When the Fiddle Wears a Tux: A Performance Practice Guide to the Michael Torke Violin Concerto, *Sky* (2019)

by

Sarah E. Wilfong Joblin

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Dissertation Committee:

Hal Grossman, Chair

Tyler Abbott, Core Member

Zachary Wallmark, Core Member

Leslie Straka, Director of Graduate Studies, School of Music and Dance

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Sarah E. Wilfong Joblin

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Title: When the Fiddle Wears a Tux: A Performance Practice Guide to the Michael Torke Violin Concerto, *Sky* (2019)

The Michael Torke Violin Concerto, *Sky*, was composed for violinist and fiddler Tessa Lark in 2019. Torke based each of the movements of *Sky* around different principles of bluegrass and Irish fiddling, which Lark interpreted through the lens of her fiddle experience. In this document I present a historical and societal framing for how and why a violin concerto steeped in fiddle styles could be successful today. I provide a melodic and structural analysis of the three movements to better understand which elements of fiddle traditions are being represented, and through the combination of interviews with notable fiddle scholars and performers, as well as my own experience as a fiddle player, I give practical recommendations to the classically trained violinist for how to incorporate fiddle idioms into this work.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Sarah E. Wilfong Joblin

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Middle Tennessee State University
Berklee College of Music

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Musical Arts, 2024, University of Oregon
Master of Music, Violin Performance, 2020, Middle Tennessee State University
Bachelor of Music, Violin Performance, 2018, Middle Tennessee State University

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Historical Performance Practice

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Adjunct Professor of Violin, Bushnell University, 2023- present.

ICT Young Artists Summer Academy, Assistant Faculty, 2022.

Adjunct Professor of Violin, Middle Tennessee State University, 2020-2021.

Artist Adjunct Professor of Fiddle, Vanderbilt University, 2013-2014.

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Outstanding Graduate Performer in Strings Award, University of Oregon, 2024

Overall Outstanding College of Liberal Arts Graduate Student Award, Middle Tennessee State University, 2020

URECA Research Grant, *Orchestrating O'Carolan: Initiating a Folk Composer into the Baroque World,* Middle Tennessee State University, 2018

Terry Lynne Carrington Award, Berklee College of Music, 2003

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DEDICATION

To Ted, Kira, Evelyn, and Kathie: best team ever.

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INTRODUCTION

Michael Torke's violin concerto, *Sky* (2019), represents a departure from the world of classical violin. While labeled as a violin concerto, this work incorporates elements of bluegrass and Irish fiddle into the three movements, ideally requiring the soloist to have working knowledge of those traditions. Torke collaborated with violinist and fiddler Tessa Lark on the project, and Lark approached the work with the technical prowess of a concert violinist, paired with the skill to embellish within the different fiddle genres that comes from her Kentucky fiddle background. *Sky* was received enthusiastically, garnering notable accolades including a nomination for Best Classical Instrumental Solo at the 2020 Grammy Awards and as a finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize. American fiddler and violinist Mark O'Connor, who is known for blurring the boundaries between classical and fiddle traditions through his compositions and collaborations, prepared the way for Torke by generating interest in the classical/fiddle crossover genre. Understanding the influence of Mark O'Connor's compositions, recordings, and fiddle camps on a generation of young violinists is also part of the story of *Sky*.

In this DMA thesis, I investigate the construction and stylistic elements of Torke's concerto, nuances of Lark's recorded performance, and provide a performance practice framework for the violinist who wishes to understand the fiddle elements in this concerto as well as providing a resource to add more as desired. I also argue for adopting the term "third path" to describe the works that include elements of both classical and fiddle traditions, and the

performers who play them. In studying Torke's concerto I examine the following: What are the specific elements and gestures that are idiomatic to the fiddle, and how is the performer supposed to execute them? How are the fiddle elements woven into this work, and what grants them cohesion? How did we arrive at this moment in time, when a classical composer can write a concerto for fiddle idioms and be celebrated for it? My hope is that by asking these questions, performers will be better equipped to dive into this vibrant work, and into third path playing more generally.

This project combines ethnographic, music-analytical, and music-historical methods. I have conducted interviews with Michael Torke, Tessa Lark, and four additional experts in fiddle pedagogy and performance to discuss *Sky*, and their individual stories of the third path. These interviews are interspersed throughout this paper, but are included in full as appendices. I share melodic and formal analyses of *Sky*, giving a broad overview before going into analysis specific to each movement. By tracing the origins of third path pieces and players through their historical context, I hope to provide a sense of direction from what has come before to the current moment.

My goal is to add clarity and nuance to the third path conversation by providing a hands-on resource for the classical violinist. I hope to open the third path to more players in a way that incorporates thoughtful integration of fiddle techniques into the technical make-up of a challenging piece. By including the interviews I have conducted with expert performers and pedagogues in their specific fiddle genres, performers will gain deeper levels of insight into fiddle performance practices. A historical frame provides contextual grounding to supply the performer with a bigger picture and encourage them to add their voice to the conversation.

Chapter one provides a historical and cultural frame for this Torke's work, outlining the important people and events that have paved the way for this work to be well received. I discuss the concept of the third path, and the markers of third path music and performers. Chapter two is an analysis of *Sky*, wherein I determine which features of the solo part are idiomatic to fiddle traditions rather than the classical violin canon of techniques and how they function as a whole. I also include comparative analysis, looking at features of the second movement and comparing them with common features of traditional Irish tunes. Chapter three is designed to provide guidance on style, bow strokes, and ornamentation.

CHAPTER 1

When the Fiddle Wears a Tux: Discovering the Third Path

What image does the word "violin" evoke in the context of the Western classical tradition? It might be a performer in formal dress in a concert hall, or perhaps an intellectual savant who reaches out to an instrument in order to counterbalance their cerebral nature. Maybe the child prodigy archetype comes to mind. These examples are linked individually to social hierarchy and prestige, intellectual acumen, and inborn talent; collectively they connect to an ethos of dedication and study. The word "fiddle" evokes a different set of images. The fiddle might be placed at a barn dance, a pub, or a bluegrass festival, and played by a flannel-wearing farmer or a grandpa on his porch. These mental pictures create a different set of links: rural communities, recreation, and a practical no-frills approach. Even the words used to describe the act of performing are different: one *plays* the violin, but *saws* on the fiddle. Given that these two worlds and their respective musical traditions inhabit such different social and symbolic spheres, what happens when they are overlaid? The musical results can be uncomfortable, exciting, or both. This thesis will examine this point of overlay, through American composer Michael Torke's 2019 work, *Sky.*[1]

Torke undertook the challenge of examining the world of fiddle music, and translated his experiences into the structure of a violin concerto. Torke worked closely with the concerto's dedicatee, Tessa Lark, who is not only an internationally recognized classical violin soloist, but

[1] Michael Torke, *Sky: Concerto for Violin*, Las Vegas: Adjustable Music, 2018.

also has credentials as a bluegrass fiddle player from Kentucky, a self-described "country bumpkin."[2] Lark is an exemplary model of the hybrid violinist-fiddler, and Torke's concerto offers a platform for the performer to explore their fiddle side without abandoning their violin sensibilities.

I myself am a product of a dual musical heritage: a violinist by training from the age of three, and a multi-genre fiddler by choice from the age of eleven. My love of multiple styles of music helped me shape a career as a performer, recording artist, session musician, and string arranger in Nashville. I find Torke's concerto fascinating. How did this moment—a classical composer writing a concerto for fiddle idioms, and being celebrated for it—come to be?

To accomplish these goals, I have conducted a series of ethnographic interviews. I was privileged to interview both Torke and Lark about their collaborative and interpretive processes. I also interviewed fiddle and violin specialists Mari Black, a noted violin and fiddle educator, performer, and winner of multiple international Scottish and Canadian fiddle championships; Matt Glaser, jazz and bluegrass scholar and head of the American Roots program at the Berklee College of Music; David Wallace, a Juilliard trained violinist, composer, Texas-style fiddler, and current head of the Berklee College of Music string department; and Kristin Weber, an award-winning Nashville session violinist, fiddler, vocalist, songwriter, and string arranger. These experts provided a richly detailed set of views on the current state of the fiddle, personal experiences related to navigating the spheres of the fiddle and the violin, and thoughts on *Sky* itself. All interviews can be found in full in appendices A-E of this document.[3]

[2] Tessa Lark, in conversation with the author, Mar 3, 2024.

[3] All interviews have been approved by and are in compliance with the University of Oregon Institutional Research Board standards for ethical research.

In this chapter I will explore the tension between the violin and the fiddle, the legacy of classical composers incorporating folk melodies, and the unlikely rise of a new genre. I will investigate violinist and fiddler Mark O'Connor's contribution to the fiddle-violin crossover genre, and how *Sky* is situated in the canon of crossover genre pieces that have come before. I call this hybrid performance practice the "third path": a pairing of the violinist's virtuosic technical skill and refined tone with the rhythmic drive, ornamentation, and improvisatory imaginings (composed or extemporaneous) of the fiddler. Rather than "crossover" or "fusion," which imply one style crossing an invisible boundary to visit the other style or two things merging to form a single entity, the third path is akin to a set of dials whereby the composer and performer can continually adjust the levels of the different stylistic elements throughout a work. In *Sky,* the violin and fiddle work together synergistically. To better understand this way of musical interaction and what makes it intriguing, it is helpful to look at the tension between the classical and the folk worlds: who holds the power, and why.

Violin Versus Fiddle

While it is not my intention to pit the violin and the fiddle against one another in an antagonistic sense, it is important to unpack the power dynamic behind these two categories to see how they interact. Here I use the term "classical music," even though this broad tradition is more accurately called Western Art Music, because in conventional wisdom violinists play "classical music," regardless of composer or era. Classical music has historically been linked to high educational status and social class. This continues to be true today, as universities and conservatories (with a few notable exceptions) train violinists for careers as symphonic

musicians, chamber music performers, and concert soloists.[4] The violin is associated with deep thinkers such as Albert Einstein and Sherlock Holmes, who have lent a considerable air of intellect to the instrument.

Fiddle music, on the other hand, belongs to the slippery category of folk music. Musicologist Ross Cole points out that "the folk" which the genre designation references are usually imagined to be the opposite of an Einstein or a Holmes: uneducated, rural people with a repertoire of songs and tunes transmitted orally through the ages. This image was strengthened by music scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who were interested in collecting the "pure music" of the common man, which is a reductive and romanticized construct rooted in an alienation with modernity.[5] As such, the idea of the classical tradition reaching down to elevate gritty vernacular music through collection, absorption, and incorporation into recognized classical forms is inherently problematic. It would appear at first glance as though classical music holds the power in this relationship through social standing, institutional representation and support, and historical prestige. Angels play the violin, but the Devil plays the fiddle.

Although classical music is symbolically powerful and remains closely associated with elite culture, the economic downturn of the 1970s saw classical music on the decline in terms of ticket sales, record sales, and cultural relevance in the United States. U.S. Presidents as recently as Richard Nixson had a ready answer when asked about their favorite composers (Beethoven, Liszt, and Gershwin for Nixon). By the early 1990s, George H.W. Bush cited the Beach Boys as

[4] Belmont University in Nashville, TN, and Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA, are two institutions that specialize in string programs that revolve around different varieties of fiddling. They are, however, the exception rather than the norm.

[5] Ross Cole, *The Folk: Music Modernity, and the Political Imagination*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2021, 1-19.

his favorite music.[6] Conversely, roots music—a rebranding of folk music—was embraced by the political left during the folk revival of the 1950s and '60s, shedding its association with Southern racism to become a fixture on college campuses around the country both through the performance circuit and as a topic of academic study. This coincided with broader cultural familiarity with Appalachian sounds through film and TV shows such as the Beverly Hillbillies. The success of productions such as *Riverdance* and films such as *O Brother Where Art Thou* are a continuation of this phenomenon. Today, well-established indie-folk-pop groups such as The Decemberists and Mumford & Sons include roots instruments like the fiddle and the banjo. Taylor Swift has single-handedly introduced a generation to stylized roots music through her 2020 album, *Folklore*, as well as sparked interest in the banjo through her own playing. Bluegrass guitar phenom Billy Strings is able to sell out 20,000-seat arenas such as the Moda Center in Portland. This speaks to the currency that roots music carries within modern pop culture: needless to say, symphony orchestras do not sell out stadiums. In short, symphonic music (the violin) retains the currency of high culture, but not necessarily the popular audiences of roots music (the fiddle).

I will argue that Torke's work strategically navigates a middle route between these poles that consists of two basic strategies. Because Torke invokes the privileged position of the violin through the medium of a concerto, he appeals to the select audiences of the classical world who will applaud his innovation with accolades and awards. In this way, the fiddle benefits the violin. Through their collaboration and centering of fiddle styles in this work, both Lark and Torke have tapped into another audience set, drawing the roots community into the concert hall. Here, the violin benefits the fiddle.

[6] Richard Taruskin, "The Musical Mystique: Defending classical music against its devotees," in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 330-353.

The Classical/Fiddle Composition Model

While the 1993 *Fiddle Concerto* by Mark O'Connor is generally considered the first piece to merge fiddle language with the concerto form, the use of folk melodies in Western Art Music is nothing new. Johann Gottfried Herder's philosophy of *Volkslieder* or folk song being representative of the soul of the people became widespread as nationalism took hold in Europe in the nineteenth century, and composers such as Bartók, Brahms, Dvořák, Sibelius, and Vaughan Williams utilized folk melodies to great (and often nationalistic) effect. Collections of English, Irish, and Scottish folk melodies have been arranged (and re-arranged) for any instrument imaginable since John Playford published *The English Dancing Master* in 1651, and novelty pieces, such as *The Banjo and Fiddle* from 1945 by William Kroll, continue to be used as recital material.

In the United States, folk melodies and spirituals were used by composers such as Charles Ives and Florence Price, and most famously Aaron Copland. Copland's orchestrational techniques, specifically during his populist (or self-described "vernacular") era of the 1940s, tended toward diatonic sensibilities and contrasting structural blocks meant to evoke the American West.[7] George Gershwin's blending of jazz and blues with the color palette of the orchestra is another American sonic touchstone.[8] Subsequent American compositions that engage with vernacular music, such as the minimalism of John Adams' *Shaker Loops* or John Corigliano's *Tournaments,* owe a debt to both Copland's and Gershwin's aesthetics, to one degree or another.

[7] Carol J. Oja, ed., and Judith Tick ed., *Aaron Copland and His World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 263.

[8] Richard Crawford and Wayne J. Schneider, "Gershwin, George," *Grove Music Online*, accessed Mar. 20 2024, https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002252861?rskey=qs8Frm&result=1.

It is one thing to borrow specific folk tunes, but it is another to meld two styles together convincingly. When I asked Berklee College of Music String Department Chair (and former Juilliard professor) David Wallace for his thoughts on this phenomenon, he responded, "I think you have to look at the *Appalachia Waltz* projects with Yo-Yo Ma, Mark O'Connor, and Edgar Meyer; I think that's what broke things open. Yo-Yo is such an extraordinary musician and person; he can make things happen, and he can make things acceptable."[9] Lark nodded emphatically when asked the same question. "Big heroes of mine are Edgar Meyer, Chris Thile, *The Appalachian Waltz* project; that [album] so informed who I am as a musician today."[10]

The *Appalachian Waltz* and *Appalachian Journey* albums feature the playing of Yo-Yo Ma (cello), Edgar Meyer (bass), and Mark O'Connor (fiddle) on virtuosic arrangements of traditional fiddle tunes, as well as original compositions by O'Connor and Meyer written in the fiddle vernacular.[11] *Appalachian Journey* won a Grammy Award for Best Classical Crossover Album in 2000, and O'Connor boasts that the pair of albums have sold, "A million CDs," and "helped to usher in a classical music crossover industry of string playing."[12] The impact of these recordings certainly opened the door for more folk/classical collaborations, boosting the profiles of players like multistyle banjo virtuoso Béla Fleck. The *Appalachian* project also laid the groundwork for albums such as the Joshua Bell (violin), Sam Bush (mandolin), Mike Marshall

[9] David Wallace, in conversation with the author, March 4, 2024.

[10] Tessa Lark, in conversation with the author, March 3, 2024

[11] Yo-Yo Ma (cello), Edgar Meyer (double bass), and Mark O'Connor (violin), *Appalachian Waltz,* Sony SK 68460, 1996, compact disc.
Yo-Yo Ma (cello), Edgar Meyer (double bass), and Mark O'Connor (violin), *Appalachian Journey,* with James Taylor and Alison Krauss, Sony SK 66782, 2000, compact disc.

[12] Mark O'Connor, "The Formation of the Mark O'Connor Fiddle Camps," *Parting Shots: From a Musician's Perspective,* Dec. 30, 2016, https://markoconnorblog.blogspot.com/2016/12/the-formation-of-mark-o-connor-fiddle.html.

(mandolin), and Meyer project *A Short Trip Home*,[13] and the *Goat Rodeo Sessions* that features Stuart Duncan (fiddle), Ma, Meyer, and Chris Thile (mandolin).[14] Lark's recent album, *The Stradgrass Sessions*, incorporates the playing of Jon Batiste (piano), Michael Cleaveland (fiddle), Sierra Hull (mandolin), and Meyer.[15]

Lark expressed positivity toward the cohabitation of folk and classical music on concert programs: "I think folk music is doing a favor for the classical community by being introduced onto the concert stage, it doesn't demean it in any way. It actually brings the audience into the concert hall and helps out an art form that's struggling to fill their halls. If classical music doesn't want to compromise in terms of the size of their halls, they're gonna have to update the music to be relevant."[16] But what about practitioners that straddle both worlds? The musician who is equally at home in the symphony or shredding a bluegrass solo? How do the classical and traditional music communities view these people who embrace a third path, and how do these players see themselves?

The Third Path Player

The third path composition is characterized by fiddle elements incorporated into a classical structure: violin and fiddle dials engaged to make adjustments between the two as each phrase unfolds. To interpret this music, the third path player must be part chameleon, part unicorn.

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[13] Joshua Bell (violin) and Edgar Meyer (double bass), *Short Trip Home*, with Sam Bush (mandolin) and Mike Marshall (mandolin), Sony SK 60864, 1999, compact disc.

[14] Yo-Yo Ma (cello), Stuart Duncan (fiddle), Edgar Meyer (double bass), and Chris Thile, *The Goat Rodeo Sessions*, with Aoife O'Donovan, Sony Classical B005G5NPIS, 2011, compact disc.

[15] Tessa Lark (violin), Jon Batiste (piano), Michael Cleavland (fiddle), Sierra Hull (mandolin), and Edgar Meyer (double bass), *The Stradgrass Sessions*, First Hand B0BVGCM737, 2023, compact disc.

[16] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

These are highly trained violinists who engage in rapid-fire code-switching depending on the situation they find themselves in, be it live performance or recording studio.[17] This includes modifying the use and type of vibrato, bow stroke, ornamentation, and rhythmic feel in order to credibly situate themselves within a specific genre or tradition.

"Double the fun, double the excitement, and double the practice time," Kristin Weber said with a chuckle, when I asked her about her career as a multistyle violinist and fiddler in Nashville.[18] Though Weber was lighthearted recalling her experiences, she was quick to note that she feels privileged because of her position as a respected member of the Nashville music community (Weber was awarded the Americana Instrumentalist of the Year in 2021 for her contributions to live and recorded performances in the Americana category), and she doesn't have to choose which way to define herself.

Meanwhile Mari Black, a highly decorated violinist and fiddler, took a more forceful stance. "Today I tour, perform, and teach in all different styles. My students will play Vivaldi concertos and Piazolla tangos…. They hold titles with the US Scottish Fiddle Championship, and they're improvising blues. It's all just music. And so I don't really see this line between violinist and fiddler, I think that's a modern construction."[19] Black confessed, "I've been thrown out of every traditional Irish session in Boston for misbehaving, and it's like, whatever, you don't like harmonies, fine. I'll go do them somewhere else. If you don't want somebody to chop, fine. Whatever."[20] But while Black might find the delineation between violin and fiddle

[17] Code switching is a sociolinguistic term used to denote the act of switching between languages or dialects of a single language based on a specific social group interaction or setting.

[18] Kristin Weber, in conversation with the author, Mar. 3, 2024.
[19] Mari Black, in conversation with the author, March 4, 2024.

[20] Black conversation, Mar. 4 2024. Author's note: the convention at traditional Irish sessions is for all the melody instruments to play in unison with a single accompanying instrument. If a player doesn't know the tune, they sit out rather than play background harmonies or chop (an act where the fiddle player hits the bow against the strings to

artificial, she has a deep respect for the musical traditions themselves. “You’ll also find nobody who venerates tradition more than I do. I want to know every lineage, every player who passed this tune down, and every possible version: I’m gonna transcribe every one of them, and pick apart why they’re different, what choices they [the player] make, and why they do it. Tradition is important, but it should never be precious. When it gets precious I start to get very rebellious.”[21]

Soloist Lark was less willing to do away with genre distinctions. “I would define myself —if I had to define myself—as a classical violinist that was born and raised in the Bluegrass State. Bluegrass was my first foray into playing music. But my training was primarily classical, and being in Kentucky I was just naturally playing bluegrass and loving it, loving the culture behind it.”[22] When asked about Lark’s success as a third path performer, Wallace commented on her fiddling credentials, “It’s interesting to see that Tessa is having this kind of career [straddling the classical and fiddle worlds], because that was not possible in the late nineties. It just wasn’t. I mean, she’s the real deal.”[23]

Matt Glaser, a long-standing prominent fixture of the fiddle and jazz violin worlds, articulated a sense of skepticism regarding classical violinists who dabble in the fiddle world, citing examples such as Itzhak Perlman performing the bluegrass tune “Bill Cheatham” on television. “...The idea that these other styles of music are so easy to learn that you could just play [them]. If you have good chops, you could just play some jazz, you could play some fiddle

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create a percussive sound rather than a pitched sound), as you would find commonly in Bluegrass jam sessions. Some sessions are more welcoming of harmonies etc., but most frown upon the practice.

[21] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[22] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024

[23] Matt Glaser and David Wallace, in conversation with the author, Mar. 4, 2024.

music." Glaser continued, "The dilettantism aspect of this is troubling to me, because I know from my own experience that any style is a lifetime's work, and even with a lifetime you're not really going to get there."[24] Glaser's concern is justified, as the presentation of fiddle music as a light-hearted diversion for "serious musicians" is an affront to the sensibilities of those who have dedicated their lives to the nuances of a specific fiddle tradition.

Weber echoed Glaser's concerns: "When I hear classical representation of fiddle music it sounds like someone saying, 'Let me let me dust this up. Let me clean it up. I can tune this up for you, and now it's palatable,' while missing what's important."[25] In Lark's view, "All these classical players, they develop crazy technique. You could plop music in front of them, and they could sight read it perfectly without any knowledge of what they're actually doing. Folk music has the opposite set of values. You come from the family, or the place, or the town, therefore you learn the music because it's part of your heritage, you are part of the culture."[26] She continued, "I think that folk music, in a way, is elevating classical music to a relevance to the people. I think this message of honoring the communities that have created the music is an important element that a lot of people who are classically trained are missing."[27] An interesting sentiment, as Lark qualifies predominantly as a classical violinist. But honoring traditions and connections—whether they are related to classical or vernacular music—is a hallmark of the third path.

[24] Glaser and Wallace conversation, March 4th, 2024.

[25] Weber conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[26] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[27] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

Lark is not the only violin virtuoso to embrace multiple styles. Chicago-born violinist Rachel Barton Pine has long been known for her interest in heavy metal music, performing frequently with her band Earthen Grave. She has also pursued an interest in Scottish fiddle music, having recorded an album, *Scottish Fantasies for Violin and Orchestra*, that features her sharing tunes with preeminent Scottish fiddler Alisdair Fraser.[28] Barton Pine is known for her foundation championing the work of Black composers, and her 2018 album *Blues Dialogues* showcases virtuosic imaginings of the blues for violin specifically by Black composers.[29]

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of carrying multiple styles of music in one's fingertips is the facility to switch gears at the drop of a hat. Black compared it to speaking multiple languages and seeking cognates, while Lark and Weber both described different styles as living in different parts of their brains, and requiring intentional thought to access them.[30] Weber described the most challenging situation as, "walking into a [recording] session for fiddle, and they [the client] have written out what they want me to play. I have to sight read, but apply the stylings of fiddle. It takes me a minute because I'm so used to improvising fiddle lines instead; that's actually the hardest situation that I'm thrown into."[31]

Lark had a similar comment regarding the act of interpreting composed music through a fiddle lens. "I have to go through a process of looking at it first, understanding aurally what I'm seeing visually, and then eliminating the visual part. Because when you look at the page, it

[28] Rachel Barton Pine (violin), *Scottish Fantasies for Violin and Orchestra,* Alisdair Frasier (fiddle), Alexander Platt (conductor),Cedille Records B0009VI5GG, 2005, compact disc.

