

How Adult Learners Learn Celtic Traditional Music: An Exploratory Case Study

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Abstract

This study was based on interviews and observations of ten adult learners at the 2005 Goderich Celtic College (GCC), a North American “summer camp” for adults wanting to learn Celtic traditional music (CTM). There was an equal gender mix, the average age of participants was 45 years, and each had been learning CTM between 4 and 15 years. With the exception of one, all had learned to play an instrument at school, but had discontinued playing their school instruments after graduation. They were attracted to CTM and traditional instruments for various reasons, and learned through the medium of “tunes,” rather than scales and exercises. Because CTM is an aural/oral culture, most valued learning “by ear,” but did regard written notation as a useful aid. Information about this kind of informal learning practice has implications for formal school instrumental learning.

Music education researchers have only recently begun to consider the many ways that people make music informally for application in formal contexts. While ethnomusicologists and music scholars have a tradition of examining music learning in various cultures (Bayard, 1956; Blacking 1976; Booth & Kuhn, 1990; Cowdery, 1990; Feld, 1988; Finnegan, 1989; Frisch, 1987; Hew, 2006; Hopkins, 2002; Kearns & Taylor, 1998; Konig, 1980; Lilliestam, 1995; McCann, 2001; Moloney, 1992; Nettl, 1983; Rapuano, 2005, 2001; Reiss, 2003; Rice, 1995, 2003; Symon, 2003; Taylor, 2003; Trew, 2003), they have not considered

the relevance of informal learning for formal contexts. Folkestad (2006) maintains that, “informal music learning outside institutional settings has been shown to contribute to important knowledge and aspects of music education” (p. 135). Music learning that occurs in informal contexts should therefore be considered as important as that which takes place in schools.

Various music education researchers have examined informal music learning among children (Harwood, 1998; Campbell, 1991a, 1991b, 1998) and in different genres (Burton, 2008; Campbell, 1995; Dunbar-Hall, 2000; Dunbar-Hall & Wemyss, 2000; Clark, 2005; Cope & Smith, 1997; Garrison, 1985; Green, 2002; Jaffurs, 2004, 2006; McCarthy, 1999; Veblen 1991), while others have specifically targeted informal adult music learning within genres (Higgins, 2007; Green, 2002; Kerlin, 2004; Karlsen, 2007; Louth, 2004, 2006; Snell, 2005, 2007; Waldron, 2007, 2006; Walrond, 2007). Research on non-enculturated adult informal music learning in folk traditions is limited but is becoming more common among music education researchers (Cope, 2005; Dabczynski, 1994; Kerlin, 2004; Veblen & Waldron, 2008; Waldron, in press; Waldron & Veblen, 2007, 2008, 2009).

It is precisely because most adult music making occurs in settings outside of academic institutions that Mark (1996) recommends them as a worthy study topic. Like Folkestad, he believes that an examination of music learning that occurs outside of formal schooling could better inform practice and re-define what it means

to teach music (Mark, 1996). Based on these justifications, this paper explored the development of instrumental skills among North American adult learners of Celtic traditional music (CTM).¹

This study took place at the 2005 Goderich Celtic College (GCC), an annual, weeklong “summer camp” that took place in the town of Goderich, Ontario, Canada. The school, aimed at adults, provided musical instruction on various instruments and types of Celtic music.² Research questions included: What were the various attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the participants with regard to the teaching and learning of CTM? How did the participants learn CTM? What implications could be drawn for formal music education practices in general?

Literature Review

Cope (2005) contended that most music education research on instrumental music learning has focused on formal classically based music schooling and not informal music learning, particularly among adults. He found this dearth of research surprising as a “large number of active [adult instrumental] musicians acquire their musical skills informally” (Cope, 2005, p. 126), citing Finnegan’s landmark sociological research in 1989. While music education researchers have examined informal instrumental music learning among

adolescents (Campbell, 1995; Jaffurs, 2004, 2006), few have explored informal instrumental music learning with adults. One recent exception to this is Green’s (2002) study on how popular musicians learn. Her participants included both teenagers and adults, and the focus of the study was to discover the ways in which musicians “pick up” the skills necessary to become Western popular musicians. These “informal music learning practices” – Green’s designation – include aurally/orally “picking up” musical skills and knowledge from family, friends and peers, and recordings.

