

‘If you want to win, you’ve got to play it like a man’: music,  
gender, and value in Ontario fiddle contests

*Sherry Johnson*

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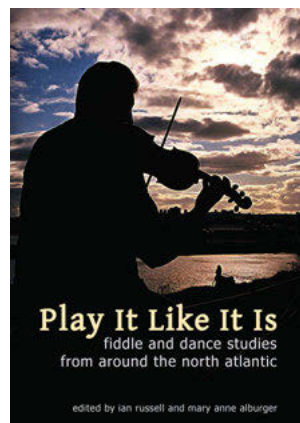
**Play It Like It Is**

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic

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## 'If you want to win, you've got to play it like a man': music, gender, and value in Ontario fiddle contests<sup>1</sup>

SHERRY JOHNSON

'Nice to see you girls fiddling,' an elderly man comments as I warm up in the practice room, before going on stage. 'Girls?' I wonder. I look around. There is no one else in the room except us. 'He must mean girls in general,' I think. 'Is that worth mentioning? It must be, at least to him.' Thus began my exploration of gender and fiddling.

### **Ottawa Valley fiddling and step dancing**

The predominant fiddle style in Ontario is a combination of Irish, French, and Scottish styles brought to Canada by the first British and French immigrants. These styles came into contact in the lumber camps along the Ottawa River from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, emerging as a distinct style, sometimes called the Ottawa Valley style, or more commonly the 'Canadian old-time' style. The accompanying dance form, similarly a result of cultural contact between dancers in the logging camps of the Ottawa Valley, is called Ottawa Valley step dancing. Probably the most important contemporary contexts for fiddling and step dancing in Ontario are fiddle competitions, held each weekend between May and September throughout the province. Most competitions are a combination of both fiddling and step dancing, and many competitors compete in both art forms. I have been participating in this 'circuit' of competitions with my family, as a fiddler, step dancer, step dance teacher, and judge, for almost twenty years.

### **Methodology**

This paper is based on interviews with women fiddlers from Ontario, with an age range from eleven to mid-forties, who have in the past, or still do, participate in the Ontario contest circuit each summer (see Appendix). Their fiddle-playing experience ranges from two years to forty-two years. Besides playing competitively, some play full-time or part-time in bands, teach privately, and judge at fiddle contests. I include myself as a participant in this study because of my seventeen years of experience in the circuit, first as a step dancer, and also later as a fiddler. I have known many of

the participants in this research since I entered the circuit: I have competed against them, jammed with them, played piano accompaniments for them, and even took fiddle lessons from one of them.

Two issues seemed particularly resonant with several participants, and with me: the separation of men's and women's performance spheres, and the gendered discourse of fiddle style. As I considered how the women had spoken about each of these issues, I began to see that both are largely concerned with value and prestige. In her introduction to *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Ellen Koskoff states that: 'In all known societies, men's actions receive higher value and prestige than those of women'.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I demonstrate how, first, the circumstances under which women (are allowed to) win at competitions, and second, the way we talk about winning fiddle styles, give more value to men's fiddling than to women's fiddling, and ultimately reinforce gender asymmetries within the fiddle circuit.

### **Gendered performance spheres**

Until the mid-1980s, it was common for Ontario fiddle contests to have a class for women only called the 'Ladies Class', which was separate from the age-specific categories and the Open Class. Kendra Norris explained how she thought the Ladies Class originated:<sup>3</sup>

Way back when women didn't play the fiddle, the men played the fiddle. The women were allowed to play the piano for them, to accompany them, but the fiddle player was always a man. Eventually things started to change, but, of course, compared to some people who had been playing fiddle for a long time, and had passed on that tradition to the males, the women didn't stand a hope in heck of competing. And so there was the Ladies Open, which was open to any ladies, and then there was the Championship Class, the Open Class, and that was for the men.<sup>4</sup>

Karen Reed, who often competed in the Ladies Class in the 1970s, observed:

Obviously the Ladies Class was there as a very special thing. Women weren't good enough to be in the Open. That's the way people thought back then. So the Ladies Open was the equivalent of the Men's Open, but not. They didn't call it the Men's Open, they just called it the Open. But women tended to stick with the Ladies thing because that's just the way it went.

