

Adult learning in traditional music

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This study is based on interviews carried out with 13 adult learners of traditional fiddle playing. The average age of the learners was 56 and they had been learning to play for between 2 and 20 years. All of the interviewees had taken music at school but none of them had been stimulated to participate further in any significant sense. The aspiration to learn to play the fiddle had various sources. Learning usually took place through traditional workshops and through the medium of the tune rather than through scales and exercises. Only one of the participants took regular conventional individualised lessons. They tended to take a pragmatic stance with regard to technique, looking for technical advice when they came up against barriers to progress. The music they played was within an aural culture and most of them learned by ear although they tended to regard notation as a useful supplement. All of them played in some sort of social context and all of them described an immense sense of pleasure and achievement from their playing. It is suggested that this kind of informal learning may have implications for learning to play instruments at school.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the development of instrumental skills amongst adult learners of traditional music. The study of traditional music seems to imply the use of ethnomusicological methodologies, but although the research techniques might be classified under a loose ethnographical heading, the current study does not adopt an explicit ethnomusicological framework. Gates (1992: 293) points out that '[T]he rubric 'ethnomusicology', for instance, curiously refers to all the world's music but that of the West!'. Even this observation is not entirely accurate, since the rubric does routinely refer to Western traditional music and is exemplified by such works as Cooke's (1986) study of traditional fiddling on the Shetland Isles. In the unusual case of an ethnomusicological perspective being applied to Western classical music (Kingsbury, 1988; Nettl, 1989, 1992), its power is in making the familiar appear strange – Nettl adopts the strategy of showing how the customs of the Western musical academy might be explained to a visitor from Mars. In the normal course of events, our cultural perspective on classical music is not made explicit. For example, Wicks (1998) has this to say about the study of music in American universities.

We do not have 'Theory of Music in the Elite Western-European Tradition' in the curriculum, we have 'Music Theory'; not 'Appreciation of Music in the Elite Western-European Tradition,' but 'Music Appreciation.' (Wicks 1998: 55)

Anything outside this music (with which we are so familiar that it needs no qualification) has, by implication, an otherness about it, which requires the explicit adoption of ethnomusicological techniques. Cooke's study has many features which give it this sense of ethnomusicological otherness. It was carried out on a remote set of islands some 100 miles to the north of the UK mainland and much of the evidence is historical, relying on the testimony of older people looking back. In this way, it is safely partitioned from us, both geographically and temporally – an interesting work but with no apparent relevance to current music education practice.

But cordoning off other styles of learning means that there is little research in the development of skill in the playing of musical instruments outside conventional tuition in classical music, as the BERA Music Education Review Group's (2004) survey of current music education research makes clear. With the exception of Green's (2001) recent work on popular musicians, the focus in both music education and in the psychology of music has been on learning to play through the classical conservatoire model. This is partly because, as Sloboda (2001) has pointed out, the majority of formal performance-based education is directed towards allowing a minority of people to play works from the classical canon. Research in formal instrument education is almost bound to focus on this style and its conventions. But a large proportion of active musicians acquire their musical skills informally (see, for example, Finnegan, 1989) and it is curious that there is so little research on such a common learning style, albeit one which takes place outside of the establishment. One other consequence of the focus on formal classical tuition is that there is virtually no attention directed towards the learning of musical instruments by adults, apart from those relatively young musicians completing a formal classical training in the conservatoire. Adult learning in general, especially in its new conceptualisation as lifelong learning, has attracted considerable research effort, but it tends to be centred on learning directed towards some kind of economic or career benefit. This focus stems largely from the government's interest in learning as a means to enhance national economic performance. On the face of it, music does not have a significant part to play in preparing a flexible, multi-skilled workforce, although there is sometimes a token acknowledgement of its cultural significance. The 1998 green paper on lifelong learning (DfEE, 1998), suggests that learning 'helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature' (DfEE, 1998: 7). But it proceeds to make no further reference to them. It is clear that the paper's concern is with learning related to working life rather than to leisure or to culture. Although adult education has traditionally embraced learning for its own sake recent policy developments in lifelong learning, as Field (2002) makes clear, have concentrated solely on 'interventions designed to improve the skills and flexibility of the workforce' (Field, 2002: 21).