Several recent music education studies have examined informal music learning among adult traditional musicians. Cope (2005) explored how Scottish adults learned that country’s traditional fiddle music. He interviewed and observed 13 adults at two music workshops and concluded that, while the ability to read music notation was considered a valuable skill by all participants, being able to play “by ear” was regarded as the “normal [way to] access playing traditional fiddle music” (p. 132). It was therefore, valued by the participants more than the ability to read notation. Written notation was, however, perceived as a useful tool. A similar study was undertaken by Kerlin (2004), who primarily explored traditional song music learning at the Irish Arts Centre in New York City, which offered Irish traditional music classes to adults. His conclusion was similar to Cope’s in that Kerlin’s participants valued aural/oral learning over written notation. Waldron and Veblen (2009) and Veblen and Waldron (2008) explored aspects of music transmission in one traditional music pub session in London, Ontario, Canada. They also concluded that, while their participants viewed written notation as a useful aid when learning CTM music, being able to play “by ear” was more

¹ For this paper, CTM is defined as instrumental dance music from Ireland, Scotland, Brittany, Newfoundland, Cape Breton, Quebec, and Ontario. All have a tradition of aural/oral music learning (Cope, 2005; Garrison, 1986; Trew, 2003; Veblen, 1991; Waldron, 2006). Musics taught at the GCC included the same.

² Instruction was available on Irish flute, tin whistle, bagpipes, concertina, accordion, fiddle, mandolin, banjo, guitar, piano, and *bodhran* (an Irish drum).

highly valued than music reading ability by the participants.

Methodology

This study blended the qualitative research strategies of ethnographic description, case study, and participant observation with narrative inquiry. Ethnographic description was employed because Szego (2002) contended that it was the “most appropriate” research tool for researchers studying music teaching and learning within the broader context of music transmission, and this was the case with this study. This research also contained elements of a case study as it was conducted in and bounded by a specific location and time frame. Defined as “a detailed examination of one setting, single subject, or one particular event,” case studies were “often undertaken because there [was] clearly a scientific value from investigating some single category of individual, group, or event to gain an understanding of that individual, group, or event, and they [were], to some extent, generalizable” (Berg, 2007, p. 284). This was also true of this research.

Further, I have been an instructor at GCC for the past ten years, and, as an “insider,” had an *emic* perspective that informed my role as a participant observer.³ My particular role as an insider at GCC allowed for a much higher degree of ecological validity than would normally be

expected when accessing any field site—a potentially valuable trade-off for the allowance of a moderate degree of researcher bias. Last, because I felt it was important for each individual’s voice to be heard, I incorporated narrative inquiry into the research.⁴

The Research Landscape

At the GCC, students took four 90-minute classes per day, and could, along with their primary instrument, study a second or third instrument, join a Celtic ensemble, and/or a singing or a dance class. When the school day was over, the GCC community moved to a theatre venue to attend nightly teacher concerts. After the concerts were finished, students and teachers spread out to various establishments throughout town to participate in or observe scheduled jam sessions, dances, and/or impromptu sessions. The latter often lasted until 3:00 a.m. or later, sometimes continuing until sunrise.

Research Participants

Ten adult student participants were selected based on an email invitation, sent by the GCC’s administration, asking incoming students if they would be willing to be interviewed and observed during the

³ According to Berg (2007), “some researchers seek to understand the worldview of native inhabitants’ social environments, or what may be called the *emic* world view. This *emic* or insider’s view of the world can be contrasted by the *etic* or outsiders worldview” (p. 173). Ethnomusicologists Steven Feld (1988), Bruno Nettl (1983), and Timothy Rice (2003) also discuss the value of an *emic* perspective in field research.

⁴ Creswell (2003) listed a variety of narrative forms, including “the use of the narrative approach in the qualitative strategies of inquiry like a case study or ethnography” (p. 197). At the specific level in ethnography, one example of narrative convention was “the use of long, short, and text-embedded quotations” (p. 197) like the ones in this paper. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussed the idea of “nested stories” (p. 1) of participants and researcher relative to the same research landscape, and this was also applicable to this research.

GCC week. I did not interview all of the students who responded because there were an overwhelming number who wanted to be study participants. I narrowed the selection of students to be interviewed to those whose schedules did not overlap with one another, and this immediately winnowed the number of potential student participants to ten. I also wanted to include a mixture of returning and new students; this occurred naturally within this group of ten students. Participants played a variety of Celtic instruments; many also sang and were involved in traditional dance as well. Participants were given pseudonyms in order to retain their anonymity, indicated in Table 1, below.