[29] Rachel Barton Pine (violin) and Matthew Hagle (piano), *Blues Dialogues*, Cedille Records B07GW4CM6P, 2018, compact disc.

[30] Black Conversation, Mar. 4, 2024. Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024. Weber conversation, Mar 3, 2024.

[31] Weber conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

looks complex and modern, almost Second Viennese School. If you look too literally, it's not gonna sound like fiddle music."[32]

Of course there are as many opinions and interpretations of what it means to be a third path player as there are third path players themselves. There were, however, some common refrains regarding the origins of their "moment of ignition," to borrow a phrase from author Daniel Coyle.[33] In one way or another, all roads lead to the Mark O'Connor Fiddle Camp.

The Fiddle Camp Phenomenon and Beyond

The concept of a fiddle camp was not new when O'Connor launched his original camp at the Montgomery Bell State Park outside of Nashville in the summer of 1994. O'Connor himself cited the Ashokan Music and Dance Camp, spearheaded by fiddler Jay Ungar in upstate New York, as a model.[34] O'Connor's star power as the preeminent Nashville recording session fiddle player, together with the star power of the clinicians he recruited, were a potent combination that resulted in sold-out camps in multiple locations around the country. Thirty years later, the O'Connor camps are still inspiring young fiddlers to expand their horizons. A glance at early camp photographs reads like a Who's-Who of the present day fiddling world, including three of the experts interviewed for this chapter.[35]

[32] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[33] Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code*, New York: Bantam, 2009, 41. Coyle posits that all high achieving athletes or artists undergo a moment of ignition: an event that ignites their passion and imagination, which cements their dedication to repetitive practice and sets them on the path of becoming an exceptional practitioner in their field, as opposed to an enthusiastic amateur.

[34] Jay Ungar is the composer responsible for the popular waltz "Ashokan Farewell," made famous by its appearance in the 1990 *Ken Burns:The Civil War* documentary miniseries. Ungar wrote the tune upon leaving Ashokan at the end of a camp session.

[35] Of the experts interviewed for this research, Mari Black, Matt Glaser, and David Wallace have all been educators at the O'Connor Fiddle Camps in addition to Black's camper status.

Black exclaimed: “Yeah. So the camps were leader for me. My first one was when I was fourteen or so, I went to the old Mark O’Connor camp.”[36] Lark concurred: “I went to the Mark O’Connor fiddle camps a few times and met a lot of people through that program. Fiddle camps were a big thing.”[37] Weber went on to elaborate about the breadth of styles available at the O’Connor camp: “ I went to Mark O’Connor fiddle camps for five or six years in Tennessee, and it rocked my world, just like it’s rocking everyone’s world when they go to fiddle camps and get to see people play in so many different styles. Classical included, but also jazz and many fiddle styles. And there’s not just ‘fiddle.’ There’s old-time fiddle, and bluegrass fiddle. And there’s not *just* old-time fiddle, here's the way *this* old-time player plays versus *that* old-time player from this region. Many categories.”[38]

Canadian fiddle champion and Suzuki-trained violinist Crystal Plohman Wiegman worked with O’Connor at Vanderbilt University in the 1990s running a pre-college fiddle centric program, and eventually took over O’Connor’s position at Vanderbilt. Building upon O’Connor’s foundation, Plohman Wiegman has cultivated a vibrant program called the International Fiddle Program that has run for over twenty years. The children involved in this program also study the Suzuki method, creating a steady stream of players who have internalized multiple styles.

The American String Teachers Association and the Suzuki Association of the Americas have expanded their thinking regarding the incorporation of fiddle music into the diet of young string musicians, in part thanks to O’Connor’s presence at conferences and the launch of his

[36] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[37] Lark conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[38] Weber conversation, Mar. 3 2024.

Mark O'Connor Fiddle Method in 2009.[39] Plohman Wiegman followed with her graded collection, *Fiddle and Song*, in 2017,[40] with more titles being added by fiddling pedagogues each year. Matthew Gelfer's 2023 release, *Fiddle Club*, is one of the most recent to join the trend.[41] Understanding the intertwined nature of fiddle culture as it relates to the world of the violin is important as we discuss the dynamics at play in Torke's violin concerto.

The Michael Torke Violin Concerto

While labeled as a violin concerto, Michael Torke's 2019 Violin Concerto, *Sky*, incorporates elements of bluegrass and Irish fiddle into the three movements. Torke noted in his program notes, "Everything is written out, nothing improvised," ostensibly negating any requirement that the soloist would need to have working knowledge of those fiddle traditions represented in the piece.[42] His compositional style falls broadly in the category of American post-minimalism, and there are parallels between the first movement of *Sky* and the first movement of Adams' *Shaker Loops*, if one were to add a healthy dash of Copeland, Gershwin, and a cadre of fiddlers. Torke armed himself with an advantage when he chose to collaborate with violinist and fiddler Lark on the project. Lark approached the work with the technical prowess of a concert violinist, paired with the skill to embellish within the different fiddle genres that comes from her Kentucky fiddle background. *Sky* was received enthusiastically, garnering notable accolades

[39] "About the O'Connor Method," *The O'Connor Method Official Website*, accessed Mar. 21, 2024, https://www.oconnormethod.com/About-Us.html.

[40]Crystal Plohman Wiegman, *Fiddle and Song, Book 1*, Van Nuys: Alfred Music, accessed Mar. 21, 2024, https://www.alfred.com/fiddle-song-book-1/p/00-45006/.

[41]Matthew Gelfer, *Fiddle Club*, Exton: WJ Pepper, accessed Dec. 30, 2023, https://www.jwpepper.com/sheet-music/search.jsp?keywords=Fiddle%20Club%20Gelfer.

[42] Michael Torke, "Sky," accessed Nov. 10, 2023, https://www.michaeltorke.com/sky.

such as becoming a finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize, and a nomination for the Best Classical Instrumental Solo at the Grammy Awards of the same year.[43]

In speaking with Michael Torke about his decision to create a violin concerto as opposed to a suite of dance movements, I asked what drew him to include fiddle material. "In terms of my original intentions, I was thinking: *a violin concerto?!*" He made an incredulous face. "The world doesn't need another violin concerto. We have all the great violin concertos. As a composer, how can you compete? How could you create a vibrant concerto that uses tonal and rhythmic elements, that would speak to today, and yet would serve and operate in the tradition of that repertory, but not imitate those works? How would you do it? And my thought was: look outside the field for inspiration."[44]According to Torke, this meant doing a large amount of self-education regarding various fiddle styles and players, noticing which traditions drew him in. He committed to representing bluegrass as an homage to Lark's upbringing. She remarked that it was, "flattering that somebody would be fascinated by not just your playing, but your upbringing and your musical life, and to want to write a whole concerto about it."[45]

Instead of setting a bluegrass tune for orchestra and soloist, Torke turned to another bluegrass staple: the banjo. Torke flipped the script, and gave the violin the role—and literal roll—of the banjo, sending the soloist on a journey of undulating sixteenth notes and spikey, syncopated rhythms while the woodwinds and brass carry the main melodic lines. Lark confessed that early on in the process, she had doubts about her ability to produce a banjo-esque

[43] Michael Torke, "Bio," accessed Nov. 10, 2023, https://www.michaeltorke.com/bio2.

[44] Michael Torke, in conversation with the author, Feb. 29, 2024.

[45] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

sound on the violin. “I told Michael, ‘I don’t know if this is gonna sound good, but it’s possible.’”[46]

The second movement is inspired by traditional Irish music, particularly the playing of fiddler Martin Hayes.[47] Torke recalled, “I took a basic jig idea and stretched it out into 4/4, like a reel. Then I slowed it down, and I did other permutations.”[48] The result is a melancholy minor melody that wends its way along, offering the soloist moments to engage in conversation; first with the woodwinds, then with the low strings. As the movement develops, the tempo increases and the piece shifts to major. A spritely fiddle tune plays until a sudden double-time strikes, setting the soloist and woodwinds in a call and response of percussive chords and flurries of melodic fragments. The movement winds down with a return to the poignant opening melody.

Torke elaborated on his thought process while composing the second movement: “When I was studying this music, I saw it was based on two ideas. You have idea A, that’s repeated. Idea B is repeated, and then it’s over, and then you move on to the next song, where the form is identical.” Irish music is typically presented in sets of two or more tunes of the same time signature. Torke continued, “A cornerstone of classical music is that this music develops. Why? So that you can encompass larger forms. Otherwise, what you have is a suite of never-ending binary tunes that get tiresome. How do you build a structure that keeps your listener interested? And so that was the goal: to take a presentational music form and then build a larger structure.”[49]

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[46] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[47] Hayes is a giant in the world of Irish fiddle, known for his phrasing and bow technique. It surely comes as no surprise that he has also been a clinician at the Mark O’Connor Fiddle Camps.

[48] Torke conversation, Feb. 29, 2024.

[49] Torke conversation, Feb. 29, 2024.

The third movement is the most recognizably related to American fiddle traditions, and incorporates a number of slides and double stops. “I’m allergic to classical violinists who try to imitate fiddle music and make a caricature of the different sounds and idioms, sliding into everything,”[50] sighed Lark, when asked how she prepared this movement. “I’m going for a feeling and a visceral effect more than any accuracy to the score… Some of these slides are written as whole steps, and I’m not sure I always do that because it’s gonna sound too grotesque.”[51]

Wallace lamented the lack of cadenza in any of the movements of *Sky*, citing it as a lost opportunity for the soloist to engage in improvisation.[52] Lark shared an anecdote regarding a cadenza that Torke supplied after the initial premiere of the piece, but before the recording session with the Albany Symphony. “He [Torke] was really gunning for it,” Lark mused, confiding that she didn’t know how history would view her, if “somebody might read in the future that there was a cadenza and the violinist was against it.”[53] Lark clarified that the cadenza Torke had composed was musically sound, if fiendishly difficult. In the end, she pushed back because of the lack of time before the recording session. Unlike many familiar concertos where the orchestra has significant tutti sections where the soloist can catch their breath or regain their composure, Torke offers little-to-no respite throughout the entirety of the work. “You need your Wheaties before you play this piece!” Lark laughed.[54]

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[50] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[51] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[52] Glaser and Wallace conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[53] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[54] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

Sans cadenza, the end result is a seemingly danceable fiddle tune complete with foot stomps, but don't be fooled: dancing would be tricky, as the stomping section is in groupings of five. Sparkling pentatonic runs abound, and the orchestration gives a firm nod to Gershwin in places. All of these elements seem tailored to elicit standing ovations, as they play to the crowd as theatrically as any concerto finale (or any fiddler wailing away on "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," for that matter).

Reception in the Concert Hall

"It's very approachable, could we say that it's the Hamilton of the violin concerto world?"[55] Weber quipped. "This is a piece that anybody would dig listening to. It's not going to alienate anybody,"[56] said Glaser. Upon reading live concert reviews, it would seem they are both correct.

A review by *The Scotsman* paper described the concerto as, "bluegrass-meets-rocket-fuelled-minimalism," and Lark's performance as, "a blast for the entire ensemble, Lark's foot-stomping opening like an incendiary wake-up call."[57] An article from the *Arkansas Gazette* recounted applause between movements, while artsknoxville.com described the work as, "Intriguing moment heaped on smile-inducing passage."[58] The popular website violinist.com also gave a glowing report from Knoxville, and the *Green Valley News and Sun* described Lark

[55] Weber conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[56] Glaser and Wallace conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[57] Ken Walton, "Celtic Connections Reviews: Fatoumata Diawara | Frigg | Sky and Lammermuir," *The Scotsman*, February 4th, 2020.

[58] Alan Sherrod, "Review: KSO Wraps Four Month Season, Looks to Future, with Torke's Sky and Beethoven," *arts knoxville.com*, May 22, 2021.

and Torke as, "...warmly and enthusiastically welcomed by their audiences."[59] The *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* called the piece a "...true tour de force for Lark and the orchestra," and noted that, "The audience roared its appreciation," and demanded an encore from Lark.[60] The only review to be less than fully positive came from the site chicagoclassicalreview.com, which concluded that, although *Sky* was a joyful experience executed at a high level, if one was looking for a bluegrass-inspired violin concerto, the 1999 Edgar Meyer concerto (dedicated to a young Hillary Hahn) was a better choice.[61]

Torke waxed philosophical during our conversation and gave his thoughts about what he hopes to leave behind. "Well, and that's the goal, you know, from our composer's point of view, we don't want to just *write* music. We want to write music that makes the player or the conductor or the listener say, "Aha!" Because it's all about love. It's not about prestige. It's not about what's 'important.' All of that gets sifted down through history. It's 'do you write a piece of music that a lot of people love, and they're drawn to it.' That's the way I think about it."[62] Torke's desire for meaningful connection and legacy speaks to the highest instincts of music making. Of course even the most thoughtful art can be mischaracterized or misunderstood, but in the case of *Sky,* Lark's bona fides as a fiddler have preempted criticism from the roots community.

[59] Donald J. Bhenke, "Music Review: Irish Fiddler Meets Bluegrass at TSO Concert," *Green Valley News and Sun,* Nov. 1, 2019.

[60] Gayle Williams, "Review: Violinist Highlights New American Music," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, Nov. 6, 2023.

[61] While a marvelous piece that draws on Americana and folk idioms, I believe there to be a far less overt influence of fiddle styles in the Meyer concerto than the Torke concerto. Though in the hands of a third path performer such as Lark (who, interestingly enough, has performed this piece) I might soften my opinion.

[62] Torke conversation, Feb. 29, 2024.

Reception in the Fiddle Community

When I spoke with Wallace regarding possible backlash from the traditional music communities of the fiddle styles represented in *Sky*, he noted that, "[Lark] is someone who's uniquely positioned to play [this] music from an insider's perspective." Following a thread of our conversation regarding the O'Connor *Fiddle Concerto*, he continued: "People weren't talking about appropriation in the nineties. I think it's complicated, because you have a lot of composers where, if you're creating music, you want to be able to work with whatever materials you can. You don't want to think about things as being off limits. But you can get into complicated territories, and you can also get into situations where the results are bad."[63]

Weber responded with a similar thought regarding Lark as the soloist of choice: "It's informed by someone with experience…. It's been informed by someone who has themselves been informed by fiddle styles."[64] Black concurred, applauding Lark's performance.[65] Even after expressing reservations about hybrid pieces, Glaser's reaction was positive. "People are hearing some elements of folk music and translating them into this higher-level technical version of the thing. It's great. It sounds great."[66] While no fiddler would listen to this concerto and say unequivocally, "This is fiddle music," it captures a general fiddle spirit that is energizing and intoxicating. It points to the third path as a viable and uniquely American form of composition that is well received by performers and listeners alike.

[63] Glaser and Wallace conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[64] Weber conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[65] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[66] Glaser and Wallace conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

Conclusion

The third path may not be a perfect term for the hybridization of Western Art Music and folk styles, but I believe that it offers more agency and flexibility than terms such as "crossover" or "fusion." Third path music is free to incorporate violin techniques with various styles of fiddle traditions in whatever proportion seems appropriate to the composer, though the best examples of the genre are ones which contain evidence of stylistic education and genuine respect for the folk traditions involved.

Third path pieces have gained acceptance and popularity since the 1990s, beginning with the O'Connor *Fiddle Concerto,*[67] a cluster of works and albums in the late 1990s and early 2000s—*Appalachian Waltz,*[68] the Meyer *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*,[69] *Appalachian Journey*,[70] *Short Trip Home*,[71] O'Connor's *The American Seasons*—[72]*The Goat Rodeo Sessions* of 2011,[73] and the followup album, *Not Our First Goat Rodeo* from 2020.[74] 2019 heralded both the Torke concerto, *Sky*,[75] but also the Wynton Marsalis *Violin Concerto* and *Fiddle Dance*

[67] Mark O'Connor, *The Fiddle Concerto*, Bonsall: Mark O'Connor Musik International, 1999. Though Paul Schoenfield's 1987 *Three Country Fiddle Pieces* for violin and piano surely deserve a mention, as well.

[68] Ma, Meyer, and O'Connor, *Appalachian Waltz,* 1996, compact disc.

[69] Samuel Barber and Edgar Meyer, *Barber and Meyer: Violin Concertos,* Hillary Hahn (violin), Hugh Wolff (conductor), Sony Classical B00004RBXW, compact disc.

[70] Ma, Meyer, and O'Connor, *Appalachian Journey,* 2000, compact disc.

[71] Bell and Meyer, *Short Trip Home,* 1999, compact disc.

[72] Mark O'Connor, *The American Seasons*, Sony Masterworks B00005OKTI, compact disc.

[73] Ma, Duncan, Meyer, Thile, *The Goat Rodeo Sessions,* 2011, compact disc.

[74] Yo-Yo Ma (cello), Stuart Duncan (fiddle), Edgar Meyer (double bass), Chris Thile (mandolin), *Not Our First Goat Rodeo,* with Aoife O'Donovan, Sony Classical B085K85LWP, 2020, compact disc.

[75] Torke, *Sky,* 2019.

Suite.[76] The Marsalis concerto has a movement dedicated to blues, as well as a finale movement entitled "Hootenanny," which incorporates fiddle shuffle rhythms and open fifth double stops for the soloist, and stomping and clapping in the orchestra. 2023 brought Lark's collaborative effort, *Stradgrass*,[77] and there are sure to be more exuberant, fiddle-informed pieces to follow.

While the third path pieces are important, the players and the educational infrastructures that support third path exploration are equally important. A generation of violinists who grew up attending fiddle camps are carving out musically broad-minded careers, and instilling those same values in their students. Institutions and organizations are responding, albeit slowly. Berklee College of Music in Boston and Belmont University in Nashville have long been known for their programs in alternative string styles, but American roots music and string band course offerings are springing up at institutions around the country (the University of Oregon included). Performers recognize that third path skills are marketable and therefore profitable, which makes it an inevitability that the third path will continue to grow.

Violinist Diane Skinner commented in her review of the Knoxville performance of *Sky*: "How wonderful it would be if violinists who do not hail from Kentucky or other parts of Appalachia [felt] comfortable digging into this joyous music in the same manner they would study the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic styles."[78] It is my sincere hope that this very thing comes to pass. Torke's concerto is one more flag planted for those of us who feel the pull of multiple ways of expressing music, who are not content to choose one road or the other, but who seek the third path. Because in the end, as Black said, it's all music.

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[76] Wynton Marsalis, *Violin concerto; Fiddle Dance Suite*, Nicola Benedetti (violin), Cristian Macelaru (conductor), Decca B07QD32SVJ, 2019, compact disc.

[77] Lark , Batiste, Cleavland, Hull, and Meyer, *The Stradgrass Sessions*, 2023, compact disc.
[78] Diana Skinner, "Review: Tessa Lark, Torke, and Tennessee," *Violinist.com*, May 26, 2021, https://www.violinist.com/blog/castadiva/20215/28781/.

CHAPTER 2

Analysis

An Overview of Movement I, Lively

"It's just a regular cakewalk rhythm," said Matt Glaser, as I played the opening of the first movement of *Sky* for Glaser and David Wallace.[79] This familiar rhythmic pattern, or "boobop sha-bam," as Wallace sang it, permeates the first movement, from the opening measure of the piece.

Fig. 1: Torke, *Sky*, movement I, "Lively," m. 1.[80]

"My belief is that Southern fiddling owes a profound debt to the musical traditions of Western Africa," Wallace said, with a crackle of energy in his voice. "You can listen to folk fiddle traditions north of the Mason-Dixon line versus south of it, and the real difference is a profound amount of cross rhythm and syncopation. That's what fed into the black string band traditions, which fed into bluegrass."[81]

[79] Matt Glaser and David Wallace, in conversation with the author, Mar. 4, 2024.

[80] Michael Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, Las Vegas: Adjustable Music, 2018, 1.

[81] Glaser and Wallace conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

Kathleen Biddik Smith places Torke in the broad category of post-minimalism, as defined by Timothy Johnson. Johnson posits that the post-minimalist composer would use two or more of the following characteristics: use of continuous formal structure, even rhythmic texture and bright tone, simple harmonic palate, lack of extended melodic lines, and repetitive rhythmic patterns.[82] While this definition may not apply to the entirety of *Sky*, it is a good fit for the first movement. "Lively" unfolds through the repetition and permutation of rhythmic cells, and maintains a relatively understated harmonic palate.

Broadly speaking, this movement can be broken into an ABA coda form. The first A section contains two contrasting ideas: the syncopated banjo picking motive, and a contrasting lyrical melody that is marked "yearning."[83] The banjo roll motive is accompanied by a persistent backbeat that finds a home in nearly every section of the orchestra in some portion of the piece, including the soloist. The backbeat pulses in the tambourine and pizzicato strings for the first nineteen measures, then is transferred to the triangle at measure twenty until the tambourine recaptures it in measure thirty-three. The woodwinds take a turn with the backbeat at measure forty-seven when the mood softens momentarily, but the jaunty nature of the backbeat rekindles in measure fifty-four when it is transferred to the wood block. The backbeat intensifies at measure sixty-eight when it is handed to the maracas while the strings strum guitar-like underneath, which culminates in an orchestral exclamation at measure seventy-nine where the backbeat is given, perhaps surprisingly, to the soloist. During all this passing, the time stays consistent at a brisk quarter note equals 140 beats per minute; appropriate for a movement marked "Lively."

[82] Kathleen Biddick Smith, "Musical Process in Selected Works by Michael Torke" (Dissertation, Florida State University, 2009), 1-2, ProQuest 3388551.

[83] *Sky* movement I, measure 178.

This persistent backbeat is a direct homage to the backbeat chucks and chops—the act of smacking the bow against the strings near the frog for a percussive effect— found in bluegrass fiddle playing; the percussive element drives the tune forward, while standing in contrast to the heavy downbeats provided by the bass, guitar and melodic line. The culminating moment of the orchestral melody and soloist backbeat is a clear expression of the fiddle chop, which is used to fill space while other players in the band take a turn in the spotlight. Lark commented on the use of backbeats as an anchor point in relation to the non-standard phrase lengths. "The structures are fascinating because he [Torke] will add half a bar to a phrase, and slightly extend it. The micro effect, especially as a player is, 'Whoa! Where am I?' It's very disorienting." She went on to reference the similarity between Torke's work and jazz tunes that use non-standard meters. "... But as a listener you don't ever feel that [the obscure meter] because the offbeats, the downbeats, they're always there, which is a very folksy thing; it's grooving, and *that*'*s* what you feel."[84] Lark's performance of this choppy section is inherently violinistic, as she creates a full (if aggressive) sounding tone rather than the classic bluegrass chop that is purely rhythmic. From a functional perspective, however, the mandate of the chop is fulfilled.

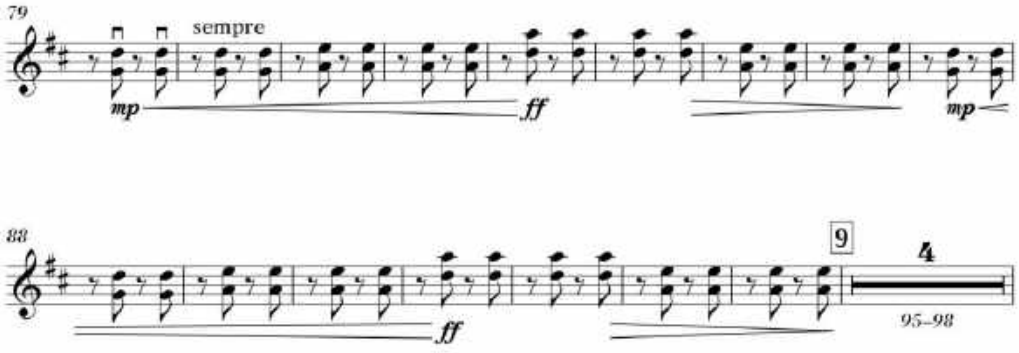


Fig. 2: *Sky*, movement I, m.79-94.[85]

[84] Tessa Lark, in conversation with the author, Mar. 3, 2024.

