Canada. At the same time, we recognize that there are styles that are not represented in this collection, primarily because we simply could not find anyone to write about them, as well as local sub-styles of which we are probably not even aware.

Naming practices amongst percussive dance styles point to where nomenclature both overlaps and deviates. We use the term “percussive dance” to refer to any dance style that focuses on the foot as the deliberate creator of sound; by virtue of the shoe that is worn (which differs among styles), a sound is emitted not unlike a percussion instrument. However, in common parlance, the term “step dance” is often used. At the same time, there are differences in how communities of practice use terms like “step dance”. For example, in the Ottawa Valley tradition, “step-dancing” is the noun of choice, rather than “step dance”. In Scotland, reference is made to both step dance and step-dancing. The Irish-Newfoundland style may be called Irish-Newfoundland step dance or even Irish-Newfoundland tap. In Métis and some aboriginal communities, the practice is called “jigging” (Sarah Quick offers a variety of other names in aboriginal languages in her article in this volume), and in French, it is referred to as “la gigue”. These latter two names can be particularly confusing since, in traditional music circles, the term “jig” refers to a dance tune in 6/8, whereas “la gigue” can be performed to tune types of various metres, and “jigging” is almost always performed to tunes primarily in 2/4.

The “step” (or “change” as it is known in Métis jigging) is at the heart of any percussive dance practice. But what constitutes a step? There may be as many answers as there are dancers. Unlike some vernacular dance forms, such as, say, Irish step-dancing or Scottish Highland dancing, none of the step-dancing practices in Canada has been institutionalized and codified. In fact, some step dancers are reluctant to codify their dancing for fear of demystifying the idea of being inspired to move by the music without premeditated planning. For others, there has simply not been a need to apply labels. Communica-

tion amongst dancers of different traditions is best accomplished through movement, rather than through talk. However, even for the most improvisational dancer, there is a corpus of “steps” – movements or rhythms – upon which he or she draws in a performative moment. In Mats Melin’s recent book on Cape Breton step dance, he deconstructs the style with a structural analysis that likens what most would call a “step” to what dance scholars Giurchescu and Kröschlová refer to as motifs or phrases (2015: 237). Pierre Chartrand (in this volume) suggests that a step he has identified as the “Rant Step” (*le Pas de Reel*) is connected to basic steps found in step dance traditions across the Maritimes, Quebec, and even Ontario.

As dance instruction in many of these traditions has become more formalized (though still not standardized), teachers generally prefer to offer clearly broken-down steps to beginners. In his article in this volume, Glenn Patterson describes learning and naming steps – shuffles, hops, foot stomps – and his struggle to take those small components and connect them as a dance. Meghan Forsyth interviewed Acadian step dancer Hélène Bergeron, who starts describing steps that she’d like to learn, but then qualifies that they are actually “moves” because “steps” are 16-beat combinations of moves. Sherry Johnson explains that a “step” in the Ottawa Valley or Ontario old-time traditions consists of combinations of these smaller components – shuffles, hops, heels – equaling four or eight bars of music. From the intuitive to the structural, what is considered to be a step and how a step is learned are important reflective moments for both dancers and scholars.

So when is a dancer considered to have mastered a step? What qualities are valued in a step dancer? According to MacEachen, the best Cape Breton step dancers are not those with the most steps in their repertoire, but those with a “total mastery of a smaller number, the ability to improvise effective variations on their steps, and a recognizable personal style” (1998: 697). Likewise, northern Manitobans also don’t require a master dancer to know a lot of steps; rather, the speed and energy of the dancing is valued within the community (Lederman 1988: 27; see also her contribution in this volume). By contrast, in southern Manitoba, it is important to have both a lot of fancy steps in one’s repertoire, and the stamina to perform them (*ibid.*). But as Sarah Quick explains in this volume, when it comes to “The Red River Jig”, it’s also important for the dancer to be able to transition smoothly between the two parts of the tune, a challenging task given that fiddlers play different versions of the tune and vary the lengths of each section.

In addition to a dancer’s mastery over a number of steps, how those steps are executed and how the body is held are important in many Canadian percussive dance styles. Dancers across the country describe the importance of dancing “close to the floor”. Although there are some subtle variations, depending on region, in the interpretations of this phrase, for the most part “close to the floor” suggests:

- neat, compact, precise foot movements, with most of the movement occurring below the knees;
- little vertical movement of the body and almost no lift off the ground in the weight transfer between feet;
- an upright, yet relaxed, torso; and
- arms that hang in a relaxed position at the side of the body.

Traditionally, step-dancing was performed with little movement around the stage (Quigley 1985: 19-21), although the influence of group choreography and large staged shows has loosened that restriction on some styles (Johnson 2012). In his contribution to this volume, Mats Melin discusses key aesthetic terms used in Cape Breton step dance, including “close to the floor”, “neat”, “light”, and “timing”, exploring their meanings in order to reveal key stylistic traits. Some of the other authors in this volume also describe the distinct characteristics of each style (for additional details, please see the bibliography). Aesthetic similarities are not merely superficial; they point us to deeper connections between styles that can sometimes be overlooked in the emphasis on each dance tradition as distinct.

