

Cape Breton & Prince Edward Island Step Dance Trip

10th July – Tuesday 30th July 2013

Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

I would like to sincerely thank LUTSF for awarding me a travel scholarship to travel to Cape Breton Island and Prince Edward Island, in the Canadian Maritimes, to explore and research the percussive step dance forms native to these areas. The objective of my trip was to learn about regional varieties in their local context and to broaden my own repertoire of steps. Thanks to the support of LUTSF this was made possible.

The experience was successful far beyond my expectations. It gave me an understanding of the social setting and community context of the dance forms which could only be realised by actually being present and visiting these places. One of the greatest things I gained was professional connections. The scholarship gave me the opportunity to meet people and to build relationships with dancers and musicians in the Maritimes which has formed a basis for future creative collaborations. Another highlight was the performance opportunities which arose while I was over there including performing at the Rollobay Fiddle Festival on Prince Edward Island. This, amongst other opportunities I had to perform, was an amazing chance to work with fantastic musicians and dancers and has enhanced my professional experience greatly.

Please see the report where I have detailed my trip, reflected upon my experiences and given an insight into observations on style and context which have informed my own understanding of the tradition.

With many thanks,

Sophie Stephenson

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Introduction

To travel to the Canadian Maritimes and experience first-hand their music and dance culture had been a dream of mine for many years. I was introduced to Cape Breton step dancing at the age of 11 when I saw dancer Harvey Beaton and fiddler player Buddy MacMaster (both from Cape Breton) perform in Scotland. The following year I attended a week long step dance course with Harvey at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic College on the Isle of Skye. Cape Breton is an island which is part of the Maritime Province of Nova Scotia, on the East Coast of Canada, where great numbers of Gaelic speaking emigrants settled from the mid eighteenth century, through the nineteenth century. Cape Bretoners have maintained their connection to “*an t-Seann Dùthaich*” (the old country) through retaining many traditional forms of cultural and communal expression brought with emigrants from Scotland. Step dance is one example of a tradition which has prevailed and evolved its own way to the course which the tradition took in Scotland. This story, of the cultural dislocation and evolution brought about by emigration, has fascinated me for many years and I was intrigued to experience the old traditions of the relocated Gael in the surroundings of the New World alongside the traditions of native peoples and other emigrant groups such as French and Irish.

Nova Scotia's neighbouring province Prince Edward Island (PEI) also had many Scottish emigrants settle there. I chose to visit both Cape Breton and PEI as their proximity in location yet distinct variation in music and dance style made an interesting and worthwhile comparison. The aim of my trip was to immerse myself in these communities, which I achieved by meeting and interacting with local tradition bearers and attending community dances, workshops, cèilidhs and festivals. This report is a summary of these events along with my reflections on the trip, my experiences and the impact of the journey on my professional dance development.

Vishtèn

Although the focus of my research trip was very much centred upon the regional varieties between dance forms, my journey begins outside of these localised parameters in Maine, New England where I met up with Acadian band Vishtèn from Prince Edward Island. Vishtèn are a trio comprising sisters Pastelle LeBlanc and Emmanuelle LeBlanc from Prince Edward Island's Evangeline Region and Pascal Miousse from the French speaking Magdalen Islands. These islands lie in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence off of Canada's east coast and are linked by a 5 hour ferry between them. PEI makes up one of Canada's three Maritime Provinces along with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, while the Magdalen Islands are part of Quebec. The islands share cultural and historical ties of the French Acadian settlers who, like the Gaels, brought with them their language and their traditions. Acadian culture on the islands is also infused with the cultural influences of the Scottish and Irish settlers and I can hear this in the music of Vishtèn.



Illustration 1: Pastelle and Emmanuelle LeBlanc of Vishtèn performing an 'Danse assise' (a seated style of percussive footwork)

Paul-Emile Comeau writes that 'L'Acadie isn't a place on the map but rather a state of collective consciousness' and music is one means by which a state of collective consciousness may be voiced and heard. For me, it is the linguistic element of the French songs along with the strong rhythmic drive carried by the foot percussion which distinguish Vishtèn's distinctively Acadian sound. Their combinations of fiddle, guitar, accordion, harmonium, whistles, piano, bodhrán, jaw harp, moog, electric guitar and percussive dance has a unique and varied dynamic which in many ways has in itself forged a modern, but traditional, voice not only for their band but for Acadian music in

general. The reason I particularly wanted to see Vishtèn live was because they are a band which has incorporated dance into their sets so organically and naturally that the steps are wholly integral to the music. I was keen to explore the performance aspects of dance with them: particularly since they are an internationally touring band. In this sense they are performing and promoting Acadian song, music and dance in a context outside of its local situation and sharing it with a wider spectating audience in a performance rather than social setting. Further to that, I was also interested in learning more about their variety of step dance which has very many similarities with the neighbouring island of Cape Breton and yet has it's own unique style.

