The Drops of Brandy: Several Versions of a Métis Fiddler Tune

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My contribution to this special issue on Native music will be in the area of Native and Métis fiddle music—a tradition which dates back to the first appearance of a white trader with a violin in the west, probably French-Canadian, and probably about 250 years ago. Because this is a phenomenon of Native and Métis musicians having taken up a non-Native instrument, this rich tradition is often ignored by scholars in the area of Native and non-Native music alike. In fact, in many Native communities, from the Maritimes right through to the Yukon, fiddle music completely replaced traditional Native singing and drumming. According to several older inhabitants of the communities I worked in in western Manitoba, fiddling was the only musical expression a lot of these communities had from around 1900 until 1950 or so, when they began to hear country music on records and radio. The various government bans on Native ceremonies and music in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s probably contributed to this evolution. But, by all accounts, the fiddle appealed to Native people right from the start. There are many reports of nineteenth century dances in the west to the music of a Native fiddler, and the Métis fiddling and dancing has become legendary.

Let me say briefly that since writing an article for the Bulletin (Volume 19, No. 3, September, 1985), which was done very near the beginning of my research, I have concluded that there is a great deal of influence from Native musical tradition in the fiddling, especially in the structures of the tunes which bear much resemblance to older Native song forms. The tunes are very asymmetric in phrasing, differing greatly from Scots-Irish versions of some of the same tunes. Summarized briefly, this means that the phrases vary greatly in length and number from one tune to the next, as well as in the same tune played by different players, and even on repeats of a tune by the same player. Scots-Irish tunes, by contrast, are quite regular, usually having two sections, each repeated, with four eight-beat phrases in each section.

This Native influence may also be the root of much of the asymmetric phrasing in older Quebec styles, which are definitely related to the Native fiddling of the northwest. While I hypothesized in the earlier article that the tunes came to Manitoba via Quebec, I would now say that this French/Native style developed within a fur trade culture extending throughout the entire northwest and Quebec. That is, tunes and elements of style could just as easily have come from the West back to Quebec as the other way around. This fur trade culture has left its musical legacy in French, Native and Métis communities throughout Canada to the present day.

Rather than try to do another general overview of the tradition, which is best approached by listening in any case, I thought I would do something I hadn’t already done.
elsewhere—present several versions of one of the most widely-known tunes, the “Drops of Brandy”. By comparing different versions of this tune, we can see the unpredictable forms I have been discussing, as well as how greatly a tune varies from one player to the next.

Like the “Red River Jig” 2, the “Drops of Brandy” is played in both Quebec and in western Native communities, and also seems to have no European antecedent, in spite of the familiarity of its name. The Scots-Irish “Drops of Brandy” is a 9/8 slip jig (see Transcription #1) while the Canadian tunes are reels. They are in the same key, G major, have a similar harmonic structure based around the G major chord, and do accompany the same line dance. 3 The Quebec versions are also usually in a regular metre of three (see Transcription #2, Louis Boudrealt), a further resemblance to the slip jig, so it is possible that a creative interpretation of the Scots-Irish tune in Canada gave birth to the reel versions we hear today. However, the contours of the Scots-Irish tune and the Canadian versions have little in common.

The Transcriptions

Transcription #2 is from a commercial recording of Louis Boudrealt, from Chicoutimi, Quebec. 4 Transcription #3 gives eight western versions. The first two versions, those of Andy de Jarlis (from Woodbridge, Manitoba) 5 and John Arcand (from Big River, Saskatchewan) 6 are taken from commercial recordings. Arcand’s is recent, while de Jarlis’s dates from the ’50’s or early ’60’s and is very well-known throughout the west. I have grouped them together, as Arcand’s is obviously based on the de Jarlis version. The other six versions are divided into three from the Camperville area of Manitoba and three from the Ebb and Flow area. 7 These two communities are about seventy miles apart and have had some musical contact over the past 50 years but not a great deal. The first two players in each group were born between 1900 and 1910, while the last one of each, Rene Ferland and Teddy Boy Houle respectively, were born between 1940 and 1950. Teddy Boy Houle is the stepson of Walter Flett. All these players learned the tune from local tradition and not from a recording. They have undoubtedly all heard the de Jarlis recording, but seem not to have been greatly influenced by it.