The recent publication of Green's (2001) work on learning by popular musicians is an exception to the absence of research on generative skill development outside the classical genre. Green looked at the way in which popular musicians learned to play outside formal instrument tuition. She was able to identify a number of key features of their learning, such as enculturation, an identification with the music usually achieved through listening to and copying recordings, and playing in social groups with their peers. Their approach to issues such as notation and technique tended to be pragmatic. They learned to play much of their music by ear, rather than from sheet music, although some of them could read it. Their attention to technique tended to occur later on during their learning and resulted

from a perceived need to improve their playing. Green concluded that informal learning of instruments is an effective route to adult participation and conjectured that it might be more likely to produce a longer-term commitment to music than conventional formal tuition.

The efficacy of formal tuition in leading to active adult musicianship is not known. A 1967 American study (Lawrence & Dachinger, 1967) suggested that 37% of those who had taken formal tuition continued to play into adulthood. Interestingly, their sample contained a small number of self-taught musicians, 100% of whom remained musically active as adults. There is no reliable research indicating the proportion of adults who play instruments in any particular genre. What research there is suffers from a lack of clear criteria about what constitutes musical activity. A 1994 survey carried out for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music reports that 22% of adults claim to be able to play an instrument (ABRSM, 1994). In the absence of a published full project report, it is impossible to say whether this represents genuine active musicianship or a memory or a more passive aspiration. But, for example, the ABRSM report states that 14% of the 22% of adults who claim to play (i.e. 3% of all adults) play the recorder. It is hard to believe that 3% of the adult population, approximately 1 in 30 of us, regularly plays the instrument we typically learned in primary school, especially given recent research which suggests that the recorder puts children off (Curtis, 2002). Hence, the conclusion that one in five adults plays a musical instrument is also not entirely convincing and is certainly unsupported by everyday experience. A recent survey of participation in arts in England showed that 9% of those aged 16+ had played a musical instrument in the last 12 months and 3% had performed to an audience (Arts Council of England, 2001: 28). But again it is unclear what level of activity these figures really represent.

The study of adult learning in music is unlikely to have any major benefits for the economy and it would undoubtedly result in focus on a wider cultural spectrum than the relatively narrow base of current formal instrument tuition. Mark (1996) points out that studying adults learning to play musical instruments could be a source of valuable information about teaching and learning in school music.

Ethnic and cultural musics are, and have been, taught successfully for a long time through informal education or education in natural settings outside of the schools. (Mark, 1996: 119)

Method

The researcher attended two workshops, one a weekend workshop in Shetland-style traditional fiddling offered at the University of Stirling, and the other a single session of a weekly workshop in traditional fiddling offered in the central Scottish town of Falkirk. The Stirling workshop was tutored by a traditional fiddler well-known in Scotland. Eight other learners attended the workshop of whom six were adults (over 18). The adult participants were asked to take part in the study by consenting to an interview to take place after the workshop was over. The Falkirk workshop was larger, and organised into three classes, beginners, intermediates and advanced, each of which had a different tutor, usually a guest traditional musician. Seven participants from the intermediate or advanced classes agreed to be interviewed. The researcher also attended, as a participant, a number of sessions in which the musicians played.

Interviews were carried out by arrangement with each participant. Given the geographical spread of the sample, participants were offered a choice of a telephone interview or a face-to-face interview at a location of their choice. A semi-structured format was used with the schedule being constructed around musical life histories. Within this framework, the focus was on topics concerned with learning to play, including topics such as practice, technique, tuition and opportunities for performance. The researcher's own experience of learning and playing fiddle music did not explicitly inform the interviews but it might have been expected to reduce his outsider status as far as the respondents were concerned. Interviews varied between 30 and 80 minutes in length and were subsequently transcribed for analysis. Analysis of the transcripts was iterative, with the identification and progressive refinement of common themes. The results section illustrates these themes with extracts from the interviews so that, as far as possible, the participants' voices are the source of the evidence. Thirteen musicians were interviewed. The age range was from 40–76 (mean = 56) years and there were nine males and four females. The characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 *Characteristics of the sample of musicians*

Letter code	Gender	Age	Time learning fiddle (years)
A	M	57	8
B	M	53	4
C	F	40	7
D	M	42	2
E	F	50	3
F	F	60	4
G	F	64	5
H	M	72	8
I	M	76	5
J	M	55	4
K	M	61	5
L	M	43	20
M	M	63	5

Results

Musical Background

The musical backgrounds of the group were interestingly diverse. All of the adults in this group were able to recall involvement in music at school, few of them, it has to be said, with any degree of enthusiasm.

