Well, CFMS is trying something new with this one, not only devoting a whole issue to an instrumental music tradition, but using a guest editor as well. My first reaction at the end of all this is that anyone who wants to edit a journal must be crazy. It is a ridiculous amount of work conscripting articles, tracking down possible contributors who often suggest other possible contributors, clarifying technical and philosophical issues on the subject matter, convincing people who are all under pressures of their own to spend valuable time on something for no financial reward, and finally actually trying to meet deadlines. It has left me with amazing respect for the job Tim Rogers does and I gladly give it back to him.

Nevertheless, it is a fascinating idea — trying to prepare a small but potent summary of the state of fiddling in Canada, made up of articles from people who are living with, working with and in many cases are themselves fiddlers. Although that was the original hope, it quickly became clear that rather than a summary, all we could realistically do was make an interesting collage of brightly coloured bits, leaving an awful lot of grey areas in between — this from sheer lack of available information. In a country acknowledged the world over for having some of the most beautiful, intricate, virtuosic and rhythmically exciting fiddle styles, the state of our research into and understanding of these styles is truly pathetic. The East coast and Quebec are far ahead of the rest of the country, perhaps because their traditions are older, and also because the territory is smaller and the cultures correspondingly more unified. Ontario’s fiddle culture is dominated publicly by the media-disseminated styles, mainly ‘Old-Time’ or ‘Down-East’ while many older layers of folk music are quietly disappearing with the people who practice them. The West and the North were the real problem areas for me however — not that there aren’t old traditions there, or people who know a lot about them, but time and distance took its toll on my ability to find out what and who they were for this issue.

The realities of deadlines, time and distance have resulted in several major omissions in the areas covered in this monograph. Most notable of these are Quebec and the
Yukon, as well as a number of other sub-provincial regions. Please rest assured that this was not intentional in the least. In fact, considerable effort was expended trying to plug these gaps — but, alas, to no avail. These missing links in the Canadian fiddle landscape are a great shame, I can only say that if it inspires anyone to sit down and write something about their area out of frustration at being omitted, good!

I took on this project for sheerly selfish reasons, so that I could learn more about the state of fiddling in Canada myself, and could begin to make contact with those who are involved in it. I have learned a great deal, but I have also learned how little we know. Our greatest gaps include some of our oldest cultures such as the Native, Inuit and Metis as well as more recent immigrant cultures such as German, Ukrainian and other Slavic groups. The whole subject of cross-cultural influences on repertoire as a result of close proximity in Canada is a fascinating one which has barely been touched. Likewise, the origin of even some of our best-known tunes is unknown. Thus, if nothing else, this issue is meant to be a catalyst, not a monument, because that’s all it can be. May the day come when a history of fiddling in Canada can be written. Before that could happen a lot of people armed with a lot of energy, enthusiasm and sensitivity will have to become willing to be involved on a very personal level.

I was also motivated because of what I perceive as a continued lack of interest in our own traditions on the part of younger fiddlers, who often prefer to learn American, Irish or other regional styles from places they have never been. Although as a player I have often been guilty of exactly that, my experience has taught me that it doesn’t work. Learning to fiddle in any particular style is exactly like learning a language. You can study it for years from the outside but until you live closely with it on a daily basis and with those who were raised to it you will always speak with an accent. Of course accents can be beautiful too and in music often supplant the original if they attract enough listeners. I am all for originality, but I have found a depth and beauty in some of the older layers of folk music in this country far surpassing anything I or anyone else could come up with in isolation. Personally, the more I enter into the oldest, richest styles of music, the more I feel able to be creative.

The main problem, I think, for those of us raised on records and tapes is that we tend to shy away from personal contact with older fiddlers and so convince ourselves that we don’t need it. It’s not easy to knock on someone’s door, especially someone of another generation and cultural heritage, someone whose political and social values may be greatly at odds with your own. But it has to be done. I can promise you will learn more about how to play music that means something by visiting the scratchy old fiddler down the street than you will by immersing yourself in the new Kevin Burke record, beautiful as it may be. The main reason it is beautiful is because Kevin Burke spent a lot of time listening to old players who lived down the street from him who had likewise listened to their neighbors and grandparents when they were young. Even if you live somewhere where you just don’t like the local style (assuming there is one), you will be amazed at what gems you can find when you get a sense of what the music means to the people playing it. On the other hand, you may be convinced there are no fiddlers within fifty miles of you. Unless you are a forest ranger in a fire tower in the bush, I wouldn’t bet on it. If you are in a large city, you may never see any public evidence of fiddling, but visit an Old Folks Home, or even phone a few and I would be very surprised if you didn’t turn up some folk fiddlers fairly quickly. Usually we are just too distracted or short of time to notice what the people around us have to offer.

Some of the articles in this monograph are written by people who are unaccustomed to putting pen to paper, some by students and some by folk music scholars of great experience. Some are very detailed about a particular local tradition, while some are general and historical. I have allowed certain statements to remain which were unsubstantiated by the writers and may later be challenged. I felt that the main thing was to get the dialogue started. If there are mistakes in fact, then the quickest way for all of us to learn more is by printing them and having them challenged. In our current state of infancy on the subject that is the
best service the Bulletin could provide.

As a way of exploring the subject further, I have tried to provide suggestions for reading and listening, again not in any attempt to be comprehensive. In general, the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada might be a good place to start, if for no other reason than to see for yourself how little the subject has been explored by ‘mainstream’ music scholars. I have appended a list of related articles in the Encyclopedia. The National Museum Mercury Series also contains a number of interesting volumes (listed below) which can be requested from the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies for free until they are out of copies. Some of these are already unavailable and must be sought in libraries. Also worth looking up is Dorothy and Homer Hogan’s Canadian Fiddle Culture in Communiqué: Canadian Studies, 1977. Other useful books and magazines are mentioned with the regional articles.

I didn’t encourage a lot of transcriptions for this issue (a policy statement for which I was roundly criticized) because I wanted to encourage people to work their way in aurally by listening to records or live performances. I still feel fairly strongly that too much is lost on paper of the essence of a style, and that is what I hope the issue inspires people to explore.

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List of Articles Related to Fiddling
Found in the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada:
Fiddling

Canadian Open Old-Time Fiddlers Contest
Country Music
Folk Music
Folk Music: Anglo-Canadian
Folk Music: Franco-Canadian
Scotland: 2/Scottish Instrumental Music
Ireland
Ukraine
Sweden
Inuit: 4/Acculturation
Ethnomusicology: 7/Scholarship after 1900 —
Instrumental folk music
Dancing — Pre-Confederation

George Wade and the Cornhuskers
Graham Townsend
Don Messer
Andy deJarlis
Joseph Allard
Arthur and J.O. LaMadeleine
Wellie Ringuette
Isidore Soucy
Joe Bouchard
Jean Carignan
Omer Dumas
Monsieur Pointu
Ti-Blanc Richard
Winston Scotty Fitzgerald
King Ganam
Ned Landry
June Eikhard
Olaf Sveen (accordion player)
Philippe Bruneau (accordion player)

National Museum of Man,
Mercury Series Publications:

No. 33. Glofcheskie, John Michael Folk Music of Canada’s Oldest Polish Community.
No. 35. Gibbons, Roy W. Folk Fiddling in Canada: A Sampling.
No. 40. Carignan, Jean. La Musique Traditionelle Pour Violon: Jean Carignan.
No. 42. Gibbons, Roy W. As It Comes: Folk Fiddling in Prince George, British Columbia.