

The Chop: The Diffusion of an Instrumental Technique across North Atlantic Fiddling Traditions

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Abstract. The “chop” is a percussive string instrument technique pioneered by bluegrass fiddler Richard Greene in the 1960s and adopted into contemporary string styles by Darol Anger in the 1980s. This article traces the diffusion of the chop through a number of North Atlantic fiddling traditions in the 1990s and 2000s. It also considers the circumstances and implications of musicians’ decisions to adopt, adapt, or reject the chop. Drawing on both sociological research on the diffusion of innovations and genre theory, this article demonstrates that the diffusion trajectory of a musical innovation depends on the innovation itself, on the sites of transmission, and on the interplay of the lived and imagined musical worlds within which musicians play, work, and study. It concludes by suggesting that, when studying North Atlantic fiddling, both regional divisions and generational trends should be taken into consideration.

The violin is so old and the techniques are so well established And now all of a sudden there’s a new thing, after how many years?

—Casey Driessen (telephone interview, 1 February 2011)

In 1966, bluegrass fiddler Richard Greene invented a percussive string instrument technique that he dubbed “the chunky chop” (telephone interview, 1 February 2011). Now known simply as “the chop” or, in its verbal form, “chopping,” this technique is currently used by violinists, violists, and cellists in nu-

Note: this article refers to figures and video clips that can be found on the Society for Ethnomusicology’s website, following the pathway Publications > Journal > Multimedia Appendices. As of 2013, the URLs for the SEM website and the multimedia appendices are www.ethnomusicology.org and http://www.ethnomusicology.org/?Pub_JournalMA, respectively.

merous musical genres, including traditional fiddling styles of the British Isles, Canada, Scandinavia, Spain, and the United States; jazz; progressive bluegrass, or newgrass; popular styles; and classical string pedagogy. In this paper, I trace the diffusion of the chop through a number of North Atlantic fiddling traditions.¹ I also consider the circumstances and implications of musicians' decisions to adopt, adapt, or reject the chop. Drawing on both sociological research on the diffusion of innovations and genre theory, I demonstrate that the diffusion trajectory of a musical innovation depends on the innovation itself, on the sites of transmission, and on the interplay of the lived and imagined musical worlds within which musicians play, work, and study. I conclude by suggesting that, when studying North Atlantic fiddling, we ought to consider not only standard geographic or regional divisions, but also generational trends.

Like *col legno* (striking the strings with the wood of the bow) or *sautillé* (a rapid bouncing that uses the natural springiness of the bow), the chop is a technique specific to bowed string instruments. It consists of dropping the bow vertically onto the strings to make a crunchy, percussive noise, then picking it up off the strings with a slight horizontal motion to make another sound. This latter sound is pitched, though in practice it is possible to play it without pitch by muting the strings with the left hand. The chop is always played at the frog, or the lower end, of the bow.

As I describe below, the particular form of chopping I am tracing developed from a simpler offbeat, percussive technique by which a fiddler would imitate the muted backbeat hits commonly used by bluegrass mandolin players for accompaniment. This technique has remained in common usage by bluegrass fiddlers and is, confusingly, also called "chopping." Fiddlers use various descriptive terms to distinguish between the two: bluegrass fiddler Laurie Lewis contrasts the "simpler chop" that she uses in "older-style bluegrass bands" with the "new-fangled" "chugging" sounds pioneered by the "Father of Modern Chopping," Richard Greene (e-mails, 27 July 2012 and 12 August 2012). At a technical level, modern chopping (hereafter simply called "chopping") differs from earlier forms by leaving the bow on the strings following the pitchless "chop" sound, making use of the sound created by then lifting the bow, and incorporating these two elements into rhythmically complex patterns.

Chopping musicians frequently look to guitarists, drummers, and other instrumentalists for rhythmic ideas on which to base chopping patterns; however, because I have chosen to focus on the diffusion of the chop as an instrumental technique rather than as a percussive sound or a set of rhythmic patterns, I have limited my research to violinists, violists, cellists, and one bassist.²

This project may be read in the context of earlier ethnomusicological and folklore research seeking to map the geographic and temporal diffusion of songs, tunes, or other musical elements. Such studies generally examined the dispersion and

variation of a musical text and then sought to reconstruct the history of that dispersion. For instance, Bayard (1954) used melodic, modal, and structural differences between variants of “Brave Donnelly” and “The Job of Journeywork” to support a particular diffusion history for these “tune families” (see Bayard [1950:33] for his definition of “tune family”). Boilès (1973) used multiple variants to construct hypothetical “proto-melodies,” while List (1978) argued that similarity of melodic contour may indicate the diffusion of a style rather than a single parent source. Problematizing the comparison of tunes to an imaginary archetype, Cowdery (1984) proposed a system for understanding how tunes within a given repertoire relate to each other. Goertzen (1985) applied the Finnish historic-geographic method to the popular American fiddle tune “Billy in the Low Ground,” arguing persuasively for the relative age of variants while remarking on the limitations of such an analysis. (See Pekkilä 2006 for a brief history of the historic-geographic method and its influence on European folklorists.)

More recently, Jackson and Levine (2002) described versions of a social dance song among Native American communities in Eastern Oklahoma. While the five performances under study had certain musical and contextual similarities pointing to historical and present-day connections between tribes, performers also used style elements such as vocal production to articulate tribal difference. My study of the chop echos Jackson and Levine by contextualizing diffusion within larger regional systems and highlighting the “capacity of communities to consciously maintain distinctive local practices in interactionally complex settings” (ibid.:302).

In general, however, ethnomusicology has moved away from diffusion research in recent decades. Bruno Nettl’s original edition of *The Study of Ethnomusicology* called for increased “sophistication and precision” in measuring the similarity of tunes and some means of distinguishing “simple similarity from genetic relationship” (1983:126–27); his most recent revision recalled these words only to emphasize their lack of relevance to present-day ethnomusicology (2005:130).

The issues Bayard and others sought to address, however, are still very much with us. How do new musical ideas, be they tunes or techniques, enter an aural tradition? How and why are certain ideas adopted and others not? How do ideas of regional or national genre affect this dissemination, particularly when it occurs across accepted generic boundaries?

I believe that the diffusion of the chop combines geographic and generic breadth with human and musical specificity in such a way as to allow a rethinking of these questions. Bayard relied on musical texts to map diffusion in part because he felt he couldn’t get the necessary facts from his informants:

When, in present-day collecting, we can trace a tune-variant at all, it is usually for only a generation or two back, and in some family line or restricted locality. The development of that variant, its time and place and cause of branching-off from

some widely known air of which it may be a form, its routes of transmission and diffusion, its alterations from singer to singer and generation to generation—these are data with which the singers cannot supply us. (1950:5)

Chopping, in contrast, lends itself to an ethnographically based diffusion history. As an instrumental technique consisting of a particular physical motion and an unusual sound, it is easily defined and easily recognized. Its relatively recent point of origin meant that I was able to speak directly with many early adopters and diffusers, and that most of my interviewees had no trouble recalling when, where, and from whom they learned to chop. For reasons I will discuss below, chopping is not the sort of technique that musicians stumble across on their own; therefore, the presence of multiple independent sources, while possible, is highly unlikely.

This paper is divided into two sections. In the first, I lean heavily on sociologist Everett Rogers's *Diffusion of Innovations* ([1962] 2003).³ Rogers defines diffusion as the “process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (ibid.:5) and investigates the four components of this definition: the innovation itself, the channels of communication, the varying lengths of time people require to adopt the innovation, and the relevant social system.

I begin by evaluating the chop as an innovation, examining those traits, as described by Rogers, that may have facilitated or limited its diffusion: complexity, trialability, observability, relative advantage, and capacity for reinvention. I then turn to the channels of communication and detail three sites of face-to-face transmission: fiddle camps, what I term “local scenes,” and university-level music instruction. I conclude the first section of this paper by examining the recent shift toward transmission of the chop by technological means.