All of the percussive dance traditions in Canada now known as step-dancing, jigging, or “la gigue”, have antecedents in Britain and/or Ireland. They were brought to Canada (and elsewhere) by migratory workers, immigrants, missionaries, and educators, as well as by dancing masters who travelled and cross-pollinated styles in their homelands and abroad. Some of these histories are well documented. The history of traditional dance in Scotland, for example, has been documented by the Fletts (e.g., 1964, 1996), who include appendices about traditional dance in Cape Breton by Frank Rhodes, as well as by Emerson (1972). In this volume, Sparling adds to the historical documentation of traditional dance in Cape Breton with her history of the Scotch Four in Cape Breton, a dance for two couples alternating travel steps and “setting” (step-dancing) performed to strathspeys and reels.

Other dance traditions, however, lack accessible histories. How a given dance style developed in the diaspora – consciously or unconsciously – may be manifest in a variety of ways. Some styles developed

in relative isolation; others consciously attempted to preserve aspects of the homeland; and many would develop with a combination of the old and the new. An interesting case of diaspora-homeland interactions is Cape Breton step dance in Scotland. While Cape Breton step dancers of Scottish descent have always insisted that their dancing came from Scotland with late 18th- and early 19th-century immigrants, no similar form of dance was practised in Scotland for at least several decades. It was only in the 1980s that Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser and Scottish piper Hamish Moore “discovered” Cape Breton music and dance and felt that they represented traditions that had been lost in Scotland, and which they wanted to reclaim (Dembling 2005). They began inviting Cape Breton musicians and dancers to teach in Scotland, reintroducing step dance there (Melin 2005). In this case, we see the diaspora informing dance in the homeland. In Pat Ballantyne's contribution to this volume, she notes that there is a growing number of Cape Breton-style step dancers in Scotland, but they lack suitable dancing contexts and, perhaps more importantly, musicians capable of playing for them. As her interviews with two pipers show, however, there is an increased awareness in Scotland that dance music requires different techniques and awareness than other kinds of traditional music.

As globalizing influences shrink our world, all of these dance styles can be viewed and shared with the click of a mouse or a swipe of a smartphone. As Harris Walsh notes in her contribution, the ability of dancers in Grand Falls-Windsor, NL, to participate in a distance *feis* (an Irish dance competition) has been made possible entirely through available technology, thereby bringing the world of competitive Irish step-dancing to a small town in central Newfoundland. The ubiquity of YouTube videos, online streaming, and ease of international travel have undoubtedly made all dance traditions instantly available to consumers. Whether this fertilization results in a greater homogenization in percussive dance styles in Canada and elsewhere remains to be seen, but it is highly likely that an earlier homeland-diaspora binary, if it ever existed as a simple binary, has now transformed into a complex web of cross-pollination amongst multiple sources. At the same time, dancers assert that individual styles have retained the integrity of their aesthetic and corporeal core.

Cross-fertilization is exemplified in the figure of Donnie Gilchrist, who played an influential role in the development of both Quebec and Ottawa Valley step-dancing (see contributions by Chartrand and Johnson in this volume), and indeed, no doubt due to geographic and linguistic proximity, Quebec and Ottawa Valley step dancers have regularly interacted ever since. In Monique Giroux's interview, Métis

jigger Simon Blais speaks about the challenges of jigging in an acceptably traditional style without being overly influenced by her years of study in competitive Irish step-dancing. In Meghan Forsyth's contribution, she quotes Acadian step dancer Yvonne Tuplin's description of the influence of television shows such as *Don Messer's Jubilee* and a local variety show called *Shur-Gain*, as well as the influence of popular professional dance groups.

While the histories and practices of various step dance styles fascinate all the authors in this volume, our interests emerged because we love *dancing* these dance styles, not simply studying them. Although the authors represented in this volume range from beginners to recognized masters, we have all experienced the challenge and joy of making music with our feet. In his article, Glenn Patterson describes how and why he started step-dancing. As an accomplished fiddler working on a PhD in ethnomusicology, he was looking for a new way to relate to familiar music, and to revisit the thrill he experienced when first learning to play fiddle and banjo that has been somewhat mitigated by the increasing professionalization of his musical life. Glenn's moving and thoughtful account offers many excellent reasons for learning to step-dance, in case any readers may need them!

And so it is the shared joy that we all take in step-dancing ourselves and in appreciating good dancing by others, as well as our interest in the histories of particular step dance traditions and the connections between them (or lack thereof), that inspired this volume – the first of its kind – examining, side by side, a number of percussive dance traditions across Canada. In it, we hope you discover both unique details of individual dancers and practices, and some of the ways that they fit into the larger picture of percussive dance across Canada and beyond.

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