

Tradition and creativity: the roots and routes of fiddler Aidan O'Rourke

Chris Stone

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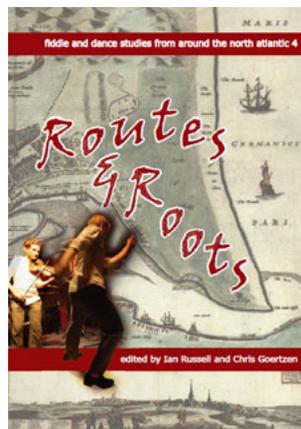
Routes and Roots

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 4

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Tradition and creativity: the roots and routes of fiddler Aidan O'Rourke

CHRIS STONE

Introduction

In searching for a topic that sat squarely between the theme of the North Atlantic Fiddle Convention conference, 'Roots and Routes', and my own musical and academic interests, I took the liberty of associating the phrase 'Roots and Routes' with 'Tradition and Creativity'. Bjorn Merker states the following elegant description of one type of musical creativity:

Command of craft and grounding in a musical tradition are no less essential to musical creativity than is originality, since for a creature of culture both adequate tools and command of tradition are prerequisites for creating substance.¹

While the word 'originality' and my use of the word 'creativity' are not precisely interchangeable, Merker goes on to describe the idea of tradition and creativity in terms of 'fidelity and novelty', implying that any creative work must come from a known area of departure (or tradition), which provides a reference for observers to measure 'novelty' or originality against. This description gives a clearer picture of my intended use of the word 'creativity' and the process it describes in this paper.

Balkin suggests that the word creativity is 'overused, misused, confused, abused, and generally misunderstood'.² However, within the constraints of Scottish fiddle music, focusing on the process and product of musical 'novelty' or 'originality' and the associated role of 'tradition', I felt that the word 'creativity' was suitably precise. The first Scottish fiddler that came to mind while mulling over these ideas was Aidan O'Rourke, and specifically his work with the band Lau. Here I felt was a clear example of tradition and creativity: a fiddler who has been immersed in the Scottish fiddle tradition and presents that tradition in ways that can be comfortably defined as creative.

It is generally understood that creativity cannot be measured objectively. Creativity is socio-culturally dependant: we have to understand the data that a creative person works from, in order to see the creative use of, or change in, that data. For example, if we had no background understanding or knowledge of traditional Scottish fiddle music to use as a reference, we would come to a very different conclusion about O'Rourke's creativity than the one I hope to articulate. We would have no knowledge of what is accepted as traditional musical forms or parameters in this particular domain. By firstly ascertaining O'Rourke's background training and grounding in the Scottish fiddle tradition, we will have a benchmark against which to view the creativity found in his work with Lau.

Balkin states that 'ultimately, society, right or wrong, rewards or rejects the creative person only for the products that emerge from the creative process'.³ In this case, the recorded works of Lau are the most tangible part of the creative process, and will therefore be the primary reference point of this paper. I have chosen to focus exclusively on the instrumental tracks of Lau's album *Arc Light*.⁴ A detailed discussion of what is and what is not traditional Scottish fiddle music is beyond the scope of this paper. However, assuming that most readers have a general knowledge of the Scottish fiddling tradition, the following brief outline of O'Rourke's musical roots should suffice.

Roots

O'Rourke was born in Glasgow, and within a year moved with his family to Oban before finally settling off the Argyll Coast on the island of Seil.⁵ He began fiddle lessons at the age of eight with local fiddlers George McHardy and Maurice Duncan. While predominantly West Coast fiddlers based in the Gaelic tradition of song and pipes, these teachers also introduced O'Rourke to the more classically orientated North-East fiddle styles. This traditional background was augmented by a few years of classical violin lessons as a teenager. While studying in Glasgow for an engineering degree, O'Rourke continued to play traditional music during the holidays with fiddler/flautist Claire Mann. After graduation, he moved to Edinburgh for a gap year of music, ostensibly before beginning his career as an engineer. However, his demand as a musician was great enough to provide him with the alternative of becoming a professional musician. Although he never formally trained in music theory or composition, O'Rourke read extensively on the subject and began composing new works in his early twenties. A feature of his compositional work was a focus on cross-genre amalgamation, bringing his Scottish fiddle roots to new musical structures paired with jazz-based improvising musicians. O'Rourke comments that:

