

Crossing over from one instrument to another

An article by:

Dr Christopher Smith -- TTU School of Music
christopher.smith@ttu.edu
webpages.acs.ttu.edu/chrissemi
www.geocities.com/coyotebanjo

Why would we bother to try to imitate the sound of one instrument on the other? Why try to play the accordion like a fiddler, the flute, banjo, or bouzouki like a piper?

Short answer: because throughout the course of Irish traditional music, at least since the 18th century, notable players have often incorporated the sound of (often older) instruments into their own technical approach. In several cases, those who were regarded as real innovators on the "newer" instruments were people who found ways to adapt the melodic idiom of an "older" instrument.

A case in point: the first button box players mostly tended to use tunings, especially C#/D, where one row is tuned to provide sharps and flats, and the other is tuned to provide easy access to a D major scale, very useful for most traditional tunes) which required the "press-and-draw" approach to tunes. This "press-and-draw" approach demanded lots of changes of bellows direction, which gives a certain kind of rhythmic character (modern exemplars of this style include Jackie Daly and Conor Keane. When players like Paddy O'Brien (the first, of Tipperary) and then Joe Burke began playing extensively in B/C tuning, they were able to much more closely replicate fiddler Michael Coleman's ornamentation idiom, because they were able to play chromatic ornaments without changing bellows direction. Joe Burke especially became known for his uncanny ability to mimic Coleman's style. The 1950s 78 recordings of O'Brien and Burke (Burke's were some of the last 78s produced in Ireland) were very influential upon other box players, showing them what the B/C tuning could do towards replicating the older style. Graeme Smith published an excellent article on the transplantation of the Irish accordion style to the emigrant Irish population in Australia in the journal **Ethnomusicology** which discusses this shift of tunings and accompanying shift of style in detail (Graeme Smith, "Modern-Style Irish Accordion Playing: History, Biography, and Class," *Ethnomusicology* 41/3 (Fall 1997): 433-63). You can find lots more information about the Irish button box at Han Speek's WWW site, at http://www.ice.el.utwente.nl/~han/ir_box/index.html.

A few other more abbreviated examples:

Most banjo players put ornaments/articulations in the same spots that fiddle players do. Banjo players tend to use repeated-note or multinode triplets instead of rolls, just because of the physics of the instrument, but they put those articulations in the same places, taking their cues from the fiddlers. This is in order to replicate the rhythmic phrasing and drive of the fiddle.

Flutist Matt Molloy's extensive use of the cran on the flute's low D comes directly from piping techniques.

Many of the Donegal fiddlers similarly replicate highland piping ornaments.

(There are many other examples).

As far as **why** we might do this, beyond a real desire to emulate the sound of players we love but whose instrument we don't play, I can only offer a personal response:

I don't particularly care which instrument I'm playing: guitar, banjo, bouzouki, or even the little bit of fiddle I play, mostly just so I understand it. I love the sound of all these instruments, but I'm never going to be able to get Michael Coleman's or Paddy Keenan's or Paddy O'Brien's or Matt Molloy's sound, on fiddle, pipes, box, or flute, or even transferring over to the plucked strings I do play. I have to give up that idea; it's not realistic (and wouldn't be even if I played the right instruments). So instead, I have to prioritize making the music **feel like** the great recordings and live players I aspire to emulate. It's a little more direct a path on pipes, flute, and fiddle; more indirect on banjo or bouzouki. But those latter are the instruments I play; if I can't get Coleman's or Keenan's or Paddy's or Molloy's **sound**, I can at least try to get their **feel**.

I would argue that one of the defining parameters that gives the music its character is its distinctive idiom of articulation and rhythmic feel. Those articulations are not really "decoration," they are essentially ways of articulating the rhythm of creating musical phrasing so that it has "lift" and "swing." Going only on my own experience, now, I find that the more I can replicate the kinds of articulations that fiddlers, box-players, and to a lesser extent banjo players use, the more the music sounds, rhythmically and in terms of feel/phrasing, the way the old guys sound. I want to sound like the old guys because I love the feel they produced.

This may seem like subtle, almost unnoticeable stuff, that the average listener would not even register. But even if the average listener doesn't consciously think "my goodness, listen to that, that's ornamented just the way that Michael Coleman did, and isn't it odd, he's managing it on the **banjo**." But even if they don't remark it consciously, on an aural/bodily level, I think they definltey do. Why does one player have great "drive" in his/her playing and another not? I think it's at the level of phrasing, rhythm, and articulation, which in ANY music are the results of degrees of technical facility, and the precision with which that player manages to transform a string of disconnected notes into a living, breathing, musical flow.

When I hear Roger Landes play pipe tunes on bouzouki, I get the same kinesthetic rush I get from hearing Paddy Keenan play them on pipes. That's not just attitude--or better to say that "attitude" is not only a subjective or personality thing--it's also a product of intimate stylistic knowledge (Landes plays the pipes, and bloody knows how they're supposed to sound), of what and how one plays.