[85] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 3.

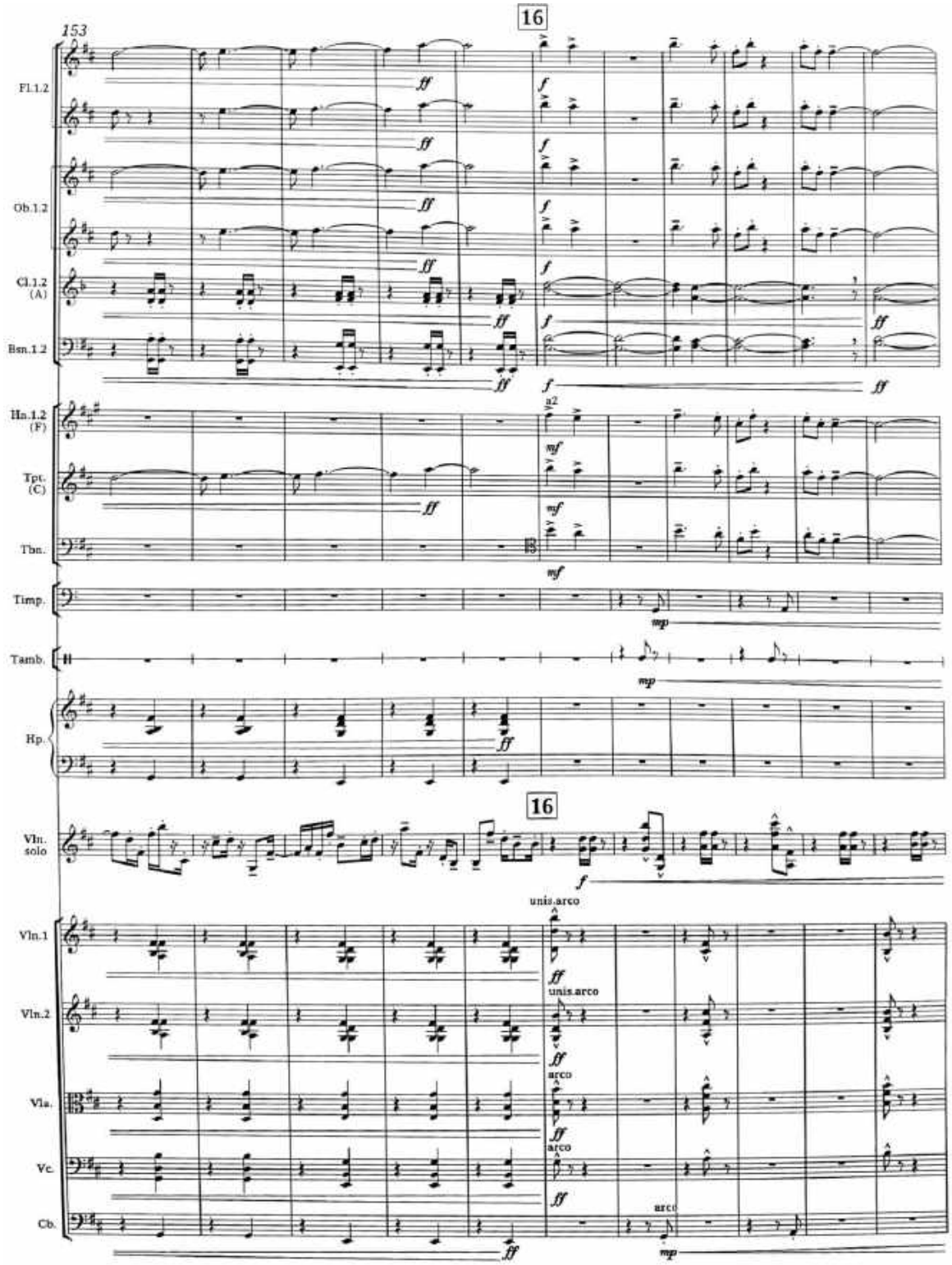
Another bluegrass function Torke honors is placing the banjo (or in this case, the violin soloist), in the role of persistent syncopated arpeggiation. Torke dials back the scale of melody found in other parts of the orchestra, running contrary to what might be found in a bluegrass band where the banjo would continue rolling along while a solo happened above it. The orchestration is deliberately sparse, giving the backbeat space to drive and the violin space to be heard.

The backbeat finally exits in measure 103, when the lively every-other-eighth-note pulse is replaced by gentle sixteenth note taps on the second beat by the clarinets and oboes. The almost non-existent accompaniment gradually builds, giving periodic subito forte stabs in seemingly random places. The stabs occur at intervals of eight, ten, seven, and eight measures, though they always correlate with the cadences of the solo line. The intensity builds until measure 158, where the soloist takes on the task of giving fortissimo stabs in triple stops while the trumpet plays a fanfare-esque melody. The solo violin stabs come across as haphazard punctuations, while the oddly structured fanfare appears metrically stable.

The orchestra begins to build up steam at this point, increasing the density of orchestration, as well as the harmonic and rhythmic interest. The soloist has a corresponding reduction in rhythmic activity, lingering on the fanfare melody which has been transformed from noble to agitated by the unsettled harmonies underneath. The tension resolves in a satisfying tutti between measures 212 and 223.

The moments in this movement where the orchestra is showcased usually herald a shift of character. The frenetic motion resides with the strings, and the brass and percussion add punctuation marks. The effect is that the eventual transition to the dolce melody in the woodwinds at measure 224 feels like a contrast, rather than whiplash. When the violin takes

over the dolce melody at 238, it offers one of the few moments where the soloist can truly sing, and the violin part of the stylistic equation is brought to the foreground.



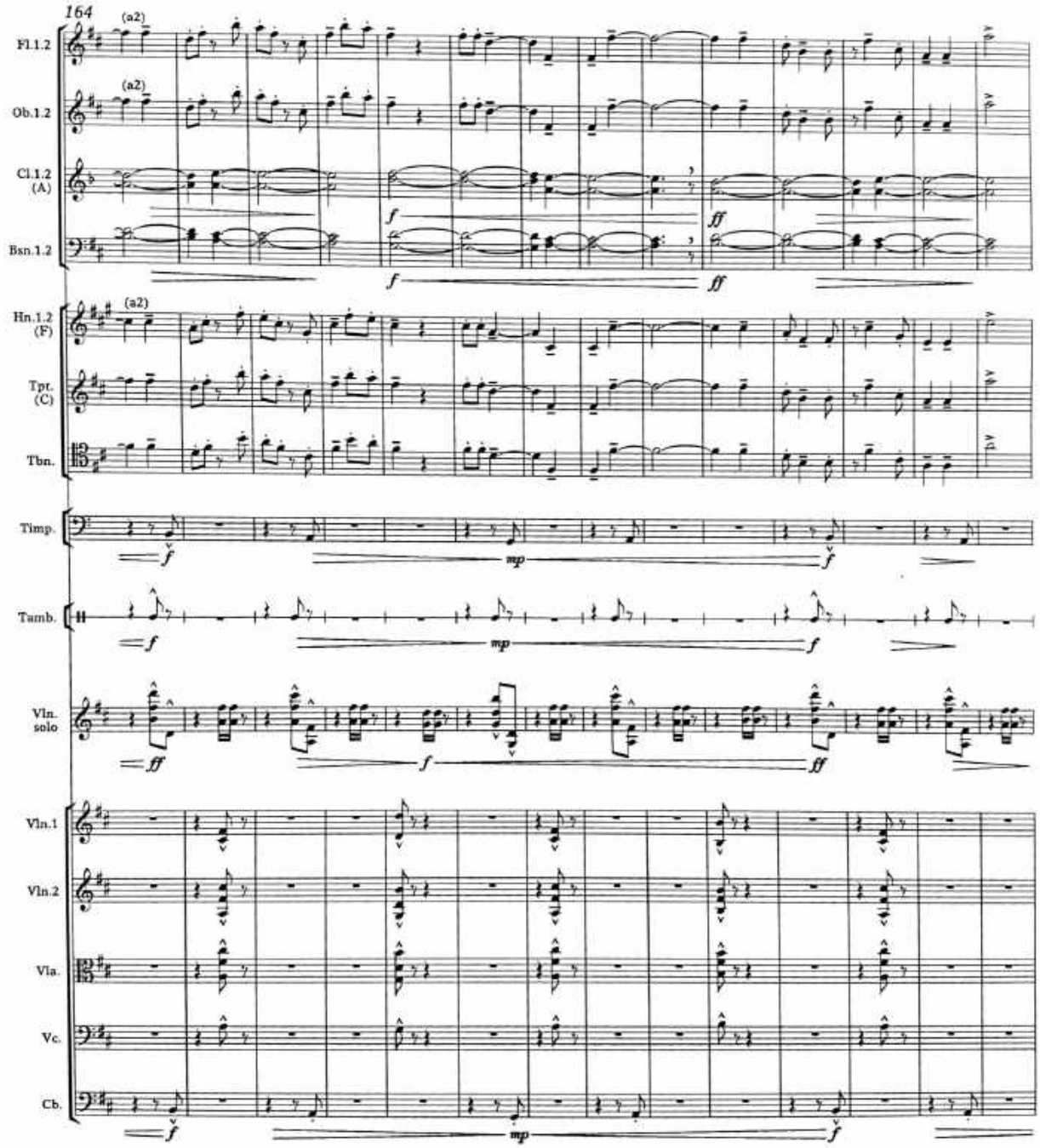


Fig. 3: *Sky*, movement I, m. 153-177.[86]

[86] Torke, *Sky*, score, 14-15

The cantabile feeling is short-lived, however, and a hearty fiddle section, which I identify as the beginning of the B part, begins at measure 256. Unlike the banjo roll, the fiddle idea in this section doesn't rely on syncopation. Shuffle bowings—the classic eighth and two sixteenths pattern—and sliding double stops abound while in the orchestra, the backbeat is alive again through subtle upper strings pizzicato.

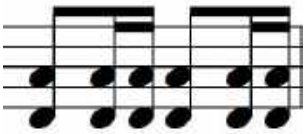


Fig. 4: shuffle pattern.

Things turn lyrical in measure 274, with a singing violin line. After eight measures, the violinist is transported back to the hoedown. These two concepts, the fiddle and the voice, alternate with one another until another brief tutti at measure 362, which heralds the return of the A section in measure 370. This time, however, the melodic contour of the first A part has been inverted:

Fig. 5: *Sky*, movement I, m. 1-6.[87]

[87] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 1.

Fig. 6: *Sky*, movement I, m. 370-375. Modified return of the A section.[88]

The effect is familiar yet different from everything that has come before. The banjo motive contains related melodic content, while strictly adhering to the previously stated rhythm of the A part. Torke is showing the A section through a mirror, and the reflections are, at times, bizarre.[89]

The lyrical melody is marked "misterioso" instead of "yearning," as the violin builds suspense by playing sustained F#s (functioning as the dominant at this moment) in different octaves. The tension is finally released by a series of tonic Bs, reaching up to a screaming B6 as the tutti steps in to have their moment. After a final dolce melody, the coda arrives in measure 623. The coda consists of a series of brief battles between the orchestra and the soloist—dueling banjos, if you will—with the original banjo motive turned right-side up. The movement concludes with a flourish from the soloist and a final iteration of the cakewalk rhythm from everybody, ending with a bang.

[88] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 8.

[89] There are a few minor rhythmic inconsistencies in the solo part during the span of measures 471- 490, but I believe these differences have to do with melodic contour and facilitating rapid string crossings rather than any sense of deliberate deviation on Torke's part.

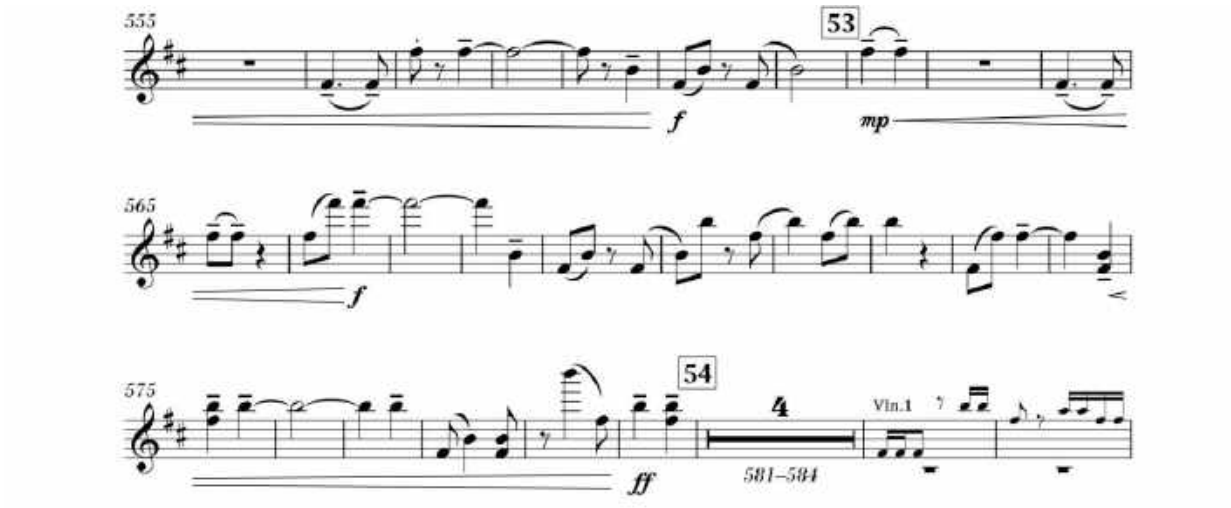


Fig. 7: *Sky*, movement I, m. 555-586.[90]

Section Breakdown: Initial A Section

The first movement of *Sky* is less about stark contrasts as it is about gradual shifts of texture, timbre, and color. "He named it *Sky,* right? The overarching feeling is so expansive as a result of these micro evolutions of the different phrases," Lark exclaimed.[91] The music lives up to the title, capturing the feeling of laying in the grass and watching the clouds shift overhead.

Because this movement is structured around gradual evolutions of phrase, the orchestral accompaniment serves as a significant component in section identification; the soloist may represent the endless sky, but the orchestra provides a window frame. The movement ranges through multiple tonal centers, but the overarching harmonic effect is one of stasis. The banjo motive sits atop a tonic pedal in the accompaniment for twenty-eight measures before it shifts into a hypnotic bVII/I motion for the next eighteen measures. The solo line might flirt briefly

[90] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 11.

[91] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

with implied passing chords, but the mixolydian quality—a common feature in multiple genres of fiddle music, including bluegrass—is well-established. The first thirty-eight measures of the movement represent the first subsection of the overarching A section, but already the music is shifting.

As the piece unfurls and more harmonic movement is presented, Torke moves away from strict two bar pairings and plays with time: some pairs occupy their allotted two measures, but have their timing altered through ties in a manner which truncates the harmonic shift; other pairs are extended over three measures. “Lively” is in 2/4 meter, but in this section the occasional 1/4 measure is used to extend the phrase so that it feels natural at its conclusion. This section of harmonic/metric instability begins at measure thirty-nine, and continues through measure sixty-seven.

Measure sixty-eight brings a feeling of righting the ship, as the trusty backbeat returns throughout the majority of the orchestra, as shown in figure eight. The french horns and clarinets have a slow ascending line which grounds the tonality in B Minor, though the solo material resides in D Major. The rhythm of the horn continues the trajectory from the previous section, as pitches are held for varied (and seemingly random) lengths of time.

The harmonic rhythm squares up once the soloist takes ownership of the offbeats in measure seventy-nine. The melody is presented by the woodwinds as two eight bar phrases, disrupting the previously established pattern. Throughout the soloist’s backbeat chopping, the tonal center is situated firmly in D Major.

The orchestra presents a slower version of the violin’s opening melody while the violin jumps in quick syncopated exclamations that sound like insistent buzzing flies. The orchestra quickly gives up any idea of carrying the melody and turns to quick stabs, a metaphorical fly-

swatter. The soloist pivots to D Minor in measure 122 while the orchestra plays two-measure phrases of Bb and G Minor chords underneath, but measure 132 brings a shift to D Major sensibilities for the soloist while the orchestration remains ambivalent. Another ascending line begins in the woodwinds and passes to the brass in measures 147- 157, crescendoing into the brass fanfare at measure 158.

The fanfare marks the beginning of the next section, sitting in B Minor. When the violin takes over the fanfare, the orchestra becomes more agitated and the harmonies more complex with tritone clusters and ambiguous chord voicings that omit the third. I-V harmonic motion in measures 206- 209 precipitates an arrival in B Major. The dolce moment that follows is harmonically stabilizing, solidifying B Major as the tonal center and granting a respite from the harmonic ambiguity that came before.

Section Breakdown: B Section

Measure 256 marks a series of new beginnings: the start of the B section, a new key (F# Major), new motivic material (the fiddle and song motives), and a new rhythmic feel (unsyncopated shuffle feel instead of syncopated banjo feel). This is the only place in "Lively" where there is no overlapping transition to navigate, no shifting sands. Turn the page, and one is squarely in fiddle land.

Similarly to the opening of the A section, the B section spends time sitting on the tonic, though only for eight measures this time. A prolonged hold on a B chord allows the contrasting song-like melody to transform the B from the subdominant function in F# major to a dominant function with a cadence in E Major in measure 289. The remainder of the B section continues tonal obscurity between the orchestra and the soloist. The soloist appears to sit in E Mixolydian

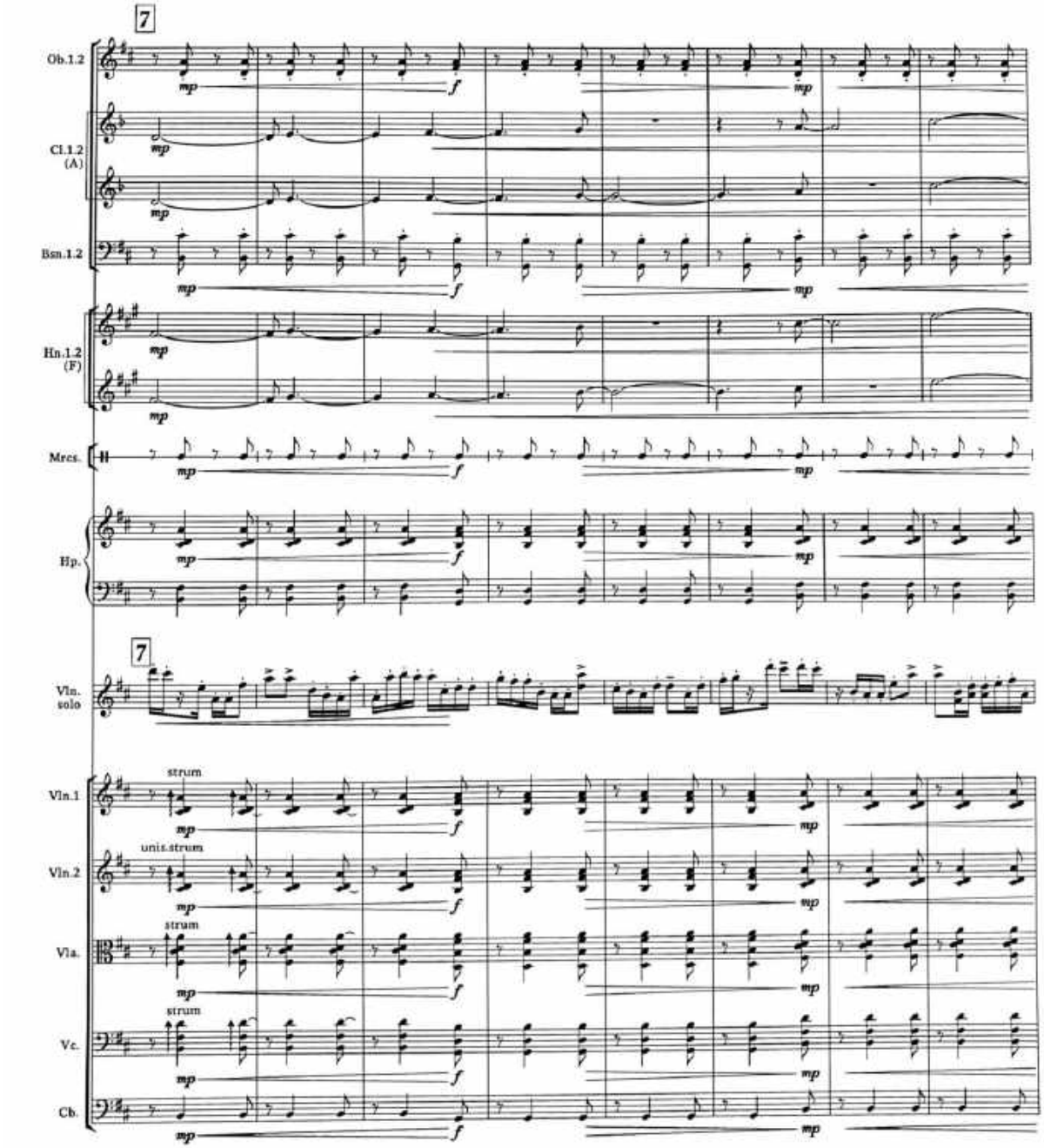


Fig. 8: *Sky*, movement I, m. 68-75.[92]

[92] Torke, *Sky*, score, 7.

while the orchestra pedals on an A, but by the end of the passage A has been established as the end-point of the modulation in measure 336, only to have expectations subverted and D is tonicized at measure 338. Once again there is an extended hold on the dominant in measures 344- 361, with a gradual recalibration to the tonic which is emphasized by eight bars of repeated A and E hits in a brief yet bombastic tutti.

Section Breakdown: A Section Return

The return of the A section uses the same harmonic structure as the opening. Not only does the solo line loosely invert itself, woodwind interjections are also altered, such as measures 390-397 and 464- 471. Measures 114- 131 of the first A section have the soloist skipping back and forth outlining A and D chords, carrying on a lively commentary. The correlating place in the A section return, 483- 500, shows the solo line adhering to *only* A and D pitches in various octaves. Torke builds tension by using somewhat sinister chords underneath the soloist, and the arrival of the fly-swatter chords are a welcome release.

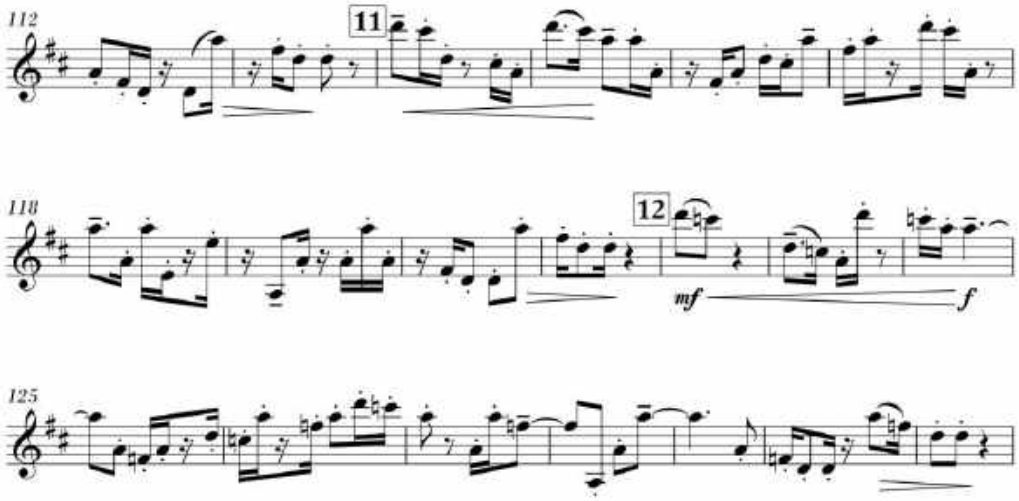


Fig. 9: *Sky*, movement I, m. 112-131.[93]

[93] Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 4.