As a composer, I've basically learned through trial and error: I was never taught music theory, but I've done a lot of reading about it, and when I'm working with all these different musicians I always ask lots of questions. I've learned to think much more three-dimensionally when I'm writing something now; I

have a clearer sense of what I want to get across, what the sonic capabilities of the line-up are, so it's all a bit more systematic, rather than just hitting and hoping.⁶

O'Rourke was soon winning a number of high-profile commissions. These included *Encore*, 2002, for a youth ensemble, *Sirius*, 2003, for a 12-piece folk/jazz ensemble, *Mantra Alba*, 2004, *An Tobar*, 2007, *Forward!* and *92.4°*, 2009, *Coriolis*, 2009, for the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, and *Bridge*, 2009. During this time, O'Rourke published two solo albums titled *Sirius* (2006) and *An Tobar* (2008), and appeared on more than eighty recordings as a guest artist.

O'Rourke was also a founding member of the band Blazin Fiddles in 1998,⁷ helping to bring Highland and Island Scottish fiddle styles to a wide audience throughout Europe and North America. In 2004, the members of Lau, Kris Drever on guitar, Martin Green on accordion, and Aidan O'Rourke laid the band's early foundations with weekly rehearsals at O'Rourke's flat in Edinburgh. O'Rourke points out that:

The three of us each have a very individual approach, but very similar tastes; we're all into improvising and we like pushing things to extremes. But we did work really hard at it [Lau] before we started gigging – with so many new bands around these days, we knew it had to be something special.⁸

They performed their first concert at the Leith Folk Club in Edinburgh a year later. Since then, they have become one of the United Kingdom's most highly lauded folk groups, also commanding the respect and praise from audiences and critics outwith the folk music scene. While delving into many musical styles, the Scottish fiddle tradition is a pivotal focus of much of their instrumental music. However, O'Rourke also states that 'I've always strived for and thrived on new challenges [...] I don't want to give myself any boundaries, and I want to keep learning new things'.⁹

Routes

One could suggest that, broadly speaking, creativity in Scottish fiddle music has been primarily confined to the role of the accompanist. Traditionally, the fiddler would perform solo or accompanied by a simple bass line provided by a cello, most famously by fiddler Niel Gow and his brother Donald on cello. The creative application of jazz chords and rhythms and instrumentation to the accompaniment is just one example of how some musicians have brought a more modern feel to Scottish fiddle music. For example, Hazel Wrigley from the Orkney Islands uses swing guitar chords and rhythms from America to accompany her sister Jennifer on the fiddle. Contemporary Scottish bands, Shooglenifty and the Peatbog Fairies, use modern rock, electronic, and funk accompaniment with their original and traditional fiddle, pipe, and mandolin tunes. Bands like the Chris Stout Quintet use unusual instrumentation like the saxophone to add colour and depth to their tune

sets. Accompaniment must inevitably be taken into consideration as an integral part of the music as a whole. However, in this paper I shall attempt to identify creativity on a more fundamental level. In particular, how O'Rourke manipulates the function, extension, and fragmentation of the Scottish fiddle tradition itself as a creative tool within the overall musical structure and intent of Lau. Finally, I will explore the technological aids that O'Rourke uses in Lau's live shows to simulate creative effects used in the recording studio. Where appropriate, I have identified specific 'listenings' from Lau's album, *Arc Light*, in support of the discussion below. I strongly recommend listening to the full album first, before locating the specific sections that relate to the text.

Function

The first point I would like to make relates to the musical function of the fiddle within the structural texture as a whole. While the fiddle is traditionally a melody instrument, and a fiddle 'tune' is traditionally a 16-bar melody in AB format, O'Rourke makes use of melody-like material and identifiable melody-related bowing patterns in a role more akin to accompaniment than tune playing. For example, in the opening track of the album, 'The Burrian', he plays a reel-like figure, identifiable as a 'tune' (for the purpose of this paper, 'tune' refers to a Scottish fiddle melody traditionally played for dances). However, in the context of this piece, with Green playing a flowing, continuous reel on accordion and Drever strumming an accompaniment on guitar, O'Rourke's line functions more like a bass line, adding depth, texture, and shape. His choice of a low register and an obviously chordal approach to his note choices assist in the function of this line as an accompaniment figure. The key point here is that O'Rourke, in adding to the musical milieu, has drawn material from his own musical background, reworking the function rather than the content of the part itself (Listening 1 – see the Appendix). Speaking on the construction of this track, O'Rourke comments that:

