



**Improvisation in Scottish Traditional Music: Tradition-
Bearing, Intentionality, and Melodic/Rhythmic
Conception in an Oral/Aural Tradition**

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Background

Over the last few months, the ways I think about music have been shifting. This paper will seek to describe where I began, and why and how my understandings are developing, while acknowledging this is just an introductory exploration of these concepts. I will focus on the role of improvisation in traditional music and its relationship with tradition-bearing, song and intentionality, melodic and rhythmic conception, and oral/aural tradition, and draw some parallels with jazz. I will explain how time spent researching and reflecting has changed my own musical practice, and how practice may in future inform my own ideas. I will not so much seek to reach a 'conclusion', as talk about my process over the last few months, and ways I would like to continue to study and explore these areas after the project's completion.

At the beginning of this project, I was interested in rhythm and accenting from other genres, especially jazz. I saw jazz and traditional music as both grounded in pulse and rhythmic flow over which melodic and harmonic ideas run, and therefore the way rhythm was conceptualised in jazz could be applied to traditional music. There seemed to be a freedom and creativity in jazz that appealed to me, though I did not have a clear idea what this meant, or what exactly I felt was 'missing' in traditional music. Several realisations, further research, and reflection then led me to completely reframe this project. The new project emerged from a desire to ask better questions; not necessarily to answer them within the timescale of this project, but rather to appreciate more of the issues surrounding them.

First, I realised that my appreciation of music was shaped by my own musical education and experiences, and the ways of thinking about music with which I had grown up. I learned mainly traditional music on the clarsach, or Scottish harp. However, my family's classical music backgrounds, my own predominantly Western Art music education through school and university, and learning classical flute and piano, also influenced my perceptions of music and its values. I was involved in the Clarsach Society and the Edinburgh Harp Festival but less so the wider traditional music scene. The history of the clarsach is a little different from that of other traditional instruments, and arguably more influenced by Western Art music. The ancient clarsach was rooted in the West of Scotland Gaelic tradition. However, it had died out in Scotland by 1800 for a variety of historical, cultural, and political reasons. The renaissance of the modern-day clarsach from the end of the 19th century centred around cosmopolitan Edinburgh in the South. The organology and playing technique of this clarsach is closer to that of the Western European pedal harp than the Gaelic harp.¹ Additionally, arranged and notated music, which comes from the classical music tradition, is relatively common within clarsach education settings. This may be because it aids coordination of the two hands and facilitates placing fingers on the strings ahead of time, which is fundamental to harp technique.

My experience on the East Coast of Scotland is also likely different to a player from the Highlands and Islands. Although oral tradition has remained a central feature of traditional music throughout Scotland, classical music practices

¹ Stuart Eydmann, *In Good Hands: The Clarsach Society and the Renaissance of the Scottish Harp* (Edinburgh: The Clarsach Society, 2017).

have overlapped with traditional music to a greater extent on the East Coast. Fiddle players in eastern Scotland such as Nathaniel Gow and James Scott Skinner also played classical music, which influenced their traditional technique and composition. It is possible that these values have continued to shape how traditional music is differently transmitted across these various areas of Scotland today.² Overall, I recognised that, for a variety of reasons, I knew less about traditional music performance practice and cultural values than I thought I did. I needed a deeper knowledge of and rootedness in one tradition, its function, and values, to understand the music I played and listened to, and to develop awareness of where it was situated within that tradition.

Second, I realised that I practise in order to improve technically, aesthetically, and play expressively, but not necessarily *also* to ask questions about the intention or values underlying those musical choices. I shifted focus from rhythm as the underlying force in music, to the influence of song on a melodic tradition. By using song as a vehicle through which to develop intentionality, each time playing the music could be 'new': the beginnings of improvisation. By deepening my understanding of ornamentation and other forms of variation in song, instrumental improvisation could become more intuitive and musical rather than simply playing what was 'under the fingers'. Eventually, I hope this will enable me to improvise with a more natural and meaningful expression of self, within the structural forms of the tradition.

