

The Quintessentially English Tune

An appraisal of the 'Cut-Time' Hornpipe, using examples from the Burnett Ms. c.1840

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This essay was written in response to the arrogant declaration in GCSE Music guidance notes which declare that a 'simple folk melody' will only earn the candidate a minimal mark at examination.

Introduction

As a brief and somewhat cursory introduction to this musical form it might be said that the hornpipe appears to have begun its life in the 17th century as a tune in 'triple' time, being set in time signatures of 3/2, 6/4 or even 9/8. Gathering and retaining popularity throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, it gradually began to recede from the popular milieu in the 18th century and was effectively extinct by the early 19th century having been succeeded by its progeny the 2/2, or 'cut-time', hornpipes. The earlier form enjoyed a revival of interest amongst vernacular musicians in the late 20th century due to the publication, by John Offord, of his collection, 'John of the Greeny Cheshire Way'. Players of traditional music in the North-West of England are currently particularly interested in this form of the tune. Curiously, and this is never remarked upon by the players themselves, a majority of this generation had been introduced to the 3/2 hornpipe at school via 'The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra' by Britten whose musical vehicle was Purcell's 'Rondo in Abdelazer'. This melody is a triple time hornpipe, one of two in the larger work, the second being published in the guise of a country dance tune by Playford as, 'The Hole in the Wall'. The simple triple time structure of this earlier form had been popular with composers such as Handel and Purcell and its demise in the early 18th century may be attributable to changing fashions and the popularity of theatrical performances, which included the new form or 'cut time' hornpipe. As will be shown, there is another possibility for the change in popularity of this form of melody.

The later form is associated in the popular mind with both the theatre and its tradition of step dance as well as with the romantic view of the sailor 'Jolly Jack Tar'. It seems likely that these associations arise from a similar source. Theatrical writers such as Charles Dibdin were instrumental in creating the popular image of the sailor with songs and sketches of an unashamedly patriotic flavour. These performances were jingoistic displays of song and dance and coincide with a dark period in English history when it seemed that Napoleon Bonaparte would conquer Europe and ultimately Britain as well. The tide of the Peninsular War turned in the first decade of the 19th century when, perhaps coincidentally, the 'cut time' hornpipe seems to have reached maturity as a musical form.

This latter form of the hornpipe, however, appears, on the face of it, to be associated with percussive step dance and therefore had to be played, at least superficially, in a manner sympathetic to the dancer. The outcome seems to be that, by the early 1800s, a body of tunes described as hornpipes, having a distinctive 2/2 time signature, together with a diversity of performance styles, appears in the English musical tradition. Later, in the 19th and 20th centuries, these same melodies are found in various collections notated in 2/4 and 4/4. This further clouds the issue since the move from two beats in a bar to four beats in a bar effectively creates a different tune type. This further moves the tunes away from their original 3 beats to a bar form. What is perhaps more thought provoking is that these tunes may, in performance, be among some of the most exotic melodic structures in the Western European canon. The reasons for this complexity are partly historical and partly due to this same diversity of interpretation and function in their performance. The 19th century Scottish writer Honeyman (1910), in his violin tutor, identifies three styles of playing these melodies. Honeyman's categories are, 'Newcastle', 'Sailor' and 'Sand Dance'. These distinctions do not address hybrids and the whole constitutes an oversimplification of the nuances involved in playing this type of melody. These

tunes, sometimes called 'breakdowns' after the distinctive three-crotchet final bar are not confined to theatrical settings nor are they particularly Northern in character. Likewise, these same distinctions deny the existence of an unbroken tradition of musical interpretation which extends from at least the 17th century. By the same token, James Scott-Skinner disregards the melodies entirely and advises the student wishing to play these tunes to seek the advice of a street musician. Either Scott-Skinner is dismissive because he doesn't like hornpipes or he is acknowledging that they are hard to play and outside the scope of his methodology.