I went along to one of their concerts in Maine to see them perform and the following day I met up with Emmanuelle and Pastelle to learn more about Acadian dance. Through sharing steps we found many rhythms and steps in common, but the process also highlighted some of the subtle formalistic differences between our styles. We then worked together to produce a routine which combined both PEI and Cape Breton steps along with our own variations and we performed this during their concert at the Skye Theatre in Maine run by Phill McIntyre. The performance was a blast and a great



start to my exploration of Acadian dance before I headed up to PEI. It was a real

Illustration 2: With the LeBlanc sisters: Emmanuelle and Pastelle at the Skye Theatre in Maine

pleasure to have been able to meet and learn from the band Vishtèn and I would love to be able to work with them again. Meeting the LeBlanc sisters was altogether a terrific experience and they provided a fantastic point of contact for making connections in PEI. They put me in touch with various dancers who I later met up with once I reached PEI and whom I may not have had contact with otherwise. There was also something magic about the off-the-cuff collaboration which filled me with excitement and inspiration for the potential of future projects which may bring together Gaelic and Acadian dance and music influences. Hopefully it won't be too long before we see each other again!

Prince Edward Island

After spending a couple of days with Vishtën in Maine I traveled north, crossed the Canadian border and went up through New Brunswick to Prince Edward Island where I spent a music and dance filled ten days. In the process of making initial contact with musicians and dancers in the planning stage of my trip there arose many opportunities for me to collaborate and perform with local artists. On my first day in Prince Edward Island I had rehearsals with Ward MacDonald, Kevin Chaisson and Ben Miller for a gig at the Benevolent Irish Society in Charlottetown. Ward and Kevin are both from PEI and it is evident from their surnames both the Scottish and French heritage of the island. Kevin Chaisson, who's father Joe Pete Chaisson formed the PEI Fiddlers Association, is part of the renowned musical family who host the annual Rollobay Fiddle Festival on the east side of the island. Ward MacDonald also comes from a family tradition of fiddle playing and he set up the PEI Fiddle Camp which runs annually and which he invited me to teach at.

The PEI Fiddle Camp comprised of workshops in fiddle, pipes and dance over the course of a weekend and the exploration of dance rhythms was central to the ethos of the camp. The other tutors, alongside Ward MacDonald, were Richard Wood, Meghan Forsyth and Ben Miller. The camp was an opportunity to exchange styles and ideas. I learned the Souris Set (a unique square set which is from Souris in PEI) and I was also able to share some Scottish social dances. For the step dance classes, my pupils were of school age and came from around Charlottetown. I talked a bit about my dance background and demonstrated my own style of steps and then they each gave me a demonstration. In contrast to how I had learned – picking up steps from different steps from a variety of dancers over the years – the girls I met at the camp all went regularly to dance schools or dance instructors in the local area. From talking with local musicians I learned that step dance on Prince Edward Island was predominantly dominated by dance troops, wearing tap shoes, and learning and performing choreographed routines. An important aspect of percussive dance is the rhythmical dynamic between the dancer and the musician and so in the workshop we focused less on specific steps or routines and instead worked on improvisation and matching rhythms to tunes.

The next week I travelled west to the Evangeline Region where I met dancers Tracey Arsenault and Karine Gallant, at a house session hosted by the extremely hospitable Collette Aucoin. Collette's home, in the French speaking part of PEI, is a regular meeting place for musicians on the island. As I headed along to the session there was a striking, red hot, burning sunset which offset the gorgeous pastel greens and lilacs in the surrounding fields – it is possibly one of the most beautiful spots on the island and could not be a more delightful location for music to ensue into the early

hours! The day after the session I met up with Tracey and we spent an afternoon exchanging steps outside on the porch. It was really interesting swapping steps with Tracey. The steps were not that different from the Scottish or Cape Breton style but there were a few differences in emphasis (namely, they precede each step with a shuffle on the up-beat in the music). Tracey also had a few Quebecois steps which she mixed in with Acadian steps. Tracey teaches regularly and has her own dance troop of young dancers. Over the years she has built up a wide repertoire of steps, as well as group routines, which she has choreographed for her dancers. It was an absolute delight to meet Tracey, to learn about the music and dance culture and feel so welcomed into the community.



Illustration 3: Sunset over Mont Carmel, Prince Edward Island.