Third, I realised that my lack of immersion in oral/aural tradition meant that my musical 'ear' was under-developed. By no longer using notation and instead

² Simon McKerrell, *Focus: Scottish Traditional Music* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

listening more deeply, I have begun to relearn how I think about melody and rhythm. Just like a storyteller does not remember the precise words but only the outline of the story, melodic and rhythmic conceptualisations are not fixed. Rather they are flexible and malleable outlines that can be realised in multiple ways and serve particular functions in traditional music. I hope that in future this will enable me to develop an embodied understanding of that which is idiomatic to an oral tradition and inexpressible through notation: melodic contour, nuance of sounds and pitch relationships, pulse, and complexity of rhythms.

Based around these new understandings, this essay will discuss improvisation in traditional music. I will begin by looking at the structures of traditional music that provide the framework within which improvisation can happen. I will then discuss how song, as the closest 'instrument' to our sense of self, can help us connect to music on a deeper level, and develop improvisatory practice. I will look at melodic contour and the 'tune-model'. Whether 'simply' playing the melody as spontaneously and meaningfully as possible, or creating layers of melodic and rhythmic variation, improvisation in traditional music remains an exploration of the distinct character of the melodic outline. Finally, I will talk about my new conceptualisation of rhythm and pulse in traditional music that has more space for flexibility and improvisatory practice and consider how oral traditions enable improvisation.

Improvisation within Tradition

In traditional music, improvisatory storytelling plays an important role in communal remembrance, culture-bearing, and function. A tradition bearer is

someone who passes on the music of the tradition, upholding and shaping communal memory. They are deeply connected to the music they make and its meaning for the community. They embody the tradition through their performance. The history, culture and story come through in the performance of these musicians. Stanley Robertson, a Scots traveller singer from the North East, has talked about the role of the tradition bearer.

Ye've got a whole ancestry behind ye, comes through ye. And when yer telling a story or singing a song, you are the vehicle by which a tribe comes through ye ...when ye take a ballad, yer gonna sing a ballad, breathe it into ye. Let it fill every part o' yer body... and when ye become all these characters, then once its inside ye...feel the spirit, and then tak it oot bonnie.³

The Scottish musical 'accent' is part of the collective national consciousness.⁴ It can be heard in the musical materials (rhythms, melodies, ornamentation) as well as the more abstract 'feelings' of the music: themes of love and loss, the imagination and supernatural, nature and the landscape. The function of the music is also integral to its sound; certain rhythms and accenting promote dance or work. Understanding of musical forms and materials can be compared to the acquisition and development of language; '[an] analogy has often been made to the use of spoken language—those who have studied more

³ Stanley Robertson and Iona Fyfe, *Away From My Window*. Cairnie Records, 2018, Accessed 30 April 2021.

<<https://open.spotify.com/track/1frJuQ4V4wXIMm3BC2wNco?si=mLYoTVzHT4q315ljudy9g>>.

⁴ Nichola Wood, "Playing With 'Scottishness': Musical Performance, Non-Representational Thinking And The 'Doings' Of National Identity," *Cultural Geographies* 19 no. 2 (2012): 195-215.

deeply generally have a larger vocabulary and more interesting things to say, but by and large, the use of that vocabulary is intuitive'.⁵ Like self-expression and communication through words, we tell more creative and interesting improvisatory musical stories through deepening our understanding of the musical tradition, its values and functions.

Before this project, I had viewed tradition-bearing as a role reserved for certain musicians, such as traveller singers or people who grew up immersed in oral tradition. However, the entire community is crucial to the maintenance and development of traditional music, and this makes any player a tradition bearer of a sort.⁶ Above all, traditional music is created for and tells stories about the people and places it is from; playing it means being rooted in a musical community with shared values, musical structures, and sounds. The tradition allows you to express yourself in the context of the culture and community it serves. Improvisation in traditional music is about finding 'freedom within form'.⁷ Musical expression can be improvisatory and meaningful (for the performer and audience, although these may be two different things) within the context and structures of the tradition from which it draws.

⁵ Marian Jago, "Musical Koryu – Lineal Traditions in Jazz: Lennie Tristano/Lee Konitz," *MUSICultures* 38 no. 1 (2011): 213.