We basically listened to classical music and analysed it and different styles of music. (D)

I went to school in the fifties and I think then it was more important to have a corporate sound and individualism wasn't encouraged . . . We sang together and she went round

and stopped people from singing and that upset me as a child. I remember there was one boy who could not sing more than a couple of notes and certainly wasn't singing what I was singing and she stopped him from singing and he was upset about it. (F)

For some, their early experience had involved taking instrument lessons of some sort. Most of them had taken piano lessons for a few years but only one, a primary school teacher (G), had continued playing into adulthood. The predominant impression of these lessons was not a positive one.

It was very parrot stuff... just to pass exams but it was all from following the music, very mechanical. I never actually learned any music, I don't have any tunes that I could sit down and play. (B)

I had a horrible teacher who was a bit of an ogre and sort of slapped my wrists if I didn't learn all my scales. (D)

K took only three weeks of piano lessons which were terminated by the teacher who handed him a 'brown envelope', containing 'a message which referred to my powers of concentration and ability', to give to his mother. C took piano lessons for a year and 'hated it' but also played the tuba in the school orchestra for two years. This did not seem to have facilitated any genuine engagement with music.

I had been shoved into various music things when I was a child at school, overeager parents but not really enjoyed it... I remember very little about it – it just shows how very little I enjoyed it. (C)

C also remembered her music teacher 'enthusiastically getting me and some other folk involved in playing some hand bells at one stage and I just found it very tedious'.

Three of the participants had learned to play the classical violin while they were at school. One (H) had to give up because of illness but the others (I and J) each had around seven years of tuition. For I, this continued into early adulthood before work and family commitments re-directed his interests. J was competent enough to win local prizes and to play in the regional school orchestra until he left school when he announced that he would not be playing any more.

I was about 17 and I left school and started working and I came home one night and says to my Dad I'm not opening a fiddle again – and I didn't. I was sick fed up with it. I'd had it for years and years and your life was full of it – I wanted to go out and play football and do other things. He was very very cut up about it, probably because he saw that things could maybe have progressed. (J)

A and D both learned to play the guitar during their late teens, outside school, and continued to play in adulthood. Their interests at that stage lay mainly in pop music, although both moved towards traditional folk music as they got older. B took fiddle lessons for a couple of years in his early twenties but then gave up and didn't return to it for 20 years.

The stimulus to take up or resume fiddle playing when it happened varied from one individual to another. For many of them, a chance encounter with traditional music rekindled their interest. For F, it was visiting her sister in Scotland and hearing her play in a traditional band.

When I went to visit her, the people were there and I was sitting listening and I was thinking I want to be joining in on this. (F)

For several of the older musicians, retirement presented an opportunity to take stock of their interests and to branch out into new activities. M described it in the following terms:

The way I look at it is that this is my selfish time of life. I did my duty to the kids with swimming clubs, scouts, everything like that but now they're big enough and I can devote my time to my own pleasures. I get a great satisfaction from playing. (M)

Learning

Taking regular individualised lessons in what might be regarded as the usual fashion for instrument tuition was exceptional for these learners. Only one (D) had weekly individual lessons from a tutor. Most of the others attended weekly group workshops at the Falkirk workshop or at classes run by the Adult Learning Project in Edinburgh.¹ This type of tuition differs from the conservatoire model in class size and in focus. Classes are typically large (up to 20) and the medium of tuition is the tune, rather than scales or exercises. Traditional music teaching and learning typically focuses on tunes (Veblen, 1996) and all of the participants in this study were learning in this way. Typically, each week the class would be taught a new tune by ear. The tutor would break the tune down into phrases and each phrase was learned by repetition so that the tune was gradually built up. In this system, technique is not a central issue, and where technique was explicitly discussed by tutors, it tended to be in terms of bowing styles and ornamentation. This has considerable motivational advantages but can lead to difficulties for individual players. Most players were aware of this trade off between motivation and technique.

