

The Traditional Performer and the Recording Context

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Article abstract

Cet article traite de l'enregistrement du violoneux Emile Benoit, un Franco-Terreneuvien de la péninsule de Port-au-Port. L'auteur examine les effets du contexte d'enregistrement — en comparaison avec d'autres milieux — sur les exécutions. Il soutient que l'enregistrement d'un artiste traditionnel n'est pas uniquement une documentation sur cet art, mais que cette séance d'enregistrement constitue en soi un artefact.

Review Article

The Traditional Performer and the Recording Context

MICHAEL TAFT

Emile Benoit: Emile's Dream

Quay CS-7932, one 12 inch, 33 1/3 rpm phonodisc (St. John's, 1979). Available from Pigeon Inlet Productions, 1 Stoneyhouse Street, St. John's, Nfld. \$5.00.

This album is only the fourth LP recording devoted entirely to Newfoundland fiddle music.¹ Interestingly, two of the previous three recordings, those of Guincharde and MacIsaac, are similar to Emile Benoit's in representing the island's west coast musical traditions, but this album is the first to explore the fiddle music of the French Newfoundlanders of the Port-au-Port Peninsula.

Upon receiving the album for review, my first inclination was to ask the kinds of questions which occur to most folklorists: How is this album useful to the scholar? How does it add to the storehouse of folklore material previously collected? Have the record producers followed the correct scholarly procedure in presenting the recorded texts and explanatory notes? Most reviewers have concentrated on these kinds of questions, and in this respect, have treated recordings as though they were books.²

For example, Rufus Guincharde's album has been reviewed by two folklorists, Paul F. Wells and I. Sheldon Posen, both of whom take the con-

¹The other three are *Newfoundland Fiddle Music*, Banff RBS-1055 (St. John's, 1955); Walter J. MacIsaac, *Musical Memories of Codroy Valley Newfoundland*, private recording LP-13 (Stephenville?, c. 1973); and *Rufus Guincharde: Newfoundland Fiddler*, Breakwater 1002 (Portugal Cove, c. 1977)

²This inclination among folklore reviewers is discussed in D.K. Wilgus, "Record Reviewing in Folklore Journals: 1947-1975," *JEMF Quarterly*, 14 (1978), 72-75

ventional “book” approach to the recording.³ Wells does a short ethnomusicological evaluation of the tunes, pointing out familiar pieces, identifying sources for Guinchar’s metre, and classifying the dance types associated with the tunes. Posen notes the ethnic influences on Guinchar’s style and comments upon his bowing and fingering technique. In essence, both reviewers describe the album as a collection of identifiable (or at least noteworthy) texts, much the same way as they might describe the contents of a book of fiddle tablature. Beyond this comparativist approach, both reviewers discuss the information (or lack thereof) which the record producers include on the album jacket, and suggest ways in which the producers might have better researched or explained Guinchar’s music, performance style, and status as a fiddler. These analyses are little different from a book reviewer’s criticisms of notes and comments accompanying a collection of songs.

I am not criticizing this approach to record reviewing. Indeed, reissue albums, fieldwork recordings, and revival recordings lend themselves to this approach, and it is important that the reader be given comparative notes on the recorded material. In addition, the scholarly approach of the album, whether the producer intended the record as a work of scholarship or not, is a critical factor in judging the academic value of a recording.

But the commercial recording of a traditional artist — especially an artist who is used to performing in a non-recorded context — lends itself to another type of analysis. Emile Benoit’s recording is not simply a sample of his fiddling repertoire, but is a type of performance in itself, and the album can be reviewed as a performance in context, rather than as an artificially preserved collection of texts. How does this performance differ from other kinds of performances by Benoit? How does the recording studio context affect Benoit’s style and repertoire? Who is Benoit’s audience for a recorded performance?

This album is not merely a documentation of the fiddling of a traditional performer, but is itself an artifact of Newfoundland culture. The recording studio is one context for the performance of traditional material by island artists and should be treated with as much respect as the contexts of the kitchen party, the dance, the concert, or the folklore interview. This is not to say that the recording represents the same kind of performance as one given at a party or concert; it has its own set of contextual constraints upon the artistry of the performer.

A number of years ago, I was fortunate enough to witness another of Benoit’s performance contexts, a “time” or kitchen party, and can make

³Paul F. Wells, “Canadian and Canadian-American Music,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 91 (1978), 881–82; and I. Sheldon Posen, rev. of *Rufus Guinchar, Newfoundland Fiddler*, *Canadian Folklore Canadian*, 1 (1979), 94–96.

some comparisons.⁴ At the party, Benoit displayed his artistry in a number of ways. He is, of course, that rare breed of fiddler who composes his own music. But besides playing the fiddle, he told jokes and stories in both French and English, traded quips and comments with his audience, danced and clogged, “documented” his tunes by explaining their origins and their connections with Scottish, Irish or French tradition, orchestrated the performances of others in the kitchen, and used his face and body throughout to augment whatever else he was doing. The fact is that Emile Benoit, like many creative people, expresses his artistry in many ways; he is not simply a fiddler, but a man who is adept at expressing himself cleverly and artistically in whichever way is appropriate to the context.

Of necessity, the recorded performance cannot show the multi-faceted nature of Benoit’s creativity. The recording context generally limits the performer to only a few modes of expression. Thus, the recording displays Benoit’s fiddling in a refined state, since in the recording studio he is not being interrupted by children trying to grab attention, the comments of his audience, or his own need to show off his other, considerable talents. Indeed, because, in the recording context, Benoit can re-do pieces if he is not satisfied with his first performance of them, this context allows him to concentrate his energies on the singular task of making music in a way which is probably unavailable to him in any other context.