The Boudrealt version from Quebec and the western versions seem somewhat related, but actually have no corresponding melodic parts. The Quebec version is in a regular metre of three throughout, whereas the Métis versions are quite irregular. The Quebec version has six distinct melodic parts with a seventh which is a kind of interlude in the middle of the fifth part, whereas the western versions have two to four parts, most commonly just two. The first, third and fifth parts in the Quebec version begin on the high G; the second, fourth and sixth sit around the middle G and B. Most of the parts in the western versions move more frequently up and down the octave. The well-known A part of the western version does not appear in the Quebec version at all. The western B parts, with their emphasis on the fifth seem vaguely reminiscent of Boudrealt’s A part, but Mr. Gagnan’s (the oldest of the western players) is the only one to emphasize the high G at the beginning (like Boudrealt’s) and his is quite unlike any of the other western versions. This suggests that the Quebec and western versions probably split off from the same root some time ago and have developed separately since.
Within the western tradition itself, the A part is quite consistent, generally eight beats long, falling into a meter which seems to be three sub-phrases of 3, 2 and 3 beats. Again, Mr. Gagnan, the oldest player, has the most unique version of this part, both melodically and rhythmically. In his four initial repeats of the phrase they are, respectively, 9 beats, 8 beats, 10 beats and 9 beats long. The next time round he plays the phrase five times — 10, 10, 8, 10 and 9 beats respectively, while the third time the phrase is heard three times — 10, 8 and 10 beats. Other players occasionally add a beat at the end of the phrase and one, Walter Flett, extends it at the beginning by one beat. But overall, all the A parts of the western versions are remarkably similar.

After the first section, however, it is much harder to generalize about the western versions. The two youngest players have second parts which are very similar to the A part, and are given here as A2. Most players have a B part which emphasizes the D, the fifth note of the scale, while Willie Mousseau uses the same opening as the A part, and might be considered just a variation of it, making his a one-part tune. John Arcand plays de Jarlis’s fourth part as his B section.

Only de Jarlis and two of the Camperville players play a C part, although the Camperville versions are obviously related to each other and are quite unlike de Jarlis’s. Only the youngest Camperville player, René Ferland, adds a fourth part, similar to de Jarlis’s.

The versions all vary widely in the number of times a player repeats a given phrase or section and in the order of sections overall. This variety can best be appreciated by glancing through the diagrams of Tune Structure, which identify sections by capital letter, phrases by which ending they use, and the number of beats in each phrase. Some versions are relatively short and repetitive, while others are very long, with a complicated order of parts. This is typical of Native and Métis tradition in which every player takes pride in having his own unique version of a tune.

**Notes**

1 I have given several of these reports in my 1986 thesis, “Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Two Western Manitoba Communities: Camperville and Ebb and Flow”. It is available from York University.

2 Roy Gibbons did a similar presentation of the “Red River Jig” in Folk Fiddling in Canada: A Sampling, National Museum of Man Mercury Series, 1981.

3 This dance, often called “Strip the Willow” in the British Isles, is called “Le Brandy” or “Danse du Crochet” in French Canada, and “Drops of Brandy” or “The Hook Dance” in English Canada and in most Native communities. For a description of the dance as performed in western Canada, see booklet accompanying the recordings, Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba, Volumes I and II, Falcon Productions, FP 187 and FP 287.

4 Louis ’Pitou’ Boudrealt, Le Tamanoir, TAM 270818.

5 Andy de Jarlis, The Happy Old Days, London EBX 4190.

6 John Arcand, Road to Batoche: Centennial 85, Cana Song Recording, New Battleford, Saskatchewan, 1985.

7 Three of these versions are on the recordings, Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba. Roderick Ross’s is on Side 3, Volume II; Rene Ferland’s is on Side 4, Volume II; and Walter Flett’s is on Side 1, Volume I. The other three come from my field recordings.
Notes to the Transcriptions

**Parts** - major sections of the tune. Boudreault has six distinct sections, de Jarlis and Ferland have four, Roderick Ross three, and all others only two parts. They are not played in a standard order, however, and one must look at the diagrams of Tune Structure to see the patterns.

**Phrases** - Each Part has only one phrase in these transcriptions. It is repeated a varying number of times with different endings. The numbers used in the Tune Structure charts (1 - 5) indicate which ending each phrase uses. Boudrealt’s D and F sections actually consist of two different six-beat phrases each, but, I have had to list them as 12-beat phrases for consistency.

**Number of Beats** - This indicates the actual length of each phrase. 1/2 note equals one beat. One can easily see from the Tune Structure charts that repeats of a phrase vary in length, usually because of the different endings. However, occasionally a beat will be dropped in the middle as in Fagnan’s B section.

- Although one could learn the tune from these transcriptions, they will only be useful as playing guides to those who are already familiar with Métis and French-Canadian style. They are presented for comparison, to facilitate further understanding of the tradition. It is hoped that fiddlers will seek out the recordings. To get an accurate idea of the whole tune as played by any other player, one must use the transcription with the Tune Structure chart to see the order of phrases and parts.

There are minor melodic variations from one repeat to the next which I was unable to note on these transcriptions. Any variations which altered the length of the phrases have been noted, however.

Many of the players hit the open D and G strings frequently. I did not notate this as it would have obscured the melody.

It would also not have been practical or even possible to accurately notate bowings. In general, bow strokes are short, a combination of one note per bow and two and three-note slurs.