The final two elements of Rogers's definition, “time” and “social system,” are closely linked. Rogers classifies an innovation's adopters according to how early or late they adopt and locates every diffusion within the context of a particular, bounded social system. Labeling his subjects as “innovators,” “early adopters,” “early majority,” “late majority,” or “laggards,” Rogers links these categories to an individual's socioeconomic and educational status and to his or her position within the social system. This approach cannot be generalized for chopping, however: players learn to chop not because they are more educated or possess a higher socioeconomic or social standing, but because the chop aligns at least in part with their sense of the music they wish to play.

I begin the second part of this paper by demonstrating the impracticality of Rogers's conception of “social system” with regard to the diffusion of the chop. I turn briefly to actor-network theory for its rethinking of the social as consisting of temporary, unstable groupings created by the actions of both people and objects, and then ask how I might read the alliances formed not only through

the action of learning to chop but also through the actions of choosing when to chop, how to chop, and whether to chop at all. I argue for chopping as a window onto the productive tension between the “lived” and “imagined” worlds of North Atlantic fiddling and for genre as the regulatory process that holds the lived and the imagined in balance. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s description of the artistic field of “position-takings” ([1983] 1993:30), I explore how musicians may use an innovation such as the chop to position musical genres in contrast to one another or to mark certain repertoires and playing styles as contemporary and others as traditional.

The transnational nature of this project precluded a single, focused period of fieldwork. Rather, most of my interviews have taken place in the context of my own travels as a performing musician: in concert green rooms, between festival sets, at after-hours jam sessions. A two-month stint in Scotland for an unrelated research project allowed me to speak with professional, university-level, and teenage fiddlers and cellists. I also conducted many interviews in between teaching duties at fiddle camps: at the Valley of the Moon Scottish Fiddle School in California, for instance, my interviewees included chopping teenagers, pre-teens, and their parents; bluegrass innovator Darol Anger; professional musicians from Spain and Québec; and cellist Mike Block, who, as a member of the Silk Road Ensemble, taught Yo-Yo Ma to chop (interview, Mike Block, 1 September 2011, Boulder Creek, CA).

In total, I have spoken or exchanged e-mails with 122 people for this project. Of that number, about half are professional touring musicians, largely fiddlers and cellists. Of the non-professionals, approximately one-third were under eighteen at the time of the interview, one-third were university students, and one-third were adult amateurs ranging in age from mid-twenties to late sixties. Many of the professional musicians were in their late twenties or early thirties, reflecting both the demographics of North American and European traditional music touring circuits and the generational associations of chopping (discussed below).

For several reasons, I sought out professional touring musicians whose livelihood is representing a particular North Atlantic fiddling tradition: these musicians are usually quite knowledgeable about the past and present forms of their musical tradition and aware of trends in other North Atlantic traditions; they tend to participate in multiple, simultaneous musical projects and can therefore speak about the place of the chop in different contexts within the same tradition; they have the technical ability to develop new chopping patterns if desired; and they frequently serve as models for younger players, so their musical decisions are therefore particularly influential. Most, but not all, of my interviewees know how to chop; a somewhat smaller number use chopping in their music making, and it is the particulars of that choice that inform the second half of this paper.

Given the large number of interviewees, I have not provided biographical details other than to identify quoted players by locale, instrument, and, if relevant, age at the time of the interview. Although parts of this paper problematize simplistic genre identifications, I do occasionally label musicians by genre. That said, I have been careful to identify musicians by the genre monikers that they themselves use on their promotional websites, or that they used to describe their music during our interview.

Innovation and Transmission of the Chop

I feel like Oppenheimer sometimes. I've released some kind of monster.
—Darol Anger (interview, 28 August 2010, Boulder Creek, CA)

The story of the chop begins with fiddler Richard Greene (b. 1942), a Los Angeles native who by 1966 was living on the East Coast and playing with the northern bluegrass band The Greenbriar Boys. Called to sub in Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys for a January 1966 concert at McGill University in Montreal, Greene officially joined the Bluegrass Boys in April of that year (telephone interview, 1 February 2011; see Rosenberg and Wolfe [2007:156–58] for details of Monroe's 1966–67 line-up). Soon, however, Greene was called to task for rushing the tempos. As he tells it:

I rushed like crazy . . . So [Monroe] asked me to not play any background fills or licks, just to play rhythm only and then to take my breaks, my solos on the vocal songs, and then play the instrumentals. But otherwise, only play rhythm . . . And the only rhythm I was aware of on fiddle at that point was a tapping on the backbeat with the tip of the bow. Which I'd seen, and Paul Warren in the Flatt and Scruggs band did that. That's all that anyone ever did in terms of rhythm so that's what I did. (Telephone interview, 1 February 2011)

Tapping near the tip of the bow for the bulk of a show lasting over an hour caused Greene's forearm and wrist to hurt, so he moved this rhythm toward the lower part of the bow and began playing "a short, accented note at the frog on every backbeat." That motion led to a different sort of arm and hand pain, however. He began leaving his bow on the string after each offbeat . . . and the chop was born. Greene frames this history as one of fortuitous serendipity: "I just was exhausted so on one of those down-bow accents, I just couldn't lift the bow up again. My hand just stayed there and that was the first chop . . . It was just like a collapsing of the bow onto the string" (*ibid.*).

How different was Greene's chop from other bluegrass fiddle backup techniques—some also called "chopping," as I described earlier—of the time? The video archive shows that other bluegrass fiddlers in the 1960s were also playing short, rhythmic offbeat patterns near the frog (see, for example, Mack Magaha's

fiddling at 1'53" in the YouTube video "Don Reno and Red Smiley 1962 Pilot TV Show Pt 1" and Paul Warren's fiddling at 0'39" in the YouTube video "Earl Scruggs—Fireball Mail"; see Videography for details on all videos cited). Fiddlers also occasionally used their instrument to imitate a mandolin (see, for example, Benny Martin's fiddling at 3'10" in the YouTube video "1965 Fincastle Bluegrass Festival Pt1"). Richard Greene's innovation, then, was twofold: he removed all horizontal motion from the downward offbeat stroke, thus eliminating pitch and creating the characteristic crunchy "chop" noise; and he left the bow on the strings after each downward stroke, thus availing himself of the sound of the bow lifting off the strings in preparation for the next chop. An innovator at heart, Greene combined these chop basics with chordal and melodic ideas, and developed a virtuoso technique to incorporate into his soloing. Since the backbeat chopping sound is purely percussive while the following "pinching with the up-bow" has a pitch, the melodies Greene constructs using the chop are highly syncopated (telephone interview, 1 February 2011).

Richard Greene went on to use the chop in roots fusion band Seatrain and several groups with mandolinist David Grisman, including Muleskinner and the Great American Music Band (listen, for instance, to Greene's fiddling from 2'15" to 2'28" on "Muleskinner Blues," the first track on the 1974 album *Muleskinner: A Potpourri of Bluegrass Jam*). Around 1975, Greene taught fiddler Darol Anger to chop (both were living in California at the time). Anger was playing with the newly formed David Grisman Quintet, the successor to the Great American Music Band, but found that "there wasn't a lot of need" for chopping in that ensemble because Grisman had by then added a second mandolin (interview, 28 August 2010, Boulder Creek, CA). In 1985, Anger co-founded the Turtle Island String Quartet (TISQ), one of the first alternative, non-classical string quartets. Hoping to avoid the "incomplete" sound of "the string section to the jazz group," the quartet used chopping to mimic the sounds of a jazz rhythm section. Says Anger, "We really wanted to have a convincing sound. We wanted it to sound like the drums were there and the rhythm guitar was there." The quartet developed chopping into a "comprehensive accompaniment technique": "[We] expanded its usage and . . . started codifying ways that you could [use it to accompany]. We would put two people on a chop pattern and we would establish a complementary pattern in which people were playing different voicings" (interview, 28 August 2010, Boulder Creek, CA, and e-mail, 2 June 2011). This was quite different in function from the solo "melodic" chopping of Richard Greene, who describes himself as "creat[ing] tunes and melodies with this device" (telephone interview, 1 February 2011). The basic physical motion and core percussive sound, however, remained largely the same.