⁶ Marian Jago, Supervision for Creative Practice Project, 2021.

⁷ Jago, Supervision.

The 'Feeling' of Song and Intentionality

Song, the most widespread and accessible form of musical expression, underpins Scottish traditional music. For example, though pibroch⁸ has evolved as a separate tradition to Gaelic song and has adapted to the sounds and technique of the pipes, its roots can be traced to the rhythms, melodies, and phrasing of the Gaelic language.⁹ The clarsach also has clear links to song and poetry through its historical role in the bardic tradition. Many songs have been passed to instrumental repertoire as slow airs or even dance music of fiddlers and pipers. Some music has also travelled the other direction. Puirt a beul¹⁰ emerged because of the Reformation, during which time instruments were banned in certain areas.¹¹ By understanding the feeling, rhythms, ornamentation, and melodies of song, we will appreciate more deeply how these elements are expressed in Scottish traditional music.

Singing is our 'natural instrument', the most direct and least analytical channel of musical expression to our own sense of self.¹² All other forms of music use an external medium, an instrument, through which to translate musical intentions into sound. When we sing, we are often more lyrical and personal than when playing an instrument, because the gap between ourselves and our voice

⁸ English for piobaireachd, meaning piping. The art music of the bagpipes, it comprises of an urlar (ground) and variations which involve complex ornamentation and a non-metrical approach to rhythm.

⁹ Allan MacDonald, "The Relationship Between Pibroch and Gaelic Song: It's Implications on the Performance Style of the Pibroch Urlar" (masters dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1995).

¹⁰ Translating 'mouth music', this is simple, or nonsense lyrics sung to the time of jigs or reels, usually for dancing.

¹¹ Christine Martin, *Traditional Scottish Fiddling*, (Isle of Skye: Taigh na Teud Music Publishers, 2002).

¹² Andy Hamilton, "The Art of Improvisation," in *Conversations on the Improvisers Art* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 102-142.

seems narrower.¹³ Song therefore helps us to establish the connection between the conceptualising mind and resulting musical sound.¹⁴

Playing and singing should *feel*/like the same thing.¹⁵ The closer our relationship to the music, and the more we 'sing' through the instrument, the more conscious and focussed our musical practice will be. Trumpeter Mutt Carey describes, 'when I'm improvising, I'm singing in my mind. I sing what I feel and then try to reproduce it on the horn'.¹⁶ Drummer Max Roach emphasises it is important to 'know the meaning of the piece...get underneath the piece, to really sing with [your instrument] and play with more feeling'.¹⁷ Our sense of melodic contour and phrasing can be developed from listening to and imitating song. This will also help us to convey the subtle use of colour and inflection reminiscent of the natural qualities of the voice through the medium of an instrument. Lee Konitz says, 'it's a matter of getting intricately and sophisticatedly involved with the melodic line so that it is one with the performer'.¹⁸ By developing a deeper intimacy with the melody through song, the music will sound more meaningful and intentional.

Improvisatory storytelling is a central feature of almost every form of artistic expression. In theatre productions, the cast retell the same story over and over, yet to me as the audience, each performance feels fresh and spontaneous. It is as though they truly are thinking up their lines on the spot. The more deeply

¹³ Jago, Supervision.

¹⁴ Marian Jago, "Jedi Mind Tricks: Lennie Tristano and Techniques for Imaginative Musical Practice," *Jazz Research Journal* 7 no. 2 (2015).

¹⁵ Jago, Supervision.

¹⁶ Paul Berliner, "Conversing with the Piece," in *Thinking in Jazz*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 180-181.

¹⁷ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 171.

