

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

“Bad” Tunes

There seems to be a general consensus on good tunes. They’re “pleasant to the ear,” and even if one tires of them after repeated playing or hearing, they are still considered sound and worthy compositions. The good ones have the right amount of musical tension-and-release (which is the mechanism music has to keep our interest), and they contain creative combinations of stepwise and interval leaps, put together “just so” to cause them to stand out from the mass of tune repertoire. While individual musical taste dictates what will become favorite tunes we learn and play, we can still admire the “soundness” of compositions that will not become part of our repertoire or our play-lists. We can even revisit, after a time, former favorites that have fallen from our repertoire.

There have been myriad books and articles on what makes a piece of music pleasing, and any text on the psychology of music will attempt to explain it. One such concept from the academic domain is called the Principle of Musical Inevitability, and it has been applied to great classical compositions, to songwriting, to folk music. The principle dictates that great music is perceived by the listener as a series of perfect choices throughout the length of the composition. The best music is that in which the composer’s choices communicate a perfect combination of how music is perceived vertically, that is, as a moment in time (think of a chord), and how it is perceived linearly, or as music flows forward over time. Finally, the principle dictates that great music must be “contextually retrospective,” which just means that the sounds you hear right now in a composition have to be in a relationship to the ones that have preceded them – they have to make sense with the music as a whole.

Lately, however, I’ve been struck by how and why “bad” tunes end up in collections. I should explain that I have seen and played through literally tens of thousands of tunes in my work on the on-line Fiddler’s Companion (F/C) and Traditional Tune Archive (TTA) websites, where I catalog and annotate traditional dance tunes. The F/C and TTA focus on historical printed collections and musicians’ manuscript collections produced over a time span of more than 300 years, and there were thousands produced, great and small. The tunes in these collections can be pictured as a bell curve – some compositions will be works of deep inspiration and lasting beauty, but the majority will cluster around the middle. They will be perhaps pleasing and diverting, but do not reach the level of musical satisfaction of the best the collection has to offer. Not every composition can be a work of genius, even by gifted composers. Then, there’s the downside of the bell curve, for inevitably there will be compositions committed to print or manuscript that do not seem representative of the quality of the rest, and do not begin to meet the “perfect combination of choices” that the Principle of Musical Inevitability dictates. The choices in these “bad” tunes are far from perfect.

Flute player Newton “Newt” Tolman was a mainstay of the Nelson, New Hampshire, dances in the 1960s, and a member of Dudley Laufman’s Canterbury Orchestra that was one of the anchors of the contra dance “revival” of the latter 20th century. He was also particular about the quality of the music he played and wrote about it in the introduction to his *Nelson Music Collection* (1968, co-authored with pianist Kay Gilbert) and expounded on in his book *Quick Tunes and Good Times* (1972). According to Tolman, good tunes have originality and variety in the melody line, and “a melody in which every note, however incidental, is exactly right and could not be improved upon.” They also have a lack of repetition – “generally the second strain with phrases developing from, but not repeating, those of the first strain.” He was merciless about some warhorses such as “Soldier’s Joy,” which he called “dismal” and opined that it was “about as joyless a sound as was ever heard

Miss Mountan’s

Late 19th-century hornpipe which, according to Newton “Newt” Tolman, violated the Principle of Musical Inevitability

The image displays the musical notation for the hornpipe 'Miss Mountan's'. It is written on a single treble clef staff in 2/4 time. The melody consists of four lines of music, with measure numbers 1, 5, 9, and 14 indicated at the start of each line. The notation includes various note values (quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes), rests, and repeat signs. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

by a soldier.” A whole period of square dance music from the latter 19th century also fares woefully in his estimation, with its attempts to “improve” on the original forms by making them more elaborate. “Whenever we run across a reel or hornpipe constructed largely of arpeggios,” he writes in the *Nelson Music Collection*, “liberally seasoned with trills, triplets or grace notes, we can tell at a glance that it was written not before the late 1800s,” noting with irony that “It is interesting to reflect that these pieces were written by some of the best educated musicians of their time, often leaders of celebrated bands and orchestras.”