Up until now, just being able to play the notes has been my main concern, but I am getting more and more interested in technique. (B)

But the focus on tunes did not mean that they were unconcerned with technique.

I am conscious of technique when I practise...I try not to just bash through the tunes...I am conscious that I have to be conscious about my bowing. (F)

I am trying to concentrate more on producing a good tone rather than just playing the notes as fast as I can. I am getting more pleasure from getting a good tone than from actually playing the tune. (B)

Some felt that more focus on teaching basic technique would be useful.

Some tutors are very good at technique. What I miss is the explanation of technique and the exercises to develop technique – we don't get that at all. Which of course, your conventional music teacher would give one. (H)

And sometimes the focus on the tune could divert attention away from developing decent technical skills.

You're really concentrating on how to get the notes right and you're not putting too much thought into the bowing. If you get the notes right you're quite happy even if you

have the bowing wrong. And then when you go home and try to practise it, and you try to get the bowing right, it's difficult because you've not been watching the way the bowing goes. (J)

It is clear that, unlike in a conventional one-to-one tutor relationship, technique is left very much to the individual and many of these learners recognised that they had to take extra steps outside the workshops to get some advice about their technique.

My fiddling wasn't getting any better and I kind of realised that there was a certain amount I could teach myself but that I needed to find out people who really knew why it wasn't quite working. (C)

It is interesting that these problems could be solved with only occasional individual lessons which were often booked from workshop tutors.

She [workshop tutor] picked up on the thing that had been keeping me back enormously was the fact that my bowing arm was very stiff and I worked on that and it has made a huge difference to me. (F)

Practice

Most of the learners reported that they tried to practise on a fairly regular basis, generally everyday although the other demands made on them by work and domestic commitments sometimes interfered with the intention. Reasonably regular practice was part of the commitment to learning which was a strong feature of each of the learners. But this commitment was underpinned by a sense of enjoyment which was important to maintain.

I quite often practise because I find it a really relaxing thing to do and if I am doing that, then I will tend to just play through the tunes I really like. (C)

The length of a practice session tended to be about half an hour but often this was extended because of enjoyment.

Some days I could go an hour and a half. It would start with ten minutes – I wouldn't expect any more than 10 minutes. But it could easily run on to 'my God is that the time?'. (K)

J contrasted his current attitude to playing with his experience of practising as a child.

I now want to play the violin when I didn't want to do it when I was younger I think. I now find that two hours is not really long for practising – I used to think that it was an eternity. (J)

For most of the time, they practised tunes rather than exercises or scales, but some did concede that scales could be useful.

I find that if I do scales before I play tunes, I am better in tune . . . but I don't like doing them. (F)

E practised in front of a mirror in order to try to correct problems with holding the fiddle which she had developed at the beginning. She was unusual in using exercises which were devised by the tutor with whom she had taken the individual lessons.

At the moment I am doing exercises which the tutor has suggested which are bits of tunes that I want to learn to play properly. (E)

For C, there was a more focused practice when she was working on technique.

When I was doing stuff with technique . . . I could easily play one tune for an hour, just trying to get the bowing engrained. (C)

The enjoyment which playing brought was tempered with a realism about the difficulties which arose, with expressions of occasional frustration at perceived lack of progress.

Some times I think it's going really well and other times I think it's crap. (G)

I've been trying to develop vibrato for about the last 2 or 3 years – getting nowhere with it but I keep trying. (H)

The commitment to continuing to play was underpinned by an awareness of the long-term nature of the project they had undertaken.

I can remember asking [tutor's name] how long it would take for you to become fairly confident and he quite seriously said about seven or eight years before you get through that pain barrier . . . It takes a long time to learn to play the fiddle well unless you are really dedicated and you are learning from a young age when you pick things up quicker. (A)

The view that maturity was not necessarily an advantage in this sort of activity was shared by others in the group.

I do regret not learning something at school . . . it is so much easier to learn when you're younger . . . when I go to some of these workshops and you see these young kids . . . their learning capacity is greater at that age, they absorb it faster . . . I think their fingers are more dextrous as well. (D)

What I do find frustrating is that I have learned so late and you see youngsters in the class just remembering the tunes and being able to play, sometimes I find it so disheartening. (F)

Use of notation

Musical literacy is a prominent feature of formal instrument tuition where it is regarded as an indispensable part of learning to play an instrument. In traditional music, playing by ear tends to be regarded as the normal form of access to playing. The tutoring that these learners received was based on playing by ear.