By 1986, therefore, only Richard Greene and the members of the TISQ were chopping. How did the chop move from this handful of California bluegrass,

newgrass, and jazz players to musicians working in a wide variety of genres and living in over a dozen countries?

According to Rogers, certain traits of an innovation may hinder or aid its adoption.⁴ For instance, an innovation that is lower in “complexity” stands a better chance of being adopted (2003:257). In the case of the chop, a certain counter-intuitive physicality seems to have slowed its diffusion. In standard violin pedagogy for both classical and non-classical idioms, students are taught to play with a beautiful tone, to keep the hair of the bow flat on the string or angled slightly inward, and to play with a bent right thumb. Chopping, in contrast, is about making an “ugly” noise, and generally requires that the player straighten his or her right thumb and angle the hair of the bow outwards. (However, some players do chop inwards.) As a thirteen-year-old Glasgow fiddler told me, “What you’re doing with your bow is basically what you’ve been taught not to do, so it’s going completely against everything that you’ve ever been taught” (interview, Rachel Joint, 6 March 2010, Glasgow). Until recently, this counter-intuitive complexity seems to have limited transmission of the chop to face-to-face interactions in which the learner might observe the unusual hand and bow positions involved. However, as I detail below, video offers one means of overcoming this hurdle, and the perceived complexity of the chop seems to have diminished as the technique has become more visible via technology and increased public usage.

The “trialability” and “observability” of an innovation also increase its diffusion (Rogers 2003:258). The chop has a high level of trialability, and not simply because anyone can try it out at home once she or he has learned the basic technique. In the public spaces of fiddle camps, sessions, festival green rooms, parties, and other informal musical gatherings, fiddlers chop along to the tunes they don’t know. It is these same musical spaces that make the chop so observable: unlike a new practice regime, say, chopping is tested out in public. (That said, many of my interviewees concurred in their dislike of excessive public chopping in sessions and disparaged players who chop “blindly” rather than attempting to learn the tunes by ear. “I think chopping is about equivalent to a really good chef’s knife,” said American fiddler Tashina Clarridge. “You don’t want to use it improperly . . . Nothing else can live if you keep waving it around” [interview, 31 August 2011, Boulder Creek, CA].)

The diffusion of an innovation also depends on its “relative advantage”: the “degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes” (Rogers 2003:15). For some professional touring musicians, chopping is both artistically and economically advantageous: a means of expanding an ensemble’s timbral and rhythmic palette without increasing personnel or instrumentation. Fiddler Pascal Miousse, of the Acadian trio Vishtën, says, “It’s percussive, it’s tight . . . We are three and sometimes we use only . . . the accompaniment that I create with the violin, with the chop . . . Even so, it fills [out the sound].” (*C’est*

percussif, c'est tight [. . .] On est trois pis des fois on utilise juste [. . .] l'accompagnement, moi, que je fasse avec le violon, avec les chops [. . .] Ça remplit quand même (interview, 10 September 2011, Calixa-Lavallée, QC). For singers wanting to accompany themselves on the fiddle, the percussive rhythms of the chop offer “another dimension,” as Scottish singer-fiddler Kate Young put it, within the constraints of a one-man band (interview, 1 March 2010, Newcastle). Says American singer-fiddler Laura Cortese, “If you’re accompanying yourself on a song, being a singer and not needing a guitar player—I was like, ‘Man, this is the money thing for me to learn how to do!’” (interview, 1 September 2010, Boulder Creek, CA).

It is the final trait that Rogers describes as aiding diffusion—an innovation’s capacity for “reinvention” (2003:17)—that chopping possesses in spades. The basic percussive noise and pitched up-bow of the chop may be combined with other sounds in innumerable ways, and such reinvention is encouraged by the fact that most people who transmit the chop teach only the basic sounds and a few simple patterns. Players therefore frequently turn to other instruments and other genres when building an individual repertoire of chopping patterns. Recalls fiddler Casey Driessen, “I hung out with drummers and bass players of the funk variety and started to grab techniques and grooves from those people” (telephone interview, 1 February 2011).

Darol Anger pioneered several game-changing reinventions of the chop. First was the Turtle Island String Quartet’s transformation of Greene’s melodic chop into a rhythmic accompaniment technique, as described above; fiddlers now learn the technique as a basic accompaniment tool. Typical was a fiddle workshop I observed at the Niel Gow Festival in Dunkeld and Birnam, Scotland (20 March 2010). The students (mostly intermediate-level adults) asked teacher Gordon Gunn how they might “get involved” in jam sessions if they didn’t know the repertoire; he responded by teaching a variety of rhythmic accompaniment ideas, including chopping. I have taught similar workshops myself in the United States, have been asked the same question, and have taught more or less the same skills in response: droning, a basic rhythmic shuffling pattern, and, in recent years, chopping.

Anger also added to the chop a motion in which the bow moves back and forth along the line of the string. (Richard Greene’s chop was, and remains, perpendicular to the string.) This motion is now a fundamental component of chopping for many players. Says Casey Driessen, who has dubbed it “The Cyclical Slant” and in 2011 devoted one of five short online chop teaching videos (“Techniques & Skills with Casey Driessen, Series One”) to this technique, “If you go back and forth, it changes the tone and you can achieve much greater speed without fatigue” (telephone interview, 1 February 2011). This motion also paved the way for other reinventions such as Driessen’s “triple chop,” a percussive triplet created as the bow skids across the strings.

As the chop spreads into new musical genres, it is continually reinvented to align with the rhythmic and accompaniment expectations of practitioners of those genres. I address such reinventions in the second part of this paper. For the moment, however, I turn to the second element of Rogers's definition: channels of communication, or "the means by which messages get from one individual to another" (2003:18).

Fiddle camps are week-long, usually summertime courses focusing on the repertoire and style of one or more musical traditions.⁵ The instructors, professional or semi-professional musicians, teach aurally, with written music, or with a combination. The students, who are of all ages and playing levels, attend group classes during the day and often spend the evenings playing in jam sessions. Some camps focus on one particular fiddling style—Scottish, Irish, bluegrass, old-time—while others hire instructors representing a variety of musical styles. Such camps are part of a larger trend of institutionalized transmission of traditional fiddling styles, and at these camps the chop may be taught in the formal setting of a group class (see Miller [2007] for a case study of changing modes of transmission in Scotland). Although similar instructional courses exist for non-fiddling genres, my primary focus is on camps that teach one or more North Atlantic fiddle traditions.