Tunes he said he would be happy never to hear or play again also included “Arkansas Traveler,” “Devil’s Dream,” “Hull’s Victory,” “Lamplighter’s,” “Little Brown Jug,” “Miss McLeod’s,” “Money Musk,” “Rakes of Mallow,” “Turkey in the Straw,” “Oh, Susannah,” and “Irish Washerwoman,” although he noted that some of them may be beloved of callers and dancers. It may be assumed these had run afoul of his prohibitions against repetition, lack of vitality and originality, coupled with the fatigue of having heard them played too often. These tunes, he concluded, were far from offering the “perfect combination of choices” strived for in the Principle of Musical Inevitability.

Still, the warhorse tunes he listed are not “bad” tunes in and of themselves, and even Tolman acknowledged they might be expectable and acceptable playing fare for the novice (to be discarded once a higher level of proficiency on one’s instrument had been achieved). This is an acknowledgment of the fact that not all “good” tunes are pleasing – musical pleasure is a subjective psychological experience unique to the listener, and while adherence to musical principles can certainly increase the likelihood of a piece being perceived as pleasurable, it is no guarantee.

The reverse – when music fails to come close to the Principle of Musical Inevitability – is much more likely to provoke displeasure. Bad compositions result in negative subjective experiences to the listener. Thus Tolman reserved scorn for those tunes that clearly not only violated the musical inevitability principles that he himself had himself discovered, but aroused intense displeasure in him. He named three in particular: “Golden Eagle,” “Miss Mountan’s,” and “Rialto,” all late 19th century hornpipes.

If we take a look at “Miss Mountan’s” we can see exactly what he was talking about. It is full of arpeggios – in fact, the pattern of the piece is a measure of arpeggios followed by a measure of stepwise movement alternating throughout the composition. Arpeggiated measures account for 10 of the 16 measures (not counting repeats). (Composition note to self: if a passage sounds too much like a bugle call, then it is not your “best choice.”) The melodic contour is like a roller coaster, alternately climbing and plunging with little internal consistency. The turns upward and downward are not dictated by sense of musical relatedness, and seem to be deliberate upturns and downturns based solely on the composer’s artificial idea that melodic lines should vary in pitch from high to low every other measure.

Thus “Miss Mountan’s” fails because it violates two parts of the musical inevitability principle: it has neither linear coherence, nor is it “contextually retrospective” in the sense that the measures do not build upon what came before as they move forward in time – they are simply building blocks arranged in a row, as if by happenstance. One can but imagine Miss Mountan did not feel particularly flattered by her namesake piece of music, and we can but hope that the sum of her own person was much more successful than is represented by this “bad” tune.

Collectors and editors sometimes identify a “bad” tune in their collections, and explain, almost in apology, why they felt the need to include it. Samuel Bayard, who collected extensively in southwestern Pennsylvania for some 30 or more years, was not shy to identify deficient compositions, but always put his “bad” tunes in context and explained their relevance in his collections. Some of his deficient tunes were degenerations of tunes that, in their original state, had been much better compositions. In pointing out the degeneration, Bayard provided a reminder that the “folk process” of oral transmitting of melodies cuts both ways. The “collective massaging” of melodies in the tradition sometimes

19th Century Dance Manuscripts For Violin

The Aurora Violin Manuscripts, from the Aurora Colony, a 19th century communal society of nearly 600 people, mostly German and Swiss immigrants in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, who had an amazing musical heritage of brass bands and violin-based quadrille bands. 166 dance tunes selected from six manuscripts: waltzes, polkas, schottisches, galops, mazurkas, quadrilles, marches, polonaises, a varsouvienne, a tyrolienne, and a redova.

The Peter Beemer Manuscript, Warren’s Diggins, Idaho. 124 waltzes, quadrilles, schottisches, mazurkas, polkas, quicksteps, etc. collected in an Idaho gold mining camp in the 1860’s, for a dance band of two violins, flute, banjo, and accordion.

The Haynes Family Manuscript, written by seven different fiddlers from pioneer families who came to Oregon’s Willamette Valley in the 1840’s and 1850’s. 65 dance tunes, including mazurkas, waltzes, quadrilles, varsouviennes, polkas.

Many of the tunes in these three manuscripts have not been played for over 100 years. This is the lost dance music of the Victorian era in the pioneer West!