They take it bar by bar or line by line and we play it over and over till we get the feeling of the tune so it's really by ear that you are learning. (I)

For the most part, these learners took a pragmatic view of notation, viewing it as useful but not crucial. Those who could read music usually attributed what skill they had to a previous more formal experience, often their piano lessons. F, for example, had picked up the rudiments of reading music from her piano lessons as a child but had developed her skill as a result of singing in a choir.

I joined a choir when I moved down to England and I started having to read music quite seriously because we were expected to sing whatever we were singing straight through first time. (F)

Those who had learned an instrument conventionally in the past sometimes found the transition to learning by ear to be difficult.

They teach you tunes by ear and then you get the music. I've never done it this way before – it's totally new to me. It can be quite difficult. (J)

That was the good thing about the workshop was that they do teach by ear. It's tremendous. When I went there I found it extremely difficult to pick up but after a few weeks you begin to appreciate learning by ear. (H)

But there was strong support for the virtues of learning by ear, even from those who had started as readers.

I can do both and I think when I learn by sight I don't learn it as well because I'm not listening as hard. I think when you have the paper in front of you, your ear switches off to a certain extent. And there's quite a few have reneged against learning by ear. All the time I've been there there's been a handful who always need the music before they can really get going. And I think they're missing out. (G)

At least half of the learners referred to the advantages of learning by ear in terms of its effect on listening but there was also a strong identification with its place in the aural tradition of the music they played. These views were expressed strongly by A who was dubious about the place of literacy in the culture of traditional music, particularly for playing in ceilidhs. In his band, he reported, they . . .

stand up and play, and play without music because then you can concentrate on the performance and make eye contact and look at the dancers . . . to me there is nothing more sterile than two or three musicians sitting on a stage with their music stands in front of them playing for a dance. (A)

Playing with music was not an option for pub sessions, a major social focal point for traditional musicians.

If you are in a busy pub, people aren't going to give you a piece of music and bring out a music stand, it isn't that kind of culture . . . It means that you are very limited when you go into a session or you are in a social atmosphere where people shout out two or three tunes and people will start a tune and off you go. The ones that need music will struggle then. (A)

Learning from recorded media

About half of the learners referred to the importance of listening to CDs of traditional music. This was partly to increase their knowledge and repertoire.

If I go anywhere in the car I listen to tapes so I'm listening to music all the time – so you get tunes in that way. That gets them into your head and once they're in your head you can work on them (L).

But it also gave them a feeling for what they were aiming to do.

The other thing is that you can have the music and have your own shot at it, but if you have a CD of someone good playing then you know what it should sound like. (H)

Learning tunes from tapes and CDs was part of the ethos of learning by ear. Workshop tutors often encouraged learners to tape the music they were learning so that they could continue to work on it between.

I use tapes at the workshop – the tutor will play the tunes either slowly or at speed and those of us who want to can tape it. (H)

Although several of the musicians reported learning tunes directly from CDs, there was no sense of attempting to copy particular sections in the way described by Green (2001) for popular musicians. They tended to use CDs to learn melody lines.

If I didn't know the tune I would listen to the CD until I was familiar. Then I would play it with the CD, even if it's a fast tune. I could learn slow tunes quickly but I couldn't learn quick tunes quickly. (G)

As this extract makes clear, the speed of the tunes made it difficult to learn them from CDs for some learners. There were various strategies used to cope with learning fast tunes from CDs.

I also use CDs quite a lot. For instance, if you can't get the music, copying the music onto a tape means you can then use the tape, the stopping and starting facility, to work away at it. So you learn it by ear off a tape from a CD. (H)

Others transcribed the tune from CDs into notation before they learned them.

CDs are a different ball game. I just write it out in lines. I do night shifts so to fill in my time I do something like that. (J)

Some of them acquired the notation for recorded tunes from other sources, such as friends or the internet and used it to support their learning by ear.