While the positive effect of a Ladies Class may have been to encourage more women to compete in an environment where they had a better chance of winning (Kathy O'Neill pointed out that there were never many competitors in the Ladies Class), the use of such category titles clearly marginalized women fiddlers. The more inclusive class, the Championship or Open Class, was really only intended to be 'open' for men. Men were of 'championship' calibre, and women were encouraged to compete in a class better suited to their abilities. The Ladies Class can also be understood to

have provided women with a socially acceptable position from which to perform in the midst of a male-dominated environment.

Kathy O'Neill, who was most active in the circuit in the 1970s and early 1980s, emphasized that the Ladies Class was much less prestigious than the Open – reflected, on one level, in the much lower prize money for the class. When I asked her if she had ever felt any resentment at the lower prize money, she replied:

Nothing ever was discussed that way. It was just another class. It wasn't something that was even taken that serious really, at the very beginning. Because I can remember one year I competed, in the late 70s, in Pembroke, Ontario, and I made the top ten [in the Open], and I was given \$100 for placing like, I don't know whether I was 8th, 9th, or 10th. But I still made as good money as if I had won the Ladies Class. . . That time I made the top ten with all the guys in Pembroke was way better than ever winning a Ladies Class. . . The perception at that time was that it was a step up to go from the Ladies Class to the Open Class.

Although Kendra Norris, who also won her share of Ladies Classes, said that she never felt her achievements were less significant in the Ladies Class, she, too, sees the Open Class as a higher level of competition:

When I was in the Open Class, I mean, when I was in my prime, I didn't worry about playing Ladies Class. I just went for the gusto. And then after I was married, once I was teaching school full-time, working, having babies, I didn't have the time to practise. It was time to step down. I was able to still be a competitive player, but I was in a category where it was okay that I would practise once or twice a week, instead of once or twice a day, everyday.

She described the disappearance of most Ladies Classes by the mid-1980s:

The number of ladies was not horribly significant, and, of course, by that time, [many of us] were playing Open Class anyways. So there wasn't the need for the Ladies Class, the same. So they decided they might as well take that prize money, and instead of having it be segregated, obviously prejudicial, that they would make it into an Intermediate Class, for those people between nineteen and usually forty-five. Then there was a class for them to go in, if they really weren't Open Class calibre. So that's when you started to see the Ladies Class converted.

The most interesting reactions to the idea of a Ladies Class came from the younger women with whom I spoke. For the most part, they had never competed in a Ladies Class, and the youngest, eleven-year old Krista Rozein, did not even know they had existed. Twenty-year old April Verch introduced the topic of the Ladies Class into our interview, commenting: 'I was really surprised when I was thinking, you know, there used to be a Ladies Class. That just sucks. It's stupid.'

All nine women agreed that there is now no need for a Ladies Class, pointing out that, women play the fiddle just as well as men, and that they are, in fact, winning against the men. One might assume that with the disappearance of Ladies Classes in the mid- to late-1980s, women would be integrated into the other classes, winning and losing against the men on equal ground. Although the women with whom I spoke agreed that gender should not be an issue in winning at fiddle contests today, the reality, of course, is much more complicated and multi-layered.

### **Gender and winning**

First of all, gender does seem to be an issue at some of the big contests, particularly where there is a title involved, but only when the winner is a woman. The most obvious example is the discourse surrounding Eleanor Townsend, long known in the Canadian fiddle community and through the media as 'the only woman to win Shelburne', home of the Canadian fiddle championships. This fact was still emphasized twenty-one years after she won the title, in various newspaper and television reports of her death on 31 December 1998. Kendra Norris was at the Shelburne contest the year Eleanor won, and remembers the emphasis placed on Eleanor being the first woman to win the contest.

Michelle Charleton, who was placed second at Shelburne in 1988 and 1989, said that although she approached Shelburne as a personal achievement, rather than wanting to be the second Canadian woman champion, the media picked up on the story and produced a television special on the Shelburne contest, focusing particularly on her 'quest' to be the second woman champion: 'They were looking for an attraction to bring more people in to see if I was going to place first'. One effect, then, of making gender an issue when women win at fiddle contests is marking the event as noteworthy, out of the ordinary, or, in Karen Reed's words, 'almost as if it isn't possible'. It does not acknowledge that women are routinely being highly placed or winning in Open Classes, and have been since the 1970s. After Michelle was placed second again in 1989, the media attention seemed to die away, to the point where there was no 'official' mention of April Verch being the second woman to win the Canadian championship in 1998. This could be interpreted either as a lack of sensitivity to women's achievements in the fiddle circuit, or an indication that women's achievements no longer need to be pointed out as exceptional.