The John Neilson Music Book, dated 1875, written down by a fiddler in Cullhill, Scotland. 120 tunes, some not found elsewhere, including popular 19th century dance forms and traditional Scottish tunes.

Standard notation with suggested chords. Historical information about the manuscripts and the tunes. Difficulty ranges from easy to technically challenging. Researched and edited by Vivian T. Williams.

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improves them over time, and sometimes erodes them. His “Round the Button and Through the Horn” is an example, or, rather, two examples, for that is the name of two quadrille tunes he printed in his collection *Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife* (1981). Bayard seems to have been taken with the title (which is perhaps a reference to a sewing maneuver, but that’s just a guess at this time), although he certainly was not a fan of either melody. He obtained them from a fiddler named James Bryner, from Dunbar in Fayette County, Pa., who was middle-aged when Bayard first visited him in 1946 and got the first quadrille. When he returned to visit Bryner in 1960, the fiddler played him another 6/8 time quadrille tune, giving it the same name as the tune Bayard had collected from him 14 years earlier. It was not, however, the same piece of music. Bayard concluded that Bryner had become confused due to the similarity of the last two bars of the first strain of each tune, which were nearly identical.

Those two bars were not the only problem contributing to Bryner’s faulty memory, however. Both tunes are in the American quadrille format (meaning they have a key change between strains, as is often the case, from root to fifth), and both have a surfeit of arpeggios and melodic outlining of chords, plus wholly undistinguished melodies. The first “Round the Button” tune has a melody that is confined to the space of an octave, while the second “Round the Button” simply outlines chords for most of its two parts. There is precious little to attach such a good title to, much less accurate recall. Bayard’s conclusion: “Each piece is a quadrille of exceedingly common sort – that is, comparatively undistinguished, and full of much-used melodic formulas.” One has to wonder how it is that such tunes survived in the fiddler’s repertoire at all, save for the cache of the title, which in true “folk process” form has become detached from one composition and landed on another. With another such change it could be deemed a “floater,” adrift in musical seas until (if lucky) it manages to reach out a tentacle and secure itself to a worthier composition.

Now that we’ve seen that “bad” melodies can reside in collections, and described how they can be adjudged deficient, we can return to the “why” of their inclusion in the first place. There’s a distinction between musicians’ manuscript collections and printed, edited, collections. We might readily “forgive” musicians who produced their own copybooks for including “bad” tunes for a variety of reasons. Musicians’ music manuscripts are usually personal collections, meant primarily for an audience of one. Who is to criticize what they include (and don’t we feel a bit like intruders when we view them)? Not infrequently, musicians include their own attempts at composing in their manuscripts, or jot down tunes they learned on, and over time these become more sophisticated. Musicians don’t erase from manuscript collections, but instead just turn to the next page (there’s often a qualitative difference between the tunes in the first half of a music copybook and the second half). How many of us would like our own attempts at learning, or our first attempts at composing, to be part of our musical legacy?

George W. Allen, whose latter 19th century American fiddle tune manuscript contains more than the usual share of excellent compositions, also includes several that are questionable. His schottische “Johnny Blow the Candle Out” [archive.org/stream/ClogsHornpipesReelsJigs/MUMSS-00089#page/n15/mode/2up] errs much the same way that Bryner’s tune did, except the lack of musical tension is produced not by monotonous arpeggios, but by monotonous stepwise motion interspaced with intervals of a third. Like fiddler Bryner’s quadrilles, these are not “best choices” for composition. In terms of the Principle of Musical Inevitability, Allen has erred compositionally in that his tune is overly “contextually representative” – there is so much “representation” in the melody as it goes through time of what came before (stepwise melody and thirds) that it’s stultifying to the listener.

Why “bad” tunes turn up in printed collections is much more

Round the Button and Through the Horn (2)

Quadrille from *Samuel Bayard’s Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife*: “...comparatively undistinguished, and full of much-used melodic formulas.”