If I can't quite hear on the tape, I can usually work out from what's written on the page the twiddly bits that I haven't quite got. (C)

A few of them made even more ambitious use of technology to help them to learn tunes by ear.²

The workshop gave us that ABC midi and you can play it at any speed you want . . . I'll take the speed up until my fingers lose it and then go back a couple so that my fingers are still keeping up the control . . . There's no doubt about it, after two weeks you were playing at speeds where you weren't playing it before and this is without losing the fingers. (M)

Social context

One striking feature of all these musicians was that music was a social activity for them. They had all joined or created a significant social context which acted as a medium for

their music and a stimulus for their continued learning. One of them contrasted the social nature of traditional music with his experience of learning the violin as a child.

We played alone and that's hard – I was fortunate, my mother was a good pianist, and I practised with her which was a help – your ear's coming into play there if you've got a pianist with you. Playing with other people is more interesting – there's all different skills. (I)

Playing in pub sessions was a major activity for many of them. The reasons were partly social.

I like the company, I like the chat, the social side of it. I think that is probably what drives me with the fiddle to a level that I can comfortably go into a pub somewhere with other people and enjoy a two hour session. (A)

Many of them also identified the musical benefits of playing in the spontaneous and unplanned setting which sessions provide.

A strange thing sometimes happens at sessions when people around you are playing tunes and you are sort of doodling away and you eventually get into the way of it and you can get to a sort of plateau where you find yourself playing tunes you don't even know – it's a sort of hypnotic thing. (L)

But there were sometimes difficulties when the disparity between their competence and that of other musicians was too great. This usually manifested itself as an inability to play at the speed which jigs and reels usually entail.

I've occasionally been but I find it's a macho scene... They start to play and it's who can play the fastest and that's not what it's about as far as I am concerned. (H)

Workshop organisers often tried to ameliorate this difficulty by running slow sessions where the pace of playing was maintained at a level more suitable to beginners.

The slow session is excellent. I do think there is great value in all playing together at a speed where even the slowest can take part because it does encourage the newcomers. (H)

But another way round this problem was for learners to organise their own social groups of players of similar ability. E played regularly with groups of friends whom she had met on a trip to a fiddle school in Donegal. They met at one another's house to play and sometimes combined this with paying a tutor to come and give them some support and advice. D played at lunchtimes with friends from his work. B discovered, shortly after he started playing, that there were other local people who were learning to play instruments. Interestingly, they started off by playing classical music because one of the learners was a cellist 'but it wasn't really satisfactory... it sounded pretty horrific'. After the cellist left the area, they switched to Scottish traditional music and shortly afterwards formed a ceilidh band which plays for local functions.

Playing in a ceilidh band was regarded as an aspiration that was a logical development from session playing. As J put it, 'I'm practising for some day when I'll maybe be able to

get into a wee ceilidh band'. F had joined a group which had started to play for country dances, an activity which she found immensely rewarding.

It is amazing how the night goes by, it is a fabulous thing to do because people are so invigorated by dancing and everybody is laughing . . . It is the best thing I have ever done in music . . . the whole atmosphere is so nice. (F)

C played in three bands, one of which was a ceilidh band with regular bookings. She had realised after playing for only 18 months that playing in a band was what she wanted to do and, with other musicians from the Adult Learning Project, she spent six months putting a repertoire together. They then 'launched ourselves onto the ceilidh market – rather ambitiously but got away with it'. C spoke with conviction about the social nature of the way she played music in groups. This was partially a function of her interaction with other group members.

You kind of bounce off people when you are playing a set which you know really well. You hear something that somebody else has done and the next time you play it you think, if they are going to do that, if I put this on top of it, it will sound really good. (C)

And communication with the audience was also an important feature.

There is a huge enjoyment in getting a reaction from the audience because what you have done had worked well I suppose, and I mean there are certain points in the evening where we know everyone is just going to go 'ooooh' because something about the music kind of makes them to do that and it's very satisfying. (C)

She contrasted this freedom to improvise with her early experience of orchestral playing.

There was a sense you sit and play in the orchestra, you read what is on the page, you play loud when it says play loud and you shut up when you're supposed to shut up . . . There was no sense for me at that age of anything communicative about the whole process or anything like that. (C)

The importance of an appropriate social context for playing was underlined by all of the musicians.

