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Alasdair Fraser on How the Scottish Fiddle Is a 'Vehicle for Different Types of Dialects'

APRIL 20, 2017

By Cristina Schreil

“If I was learning French, I couldn’t do it from a book. At some point, I’d have to go and hang out with French speakers and imitate them.”

I’ve asked renowned Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser about his expertise, and this is part of his answer. It makes sense to think so big. Fiddling—vernacular violin playing—springs from the same kind of complex influences that sculpt language.

“You couldn’t write a manual and say, ‘In order to sound like Scottish fiddling, you do this, this, and this.’ It doesn’t work like that. That manual would be quite elusive,” he says. “But, it’s beautifully elusive.” The Northern California–based fiddler speaks from Glasgow, the day after an album–release concert with cellist Natalie Haas. *Ports of Call* explores fiddling from Scotland, France, Spain, and more. Mastering those styles requires the same deep immersion as language fluency, Fraser asserts. It’s not about simply learning sheet music, but speaking in a regional dialect on your violin. He asserts this topic is vast. But he offers places to start.

If you’ve done some research already, chances are you know there are various types of tunes: jigs, reels, strathspeys, marches, hornpipes, and slow airs. Each have distinct colors, rhythmic shapes, time signatures, ornamentations, and contexts in Scotland’s history. A new fiddler can easily find sheet music of these tunes. However, Fraser encourages first immersing your ear, not your eye. A successful Scottish fiddler communicates in a way that others recognize as coming from a distinct place.

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The advertisement shows two versions of the Strings Magazine cover. On the left is a print magazine, and on the right is a tablet displaying the same cover. The cover features a photograph of Alasdair Fraser conducting an orchestra in a large hall. The headline on the cover reads "THE ALAN GILBERT ERA" in large, bold, white letters. Below the headline, it says "The innovative music director reflects on the defining moments of his night-season tenure at the New York Phil". There are also smaller headlines at the top of the cover, such as "DO SIMO PONTCH METROSPÉCINE: THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF A CELLO LEGEND" and "KIM KASHIMASHI IS CLOSING THE GILBERT BETWEEN PLAYER, COMPOSER, AND AUDIENCE". At the bottom of the advertisement, there is a large blue button with the word "SUBSCRIBE" in white, bold, capital letters.

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"Every finger is available to add spice and nuance to the melody notes at any time."

How do you play so that you sound like you're "from" a certain place? Just as accents and customs vary from region to region, fiddling styles and repertoire are also well defined. Elements like bowing styles and phrasing choices spring up for specific reasons. "When you put it all together you come out with a sound that is of a place," Fraser says. There's Western and Highland-style fiddling, wherein a fiddler would "play" in Gallic, Fraser explains. Here, fiddling often mimics other instruments in the region—bagpipes, harps, and singers—and marches, jigs, and slow airs derived from Gallic singing are abundant.

Or, Fraser offers, "I'm going to play my fiddle in Doric, which would be northeast, Aberdeenshire." There, you'll find a sophisticated focus on the art of strathspeys. "I could go up to the Shetland Isles where I would admit more Scandinavian influence into my sound," Fraser adds. In those remote islands, positioned between mainland Scotland and Norway, you may find open ringing strings and a distinct swinging sound. "As you head south to big cities like Edinburgh and suchlike, where there's been more contact with the European continent, more Italian influence coming over in the 18th century, you can allow sound to be more informed by Baroque stylings," Fraser adds. "You want to sound like yourself, you want to be an individual, and you want to express yourself putting that in the regional language of choice. It's so much fun," Fraser says.

Fraser grew up with traditional Scottish music all around him. But how can players who weren't as lucky adopt Scottish fiddling? Fraser says to do your homework in "vernacular violin playing." Regions also have key figures and composers associated with each; new fiddlers can study them as well. "You have to identify your heroes," Fraser says. "Copy every nuance, every sound and phrase, just as you would if you were learning another language." He likens it to any traditional art form. Fraser paints an example of an apprentice potter imitating how a master works the wheel and moves his hands to control the form. He does exactly this with fiddler Hector MacAndrew's playing. "I have fun days imagining one of my heroes playing a certain phrase and then I can close my eyes and kind of morph my bow arm into his bow arm. It's really amazing to try and do that. When you do that [with your heroes] you get some of their sound." If your hero is alive, reach out for a lesson.



Photo by Amy Luper

Context is also significant. In Scotland, fiddlers play a key role in traditional dances. “We have to talk about the dances,” Fraser says, adding that this is a huge subject in itself. The bow arm is linked to dance moves. “Do people want to get up off the floor? Do they want to push into the floor? Are they doing rotational motions? Or are they doing linear big strong handholds? You bow differently for all of these types of situations,” Fraser instructs. Performing at dances demands a reservoir of tunes; fiddlers must play for hours without repeating songs, keeping dancers energized. “Developing that kind of mind is best served by having that ability to learn by ear,” he adds.

A third component: Knowing how to articulate. “So we’ve got the language, which gives a regional flavor, we’ve got the bowing, which can be influenced by the dances, and we’ve got the ornamentation, which is part of the language,” Fraser says. In Scottish fiddling, there are multiple ways of embellishing with grace notes. With ornamentation, it’s all about developing “fistfuls of informed palette” as Fraser describes. “Every finger is available to add spice and nuance to the melody notes at any time.” The best way to discover ornamentations is to listen. Go see a Scottish fiddler perform, or view tutorials online. “Listen to your favorite bagpipe player, and steal all their grace notes,” Fraser adds. Singers are also helpful sources.

You can also look into fiddling camps, such as the four Fraser has led for many years. Camps offer an intensive immersion among fellow explorers, he attests. Or go to a Scottish dance or session in your area. If there aren’t any sessions, Fraser has a simple solution: Start your own. “It’s amazing who shows up.”

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Pat Jolly

It's such an immense joy to listen to Alistair play, and to watch him go to a different realm as he plays. But it is also great fun to hear him speak so knowledgeably and passionately about music. I admire him greatly!

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Chris Hauke

He's amazing. Copy his sound -- you can't go wrong. He's our most available direct link to the great fiddlers of the past. I highly recommend his discography. In chronological order according to issuance, the clearly show his progression from an adequate fiddler to a consummate master of the genre(s).

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Shirley Christie

He is my idol and inspires me to keep playing such a beautiful instrument. I met him on one occasion and he certainly didn't disappoint , he was everything I hoped he would be.....charming, charismatic and such a joy to speak to. I never tire listening to his playing.

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Greg Freitas

His words and playing have been a light to my life for a number of years now. It hasn't diminished and keeps growing as the years go on. It is a distinct pleasure to know him and many of those to whom he has brought such personal warmth and joy!

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