To demonstrate the power of fiddle camps and similar courses to amplify the diffusion potential of a single musician, we might consider the trajectory of California cellist Renata Bratt. Classically trained, Bratt became interested in learning jazz after attending a Turtle Island String Quartet performance around 1988. In the early 1990s, Bratt enrolled in the TISQ's strings program at the Stanford Jazz Workshop, a weeklong summer course, and learned to chop from violist Jeremy Cohen. In 2000, after a decade of using the chop in her jazz playing, Bratt attended the San Diego Strings Conference led by American fiddler Mark O'Connor. There, "blown away by people's playing of fiddle tunes," Bratt began playing fiddle music herself (though still on the cello). Meanwhile, she had begun teaching the chop, and over the next decade she introduced the technique to classical, jazz, and fiddling cellists across the United States, teaching at Suzuki institutes from Colorado to South Carolina; at Strings By the Sea, a summer music camp for Suzuki string players; at the National Cello Institute; through the National Association for Music Education (formerly MENC); at the National Conference of the American String Teachers Association; and at fiddle-focused events including the Valley of the Moon Scottish Fiddle School (directed by Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser), Alasdair Fraser's Sierra Fiddle Camp, Mark O'Connor's Strings Conference, and the Wintergrass Bluegrass Festival. In 2010, she taught a "great big chop class for many, many cello teachers at the Suzuki Association of the Americas' national conference." She estimates that she has taught thousands of string players and teachers to chop over the last decade (interview, 30 August 2010, Boulder Creek, CA, and e-mail, 9 March 2013).

At fiddle camps and similar instructional courses, players from geographically dispersed locales gather to learn a shared repertoire of tunes and techniques. Once the week is over, they frequently bring those back to the other musical circles in which they move. Consider the trajectory of Casey Driessen, who in the early 1990s had already been experimenting with rhythmic accompaniment techniques as a teenager in a Chicago-based bluegrass band with no mandolin: “I was starting to develop some rhythmic stuff on my own and then, as I was developing kind of a percussive, shuffly, muted string kind of thing, somebody told me I should check out Darol Anger” (telephone interview, 1 February 2011). In 1995, he attended the Mark O’Connor Fiddle Camp outside of Nashville, TN. Darol Anger was on staff that year, and recalls taking aside Driessen and other accomplished younger players for extra tuition: “We listened to jazz stuff and I ran them around the circle of fourths and just did a lot of stuff, and part of that was a day of chopping” (interview, 29 August 2010, Boulder Creek, CA). Driessen returned home to his band and began to incorporate the percussive techniques he had learned from Anger. The following summer, Driessen again studied with Anger at the Berklee College of Music’s inaugural String Fling, and in 1997 he moved to Boston to attend Berklee. Once there, he introduced the chop to a particular local scene.

In this paper I use the term “local scene” as my interviewees used it: to indicate a group of people who live near one another, meet regularly to play music informally, generally at jam sessions or parties, and share a common sense of how the music they play together will sound. This is similar to Straw’s description of scenes as “the grafting of tastes or affinities to physical locations. Within scenes, tastes or affinities become organized as itineraries across series of spaces” (2002:254; also see Shank 1994). I am purposely avoiding the word “genre,” because local scenes can, and do, include individual players who identify with a variety of musical genres. Local scenes are not, of course, fixed: people move in and out of town, or stay in town but stop attending the jam sessions regularly. Players may belong to several such scenes, and a player who travels frequently may belong to a local scene distant from his or her hometown. Scenes also have certain internal hierarchies and offer a variety of levels of belonging.

The local Boston scene to which Casey Driessen introduced the chop included other Berklee students, some New England Conservatory students, some local teenage fiddlers playing Scottish and Cape Breton music, and some non-student local musicians, including me. (I would describe myself as a peripheral, or occasional, member of this scene.) Because it was not unusual for concerts of out-of-town fiddlers to be followed by a house party at which the out-of-towners and locals, many of whom knew each other from fiddle camps, socialized and played music together, the scene also included certain musicians, such as Darol Anger, who lived elsewhere but traveled to Boston regularly to perform. Fiddler Hanneke Cassel, at whose apartment music parties frequently took place,

describes the scene as “all these people that were playing Irish and Cape Breton and Scottish music fusing with people who were playing bluegrass music” (interview, 2 September 2010, Boulder Creek, CA). That fusion often took the form of Celtic melodies accompanied by chopping, but the overall musical atmosphere was fluid and improvisational.

In the context of this local scene, the transmission of the chop tended to be informal. “I don’t exactly know how I learnt [to chop],” says New England fiddler Lissa Schneckenburger, who was a New England Conservatory student at the time. “It just seemed like, organically, everybody was learning how to accompany each other” (interview, 19 December 2009, Hanover, NH). A player would watch another musician chop and then either figure out the technique on his or her own or ask that musician for assistance. Singer-fiddler Laura Cortese, then a Berklee student, remembers figuring out a rough chop on her own before asking Casey Driessen for some pointers (interview, 1 September 2010, Boulder Creek, CA). For his part, Driessen doesn’t remember “sitting down and teaching anybody . . . It was all part of the social circle that we hung out with” (telephone interview, 1 February 2011).

This sort of informal transmission may seem to stand in contrast to the formal tuition of fiddle camps, but in fact the same informal dynamic occurs between students, and sometimes between students and instructors, during fiddle camp jam sessions. Similarly, camps often play host to the same sort of cross-genre jam sessions found in the Boston scene. Fiddler Brittany Haas recalls sessions in the early 2000s at the Mark O’Connor Strings Conference in San Diego: “Especially among the kids, it wasn’t segregated at all, you know, ‘I play Celtic music so I’m gonna go jam over here.’ I think everybody got together. Seems like in most sessions there was somebody that was like, ‘I’m going to use my chop!’” (interview, 29 December 2009, Montreal).

These parallels between fiddle camps and the Boston local scene are not accidental: players from the Boston scene regularly attended fiddle camps together in the summers, and some of the teenagers they knew from those camps later moved to the greater Boston area to attend college. The Boston local scene might thus be described as an extension and conjoining of several fiddle camp scenes, and fiddle camps as the meeting of numerous local scenes. In many ways, fiddle camps *are* local scenes: they just happen to exist for only one week out of every year.

In these same years—the late 1990s and early 2000s—the chop was gaining an international foothold in Scotland, via exchanges with North American fiddle camps and the Boston local scene. As in the United States, it was younger players who first adopted the chop in Scotland.

In 1998, Hanneke Cassel (of the Boston scene) taught chopping to several teenagers at the Alasdair Fraser Fiddle Course at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic College on the Isle of Skye, Scotland. Sarah Naylor was fifteen at the time:

[Hanneke] was suggesting it in the class and then I think she touched on doing it, but there was a sense of, “Oh no, we want to stick to the tunes.” So she took a group of kids after the class, there were four of us . . . I went home and I drove my mother crazy. She would said, “Can you not just play a nice tune?” (Interview, 19 August 2011, Boston)

In 2000, another of those four teenagers, Patsy Reid, attended the Valley of the Moon Scottish Fiddle School in California, where she was “wowed” by more chopping (interview, 7 March 2010, Perth, Scotland). The following January, Laura Cortese and Lissa Schneckenburger (both of the Boston local scene, and regulars at the Valley of the Moon camp) met Reid again in Glasgow at Celtic Connections, Scotland’s largest traditional music festival. Reid, who hadn’t yet mastered the technique, asked Cortese for a brief chopping lesson: “She just showed me the basic sounds and probably an example rhythm that she does, and then I just took those sounds and put them in my own [music]” (ibid.).

By then, both Patsy Reid and Sarah Naylor were studying Applied Music at the University of Strathclyde and were part of a young local Glasgow scene. Recalls Naylor of her peers, “I could sense that they were picking it up by just watching it. I don’t remember giving a lesson. But then now when you go to Glasgow, it’s everywhere . . . You could feel it spreading just by people watching” (interview, 19 August 2011, Boston).