Table 1
Characteristics of Study Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Years learning Celtic music
Laura	F	48	10
Stefan	M	47	9
Sal	M	32	5
Robert	M	50	4
John	M	46	15
Betty	F	53	4
Anne	F	44	7
Dana	F	29	7
Tony	M	52	11
Lynn	F	54	8

Data Collection Devices

Individual interviews and observations. Interviews took place throughout the GCC week and were scheduled after participants were observed either in classes and/or at one of the nightly jam sessions. Session observations were, by necessity, more serendipitous due to the osmotic nature of sessions. Observation data also served, to some extent, to triangulate data obtained through interviews. Because I

had *emic* status as an instructor, observation was relatively unobtrusive, and I participated in musical activities when appropriate. To clarify data from the initial interview and observations, follow-up telephone interviews were conducted over a two-week period following the conclusion of GCC.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature because the study involved perceptions of teaching and learning, and interviews required a framework in order to keep responses focused on these issues. The semi-structured nature of the interviews also allowed participants to describe experiences and raise supplementary issues that they felt were relevant to their learning processes. Allowing supplementary questions generated from participants' initial responses did not presuppose a full understanding of the issues involved, because this would have defeated the purpose of a qualitative inquiry. The semi-structured interview was, therefore, an appropriate compromise.

Researcher's Journal. I maintained a log/journal that contained a record of all of the interactions with the study participants. This contained all email correspondences, records of phone conversations and field notes taken during the week of GCC. The latter included notes taken during daily classes and notes taken at night while observing jam sessions.

Triangulation

Triangulation of teaching and learning situations was made possible through cross-checking the perspectives of student(s) and observer/researcher relative to the same teaching and learning events. A strong return rate among students provided the study with perspectives informed by experience and this further helped to ensure internal validity. Member checking was also incorporated into the research.

Data Analysis

Once all of the transcripts and field notes taken in shorthand were transcribed, a copy of all transcripts and notes were made and these were then used as a “working set.” Analysis was iterative; after the interviews were transcribed, codes were determined after many thorough and thoughtful examinations of the transcripts and the field notes.

Results

In order to document the development of instrumental skills, I asked participants to describe (a) the circumstances under which they began to play, (b) their early musical experiences, (c) how they learn CTM, (d) their comfort with notation, and (e) their comfort with “playing by ear.” Although there were several themes that emerged from the data, including the importance of learning CTM in the community and CTM as a significant lifelong learning activity, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on the theme of participants’ self-developed music learning strategies.

Study participants were adults, formally schooled, competent visual music learners – in that they could read written notation – and were generally uncomfortable with aural/oral music learning when introduced to CTM as adults. Thus, when first learning CTM, participants were both unfamiliar with and had difficulty learning the music in the way in which it was traditionally transmitted, that is, through aural/oral learning in context. This was further complicated by the fact that, in addition to learning music in a new way, participants were also learning a musical genre in which they were un-enculturated, and on instruments that were new to them. To learn CTM in what was perceived by the participants to be the most natural and authentic way – aural/oral – participants

found it appropriate to devise self-teaching strategies to accommodate aural/oral learning of CTM. There was a wide variety of self-designed strategies among the participants, and this is discussed in the next section.

Attitudes and Abilities: A Continuum and Self-developed Learning Strategies

Participants’ comfort and abilities with aural/oral and visual music learning can be envisioned as situated at points along a continuum, with bi-musical learners in the center, completely visual and aural learners at each end, and all others lying at various places in between.⁵ Participants’ abilities were sometimes associated with attitudes toward one or both styles. Specifically, some participants felt positively about the idea of

⁵ To describe persons trained in one musical practice – usually Western art music – that have acquired the musical practice of a second “cultivated” culture (for example, China, Java, or India), ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood, in 1960, coined the term “bi-musicality.” Titon (1995) maintained that, since Hood originally defined the term, it has evolved to mean fluency in two or more musics and was therefore analogous to *bilingual*, leading to what he described as “subject shift.” He defined this as “acquir[ing] knowledge by figuratively stepping outside of oneself to view the world with oneself in it, thereby becoming both subject and object simultaneously” (p. 288). In this way, bi-musicality became a learning strategy for obtaining musical skills and understanding how people make music. Further extending the term, Green (2002) applied it to describe people who have acquired musical skills through both formal music instruction and informal music learning practices, and were, therefore, proficient visual musicians as well as competent aural/oral musicians.

