

REINVENTING ‘SPRINGS’¹

Constructing Identity in the Fiddle Tradition of the Shetland Isles²

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*Hurra fur da Fiddler
Lang may he live
Tae dra da bow
Never may he die!*

(‘A Toast to the Fiddler’ - Shetland, anonymous)

Abstract

The relative isolation of the Shetland archipelago until the beginning of the 20th Century promoted the development of a fiddle tradition distinct from either that of neighbouring Scandinavia or mainland Scotland. Contemporary Shetland fiddling reveals changing perceptions of space, in relation to generational differences and the dichotomy of traditional/contemporary, and constructions of place, in terms of individual interpretations of islandness and individuals’ ties to their environment. This paper focuses on recent and current fiddling in the Shetland Isles in the context of identity construction and representation. I consider changes to Shetland fiddling since the development of the contemporary tradition in the 1970s, and explore how Shetland fiddlers construct their identities as Shetlanders through their individual interpretations of the tradition. Moreover, I examine how they choose to represent Shetland fiddling in the contemporary global market.

Keywords

Shetland Isles; fiddle; contemporary tradition; identity construction; representation

Introduction

When they think of the Shetland Islands, most people think of Shetland ponies, fishing, bird-watching, the discovery of oil in the North Sea and, of course, pubs resounding with the sound of fiddles. Accounts of the Islands’ eccentric traditions, frequent thundering gales “thrashing across the raw landscape” (Wilson, 2004: 387) and descriptions of the Islands as a “play thing for the raging northern Atlantic Ocean” (ibid: 369) often spring from travellers’ tales. In contrast, Shetlanders and those visitors who spend significant time on the Islands speak of the beauty of the rugged shorelines, the hospitality of the Shetland community and a *joie de vivre* that is reflected in their music.

The Shetland Isles are both isolated and at a crossroads (Swing, 1991: 23). They lie in the centre of the North Sea, approximately 165 kilometres (100 miles) northeast of mainland Scotland and 300 kilometres (186 miles) west of the Norwegian coastline (see figure 1).³ The relative isolation of the archipelago until the beginning of the 20th Century promoted the development of a fiddle tradition distinct from either that of neighbouring Scandinavia or mainland Scotland.⁴ However, the Islands were not as isolated as they are often made out to be. Surrounded by rich fishing grounds, the Shetland Isles were a port of call, a place of refuge, and often a source of seamen for sailing and

fishing expeditions for many European nations throughout the centuries (Smith, 1984; Cooke, 1986; Swing, 1991). As Swing explains, the practice of ‘press-ganging’ by the Merchant Navy, Arctic and Antarctic whalers, and both the First and Second World Wars took Shetland men off island and in contact with other cultures (1991: 24). As a result of this traffic of people to and from Shetland throughout the centuries, the contemporary culture of the Islands, and particularly the musical tradition, is a blend of historical Shetland characteristics and outside influences.