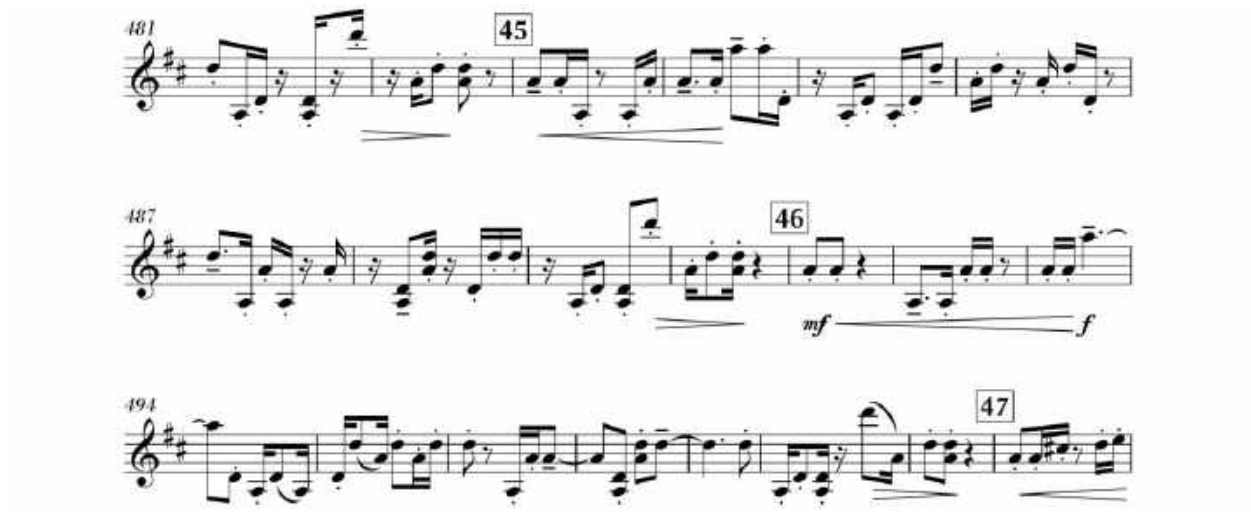


Fig. 10: *Sky*, movement I, m. 481-501.[94]

When the orchestral fanfare arrives in measure 527, it is no longer the heroic melody from before but rather concerned iterations of F#s and Bs in the fanfare rhythm. The soloist follows suit at measure 547, reaching the aforementioned B6 as the tutti takes over, and relaxing into a melodic dolce at measure 607. The coda arrives at 623, and as the orchestra and soloist battle it out, the tonal centers cycle through F# Major, B Major, a truncated version of E Major, and finally home to A Mixolydian. Boobop shabam indeed.

An Overview of Movement II, Wistful

This movement begins by evoking a slow Irish reel in the moody key of G Dorian. A typical reel consists of eight bar phrases in an AABB binary form, repeated as many times as the player cares to play it.[95] Torke's version of a reel maintains some of the structure: eight bar phrases are present for the first iteration of the tune, but the delineations of phrase beginnings and ending

[94] Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 10.

[95] The common practice at Irish sessions is to play tunes through three times, though this practice varies somewhat from session to session.

become more fluid as the movement progresses. The second time through the tune (measure twenty-one) introduces little melodic echoes from the woodwinds, while the third iteration of the tune (measure forty-five) evolves into a conversational duet between the soloist and the cello section. The B section of the third iteration, beginning at measure fifty-three, sees a departure from previously stated B parts. Some of the melodic material is retained, but much is expanded as the register rises substantially. The violin trails off in measure sixty-nine, and the low strings trail behind it for three additional measures.

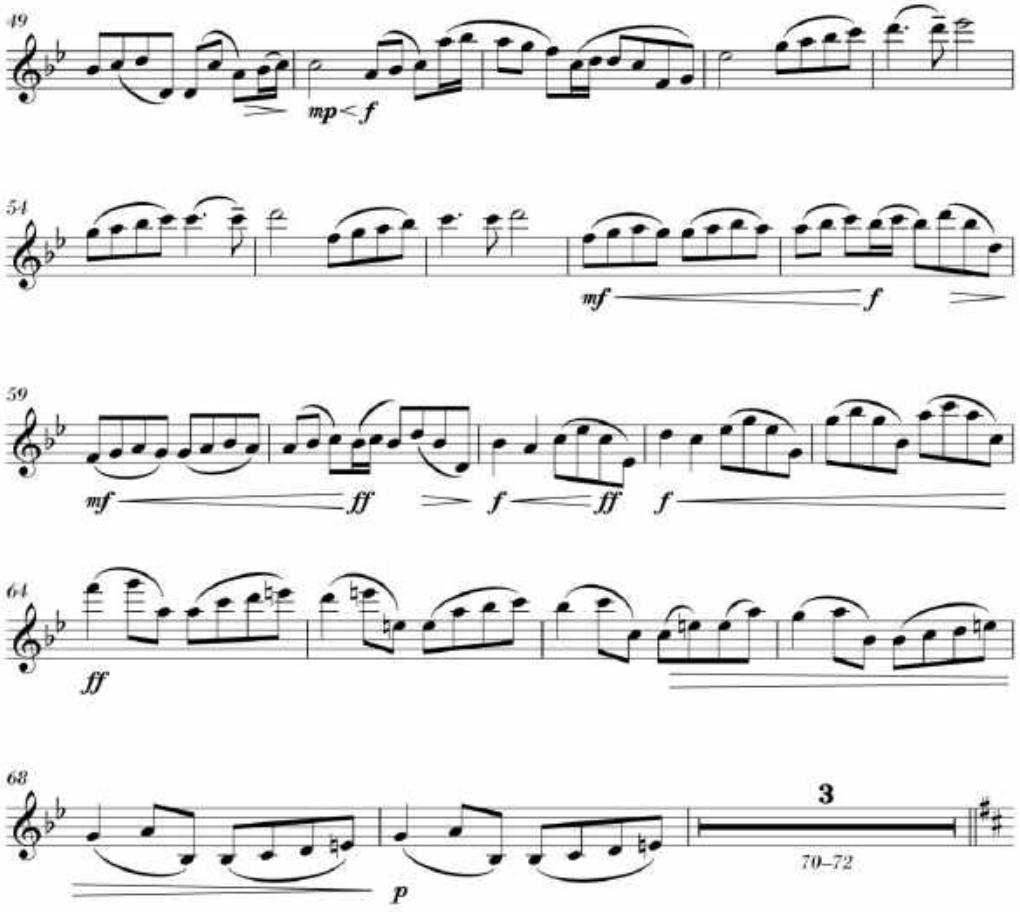


Fig. 11: Torke, *Sky*, movement II, "Wistful," m. 49-72. Tessitura shift.[96]

[96]Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 15.

In measure seventy-three the tempo increases from quarter note equals 112 beats per minute to 160 beats per minute with a half note pulse. The key modulates to D major, and a danceable tune begins. The first eight measures go by, revealing two four-bar A sections. The B section rolls along, following the Irish tune convention of having a higher tessitura than the A section, and everything seems poised to fulfill the expectation of a binary tune form in neat, even phrases. Torke does not tie up the B section neatly, however, and instead leaves the phrase sending ambiguous. In the second repetition of this second tune, the melody is spread into a call and response between the violin and the flutes which references the earlier duet with the cellos. The A section phrase is expanded to twelve measures from eight, and when the B section arrives, it expands even further as the violin and woodwinds hand sequences back and forth in a seemingly endless cascade of notes which end abruptly at measure 126.

Measure 127 marks the beginning of the next section, precipitated by a key change to D Minor and a double time tempo change: half note equals 112 beats per minute. (See figure twelve.) Measures 127- 150 feature the soloist and the woodwinds in a veritable dance off, carrying one melody but trading off in two measure increments while punctuating the ‘off’ measures with swift jabs. The orchestral accompaniment stays out of the way (lest they get kicked), with some light support from pizzicato strings. The orchestra is more involved at the return to D Major in measure 151, with a low pedal on D and A, and emphatic exclamation points in the bass drum on the “and” of one, every other measure. The excitement builds through the end of the section, culminating in four swift chords from the soloist and the winds.

Measure 175 marks another key change, this time back to the home key of G Minor. The woodwinds continue the fiery melody from the section before, though it gradually diminuendos as the cellos present the slow reel from the opening of the piece. The violin floats above,

occasionally playing in harmony with the cellos, other times interjecting responses, and sometimes drifting off in moments of ethereal sustain. Measure 228 brings a Tempo 1 marking of quarter note equals 112 beats per minute, with a note that "It will feel like a L'istesso Tempo."[97] The strings and winds alternate accompanying the singing melody, keeping the orchestration rich yet light as it moves through previously unexplored major iterations of the opening reel melody.

The mood shift is profound at measure 251, marked "Sadly" in the score. The orchestra returns to quiet static chords, but a distant tin whistle, portrayed by the piccolo, duets with the solo violin. The movement ends with a pizzicato chord from the soloist, and a trailing, transparent chord of open fifths from the strings that fade into nothing. Lark commented, "The sound worlds and the textures he [Torke] creates in the orchestra are so surreal and magical throughout the whole piece; but in the second movement, with the three different groove and sound worlds, he morphs it so beautifully and so cleverly with different pairings of instruments."[98] Torke privileges character over virtuosity in this movement, and has gifted the violinist with an opportunity to fiddle in a lovely way as well as a danceable one.

Movement II Melodic Analysis

The three main sections of this movement each have a distinct melodic profile, and correlate—to greater or lesser degrees—both to signature patterns found within traditional Irish music in general, as well as a specific tune in particular. The slow reel melody of the first section bears a

[97] Torke, *Sky* piano reduction, 40.

[98] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

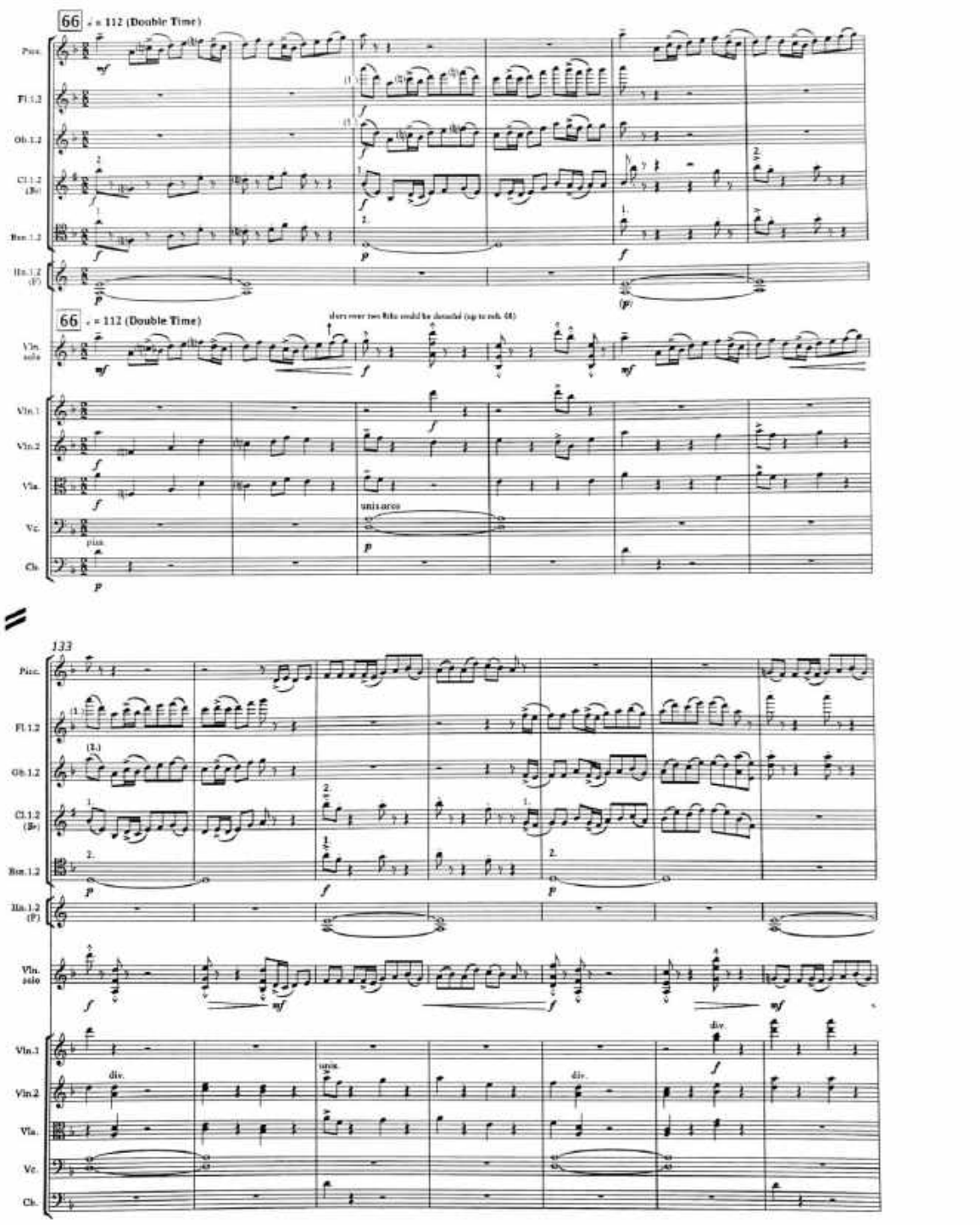


Fig. 12: *Sky*, movement II, m.127-139. Interlocked soloist and woodwinds.[99]

[99] Torke, *Sky*, score, 59.

healthy similarity to the jig, "Paddy Fahey's No. 1," composed by fiddler Paddy Fahey.[100] Fahey's tune is in 6/8 versus Torke's reel in 4/4, but if we look at the structural pitches of the A sections, we see that the opening measures of both Fahey's and Torke's melodies include the outline of a G Minor triad with an extended Bb.

Fig. 13: "Paddy Fahey's Jig No. 1," m. 1-4, as performed by Martin Hayes.[101]

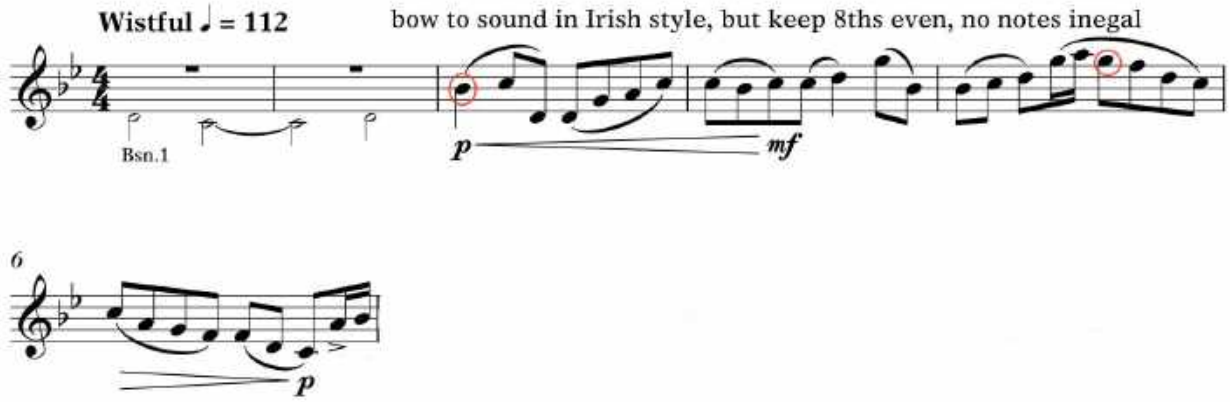


Fig. 14: *Sky*, movement II, m.1-6.[102]

[100] Fahey was known to be an exceptional fiddler and composer, yet he never published any of his tunes or made any commercial recordings during his exceptionally long life (Fahey died in 2019 at the age of 102). His tunes have been recorded by a number of well-known Irish musicians, including fiddler Martin Hayes.

[101] Martin Hayes, *Martin Hayes*,Green Linnet CSIF1127, 1993, compact disc.

[102] Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 15.

The next measures have corresponding C-Bb-C-D motions, while the fourth beat in measure four of Torke's melody mirrors the beginning of measure three of Fahey's tune, minus the D. Measure six of Torke and measure four of Fahey are almost an exact match.

The B sections also align: measures eleven and twelve of Torke are nearly identical to measures nine and ten of Fahey, though the order of the material is reversed in eleven (Torke) and nine (Fahey). Torke expands on Fahey's material in measures thirteen and fourteen (Fahey measures eleven and twelve), but maintains the importance of the F and the A moving to the Bb in measures thirteen (Fahey) and fifteen (Torke). Torke uses every pitch of Measures thirteen through sixteen of Fahey for his concluding statement, with additions of his own. Once the initial iteration of the tune is presented in Torke's work, the commonalities between "Paddy Fahey's No. 1" and "Wistful" diverge, though they never fully disengage.

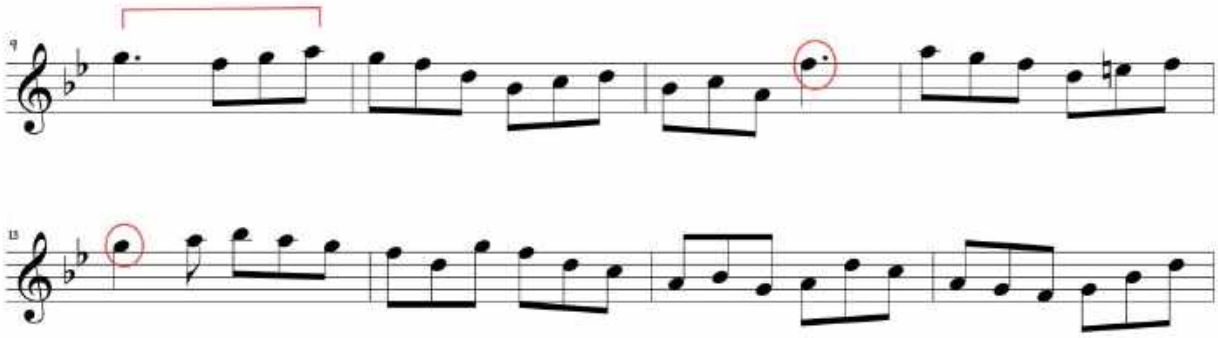


Fig. 15: "Paddy Fahey's Jig No. 1," m.9-16.[103]

[103] Martin Hayes, *Martin Hayes*, 1993.

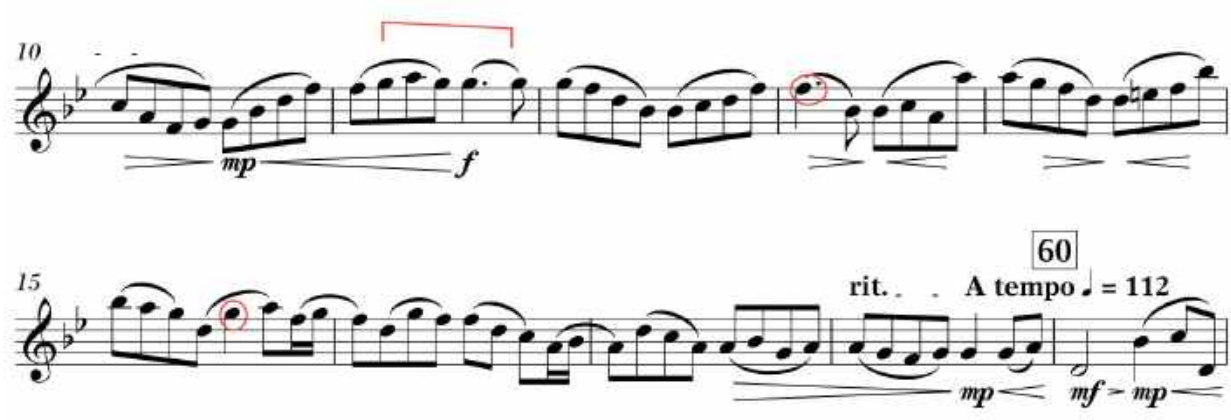


Fig. 16: *Sky*, movement II, m. 10-19.[104]

In order to investigate a possible relationship between Torke's work and Fahey's, I referred to my conversations with both Torke and Lark which referenced fiddler Martin Hayes as an inspirational figure.[105] Fahey's tune appears on Hayes's self-titled recording from 1992,[106] and Torke himself said, "I took a basic jig idea and stretched it out into 4/4, like a reel."[107] Whether the two pieces represent direct borrowing or a shared inspiration, there are enough commonalities to make listening to Hayes's version of "Paddy Fahey's Jig No. 1" a must for stylistic interpretation.

The second section of "Wistful" does not appear to have direct associations with a specific tune, though it has organizational features that align it with an Irish reel. The fact that the A part has a quarter note on beat three in the first measure of the section (measure seventy-three in the score) is a little unusual, though there are plenty of tunes which use this figure such as "The New Policeman," "The Humours of Scariff," and "The Tullagh Reel."

[104] Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 15.

[105] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024; Torke conversation, Feb. 29, 2024.

[106] Martin Hayes, *Martin Hayes*, Green Linnet GLCD 1127, 1992, compact disc.

[107] Torke conversation, Feb. 29, 2024.

Fig. 17: *Sky*, movement II, m.73.[108]

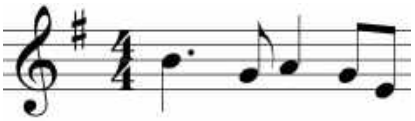


Fig. 18: "The New Policeman," *Irish Session Tunes.*[109]

Fig. 19: "The Humours of Scariff," *Irish Session Tunes.*[110]

Fig. 20: "The Tullagh Reel," *Irish Session Tunes.*[111]

Part of what makes Torke's depiction of this figure feel slightly out of place is that in a traditional Irish fiddle context, the fiddler would likely embellish the quarter note with an ornament, or convert it to eighth notes instead. What he does do is change the chord underneath when this quarter note hits (and again in measure seventy-five when the figure appears again) and give it a gentle accent with a pizzicato note from the strings. The typical shape of an A section is observed, using stepwise motion and small leaps at first, and then leaping an octave before descending (see example 21 below). Octave leaps are less common than leaps of a fifth or a sixth, but they do occur, such as in the B section of "Paddy Ryan's Dream."

[108] Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 17.

[109] Matt Cranitch ed., *Irish Session Tunes: The Red Book; 100 Irish Dance Tunes and Airs,* Cork: Ossian Publications Ltd, 2000, 35.

[110] Ibid, 31.

[111] Ibid, 34.

Fig. 21: "Paddy Ryan's Dream," *Irish Session Tunes*.[112]

At first glance, the B section of "Wistful" appears to be an homage to the common figure of a sequence of string crossings in which the lower string maintains a pedal, while the upper string provides a moving line. A survey of thirty-two tunes yielded nineteen instances of this figure. In fact, Torke is referencing the reverse form of this figure, where the pedal is maintained in the upper voice. This figure is less common —in the same survey of tunes, eleven out of thirty-two tunes use this pattern— but it is still present in the repertory. What is almost never present, however, is a tritone, which Torke incorporates into the solo melody in measure eighty-two.[113]

Fig. 22: "The Humours of Scariff," *Irish Session Tunes*.[114]

Fig. 23: "The Boys of Malin," *Irish Session Tunes*.[115]

[112] Cranitch, *Irish Session Tunes*, 2000, 31.

[113] I say "almost never," because there is great debate within the Irish music community as to how many tunes exist (and if they qualify as Irish), but a conservative estimate of the tune repertory puts it at greater than 10,000 tunes, with my guess that the actual number is much higher and with continual additions. I would be foolish to assert that there are zero tritones present in a sample size that large.

[114] Cranitch, *Irish Session Tunes*, 2000, 31.

[115] Cranitch, *Irish Session Tunes*, 2000, 29.

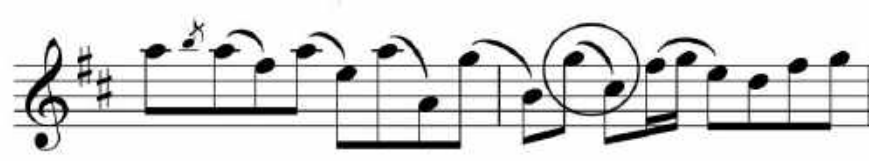


Fig. 24: *Sky*, movement II, m.82-82.[116] Tritone.