I mean I think it certainly helped enormously. [Without it] I might be a little more inclined to forget about it for a while. (B)

I've thoroughly enjoyed my time since I retired, mingling with all these different people and everything; it's really good. Everybody's friendly and willing to help. (I)

Discussion

The sense of both the pleasure and the challenge experienced by the participants of this study is striking. The amount of time which some of these musicians were devoting both to learning and to various forms of participation and performance was not trivial. The power of music, as a social practice, to have significant impacts on people's lives is evident from their accounts. Several questions arise about the nature of their learning, the difficulties which they encountered, their participation in music as a social activity, and, for some of

them, the failure of past musical experiences to engender the commitment and involvement which was clearly awakened in adulthood.

The contrast between learning through the formal classical system and learning informally has been noted before (Finnegan, 1989). The learning involved in this study was much less structured and organised than that associated with conventional tuition. In fact, regular individual tuition itself was the exception rather than the rule. The approach to technique was pragmatic in that the learners tended to consider technical issues when they seemed to offer them a way past some barrier to progress. Although there was some indication that more consideration of basic technique might have been useful in their tuition, there was little appetite for the sorts of exercises and scales that figure in formal classical tuition. The medium for learning was the tune and even where exercises were used they tended to be based on tunes. The culture in which they were playing places significant value on learning and playing by ear. This is reflected in their views on notation which were also pragmatic. Some of them would use notation as an aid to learning a tune but, even for those who were more dependent on notation, the goal was to be able to play fluently by ear, a crucial skill for the sort of social playing to which they aspired.

There are some interesting resonances with Green's (2001) work on popular musicians, whose approach to technique and to notation were broadly similar to those reported here. In both studies, the musicians reported an enormous sense of enjoyment of their musical activity. But there are interesting differences that seem to stem from the different musical cultures and associated expectations. Green's musicians spent significant amounts of time copying from specific recordings of music so that they could reproduce the sound of particular bands. This is not a feature of traditional music where there is no demand for cover bands and no expectation of this kind of imitation. Furthermore, traditional fiddle tunes are often played at a speed which makes it difficult for learners to copy them. The fiddlers did learn from CDs but seemed to use them largely for acquiring new tunes to add to their repertoire. On the other hand, a feature absent from Green's account is the significance of workshops as a source of tuition and this again seems to be a result of a difference in the cultures. The workshop is a well-established learning context for traditional musicians and may be related to the longer tradition of informal learning within a community. One characteristic of the workshops described is the mixture of ages – old and young learn together, although the reported perception of greater skill and learning capacity of young people was a source of some frustration to the adult learners. This mixture of ages does not seem to occur with popular musicians.

Another feature common to all the musical experiences described above is the importance of some kind of social context in which to play. Without exception, all of the musicians were involved in playing with other people. They participated in activities such as lunchtime sessions with colleagues, ceilidh bands and sessions in pubs. In a broad sense, there is a link between the kind of social contexts they discovered and made and with Scottish culture – but it would be too easy to infer a simple relationship between the musicians and their national location. One of the musicians (F) lived in England, for example, and had travelled to Scotland specifically for the workshop. Her social musical contexts, which included playing in a country dance band, were not located in Scotland. Finnegan's (1989) study of music in urban England showed that, for most people, there are many possibilities of music-making in different traditions. Country and western music

had an enthusiastic following, including performers, although its cultural origins are in the southern states of the USA. There were several *ceilidh* bands in her study, playing a varied repertoire, including English, Irish and Scottish music. MacKinnon, (1993) suggests that, to a large extent in the modern world, culture is something we choose rather than something we possess. Musical taste can vary dramatically within one parent culture and, in contrast to Cooke's (1986) Shetland fiddlers, most of the musicians in this study were from Scotland's heavily populated central belt. They had clearly chosen traditional music in the same way as Green's (2001) musicians had chosen popular music.