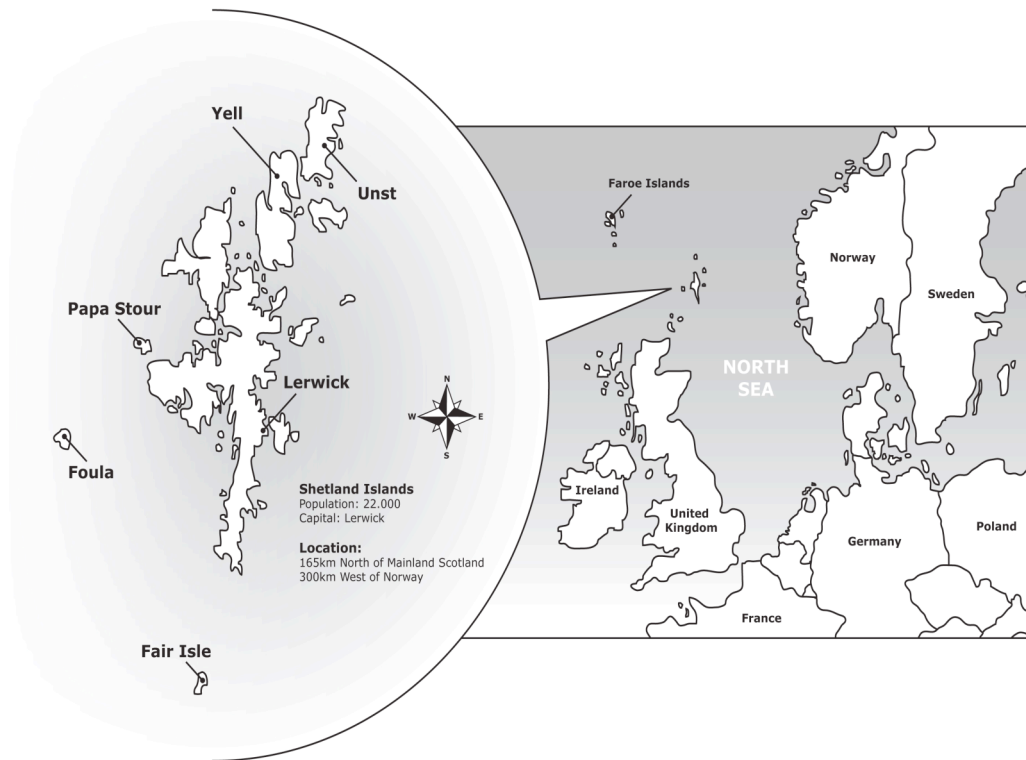


Figure 1: Map of Shetland Islands and locale (Wilco van Eikeren)

The Shetland fiddle tradition, as it exists today, is relatively young compared to other fiddle cultures in the world. Elsewhere, I have proposed that the contemporary tradition that emerged after WWII resulted from a synthesis of smaller contributions by the four “grandfathers” of Shetland music: Tom Anderson, Ronnie Cooper, Willie Hunter Junior and ‘Peerie’ Willie Johnson (Forsyth, 2005).⁵ These four musicians were musically and socially influenced by increased access to “off island” cultures during the Second World War and by media developments in the middle of the 20th Century, particularly radio broadcasts from Scotland and recordings from Ireland and America. In the light of these influences, the contributions these musicians brought to Shetland music included the collection of traditional tunes, an extant school fiddle program, a contemporary style of fiddling influenced by the fiddling styles of mainland Scotland, new ideologies of tune composition and, finally, the development of a new style of guitar accompaniment for traditional Shetland fiddling influenced by the jazz-style guitarists of the early 20th Century. The combination of these musical ideologies forms the distinctive core of the contemporary tradition. This emergent tradition has subsequently been preserved and reinterpreted by successive generations of fiddlers, revealing changing perceptions of musical and cultural identity.⁶

This paper focuses on recent and current fiddling in Shetland in the context of identity construction and representation. As Goertzen points out, too often contemporary traditions are “treat(ed) as a window on what is considered to be a richer past”, and much of what is currently happening within a musical community is ignored (1997: xiii). In this paper, I consider changes to Shetland fiddling since the development of the contemporary tradition in the 1970s and explore how Shetland fiddlers construct their identities as Shetlanders through their individual interpretations of the Shetland

tradition. Moreover, I examine how they choose to represent Shetland fiddling in the contemporary global market.

Music and Identity

Musical styles and traditions play an important role in the construction and expression of cultural identity. McCarthy notes the dual function of music in shaping both musical and cultural identities; that is, music transmits not only shared understandings of rhythms and tones but also a set of values and beliefs that are “inextricably linked to political, social, cultural or economic power structures and ideologies in the culture” (1999: 3). Frith elaborates on this comment, describing the importance of music to identity: “music, an aesthetic practice, articulates *in itself* an understanding of both group relations and individuality, on the basis of which ethical codes and social ideologies are understood (1996: 111).