Measures eighty-five and eighty-six feature a stylized version of the descending broken thirds pattern that is another common figure in Irish music; the survey resulted in eighteen out of thirty-two tunes having two or more sets of consecutive broken thirds. Torke does away with the interval of a third as the requirement, and introduces a sequence of broken sevenths and fifths instead. When the B section is revisited at measure 101 in an expanded form, it is moved out of fiddle territory to the purview of the violin as it sits in the register of D6- B6.
The sevenths and fifths continue and are passed between the soloist and the winds during the cascading sequence that leads to the double time.

The third section bears the least resemblance to a traditional Irish dance melody. While Torke uses the speed of the section and the inclusion of two sixteenth notes before beats one and three to simulate ornaments, the melodic contour is just a little off. Take for example the instance of three repetitions of the same pitch, as in measure 135. As with all things, an example of this figure can be found in traditional tunes (for example "The Tullagh Reel" has instances of three repetitions), but it is the exception, not the rule.[117]

[116] Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 16.

[117] Cranitch, *Irish Session Tunes*, 2000, 32.

Fig. 25: *Sky*, movement II, m.135.[118]

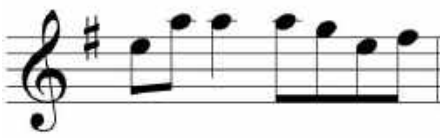


Fig. 26: "The Tullagh Reel," *Irish Session Tunes*.[119]

Throughout this section, the melodic lines in the winds and the solo violin are interlocked with both parts playing in overlapping unison at the beginnings of the two-bar segments. The melody in measures 163- 168 (figure twenty-seven) is one that gives the impression of a flurry of motion, the energy of an Irish tune, without completely capturing the essence of the thing itself. When I played this area as an excerpt for Weber, she responded thoughtfully, "That [portion] felt far more classical to me. But I guess you could say, this whole piece is meant to be a classical composer's impression of fiddle music. What an interesting perspective."[120]

The return to G Minor continues to draw on the Paddy Fahey tune, as the Torke slow reel undergoes various permutations. A lovely moment occurs after the L'istesso Tempo (measures 233- 238, shown in figure twenty-eight) where the reel melody is played twice as slow by the soloist, but in a higher octave. The orchestra continues to burble underneath, but the soloist and the listener are given space to luxuriate in the loveliness of the melody, allowing for a rare moment of romanticism in the violin.

[118] Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 17.

[119] Cranitch, *Irish Session Tunes*, 2000, 34.

[120] Weber conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

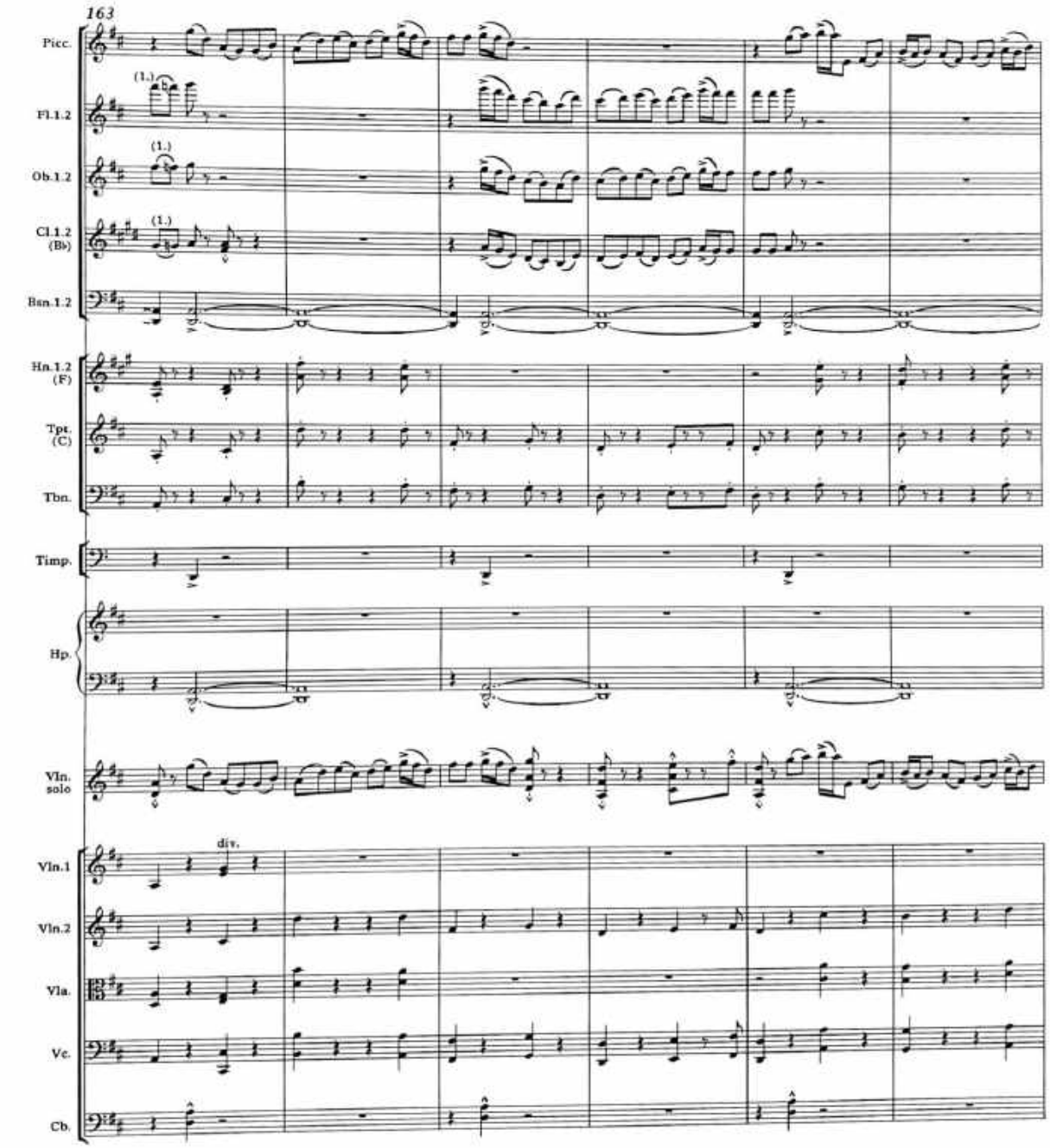


Fig. 27: *Sky*, movement II, m.163-168.[121]

[121] Torke, *Sky*, score, 63.

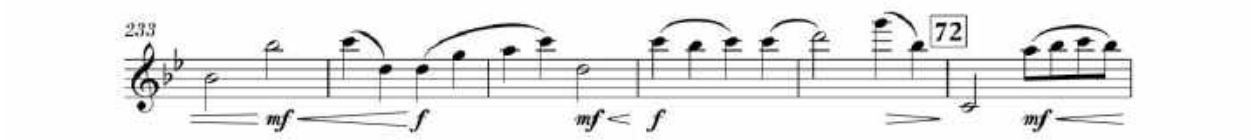


Fig. 28: *Sky*, movement II, m.233-238.[122]

Skinner offers a summation of "Wistful," with a hopeful forecast of its future: "Although I was extremely taken by the entire piece, *Wistful* is an absolute gem. I could envision it being extracted from the broader work and performed separately, in the manner the second movement (*Sorrow*) of William Grant Still's Symphony No. 1, "Afro-American," has taken on a life of its own, separate and apart from the broader work from which it was born."

An Overview of Movement III, Spirited

The third movement of this work opens with a bluesy solo from the violin, with sparse pizzicatos in the double basses. Of the three, this movement is the one most clearly rooted in American fiddle styles with slides, bends, and double stops, including crunchy tritone intervals as well as open string drones and fifths. Once again the tonality is planted in A Mixolydian; flat sevenths abound, which add an instant fiddle gloss to the proceedings. The tempo marking is a brisk ninety-six beats per minute to the half note, and though the movement is notated in 2/4 it is meant to be felt in one.

Unlike the Marsalis violin concerto with its movement titled "Blues," which incorporates several different forms of Blues throughout, "Spirited" flirts with the idea of blues through the use of "blue" notes (the flatted third and seventh degrees of the scale) and microtonality through the use of slides. The I, IV, and V chords are represented as a discernible

[122] Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 19.

unit, but Torke does not commit to a standard twelve or sixteen bar blues form. Instead, the fiddle (for the soloist is most definitely in fiddle mode at this juncture) ranges over eight measures on the I chord, seven on the IV chord, nine on the I, and three on the V.

I	IV	I	V	I
m.1	m.8	m.15	m.24	m.27

Table 1: *Sky*, movement III. Harmonic outline of measures 1-27.

When the orchestra joins at measure twenty-seven, Torke shifts into a feeling of five by creating internal groupings of 2/4 + 3/ 4 measures. The soloist is instructed to "stomp" on the fifth beat of each grouping, calling to mind a fiddler stomping to keep time. The stomping stops at measure seventy-seven, and a new pattern is established: four measures of 2/4 plus one measure of 3/ 4. Torke sets up a pattern of quarter note punches that feel as though they are swinging out of nowhere, but it is in fact quite systematic. The third measure of each set of 2/4 bars contains two accented quarter note hits, as shown in figure twenty-nine.

Measure 113 (figure thirty) gives us new material in the form of brilliant pentatonic triplet runs in the solo line. Torke presents new patterns: four measures of 2/4 with an orchestral punctuation on the second beat of the fourth measure, followed by a 2/4 + 3/ 4 grouping with a hit on the third beat of the 3/ 4. This pattern stops abruptly at measure 137, when the solo melody recaptures the triplet feel quarter note/ eighth note pairing from before with a lilting melody in D Major.

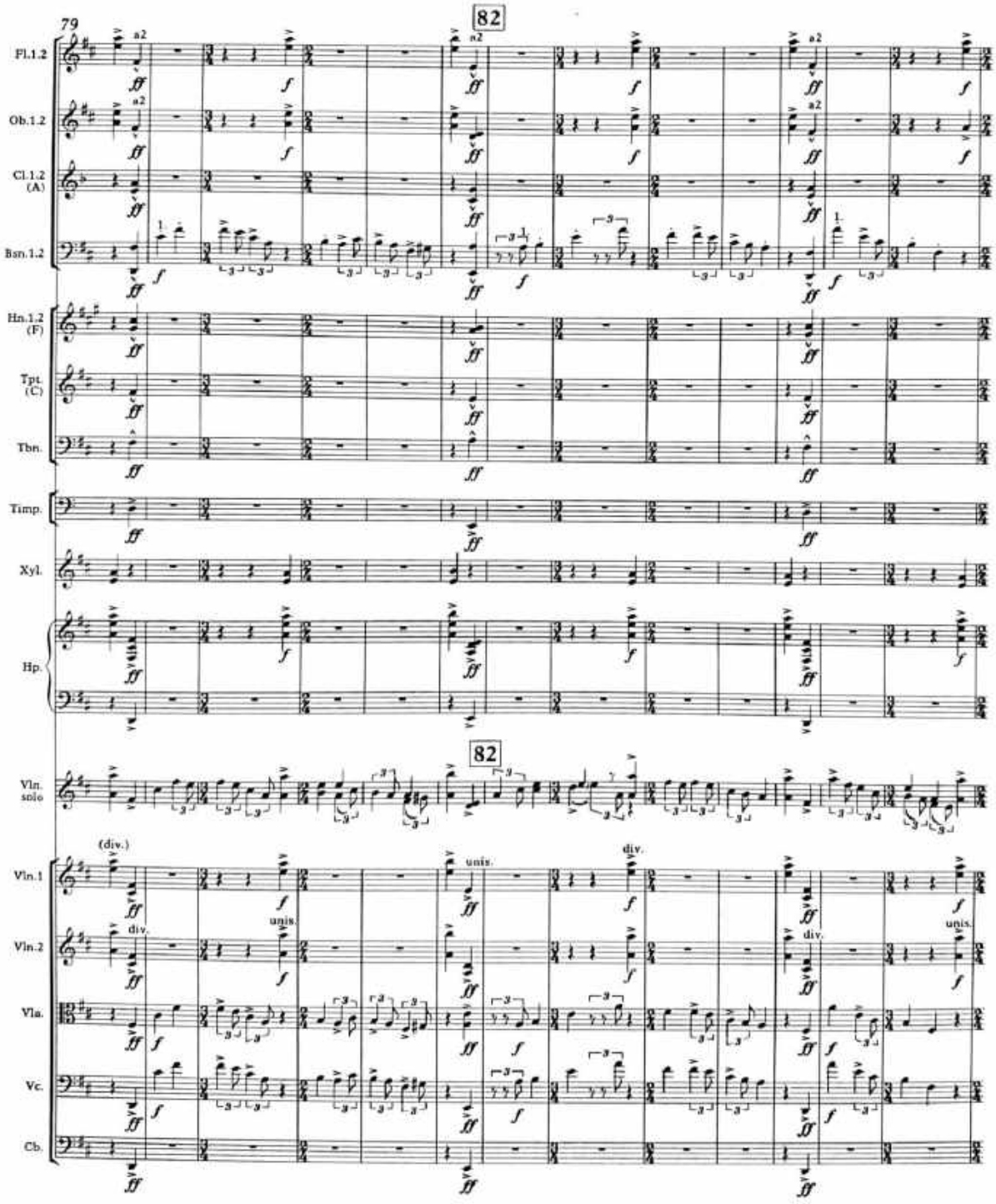


Fig. 29:Torke, *Sky*, movement III, "Spirited," m.79-91.[123]

[123] Torke, *Sky*, score, 80.

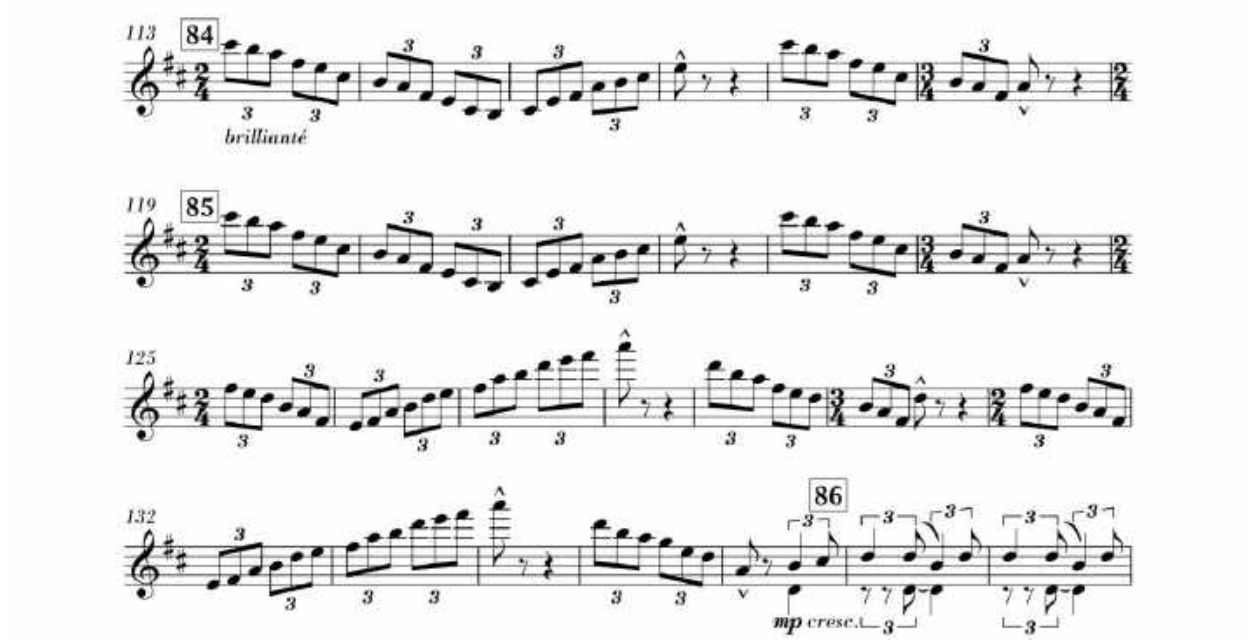


Fig. 30: *Sky*, movement III, m.113-138

Trombone “scoops” join the soloist at measure 201, and the mode shifts back to A Mixolydian. Measure 235 revisits the pentatonic triplets with hits, this time truncated to only the 2 + 3 groupings. The “stomp” melody emerges next (sans stomp marking) at measure 243 but Torke has abandoned his groupings of five, opting for straight 2/4. The orchestra echoes the soloist’s line in playful writing that never overpowers the violin. Measure 311 moves the soloist into triplets, and Torke brings back different metric groupings, alternating groups of a 2/4 measure plus a 3/ 4 measure with groups of four 2/4 measures plus one 3/ 4 measure.
At measure 321 the trumpet presents the “stomp” melody while the soloist continues with sparkling triplets.

The partnership between the soloist and the winds at measure 367 is an emotional high point of this movement, evoking Copeland’s open harmonies and sweeping vistas with an infectious gregariousness. Torke begins trading groups of triplets between the soloist and the

stings and winds, first in groups of three beats (measure 416), then in two beats (measure 420). The length of the orchestral interjections expand while simultaneously introducing augmented and whole tone harmonies. Meanwhile the brass have a Gershwin-esque jazz moment.

The momentum builds until measure 451, when the trombone "scoops" reappear while the soloist accompanies with pyrotechnic left hand pizzicato runs. Torke plays with metric stability by crafting phrases in uneven measure groupings spanning from one-and-a-half measures to seven. Measure 504 launches an orchestral "shout chorus" of sorts, with the soloist switching roles to the punctuator using triple stops. The groupings of five return from earlier in the movement, and the orchestra and soloist end together on a final brilliant A chord.

Movement III Sectional Organization

In this movement, Torke takes five melodic concepts and crafts a modular movement out of them. For ease of identification, I have given each of these melodic ideas names: the bluesy statement, the "stomp" melody, jabs, triplet sweeps, and the lilting melody. Torke fully explores each of his concepts, building them out, pulling them apart, and blending them with one another.

Bluesy m.1-27	Jabs m.28-42	Stomp m.43-112	Triplet sweeps m.113-136	Lilt m.137-200
Bluesy m.201-234	Jabs m.235-242	Stomp m.243-330	Sweeps/Jabs m.331-366	Lilt m.367-415
Sweeps/Jab m.416-452	Bluesy m.455-478	Coda begins:	Triplet Sweeps m.479-504	Jabs m.505-519

Table 2: *Sky*, Movement III, form breakdown.

The bluesy motive functions as an introductory statement. It is first presented by the soloist with pizzicato accompaniment from the strings, allowing the solo line to focus on melodic slides and double stops. The second time this motive appears at measure 201, it is as a duet between the soloist and the brass. The third time, at measure 453, the brass have the melody and the soloist is the accompaniment in the form of pizzicato. The evolution of the soloist's relationship to this melody is interesting, as the listener is kept on their toes even as familiar material is presented.

The stomp motive first appears at measure forty-three and undergoes a similar transformation as the bluesy motive: the first iteration is focused heavily on the soloist, with some melodic doubling from the low strings in pizzicato. While the metric groupings of five are clearly established, the phrases follow an eight bar structure for four phrases before switching to ten bar phrases at measure sixty-seven. The second iteration at measure 243 is conversational, as the orchestra repeats the solo line and offers interjections. These interjections cause the phrases to expand to groups of fourteen and twenty measures, leaving the listener longing for a cadence. The introduction of the trumpet carrying the stomp idea at measure 321 shows a similar sense of evolution to Torke's treatment of the bluesy melody.

The lilting melody at 137 offers a point of stability in the form of eight bar phrases, coming off the heels of the irregular triplet sweeps that precede it. Regular phrases continue as the soloist passes the melody to the clarinets and accompanies with triplets. The next time the lilting motive appears at measure 367, the material is handled similarly to the stomp motive in that the phrases expand from eight to twelve bars due to the interactive nature of the orchestra and the soloist. Large chordal jabs appear as transitional material in several places, beginning after the opening statement of the bluesy motive at measure twenty-seven. In this first instance,

the orchestra hints at the triplet idea to come, but does not present it fully. The soloist and the orchestra give jabs at regular intervals that build anticipation into the first stomp section. At measure 113, sweeping triplets in the soloist alternating with orchestral jabs provide a transition between the stomp and lilt ideas, and appear again in a truncated form as an interlude between the second iterations of the bluesy and stomp motives at measure 235 with the soloist again featured on the triplets while the orchestra jabs. The next presentation of this transitional material appears at 331, between the second presentation of the stomp and lilting motives. As we have seen with everything else in later iterations in this movement, this version of the triplet sweep is expanded to include a set of triplets tied to a quarter note while the orchestra responds with triplets of their own. While the arrangement of phrases in this iteration appears as repeated groups of a phrase of six and then a phrase of three, Torke sticks to this set of groupings and effectively normalizes it.

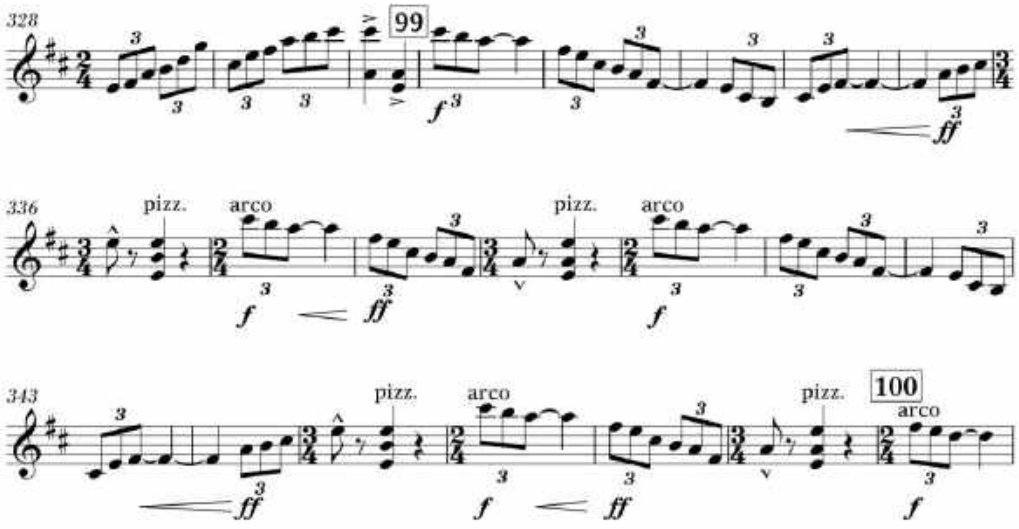


Fig. 31: *Sky*, movement III, m.113-138[124]

[124] Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, 25.

Measure 416 brings another example of the sweep and jab, this time situated between the second lilting section and the final bluesy section. This set of sweeps is irregular and takes us to the most expansive harmonies in the movement. Measure 479 begins the final set of sweeps—an extended show of virtuosic triplet runs from the soloist with jabs from the orchestra—and at measure 505 revisits the very first concept of the sweep and jab, this time with a full-throated orchestra wailing away on repeated rhythmic Es as the soloist jabs with gusto to the conclusion of the concerto.

Conclusion

The three movements presented here each utilize a different structure. The ABA' form of the first movement uses elisions to move seamlessly from one tonal center to the next, and the parameter Torke set for himself to keep reuse rhythmic material adds subtle structure to what might otherwise appear random. The second movement features an ABCA built of contrasting material and tempos, but all rooted in the idea of Irish music. The third movement is a modular take on a rondo, bringing back previous material in increasingly creative ways. Throughout all three movements, Torke is economical with his material. If an idea is presented, he is sure to find a way to manipulate it within its given movement. He is a master of permutation and expansion, which results in phrases that sit well in the listener's ear. It is music that is 'like' many things, but not 'of' them: Torke has crafted his own sonic playground and offers an invitation to join in the fun.

CHAPTER 3

Performance Practice Guide

Listening to *Sky*, there is an unmistakable pull to the world of the fiddle in Torke's writing. Lark's fiddle background informs and enhances her violin technique, enriching her performance of *Sky*. Torke has provided a framework and Lark has provided a compelling interpretation, but there are many possibilities available to the performer who wishes to make an individual statement regarding their position relative to the third path. This chapter will explore performance practice options to help the violinist who is curious to incorporate more of the fiddle vernacular into their interpretation of this piece. While I discuss concepts that apply to each movement specifically, there are two things that apply to all three movements: use of open strings, and use of first position.