¹⁸ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 180.

connected and committed to their performance the actors are, the more they will really be able to create art that feels genuine, meaningful, and fresh. Hamilton says, 'the crucial musical issue is not so much whether or not something is composed or invented in the moment, but that it sounds fresh, spontaneous, and natural'.¹⁹

This project has changed how I think about intention and value in music. Beforehand, I would have placed greater value on the outcome: the aesthetic and technical result. I would now suggest the real meaning comes from the choices and context *surrounding* the musical outcome. That is not to say musical sounds themselves are unimportant. However, it is also important to ask questions about what is being communicated, how and why, its place in tradition, and the process of its creation. In the same way, improvisation is less about the performer's decisions and abilities and more about the *reasons* for those improvisatory choices. In summary, 'the emphasis [lies] not on materials (chords, scales, patterns) and instrumental technique, but in how and *why* those materials [are] used in the cultivation of creative expression and improvisational ability'.²⁰

Personally, I have been working on finding this sense of intentionality and feeling of the singing in my own practice. I began by listening to different performances and singing the melodies. I then played the melodies on the harp, trying to find the feeling of singing them. I also realised that once I am familiar with the melodies, I might start playing them 'automatically', and they would lose their freshness. Instead, by remaining focussed fully on the melody, I have been trying

¹⁹ Andy Hamilton, "The Art of Improvisation," in *Conversations on the Improvisers Art* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 102.

²⁰ Jago, "Musical Koryu," 206.

to find the feeling of not knowing what will come next, so the music really is created in the moment. I also found that by not becoming so attached to certain fingering patterns, and making small changes altering the rhythms, ornamentation, or melodic line, has helped to retain the feeling of spontaneity. I have also thought about *why* I make certain musical choices. Am I trying to imitate a certain style or singer? What do I want to convey? How do I want the audience to respond? What do I want to say about tradition or about myself? By thinking about these aspects beforehand, I could be fully focussed in the moment of performance to put all the feeling and expression into the music itself.

Melody and Melodic Improvisation

Compared to rhythm or harmony, melody is to be the enduring, defining feature of a piece in traditional (and some jazz) music. Although harmony and rhythm might enrich and provide context for the music, they do not necessarily set it apart from other tunes of a similar structural form. Melody, however, is distinctive. It determines the character of the piece and provides the skeletal information from which the rhythm and harmony is hung.²¹ In traditional music, melody is also a communally owned and understood artifact with particular significance for its community.²² Melodic contour remains remarkably unchanged by oral transmission, editors, and styles through time.²³ It is therefore melody which forms the basis for improvisation in traditional music.

²¹ Jago, "Musical Koryu."

²² Jago, Supervision.

²³ Sirvart Poladian, "Melodic Contour In Traditional Music," *Journal Of The International Folk Music Council* 3 (1951): 30-35.

Scholars have proposed various ways of categorising traditional melodies, but I find the most helpful one for improvisation is Cowdery's 'tune model'. Cowdery proposes that the essence of a tune is captured by the overall melodic contour. The outline is not fixed, or even performed; rather it is the conceptualisation in the mind of the performer of a structural outline of a tune. This is what allows them to use their own creative freedom to improvise.

A tune model is a generating pattern in the mind of the individual and, by extension, of the group. Any given rendition is one of an infinite number of possible manifestations of the tune model...a tune model is a living potential which may unfold slightly differently in different situations, but which will always be recognizable as itself, just as a plant retains its identity whether it grows in sun or shade, soil or sand... Like a seed which lies dormant, a tune model does not belong to the realm of action; it silently waits for the conditions which will allow it to be manifested in a performer's rendition. ²⁴

The tune model of the performer with less advanced aural and improvisatory skills will be quite simple and have less scope for improvisation. However, a musician who has developed these skills, and is also deeply aware of what the music means in its cultural and musical context, will be able to conceptualise a more advanced model. This allows them to explore a wide range of melodic and rhythmic possibilities with each repetition of the tune.

²⁴ James Cowdery, "Portrait of a Tune: 'The Blackbird,'" in *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland*, (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), 44.

The tune model can be likened to telling a story. Some forms of music are like a written speech, where the words and music of the composer are the 'correct' version. This is the approach to music usually taken in Western Art music. Though there is some scope for the individual artistic voice, performers aim primarily to reproduce what the composer intended. Instead, traditional music is more like storytelling. The tunes may have long and unknown histories, and multiple variants that have emerged over time through a 'living tradition'. Each artist will perform it slightly differently; '[there] are only "stories being told", no "speeches being read" ...[we are] left to retell the story'.²⁵

From the structure of the tune model, it is possible to derive a potentially infinite number of improvisatory ideas. This defines the main constraints and freedoms of improvising within traditional music; on one hand, the tune is identified by its melodic outline and significance to the community, on the other, the performer can reimagine the tune each time they play it. Like a signature it will be slightly different every time but retain the characteristics which define its identity.