Spain seems to have been the first country in which the chop was regularly transmitted via university-level music instruction. Fiddler Oriol Saña, originally from Granollers (Barcelona), studied at the Berklee College of Music in the late 1990s. He learned to chop from Darol Anger in 1997, when Anger was an occasional visiting instructor at Berklee; Saña also participated in the Boston local scene described earlier. In 2002, Saña became a professor of jazz and modern violin at L’Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya in Barcelona, where he taught chopping to “all my students” (e-mail, 3 July 2012). Among them was Carol Durán Moreno:

He was amazing for us because he had new techniques that we didn’t know. So the people there said, “Oh, what’s that, what’s the chopping thing?” And also, “What’s the improvising thing?” . . . The students that want[ed] to learn these new techniques, they [enrolled] in the lessons of Oriol, and so many people went. (Interview, 30 August 2011, Boulder Creek, CA)

Fiddlers in Spain learned to chop in non-academic settings as well. Galician fiddler Alfonso Franco remembers learning the technique from Saña at an alternative strings workshop at the Seminario Internacional de Jazz de Zarautz (interview, 24 June 2011, Nevada City, CA, and e-mail, 28 February 2013). Castilian fiddler Blanca Altable recalls first encountering chopping in 2005 at the Alasdair Fraser Fiddle Course on the Isle of Skye, where Patsy Reid was by then an instructor (interview, 30 August 2011, Boulder Creek, CA). In 2008 Galician

fiddler Alfonso Merino attended the inaugural year of Crisol de Cuerda, a fiddle camp in northern Spain (founded by Alasdair Fraser and co-directed by Blanca Altable); there, he learned to chop from cellist Natalie Haas, an instructor at the camp who had herself learned the technique from Darol Anger at the Mark O'Connor Fiddle Camp in Nashville in 2000 (interview, Alfonso Merino, 24 June 2011, Nevada City, CA; interview, Natalie Haas, 29 December 2009, Montreal).

As described above, the counter-intuitive physical complexity of the chop seems to have limited it to face-to-face transmission. In recent years, however, that other face has frequently been on a screen; with the advent of YouTube and the 2005 release of *Chops and Grooves*—an instructional DVD featuring Darol Anger, Casey Driessen, and cellist Rushad Eggleston—visual technology has become an increasingly important channel of communication for the diffusion of the chop.⁶ Irish fiddler Damien McGeehan, for instance, learned the basic chop sound by watching Darol Anger on YouTube, then developed his technique by watching *Chops and Grooves* and YouTube clips of Casey Driessen, and by listening to Driessen's 2006 album *3D* (e-mail, Damien McGeehan, 29 June 2011).

I would argue that as the chop becomes increasingly available for viewing—via both human and technological channels—the difficulty of learning it (its “complexity,” in Rogers's terms) decreases. This is particularly true for younger players who participate in local scenes or attend fiddle camps at which the chop has become the norm; there is nothing counterintuitive or physically awkward about a technique that they have seen and heard since they began playing the fiddle. Marley DeBrito was nine years old at the time of our interview; from Corvallis, Oregon, he plays bluegrass and Celtic tunes and has a violin teacher and peers who chop. He also attends many chop-heavy fiddle camps and events, and has watched both Darol Anger and Casey Driessen chopping on YouTube. DeBrito learned the technique at age six or seven and says, “It was just a little bit of exposure here and there, and then it came in and I just got it” (interview, 30 August 2010, Boulder Creek, CA).

Figure 1 maps the transmission of the chop between the fiddlers and cellists whom I interviewed. I have also included a few other musicians whose chopping histories were relayed to me but with whom I have not spoken personally (these musicians are indicated with an asterisk). This diagram includes only those musicians who I am certain use the “modern chop” as defined above. I distinguish between direct and indirect modes of face-to-face transmission and indicate technological sources, but due to space limitations do not include other details of transmission, such as the name of a particular fiddle camp or university. I group musicians by country (if not otherwise indicated, a musician is in the United States) but not by musical genre; I have also indicated the Boston local scene described above. Given that this diagram is largely limited to my informants, it should not be taken as a representative sampling of choppers. For instance, I have spoken with more choppers in Scotland than in Sweden,

and therefore the coverage of Scotland is more extensive. However, chopping is also thriving in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark—I simply have not had the resources to interview a significant number of Scandinavian musicians.

In spite of these qualifications, I find this diagram useful for its demonstration of the explosive diffusion of the chop in the late 1990s and early 2000s; of the importance of certain key players; of the dynamics of a local scene; and of the shift towards technological modes of transmission after 2005.⁷

Chopping and Genre

Maybe I associate the sound of it with music which isn't necessarily Scottish. Maybe someone who's doing some chopping that sounded really Scottish . . . I would be quite excited by that . . . I suppose we all have a little bit of purist in us, and I think maybe chopping brought that out in me. Because suddenly I was worried that all of our great young players were going to sound like someone else.

—Lori Watson (interview, 16 March 2010, Glasgow)

Rogers describes a “social system” as the “boundary within which an innovation diffuses” (2003:24) and defines it as composed of “a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal” (ibid.:23). In the examples he gives, such as the diffusion of hybrid corn among Iowa farmers or the diffusion of boiling-water technology among residents of a Peruvian village, the social system is clearly defined and he is therefore able to differentiate adopters of an innovation according to how early or late they adopt within the context of that particular, bounded system. Chopping musicians, however, include professionals, amateurs, children, adults, teachers, and students; they live on several continents and play in a variety of musical genres, and many travel extensively. What, then, is the social system within which chopping has diffused?

North Atlantic fiddlers, both professional and amateur, might well be described as a “set of interrelated units” insofar as they often perform at, teach at, or attend the same fiddle camps, workshops, festivals, and concerts and share virtual space on radio, in folk music magazines, on record store shelves, and online. However, jazz, classical, and pop/rock players also chop (though few are represented in Figure 1). In addition, it would be a stretch to describe North Atlantic fiddlers as “engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal”; that description seems more appropriate to those groupings of musicians engaged in the maintenance and development of a recognized musical tradition (such as “bluegrass,” “Scottish,” or, depending on the circumstances, “neo-bluegrass,” “West Highland,” or “American Celtic”).

Might it be argued, then, that the North Atlantic diffusion of the chop is actually the sum of several distinct instances of diffusion: bluegrass, Scottish,