Later in the week I went to visit another Acadian step dancer Helen Burgeron Arsenault at her home in the Evangeline Region. I recorded an interview with Helen and learned about her dance background and the culture she grew up with. She described for me how her “first instrument was her feet” and her approach when playing piano accompaniment for fiddle tunes comes from her “sense of rhythm as a dancer”. Helen grew up surrounded by fiddle music and the tunes and the beat were so engrained in her that “it was difficult *not* to dance”. She would see her grandfather and other people, mostly men, get up and dance one at a time at house gatherings where there would be music and she learned to dance by trying to emulate their steps. Helen was able to show me some older steps which she remembers that her father would have done. These steps seemed to be free and less choreographed than the style typical of dance troops on the island. They were also closer to the floor, and very reminiscent of the Appalachian style of flatfooting or certain aspects of the old Irish style (Sean Nós). In the interview Helen touched on some really interesting points about style

and repertoire and how the dance reflected the fiddle music. Although many of the tunes and the steps were generic across the island, it was the style of fiddle which differentiated the regional stylistic variations in the way certain steps were executed. Helen also remarked on how style was circulated by individual dance teachers. The French speaking community Helen grew up in was isolated from other French speaking communities and so when they went outside of their community and encountered different dialects of French from other regions such as Quebec they assumed their language was wrong and therefor would adapt to fit in. This sense of cultural inferiority extended also into the dance traditions. Helen would go to dance and fiddle competitions on the east side of the island and see dancers with shiny shoes with bows on and Helen suggested that this gradually influenced the Acadian style. This gave me an extremely interesting insight into the possible history and evolution of the dance styles and how outside cultures and influences may effect local traditions.

I was able to experience an accumulation of these different styles at the Rollobay Fiddle Festival which was a flourishing round off to my time in PEI. Hosted by the Chaisson family, Rollobay is festival with family and community at the heart of the music making. The whole style of the festival was very laid back and informal. Step dancers were invited to get up whenever they wanted and the design of the stage itself demonstrated the integral place of dance amongst musical performances. There was a wooden floored section in front of the main stage and this had microphones positioned to pick up the percussive sound of the dancers' feet onstage. The majority of the musical repertoire performed was dance tunes and therefor it was fully expected for someone to get up and dance. The Ouellette sisters also ran a step dance workshop. They had very similar steps to Tracey Arsenault and to Emmanuelle and Pastelle LeBlanc and so this was a good recap. As well as solo step dancing there were also opportunities for me to take part in the social set dances which I had learned earlier in the week at a dance in the Lorne Valley. Rollobay provided the perfect transition from PEI across to Cape Breton as the festival hosted performers from off the island including Chrissy Crowley, Allan Dewer, Shelly Campbell and Andrea Beaton from Cape Breton.



Illustration 4: Rollobay Fiddle Festival, PEI.

Cape Breton

After the Rollobay Fiddle Festival I took the ferry from Prince Edward Island across to Nova Scotia and then carried on up to Mabou, Cape Breton in time for the Monday night session at The Red Shoe Pub. The first thing which stuck me upon arriving in Cape Breton was the predominance of bilingual Gaelic and English place-name sings. There was a very visual presence of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the island and these signs were visual identity markers. I headed along to the Red Shoe where Melody and Derrick Cameron were playing fiddle and guitar and Melody also got up for some steps. In contrast to the performances which I had witnessed the day before at Rollobay – where dancers wore tap shoes and the sound was enhanced to be heard over the music using amplification – Melody wore a pair of normal soft shoes without heels or taps and indeed you couldn't hear her feet over the music in this particular context. This shows the importance of the visual aspect of the dance and though I couldn't hear her feet I could see the rhythms through her footwork.



Illustration 5: Session at the Red Shoe Pub, Mabou, Cape Breton.

After the session it was on to the Brook Village Square Dance which runs every Monday night throughout the summer. In Brook Village they danced the local type of square dance known as the Inverness County Set which comprises of two jig figures followed by a reel figure. The dance was very organic and followed without any instruction. The band onstage would begin a set of jigs and gradually couples would get up and join together to make circles on the floor. If I was to

compare it with social dancing in Scotland I would say it was more like an Orcadian Strip the Willow where as many couples as there is space for on the dance floor could join in the dance at any time, rather than the structured Strip the Willow in which there must be four couples per set ready to begin the dance. With each figure more couples would join in and there would be a packed dance floor by the time it was on to the reel figure. The evening continued like this with short interludes filled with old time waltzes or spots for solo step dancers. The main difference between the Inverness County Set and the Souris Set I had experienced the week before, was that at Brook Village they step danced throughout the figure. The figures themselves seemed to me simpler and more straightforward than in the Souris Set but almost everyone in the hall could step dance and would be doing their own, individual jig and reel steps as they moved around the dance floor. In the reel figure in particular people would make encouraging cheers and “whoops”. Expressions which are common over there but which were new to me are “Drive 'er” and “Give er” which I would hear as I was step dancing around the grand chain in the third figure. People would use these expressions to encourage the energy of the dance and, like this, people would build off each other's energy and enthusiasm. When it all flowed and everyone gave it there all there was quite a resounding energy which lifted, as did the music, as the night progressed.