aural/oral learning, yet had difficulty with it in practice.⁶

Bi-musical Learners

Although several participants felt that they could learn music either way, two of them expressed equal comfort with aural/oral and visual music learning, and therefore were identified as bi-musical learners. They had similar learning backgrounds. Both had vivid memories of informal aural/oral music experiences when younger, as well as having received extensive formal music training, particularly when compared to the other participants. The first student, Laura, as a teenager played piano in a “Carole King” style garage/pop band, and learning the piano parts required that she aurally “lift” songs from records. She attributed her comfort with aural learning to this early experience, as well as working with an adult choir, which further developed this acuity. Her two advanced degrees in music secured strong visual learning skills that now enable her to “read like a hawk.”

Interestingly, Laura was also the coordinator of music education at a large Canadian university at the time of this study, and, prior to attending GCC, did not have a systematic aural/oral learning strategy in place to learn CTM. Aside from her sentiment that learning Celtic music from notation was an impediment to learning the music in a way that was musically accurate

and fulfilling – what she called the “true sense” of the music – Laura was surprised to find that she had difficulty remembering tunes learned from notation despite her many years of formal training. She said, “I thought that if I could just play it with the [sheet] music enough [on the harp], it would stick in my memory, and it never did.” Laura did, however, understand the difference between the actual played sounds and written music, and thus believed that stylistic elements, which were not notated, were best learned aurally.

Mid-week at GCC, Laura had an epiphany about developing a personal aural/oral learning approach. She was amazed that this idea had not occurred to her earlier because she “knew how to learn.” Her new strategy involved recording the tune that she wanted to aurally learn – at full tempo and then at half speed – leaving a blank space on the tape so that she could play the tune back while the tape was playing.

The second bi-musical student, Stefan, developed his music reading proficiency through playing the trombone in school and community ensembles. After high school, Stefan continued to play trombone with the local musical theatre troupe and the nearby semi-professional orchestra, and briefly considered becoming a music major at university. His father, an accomplished singer, sang *a cappella* nightly to Stefan and his brothers, and Stefan believed this fostered his ability to learn CTM aurally later on. It was only as an adult that he realized how unusual and significant this experience was.

Stefan, like Laura, believed it was more difficult to remember tunes from notation than tunes learned aurally. Self-described as “musically ambidextrous,” he also claimed to integrate visual with aural music learning fairly easily. Although he could learn music either way, he used sheet

⁶ For purposes of both brevity and this paper, I used the most common combination of “bi-musical” learning styles – aural/oral learning and reading written notation – when applying the term “bi-musical.” Rice (1995) has also identified observational music learning and kinesthetic music learning as styles distinct from aural/oral music learning.

music only when he “got stuck” aurally learning tunes on the banjo. Although he sometimes learned a tune completely from notation, Stefan usually returned to the tune at a later time and aurally “re-learned” it to reinforce it in his memory and add various nuances.

However, his preferred method for learning new tunes was by using the transcription software *The Amazing Slowdowner* (Amslo). Unlike earlier recording technology that slowed music down to pitch only at half speed, the Amslo enabled users to take a CD and slow it down to any tempo while retaining the pitch. Stefan initially slowed down the tune he wanted to learn using the Amslo, “chopping it up” into smaller phrases, then gradually speeding up the CD to tempo while he played along. Finally, he transcribed the tune so that he would have a written record of it, sharing that, and a burned CD of the tune, with his friends so that they too would learn the tune.

Despite his formal training, Stefan maintained that, in CTM, sheet music served as a blueprint and not as a manuscript in the Western sense. Instead, he felt sheet music functioned as a “skeleton” for learning CTM when aural sources were unavailable. Further, it was his opinion that when most North American adults began learning CTM, they did so with a misunderstanding of how printed music functioned in the genre, based on their experiences with formal music instruction. Stefan explained that this misconception had kept them from learning aurally, thus blocking their development as CT musicians because it impeded their ability to listen for style, also mentioned by Laura. Stefan did, however, reiterate that sheet music was a useful tool:

In Irish music, there’s often a tendency to say that we don’t use script because you lose something there, but I also

know that I’m able to get things from the script sometimes when I haven’t got the source to go in and get it from. The bones of the notes, so to speak.