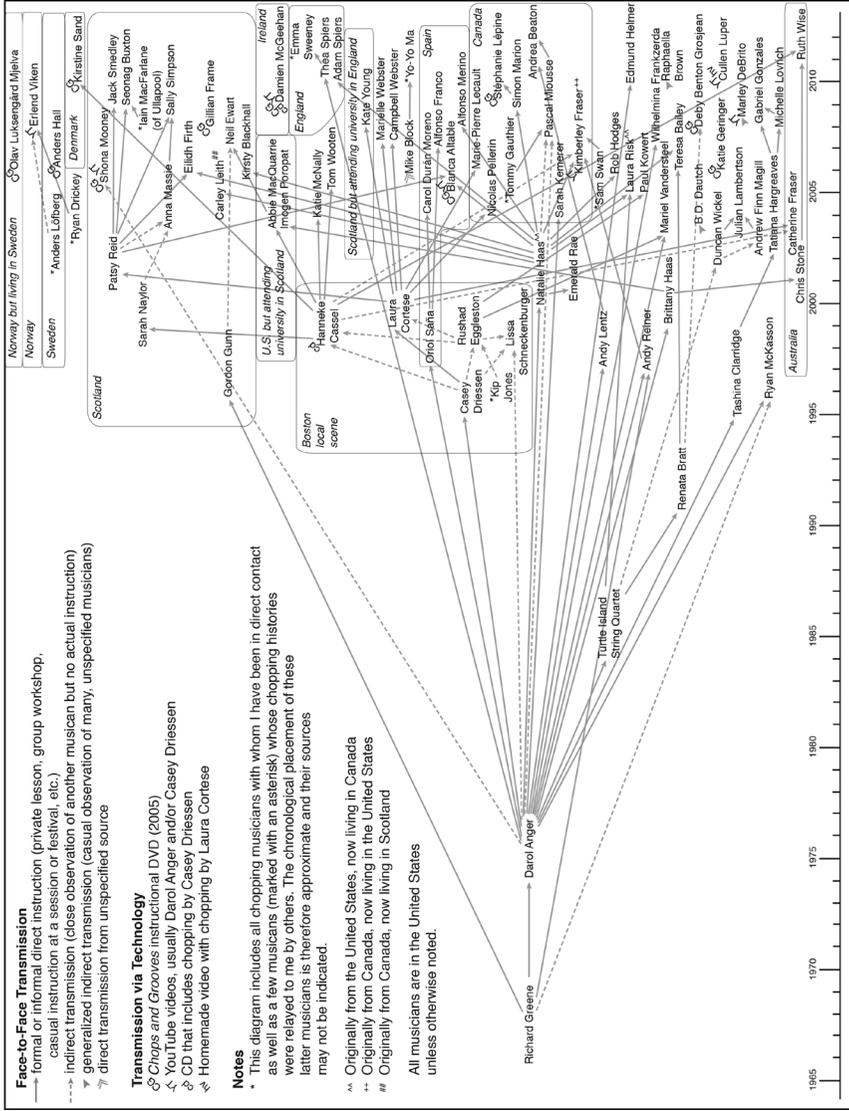


Figure 1. The diffusion of the chop, 1966–2013.

Galician, and so on? I think not: far from simply being parallel processes, these multiple diffusions have been—and continue to be—mutually constitutive. Neil Ewart, a Glasgow university student, first heard chopping on a neo-bluegrass CD by Casey Driessen that was passed to him by a secondary school teacher, Gordon Gunn. Gunn is from northern Scotland but plays bluegrass, country, and jazz fiddle as well as Scottish, and learned to chop from Richard Greene at the Mark O'Connor Fiddle Camp. However, Ewart himself only learned to chop after an informal lesson with American fiddler Abbie MacQuarrie, who grew up playing Scottish and Cape Breton music in Boston but moved to Scotland in 2006 to study at the University of Edinburgh. MacQuarrie had learned to chop at the Boston Harbor Scottish Fiddle School from self-described “Scottish-American”-style player Hanneke Cassel, who learned to chop from bluegrass- and rock-influenced improvisational cellist Rushad Eggleston . . . and so on (interviews, Neil Ewart, 17 February 2010, Glasgow; Gordon Gunn, 20 March 2010, Dunkeld, Scotland; Abbie MacQuarrie, 28 February 2010, Glasgow; Hanneke Cassel, 31 August 2011, Boulder Creek, CA.) To segregate the diffusion of the chop according to fiddling style would be to ignore this constant stream of human and musical connection.

What we need, in other words, is a new paradigm. Actor-network theory (ANT) suggests one alternative, doing away with the idea of an overarching social system within which actions—such as the diffusion of the chop—occur. Writes Latour, “There is no relevant group that can be said to make up social aggregates, no established component that can be used as an incontrovertible starting point” (2005:29). Rather, the social is a series of highly unstable, temporary groupings formed and dissolved through the actions of both humans and objects. (ANT considers both to be actors. See Bates 2012 for an application of ANT to organology.) This is, to a certain extent, where the first half of this paper leaves us, thick in the unexpected musical and human alliances forged by the chop. However, if the action of chopping constructs the social, so do the actions of choosing how to chop, when to chop, and whether to chop at all. In this second section, I argue that such decisions offer a window into the complex interplays between the practice of a musical genre and musicians’ conceptions of that genre.⁸

First, we must distinguish between the “lived” and the “imagined” states of North Atlantic fiddling traditions (see Brackett 2012:170). While the lived reality of North Atlantic fiddling is one of constant crossover, in which the horizontal flow of ideas (between members of the same generation but across regional genres) is often as great as the vertical (within one genre and from one generation to the next), the imagined posits clearly definable regional styles whose musical distinctiveness reflects distinctive regional identities. I use the terms “lived” and “imagined” guardedly, aware that the latter may be read as somehow less significant—less real—than the former. This is not my intent. Rather, I use

these terms as ANT might have it: both the lived and the imagined consist of concrete actions and have very real consequences. While we may read such a dichotomy into any number of musics, it has particular resonance for folk or traditional genres, which, to use Foucault's words, "seek [their] soul[s] in the distant ideality of the origin" ([1971] 1998:373; also see Gelbart 2007. Foucault is arguing for writing history as "the concrete body of becoming" rather than as a search for idealized origins.)

The lived and the imagined are engaged in a process of mutual creation, with the influx of new ideas into the lived perpetually reshaping the imagined and the imagined continually restricting or reworking the practice of those ideas in the lived. To take this argument one step further: the fact that North Atlantic fiddling genres remain distinct despite constant communication and exchange is due, in part, to a consensus that they are distinct; it is our imagining of regional styles that maintains those styles.

Genre theory offers a means of parsing this dichotomy. I am not referring to genre as a fixed musical style, but rather as a regulatory process by which musicians use repetition and difference—both imagined and lived—to maintain and alter a musical style and repertoire. As Franco Fabbri ([1982] 2004) notes in an oft-quoted article titled "A Theory of Musical Genres," a given genre encompasses not only the "formal and technical rules" of musical structure and composition, but also "semiotic rules" of musical meaning and representation, "behavior rules" for performers and listeners, "social and ideological rules" of associated collectivities and values, and "economical and juridical rules" of marketing, consumption, and regulation. Genre is at the intersection of production and reception, informing musicians' aesthetic choices, such as the decision to chop, as well as listeners' responses. Genre also allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between musics and collectivities; David Hesmondhalgh, for instance, has suggested replacing the standard homology between a musical style and a social group with a set of genre-linked "articulations" in order to allow for a "differentiated and gradated range of relationships between music and the social" (2005:33–35; also see Holt 2007 for an ethnography-based study of genre in popular music).

Film scholar Steve Neale was one of the first to recognize that genres are in a constant state of flux—"instances of repetition and difference"—as new works both reinforce accepted stylistic markers and introduce new elements (1980:48). Popular music scholar Jason Toynbee combined this understanding with Fabbri's rule-based approach and described genre as "a process in which the tension between repetition and difference fundamental to all symbolic forms is regulated" (2000:106).

As a recent innovation with a distinctive sonic fingerprint, the chop hovers intriguingly in this space between repetition and difference; listening to musicians

as they choose when, how, and whether to chop is one means of exposing the workings of the generic process. Sally Simpson, a fiddler from Edinburgh who was fifteen at the time of our interview, described chopping as a means of making Scottish traditional music accessible to her secondary school peers because those peers had already encountered the rhythms used in chopping in popular music and could therefore “identify . . . with the kind of effect that [chopping is] meant to create” (interview, 6 March 2010, Glasgow). In this case, chopping creates desirable difference in Scottish music through the repetition of rhythmic patterns drawn from other genres. In contrast, Norwegian fiddler Olav Luksengård Mjelva and Swedish fiddler Anders Hall, who perform with Shetlander Kevin Henderson as the trio Nordic Fiddlers Bloc, describe chopping itself as undesirably ubiquitous and the act of not chopping as an assertion of difference:

ANDERS HALL: We actually took a decision, because we really like the [chop], but we decided not to Because for us, it was like, everyone was doing it, and it was like a fling [i.e., a fad] All kind of string groups in Sweden were trying to do this

OLAV LUKSENGÅRD MJELVA: Five years ago, you could stand out if you used the chopping. But now it's more like you stand out if you don't. (Interview, 12 May 2012, Montreal)

As many scholars have noted, genres exist in relation to one another. “Thou shalt not define genres singly,” commands Thomas Beebe (1994:256), and Heather Dubrow compares the totality of literary genres to the color spectrum: “no one genre, no one hue appears in isolation, and none appears in its purest state” (1982:28; see Sparling 2008 for a case study of intertextuality in Cape Breton Gaelic song genres). Here, I find particularly useful the imagery of Pierre Bourdieu, by which we might describe North Atlantic fiddling as a “field of cultural production” ([1983] 1993). In Bourdieu's terms, individual genres are “positions” which together constitute a field, and their relative status, or value, in that field is claimed by the “position-takings” (works, pronouncements) of various agents (individuals, groups, institutions). Taken together, these position-takings constitute a field inseparable from the field of positions, and are therefore defined not in absolute terms, but relative to each other:

Every position-taking . . . receives its distinctive *value* from its negative relationship with the coexistent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by delimiting it. (Ibid.:30; emphasis in original)

Position-taking, we might say, is the lived response to challenges to the imagined, or the reaffirming of the imagined in response to the lived, or some combination thereof. Bourdieu describes it in combative terms: “The literary or artistic field is a *field of forces*, but it is also a *field of struggles* tending to transform or conserve this field of forces” (ibid.; emphasis in original).