Open Strings and First Position

In the fiddling world, open strings are not taboo in the way that they are in the classical world. In fact, the ringing brilliance of open strings are a hallmark of the majority of fiddle styles. This is not to say that I never use a covered note when an open string is available, there are plenty of moments in this piece where the choreography of string crossings simply will not allow it. I do, however, look for opportunities to incorporate open strings, particularly when doing so will add ease and tonal ring.

Using first position falls under the same category: fiddlers use it out of utility, and it has become part of the expected sound. There are plenty of moments throughout Torke's concerto that are written in higher registers and absolutely require higher positions; but if the opportunity to stay in first presents itself, I advise taking it. This is an easy win, when cataloging possible fiddle values to incorporate into the piece.

Movement I: Lively

At first blush this movement is the most straightforward: there are no extemporaneous ornaments to be added, and Torke is thorough in his articulation, bowing, and dynamic markings. I suggest three things to elevate the fiddle affect: bow stroke, slide management, and chops. Making an informed choice about the types of bow strokes will help code outer sections of this movement as fiddle rather than violin, while a nuanced approach to slides will keep this movement from falling into the trap of sounding like a caricature of a fiddle tune. Including a chop element will add a dash of "instant fiddle" in an easily approachable manner.

Bow Stroke

In the interviews I conducted with expert fiddle performers and pedagogues Mari Black, Matt Glaser, David Wallace, and Kristin Weber, a recurring discussion point was how much to stay on or off the string during the first movement. Black's assessment is astute and addresses multiple layers of considerations, including the aspect of imitating a banjo roll. "What could potentially code it ["Lively"] as banjo picking would be a more off-the-string stroke, like a thick

marcato or spiccato. And she [Lark] is using that here. But that [spiccato stroke] is *also* a thing that classical violinists do when they're trying to make a fiddle sound!"[125]

I will weigh the evidence in favor of on versus off the string. The evidence in favor of off the string rests, first and foremost, with Torke's articulation (dots over notes) and tempo marking (quarter note equals 140 bpm) which would lead the performer to conclude that he intended the violinist to play off the string the majority of the time, though his use of staccato dots is interspersed with dashes or accents on significant notes. The second piece of evidence in this category comes from the banjo roll concept: banjos have a sharp initial attack to their sound, in part because bluegrass players use finger picks to produce banjo rolls, but also due to their construction of a stretched membrane (similar to a drum) with a floating bridge which lends itself to a percussive sound. In this instance, a sharp attack such as an angular spiccato stroke would be the best match on the violin, and it is a tool Lark employs on the recording, though not continuously. From a practical perspective, there are certain figures that lend themselves to being off the string when performed at the stated performance tempo, such as the section from measures 318- 324. In this instance, the eighth notes have carrot accents and dots, which could indicate angular, accented, and on the string. The sixteenth notes are light and bounce well, providing contrast to the section that comes before (measures 310- 317) where things are more clearly notated on the string. Both sections use a shuffle pattern, but they are open to different interpretations.

[125] Black, conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

Fig. 32: *Sky*, movement I, m. 315-319. On the string.[126]

Fig. 33: *Sky*, movement I, m.320-325. Combination of on and off the string.[127]

On the other hand, a compelling case can be made for staying on the string. Returning to the banjo roll concept, while the banjo has a sharp initial attack, it also has a ringing decay. This contradicts the impulse to use a short, bounced stroke, and would point to an on-the-string détaché stroke with collé. Staying on the string in places also has Lark's stamp of approval as she commented, "I don't play every single note staccato that's written staccato to add more of a fiddling flair."[128]

Lark's statement is worth noting, as the interpretive line between fiddle and banjo in this movement is fluid and at a certain point it is helpful to realize that a violin is never going to sound like a banjo. A fiddle sound, however, is quite achievable. The on/off-the-string debate gains an additional dimension when looked at with the fiddle sound as the primary goal. "A lot of fiddling is on the string. Nearly 100% of it; we almost never come off the string," Black explained, regarding the perception of bounced strokes in fiddle music by a lay audience. She

[126] Michael Torke, *Sky*, violin solo part, Las Vegas: Adjustable Music, 2018, 7.

[127] Ibid, 7.

[128] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

continued, “But it *sounds* off the string because of the groove. When the stick is really engaged… there’s a sautillé-like effect that can happen… but one that is very commonly misheard.”[129] This misinterpretation of sound can lead violinists who are in the beginning stages of learning fiddle styles to opt for bounced strokes, which serve as a “tell” for their violinistic background.

Because so much of this movement is rapid-fire sixteenth notes or densely syncopated rhythms, opting for a hybrid approach of primarily on-the-string but occasionally off-the-string seems an appropriate choice. Using an overall détaché stroke will code this movement as “fiddle” with implied banjo figuration when used in conjunction with other fiddle devices. Using bounced strokes to add contrast, navigate a string crossing passage, or add dimension to a shuffle stroke, will help keep the texture of the melody interesting.

Slides

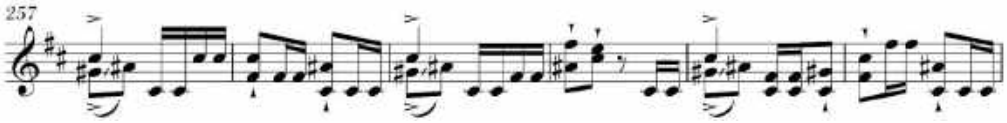
Approaching a pitch by a slide rather than landing directly on the pitch itself is an interpretive choice made by both violinists and fiddlers. Many fiddle traditions harness the slide as a stylistic hallmark, though there are variations of length, speed, and emphasis of slide that relate more directly to one tradition or another. Black refers to “wet” versus “dry” slides, indicating the speed and exaggeration with which the slide is executed (a slower slide is wetter).[130] Currently, American fiddling traditions tend to favor a wetter, juicier slide; part of the “juice” comes from the rhythmic placement of the slide in relation to the downbeat. Recordings of Leopold Auer, Joseph Joachim, Fritz Kreisler, and Eugène Ysaÿe from the first three decades of

[129] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[130] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

the twentieth century demonstrate that there has not always been such a divergence between classical and fiddle styles on this point, but on the whole, current classical performance practices favor less theatrical slides. Weber commented that Lark's performance captures this idea, as Lark leans into the downbeat with her slides in "Lively."[131] Torke has given written indications of where he would like slides to be placed, and they tend to be in the areas that have other fiddle coded figures such as the shuffle bowing and droning double stops beginning at measure 256.

Interpreting Torke's written slides involves adhering to the spirit rather than the letter of the law. The section from measures 256- 317 features many double stop slides in which the upper voice holds a quarter note and the lower voice moves a whole step in eighth notes, with the slide indication between the two eighths.



Ex 34: *Sky*, movement I, m. 257-262.[132]

Lark cautioned me against a literal interpretation of Torke's slides, saying, "I'm going for a feeling and a visceral effect more than any accuracy to the score, because when I play these slides I'm not starting on the written first note."[133] She explained further, "Some of these slides are written as whole steps, and I don't always do that because it's gonna sound too grotesque."

[131] Weber conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[132] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 6.

[133] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

Lark might only use two: a finger on the upper voice and a finger to slide the approximate interval between the lower notated pitches, but prioritizing the second pitch as the arrival. “There’s a little bit of interpreting in terms of knowledge of the [fiddle] style when you look at Torke’s music, and I’m not sure there’s any right way to write it down,”[134] Lark noted.

Part of the challenge for the performer is to imbue the slides in these sections with a sense of spontaneity: a fiddle player might have certain places where they like to slide, but it is an ornament that is typically applied in an improvisatory, off-the-cuff fashion. Bluegrass fiddlers such as Michael Cleveland, Vassar Clements, and Ricky Skaggs all have particularly fine slides, and it would behoove the performer to listen and observe the feel, speed, and velocity relative to the slide that these fiddlers present; their “wet factor,” as it were.[135] Because this movement is rooted in banjo figures, slides only occur in the B section where the writing shifts to fiddle-coded rather than banjo-coded. Therefore, I do not recommend inserting slides in places where they are not notated.

Chopping

Chopping is an easily accessible low-hanging fiddle fruit. Commonly used by bluegrass fiddlers, the chop is a percussive hit executed by dropping the bow into the strings close to the frog to create a gritty sound on beats two and four.[136] The amount of defined pitch versus percussion varies from player to player, sometimes within the same tune. Chopping is a

[134] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[135] Interestingly, beloved Bluegrass fiddler Kenny Baker doesn’t utilize slides in his playing very often. Even his performance of “The Orange Blossom Special” which practically demands slides from the fiddler uses quick and precise “dry” slides rather than the more stereotypical elongated slides used by other players.

[136] This is the basic concept, though fiddlers such as Casey Driesson have taken the chop and expanded upon it, turning the fiddle into an entire drum kit.

technique used to add percussion while other players take solos, or while a vocalist is carrying the melody. Measures seventy-nine to ninety-four and the mirroring section from measures 451 to 463 of "Lively" offer a perfect opportunity for chopping. Weber noted the potential for chopping in these places, while closing her eyes and listening intently: "Yes, we hear fiddles do something like that," she said, referencing the back beats in the solo part, "But with a little more grit in the bow."[137] This, then, is an opportunity to embrace some grit and turn the fiddle dial up with no negative repercussions in the solo line.

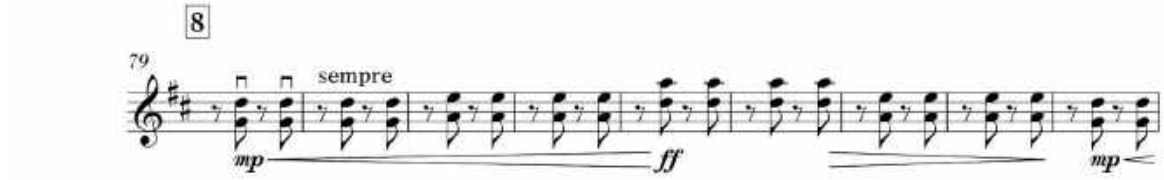


Fig. 35: *Sky*, movement I, m. 79-87.[138]

Movement II: Wistful

The second movement presents exciting performance considerations for the performer. Irish fiddle traditions are full of subtleties that vary from one region of the country to another. A simplified inventory of Irish ornaments include cuts (a cousin of the grace note), rolls (related to turns), dry slides (quicker and less exaggerated than the juicy bluegrass variety), and bowed triplets (an ornament accomplished by an energetic triplet played on a repeated pitch that creates a rhythmic punctuation). All of these ornaments are worth considering in "Wistful," and I give examples of how to approach each below.

[137] Weber conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[138] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 3.

"Bow to Sound in the Irish Style"

Unlike the first and third movements that include written ornaments, Torke's only instructions in the second movement are to "Bow to sound in the Irish style, but keep 8ths even, no *notes inégales*."[139] But what, exactly, does that mean? Master Irish fiddler Tommy Peoples wrote that, "As traditional Irish music consists mainly of dance music, there is a definite emphasized rhythm. This is obtained by stressing certain notes, which is easier done on the down-bow. The emphasis is usually on the first note of each bar, with lesser emphasis on the first of the second group of notes in each bar, but to the player's individual taste, and not overdone."[140] This type of bowing organization is familiar to the classical performer, as it describes beat hierarchy. The Irish fiddler has an interesting way of expressing that hierarchy, leaning on bowings that favor slurs over the bar line that arrive on beat one, or slurs that highlight the off-beat within a single measure. Black referenced two typical bowing patterns that serve this function; she refers to them as the "smooth hook three" bowing, and the "palindrome" bowing. If the measure is made up of eighth notes, the smooth hook three bowing would consist of three slurred, three slurred, and two separate within the bar; while the palindrome bowing would be three slurred, two separate, and three slurred.[141]

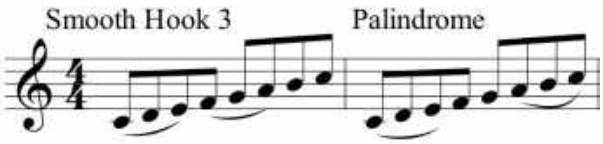


Fig. 36: Black's bowing suggestions.

[139] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 14.

[140] Tommy Peoples, *Ó Am go hAm - From Time to Time*, St. Johnston: T.P. Publishing, 2015, 17.

[141] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

Peoples offers three different bowing possibilities, shown in the opening of the Michael Gorman tune, “The Mountain Road.” These suggestions do not follow either the smooth hook three or palindrome bowing options. They do, however, point toward the desire to engage with off-beats to create a groove, which is at the core of Black’s bowing.

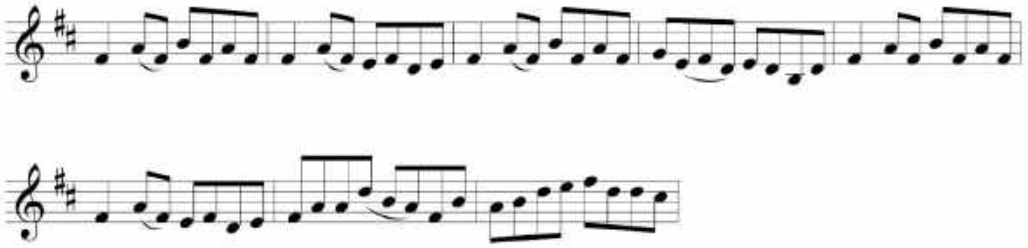


Fig. 37: “The Mountain Road,” *Ó Am go hAm - From Time to Time,* “The Mountain Road.”[142]

As with the slides in “Lively,” I would strongly encourage the performer to watch and listen to fiddlers from this tradition, specifically Martin Hayes as his performance is the movement’s model. An example of some characteristic bowings from Hayes are shown here, as transcribed from his performance of “The Maids of Feakle” on the album *Under the Moon*, shown in figure thirty-eight.[143] Measures ten through twelve are of particular interest.

[142] Peoples, *From Time to Time,* 29.

[143] Allan MacDonald (transcriber), *Martin Hayes Under the Moon,* Pacific: Mel Bay Publications, 1999, 18.

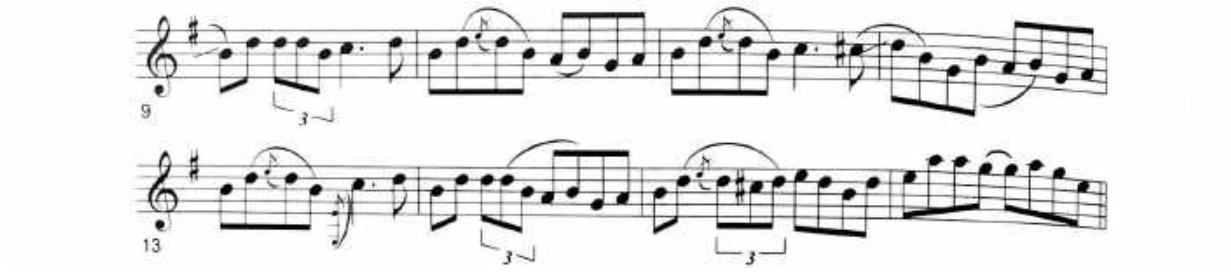


Fig. 38: *Martin Hayes: Under the Moon*, "The Maids of Feakle."[144]

Hayes is also a master of "lift," a term used by Irish musicians to describe an ineffable joyfulness or bounce that the player brings to the tune. His phrasing often accents the offbeats, or suspends the next large beat in a way that causes a free-falling sensation until the resolution grounds the tune again. Glaser reflected with a frown on Lark's bowing during our interview. "One thing I was struck by in the recording you played, Sarah, was that she [Tessa Lark] never took her bow off the string for one microsecond. That's very weird, it was just a constant bow on the string. I'm always looking for a break in the sound, a momentary breath."[145] While Hayes has a very smooth bowing style, there are undeniably breaks in the sound that come from the placement of the bow changes.

Lark stayed true to Torke's slur markings on the recorded version of *Sky*, and she produced a credible Irish sound; this could potentially be enhanced if she were to separate some of the longer slurs into smaller groups and avoid even numbered groups of two and four note slurs. Here is an example of a possible bowing alteration drawing from the sources listed above:

[144] MacDonald, *Martin Hayes Under the Moon*, 18.

[145] Glaser and Wallace conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

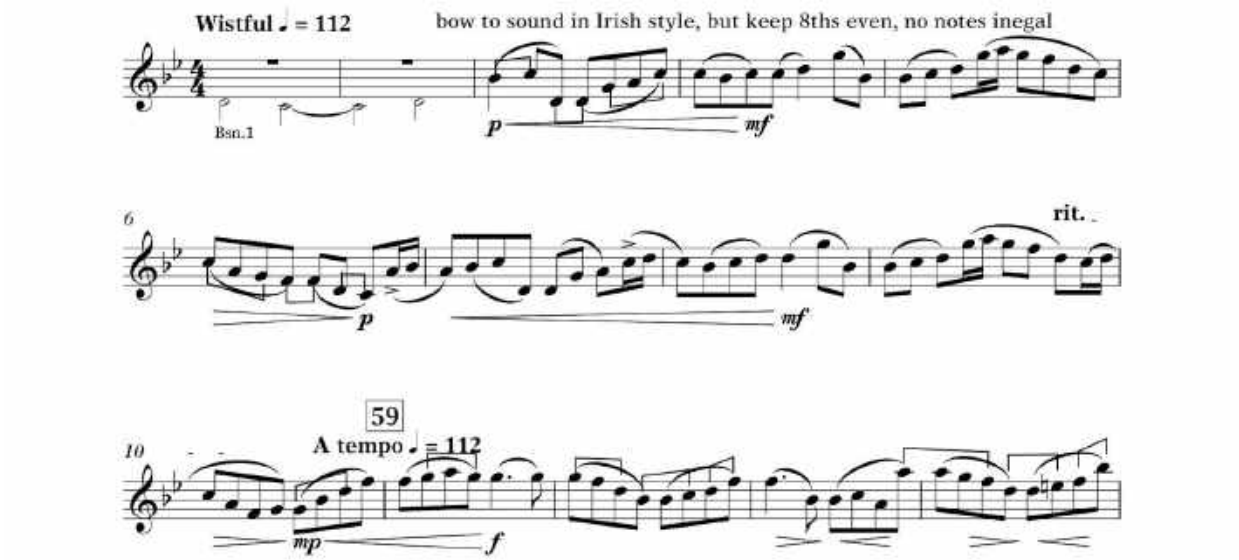


Fig. 39: *Sky*, movement II, m. 1-14. Torke's bowings are notated by slurs, my suggested bowings are notated by brackets.[146]

This is a small sample of possible bowings based on Irish fiddle conventions. I urge the performer to explore this rich interpretive vein, as bowing patterns are a simple and effective way to telegraph the Irish fiddle intention behind this movement, particularly in the opening and closing sections. Bowings are an excellent entry point into the world of Irish fiddle, but there is something even more basic that can telegraph fiddle intent: vibrato.

To Vibrate or Not to Vibrate

Indeed, it is a question worth asking. The third path asks that violin and fiddle tendencies respectfully cohabitate with one another, and in this instance vibrato is naturally more present when the "violin dial" is turned up, but used less or not at all when the "fiddle dial" is in the primary position. Fiddle music is not known for having a rich, singing vibrato. This is not to say that fiddle players never use vibrato; they certainly do, and some genres of fiddle playing (or

[146] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 14.

specific fiddlers) use more than others. Fiddlers tend to treat vibrato as an ornament much as a historical performance practitioner would. During our conversation, Black and I discussed the need to find effective ways of presenting Torke's music as fiddle coded, and how that might involve adhering to stricter standards of non-vibrato than either of us might choose during a genuine fiddle performance. Black gave a frank assessment: "I'm going to have to make compromises and play with a less fiddly bow than I would like because of things that we talked about: string crossings, tempo, offbeats, and concerto projection. But something I can give up without any difficulty at all is vibrato."[147]

Lark came to the same conclusion, and in her recorded performance, she doesn't use vibrato for the first thirty-three measures of solo playing of "Wistful," an unimaginable artistic choice for standard violin repertoire. The effect is an automatic flip of the fiddle switch in the listener; when Lark does begin vibrating in measure thirty-five, it is not an arbitrary choice: the violin dial is being turned up through rising tessitura, dynamic swells, and orchestration that demand a fuller sound from the soloist, and Lark is responding.

"It's a good choice," Black continued, "Because it's an easy thing if you're balancing the scale between the classical sensibilities and the fiddle sensibilities. You need to think of things that each side can give up without losing their identity, because it's important that both identities be present. And there are some things that are compatible, and there's some places where you've gotta pick."[148] Lark and Black are on the same page, as Lark shared, "... This, probably more than any of the other movements, was one where I had to define for myself when

[147] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[148] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

I felt that it —the piece— was really calling for more of a traditional style of playing, and when I should morph back into a more classical, romantic sound."[149]

Lark makes thoughtful choices throughout the movement, bringing out understated violinistic tendencies when the line rises in measures sixty-three through sixty-six, but adjusting the dial back toward the fiddle as it lowers in measures sixty-seven through sixty-nine. Despite a higher tessitura in measures 101- 120, Lark's vibrato and phrasing "thread the needle," to use Glaser's phrase, as she weaves back and forth across the violin and fiddle center line without fully committing to one or the other for more than a few notes. This is no easy feat, considering the technically demanding nature of the passage.

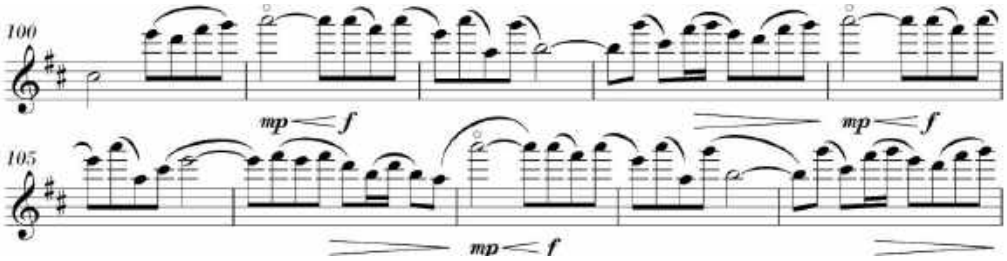


Fig. 40: *Sky*, movement II, m. 100-109.[150]

Because of Lark's restraint throughout the first three-quarters of the movement, when she embraces a fully romantic sound during measures 181- 250 in the return to G Minor her vibrato and sound quality signal an emotional release.

[149] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

[150] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 16.

Cuts, Rolls, Slides, and Triplets

These four types of ornaments, when paired with Irish bowing conventions and lack of vibrato, grant an overall effect of Irish fiddle. I will provide a brief overview of each ornament, but I recommend observing a variety of experienced practitioners through videos, recordings, or if possible, in person. Some excellent fiddlers to seek out would be Kevin Burke, Liz Carroll, Gerry O'Connor, Frankie Gavin, Martin Hayes, and Tommy Peoples, to name but a small handful.

Cuts

Cuts are related to grace notes, and are typically notated in tune books as such. Both cuts and grace notes can occur either before or on the beat depending on the particular situation, but cuts can also occur in the middle of a note. The most noticeable difference between a cut and a grace note comes from its function. Whereas grace notes are a pitched ornament designed to add emphasis to a longer pitch, cuts function as more of a rhythmic interruption than a pitched ornament. The finger used to execute the cut is up to the performer, though the third or fourth fingers are the most commonly used. The action of the cut is more of a swipe than a tap, a way of subdividing a longer note or breaking up repeated pitches, which is the way Lark uses them in this movement.

Black was positively gleeful when discussing the cuts Lark employed on the recording. "If you could put one ornament on the Wheaties box to represent Irish music, what would it be? ….[Lark] got that one big time, really good move."[151] The next example shows a transcription

[151] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

of Lark's cuts over the first nineteen measures of the movement, followed by an example of where I believe a cuts would be effective over the same span of measures.