In Shetland, musical identities are constructed through the incorporation of particular, collectively agreed upon practices from the old, 19th Century tradition, into their contemporary performance styles and compositions. Moreover, references to the idiosyncratic styles of particular old Shetland fiddlers, homesteads, and regions of Shetland surface frequently in stories and discussions of the influences behind a tune’s composition or performance style, emphasising the important role of music in representing Shetland identities.

As anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1934) explains, cultural identity is constructed through, not outside of, perceived difference in relation to the other. Hall furthers this discussion, emphasising that cultural identity is constructed on the basis of a shared understanding of a common origin and shared characteristics (1996: 4). The cultural identity of Shetlanders is expressed through their “opposition and relativities” (Stokes, 1994: 6) to the cultures of neighbouring Scotland and Scandinavia. On the one hand, Shetlanders display an open disregard for particular customs, such as the kilt wearing and bagpipes of mainland Scotland; on the other hand, there is a collective recognition among Shetlanders of the history and particular customs they share with their neighbours.

Shetlanders maintain a sense of identity that is unique to Shetland; having said that, most are quick to point out that they associate more closely with their Scandinavian heritage than with their ties to Scotland. This connection to Scandinavian culture is a source of pride to many modern-day Shetlanders who often cite it as one example of what differentiates them from the rest of Scotland. For example, Shetlanders speak with a distinctive accent and use many expressions that derive from old Norse, including many place and fiddle tune names. The Scandinavian heritage of the Islands is also expressed by a symbolic attachment to the Icelandic/Old Norse calendar and the many island festivals, such as Up Helly A⁷ in which music has a primary function. Shetlanders’ affiliation to their Scandinavian roots is expressed in their music through the use of particular musical elements characteristic of the Hardanger fiddle style from Norway, such as ‘ringing strings’⁸ (such as drones and chords), *scordatura* tunings⁹, syncopated rhythms¹⁰, strong accents, left hand ornamentation, cross bowings (bowing that cross the bar lines) and key changes within tunes (Cooke, 1986; Goertzen, 1997; Forsyth, 2005).

A duet between traditions

In response to increased access to musics from around the world, many younger generation fiddlers have developed innovative approaches to Shetland fiddling, revealing new ways of constructing and expressing their identities as Shetlanders. These approaches have taken several forms: from the performance of traditional Shetland repertoire in a contemporary style influenced by the lyrical, classical fiddlers of mainland Scotland to the composition of tunes in the traditional style, merging elements from other fiddle cultures, particularly Scandinavian, Irish, and American styles. These approaches extend also to non-Shetland repertoire performed in a distinctly Shetland style and,

finally, the composition of non-Shetland style tunes, such as jazz, infused with elements of traditional Shetland elements and techniques.

Entwined in these diverse interpretations and expressions of the Shetland tradition are particular elements of the traditional Shetland style, such as slurred bowings that cross the bar lines, ‘shivers’¹¹, and the ‘ringing strings’ in the style of traditional Scandinavian fiddling, that have been preserved, retaining in contemporary compositions and performances the driving quality and rhythmic accents characteristic of Shetland fiddling. These combinations of new and old, in some cases older tunes performed in a contemporary style and in other cases new tunes performed in a traditional style, form the basis for what is recognised in contemporary Shetland as the ‘Shetland style’.

While many of the old, traditional tunes have been forgotten and replaced by more contemporary compositions, recordings of many traditional Shetland tunes made by the late Shetland fiddle teacher Tom Anderson (1910 – 1991) can now be found in the Shetland archives.¹² An extensive collection of tunes can also be found on the commercial ethnographic recording of traditional music made by ethnomusicologist Peter Cooke in the late 1970s-80s. Shetland fiddler Catriona MacDonald has incorporated a number of these archived tunes into her own repertoire by listening to archived recordings of old Shetland players, learning the old tunes, and subsequently modifying them to fit her own style by adding accompaniment and jazz-influenced harmonies.