Working Toward Equal Aural and Visual Reading Competency

Several students classified themselves as stronger visual learners but were working hard towards quickly strengthening their ability to learn “by ear.” The first of such students, Sal, played the bassoon throughout high school. He still played in pit orchestras in his hometown and this kept his reading “chops” at a proficient level. When he first began playing CTM on the tin whistle, Sal did not understand the importance of listening in the genre, and he described a College class taught three years earlier by master Irish flute player Peter Horan to illustrate. Sal stated,

I realized just how much I didn’t know at the time. I weep when I hear the tapes, because he [Peter Horan] played tunes in class, and if we knew it, we’d play along. And every time I’m playing along with the tape, I’m like, “Arg! A tune wasted! I can’t hear how he’s playing it!” And the valuable thing here was listening to how a master played it. It was fun playing with him, but I wasn’t anywhere near in a position where I could learn anything by playing with him at that point. Now – maybe – it would be closer anyway, that I could pick something up on the fly, but back then, not a chance in hell.

Conservatory trained violinist Robert, another strong visual learner, commented on the “silliness” of using written notation to perform and learn music rooted in an aural/oral tradition. His primary purpose for attending the GCC was to force himself to play “by ear,” because he

considered himself “addicted” to note reading. This was his second year at GCC. Based on his experience learning fiddle “by ear” the last year, has adopted his own “call and response” strategy for learning new tunes based on fiddle instructor Pierre Schryer’s use of the technique. Robert described,

Pierre would play one or two bars slowly, and then we’d play it back, and then he played it again slowly, and then we’d play it back, and then he played it again. Then the next two bars, and then four and eight, and he would play the whole tune up front first, at normal speed. Then he’d usually do it again slowly, and then he’d say, “OK, we’re going to go through it,” and we’d slowly build the tune up chunk by chunk. It was great. I’d never learned like that before.

Another primarily visual learner, John, explained that his first experience at this year’s GCC re-affirmed his intuitions about the advantages of aural music learning. In high school, John played the saxophone and he read written notation. However, he asserted that there were many advantages to learning music by ear and his experience at the GCC reminded him of the way he first began learning Celtic music, laying on his bed while playing tin whistle along with his Clancy Brothers albums. At the time of this study, John played with a Celtic band whose members were sheet-music dependent and, he noted, with some chagrin, that he has acquired a repertoire of tunes learned from sheet music. However, he said that tunes did not come “alive” for him unless he was playing them with other people who had also learned the same tunes aurally. He said,

I use notation as kind of a guide and a crutch, but it’s not nearly as much fun as

lying on my back in my bedroom, playing by ear for the fun of playing; I get a lot more joy out of it, and I feel like it’s more musical. I’ve learned a lot of things by rote now, and it’s actually fun because it’s taken me back to the way I learned music at first. It’s like saying to myself: “You were right!”

Although John felt that he was a proficient-enough visual learner when he played the tin whistle, he found written music “useless” when learning tunes on his other instrument, button accordion. He felt that this was due to the nature of the instrument –he was unable to see his fingers, as when playing whistle – and was therefore unable to “make the visual connection.” Interestingly, John did not discern any difference between learning visually from notation and learning visually by watching his or others’ fingers. He has devised a method of “picking up” tunes at the local CT jam sessions that integrated observation with playing “by ear.”⁷ John first familiarized himself with the melody by listening to and observing other players while figuring out the chords, arpeggios, and rhythms on the button accordion. After several repetitions, he could usually sing and/or play the melody on tin whistle.

Weaker but Progressing Aural Learners, Strong Visual Learners

Several self-proclaimed visual learners initially believed that they would never be able to play CTM by ear. However, after some initial discouraging experiences, they felt that they were progressing as aural learners, despite continued frustration. The

⁷ Using Rice’s (1995) music learning styles, this would make John a “bi-musical” learner on the button accordion, as he learned equally through aural/oral learning and observation.

rate at which they were adapting to aural learning appeared to be connected to self-confidence as well as the types of learning strategies that they were able to devise. For example, Betty, as a child, was completely intimidated by her father's ability to play piano "by ear." This was something that she was never able to do, despite many years of formal conservatory piano training and hard work. She classified herself as a strong visual learner, and was convinced she would never develop her aural memory to the same extent as her visual memory. However, Betty said,

I am comfortable with playing by ear now, but it depends on what I'm playing. If it's a tune I know – from my childhood, from my life – then I'm comfortable with it. I can pick it up. I couldn't very well when I started, but now I can pick it up, and I can almost immediately know what note I should start on, rather than having to experiment I don't know how I do that, but I do, and I can usually figure out the tune if I know it, pretty well right off. I'll play maybe the odd little flub, but then I immediately know it's not the right note and I can find it.