The decision to adopt the chop or not is one such struggle. In order to retain the ontological—and by extension, commercial—strength of multiple regional North Atlantic genres, players insist on their distinctiveness. Says Québécois fiddler Nicolas Pellerin, “At first I asked myself, can we put [the chop] into Québécois music? It’s American, maybe we can’t integrate it” (*Au début je me suis dit, est-ce qu’on peut le mettre dans la musique québécoise? C’est américain, peut-être qu’on ne peut pas l’intégrer*) (interview, 9 October 2011, Carleton-sur-Mer, QC).

The cross-genre diffusion of the chop has thus become a forum for players’ fears of homogenization, even for musicians who revel in other sorts of musical crossover. Sarah-Jane Summers is a fiddler from the Scottish Highlands with a deep interest in Scandinavian music. Although she herself enjoys blending these traditions (she co-founded the Norwegian-Scottish crossover band Fribo and frequently uses the tagline “lush Highland fiddle with a Nordic edge” to describe her music), she told me that she felt “dismay” at seeing chopping in Norway for the first time in February 2010. “It’s becoming so universal. I think it’s a mild dilution of traditions when everything is underpinned by a universal rhythmic idea” (interview, 6 March 2010, Glasgow).

For some, the solution lies in intentionally regionalized chopping variants. Such variants do not alter the basic physical motion and percussive sound of the chop, but rather use that sound to create particular rhythmic grooves which may be associated with geographically-localized playing styles. In a joint interview, Galician fiddlers Alfonso Merino and Alfonso Franco described and demonstrated this process:

ALFONSO MERINO: I learned from [cellist Natalie Haas, this rhythm that] plays in $\frac{6}{8}$ (Figure 2).

ALFONSO MERINO: But we sometimes play *muiñeras*, a traditional [Galician] rhythm, and we make this pattern (Figure 3).

LAURA RISK: Is that the same as the tambourine [*pandeireta*] rhythm?

ALFONSO MERINO: Yeah, it’s close to the tambourine, and to the percussion: the snare drum and the bass drum . . .

ALFONSO FRANCO: I am looking for how to put [the chop] in our music . . .

Percussion is the main instrument in Galicia. So all [Galician music] needs to have percussion. The pipe is nothing without the percussion. The dances are with percussion, with tambourines, or with shells. So when we need to feel that we are playing Galician, we need to reinforce the drones with some bowing. So [the] chop is fantastic. It’s the perfect complement. [But Galician music] doesn’t run perfectly with all the normal chop, it doesn’t run with different rhythms . . . What we’re trying is to find a chop, a standard chop, that runs good in playing Galician music . . . I am trying to find—I am working on a [chop pattern for the] *xota* [a tune and dance type in $\frac{3}{4}$] (Figure 4) (24 June 2011, Nevada City, CA).

Figure 2. Alfonso Merino demonstrates a $\frac{6}{8}$ chopping pattern as learned from Natalie Haas (× noteheads indicate a chop. Small noteheads are played with very little bow and are barely audible).

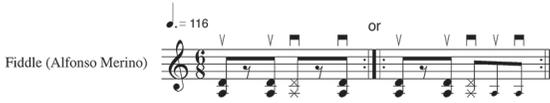


Figure 3. Alfonso Merino demonstrates a chopping pattern to accompany a *muiñera*.

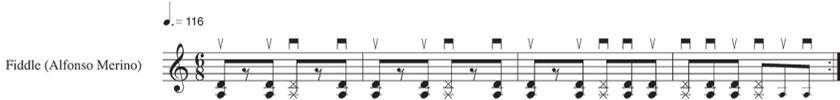


Figure 4. Alfonso Franco demonstrates a chopping pattern to accompany a *xota*.



Alfonso Franco then played the “Xota de Monforte,” while Alfonso Merino demonstrated a different chop pattern that might be used with a *xota* (Figure 5).

Position-taking occurs within genres as well. Within a given North Atlantic fiddling tradition, certain repertoire, playing styles, arrangement techniques, ensembles, and presentation styles are marked as “traditional” while others are marked as “contemporary” or “modern,” and musicians may choose to present themselves as more traditional on certain occasions and as more contemporary on others. In such a context, the chop may serve as a marker of modernity. Bands that market themselves as traditional don’t chop; those bands that do chop describe

Figure 5. Alfonso Franco and Alfonso Merino play the first part of “Xota de Monforte” with an accompanying chopping pattern.



themselves as “inventive and diverse . . . Scottish folk,” “*une musique trad exploratrice*” (exploratory [Québécois] traditional music), “new Swedish folkmusic,” and “nu-folk bluegrass.” Many players move with ease between these positions: Alfonso Franco told me that he doesn’t chop when he is “teaching traditional” but that when his band gives a concert, they “play more groovy” and then “the chop is perfect.” He uses ricochet, a different rhythmic bowing technique, when playing in a more traditional style (24 June 2011, Nevada City, CA).

Many fiddlers thus consider the chop more appropriate to the accompaniment of recently composed tunes, which often have pop-influenced chord changes and grooves. Fiddler Abbie MacQuarrie described her criteria for chopping in sessions in Edinburgh and Glasgow:

You would just feel a bit funny chopping along behind [a really traditional tune]. But if it’s a bit more of a contemporary tune—even if it’s traditional, but just has a more contemporary feel to it, or a player who has a more contemporary feel to them. Like [contemporary fiddler and composer] Adam Sutherland, a lot of [contemporary piper and composer] Gordon Duncan tunes, piping tunes, which are very popular nowadays, kind of a bit more funky. (Interview, 28 February 2010, Glasgow)

The above examples may suggest that, in a sort of personal-musical homology, the players I interviewed each identify with a single North Atlantic fiddling genre. While this is indeed the case for some, many others possess stylistic knowledge and repertoire spanning several genres. I asked most of my interviewees to fill out a short preliminary questionnaire that included the question: “How would you describe the style(s) or genre(s) of music that you play?” Responses ranged from “Norwegian traditional music, Swedish traditional music, old-time music, bluegrass” (Norwegian fiddler Erlend Viken, 28 June 2012, Derry, Northern Ireland) to “Galician traditional music, folk, Irish, Scottish” (Galician fiddler Alfonso Merino, 24 June 2011, Nevada City, CA) to “American Scottish, and I also play contra and old-time” (American fiddler and violist Ryan McKasson, 31 August 2011, Boulder Creek, CA).

Embodying a lived reality of crossover, these musicians nonetheless participate in these genres according to the rules of the imagined, by which each genre remains distinct. In other words, not only do players position themselves relative to other musicians working in other genres, but they also position certain parts of the music that they play relative to other parts. In such contexts, a musician may develop an individual repertoire of genre-linked chopping patterns.