Karen Reed reflected on the achievements of Eleanor and April at Shelburne:

[Eleanor] won it once and it was this big thing that she was the first one, and nobody ever won it until this year, April Verch. And somebody in the audience yelled, 'It's about time,' and I was thinking, 'Okay, well [April] hasn't been competing that long, so does that mean it's about time another woman won?' Yet she deserved it. She played well, had nothing to do with gender. That night when I listened to that contest, it was like, 'Okay, if she doesn't win, something's wrong with this'. Just close your eyes, listen to them play, and it doesn't matter whether you're male or female, the best player's the one that should win, and gender should never take a place in judging.

Kathy O'Neill expressed similar sentiments: 'I think the sooner people get over this she/he business, and just judge the fiddle player for the fiddle player, then the better off we're going to be.' Of course, gender should not play a role in judging but, as many of these women pointed out, judging is a subjective activity. Since gender does affect the circuit in various ways and at various levels, there is really no way of knowing how gender affects judging in any particular circumstance. Perhaps even more important than the reality, though, is how participants perceive gender to affect judging. Certainly, the insistence by the women quoted above that gender should not play a role, leads me to believe that at some time they believe that it did.

I asked April Verch to reflect on her experiences at Shelburne:

I think it was particularly hard at Shelburne. Eleanor had only won it, and nobody was ready for another female. I played around there for a few years, second and third, and it didn't seem to matter. . . People were starting to say, 'What kind of chance do you have? They're not going to let another woman win it.' And then people would be like, 'Well I think it's time. Now you're going to win.' And that would make me feel bad too, because people were saying, 'Well, it's time for a woman to win, so that's why [you won] it, you're the only one in there.'

From my discussions with April, I sense that on a personal level she is confident in her own ability to compete against anyone in the Open Class on the basis of her fiddle playing; however, on the level of public discourse, her achievement is devalued by connecting it to gender. A second negative effect, then, of emphasizing gender when a woman wins, is the devaluing of her skill and ability as a fiddler, making it seem as if gender is a significant factor in the win. Even though women fiddlers are now competing with men in gender-neutral classes, the gender ideology of the circuit reinforces the power differential between men and women, less explicitly, and more subversively, than when the two were separated into different classes.

And yet, the effect of emphasis on gender is not wholly negative. Certainly young female fiddlers, Eleanor, April, Michelle, and the many other women who have done well in Open Class competition, have become role models of excellence and achievement in the fiddle circuit. Perhaps the difference, then, is who is making an issue of women winning in the Open Class, and for what purpose.

### **Gendered discourse of fiddle style**

The second issue that I examine in relation to music, gender, and value is that of a gendered discourse of fiddle style. Kendra Norris had opened our interview by saying:

I thought of something before you got here, and I wanted to be sure and say, I can remember as a kid my father saying to me, 'If you want to win, you've got to play it like a man.' And that bothered me to no end, because it seemed like you had to go up there and play it with so much power and strength. Now

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maybe that's confidence, but, to me, I internalized that as it had to be loud and it had to be strong.

Whereas Kendra associated 'playing it like a man' with power, strength, and confidence, both April and Michelle associated the phrase with aggression. April said, 'Lots of people say that I play more like a guy because guys are more aggressive, I guess', and Michelle remembered, 'There weren't as many female players, so if you were a female player, you had to really play, my dad would say, you had to play like a man, with a little aggression'. Karen Reed, who has often been told she plays like a man, reflected on the phrase in the context of April's playing at Shelburne in 1998:

I don't know if it's aggressive, or just the dynamics. It's a strong playing ability. April Verch has strength behind her playing. She sounds confident, and women aren't looked upon as real confident. You listen to her and you know she's in control of what she's doing. Is that a male thing? Are women just flighty and bubble-headed, and when they play they just kind of half play? I don't think so.

Karen introduces here a dichotomy between the perception of male playing as strong and confident versus female playing as 'flighty and bubble-headed'. April set up a slightly different opposition between 'aggressive' male playing and 'wimpy' female playing:

But I can't really think of a girl in my mind that plays wimpy either. Maybe we would be, but because we compete against [males], we conform ourselves to be like that, because we have to compete with them. Maybe we're trying to make up for something, and so that's why we all play like that. Maybe it's just expected that we shouldn't be as aggressive, and so people say, 'Well, you play like a guy'. But really that's just the way we play. That's the way fiddlers play. That's just a fiddle thing.