This practice of reviving traditional tunes that have been forgotten for decades has become one of her trademarks. On her debut CD, *Bold* (2000), MacDonald is recorded over the top of archival recordings of old Shetland fiddlers, such as renowned performers Gibbie Gray and Gibbie Hutchinson. While maintaining the rhythmic articulations and other stylistic features of the old players, MacDonald performs them in what reviewers describe as a modern style with her signature “expressive depth, rhythmic fluency, and silky-sweet tone” (Wilson, 2000: online). By recreating these traditional tunes in her own style, MacDonald has found an innovative way of expressing her Shetland heritage and bringing the traditional tunes back into the contemporary Shetland repertoire, making them more accessible for subsequent generations to enjoy and learn.

Throughout the documented history of Shetland music, Islanders and travellers described the eagerness of Shetlanders to learn and experiment with other music styles, and many North American and Irish tunes have been adopted into the popular repertoire. The ability to pick up new tunes and imitate different musical styles, such as an Irish or American style, has been increased by formal learning. Fiddler Debbie Scott recalls spending weeks as a young student trying to imitate the technique of a particular fiddle style until she had figured it out, and then moved on to another (p.c. February 2005). Elements of different musical styles are evident in her playing, such as the frequent use of left-hand, or fingered, ornamentation (such as grace notes, mordents and turns) prominent in Irish fiddling.

Although many fiddlers enjoy the challenge of learning new tunes and imitating the styles of other musical traditions, foreign tunes are most often adapted to suit Shetlanders’ musical tastes and fiddle styles (see Cooke, 1981). One musician explained this process of *Shetlandising* (as Shetlanders see it) as “flattening out” (Jim Leask, p.c. April 2005) the tunes by simplifying rhythms, taking out notes, and adding drones and the characteristic slurred Shetland bowing to accentuate and ‘drive’ the rhythm. The degree to which a tune changes varies considerably based on the individual tastes of performers. This practice of *Shetlandising* foreign tunes has led to a wide variety of tunes that have entered the Shetland fiddle repertoire. While they have been appropriated from various fiddle traditions around the world, many have become standard session tunes and are often modified to such an extent that they are unrecognisable from the tune in its original form.¹³

Reinventing ‘Springs’ in contemporary Shetland

New tunes composed by Shetlanders are frequently written in the style of an older fiddler or as reflections on socio-cultural circumstances or events, such as political situations or weddings, or

areas of Shetland that hold personal meaning to the composer or community. Debbie Scott, originally from the eastern island of Papa Stour, is the only living fiddler who has maintained the distinctive Papa Stour fiddle style. Also a prolific composer, her performance and compositions reflect her early interests in Norwegian and North American fiddle styles. She incorporates many non-Shetland elements into her compositions, all the while retaining a distinctive Shetland sound that has been described by other fiddlers as “gravitating back to the traditional Shetland style” (p.c. February 2005) through her use of timbre, syncopated rhythms, and bowed ornamentation, giving it the characteristic ‘Shetland lilt’. Scott also describes her own fiddle style as a “mixing of the distinctive old traditional style of Shetland with the contemporary styles from outside Shetland” (ibid) and expresses her desire to illustrate through her music her conception of the Shetland tradition, her sense of place as a Shetlander, and creative expression as an artist.

Scott’s tune, *The Chief* (Figure 2), written for the late Malcolm Greene, who was Chief Executive of the Shetland Islands Council and a fellow fiddler, demonstrates the incorporation of musical elements from non-Shetland styles into her compositions. As Scott explains, the tune’s low register, minor third double stops, and triplet rhythms create a distinctly Scandinavian flavour, while the slides up to particular notes (measures 2 and 6), other ornamentation, and the relaxed, swung rhythm of the dotted eighth notes are characteristic of the fiddle style of North American fiddlers Graham Townsend and Rodney Miller. Moreover, the recurring ‘shivers’ (measures 4, 10, and 14), characteristic bowed accents and quick, lilting reel speed (220 – 230 beats per minute) are hallmarks of the older (traditional) Shetland style.