The ensuing essay will attempt to outline why the 2/2 hornpipe, the "quintessentially English tune", as English fiddle player, Dave Shepherd puts it, is so complex. An examination of both the form and the internal rhythmic structure of this tune type will show how the melody is evolved, in performance, from its 'skeletons'. The latter being experienced only as, to use Witkin's terminology (Witkin 1974), a written holding form which serves as the aide-memoire for the performer. The proposition here is that the melody exists in two distinct and differing forms, the first, the emic form is perceived only in actual performance by a musician who is an 'inheritor' of the tradition of playing such tunes. The second or etic form may be examined by anyone having the ability to read standard musical notation. It has been demonstrated that knowledge of either of these does not bring enlightenment as to the other.

Form

It is perfectly possible to contain much of a heard melody within the confines of musical notes on a staff. There are, however, problems inherent with this practice, which, although easily discerned when dealing with 'exotic' musical forms, are less obvious if one makes the erroneous assumption that, since this is English music, it conforms to the western approach. This is unacceptable to those who play this music which is best treated by all students, regardless of cultural origin, as being 'exotic' for the purposes of study.

Cultural conditioning forces us to recognise music on a rather superficial level at times. Seeing the hornpipe as a written form we quickly recognise the 32 bar structure common to most traditional musics of the British Isles. It is only if we reject the cultural baggage with which we are imbued by our mere existence that we can see deeper into this complex musical artefact. A lifetime of playing this music gives an insight which reveals that, despite the apparent two, or four, bar phrasing of the melody as written, there is a discernable sub-text within the phrasing when played by a traditional musician. Consequently a closer inspection reveals that what appears initially to be a sixteen bar tune in four bar phrases is in reality a series of four three bar phrases each carrying six beats. These are held in suspension by a set of musical features, which serve as transitions, resolutions and reiterations. In performance the tune appears simple to the listener but it will be seen that a complex process is occurring in the mind of the performer. On the etic level the melody has an obvious binary structure. However the emic experience outlines a form which may be ternary or quaternary.

Typically, the melodic form begins with the upbeat, which draws the listener into the first pattern, a group of three bars or six beats. The emphasis is then drawn towards the conclusion of the section by a 'pre-emptive' bar, which holds characteristics both of the previous three bars and of the impending final bar in the melodic idea. This is then followed by an answering three bars, often reiterating or developing the melodic and rhythmic material from the first three bars. Finally the ultimate bar gives the 'breakdown', usually consisting of an emphatic three crotchets. The B section of the tune then repeats this pattern using new melodic ideas but frequently retaining the first melodic idea from the A section to give an overall ternary structure to the melody.

Internal Structure

A grouping of two minims, each of which represents the beat, moulds the rhythmic shape of the

'cut time' hornpipe. The most usual expression of these is, however, a group of four quavers for each minim. These groupings are placed two to a bar and generally progress internally by step in opening sections. This predictability is such that it is comparatively easy to create a distinctive melody by deliberately breaking this step progression and using leaps of other interval values in the latter parts of the melody. These are used sparingly in tradition to give an individual hornpipe its identifying features which thence establish its character and 'personality'. Characteristic of this type is 'Blanche's Hornpipe' where the first three bars provide a statement capped in the fourth bar by a showy little flourish of triplets which leads to a reiteration of the upbeat which in turn heralds a repeat of the theme before the final 'breakdown' of three crotchets. The B figure follows this pattern with pedal figures introduced in the sequential second theme. The untitled hornpipe renamed for convenience as 'Lewden Hill' has a distinct four beat structure to the bar and is the only tune in the collection to include bowing marks. Here the theme in the A music is very different from the B part which is dotted and contrasts with the almost reel-like first part. In the Burnett collection there are several hornpipes which have wholly distinct characteristics, such as 'Kershaw's' which was written by a player, Joseph Kershaw, from Saddleworth. Kershaw was Burnett's contemporary and Saddleworth in their day was in Yorkshire. This hornpipe uses the interval of a 6th to establish its character in the B part. Kershaw's is an unusual example in other ways because of its successive development of the theme rather than the more common restatement of thematic material. Other tunes such as 'Milton's' share formulaic sequences of quavers with other melodies. In this case, there is a phrase in the B part which is virtually identical with its counterpart in the 'Devil among the Tailors', a Scottish tune of some significance. The melody is known in Southern England as 'The Gypsy Hornpipe', In the Burnett example, it is the A figure which gives the melody its character ascending in thirds over its first two bars.