I have used the 3/2 time signature in the Louis Boudrealt transcription because it is commonly used for triple time tunes such as this one. Since the western versions are so irregular, I have abandoned barlines but have kept the corresponding note values, even though they are double the convention for notating reels. This means that in both Transcription #2 and Transcription #3, the half note equals one beat.

Transcription # 1

**DROPS OF BRANDY**

![Transcription Image]

from Kerr’s Second Collection of Merry Melodies for the Violin. Glasgow: James S. Kerr. No date
TUNE STRUCTURE

Louis Boudrealt, Chicoutimi, Québec
- from Louis "Pitou" Boudrealt, Le tamanoir TAM 270818

Parts: B A B

Phrases: 1 2 1 4 // 1 1 1 5 // 1 2 1 4 // 1 1 5/

No. of beats: 7, 6, 6, 6 // 6, 6, 6, 6 // 6, 6, 6, 6 // 6, 6, 6, 6

C D C E

1 2 2 5 // 1 3 // same // 1 1 3 // 1 1 1 4 // 1 1 3 /

6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 6 //*12,12,12 6, 12,12 // 6, 6, 6, 6 // 12,12,12

interlude E F A B

1 1 / 1 1 2 / 1 1 // 1 3 // 1 2 1 4 // ending

6, 6 12,6, 6 / 6, 6 // 12, 12 // 6, 6, 6, 6 // 6, 7

*These are really two six-beat phrases, consistent with the rest of the tune. They are transcribed as twelve beat sections because the second half is different than the first.
DROPS OF BRANDY  A Part

DROPS OF BRANDY B Part

*1 This beat is omitted on repeat and on later B parts.
**TUNE STRUCTURE**

**Andy de Jarlis, Woodbridge, Manitoba**
- from Andy de Jarlis, *The Happy Old Days*, London EBX 4190

Parts: \[ A \quad B \quad A \quad C \quad D \]

Phrases: \[ 1 \quad 2 \quad 1 \quad 4 \quad // \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad // \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad 1 \quad 4_2 \quad // \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad // \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad // \]

No. of beats: \[ 8, \quad 8, \quad 8, \quad 8 \quad // \quad 8, \quad 7 \quad // \quad 8, \quad 8, \quad 8, \quad 8 \quad // \quad 8, \quad 8 \quad // \quad 8, \quad 7 \quad // \]

Whole form repeats with an A section at the end. My recording runs out just before the last phrase, but ending 5 is the most likely.

**John Arcand, Big River, Saskatchewan**

Parts: \[ A \quad B \quad A \]

Phrases: \[ 1 \quad 2 \quad 1 \quad 4 \quad // \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad // \quad 1 \quad 5 \quad \]

No. of beats: \[ 8, \quad 8, \quad 8, \quad 8 \quad // \quad 8, \quad 8, \quad 8 \quad // \quad 8, \quad 9 \quad \]

**Grandy Fagnan, Camperville, Manitoba**
- from field tapes

Parts: \[ A \quad B \quad A \quad B \quad A \]

Phrases: \[ 1 \quad 2 \quad 3 \quad 4 \quad // \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad // \quad 3 \quad 3 \quad 2 \quad 3 \quad 4 \quad // \quad 1 \quad // \quad 3 \quad 2 \quad 3 \quad // \]

No. of beats: \[ 9, \quad 8, \quad 10,9 \quad // \quad 9, \quad 9 \quad // \quad 10,10,8 \quad 10,9 \quad // \quad 8, \quad 9 \quad // \quad 10,8, \quad 11 // \]
Roderick Ross
- see Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba, Volume II, Side 3.

Parts: A B C A B
Phrases: 1 2 // 1 2 // 1 2 // 1 2 // 1 2 // 
No. of Beats: 8, 9 // 9, 8 // 9, 8 // 8, 9, 8 // 

Rene Ferland
- see Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba, Volume II, Side 4

Parts: A A2 B A A2 B A A2
Phrases: 1 2 // 1 2 // 1 // 
No. of Beats: 8, 8 // 8, 8 // 8 // 

Willie Mousseau, Ebb and Flow, Manitoba
- from field tapes

Parts: A B A B A
Phrases: 1 2 1 // 1 2 // 
No. of Beats: 8, 8, 8 // 8, 8 // 

Walter Flett, Ebb and Flow, Manitoba
see Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba, Volume I, Side 1.

Parts: A B // A B A B2 // A B2 last A
Phrases: 1 1 // 1 1 // same // 
No. of Beats: 9, 8 // 8, 8 // 

Teddy Boy Houle, Ebb and Flow, Manitoba
- from field tapes

Part: A A2 A B A B2 A
Phrases: 1 1 1 1 // 1 // 1 // 
No. of Beats: 8, 8, 8 // 8 // 