There is no fixed original, like an author's signed autograph, to be memorized note for note and word for word. Just as in the telling of a prose yarn by a practiced raconteur, the true folk singer carries in his or her memory the mental image of a song, malleable in verbal and melodic detail, to be given new realization in every fresh rendition. The differences may be almost unnoticeable, but it is next to impossible for a singer to give an identical repetition of the same song...Tradition

²⁵ Mats Johansson, "Paraphrase This: A Note on Improvisation," *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 26 no. 1 (2017): 42.

is a fluid medium, never quite the same, ever renewed. That is what keeps it inexhaustibly interesting and alive.²⁶

In the jazz tradition, Lee Konitz had a melodically oriented approach to improvisation. In an interview for *DownBeat*, he describes that it involves ten steps, which start close to the melody and gradually move outwards. The first step is playing the melody, as meaningfully and beautifully as possible, and with all the feeling of singing it, as discussed in the previous section. When he has developed an intimate understanding of the melody, Konitz stretches its rhythms and expression, then adds some ornamentation. Each variation has a progressively more complex and sophisticated level of embellishment, until the original melody is displaced entirely and a new one created.²⁷ This melodic approach to improvising begins with the song and shows how it is possible to create an infinite amount of new music that will always, however distantly, reference its melodic source.

Although Konitz was a jazz musician, I believe this approach could be useful when thinking about improvisation in traditional music. This systematic process of beginning close to the tune and gradually exploring the melodic and rhythmic possibilities that can come from it, could help me to begin to improvise on traditional tunes while retaining their unique melodic 'signature'. Through deepening understanding of the identity of a tune as a melodic outline, in its

²⁶ Bertrand Bronson, "Traditional Ballads Musically Considered," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 no. 1 (1975): 40-41.

²⁷ David Kestin, "Lee Konitz: Back to Basics," *DownBeat Magazine*, December 1985.

musical and cultural context, I hope to strengthen my ability to create new melodic ideas in the moment and tell 'musical stories'.

Rhythm, Pulse and Rhythmic Improvisation

Before beginning this project, I mainly conceptualised rhythm as the beat and subdivisions of crochets, quavers and so on. However, I have begun to appreciate there is more depth, complexity, and possibility within rhythm. An important moment for me was the shift from thinking of 'beat' towards a more flexible and dynamic idea of 'pulse'. To me, 'beat' suggests a metrical, mechanical division of time into evenly spaced units. Rather, 'pulse' is more akin to the natural rhythms we find around us: walking, breathing, speaking, the heartbeat.²⁸ These are felt rather than measured; purposeful but also instinctive; they have room for movement without losing the underlying sense of continuity. In comparison to the stiffness of the beat, pulse suggests warmth, movement, life and meaning. If the beat is the dividing line between areas of time, the pulse is round.²⁹ It occupies a malleable space within time that can be pushed forward or pulled back. The ways in which sounds occupy the space within the pulse can provide layers of meaning and nuance.³⁰ It also moves away from automation, and the binary notion of right or wrong rhythm. Rather it suggests intentionality, asking why and to what effect rhythm is used. The dynamism of pulse makes room for more improvisatory freedom and creative expression. Yehudi Menuhin summarises this well:

²⁸ Heather Bixler, "Meeting at a Crossroad: Traditional Irish Music and Classical Music Taught in the Same Space," (masters dissertation, University of Memphis, 2015).

²⁹ Jago, Supervision.

³⁰ Bixler, "Meeting at a Crossroad."