Their choice implied elements of social context which are distinctive. The culture of traditional music is not uniform but informality tends to be a common feature and is exemplified by the pub session, which has characteristics atypical of the Western concert tradition. Although sessions present a performance opportunity, they exhibit an ambivalent relationship between musicians and audience (MacKinnon 1993). Musicians face each other rather than face the listeners and the performance is more intimate and inward-looking than a concert (Fairburn, 1994), a feature which makes them less threatening for inexperienced musicians. There seems to be an ideal, at least, that sessions should be characterised by openness, inclusiveness, and an acceptance of learners, although these ideals are subject to tensions when, for example, newcomers pay insufficient regard to established conventions (Stock, 2004). One tension reported in this study occurs when learners' competence significantly limits their capacity to participate. Learners often reacted to this difficulty by setting up their own groupings which allowed musicians of similar competence to play together. The pleasure they derived from these kinds of social participation is evident in their accounts and clearly forms a significant part of the motivation for continuing to play.

Many of the participants referred to a perception that learning as an adult was more difficult than learning as a child. They observed younger learners picking up skills with apparent ease. There is evidence that facility with both cognitive and motor skills, both of which are significant in learning to play a musical instrument, declines with age (see, for example, Ketcham & Stelmach, 2001). This raises questions about whether starting to play in maturity places limitations on learners. It seems unlikely that adults would be able to reach the levels of virtuosity to which conservatoire training is directed and this partially might explain the lack of research interest in their learning. But any disadvantages stemming from this late start are compensated for, to some extent, by their commitment and their increased awareness of themselves as learners. In terms of their own criteria, most of them were successful; many of them were able to play music to a level which allowed them play in sessions and to join or form bands – and they enjoyed themselves.

The commitment of the participants is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, the considerable efforts directed towards teaching children to play musical instruments are presumably motivated by aspirations that they will continue to play in adulthood. For these musicians, in nearly every case, there had been previous involvement in music that had not produced the commitment they were now showing. More than half of them had taken piano lessons, for example, and all but one had given up. It may be that adults have a perception of greater control over their activities. Part of the reason for the increased commitment in adulthood may be that participation is intrinsically motivated. Perceptions of autonomy and of competence each increase the strength of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Ryan and Deci also present evidence that external rewards, such as testing, deadlines and competition, can undermine intrinsic motivation. This may have implications for the dropout from playing in school to playing in adulthood. Nevertheless, it remains curious that people with such obvious enthusiasm for active musicianship were not stimulated by opportunities provided when they were younger. Their accounts of school music are similar to those given by Green's (2001) popular musicians. In the case of the musicians in this study, it may be argued that these experiences occurred before current curricular changes in school music took place. But there is no evidence that the pedagogy of instrument tuition (rather than classroom music) has changed dramatically over this time period. For at least some of the participants, their earlier formal tuition was perceived as over-formal and restrictive. They were critical, not so much of the focus on notation as the concomitant lack of concern with what Green describes as developing the ear. The retrospective analysis of at least one of them was that he 'had' no tunes from this period of his life, an interesting turn of phrase which illustrates the importance, in traditional music, of owning tunes through knowing them by heart rather than having to rely on music. There was a clear feeling from another player that the formality of the classical genre had inhibited her musical expression, something that she was clearly enjoying exploring in her present musical activities. In fact, in the case of C, the contrast between her negative memories of school music and her current enthusiasm for playing in her band is especially striking. Sloboda (2001) points out that the classical orchestra is dependent on the subjugation of the cultural project to the will of the conductor who is subjugated in turn to the composer. C's memories of participating in this kind of activity show a clear antipathy to this way of working.

Green (2001) suggests that there are different paths to musicianship and calls for a more open attitude to music-making and towards active amateur musicians. For school instrument tuition, this might imply less formality, a respect for other cultures and their practices such as playing by ear, a more relaxed approach to technique and to reading music, a willingness to allow learners to take more control over their own learning, the facilitation of meaningful social contexts. Such an approach could be justified solely on the grounds of inclusion (Allan & Cope, 2004) but, if it resulted in the kind of commitment exhibited by the adults in this study, it might considerably increase the likelihood of children continuing to play into adulthood.

Notes

- 1 The Adult Learning Project Scots Music Group is a community education project based in Edinburgh which aims to make the traditional music, song and dance of Scotland widely available to everyone by offering classes, events, workshops, social gatherings and publications. It is extremely popular, routinely attracting around 400 learners each session. See <http://www.alpscotsmusic.org/>
- 2 There are now computer utilities available which allow the user to slow down CDs without altering the pitch. These may facilitate learners' access to CDs. See, for example, <http://www.ronimusic.com>

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