This piece began with the main accordion melody which was written by Martin and is based on the rhythm of the Lancashire 3/2 hornpipe [...] My counter melody fits tightly with the chord chart which Kris added to the initial melody.¹⁰

In track three, entitled 'Horizontigo', we find a different kind of reworking of a traditional-sounding tune. This time, O'Rourke's part acts as a textural addition. During the track, while members of the band are creating a free atonal soundscape, O'Rourke has overdubbed a second fiddle line, a reel written by Green. This tune is busy, strong and engaging, and easily identifiable as the melodic and rhythmic focal point it becomes later in the track. However, in this context the reel acts as a background wash of sound, adding depth and momentum to the floating, airy effects already present. This effect was achieved by both the dynamic shaping of the performance paired with digital manipulation of the track in the mixing stage of

the album, specifically by gradually increasing the relative volume of the new line (Listening 2). O'Rourke made the following comment on this piece:

We thought long and hard (about) what to do with the end of this track. We were very happy (with) how the air developed and the build existed before we knew where it would go. We tried various ideas and settled on the use of a reel. A tune Martin wrote years ago seemed to sit the best and this is what we used.¹¹

The last point I will make regarding the function of O'Rourke's playing can be found in track six of the album titled 'Steven's'. Here O'Rourke reworks a classic bowing pattern, the birl or bowed triplet, traditionally used to embellish a tune. By the addition of double stopped chords to the birl, he creates an accompaniment figure that sits between the accordion's tune and the guitar's strummed accompaniment. This motif adds a percussive, rhythmic drive to the track, and helps to build the overall dynamic of the section (Listening 3). O'Rourke states that:

This pattern again sits tightly with the chord chart. I commonly use birles to add sustain or attach to a chord. It's one of those intrinsically Scottish decorations. When playing with musicians from outwith the traditional scene it's the ornament that's most commonly queried and replicated.¹²

Extension

In the previous examples O'Rourke has taken identifiable Scottish fiddle techniques and changed their musical function to enable him to add depth, texture, and drive to the music. In the following examples, we can see a different type of manipulation: that of extending the structures, forms, and arrangements of a Scottish traditional tune. However, in contrast to the preceding examples, this is done while O'Rourke's playing maintains the function of the fiddle as a melody instrument.

Track three, 'Horizontigo', is a good example of how O'Rourke treats the structure of a set of fiddle tunes. The points of interest and change in a traditional set of tunes are normally rather symmetrical and conform to a predictable structure. Each tune is played two or three times, each 'A' and 'B' sections is repeated, resulting in a measured, balanced work. The final tune O'Rourke plays in this track is constructed in a traditional way. The arrangement of the track as a whole, however, significantly intensifies the effect of this final tune, through a simple process of suspense. The track lasts for seven minutes and seventeen seconds, but the tune or melody itself (when performed as the focal melody) begins five minutes into the track. Before this moment is reached, the slow build up of the previous tune and the extended 'jam' following strongly intensifies its eventual arrival. At this point, an immense sense of release is experienced, and the ultimate direction of the track is finally unveiled (Listening 4). O'Rourke points out that:

We had the air and build long before we knew where it would go. We arranged the track for the desired release. We always knew the shape it would take.¹³

Another method of extension used by O'Rourke involves a creative paring of time signatures and associated forms. A prime example can be found in track eight, titled 'Frank and Flo's'. This set moves through some interesting time signatures, starting out in a simple 6/8 jig with sections of 9/8. O'Rourke adds a more unique twist, moving from the 6/8 section to a 4/4 feel that segues into a new 3/4 feel, keeping crotchets constant throughout (with the allowance of a slight tempo shift), then alternates between 6/8 and 3/4 feels. This type of accent shift is a common addition to jig playing for many fiddlers. However, the extent to which these changes and the accompaniment are worked into the tune via the addition of the 4/4 sections, and more importantly how pivotal they are to the structure of the track as a whole, is significant. The melodies throughout the track are engaging and lively, but it is these rhythmical changes that mark the progression, and ultimately the structure, of the track (Listening 5). O'Rourke explains that:

I added my melody 'An Tobar' to Martin's 'Frank and Flo's'. We felt that there was an exciting rhythmic connection between the 6/8 and 9/8 feel of Martin's tune and the 6/4 in mine. There's a slight tempo change but the basic groove or pulse is connected. We enjoy playing around with changing time signatures. It adds its own sense of tension.¹⁴

Fragmentation

The last point I would like to make relates to O'Rourke's use of fragmentation, sampling and looping as a compositional tool. By using these techniques, he achieves a degree of tension, disorientation, and release that is often not apparent in the comparatively even meter of Scottish fiddle music. Again during the opening of the first track on the album, 'The Burrian', O'Rourke begins with a figure not unlike a reel in feel, although he is playing in 3/4. His lines are not closed, however, and after each phrase the tune is left hanging on a long, drawn out note, before moving to the next figure. By fragmenting the line, O'Rourke creates short waves of tension and release, and he continues to build on this throughout the track. This theme is utilised again at the end of the piece (Listening 6).

