

# Alasdair Fraser & Natalie Haas

*exploring new compositions and arrangements based on traditional music forms*



## **Musical Language**

To play traditional (fiddle) music one must learn to play one's instrument in the vernacular. This means developing a voice on your instrument which is influenced by “place” - the culture and character of the native language – and knowledge of the native dances. One develops a “voice”, which is not generic but is imbued with the characteristics of different countries and different regional styles within these countries. It is a joy to travel from culture to culture, and to celebrate and compare the essences and modes of expression of these different cultures e.g., playing a Galician muñeira versus a Scottish strathspey– or a Gaelic song versus a Swedish polska.

## **Influence of Dance**

Traditional fiddle music is very connected to the dance floor. The music and the dance have evolved together for centuries and continue to do so. The melodies, played traditionally, are in a form which suits the dance e.g., AABB. And the manner of playing – bowing, phrasing, articulation, timing - is fundamentally connected to the musician's role of inspiring people to move on the dance floor in certain ways.

In our new compositions we build upon and go beyond the traditional forms as defined by the dance. For example, we add interludes, developed sections, changing time signatures, grooves from other cultures etc. and the music tends to be more through-composed. Rather than have a medley of different tunes as in the old tradition we create one new piece which takes the listener on a journey, more in line with certain classical forms of composition. However, the playing style and language used remains very influenced by traditional vernacular style as described above. It is fun to see new dances choreographed to our new music – and to encourage new social dances to evolve stylistically in the same manner as the music.

(over)

### **Teaching Our Approach to Composition:**

Our approach is to explore a variety of techniques for beginning a piece from scratch, including the foundations of tune melody writing. Starting from a drone or a groove, we start by making up a question phrase, then an answer, then let it play out from there. Once we have an outline of a basic melody, we start to think about chordal analysis and possibilities, then arrangement (see below).

Depending on the length of the class, we demonstrate different ways of starting to compose a melody: drones, rhythm machine, etc., and talk about where inspiration comes from. We explore the structure and form of fiddle tunes, using conversation and question and answer phrasing.

### **Teaching Our Approach to Arranging:**

We often use the subtle art of implication, in a setting where no one's role is strictly defined – instruments can duck & dive around each other, trading melody back and forth while incorporating all sorts of arrangement techniques used commonly in string writing for traditional music: parallel harmony, counterpoint, obligato, rhythmic hits, chordal substitution and variation, creating textures through different means of sound production, writing riffs & expanding by development. We also explore the use of voicings and registers to fill out your musical space using instruments that typically play only one or two notes at a time. This approach can work with larger ensembles (i.e., more than two!) and with other instruments, but we start with the fiddle and cello since that's what we play.

In a class, we begin with a melody and delve into what the arrangement process looks like for us. Students will take away the process of growing an arc of a concert presentation of a tune using chords, rhythms, textures, riffs, etc. Together we explore how we apply these elements, depending what instruments we have available and the size of the ensemble.

### **Before the class:**

Before our arrival, we will talk with the appropriate person(s) to determine class length and focus and can provide either sheet music or recordings of melodies so students can start to think about composition and arrangement ideas ahead of time and formulate questions. Students are also encouraged to bring in their own compositions.

### **Contact:**

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