This melodic shaping appears straightforward when experienced in the written text but assumes problematic features when heard played by experienced practitioners of the form. In performance there is an unwritten imperative to cast the melody in a series of structures relating to the number three. Barring aside, the normal division in the hornpipe, when performed, is the triplet. This causes some problems for inexperienced players because of its perceived tempo change. In fact the experienced player plays sets of triplets in pairs giving a nominal count of two sets of six beats in the bar. This enables articulation to be retained in a manageable fashion but throws up the oddity of a six beat pattern, which again seems to syncopate the melody. This can be seen in the B section of 'Paganinni's 2nd. Hornpipe' (sic)

In the fashioning of a hornpipe this experiential stress on the triple unit causes paired crotchet and quaver groupings to appear around the beat, which again reflect the triplet. Use of dotting on some bars seems to emphasise this with a delivery 'dotted and tailed' reducing the rhythmic unit to a value of three semiquavers again giving the two groups of six to the bar value. Rarely, in fact, does the traditional musician articulate this complex melody type as it would be notated by convention.

This phenomenon has been commented on by Jeffrey (1992) in which he observes that interpretation of music in performance often differs from the written form. In this function the written music acts as a framework or 'skeleton' around which the player constructs the working melody. In the 2/2 hornpipe this construction can be shown time and again to involve a sense of timing and articulation in which three becomes the internal value of sections of the melody within the apparent external structure of the two beat bar.

Melodic shape is a product of paired groupings of notes, usually with an arched profile, and being most commonly linked to each other by intervallic transitions of no more than a third. These structures are often built into the three bar pattern as sequences with a rise or fall being resolved by a rapid downward or upward run built directly on the scale. This resolution enables the sequence to be

repeated or a new pattern to start. Exceptions to this are deliberate artistic constructs designed to create a particular character to the melody in question. In this manner B sections of many hornpipes feature a pedal figure of ascending or descending steps alternating with the tonic. These climbing or falling patterns with their tonal underpinning frequently emphasise the notes A or D, both of which are played on open strings on the violin. Popular theory, however, links these features with pipers rather than fiddlers.

In 1997 I had occasion to play 'The Newtondale Hornpipe' with its composer David Shepherd. This melody, it transpires, is a minor key re-working of the reel form, 'Goathland Square Eight', a melody in common time. David and I played the melody together without recourse to any form of notation. Shepherd asked where I had learned it and I confessed to having transcribed it from a recording of his playing. Examination of my transcription, however, revealed that I had notated the tune in the standard 2/2 time. Shepherd had written it as an example of a melody in 3/2 time in the manner of the 'old English' hornpipe. Despite these differences the melodies scanned perfectly in a playing context but looked different in a written form.

Further experiments in barring melodies in 3/2 time as if they were the later 2/2 form revealed that, for all practical purposes, they are one and the same. The effect is obvious in listening where the element of two beats in place of three gives that curious and distinctive feel which is the modern hornpipe. My suggestion is that the hornpipe in 2/2 is nothing more than an attempt to quantise a hornpipe played in 3/2. This takes up a third less space on the page which, in earlier times when paper was scarce or expensive, may have been an economic consideration. This is then a matter of notational convention rather than an actual change in practice. The placing of twelve quavers in the space of three minim beats is entirely consistent with the way in which the melody manifests itself to the traditional player and gives the element of syncopation so noticeable in practice. Where this occurs there can be seen again the six beat structure occurring across the pattern but articulated by the player in a single bar in the 'cut time' form.

The extant manuscript tunebooks of the early 19th century show no difference in the way in which reels and hornpipes are notated. Burnett is no different in this respect. Nevertheless these melodies sound distinctly different when played by musicians who understand the traditional distinctions. Players of reels play the melody by 'thinking' in a square timeframe. The emic approach to playing the cut time hornpipe is to 'think in threes' whilst playing in twos. This approach is assimilated experientially. It is not taught but absorbed hermeneutically and it is extremely unlikely that a player would be able to identify why he or she plays this tune family in such a distinctive way, indeed, a fast approach to debate among traditional players is to suggest that 'hornpipes should be played thus...'.¹

