

## On «Spirit Reel»

Jim Hiscott

**Spirit Reel** is a composition for violin and G/C button accordion, written in 1981, and premiered in 1982 by Victor Schultz, violin, and myself on button accordion. It's been played on new music series (Vancouver New Music Society, Izmusic in Winnipeg, the Trillium Concerts in London, Ontario, "The Big Squeeze" at the Music Gallery, Toronto, and the new music series at Colorado College, Colorado Springs, among others) and at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival (Main Stage, 1990). It was released on cassette (with **Métis Dance Variations**) in 1990 and on CD (with **Métis Dance Variations and Lesotho**) in 1991.

I took piano accordion lessons when I was about 7, but eventually gave up the instrument. It was just too heavy, and I hated practising. I never thought I would get near an accordion again. But many years later I found I had a fascination with the button accordion—the push/pull diatonic variety. This was probably because of my interest in Irish and other types of traditional music. The instrument had a unique rhythmic drive and a sound that was both down-to-earth and somehow especially warm, almost spiritual. In 1979 I finally had the chance to buy one: a G/C Hohner *Strauss* model, from O'Neill's Music in St. John's, Newfoundland. Over the next couple of years I began the slow process of learning to play it.

While pursuing traditional music and "world" music as an avid fan, I was studying composition and was writing new music (of the "classical" variety), in a semi-avantgarde mode. But around 1980 I felt I needed to put together the various musical threads, and make the music I wrote consistent with the music I cared most about. For me that meant bringing the rhythmic feel and emotional directness of traditional music into the realm of new music.

The button accordion was exactly the instrument on which to do this, since it practically had the folk "feel" built into it. I could play as I wrote, the way other composers might use the piano. It's a diatonic instrument, which is very limiting in a chromatic world, but I found that very useful as an imposed restriction. You always have to set yourself limits when you write music; this one was a condition of the instrument itself.

*Jim Hiscott's name may be familiar to readers who are also listeners to CBC, for he works days at CBC Winnipeg as a producer. In addition to concerts of many varieties, he produced a five-part series on Canadian fiddle music, entitled **The View from the Bridge**, which has aired twice this year. He's currently preparing for broadcast a concert of Métis fiddling which he produced and recorded recently.*

***Spirit Reel** can be ordered, as either cassette or CD, from Festival Records, 1351 Grant Street, Vancouver, BC, V5L 2X7.*

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*Lew Hayden's boy Ken also learned to play the violin, and he and I played for dances in the late Twenties; I can also remember him playing when he had to stand on a chair to keep from getting trampled by the dancers. Later he joined Si Hopkins' orchestra in Calgary, finally buying Mr. Hopkins out and continuing to play on radio and for dances.*

*Author Unknown, **Mosquito Creek Roundup** (Nanton, Alberta)*

**Spirit Reel** was written in 1981, as a piece for Victor Schultz. He's a gifted classical violinist, and he's also a member of the Winnipeg Klezmer group *Finjan*. He brings an intensity, directness, and honesty to both types of music, and it was this feeling which I felt was an important unifying ingredient between classical and traditional music.

**Spirit Reel** is based on an original reel which has an odd meter, in the spirit of Métis fiddle tunes. The piece is a set of variations (12 approximately) on this theme, with the pitch centre outlining, in very slow motion, the first line of the reel (G / F# / E / A / B / D / B / A / G / A / B / D / B / A).

The episodes sometimes refer to traditional and pop dance forms (there's a pop tune in the early 80s *new wave* style and an Irish polka, among other things). At other times, they're more meditative and reflective, and attempt to evoke the spiritual world of Cree and Ojibway painters. I've always been drawn to the work of Norval Morrisseau, with his strong outlines and power lines linking people, animals, and natural objects.

In this piece I'm trying to find a language that comes out of traditional folk music, but uses the building and developmental processes of classical music. The diatonic harmonies, the sounds of violin and accordion, and the direct emotional palette are folk; the form, structure, and textures come from the world of classical music.

**Spirit Reel** was one of my first experiments using the button accordion to link different musical worlds. **Métis Dance Variations**, for violin, button accordion, percussion, and piano, is based on the "Red River Jig." **Lesotho** is influenced by South African button accordion music. **Blue Ocean** is for clarinet, button accordion, cello, and piano, and draws on Cuban music and Zairean rumba. **Dancing with Wings of Fire** is for button accordion and orchestra (available on WSO Records from the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, and **Life In Paradise** for bass clarinet and button accordion has a variety of sources, including Huasteca music from Mexico and the musics of Gustav Mahler and Zairean rumba master Franco Luambo.