Figure 2: ‘The Chief’ - Reel by Debbie Scott, transcribed by M. Forsyth.
As played by Debbie Scott (Quarter note = 220 – 230 bpm) sh = “shiver”

In a similar vein, Steven Spence, from Shetland’s northern-most Island, Unst, is an active preserver of traditional Shetland music, carrying on the Unst fiddle tradition in both his performance of old Unst tunes and his preservation of the distinct Unst fiddle style.¹⁴ As he explains, (music is) “in the blood” (p.c February 2005), and he continues a long family tradition of fiddling. Moreover, Spence is a prolific composer, whose compositions reflect both the Unst tradition in style and technique and the contemporary influences from mainland Scotland, particularly in the structure and keys of tunes. Many of his tunes reflect the influences of older fiddlers and stylistic particularities of the Unst tradition;¹⁵ for example, his tune *Gibbie Gray* was composed in the style of the late Unst fiddler, Gibbie Gray, one of Shetland’s most prominent fiddlers who was famous for playing in the old Shetland style, but in his own unique, very rhythmic way. As Spence explains, he tried to recreate Gray’s style:

Gibbie was just playing an old style he had himself. It was all Shetland. The lilt was in there too, ye ken. Three up one down bowing style. He used to play tunes in minor keys a lot. Like the tune ‘Gibbie Gray’ is in A minor. So, I mean that sort of thing, that’s the just the sort of thing I could remember Gibbie playing. (p.c. April 2005)

Gray was very influential in the development of Spence’s own style:

I remember when I was a boy, Gibbie and his wife Minnie coming over to my parents for a musical evening, and I was fortunate enough that Gibbie recorded some of his playing that night specially for me. (ibid)

Written in the key of A minor, one of Gray’s favourite keys, the tune incorporates Gray’s characteristic style of slurring pairs of semiquavers together, a technique he tended to emphasise more than other Unst fiddlers. In Figure 3, the bowing patterns as performed by Spence have been notated, as the slurred, separated, and ‘one down, three up’ pattern, which provide the tune’s characteristic articulation (‘lilt’), are distinguishing features of the tune.

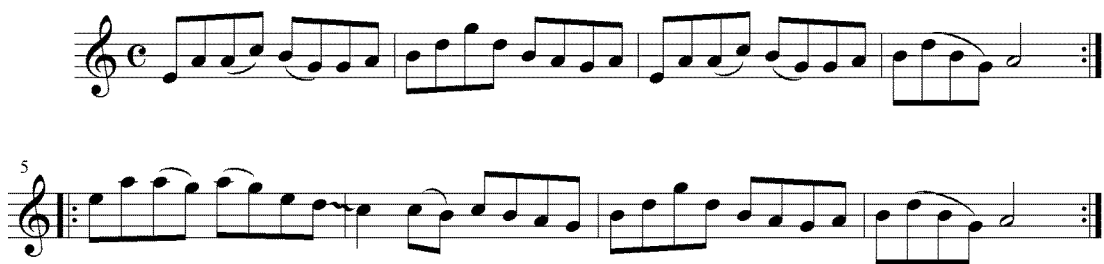


Figure 3 – ‘Gibbie Gray’. Reel. By Steven Spence, transcribed by M. Forsyth
As played by Steven Spence

The practice of composing and performing contemporary tunes in a traditional style is popular among contemporary fiddlers in Shetland. Through the process of immortalising in their compositions particular musical elements deemed reflective of Shetland’s history and older musical traditions, such as Scandinavian-influenced techniques and the styles of older Shetland fiddlers, contemporary Shetland fiddlers construct, express, and preserve their cultural identity as Shetlanders.

Making Waves

Digressions from the traditional Shetland style now occur more frequently than in previous generations. The performance and compositional styles of young fiddlers, in particular, often comprise fusions of different musical styles, instrumentation, and rock- or jazz-influenced rhythmic accompaniment. As more and more Shetlanders experiment with new musical ideas, particularly fusions of jazz or American fiddle styles and traditional Shetland music, some musicians and music critics have questioned the authenticity of new styles and the future directions of Shetland music. Consequently, many young fiddlers are faced with a conflict between, on the one hand, being pushed towards reproducing ‘authentic’ Shetland music by those who see cultural elements frozen in time and, on the other hand, creating music in new forms.