Tonality

The hornpipe is one of the easiest tunes to 'get into' in an informal session. Provided the player has absorbed the traditional structuring outlined above then the tonality is reduced to a matter of formulaics which, because of their relationships to the structure, make the tune family instantly accessible to the player. Tomas O'Canainn (1978) in his analysis of tonality in Irish traditional melody uses a procedure to ascertain note frequency in a melody. The process involves attributing a points score to each note of the scale based on the position in the melody and the frequency of occurrence. Using this procedure highlights a feature of traditional music, which, when applied to the Burnett and other hornpipes, reveals odd relationships within the tonal structure. Such an analysis reveals that, although the tonic appears to be that declared by the key signature, dominant and subdominant positions are only rarely occupied by the fifth and fourth degrees of the scale. The 'Brown Paper Hornpipe' has a tonic G with a dominant D and subdominant A which makes it an unconventional tune. On the other hand, 'Chatam', 'Cooper's' and the 'Butterfly' hornpipes all have D as tonic and A as the dominant but they all share a

subdominant F#, effectively using the first, third and fifth degrees of the scale as the tonal framework upon which they are based. 'Brumby's' and 'Down's' hornpipes are even stranger constructions having a straightforward tonic, A in the case of the former and Bb in the case of the latter. They then have a dominant based on the third degree of the scale and, even more oddly, appear to have a subdominant framed on the second degree. 'Abbott's' in F and 'Durham' in D share the characteristic of being built on the first, third and fifth degrees, but in their case the third degree is dominant and the fifth degree subdominant, which is somewhat at odds with orthodoxy. This latter phenomenon simply points out that, in the case of traditional music in Britain, we are not dealing with standard usage and the reader's attention should be held by that fact. This structuring on degrees of the scale other than those assumed by Western European musical theory has also been noted in Armenian song where melodic lines can be shown to be structured similarly to these melodies (Komitas/Gulbekian 1998)

A curiosity of these melodies is that the tonic is only occasionally also the tonal centre and for much of the performance of a given melody we hear a return to a tonal centre which is as likely to be the dominant. The sense of returning is further complicated by the occurrence of two tonal centres within one melody. In 'Abbott's Hornpipe', nominally in F major, for example, the A figure has a focus, based on the 3rd degree of the scale whilst the B figure moves around the tonic. There is a very real sense of centralisation in all of these tunes and the approach to, and departure from the tonal centre falls into three main structures. The first is an arching figure in which notes rise above or descend below the desired objective before the actual approach. The second is a straight line in which the tonic centre is gained by a series of steps or leaps up or down the scale in scalar progression. The third is the pedal figure, often ascribed to the influence of bagpipers but in reality simply achieved on the fiddle by raising and lowering the bowing hand. Here the melody is punctuated by the occurrence of the central tone after every other note giving a hopping feel to the tune. These three patterns dominate in the hornpipe and provide an effective formulaic for experienced players to anticipate passages and to create variations accordingly. Most commonly in order to ornament in performance, triplets will be inserted into one of these patterns rather than elsewhere in a melody

O'Canainn asserts that this relationship of tonalities indicates that the music to which it belongs is concerned more with melodic progression than with harmony and chordal structure. This is not necessarily the case in the hornpipe where it can be seen that the melody is made up of formulae based on the four quaver subdivision of the beat. These shapes reflect manipulations of the chordal structure. The famous 'Harvest Home' hornpipe, although not in Burnett's collection, must be cited here because of its thematic use and development of the chord in the tonic, fifth, third, fifth progression seen in the 'Alberti' bass. Other structures lie deeper and an analysis based on the intervallic movement within the beat reveals how the musician develops thematic material within the chordal structure. This analysis uses only three points of reference, the progression from the first note in the group to the second and thence to the third and fourth. For example, 222 is a group of four quavers which descend in steps of a second. In the same way 2'2'2' is the reverse where the quavers rise up the scale whilst 3'2'3 indicates a rise of a third then a second followed by a descent of a third. It is these groupings which allow experienced players to create and recreate this melodic form. These units act as formulae resembling in part those verbal structures or oral formulaics observed by Lord and Parry in their work on the Yugoslav epic. (Lord, 1960) Their proposition has been subsequently developed by McCarthy (1990) to provide an analysis of ballad repertoires. Similarly, continuous exposure to the hornpipe form leaves the player with a repertoire of these clichés or 'interval formulae' with which to work or upon which to fashion variations and divisions.