Because Betty was most comfortable with notation, but also understood the importance of aural learning in CTM, she has devised a learning method that used a combination of standard written notation and recordings of her tin whistle teacher, Loretto Reid – who did not read standard notation – playing tunes. Betty began by calling Reid before her lessons, asking her the names of tunes that they would be working on, then finding and downloading written notation of those tunes from the Internet. At her lesson, Betty marked on the sheet music any ornaments Reid suggested along with any variations in the tune that

Reid made. They finished with Reid recording the tune for Betty, who then listened to the tune "as much as I could stand it," beginning by learning the tune as much as she could "by ear," and stopping when she became too frustrated. At this point, Betty resorted to sheet music, and added that, in addition to finding the right notes, it was useful for her "to see" where Reid had marked the spots where ornaments could be inserted. As frustrating as this process was for Betty, she said that she was slowly getting better at aural learning.

Flautist Anne also recorded her lessons with teacher Loretto Reid and then learned as much as she could from the tapes before supplementing them with written music. Anne played the clarinet in her high school band and considered herself a proficient visual learner. When beginning to play Irish traditional music she was completely dependent on written notation, but she had since become a more confident aural/oral learner. To learn tunes, Anne recorded Reid playing at her flute lessons, and then took the tapes home for repeated hearings before trying to play along with the recording. Anne adamantly stated,

To me, if you're an adult and haven't grown up playing that way [aural/oral], that's a skill to be learned as well as playing the instrument itself, [that is], *learning how to learn tunes*. . . . I'm still learning how to do that part of it [playing "by ear"] as well.

Neither Anne nor Betty had discussed their similar approaches with one another, despite taking lessons from the same teacher.

Primarily Observational Learning

One participant, Dana, identified herself as "musically illiterate" because she did not read written notation, and this would seemingly place her at the extreme aural

pole of the continuum except for one fact: She also claimed to be an extremely poor aural learner. Dana explained that after seven years of flute playing, she had only been able to learn one tune “by ear” from a CD. Instead, she had devised an elaborate observation system/strategy that augmented her aural learning, which was why Dana insisted that she “must have a live person to look at” when learning tunes. Thus there was an important visual component to her learning process, albeit not one related to reading notation. She described a process of learning tunes by observing the fingers of the other musicians at jam sessions, many of whom were not flute players. She explained how:

I sit way at the back [of the session], and I play all of the A's. I sort of start with A, I can see that, it's two fingers down. If I don't know the note, then I have to see. I know A's on fiddles, banjos, flutes, accordions, pipes, [and] some button accordions. But I know to look at what note they are playing, at least some of them. F# on a banjo, fiddle, they're all the same. The way I learned it is, I look at a flute player, and then I look at a fiddler. When the flute player is playing an A, I look at the fiddler, and he's playing the F#. With the flute, I can't always tell if they're a man and have very big hands, if their fingers are up or down. But I just started with, “Nope, that's an A, that's an F, that's an E (laughs).”

Dana's session learning strategies were consistent with some of the visual music learning practices of other cultures reported by Rice (1995), who studied Bulgarian bagpiping, and Hopkins (2002), who discussed music learning modes in Eastern cultures.

Visual Notation Learning Only

Two students, Tony and Lynn, expressed complete frustration with aural learning and were adamant in their claims that they could never learn without notation. This placed them at the visual end of the learning spectrum. Lynn felt that her inability to learn aurally was attributable to the visual way that she had learned piano as a youngster through the Royal Conservatory. She now refused to try to learn tunes “by ear” because of an earlier negative GCC experience. Since that time, Lynn had not attempted to learn aurally, and only used written notation to learn new tunes.

Tony, unlike the other participants, was born in England. While growing up, Tony was taught music in school in a way that was completely unrelated to practice because music class consisted solely of Royal Conservatory theory and music history. When Tony talked about how he learned tunes on the guitar, he maintained that he could not play or learn anything unless he had written music in front of him.

