

Improvisation and Vernacular Traditions in Historical Performance:

We set about the consideration of this volume of the journal with a guiding idea that the discourse for both historically-informed performance and vernacular musics requires of the performer-scholar many of the same investigative and performative processes. Historically-informed performance, mainly within the last thirty years, has attempted to negotiate historical, cultivated, and vernacular traditions in an effort to explore the questions of context, lingual sensitivity, stylistic paradigms, and sonoric diversity. This has been a continually growing and shifting field of inquiry since the mid-20th century that acknowledges a dichotomy of scholarly and aesthetic issues, attempting to navigate them toward the realization of largely pre-tonal musics. For their part, musicians primarily concerned with vernacular musics are involved in many of the same questions as they consider the performance of canonic works within their repertoires, new works within a related paradigm, and the emerging area of performative confluence, where vernacular traditions are intentionally merged with other musical styles or traditions to query their inherent relationships or consider new, fertile collaborations. Changing social paradigms challenge traditional methods, contexts, musicians and audiences; who are the keepers of traditions and who decides when those traditions may be altered? The arbiters of the past have often been elders within traditional musical cultures, but this too has been subject to change in the face of artistic professionalism or issues of cultural survival.

While some few musics are composed in a strict fashion where the performer is asked to follow the composer's markings as faithfully as possible, many musical traditions incorporate improvisatory concepts. Improvisatory elements are embedded within the performance of both of the repertoires considered here, forming an integral relationship between musician and repertoire that is enhanced by study, demonstration, and most importantly experience within the repertoire. This goes beyond performative embellishment to allow musicians to investigate all aspects of the work from texts and origins to contexts and reception. What was allowable within specific traditions, whether historical, vernacular, or both and how do we think we know? Evolving ideas about history—even Western historical texts—and sociology provide an increasing body of enriching complexities that permit and even encourage musicians to interpret art in new (often revived older) ways, which has occasionally resulted in controversial performances. This edition of the *Journal of the Vernacular Music Center* champions such efforts and seeks to continue said discourse with articles that question performance styles and choices, performative collaborations, and aspects of our ways of knowing, epistemologies within musical cultures that are constantly, and fruitfully in flux.

Ballads continue to confound us. Their rich traditions reaching back across regions and centuries create complexities that Donna Corriher considers in her comparative study involving "Jobal Hunter" (Child 18). This study considers ballads printed in seventeenth-century Britain, and how, as the use of ballads and broadsides evolved, their cultural impact increased, particularly in the evolution of the assumed characteristics, identification, and treatment of witches. This can be observed in ballads and broadsides about witchcraft, particularly several versions of one ballad dating back to the seventeenth century about interaction with the witch,

"Jobal Hunter" (Child 18). These older ballads about love, murder, and witchcraft, that shared vibrant European traditions in the Early Modern period are alive and well in 21st-century Appalachia. Several names heard in Western North Carolina synonymous with ballad, song, and storytelling that have humbly shared what has been passed down to them in the oral tradition are: The Ward, Hicks, Presnell, Rhymer, Norton, Guy, and Harmon families. This study reopens some of the questions asked by late-19th-century ballad collectors such as Cecil Sharp and Maude Karples about the transference of broadside subject matter from Britain to America, by comparing historical versions of related ballads involving witches and the supernatural found in primary source and facsimile research with primary source interviews of the Ward family conducted by the author. What does the contemporary tradition owe to the older ones by which it is informed and how can modern audiences better understand and appreciate the richness of this living, yet historic, vernacular musical tradition?