In this joint interview, Boston-based fiddler Hanneke Cassel and Seattle-based fiddler and violist Ryan McKasson describe the various chopping patterns they associate with Scottish, bluegrass, Irish, and New England contra dance music:

HANNEKE CASSEL: If I were going to chop with [the Scottish reel Millbrae] I’d play it a little bit slower [Figure 6] . . . I think the chop sets things into this

Figure 6. Hanneke Cassel demonstrates a chopping accompaniment to the first four bars of the Scottish reel “Millbrae” (/ noteheads indicate a slight noise made by lifting the bow from the strings after a chop; ▼ noteheads indicate a slight noise made by placing the bow on the strings).



Figure 7. Hanneke Cassel demonstrates a bluegrass chop.



Figure 8. Ryan McKasson demonstrates a chop that he regularly uses.



medium groove unless you’re doing the bluegrass chop [Figure 7] and then I feel like it makes it sound like bluegrass music and pulls it away from Scottish . . . [Ryan McKasson’s chop is] softer, groovier. I think it would work a little bit more, possibly, with Irish music. [To Ryan McKasson:] Play your chop [Figure 8].

RYAN MCKASSON: . . . I do a little bit more of a contra dance [rhythm] . . . so it actually kind of works with Irish players better. But to be honest with you, if you did that with some Irish players they’d just think you’re just another American rocker fiddle player. (2 September 2010, Boulder Creek, CA)

**Conclusion:
Toward a Generational Model of North Atlantic Fiddling**

Chopping is associated not only with modernity but also with youth—which is, of course, also generally associated with modernity—and in many cases the diffusion of the chop falls as much along generational lines as along national borders. In the summer of 2010, Hanneke Cassel taught at the Alasdair Fraser Fiddle Course in Scotland and at Haugaard’s International Fiddle School in Germany. At both camps, Cassel observed a generational split in student response to the chop:

People older than me [thirty-two] are not interested in it pretty much across the board. People my age, some of them are interested in it, some of them are not. Teenagers: every one is interested in it . . . I'd say that most people between the ages of twenty and thirty, or twenty-eight, can do it now. (Interview, 2 September 2010, Boulder Creek, CA)

When adult professionals do learn to chop, it is frequently to satisfy younger students. California fiddler Deby Benton Grosjean told me, "I had so many teen students that would go, 'Teach me to chop, teach me to chop!' so I went, OK, I guess I better get into chop. Then I realized, this is actually a really cool tool to have" (28 August 2010, Boulder Creek, CA).

Musicians who learn to chop as adults tend to consider carefully the appropriateness of applying this new technique to the musical styles and repertoires they know, as discussed above. Many children and teens, however, now learn to chop simultaneously with their assimilation of various fiddling idioms. "I just kind of taught myself," eight-year-old Raphaella Brown told me. "It sounded cool and my teachers did it a lot" (30 August 2010, Boulder Creek, CA). For the moment, chopping is a window onto the ongoing negotiation of the lived and the imagined; when today's pre-teens have become tomorrow's touring fiddlers, chopping may well have settled comfortably into various musical idioms or disappeared completely, and some other new technique or tune will be the flashpoint.

The adults I interviewed saw in chopping a locus of experimentation for furthering a fiddling tradition, a forum for fears of homogenization, and an option for positioning one's music on the contemporary edge of a tradition. For my youngest interviewees, however, chopping held none of this baggage. Like a new grace note, slurring pattern, or vibrato type, it was simply a technical step on the road to the creation of an individual playing style. One of my favorite fieldwork moments was an interview with an eleven-year-old Oregon fiddler: I turned on the video camera and without waiting for a question or prompt from me, he put his violin to his shoulder and proudly announced, "I'm Gabriel Gonzales and this is my chop" (30 August 2010, Boulder Creek, CA).

Not all choppers are young, of course, and not all young players chop, but taken as a general trend these generational patterns point to an alternative approach to parsing the broad sweep of North Atlantic fiddling traditions. We define fiddling along geographic lines: whether "Irish," "Scottish," "Appalachian," or "Swedish," a traditional music is, almost by definition, associated with a particular physical place even when its linkages with other traditions are well known. Mapping the chop, however, has made me wonder if we might not be better off examining the related traditions of the North Atlantic along both geographic and generational lines. I think of the transnational influence of the 1920s and '30s recordings of New York Irish fiddler Michael Coleman; or of New Brunswick radio and television star Don Messer in the '40s, '50s, and '60s;

or of the Irish supergroup The Bothy Band in the 1970s. Will chopping be the generational trend of the late 1990s and early 2000s?

These are all twentieth-century examples, and I think a central, unanswered question is whether such trends existed prior to the introduction of recording and broadcasting technologies. That said, I would argue that even in this era of mass communication, my study of the chop suggests that traveling musicians, face-to-face transmission, and sites for meeting and exchange make for a potent combination.

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Notes

1. I borrow the term “North Atlantic fiddling” from the North Atlantic Fiddle Convention (NAFCo), an academic conference and traditional music festival hosted by the Elphinstone Institute at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland in 2001, 2006, and 2010; by Memorial University, Newfoundland in 2008; and by the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland in 2012.

2. Until recently, I had not seen chopping on other bowed string instruments used in North Atlantic fiddling. I believed that the mechanics of the technique, which depend partially on the weighted frog of modern bows, would exclude nyckelharpas; however, I recently saw a YouTube video in which nyckelharpa player Erik Rydvall chops using the middle of the bow (0’48” in “Nordic Live at Urkult august 2009”). I have not yet seen Hardanger fiddle players chopping. In addition, bassist Paul Kowert recently told me that he has “abandoned” chopping for lack of appropriate musical circumstances and believes that “the bass can add rhythm in other ways that are more effective and sound better” (e-mail, 6 April 2013).

3. Rogers updated and expanded his original model across five editions of this classic text, incorporating recent research and theoretical developments.

4. In addition to the five traits I focus on here, an innovation that is “compatible” with the “existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters” has a higher probability of adoption (Rogers 2003:240). Since this is a function not of the chop but of its potential adopters (what seems like a compatible technique to one fiddler may seem the opposite to another), I address this later in my discussion of genre.

5. My interviewees tended to use “style” and “genre” interchangeably (though primarily the former term). In this paper, I use “style” in the more limited sense of the sonic markers associated with a particular musical genre.

6. As a visual source of chopping instruction, *Chops and Grooves* was preceded by Homespun Tapes’ 1998 release *Bluegrass Fiddle: A Private Lesson with Richard Greene*. I have yet to meet a

musician who learned to chop from this video, however, perhaps because Greene's presentation of the chop is buried halfway into the VHS tape. In addition, the video's packaging does not mention the chop by name, but merely refers obliquely to "the funky rhythm effects that Richard made famous in his days backing up Bill Monroe." In contrast, *Chops and Grooves* gives the technique top billing and devotes nearly all of its ninety minutes to chopping. *Chops and Grooves* has also been widely distributed: most musicians I spoke with knew of or owned it, while only one was aware of *Bluegrass Fiddle*. One fiddler told me she had seen bootleg copies of *Chops and Grooves* in street markets in China (interview, Hanneke Cassel, 2 September 2010, Boulder Creek, CA).

7. My thanks to Alan Jabbour for suggesting the term "explosive diffusion."

8. My thanks to one of the anonymous *Ethnomusicology* reviewers for helping me to clarify this point.

9. Respectively: Breabach (<http://breabach.com/>), Nicolas Pellerin et les Grands Hurlleurs (<http://www.nicolaspellerin.com/>), Timber (<http://www.myspace.com/timber3>), Crooked Still (<http://crookedstill.com/>) (all accessed 2 February 2011).

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