While many artists identify as Shetland fiddlers, and are perceived by other Shetlanders to maintain the tradition developed in the 1970s, they have nevertheless been strongly influenced by external (non-Shetland) musical genres, artists, and performance practices. In the light of these influences, and in response to increased demand by the commercial industry for individuality as professional musicians, these artists have developed new ways of expressing Shetland identity in their compositions and performances.

Delimiting the genre is particularly problematic in terms of marketing Shetland music. While many young Shetlanders are interested in experimenting with new styles and fusions, there is much pressure from traditionalists to maintain ‘pure’ forms of Shetland’s traditional music. The tourist industry also contributes to this pressure by insisting that musicians conform to traditional codes; tourists to the Islands wish to see and hear traditional music making. As one Shetlander expressed, the difficulty in marketing contemporary Shetland fiddle music is that, while retaining some aspects of the older style (of the 19th Century tradition) and therefore to some extent the distinctive character of traditional Shetland music, young commercial artists do not want to be labelled as ‘traditional fiddlers’ but as world musicians or fusion artists.

Chris Stout has taken Shetland fiddle music in new directions through his innovative compositions and musical ideas. Originally from Fair Isle, a small island off the coast of mainland Shetland, Stout is now pursuing a professional career as a fiddler and fusion artist in mainland Scotland. Jazz and various world musics have been an important source of inspiration for Stout’s own compositions, which feature fusions of traditional Shetland fiddling, melodic improvisation, synthesised timbres, and jazz harmonies. This jazz and improvisational influence rests at the forefront of his compositional style, in which he combines jazz forms with Shetland techniques, such as the characteristic bowed articulations (‘shivers’ and slurring over the bar line) and fiddle riffs. Many of Stout’s compositions are founded on jazz structures and infused with traditional Shetland elements; however, he reveals the challenge of working the other way around – that is, preserving the overall idea of a traditional tune while adding other (non-traditional) musical elements to it, such as jazz chromaticism:

Most fiddle tunes are modal or diatonic. There is only so much chromaticism that can be added before the character of the melody is lost. The danger is when the chords become more important than the melody: there is only so far a traditional tune can bend before it just sounds awful! (p.c. April 2005)

As Stout explains, his approach to making music allows him the freedom to experiment with different styles and timbres “If I want to fuse styles together I’m not offending anyone by doing it to a traditional tune that has a hundred years of history attached to it.” (ibid)

His tune *Double Helix*, appropriately inspired by and named after a collaboration between folk and jazz musicians with whom he toured in 2002, exemplifies both his strong jazz and Shetland influences. As he explains, the syncopated rhythms and low register maintain the Scandinavian-influenced Shetland character; thus, for him, this reference to the Shetland style expresses and reinforces his identity as a Shetland musician. At the same time, the semi-improvised, circular melody, and accompanying jazz-influenced instrumentation and harmonic structures illustrate his musical vision as a contemporary fusion artist.



Figure 4 – ‘Double Helix’, mm. 1 – 4. By Chris Stout, transcribed by M. Forsyth
As played on the CD: *First o’ the Darkenin’* (2004)

Conclusions

As Hall (1996) notes, cultural identity is continuously constructed in the context of a range of influences, including geography and globalisation. Prior to the 20th Century, cultural identity in the Shetland Islands was influenced by the Islands’ relative isolation from and contact with neighbouring

countries. A distinctive identity as Shetlanders existed and was expressed both intentionally and unintentionally in musical forms. This identity as Shetlanders still exists, as Shetlanders maintain a strong sense of identity unique to the Islands, in stark contrast to their (mainland) Scottish and Scandinavian neighbours.