There are musicians who mistake metronome meter for pulse. Pulse is a living measure which, though fairly even, is not a military exactitude...In fact, people who are very strict and very superior and play music to the metronome have generally a very poor sense of rhythm...for within the rhythm there is life, there is no rigid beat but rather a sense of strolling in the woods while the mind and the heart are free to dream.³¹

In traditional music, improvisation is often used to add rhythmic movement. In songs and airs, the text and phrasing govern the sense of overall internal pulse for traditional singers.³² It allows them to weave around the pulse in an improvisatory and instinctive way to bring expression to their songs without disturbing the flow.³³ In instrumental music, we can still maintain that improvisatory and intentional 'feel' of the rhythms of song, allowing space for the phrasing to breathe and move. The more we listen to other musicians, the more we appreciate their personal relationship to pulse.³⁴ Improvisation may be through melodic or rhythmical variation, ornamentation, phrasing and articulation, or weighting and stress. However, especially in dance music due to its function, improvisation should enable rather than disturb the flow and lilt of the music.³⁵

³¹ Yehudi Menuhin, *The Compleat Violinist: Thoughts, Exercises, Reflections of an Itinerant Violinist*, (New York: Summit Books, 1986).

³² Ailie Munro, "Lizzie Higgins, and the Oral Transmission of Ten Child Ballads," *The Journal of the School of Scottish Studies*, 14 no.2 (1970): 155-188.

³³ Sean Lucy, "Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse," *Irish University Review*, 8 no. 2 (1978): 151-177.

³⁴ Maeve Gilchrist, "Rhythm Intensive for Harpers," online harp course, 2021.

³⁵ Niall Keegan, "The Parameters of Style in Irish Traditional Music," *Journal of Irish Music and Dance*, 1 no. 1 (2010): 63-96.

I think that redefining how I conceptualise rhythm and pulse is beginning to help me develop a looser relationship to the pulse, if only in small ways at the moment. Perhaps because of the closeness of the voice to our mind and sense of self, it is easier to intuitively feel the spaces between and around the pulse when singing. Singing these rhythms and then transferring that 'feeling' to the harp would help me to develop this further. Over time, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of pulse through song, listening and practice, and be able to move more confidently within it to convey different feelings in a genuinely improvisatory way.

Oral/Aural Tradition and Developing Musical Fluidity

Traditional music is rooted in oral/aural tradition, transmitted and understood through sound not sight. It is a living tradition and so, like storytelling, the identity of tune is retained while allowing individuals to continue to reshape it. It therefore supports a fluid and dynamic conceptualisation of both melody and rhythm.

A story of a Donegal fiddler helped me to appreciate what it means for music to be a sound-based art form. The story goes that a visitor hears a traditional tune and asks the fiddler to write it out for him, so he can learn it. In response the fiddler asks the visitor, "if we went to an art gallery, what would you think if I told you to learn how to paint by smelling the paintings?" In the same way, learning an 'art form of the ear' cannot be achieved through a piece of paper; we spend a lot

of time 'developing the wrong organ'.³⁶ The bizarreness of the analogy demonstrates the significant limitations of using a score to both conceptualise and transmit music. The oral tradition maintains a direct relationship between conceptualising sound and physically creating it. This helps us to play with more feeling, and to develop a deeper relationship to the tradition, the melody, and the pulse.

Before this project, I had not truly considered the benefits of conceptualising and transmitting music, a sound-based art form, exclusively in terms of sound. I would like to learn to listen to and play music with more thoughtfulness and understanding. Practice away from the instrument could develop a more embodied understanding of pitch and rhythmic relationships, melodic movement and 'rhythmic core'.³⁷ The voice in particular is crucial to developing the connection between conceptualisation of abstract ideas and creation of musical sound. It serves as a link between the mind and instrument. This way of practising shifts the focus from our development as an instrumentalist, to that of a *musician*. It removes the safety net of instrumental muscle memory, which allows an automatic and fragile conception of melodic and rhythmic material. Instead, it strengthens the internal musical ear and imagination, which can eventually be applied to any number of musical contexts. This requires more focussed and conscious practice. However, commitment to this way of studying may eventually lead to greater command of our musical voice and permit greater

³⁶ Caoimhin MacAiodh, "The Blood Red Tear and The Hidden Note," in *Crosbhealach an Cheoil- The Crossroads Conference 2003: Education and Traditional Music*, (Dublin: Whinstone, 2003), 67.