O'Rourke uses a similar technique during the middle section of track four entitled 'Saltyboys'. The material O'Rourke uses in the breakdown section towards the middle of the set is sourced from the tune leading up this point, but by taking only a fragment of the tune and looping it in cannon with the guitar and accordion, the section builds a great degree of tension for the listener. Perhaps this is only fully realised when O'Rourke begins the next section, the tune played in a straightforward manner, doubled by the accordion and accompanied by strummed guitar, at which point the tension is released (Listening 7).

Another good example of O'Rourke's use of fragmentation to build tension can be found in track six, titled 'Steven's'. After a simple introduction, O'Rourke exits the melody via a heavily distorted, atonal improvised solo. He then begins to loop a short fragment of melody. This motif is then layered with a similar theme on the accordion, before they join for a short looped motif in edgy harmony. O'Rourke continues until a second, overdubbed Lau (see 'Loop Pedals' below), mixed well back in the track, begins to make itself heard through the wash of sound created by the disorientating first Lau. Finally this second Lau wins the battle and the listener is once again released by the flowing, measured lines of the new tune (Listening 8).

Loop Pedals: A Technologic Aid in Live Performance

Throughout the album *Arc Light*, O'Rourke uses overdubbing – recording separate layers of music, then mixing these together to achieve the effect of more than one fiddle playing at the same time. For many of the points discussed above, overdubbing was either pivotal to the effect, or supportive of it. For instance, in Listening 2, an overdubbed layer of O'Rourke was gradually added to the original recording before finally taking the lead into the next tune. In the studio, this effect is simple to achieve.

When Lau perform live, arrangements like this that make use of overdubbing in the studio must be replicated. To do this, O'Rourke uses a loop (repeat) pedal. This works much like a recording device that can be synchronised with either a click track (regular beat provided to keep a band in exact time) or music being played live by the band. Where O'Rourke would normally leave behind one musical figure or function to begin the next, with a loop pedal, he is able first to record a section of his own playing during a performance, set up a continuous loop of that section, and then begin to play the next section himself. For instance, in Listening 3, O'Rourke explains how he performs both the birl-like accompaniment figure and the melody at the same time:

When we play this track live I use a loop station to record this pattern live and then play it along with the guitar part as I play the melody. We use loop stations more and more in Lau to reproduce overdubbed ideas achieved in the studio.¹⁵

The loop pedal enables not only the replication of effects achieved in the studio, but expands the possibilities of O'Rourke's creativity as a composer and arranger. Using the loop pedal, O'Rourke can be active on multiple musical levels, effectively adding a fourth member to the group. This also means that Drever and Green are not required to fill a musical 'gap' as O'Rourke moves to a new figure, allowing them more freedom in what they play and why they play it. On the other hand, the consistency of style or effect that can be achieved with the loop pedal is also a valuable asset for Lau. O'Rourke comments that:

We quite often build up numerous musical components that are interchangeable between instruments but sound quite different when played because of obvious tonal differences on the instruments but also because when we apply our own musical backgrounds and left to our own devices we phrase things quite differently.¹⁶

Rather than passing musical ideas around the group, with each member taking turns as accompanist and melody player with their own unique interpretations, O'Rourke can keep his interpretation of a figure or melody constant with the use of the loop pedal. This provides a more solid base for the far reaching musical exploration that Lau enjoy, by giving the listener a constant point of reference that indicates the underlying structure and direction of the music.