Throughout my week in Cape Breton I experienced step dancing in many different contexts and occasions. What was interesting was how I could notice trends in particular steps which were shared across the island. It seemed to me quite a conservative tradition, with different dancers doing a lot of the same steps, but I could also appreciate the individual style which they brought to the steps, making them their own. I realised there were certain formulaic aspects expected of step dancers. For instance it was expected that you would repeat the same step again on the other foot. Dancers were admired for their neat footwork, good posture, steps which were close to the floor and in good time with the music. From what I saw in Cape Breton, solo step dancers would always get up one at a time (as opposed to at Rollobay Fiddle Festival in PEI where there would at times be several dancers up at once all doing their own steps). The exception to this was dance groups performing choreographed routines such as the fantastic Celtic Touch dancers led by



Illustration 6: Celtic Touch Dancers, at The Strathspey Place, Cape LUTSF StBreton.

choreographer by Sabra MacGillivray who I saw perform at the Strathspey Place in Mabou, Cape Breton and also at the Broadcove Scottish Concert. On the whole however, my interactions with step dance were mostly informal and it was at social dances and house parties where I found most opportunities to swap steps with dancers.

Over the course of my time in Cape Breton I went to a dance almost every night. These included Glencoe Mills, South West Margaree and Cheticamp, but the energy in Brook Village was unbeatable and I was able to go on both my first and last night in Cape Breton. At a certain point towards the end of the evening the fiddler would fire into a set of strathspeys and this was the cue for individuals to get up and show off their steps one by one. I took a video of the step dancing which I posted on youtube and it had over 1000 views within a couple of days and even inspired one person to write a blog about why she dances. Here is an excerpt from her blog:

'When I watch this video, I feel the energy that pulses out of the musicians on piano and fiddle, an energy that resonates with each individual and makes them move, whether that is tapping a foot or joining the queue. The picture is too fuzzy to see, but I imagine the musicians beaming out at the dancers, or at each other, or just relaxed with an expression of deep peace on their faces as they play. People praise musicians for "stage presence," for being able to interact with an audience and involve them with the music through personality, telling jokes, explaining what they are doing. And that is all very well. But even better is when neither audience nor musicians feel the pressure to "show off" for each other: neither to seek adulation nor to ostentatiously offer it, because both parties already understand why they are there, and why they are enjoying it. Watching this video, does one even think: That is the audience, and those are musicians, and those are dancers? No, one thinks: This is a community, and making music and dancing and listening and foot tapping and watching are what they all do. That's why I dance. Because I want to be part of a tradition and community where people dance and play music because it is what they do, and it makes perfect sense, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world'.

(For the full blog post visit: <http://trionatrog.blogspot.ca/2013/07/why-i-dance.html>)

The expresses beautifully the social and community aspect of the dance which is at the heart of the music and culture. It is in village halls where everyone comes together and dance is part of the fabric which binds the community.

Conclusions

In the short time that I spent in Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton I experienced a variety of dances, concerts, sessions and ceilidhs – not to mention impromptu step sharing sessions and late night tune parties. From dance halls to festival stages, it was apparent that dance rhythms are a central and integral part of musical performance in the Maritimes. Much of the energy and driving force behind the music comes from the constant rhythm perpetuated through foot percussion (Danse assise) and step dance. In concert contexts the ethos I experienced was quite different to that in Scotland. In the Maritimes the music is driven by dance and musicians will almost always sit down to play so that they may tap their foot.

Travelling to these island communities gave me the unique opportunity to develop skills and knowledge which will greatly inform my profession as a performer and as a teacher. In particular it has been an extremely valuable experience for making connections, widening my cultural experience, broadening my repertoire and learning about different percussive styles. It was also interesting to discover how geographically and linguistically defined communities marked the distinctive, and yet overlapping and merging, cultural boundaries of the islands. Most importantly I gained an understanding of the context of the dance traditions within their community settings. It was the hospitality of the people I met on the trip and their welcoming spirit which allowed me to feel part of their culture for my brief time I spent in their communities. This hospitality goes hand in hand with the traditions themselves to form the bonds of community and commonality between people brought together in music and dance. Thank you LUTSF and all the individuals who made this experience possible.