Conclusion

All of the participants in this study, including Lynn and Tony, felt that the “proper way” to learn CTM was without written notation, based on their own, and sometimes limited, knowledge of the genre. I found this somewhat surprising because – based on my own experience teaching at the GCC and the way that formal instrumental music education is generally delivered in the United States and Canada – North Americans can have a preconceived notion that learning music aurally is either “wrong” or “hard.” Although all of the participants in this study were aware of the value of learning CTM aurally, most mentioned that, when they first began learning CTM, they did not fully comprehend why they should have to learn it “by ear.” Most participants began learning aurally on faith, often

because a peer had told them that it was “the right way” to learn CTM. All of the participants – even those who claimed not to be aural learners – did eventually come to understand why learning “by ear” was necessary if one was to become a proficient CT musician. In other words, they experienced their own “paradigm shift” as to how written notation functions in CTM compared to Western art music.

With the exceptions of Lynn and Tony, who learned only through written notation, there was a wide variance of strategies among the participants. Their abilities toward aural/oral learning varied from each individual, and personal discrepancies – strengths and weaknesses – resulted in the development of each participant’s unique learning strategy. Strategies often included some type of written notation –for example, standard musical notation or guitar tablature – some type of recording technology, and, in the case of two participants, watching other CT musicians’ fingers while playing at sessions. Green’s (2002) participants also developed personal learning strategies, as did Veblen and Waldron’s (2008).

Participants who were the most satisfied with their own musicality, and who also expressed the most comfort with their own music learning abilities, were those situated at the middle of the “bi-musical” continuum. In other words, those learners who were both proficient aural/oral and visual learners were glad that they were able to learn in either mode, because the ability to do so made CTM more accessible and easier to learn than music learners who were restricted only to one learning mode. Like Cope’s (2005), Kerlin’s (2004), and Waldron and Veblen’s (2009a) participants, all of the participants in this study valued the ability to “learn by ear” more than being a “good” sight-reader, and this was because aural/oral learning was perceived as a more

“authentic” and musical way to learn CTM. The one participant (Dana) who did not read written notation maintained that she wished that she could read notation as well as learn music more proficiently “by ear.”

With the exception of Dana, all of the participants had either been members of their secondary school instrumental ensembles or were enrolled in private lessons through the Royal Conservatory during their school years. All of the participants who were members of their schools’ instrumental performing ensembles had positive memories of the experience, but the participants who had taken private lessons through the Conservatory reported experiences that ranged from mildly negative to outright disparaging. Based on participants’ experiences with Conservatory lessons, and in particular, piano instruction, instructors in that institution should at the very least consider adding aural/oral learning to the curriculum in the early years of students’ lessons.

However, regardless of the quality of those earlier experiences, none of the participants could recollect aural music learning or teaching being utilized by a teacher in a secondary school instrumental setting. The two participants at the center of the continuum – Laura and Stefan – both attributed their proficient aural abilities to musical experiences that occurred outside of an academic institution, a disturbing commentary because both had the most extensive formal musical training of all the participants.

The way in which the participants in this study developed their learning and teaching strategies should be examined more closely. Based on the evidence presented in this study, instrumental music educators should at least consider employing some type of aural/oral teaching approach in their classrooms.

We usually assume that “music education” is defined by place – typically in some type of academic institution – and is delivered through some type of formal music instruction. An examination of how music learning is perceived by adult learners in Western non-classical folk traditions

could provide insights into our own teaching and learning practices, and perhaps stimulate new ideas and approaches, which could then be implemented into formal music education practice. Ultimately, this should lead to musically fulfilling adult lives and stimulate the pursuit of lifelong music learning.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

中文摘要

成年學生如何學習塞爾特傳統音樂：一個探索性個案研究

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此研究基于對2005年*Goderich Celtic College (GCC)*的10位成年學生的訪談與觀察。GCC是一個為想學塞爾特傳統音樂(*CTM*)的成人而設的北美夏令營。研究參與者男女人數相同，平均年齡為45歲，已學習塞爾特音樂4年到15年不等。除1人以外，其他參與者都曾在學校學習演奏一種樂器，但畢業後都沒有繼續彈奏這一樂器。他們由于各種不同的原因而對塞爾特傳統音樂和傳統樂器感興趣，并且通過“曲調”來進行學習，而不是通過音階或練習。因為*CTM*是一種口傳文化，通過“耳朵”來學習最具價值，但記譜也被視為是一種有益的補充。從這種非正式學習實踐而得的信息對正式的學校器樂學習亦有所啓示。