The image shows a musical score for a quadrille in 6/8 time, written in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score is divided into four staves, with measure numbers 1, 5, 9, and 14 indicated at the beginning of each line. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets. The first staff (measures 1-4) ends with a double bar line. The second staff (measures 5-8) also ends with a double bar line. The third staff (measures 9-13) contains a triplet of eighth notes in measure 9. The fourth staff (measures 14-17) continues the melody. The piece concludes with a final double bar line at the end of the fourth staff.

complicated, since, unlike manuscript collections, they are (presumably) subject to editing, even if they are largely the compositions of one person. Good editors will cull “bad” tunes and limit more mundane ones, or at least attempt to explain their inclusion. There certainly have been “politic” justifications for including some of these compositions – perhaps they were named for a wealthy and powerful patron, or a stage personality whose name might be recognized (and thus add cache to the collection). In these cases it’s the inclusion of the title that is the goal, and the music is incidental. Perhaps some were included to curry favor or flatter an admired person – there are more titles that begin with “Miss ____” than any other titles in the whole of traditional music literature, where the object is not so much to produce worthy music as it is to artistically massage an ego. Some questionable tunes we might consider “filler,” included out of necessity to round out a collection that would otherwise have seemed too short. If the editor is also the composer, then they may have included compositions they knew were not their best to fill out a volume. Even master tunesmiths may find themselves in this situation. One of the best and most famous early-20th century fiddle collections is J. Scott Skinner’s *Harp and Claymore* (1904), for which he composed 144 of the 252 tunes (the remainder being among the best from older composers, selected by, and often with variations by, Skinner). The collection is overall a work of power and beauty from a master musician and composer at the height of his powers, yet it contains compositions that are mundane alongside some of

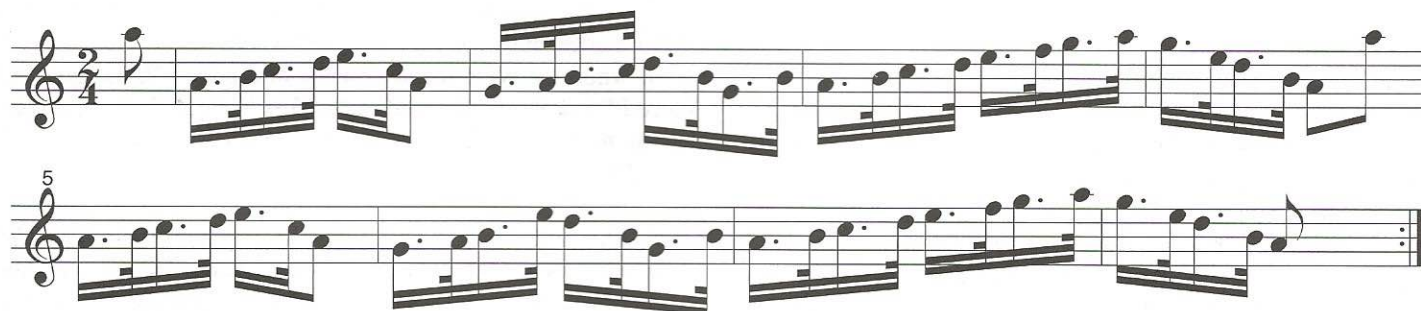
his best works. His schottische “Big Captain of Cartlehaugh” is but a noodle of a melody in the first strain, and arpeggios in the second. Skinner’s working title had been “Big Sergeant of Cartlehaugh” but after he submitted it to his music editor, Gavin Greig, it was deemed a musical promotion was in order and his rank was changed from non-com to officer. It did not make the composition any better, however. “Happy Frank” (in honor of Frank Gilruth, Dumfries Academy), is an unworthy Skinner hornpipe-of-arpeggios dedicated to his friend, a teacher of commerce at Dumfries Academy from 1882 until his death. Gilruth was also an amateur composer and fiddler, as well as an artist, and Skinner had the sense to include Gilruth’s own excellent composition “Farewell to Gartly” in *Harp and Claymore*.

In terms of tune history, “bad” tunes often give as much information as good ones, whether in a manuscript or a printed collection. They won’t make my own play-list, but they have as much to teach about the composer as good ones. Their value is in the context in which we find them.

[Andrew Kuntz maintains two on-line databases, The Fiddler’s Companion (ibiblio.org/fiddlers) and his current project The Traditional Tune Archive (tunearch.org). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in a variety of old time, Irish, and French-Canadian music sessions.]

Johnny Blow the Candle Out

Schottische by George W. Allen, displaying a “lack of musical tension”



Happy Frank

“An unworthy [James Scott] Skinner hornpipe-of-arpeggios”