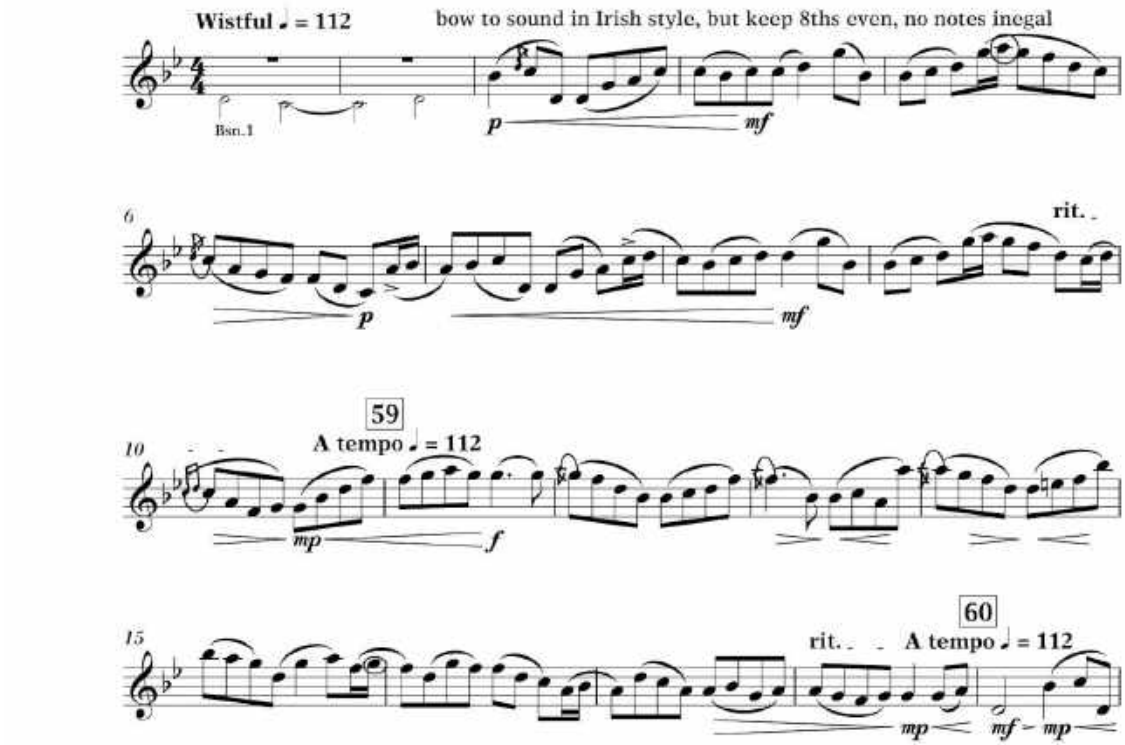


Fig. 41: *Sky*, movement II, m. 1-19. Showing Lark's cuts; circles represent notes treated as cuts rather than given their full value.[152]

[152] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 14.

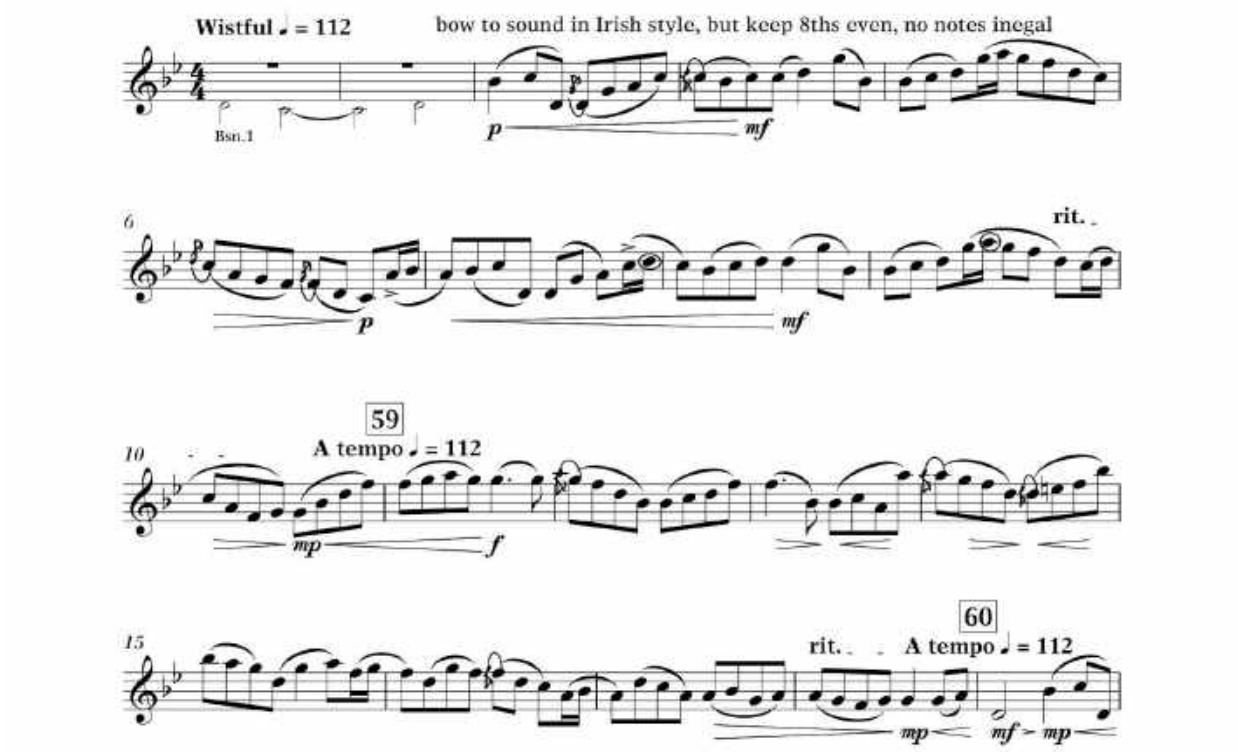


Fig. 42: *Sky*, movement II, m. 1-19. My cut suggestions: circles represent notes treated as cuts rather than given their full value.[153]

Rolls

Rolls are essentially the Irish name for what the classical musician would call a turn: a pitch that is decorated by pitches immediately above and below it. If I were to use a roll while performing a Mozart violin concerto, it would sound mushy and imprecise. In Mozart, I would choose to place my turn at the beginning of the desired note, and I would want to clearly represent all of the pitches involved. In some cases I might choose to perform a turn nearer the middle of a note, but I would still opt for clarity of pitch. My goal would be to ornament the desired note as cleanly and facilely as possible.

[153] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 14.

The Irish musician is more likely to perform the roll in the middle of the note, rather than at the beginning of the note. Irish music scholar and uilleann piper Breandán Breathnach writes, "It is the essence of the roll that the middle grace note be of the shortest possible value, the slightest flick of the finger, otherwise the decoration will sound like a triplet prefixed by a grace note."[154] Like the cut, the roll functions as a rhythmic interruption of the longer note, rather than a distinct melodic enhancement if it is utilized on a note with a value of a quarter note or more[155]. If the roll is placed on an eighth note, it will occur at the outset of the note.

Torke simulates rolls in the up-tempo middle sections of this movement, as shown by the two sixteenth notes preceding a pair of eighth notes as in measure 127. These sixteenths are essentially an abbreviated roll, decorating the eighth note they precede. Torke has placed an accent on the first sixteenth note of the grouping, which I interpret to indicate a collé attack to the bow stroke. If the sixteenths are treated as grace notes instead of precisely in rhythm and executed with a collé start to the stroke, the effect is essentially a roll with some of the filling removed.

Fig. 43: *Sky*, movement II, m. 127-130. Simulated rolls.[156]

[154]Breandán Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*, Cork: Mercier Press, 1971.

[155] This is a broad statement and not a unilateral truth, as the interpretation of rolls depends in part on the player, the regional style, and the specific tune in question.

[156] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 17

Lark is cleaner with her execution in these sections than what I am suggesting, and the end result is that her performance is sparkling and witty. My aim is for something slightly grittier, a little less sparkle and a little more peat bog. This is an area, however, where the individual should interrogate their internal violin and fiddle dials and see how far they care to push one or the other; no two people will have the same preferences.

Slides

In this movement, I would follow Black's recommendation and opt for dry slides as opposed to wet ones; dry meaning gentler, faster, and without vibrato in this case. On the recording of this movement, Lark uses some tasteful slides in measures five and six, sliding up to the G in five, and down to the D in six. In measure eleven, she luxuriates in the slide a bit more going into the dotted quarter G, and slides into the final eighth note A of measure thirteen as shown in figure forty-four.

These are all excellent placement choices for slides, as they occur at peaks in the melody and serve to draw attention to the following note. Be wary of overusing the slide, however. Lark uses good taste in choosing where and how to execute slides, but even she warns of overusing them.[157] The lesson here is, when in doubt, leave it out.

There are opportunities for slides on the other side of the slide spectrum as well. Measure sixty-four (figure forty-five) offers an opportunity for a beautiful portamento leading to the high F, for example. The more romantic section in measures 181- 250 also offer opportunities for tasteful slides; though just because they could be applied does not mean they must be.

[157] Lark conversation, Mar. 3, 2024.

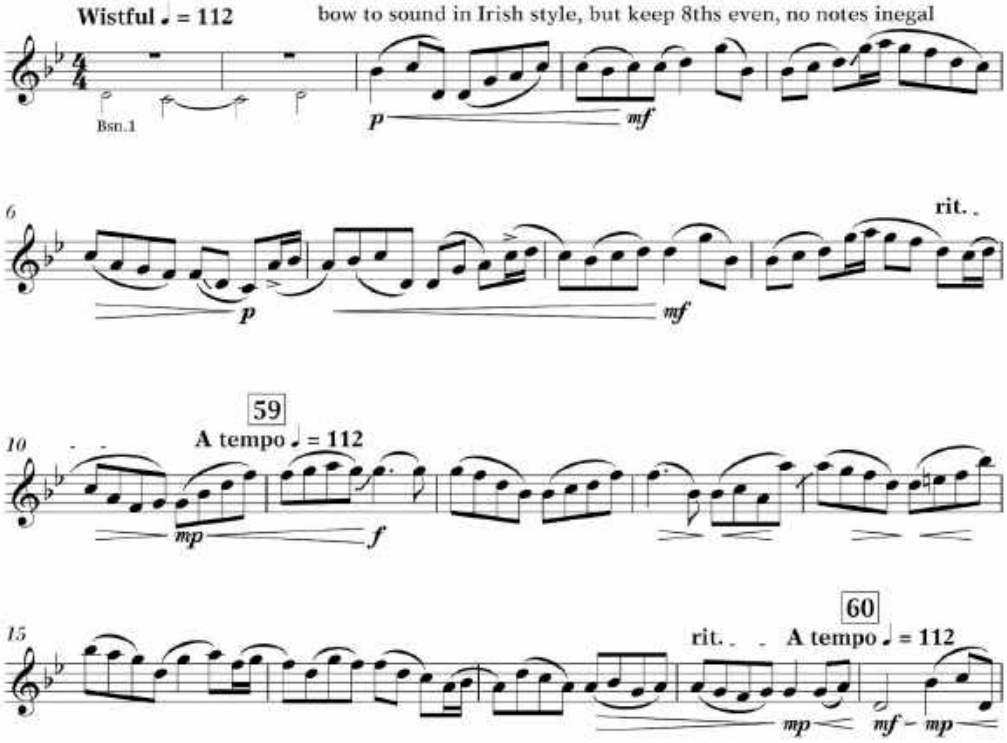


Fig. 44: *Sky*, movement II, m. 1-19. Showing Lark's slides.[158]

Fig. 45: *Sky*, movement II, m. 64-67. My suggested portamento.[159]

[158] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 14.

[159] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 15.

Bowed Triplets

Bowed triplets are the Irish ornament I would be least likely to apply to this movement. Bowed triplets are, once again, primarily a rhythmic ornament, created by using a very short scrubby bow and grinding out the first note of the triplet (typically on a down bow, but it can work in either direction) and releasing the bow quickly to allow the other two notes to rebound. The noise-to-tone ratio is controlled by the amount of pressure in the right hand and determines how crunchy the tone of the triplet will be. Some fiddlers prefer a fairly gentle triplet, while others prefer one with practically zero tone and pure crunch. Lark does not use bowed triplets at all in this movement which is not a statement about their importance as an ornament in Irish music, but is instead an indication that they do not fit the overall mood of this movement as well as other ornaments.

Movement III: Spirited

"Spirited" encapsulates a sense of swagger that is often associated with fiddle music, embracing the bluesy bending of notes and a certain amount of swing. These two concepts, plus bowing suggestions, are the core of what I wish to discuss in this movement. Keep in mind, identifying an appropriate swing feeling is a matter of taste.

Swung Eighth Notes Versus Triplets

My conversation with Glaser and Wallace yielded this entertaining exchange as we discussed Lark's performance of the opening twenty-six measures of the third movement. Glaser has strong feelings about people who play swing as triplets. "Anytime anyone goes, 'Daa-da daa-da daa-da daa,'" as he launched into an animated rendition of the "Tarantella Napoletana," "I want

to punch them in the nose!"[160] Wallace interjected with a deadpan delivery, "You're okay with tarantellas, but not with the approximate notation of swing." Glaser shrugged, and grinned impishly. He responded in a mollifying tone, "So it's pretty good, but it's edging in that [tarantella] direction rhythmically."

This conversation highlights the chasm between what the performer sees printed on the page—in this case, clearly notated quarter note/eighth note triplets—and what the listener perceives aurally, which is swung eighth notes. It is all well and good to tell a performer to simply take the written triplet rhythm and make it swing, but what does that mean? How does one define swing? American jazz vocalist and pianist Fats Waller said, "Lady, if you gotta ask, you'll never know."[161] That is a hyperbolic answer, but swing is subjective, falling in the category of "you know it when you hear it." At its most basic, the concept of swing revolves around pairs of eighth notes that are performed in an unequal fashion, with the first note of the pair being longer than the second. The exact duration varies by performer and by tune, but it rests somewhere between *notes inégales* and a quarter-eighth triplet.

Weber observed, "I think one of the reasons it feels like blues, and yet isn't blues as we would hear it in bluegrass, is the precision of her [Lark's] rhythms in regard to the swung eighth notes. These sound like triplets rather than a true swing." Black concurred: "...It used to be that the classical world's way of notating swing was to use a dotted eighth and a sixteenth, which is way too exaggerated! And then somewhere, post-late Copeland, they started using triplets. That's closer, but it's still too literal. Swing is the space in between. Not quite a triplet,

[160] Glaser and Wallace conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[161] Stanley Dance, *The World of Swing: An Oral History of Big Band Jazz,* Da Capo Press, 1974, p 436. Author's note: Black also paraphrased this particular quote in our interview.

and not equal eighth notes." Black gestured with her hands to physically convey the feeling of swing. "It's about a natural positive inequality between pairs of notes that is based on a gravitational principle. You can't put that on a page. But I can see why [Torke] chose triplets if he's trying to present this to the classical world. That is currently the best option available to us."[162]

The best path forward, for the purposes of Torke's work, is for the performer to familiarize themselves with bluegrass players who incorporate swing into their fiddling. Kenny Baker, Vassar Clemments, and Buddy Spicher are excellent places to start, but it is informative to listen to other expressions of swing as well, be it western swing greats like Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and Spade Cooley, or jazz violin giants Stéphane Grappelli, Stuff Smith, and Eddie South. O'Connor swings well, as do Nashville legends Craig Duncan, Stuart Duncan, and Joe Spivey. Once the swing feel is in place, the tension in Torke's work is created by strict sparkling triplet passages contrasting against grooving swing.

Bowings and Bow Strokes

Black leaned forward, her eyes intense as she listened to the opening of the third movement. After a pause for consideration, she let forth a barrage of expert opinion. "So to me, a lot comes down to the rhythm, which is very much affected by the bow stroke. [Lark] is using a heavy, long, brush stroke here, that will always make it sound more square. There's space in between the notes [in fiddle styles], so you're rounding off everything. If she were to play that on the

[162] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

string, it would swing more. It comes off as a very heavy swing feel: it's *too* heavy, and that's what makes it sound almost artificial."[163]

Bow strokes are the driving force behind feel, so choosing wisely is imperative. I have found détaché to be an effective stroke; the directionality of the bow and slur groupings impact the delivery of the swing feel. Lark sounds the most fiddly at 137 in the lilt section, where Torke's marked bowing changes from either separate bows or groups of slurs that neatly cover a single beat to a bowing that slurs across the midline of the measure.

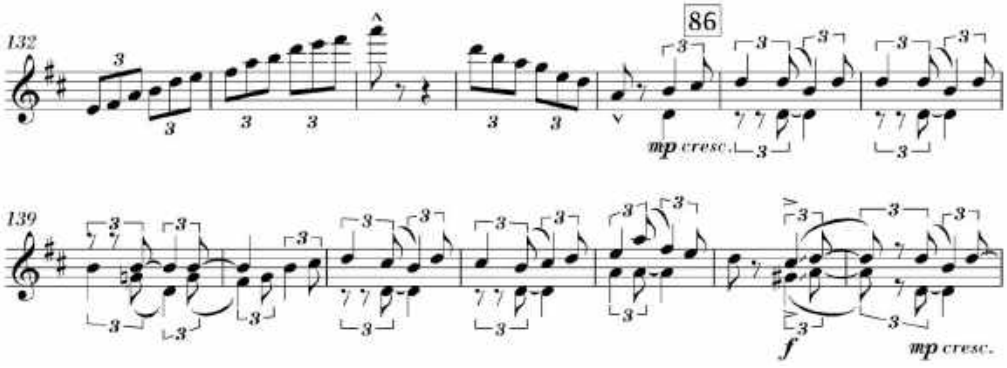


Fig. 46: *Sky*, movement III, m. 132-145.[164]

The stomp sections carry the greatest risk for sounding artificially perky and square, as the rhythm could easily fall into Glaser's dreaded tarantella trap. I suggest that using bowings that slur across the midline will counteract this tendency. Highlighting beats one and three within the slurs will

[163] Black conversation, Mar. 4, 2024.

[164] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 23.

create a rocking feeling that, if combined with a relaxed rhythmic interpretation, will give a solid groove.

This being said, coordinating down bows on the "stomp" fifth beat is a high priority as well. I suggest adding the following slurs to the figure measures forty-three and forty-four any time it appears, with the understanding that when performing the quarter/eighth triplet figure the eighth should not be too short or stilted, as that will break up the groove.

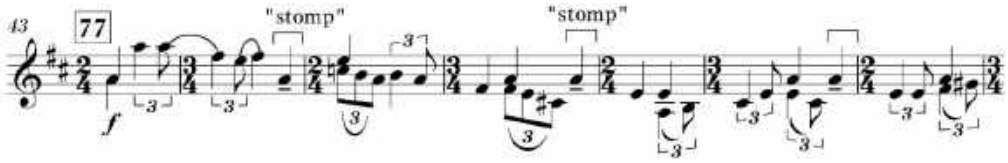


Fig. 47: *Sky*, movement III, m. 43-49. Slurs in measures 43 and 44 are my suggestions.[165]

In the later lilt sections where the sparkling triplet runs intercut with the lilt melody, I suggest staying aggressively on the string for the lilt and allowing the bow to come off for the triplets. The triplet sweeps have the potential to be on or off the string as the performer desires; Lark shifts between détaché and spiccato during the runs, which adds color and vitality. Ultimately the performer should choose a method that is convincing and comfortable.

Bluesy Slides

"Spirited" has the most frequent and the wettest slides of any of the movements in this piece. The opening bluesy section has eleven slides marked over the course of twenty-six measures; slides

[165] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 22.

accompany the bluesy motive every time it occurs, both in the solo opening, and later in conjunction with the trombone at measure 202.

Like the slides in "Lively," these slides do not demand slavish adherence to the printed page and should function as a guideline. For example, measure eight contains a slide from C to D, while an F# is held below as a double stop.

Fig. 48: *Sky*, movement III, m.6-12.[166]

This is one of those instances the Lark referenced, where a literally interpreted whole-step slide might sound grotesque or clownish. Playing an abbreviated slide would certainly capture the fiddle flavor, but I suggest taking it one step farther: instead of sliding exclusively between the C and D, I would incorporate the F# by placing it on an F natural and sliding both fingers simultaneously. This sounds much more natural than a static tone with a slide above. (This execution does not apply in the case of a drone on an open string with a double stopped slide, as open strings against double stopped slides are absolutely idiomatic to fiddle.) These slides are meant to be a little dirty, therefore allowing a hint of bow grit to creep in would be stylistically appropriate.

[166] Torke, *Sky*, violin part, 20.

Conclusion

Having explored the degree to which classical and fiddle traditions commingle in *Sky*, I suggest a Venn diagram. The violin in one bubble, fiddle in another other, and the overlapping area representing the third path. The third path exists as a framework for playful and synergistic interaction between both sides and is not defined by one specific composer or musician.

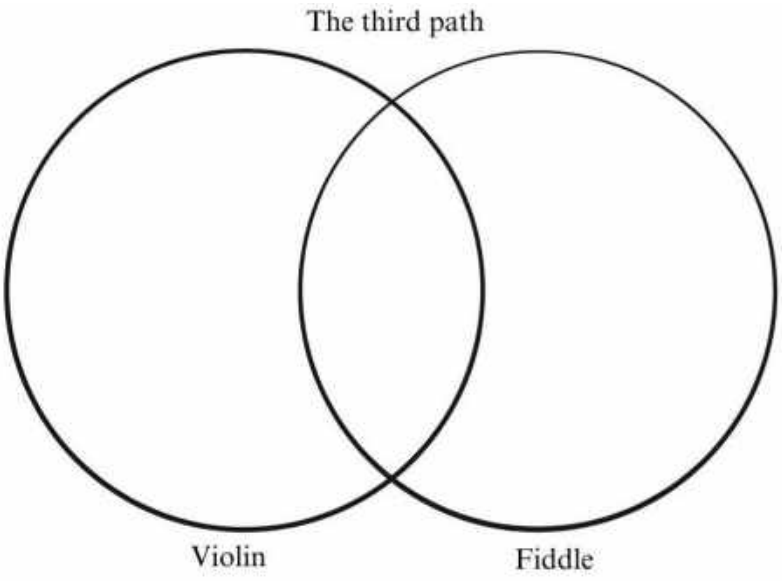


Fig. 49: Third path Venn diagram.

By providing a historical context to *Sky's* development, my goal is that the reader will take away a sense of lineage and understanding that nothing occurs in a vacuum. Michael Torke is not the first to chart this territory, but he has expanded upon it by adding his unique perspective.

Tessa Lark's interpretation of this work owes a debt to her experiences as a child in Kentucky, as well as to her training as a violinist. My analysis of each movement is meant to highlight the features that are unique or challenging. New works demand study by the performer in a different way than standard repertoire, as they have yet to be woven into the broader musical landscape through repeated exposure.

Choosing to perform *Sky* comes with a burden of responsibility for the performer: the mandate to represent the fiddle styles included to the best of the performer's ability, and the invitation to study these styles more deeply. It behooves the performer who is looking to support themselves through their music-making to have as broad a skill set as possible, and it is my hope that the techniques outlined above and the recommendations for further listening will prove useful to other violinists in their quest to play this piece (and others) with a satisfying degree of fiddle fluency. Perhaps, for some, it will be the first step along the third path.

APPENDIX A

Interview between Michael Torke and Sarah Wilfong Joblin

February 29th, 2024

Michael Torke is an American composer who has won acclaim, such as a Grammy Nomination and Pulitzer Prize nomination, for his imaginative post-minimalist inspired works. Torke studied at Eastman and landed in New York City where he became adept at creating his own opportunities. In 1994 he was commissioned by the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games to write Javelin, which was made popular during the 1996 Olympic Games. Torke started his own record label, Ecstatic Records, in 2003, and delights in crafting creative compositions through meaningful collaborations.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I was checking out your blog, and you mentioned on one of the blog posts that Tessa Lark helped give you an education on fiddle music. I was wondering what that looked like.

Michael Torke

We started with a Facetime call where she took out her violin and said, “Here are some characteristics that you might find in fiddle music.” She identified a common feature: off beat “chucks”—a noise that they make with the bow. I mean such basic things. I was clueless. I had only heard the *Beverly Hillbillies* theme. That was the extent of my knowledge of Bluegrass.

I didn’t even ask, “Who should I listen to?” I felt it’s *my* job to go onto YouTube and listen to everything that I can. Old-time style, “newgrass,” listening to some practitioners like a trio called Nickel Creek. Have you heard the album they did with Alison Krauss? She’s legendary in the bluegrass and pop fields, and she produced their first album that became a big hit.