Intention and Inspiration

The powerful set of tools that O'Rourke has developed allow him to draw on his skills in Scottish fiddle playing and rework these abilities by extending, fragmenting and altering their function. These tools aid him in the creative dissemination of the Scottish fiddle techniques that are key building blocks in his compositional technique. While his playing remains identifiable as 'Scottish fiddle', his approach to the medium enables further musical development. While maintaining the original building blocks of a Scottish fiddler, O'Rourke has created a new, flexible and powerful vocabulary for their use. This new method of expression has enabled him to become more than, and yet remain, a Scottish fiddler at heart. O'Rourke remarks, 'First and foremost, I'm a Scottish fiddler [...] there'll always be a part of me that just wants to sit down with my fiddle and an old book of tunes.'¹⁷

O'Rourke's creative approaches to Scottish fiddle music seem to have a common thread. While many fiddlers write and arrange tunes that stretch the traditional boundaries of the idiom, O'Rourke has a goal larger than Scottish fiddle music. Having stretched the tension and release inherent in the structural form of traditional fiddle tune to its limit, he has taken a bold step further. By using the techniques discussed in this paper, O'Rourke has freed himself from the idiom, and this has allowed him to apply tension and release in a more extended format. This in turn has enabled him to explore more sophisticated, larger-scale musical architecture. By using tune-like material in the way a classical composer would use a motif or a jazz improviser would use a riff, O'Rourke builds his compositions and arrangements with the content subservient to the form of the music. This is a considerable advancement in the sophistication of approach compared to a traditional fiddler, and in essence turns the function of a 'tune' on its head: a tune can now be purely source material for the compositional process. And this is where Lau's formula really works for the listener: both the instant access and enjoyment of tune playing paired with the more substantial emotional and intellectual content made possible through the large-scale compositional conception.

Only time can tell if a musician or composer re-inventing and extending the form of their own tradition will be broadly accepted or not. It appears that O'Rourke alongside Lau have carved not just a niche for themselves in the traditional music landscape, but potentially helped point the direction of the tradition for the future. Merker speaks of creativity as a moving mass: the substance of tradition being propelled by innovation and imagination.¹⁸ Through the very nature of itself, no aural musical tradition can remain completely sterile or unchanging. However, I believe there can be notable instances of inspired change or development. O'Rourke appears to be deliberately taking Scottish fiddle music into a new realm. His thoughtful, inspired creativity draws directly from the tradition and while acknowledging Scottish tradition's forms and parameters, he has taken a bold step en route to liberating and furthering its artistic possibilities. There is no better definition of creativity.

Appendix 'Musical Listeners'

From Lau, *Arc Light*, NAVIGATOR20 CD, Navigator Records, 2009.

Listening 1: Track 1, 'The Burrian', 0:00 to 0:37

Listening 2: Track 3, 'Horizontigo', 3:50 to 4:25

Listening 3: Track 6, 'Stephen's', 6:00 to 6:25

Listening 4: Track 3, 'Horizontigo', 4:39 to 5:10

Listening 5: Track 8, 'Frank and Flo's', 1:40 to 2:15

Listening 6: Track 1, 'The Burrian', 0:00 to 0:37

Listening 7: Track 4, 'Salty Boys', 2:29 to 3:15

Listening 8: Track 6, 'Stephen's', 3:19 to 3:50, then 4:30 to 5:12

Notes

¹ Bjorn Merker, 'Layered Constraints on the Multiple Creativities of Music', in *Musical Creativity: Multidisciplinary Research in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Irene Deliege and Geraint A. Wiggins (Hove: Psychology Press, [2006]), pp. 25–41.

² Alfred Balkin, 'What is Creativity? What is it Not?', *Music Educators Journal*, 76 (1990), 29–32.

³ Balkin, 'What is Creativity?', p. 30.

⁴ Lau, *Arc Light*, NAVIGATOR20 CD, Navigator Records, 2009.

⁵ 'Aidan O'Rourke Press Bio', February 2009, see <<http://www.aidanorourke.net/pressbio.pdf>> [accessed 21 August 2010].

⁶ 'Aidan O'Rourke Press Bio', 2009.

⁷ Blazin Fiddles website, <<http://www.blazin-fiddles.com>> [accessed 21 August 2010].

⁸ 'Aidan O'Rourke Press Bio', 2009.

⁹ 'Aidan O'Rourke Press Bio', 2009.

¹⁰ Aidan O'Rourke, 30 June 2010, email correspondence with the author.

¹¹ O'Rourke, 2010.

¹² O'Rourke, 2010.

¹³ O'Rourke, 2010.

¹⁴ O'Rourke, 2010.

¹⁵ O'Rourke, 2010.

¹⁶ O'Rourke, 2010.

¹⁷ 'Aidan O'Rourke Press Bio', 2009.

¹⁸ Merker, 'Layered Constraints', p. 36.