To some extent, the producers of this album may have been aware of these peculiarities of the recording context and have tried to include some of Benoit’s other talents. They have wisely included two pieces in which Benoit accompanies his fiddling with chin music (“Brother’s Jig” and “Michael T. Wall Breakdown”), and the jacket notes seem to be a transcription of Benoit’s description of how he took up fiddling, as well as his explanations of the origin of some of his tunes. Although the producers are to be commended in this matter, two small examples of chin music and a written transcription are poor substitutes for witnessing Benoit’s general artistry; a recording can only do so much.

Has Benoit’s artistry and performance been affected in any other ways by the recording context? The titles of some of his tunes seem to indicate that Benoit is quite comfortable in the recording context, and also show that Benoit has become more aware of the commercial potential of his artistry than he was when I met him eight years ago. His “Clode Sound Jig” was inspired by the recording context (Clode Sound is the name of the recording studio), and “Ryan’s Fancy Arriving” and “Michael T. Wall

⁴1. Sheldon Posen and I recorded Benoit at his home in Black Duck Brook, 30 September 1972. The tapes are now stored at the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, accession number 73-45.

Breakdown" were inspired by Benoit's contacts with these well known commercial artists. Of course, it is important to realize that, in general, the titles to fiddle tunes bear about as much relationship to the tunes as painters' titles do to certain abstract works; such titles represent a personal association with the work or an arbitrary tag, rather than a statement of the tune's message. Thus, "Washroom Reel" does not evoke scatological images, but merely informs the reader that, in Benoit's words, "a reel came into my mind when I was sitting on the toilet."

Where is Benoit's audience in the recorded context? He has at least two audiences: the audience for which his recording is intended, and his regular, local audience which may listen to his recorded performance. The recording seems to be intended for an island-wide audience, as the producer and arranger of the album, Kelly Russell, explains: "It is my intention, with the establishment of Pigeon Inlet Productions, to produce more of these folk records and to distribute them to areas where this sort of music is popular."⁵ Although the album has not yet been distributed off the island, Russell eventually hopes to reach the mainland market. The result of this expanded audience on Benoit may well be that he will find himself playing in non-local contexts more often than before, such as at folk festivals, on television, or in the recording studio once again. How might these further performances affect his repertoire, style, and self-image?

The local audience for his recording may also force changes on Benoit. Will his friends and neighbours begin to compare the refined product of the recording with the more multi-faceted performances of the party or concert, and will they come to expect this more refined fiddling from Benoit? Will he gain some type of celebrity status in his community through this recording? Only future fieldwork will answer these questions, but the folklorist must be aware that a recording may have ramifications on the performance of an artist in non-recording contexts.

Interestingly, the "celebrity" image and the "local performer" image seem to be reflected in the two photographs of Benoit on the record jacket. The entire front cover shows Benoit standing on a beach. He has his fiddle tucked under his chin and he is looking at his own bowing and fingering. This photograph is obviously posed and stylized. Would Benoit ever play his fiddle under his chin, and in what context would he ever play outside on a beach? This photograph is for island-wide consumption and thus stresses Benoit's image as a virtuoso and perhaps as a celebrity. On the reverse of the jacket is an image which is much closer to my own memories of Benoit: he is sitting in front of the stove in a (his?) kitchen,

⁵Letter to Carole H. Carpenter, no date.

playing the fiddle, which is tucked under his left collarbone. He is staring and smiling at the photographer. This photograph shows Benoit as the local fiddler and entertainer whom his neighbours know him to be.

The accompaniment to Benoit's fiddling also indicates, in a small way, this double image of Emile Benoit. When I saw him playing in his kitchen, he was accompanied by a guitar; indeed the guitar accompaniment seemed to be accepted and appreciated by everyone at the party. Most of the pieces on this album are accompanied by the guitar-playing of Ron Hynes, a well-known Newfoundland performer. However, two of Benoit's pieces are accompanied by the bodhran — an Irish drum which could not be more foreign to the musical traditions of French Newfoundlanders and which would certainly never be used as a traditional accompaniment to Benoit's playing in the context of a kitchen party. Yet this small drum has become a very popular instrument in the folk revival movements in Britain and Newfoundland, and thus represents the non-local audience and the non-local aesthetic for which this album is primarily intended. The producers of the album must again be commended for placing the accompaniment on one speaker of the stereo and Benoit's fiddling on the other, so that the audience can either listen to the guitar and bodhran accompaniment or simply to Benoit's fiddling.

This album, then, like all recordings, raises some very interesting questions, some of which can only be answered through further research. I have left the usual comparativist and ethnomusicological questions to another reviewer, one more expert than myself in these matters, as this recording deserves more than one review. I have also avoided the questions of whether Benoit is a good or a bad fiddler, whether his tunes are worthwhile, or whether the album itself is good or bad. Most folklorists, including myself, are cultural relativists, and such value judgments, therefore, do not seem appropriate. I leave such questions to reviewers in non-scholarly journals.

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Résumé

Cet article traite de l'enregistrement du violoneux Emile Benoit, un Franco-Terreneuvien de la péninsule de Port-au-Port. L'auteur examine les effets du contexte d'enregistrement — en comparaison avec d'autres milieux — sur les exécutions. Il soutient que l'enregistrement d'un artiste traditionnel n'est pas uniquement une documentation sur cet art, mais que cette séance d'enregistrement constitue en soi un artefact.