This collective sense of Shetland identity is expressed musically. Shetlanders see themselves expressing a musical form representative of their particular ethno-cultural group, regardless of whether it deviates somewhat from what are perceived as ‘pure’ or traditional musical representations. The exposure of Shetland musicians to other musical forms, such as jazz, is complicated by tensions arising from the music industry’s need to market traditional Shetland music, pressure from traditionalists for fiddlers to conform to and maintain ‘authentic’ forms of music, and many young musicians’ own desires for creative freedom. These influences continue to shape the contemporary music scene in Shetland.

The contemporary fiddle tradition of the Shetland Islands is vibrant and continues to gain momentum as younger generations of fiddlers discover new ways to express their conceptions of the Shetland tradition. Music on the islands functions as an important medium for the expression of individual and cultural identities of Shetlanders. In this article I have explored how some contemporary fiddlers construct and express their identities as Shetlanders through their unique interpretations of the tradition and fusions of the Shetland fiddle tradition with other musical genres. These new and varied approaches to Shetland fiddling express the diversity of musical interests in Shetland. By incorporating features of the traditional Shetland style in individual fusions of traditional and contemporary (and/or foreign) styles, Shetland musicians construct their identity as Shetlanders. Moreover, while they accordingly retain a sense of uniqueness, these musicians evince a strong intent to engage in the community of fiddlers that exists globally and continue to experiment with reinventing Shetland ‘springs’.

Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Shetland’s beloved guitarist ‘Peerie’ Willie Johnson (December 10, 1920 – May 22, 2007) who passed away while I was writing this paper. My warmest thanks to the Shetland community for their assistance in this project, and to my Shetland friends for welcoming into their homes and with whom I shared many stories, many laughs, and many good tunes! Thanks to Dr. Ruth Davis for her suggestions on my thesis, and to Dr. Robin Elliott, the *Shima* editors, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Finally, thanks to my family for their unflinching encouragement and support over the years.

Endnotes:

1 The term ‘springs’ was first explained to me as an old Shetland word that means, “a tune played in a traditional style”. It is most commonly used on Whalsay, one of Shetland’s northern islands.

2 This paper draws on the data, including interviews and music, obtained during my fieldwork in the Shetland Isles and mainland Scotland, in 2005. This paper developed out of my M. Phil dissertation (Cambridge, 2005).

3 According to the 2001 Census, the population of the Shetland Isles was 21,988.
<http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/census/>

4 Politically, however, the Islands have been part of Scotland since 1469.

5 ‘Peerie’ is a word in the Shetland dialect that means ‘little’.

6 My interpretation outlined briefly here differs from that proposed by Pamela Swing in her earlier study of Shetland’s school fiddle program (1991), in which she focuses mainly on the contribution of Tom Anderson and his role in the emergence of the contemporary tradition; however, we are of the same mind that “inventions should not be seen as static entities but as a fluid process of continual reinterpretation” (Swing, 1991: 276).

7 Up Helly Aa is an annual fire festival marking the end of the Yule season.

8 ‘Ringing strings’ are double stops, performed by striking the open string below the string being fingered. This technique was absorbed from the Hardanger fiddle style of Norway.

9 *Scordatura* tuning is when the strings are tuned to different pitches, for example EADG to EAEA.

10 In music, syncopation is when the accents are placed on beats that are normally unaccented.

11 A ‘shiver’ is a form of accent, played as a quick triplet on a single note. It is most often found in reels and performed by stiffening the muscles of the bow arm.

12 The Shetland Archives are located in the capital, Lerwick.

13 A ‘session’ is an informal musical gathering.

14 Until the inter-island ferries were set up in the 1970s, Unst was the most isolated of the larger islands (with the possible exception of Foula and Fair Isle), a position that promoted a distinctive regional style that still remains, although it is not as prominent as it once was.

15 This practice of writing tunes in the style of well-known (usually older) fiddlers or in the particular regional style of an area of Shetland can be seen in the compositions of many other contemporary Shetland fiddlers.

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