In playing these tunes on the violin, arguably their instrument of origin, the fingers fall naturally into chordal patterns, which are partly associated with double stopping. It therefore becomes natural to build one's interpretation of a given melody on the notes upon which one's fingers naturally fall. The

hornpipes of Joshua Burnett indicate an interpretation based upon the way in which Burnett's fingers operated on the instrument. The tonality of these tunes is essentially chordal and appears in many cases to be based, not in orthodoxy but as a series of articulations of the chord which the player 'homes' into upon gripping the instrument in order to play in a given key. As a violinist, if I play a tune in G major, my personal style encourages the index finger to fall onto, and remain on the B above middle C whilst the third finger plays the G. This is reasonably standard practice but when I play the D above that B my second finger falls onto F# on the D string and I tend to double stop the middle two strings at that point. The effect is that my style of playing is different to that of another player since he/she may not double-stop in the same chordal progressions. Hence a melody noted from any individual's playing might have differing dominant and sub dominant degrees. This observation appears consistent with Barlow (1993) who notes that ambiguities of tonic centre occur in early hornpipes which have similar extemporised content. Thus, in 'Aston's' hornpipe, Barlow notes that the supertonic G is succeeded after six bars by a tonic F. Similar ambiguities been found in the hornpipes in the Burnett collection which are later than Barlow's materials.

In Burnett's collection there are a number of tonal structures which suggest that the tunes originate with different players. Note, this does not indicate different composers since in this form of music there is a synchronicity of composition, interpretation and performance. Thus, using O'Canainn's system to analyse the tonal relationships of these melodies we discover four tune types: -

- Melodies fashioned on the chord of the tonic or of the relative minor.
- Melodies fashioned on the chord of the tonic or relative minor but having a moveable third within that chord.
- Melodies fashioned on the 1st, 4th and 5th degrees of the scale.
- Melodies constructed on the character of the instrument of origin

From this analysis it is, in theory at least, possible to postulate something of the style of playing both of Burnett and of the other two named contributors to this collection. Burnett was not only a player of the violin but also a collector. His materials originate from different sources and seem to be selected for the high level of technical difficulty which they display in comparison to the contents of other, similar collections. For example, the tune attributed to Joseph Kershaw is a difficult one since it adopts the second of these approaches to melodic progression. The analysis shows that the tune is one of those built on a chord of the tonic. However, there is an ambiguity in this melody with the third of the chord of D being equally shared by the notes F# and B. With both of these notes sharing the subdominant position in the melody there is a constant shift between the chord D major and the relative B minor as the basis for the melody. This chord substitution, occurring as it does in an apparently unstructured way means that a player of this music encounters the melody as a series of unorthodox formulae. This is borne out by the intervallic movement in the B part where there are a succession of 6:1 beats with the melody being built overall on formulae, 3'33' or 333' and 32'3 groupings varied with some 4th and 5th intervals. These factors together make the tune distinctive, unusual and therefore difficult for the average practitioner.

The second named contributor is James Knight, blind musician of Sheffield. Knight's hornpipe is in the key of F major and is unusual in modern terms since it is in a flat key. This automatically makes it more difficult for the 20th century traditional player who, since the late 19th century has become more used to melodic material in sharp keys due in a large part to the influence of the diatonic accordion or melodeon as it is customarily described. The hornpipe by Knight has its structure based, to the greater extent on the normal chordal framework of 1st, 4th and 5th degrees of the scale. There is a sharpening of the 4th degree of the scale in the pre-emptive bar in the A part creating a tension which throws the listener's ear into the next three bar pattern.. In this melody the 2nd degree chord G minor seems to

exert a stronger influence than the 5th degree chord C major although both have a similar occurrence within the melody. Overall then, it can be said that Knight's tune follows a more orthodox progression than does that of Kershaw, the third identifiable individual named in the document. This being so, it might be argued that the latter gives some evidence of formal musical education. Certainly Knight's is, by this structural signature, a rare tune type in this collection.

