

The Fiddler's Heritage at Pangnirtung

by John Bennett

A Scottish visitor to a dance in the community of Pangnirtung, on Cumberland Sound, Baffin Island, would probably wonder why the music sounded so familiar. The folk tradition of the Inuit, who make up most of the population of just over one thousand, includes the playing of jigs and reels of Scottish origin. This music was undoubtedly first played in Cumberland Sound on the fiddle by Scottish whalers.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century whaling ships from the Scottish ports of Aberdeen, Dundee, and Peterhead, as well as from England and the United States, regularly visited Cumberland Sound in search of the bowhead whale. They frequently met and traded with local Inuit, one of whom, Inuluapik, had spent a winter in Scotland, and had first taken the Scottish whaling captain, William Penny, into the Sound, a major bowhead habitat in spring and fall. In 1851 a party of whalers from an American ship spent the winter at Qimisuk in Cumberland Sound while their ship returned home. The Inuit, with whom they lived and got on well, kept them in good health until the spring, when the Americans killed a number of whales and were picked up by another ship. By wintering in and around the Sound, called Tinirjuarvik by the Inuit, the whalers were able to extend the short whaling season without the risk of ships being trapped in the ice during the homeward voyage. They would choose a harbour close to an Inuit village and allow the ship to freeze solidly into the winter ice.

Without the survival expertise of the Inuit, who kept them warmly clothed and supplied with fresh meat, an effective antiscorbutic, the whalers could scarcely have hoped to stay alive through the winter in such an unfamiliar and unforgiving land; without their company, a long, dark winter in a stationary ship would have been more than some whalers could bear. Music, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers, was at the heart of the social life where whalers and Inuit were together for long periods.

Music had long been an integral part of life on board a sailing ship as a form of relaxation for the crew, as an accompaniment to work, and even as an aid to health in the minds of some. The British Navy during the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries required its men to dance to fiddle music during the dog watch from six to eight p.m. for it was thought that exercise would help prevent scurvy. The ship's fiddler was thus listed as a member of the sick bay. Shipboard tasks were frequently done to the singing of shanties, and towing a vessel through heavy ice was often accompanied by the lively music of fiddles, bagpipes, fifes, and drums. The men also sang when towing a dead whale, and one of their favourite songs was *Bonnie Laddie*, *Highland Laddie*. Inuit hunted whales with the Europeans and in 1884 the surgeon of the Dundee whaler, *Aurora*, heard a Baffin Island Inuk sing that song. Whaling ships made a practice of having dances on board, to which Inuit were invited. European style dancing was very common among the Inuit of Holsteinborg in Southwest Greenland by the 1860s. Captain Barron, whose ship visited in 1851, describes such a scene when local Inuit had come on board to trade:

The natives brought a violin and the 'tween decks were cleared away for dancing. The females are great dancers, and are not fatigued after ten or twelve hours of such exercise.

Many of the same ships which visited Holsteinborg also visited Cumberland Sound. The Scottish music delighted the Inuit and they quickly learned to play it on fiddles, accordions, and even bagpipes that they obtained from the whalers. They also made their own fiddles out of tin boxes or wood. The whaling era ended in 1915 and during its closing decades in Cumberland Sound whaling crews were made up entirely of Inuit operating from two permanent shore stations run by Scottish companies. Every Saturday night and during the Christmas and New Year's festivities, a space would be cleared in the station workshop and by the soft light of an oil lamp the Inuit and Europeans would hold a dance; far into the night the clear arctic air would resound with the merry noises of jigs and reels, callers' shouts, stamping feet, and cheering, coming from the packed and stuffy interior of the little building.

At the whaling station sites the visible evidence that now remains of half a century of activity are rusted barrel

hoops, iron cauldrons once used for rendering blubber, grassy mounds covering the foundations of the buildings and the remains of the Inuit dwellings, weatherbeaten headboards of whalers' graves and a litter of human bones from the disintegrating barrel and box graves of the Inuit. The majestic bowheads, once so common there, and originally hunted by the Inuit in very small numbers for food and fuel, are now rarely seen in Cumberland Sound. Very few Inuit are still alive who can remember the closing years of the whaling era, but music, just as it defies the boundaries of language, also scorns the passing of time, and the music and dance of the whalers live on in Pangnirtung.

The Inuit refer to jigs and reels as *Inuktitut* music, or music "the Inuit way." Part of the reason for this is that the Anglican missionaries who arrived in Cumberland Sound at the turn of the century, converting within a decade most of the population, considered the original music of the Inuit, which was often associated with their religion, as an evil to be eliminated. The missionaries, who were kind if overzealous men, were able to win the respect and confidence of the Inuit, who obligingly set aside most of their traditional songs and dances and did not teach them to their children. A music-loving people, they instead adopted the whalers' music and Anglican hymns as their own, and today very few of the oldest Pangnirtung Inuit can sing traditional Inuit songs. They are more willing to play the accordion.

The accordion has replaced the fiddle as the most played "traditional" music there, although much of the music is based on fiddle tunes. Pangnirtung is a very musical community and dancing to jigs and reels is a major part of festive gatherings. The biggest of these as in whaling days is Christmas. Every night during the Christmas week the school gymnasium is packed with dancers and musicians not only from Pangnirtung, but also from other communities such as Iqaluit-Frobisher Bay and Broughton Island. The accordionists are often accompanied by bass guitar, acoustic guitar and drums. The same music is frequently heard in homes when musicians get together to play. During the summer months when most families leave the settlement for scattered hunting camps in Cumberland Sound,

they usually bring along accordions, guitars or mouth organs.

Although there are fiddle players in some other Inuit communities, the fiddle has not been played much in Pangnirtung for many years. The people there nevertheless take great delight in listening to it as I found out when I lived with a local family for several months. I had brought my violin along and when I began to learn Inuktitut music I was welcomed as a visitor into many homes. The Inuktitut versions of certain pieces were quite different from versions that I knew because of variations of rhythm and accent as in Example 1. One of the most popular dance pieces in Pangnirtung is given in Example 2. It was identified recently for me by a non-Inuit musician as the Scottish tune, *Ceilidh*.

Many of the dance tunes and especially those played by the older people were learned from the whalers. Kudlu Pitsiulak, who grew up at the Uumanaquaq (Blacklead Island) whaling station and who is now in her eighties, still plays on the accordion the pieces she learned when she was a girl. A younger Pangnirtung musician is Simeonie Keenainak, in his thirties, whose mastery of the accordion coupled with an almost superhuman endurance by which he gradually exhausts first dancers and then fellow musicians, have made him famous in the Canadian Arctic.

In recent years the arrival of radio and television in Canadian Inuit communities has meant they are more in touch with each other and with the world at large than ever

Example 1:



Example 2: *Ceilidh*



before. Inuit are visiting the south more than in the past as well. This has allowed an expansion of the scope of Inuit music and there are a number of well known Inuit folksingers, song writers, and rock musicians. Also the jigs and reels played now include those learned from sources other than the whalers. Despite this interest in other kinds of music there is a good indication that younger people value the traditional music enough to continue learning and develop-

ing it. The band which normally plays for the community dances is made up of musicians under thirty with the exception of Simeonie. Recently some young people have taken a keen interest in the violin, and it is possible that Pangnirtung may in the future produce a fiddler equal to the ones who played for the whaling station dances, which the old people remember with such fondness.