In the past fifteen years as director of Baroque Northwest, Dr. Kim Pineda has worked on building relationships and creating concerts involving musicians trained in the historically informed performance practices of classical music (thirteenth through eighteenth centuries) with musicians specializing in vernacular musics from aural traditions in the Western hemisphere. The goal of this ongoing project has been to bridge the musical and cultural crevasse that appeared in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the increased availability of printed music aimed at the highly skilled but unpaid musicians of the middle class. This seemingly innocuous event not only segregated the players of classical and vernacular musics, but created a cultural divide between musicians and audiences who previously enjoyed and embraced diverse repertoires of music. In this essay, Dr. Pineda offers a brief history of the divide and discusses processes involved in rediscovering the common repertoire and performance practices, creating a concept for particular cross-genre programs, learning how to divulge the point of departure between modern musicians with completely different styles of training, reconciling the differences in how each group approaches a particular piece, and observing that, with a history of music in performance as our reference, the distance between particular styles of music may be reduced, if not eliminated.

Francis Child's seminal work created a 19th-century foundation for much of modern ballad studies, establishing a basis for the study of textual variants, motif/motive studies, and questions of ballad origins. Tied within certain historical and emerging nationalistic discourses, Child's work, even as it represented the rhetoric of strict positivistic research, can be understood to espouse certain cultural agendas. At the heart of the study, within its very title, is the concept that the ballads contained within the study were in some essential way related to the United Kingdom, specifically England and Scotland. This has created musical and performative expectations that are now considered normative, even canonic. While the details of Child's work reveal a vast array of traditions, collection points, and cultural overlaps, the larger cultural mission has to some degree glossed over these critical historiographies as divergent variants. In his study of the "Twa Sisters" (Child 10) Christopher Hepburn follows a long line of textual and musical inquiry that seeks to question and recontextualize ballads, re-accessing historical fieldwork in light of new historic and anthropological information. Particularly, this work reconsiders "Twa Sisters" with respect to newly-translated materials

from Russian and Ukrainian sources, inflected by complimentary scholarly folkloric reconstruction. The contested motif of the singing bone has strong ties to *Russe* origins and may have important, even transformative implications for future related ballad study.

Vernacular traditions occasionally merge organically and syncretically through the aegis of migration and diaspora. Benjamin Duvall-Irwin considers first the traditions of the Mexican *corrido* ballads and the Appalachian union-protest ballads. Both of these ballad traditions have received scholarly consideration. Individually they have many commonalities from their European roots and their initial regionally-isolated contexts, to their more modern expressions of struggle against oppressive power structures. Interestingly though, these commonalities have led several ballad singers with Latino origins, currently living in Appalachia to integrate these traditions—bringing not only the Spanish language, but the regional/nationalistic fervor of the earlier *corrido* song tradition to the Appalachian miners' protest songs. The Appalachian *corrido* song tradition is in the process of development as Duvall-Irwin points out, and awaits future research that will likely show further how these works represent the combined traditions experienced by the migrant Latino communities in Appalachia, even up to the present day.

Fifteen years ago, flutist Norbert Rodenkirchen recorded the acclaimed CD *Tibia ex tempore: Medieval Sketches*, a collection of medieval songs and improvisations played on medieval transverse flute, and recorded in one continuous flow of sound without interruptions. In 2016, he has released a new, revised, live version of the CD. In this article, Rodenkirchen offers a window into the processes involved in employing improvisation as an integral part of medieval performance practice, from primary source documents and scholarship relevant to the chosen pieces, to the medieval modes and text/melody structures that provide models for improvisation. While he contends that for himself, “research and musicological reflection is much more a part of the daily craftsmanship than academia and the discourse of scholarship and teaching,” Rodenkirchen’s examination of the process epitomizes the ways in which a scholar-performer combines research and artistry to create “a performance concept, a repertoire, a musical experience, a concert program” and a recording.

Interlacing historically-informed performance with vernacular musical traditions in a variety of ways, this edition seeks to discover defining moments within the long histories of these different musical cultures to explore and question them, to find shared or comparative processes, and to assert that while they are superficially separated by historical and cultural structures, they are in fact, formatively related and connected. The recognition of this interconnectedness will, we hope, assist musicians as they creatively move forward in the study and performance of these repertoires.

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