The untitled melody called 'Brumby's Hornpipe' in the published collection seems to be constructed as a melodic progression lying on and around the A string on a violin. The tonic is A but the dominant position is held by the note C# with B in the subdominant position. Musically this should make a rather dull tune especially as the most usual interval formulae are 222, 22'2', and 3'2'2. However dullness is avoided by the use of a pedal figure in the B section of the tune built on an 87'7, 65'5, 222 sequence that adds interest as the tune 'turns'. A similar structure can be seen in 'Kendal Green' a hornpipe which seems to be based on excursions on and around the two middle strings of a violin, D and A. In the interval formulae it may be seen that the 4th is common and here, as in Knight's hornpipe the 4th is sharpened. Here the chord of the 4th degree is substituted by its relative minor, that of the 2nd degree, E minor. One explanation for this might be that it is a tune built using scordatura with the violin in 'old' ADAD fiddle tuning.

'King William', 'Joseph Ward's' and 'Fiddlesticks' hornpipes are all examples of melodies built solidly upon the chord of the tonic. 'Ward's' is distinguished by its interesting 6 5'5 groupings whilst 'King William' displays a strong adherence to the internal functioning of the tripartite division of the rhythm. 'Fiddlesticks', like 'Ward's' is characterised by its formulae and makes a distinctive use of the 433' pattern set against the ubiquitous 222 and 2'2'2.

Summary

In conclusion it would be unacceptable to judge this complex tune family as a 'simple folk melody' by the written notation alone. The difficulty encountered by musicologists in dealing with materials from their own folk culture is that they are all too often regarded superficially. The failure to view this material as 'exotic' is, of course understandable but just because it is notated using a western standard should not seduce the student into believing that it is therefore equivalent to other music notated in the same way. With close examination there emerge a set of internal characteristics which directly affect the performance and interpretation of these and other folk tunes extant in the British Isles' musical traditions. Each tune family has its own character and subtleties. The following are the characteristics which separate the hornpipe from other types of traditional music in dance form.

Thus we may say that the hornpipe;

- Is a tune written in 2/2 but played in the manner of a tune written in 3/2 with an internal division of three being an overarching consideration in performance. The authentic performance of these tunes will therefore manifest a subtle form of syncopation based on this internalisation of the rhythmic divisions by the performer. In the same respect it can be expected that the practiced traditional performer will ornament and embellish the tune in performance by a conscious or subconscious application of this tripartite subtext.
- Is, like other traditional tunes from these islands, a melodic form structured on the chord of the tonic in many cases or, in other cases being based on a set of three notes which, by their frequency of occurrence occupy the relative position and functions of tonic, dominant and subdominant within the structure. These notes only rarely reflect

orthodoxy in their relationships.

- Is a musical form which is constructed from formulae based on the intervallic movement of groups of notes which are structured around the beat. These formulae are predictable where they carry the melody forward and unpredictable where they comprise the identifying formula for a particular tune.
- Is a tune type which allows itself to be reconstructed in each performance by the use of the features identified above. It cannot be defined as simply a tune in 2/2 time for the same reasons. Consequently it can only be experienced in actual performance. It is this reconstruction which causes the wide range of opinion regarding the interpretation of the hornpipe in performance.

The performance of a hornpipe, perhaps more than most traditional dance forms, includes all of the stages of the creative, reflective process outlined by Witkin (1974). Thus the melody itself which is only notionally agreed between players within the tradition acts as the 'holding form', from which the performer spontaneously creates a succession of 'approximations' which lead the listener's ear towards the 'realised form' which is the hornpipe. The process is temporal and is created afresh each time the player performs the melody. This will occur within the cycle of repetitions in a single playing as well as over a number of subsequent playings. In the North-East of England variations are still used which manifest as successive reductions in note value with a correspondingly greater incidence of note occurrence through each repetition of the melody. The process is not dissimilar to some oriental musics in that the change and variation increases with the cyclic motion of the performance. It may be shown in such instances that the new formulae produced by division are, in fact, structured in the same way as those formulae from which they were derived.

These factors place the 'cut time' hornpipe amongst other 'exotic' folk melodies as being a complex and demanding example of human musical ingenuity. This is far from a 'simple folk melody' as some self styled 'authorities' have put it.

Sources

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