³⁷ Gilchrist, "Rhythm Intensive."

fluidity in performance.³⁸ An internalised understanding of grammar and vocabulary in our first language facilitates spontaneous and intuitive verbal communication. In the same way, internalisation of melodic and rhythmic concepts leads to more improvisatory and meaningful musical expression and communication about the tradition or ourselves.^{39 40}

The shift from learning tunes through a combination of ear and notation or notation only to *exclusively* by ear has helped me to focus on the sound. Learning the feeling and shapes of the notes, rather than 'memorising' the tune in a fixed and brittle sense, has helped me to imagine the connections between sections and imagine ways to improvise that sound more organic and fit better with the flow. There is much work to do to develop my awareness of melodic and rhythmic relationships and ability to translate abstract ideas in the mind into external sound on the voice and harp. However, I hope that by strengthening this, I shall develop a stronger and more flexible conceptual structure of the tune. With more time and practice, I hope this will eventually enable me to understand the layers of nuance and improvisatory possibilities within the tune. This would bring freedom to experience the feeling of playing music spontaneously and intentionally each time.

³⁸ Jago, "Jedi Mind Tricks."

³⁹ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 178.

⁴⁰ Jago, "Jedi Mind Tricks."

Reflections/Conclusions

This paper has sought to chronicle how my understanding of improvisation in traditional music has changed and developed over the past months. This paper is just the beginning of an exploration of these ideas, so I shall mention some possible areas for further study and practice.

I would like to deepen my understanding of traditional music. Developing the regular practice of more *intentional*/listening to the music of others and their ideas about music would bring greater appreciation of the scope of imagination, creativity, and improvisatory practice in traditional music. I hope that over time I would understand better what I listened to. I would appreciate more fully traditional players' use of *musical sounds* - ornamentation, rhythmic devices, melodic relationships; *musical imagination* - rhythmic conception, 'tune-model', approach to improvisation; and *artistic voice* - understanding of and place within tradition, intention and 'feel' in performance. Through listening to and playing with others, I hope that I would begin to hear more connections between ideas. I hope I would understand not just what I hear, but how these ideas feel in an embodied sense and what they mean for the performer and community within their context.

I realised through this project that I lack intentionality in practice. I am not accustomed to asking myself *why* I make certain technical or aesthetic musical choices when practicing or performing, beyond them being an expressive or emotional end in themselves. I think regularly doing so would help me to develop more reflective and conscious practice which could be heard in the resulting musical sounds. Additionally, I feel that there is still a bit of a disconnect between my conceptual grasp of the 'feeling' and 'intentionality' of singing, and my

translation of that into musical sound. Further reflection and study would help me link this theoretical conceptualisation of ideas, to a more direct and embodied understanding of playing with intentionality and meaningfulness.

I would like to develop a more embodied understanding of melody and rhythm, which in turn would inform and support improvisatory practice. I have shifted from thinking of learning a tune as a matter of 'memorisation' to 'internalisation'. This would give me greater flexibility and a more malleable concept of the tune, rhythmically and melodically. Though not touched on in this essay, 'internalisation' could also be extended to harmony and accompaniment. This would lead to greater ownership and embodiment of the tune, so I could understand it more deeply, communicate it more meaningfully, and have greater scope for improvisation in its performance. I think further practice with the voice would develop musical fluidity and internalisation of musical sounds and relationships. Continued study and listening to how melody, rhythm and improvisation is conceptualised within jazz traditions, could help strengthen my melodic and rhythmic conception as a musician (above harpist), and further inform my ideas about its relevance for traditional music.

In conclusion, this project has led to deconstruction of my ideas about music, and I do not feel like I (yet) have many of the puzzle pieces to reframe it. However, I think it has also shown me how I might think about, feel, and experience music differently, and has opened doors to glimpse new avenues for musical exploration and imagination. I hope that continuing to develop these ideas through study, listening, reflection, and practice will deepen my

understanding of how to apply them within an improvisatory approach to traditional music.

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