In both cases, the characteristics attributed to a masculine style – strength, power, confidence, and aggression – are considered also to be characteristics of good fiddling, and are obviously more highly valued than fiddling that is weak or unconfident.

Kendra Norris also set up a stereotypical opposition between masculine and feminine fiddle styles, but describes the feminine style in more positive terms, such as soft, gentle, and subtle:

I think [April] is still playing more like a man, than the men are playing with the sort of stereotypical gentleness of the woman. Some of them are. Some of those guys are allowing much more of those subtleties to enter into their playing, primarily in their waltzes, but also in their jigs and their reels. I think if you listen very carefully, there are maybe more dynamics than just solid 'bull in the china shop' charge from beginning to end, at the same volume level.

But I think, even yet, the women are still trying to play like men, as opposed to the men letting the softer, gentler side in. I don't know of anybody in the contests that plays that way.

Although she described both the masculine and feminine styles in positive terms, she also acknowledged that because it is the consistently winning style, the masculine style is more valued within the circuit. She was quick to point out, however, that these are just stereotypes, and that fiddle style really is, or should be, about personal expression.

Interestingly, while the women in Amy Skillman's study felt there was no difference between the playing style of men and women fiddlers, the men that Skillman interviewed did identify a difference. They indicated that women 'play more smoothly, have more personality in their music and get a prettier tone out of their fiddle'. One modified that description by saying that women 'play waltzes more beautifully but when they try a hoedown they just don't have the bow action'.<sup>5</sup> I have yet to discuss gendered fiddle styles with male fiddlers within the Ontario contest circuit.

While the 'play it like a man' phrase found least resonance with three of my four youngest participants, it has not disappeared from circuit discourse. Both Kendra Norris and Kathy O'Neill use the phrase in their fiddle teaching to encourage their students to develop strong, confident playing styles. Kendra said,

And I joke about that now, and I say that to my students, 'My father always told me...' Somehow they seem to understand what I mean when I say that, and I get the desired effect out of them. I don't know why, whether it's just that imagery of the man, the strength, the solid, confident kind of thing, or what. I don't know, but that seems to be what is the difference, in some cases, between an average player and a contest winner.

Kathy interprets the phrase differently, removing it in her mind, from its gender connotations:

'You have to play like a man.' I tell that to my girl students as well. And it's a terrible thing because I don't think they mean play like a man, a female, a male thing. That was a compliment, to play like a man. It was nothing negative. I never, ever took it as a sexist remark. I always took it as a compliment. It, to me, meant, 'You're playing strong, you're playing confident, and you're playing like a winner.'

Whether or not such masculine or feminine fiddle styles actually exist in practice, our use of these gendered binarisms perpetuates the perception that they do, ultimately maintaining gender asymmetries within the circuit by giving value to that which is associated with a masculine style.



## Conclusion

These preliminary observations about gender and value, from the point of view of women fiddlers only, must be understood within the context of the very traditional and conservative culture of the Ontario fiddle circuit. Gender ideology is internalized and rarely, if ever, acknowledged explicitly. At present I am exploring gender with a number of male fiddlers, a more delicate and challenging task, but one which is necessary to complement the perceptions of women fiddlers, as presented in my preliminary research.

## Appendix

### Tape-Recorded Interviews

Charleton, Michelle, interviewed by author, telephone interview, Pickering/Toronto, ON, 18 April 1999.

O'Neill, Kathy, interviewed by author, telephone interview, High River, AB/Toronto, ON, 18 April 1999.

Norris, Kendra, interviewed by author, Waterloo, ON, 10 February 1999.

Reed, Karen, interviewed by author, telephone interview, Kitchener/Toronto, ON, 14 April 1999.

Verch, April, interviewed by author, Newmarket, ON, 9 February 1999.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was published in *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music*, 27 (2000), 10-19.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Koskoff, *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press; New York and London: Greenwood, 1987), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations are transcribed from tape-recorded interviews – see Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> Skillman documents women fiddlers' attitudes toward the Ladies division in Missouri contests, and the eventual disappearance of this division from contests. Although I was not aware of Skillman's work until after my original article had been published, there are many similarities amongst the women fiddlers' experiences in Missouri and Ontario. See Amy E. Skillman, 'She Oughta Been a Lady': Women Old-Time Fiddlers in Missouri, *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*, 13-14 (1991-1992), 123-32.

<sup>5</sup> Skillman, p. 130.