I started listening to Sarah Jarosz. I wrote to Tessa, “I’m listening to this, and listening to that,” and she would say, like with Sarah, “I know her, you know. She’s my favorite!” and so on. It seemed like we were really clicking with the various examples I was drawn to. But I wanted to go beyond learning who are the great practitioners. I had this idea that banjo picking is so bizarre and so wonderful and so different from anything that we’re used to hearing in classical music. What if you reproduced what a banjo does on the violin strings, what would that be like? That might be fresh. Because when you think about bluegrass, you think about fiddle playing and fiddle playing is completely different from banjo playing. I was trying to explore all of this in unexpected ways.

And Tessa is so open-minded and so lovely. She was like, “Great!” And then there was a point after I committed ideas to paper that we met in person, and she would play through them. In one instance I had two versions of the same idea. “Which do you think works?” “Well,” she said,

“Why couldn’t you do both?” Which I love! She was so completely creative and open-minded, which I found wonderful.

She created this open, nurturing space. “This is exciting. This is wonderful. Keep at it!” Not every collaborator would say that—you would be surprised at how many collaborations just fall apart, because one person is critical of another, or someone stands in judgment. You encounter, “Well, that isn’t what I was expecting,” which can just kill the creative urge. But Tessa, who is creative herself—she's a composer, too, you can ask her about that—she understands: keep it open. As we were bringing the writing to a conclusion, she would play through things and say, “This actually would work better in this register, and this works really well, do more of that.” And so she was my guide.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Well, that’s amazing. It sounds like a dream collaboration.

Michael Torke:

It was just pure luck. I mean, the way that I met her was, there was a Carnegie Hall Commission. She was asked to play a recital, and they gave her some money to commission a new work. Her job was to find a composer. We’re in different generations. She’d never heard any of my music but her fiancé, Michael Thurber, who is a jazz and classical bassist, said, “Check this out.” He played her a piece of mine called *Miami Grants* for 10 pianos and she heard one movement, said,

“Okay, I want to go with this guy.” So to this day, I’m always thanking Michael Thurber, because we would have never met otherwise.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's amazing!

I’m coming back to the banjo picking on violin idea. So, being in Oregon, the Oregon Mozart Players was one of the orchestras on the commission. A friend of mine was playing with them for that concert, and was like, “Listen, I have comps. This is right up your alley. You have to come to this concert.” And I was like, “Oh, okay, sure, I’ll come to this concert, that sounds great.” And I was really struck from the opening couple of measures. Because it's not fiddle music, but it’s also not *not* fiddle music. So as I’ve been working through it myself, learning it and working on it, I’m like, wow, banjo is a very different instrument from violin. This is a trip!

Michael Torke

We had to make certain macro decisions early on. When it comes to fiddle playing in concert, even if the fiddle appears only with a guitar, it is always amplified. It’s part of the tradition. So Tessa asked, “Are we going to amplify the violin or not?”

And that's a big question. And I said no, because ultimately my goal was to write a violin concerto in the traditional sense, but is nevertheless infused and informed by sources lying outside of classical music, to attempt to breathe life into an old form. This also meant I had to be careful with the orchestration.

Still, Tessa and I agreed, wouldn't it be great if fiddle players played this? While I thought a violin concerto needs the presence of a concert artist whose bow strokes fill a hall and soars above an orchestra, while fiddle playing holds the bow and approaches the strings in a completely different, more intimate way, there might be fiddle players who produce a big sound, and we should try it!

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So that's actually a question that I had for you: who was your audience of performers? I am aware of people growing up in my generation, in the nineties, experiencing the advent of the fiddle camp being something that people could do. There being this groundswell of violinists who are classically trained, but also have this adjacent skill set. And I was wondering if that was something you were even aware of.

Michael Torke:

No, I was not aware of that, and I'm really glad to hear it. As time goes on there will be more violinists (like yourself) who are proficient in both traditions. We may reach a time where we don't even have to ask the question of what style you play in.

Maybe it's similar to modern dance and ballet. The young dancers these days, they can do both; they can do everything. Things are evolving.

Who is that blind fiddle player that Tessa has worked with?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Michael Cleveland?

Michael Torke:

Yes, that's him! Maybe we should invite him to play *Sky*, perhaps with a chamber orchestra, and maybe he's amplified. I should talk to Tessa about that.

But in terms of my original intentions, I was thinking: *a violin concerto?!* The world doesn't need another violin concerto. We have all the great violin concertos. As a composer, how can you compete? How could you create a vibrant concerto that uses tonal and rhythmic elements, that would speak to today, and yet would serve and operate in the tradition of that repertory, but not imitate those works? How would you do it? And my thought was: look outside the field for inspiration.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So when you're casting around for something else to merge with the tradition of the concerto, which has its illustrious lineage, and also probably some baggage, did you encounter any political pushback from people or groups about reaching to a fiddle tradition? Was there any sense of, "Whoa! You're going to elevate the fiddle tradition and put it in the concert hall!" Was any of that part of a conversation at all?

Michael Torke

No, but that could be because I am not affiliated with any institution. So, for example, I don't have any students. I don't teach. I don't sit on any committees. I'm on very few judging panels. So who would possibly give me any pushback? I compose in a vacuum.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Well, I mean, that's fair.

Michael Torke:

But your question is a good one, and I don't mean to be flippant about it. Let's roll back to how this project actually came about. Going back to that Carnegie Hall Commission, I wrote a piece for piano and violin, for Tessa.

I had heard that she had a non-classical background in addition to her wonderful training. And so I said in my program note that I was going to design this 3-movement sonata that was influenced by her Kentucky upbringing.

What you find in fiddle music is that everything is played détaché. There's one bow stroke per note generally. And so I wrote this piece, Spoon Bread, which, of course, has nothing to do with anything bluegrass. But, you know, everyone presenter requests a program note. You always have to say something, and so I thought it would make good copy to say that the détaché style was influenced by Tessa's Kentucky heritage.

We were doing the recording session. There was my producer, Silas Brown, there was Tessa performing, and the wonderful pianist Roman Rabinovitch, and I said on a break "Tessa, you know it's kind of 'bull' what I wrote on those program notes about a bluegrass influence. What if you taught me some rudimentary things, and I wrote you a violin concerto that was really informed by a bluegrass style? Would you play it?" And she said, "Yes." And Silas, the producer said, "And I will record it."

And then I thought, okay, we have a project. We have no orchestra. We have no commission. But then I remembered I had an incomplete recording project with David Alan Miller and the Albany Symphony. Could I interest him in performing and recording it. He said yes, he was a believer in the project.

So returning to your question of pushback, every one of the principals involved said yes.

Instead of worrying about money before pen is put to paper ("who will commission this?") we waited to attract support until AFTER the piece was written. A wise person I know once told me, "Be inspired first; the money will follow." After everything was written and Tessa was learning the part, her manager and my publisher approached orchestras asking if they'd like to be involved with the project. 11 orchestras participated, and it was a win-win for Tessa who had all these new dates, and for me, getting these performances (on which royalties are paid).

Back when I started out, commissions would come first, and then you'd have to come up with an idea, and there would be expectations and restrictions. I wanted to break that model. So the whole project was led by Tessa and me and there wasn't anyone that could really push back.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin

I feel that because she embodies both the classical world and the fiddle world, she probably mitigated any push back that would have come from the fiddle side of things. People going, "Hey? What are you doing now?"

Michael Torke

That's true. Tessa has such credibility on both sides.

When it comes to writing a concerto, the soloist really drives the project. You don't write a concerto and then search for a soloist. No one will sign up. It's such a commitment to learn a new work. And a soloist must feel represented by the work; they will want to be involved in its creation.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin

That makes a lot of sense. It's almost always been that way, having composers and soloists in collaboration.

Michael Torke

When Tchaikovsky wrote his violin concerto, wasn't he spending time in Italy, just having a great vacation? And he wrote this spectacularly inspired piece. Did he have a soloist in mind? Do you know?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin

I'm not sure if he had a soloist in mind, but I think he had a former student who was a violinist, who was visiting him at that time and advising him on it.

Michael Torke:

Oh, okay! So you know. There was someone around.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

There was somebody. I do wonder about this violinist being like, "Oh yeah, that's totally playable." [laughter from both Torke and Wilfong Joblin]

What drew you to writing a concerto as opposed to making a fiddle sonata or a collection of dance movements?

Michael Torke:

You want to make a statement—concertos are the real showcase, as opposed to suites, or serenades, or sonatas. And you want to create a large structure that holds up, as opposed to a medley of tunes, or moments, strung together. Once David Miller and the Albany Symphony

opened up that spot on the concerto album (the other pieces were the woodwind concertos SOUTH, for oboe; WEST, for bassoon; and EAST, for clarinet) then it *had* to be a concerto.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Music making today relies so heavily on recordings that it feels as though you could conceivably write something with the goal of making the recording and capturing that moment. And then throwing it open to see if it gains traction and other people are able to perform it. But if not, it's preserved in this iteration. Was that something that you were thinking about at all?

Michael Torke:

Well, from about 2000 to 2012, many were saying that the music business had fallen apart. Globally. File sharing and the digital revolution killed it. It was said that recordings are worthless, absolutely worthless. Fast forward to today, and streaming (Spotify, Apple Music) has turned the whole industry around. Now the record companies—believe it or not—are flush with cash. It's like the old days again!

And what always happens is when the music industry has cash, then it always becomes top heavy. The big-name pop acts are earning the lion share of the available money. Once again, the classical people drop down to the bottom of the earnings triangle. However, there was a short time, 15 years ago, where classical people were making more money than the starving rockers, because classical music has always been so dependent on live performance, where money still could be earned. People might have scratched their heads when I founded my record label, Ecstatic

Records in 2003, given the “worthlessness” of recordings then, but I always believed there would be value, and my premonition turned out to be true. Recordings are so important these days.

You make a recording of your music, and through streaming everyone around the world hears it instantly. It’s just amazing! Back in the 90s when I worked with Argo/ Decca (which was based in London), I felt particularly lucky because I had a European reach. Now you don’t have to worry about European distribution: It’s worldwide.

Through recordings you can “get the word out,” but, of course that guarantees nothing. It doesn’t mean it’s going to be successful, it doesn’t mean anyone’s going to like it, or that you even will make any money. But at least you can get stuff out.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes, I'm familiar with that kind of paradox myself.

Michael Torke:

Once I said forget about commissions, and do what I want to do, and figure out a way to record it, it began the way I do all my work these days. It started with *Sky*, and that inspired me to do *Being*, a piece for twenty-four musicians, and I recorded everyone in the studio. We put these projects together and release them on my label, and then I go out and find performances. Exactly the opposite of what we did back in the eighties and nineties.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's fascinating. Congratulations for breaking the mold and being able to make the art you want to make.

Michael Torke:

That's that dream. I'm living the dream.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Circling back to the structure of *Sky* with its three different movements. It feels as though bluegrass is represented in the first movement, the second movement is Irishy, and the third movement is, I don't want to say generic fiddle, but it has a touch of blues, but some of those licks are the things that you might think of when you say, "fiddle." Did you know where you were going with it, or would the motive lead you, and you would go from there?

Michael Torke:

The whole idea of the second movement with the Irish tradition, that was an awakening. I was doing research, and I found out that Irish fiddle music is very close to Appalachian fiddle music. Why? I guess those settlers came over with their violins. I don't know the history there, but the music has similarities. I talked to Tessa and I said, "You know, what about an Irish thing?" Oh, she's all for it, endless enthusiasm.

What did I do? I took a basic jig idea and stretched it out into 4/4, like a reel. Then I slowed it down, and I did other permutations. Since the first movement featured the banjo idea, and the second movement looks towards Irish music, I thought there's got to be some place where fiddle tradition is center stage: the third movement.

There's a “stomp” tradition. Tessa said, “You actually do that in the third movement. But you put it in five, which is really bizarre for fiddle music.” So it has a twist. Some listeners say that you have to wait till the third movement to get a true, unfiltered fiddle influence, but in the end, each movement for me is influenced by the different sides of bluegrass.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes. Well, the fiddle elements are certainly more surface level. I feel like in the first movement, the fact that you have the offbeats happening consistently throughout pulls you in right there along with the double stops. To me, that reads as “fiddle” right away.

Michael Torke:

I hope so.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I am predominantly an Irish fiddle player, so the second movement is the one that grabbed me immediately.

Michael Torke:

Well, then, let me ask you, what is your reading of the history of why music in Kentucky is like music in Ireland. Is it an immigration thing? What can you tell me?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I think that it is in part an immigration thing. It's really interesting to look at the evolution of the American fiddling tradition. It's very easy to point to the Irish and Scots immigrants and say obviously it came from there, and then we just added a little twist to it. I think that the truth of it is much more complex, and that kind of thinking negates both the influence of African American musicians, and points to how much of their influence in American fiddling traditions is largely unrecognized. Although, as a friend of mine mentioned recently, people like Rhiannon Giddens are trying to repatriate that tradition, which is really important work.

But at the end of the day, you have two traditions [American and Irish] with binary dance forms, they're in the same time signatures, and they have a lot of the same melodic profiles. Undeniably, there's a link.

Michael Torke:

Yeah, that was another thing I thought about. When I was studying this music, I saw it was based on two ideas. You have idea A, that's repeated. Idea B is repeated, and then it's over, and then you move on to the next song, where the form is identical. It's presentational: it's this idea, and then it's that idea. A cornerstone of classical music is that this music develops. Why? So that you can encompass larger forms. Otherwise, what you have is a suite of never-ending binary tunes that get tiresome. How do you build a structure that keeps your listener interested? And so that was the goal: to take a presentational music form and then build a larger structure. Could I do that? That was one of the goals.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Personally, I feel like it was successful because when I play through it, I can identify and feel like I am playing the A section and the B section of a tune. And yet it does develop, and that is very cool. I really enjoy it.

Michael Torke:

Well, thank you. I'm curious about something. This is a diversion, but you said growing up in the nineties. So I mean, you look like you're twenty-four years old. I have a feeling you're older.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I am. I'm forty-one. But you're very kind.

Michael Torke:

Wow, okay, so that's good. Did you come back to school?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I went to Berklee in Boston for most of my undergrad, and was out there studying with Matt Glaser, who's a marvelous fiddle player, and jazz and bluegrass scholar. I got a gig offer to go on the road with an all-girl country band, so I dropped out of school and moved to Nashville, and was on the road 200 days a year for a decade with this group.

Michael Torke:

That's amazing.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Then, you know, got married, had a family, kind of pivoted to doing Nashville freelance work. I did a lot of session work. I did a lot of string arranging and teaching. And eventually my husband, who is a professional juggler (which is hilarious), we looked at each other one day, and we're like, "Wow, we have these two gorgeous baby girls, and we're a fiddle player and a juggler, and we might need a grown-up job around here." Which was fine, because I was finding the Nashville mindset to be very looks-driven, very self-promotional, and there's only so much of that you can take before it really starts to be a drag. I was ready for something different, and I had always been interested in going back to school. A student of mine was a department chair at Middle Tennessee State University. He said, "There are scholarships for people like you. I bet you could go back and finish your undergrad on a full ride." And I was like, "That's not going to happen." But here we are!

Michael Torke:

The fact you were touring 200 dates a year, and living in Nashville… I just think the world of anyone who makes it in popular forms. I'm on my knees now, we classical people could learn a thing or two from a successful, touring musician. Gosh, for someone from your background to come to a piece like *Sky* is really exciting. I'm really honored. I hope my classical background didn't carry an editorial tone…

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Oh no! I'm approaching this project as a violinist, I'm coming at it through the lens of classical music, because right now that's where I'm situated. But my goal with this project —the performance, guide idea —is to be able to broaden the scope of who this is accessible for.

Michael Torke:

Well, good! Thank you. You're doing something really nice for Tessa and me. I really appreciate that.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Well, I'm excited. It's great to have a project that you get up in the morning, and you're like, "Yes! I get to work on this!" As opposed to saying, "Oh, man, it's just another thing that I have to do to get the stupid degree."

Michael Torke:

Well, and that's the goal, you know, from our composer's point of view, we don't want to just *write* music. We want to write music that makes the player or the conductor or the listener say, "Aha!" Because it's all about love. It's not about prestige. It's not about what's "important." All of that gets sifted down through history. It's, do you write a piece of music that a lot of people love, and they're drawn to it. That's the way I think about it.

Nothing in art works because you're "supposed" to play this or listen to that. That's why a quota idea in the arts is, I think, misdirected. There never should be any "should." And I'm using "should" by saying it.

When it comes to art it has to come from your heart, not from some idea of what's right and wrong, or to fix social injustices. Leave that to the politicians and lawmakers. I think that that's how it works: it comes from loving something, and consensus forms over time when entire cultures value and love something.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah, it's like falling in love: there may not be any rhyme or reason. But I certainly appreciate the joyfulness. There's a lot of subtle nuance to unpack with *Sky* that is really lovely, and it's nice and chewy in the learning process. So thanks!

APPENDIX B

Conversation between Kristin Weber and Sarah Wilfong Joblin

March 3rd, 2024

Kristin Weber has eighteen years of experience performing, recording, and writing as a violinist, fiddler. and singer. She performs in multiple styles including bluegrass, classical, country, pop, and indie rock. Weber was named Winner of the Americana Music Association Instrumentalist of the Year for 2021 and has appeared as a session violinist on recordings for Dolly Parton, Little Big Town and as a fiddler with Kacey Musgraves and Margo Price. Weber attended Berklee College of Music and moved to Nashville in 2008.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So as a question to the ball rolling, would you tell me a little bit about your intersectionality between violin and fiddle and what those categories mean to you?

Kristin Weber:

Yeah, there's a clear distinction in my brain with style and language and approach, how I approach the instrument, and even where it feels like it sits in my brain.

I started studying classical music when I was four, and that included sight reading, playing in orchestras, and taking private lessons. And then, when I was eight, my parents added in bluegrass lessons, where I was learning fiddle tunes and starting to understand chord progressions, music theory, and improv.

So I've kind of grown up with both styles, and always pursued both. Even as I grew up in high school, I continued to take fiddle and lessons and participate in bands, while also taking classical lessons and being part of symphonies.

When I went to Berklee, I also studied both pretty actively and equally, and as I work professionally, I still participate in both worlds. In recording sessions I use sight reading and classical-style violin, while also in recording sessions I use bluegrass or other fiddle styles. With bands and live concerts I also do both.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Okay, you're the exact model of a person…

Kristin Weber:

I straddle both worlds equally.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I'm curious, do you think that there's any connection between you having the career that you've had, and other people that we both know, who have a similar profile of high levels of classical capacity and technique, but also extreme knowledge of fiddle styles and ability to improvise, and the rise of the Fiddle camp?

Kristin Weber:

Um-hmm.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Did you go to fiddle camps?

Kristin Weber:

I did. I went to Mark O'Connor fiddle camps for five or six years in Tennessee, and it rocked my world, just like it's rocking everyone's world when they go to fiddle camps like that and get to see people play in so many different styles. Classical included, but also jazz and many fiddle styles. And there's not just "fiddle." There's old-time fiddle, and bluegrass fiddle. And there's not *just* old-time fiddle, here's the way *this* old-time player plays versus *that* old-time player from this region. Many categories.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I have a hypothesis that, in part, a concerto like the Torke concerto wouldn't necessarily be able to exist — of course it could exist! — but it wouldn't have had the reception that it's had without a generation of violinists who are like, "Yes, you're speaking my language."

Kristin Weber:

I like that. I think you're probably right about that. I feel like, when I first started taking fiddle lessons, my classical teachers: some of them got it, and some of them didn't get it. And now it seems so much more accepted that you can grow up with both. There's so many examples of that.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah. In my paper, I'm calling it the "third path."

Kristin Weber:

That's a scary path to those people who are only in one or the other. They're like, "Oh no, you're one of those people that can do both. Oh my God."

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes, but you also double your anxiety! You can be anxious about *two* ways of playing!

Kristin Weber:

Double the fun, double the excitement, and double the practice time.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Exactly. Do you find that you identify more as a fiddle player than a violinist, or is it kind of a situational thing?

Kristin Weber:

Living in Nashville? I don't have to choose. I think because of the people that I work with in Nashville and because so many people dabble in both, or are curious about both, or know a lot of people that do both, you don't have to identify yourself one way or the other as much as you would in some circles. Maybe I've played bluegrass gigs where afterwards people tell me, "Oh, I can tell you're classically trained," by some of the things I was doing with my sound. While I was growing up and playing in symphonies, you would get strange looks if you said you played fiddle. But as far as my identity and where I'm stationed now, it's okay for me to identify as both.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So it's almost a case of code switching based on the session that you walk into. If this is a bluegrass show, obviously you're pulling out bluegrass brain today.

Kristin Weber:

Totally. And what's really confusing —I wonder if you relate to this— is when I walk into a session for fiddle, and they've written out what they want me to play, I have to sight read but apply the stylings of fiddle. It takes me a minute because I'm so used to improvising fiddle lines instead. So that's actually the hardest situation that I'm thrown into.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's funny, I don't think I've ever had that one. I've had the reverse where somebody wanted improvised classical parts from multiple people, and really didn't understand that it doesn't work that way.

Kristin Weber:

That was not gonna happen the way they thought! Oh, I've done that. I've been in that situation quite a few times.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So here's a question that is a little bit more philosophical. Whenever you have two different genres of music combining, there's going to be a perceived power dynamic at play. In the case of the Torke concerto, we have the form of a concerto which has this weight and history, this grand tradition. It has associations with the concert hall, and an aristocratic lineage that we can trace. And then we have these fiddle elements that are being incorporated into it.

Kristin Weber:

Also the instrumentation of the band.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes! The orchestra, which has its own history.

Kristin Weber:

We go to the concert hall to venerate the orchestra.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

How does that play out at first blush? I might look at the combination of classical form and fiddle vernacular and think that the classical form is reaching down to elevate the fiddle, but I don't know if the power dynamic actually flows that way.

Kristin Weber:

In this concerto?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Maybe even more broadly.

Kristin Weber:

It really does feel like that's been the power dynamic when composers choose to elevate fiddle music because there are many examples of classical composers taking, stealing, or misrepresenting a fiddle melody. Almost like they want to shine it up while leaving out some of the elements that make it what it is.

I think, to a lot of classical musicians, shining up some of the fiddle tone and approach makes it sound better to them. That's what it sounds like when I hear classical representation of fiddle music: "Let me let me dust this up. Let me clean it up. I can tune this up for you, and now it's palatable." while missing what's important.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So that's where things get interesting with the Torke concerto, because we have Tessa Lark playing such a crucial collaborative role with Michael Torke. I interviewed him a couple of days ago, and he was saying that she really made a lot of decisions in terms of ornamentation, and the artistic representation of certain slides and double stops. She really set the bar for how it could be performed, and because we happen to know that she is also a fiddle player, I wonder if that shifts the power dynamic in this piece in a different way than we might see in others.

Kristin Weber:

It absolutely does, because it's informed. It's informed by someone with experience, as opposed to a composer composing their own representation [of a fiddle style] and making other classical musicians play it. It's been informed by someone who's informed by fiddle styles.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's my feeling, too. And I also feel like we can't discount the power of the fiddle in this equation, either, because of the popularity of fiddle music in popular music genres like country, indie folk, and other styles that are incorporating fiddle.

Kristin Weber:

You're probably right, the fiddle is so much a part of our culture.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah. You mentioned other composers who would prettify a fiddle melody. If we set aside people like Copeland and Bartok, and focus on people making a concerted crossover effort between the genres, is there an artist or album or piece that springs to mind for you as a pivotal moment when this kind of merging of the genres became more acceptable?

Kristin Weber:

There's several people that come to mind when I think about that. Of course I think of Mark O'Connor, fiddle extraordinaire, who transitioned into being a classical composer through

writing his fiddle concerto. And then you think of the popularity of bands like the Punch Brothers and Nickel Creek, *The Goat Rodeo Sessions* [album], and all these super virtuosic bluegrass musicians that are kind of making classical music, or something in between the two styles.

And then often those players and members of those bands branch off and make their own classical music, do their own classical tours and make their own classical records while still participating in the bluegrass world.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah, in a lot of ways it kind of comes back to Mark O'Connor, and the *Appalachian Waltz* and *Appalachian Journey* albums.

Kristin Weber:

Right.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

All of those guys have really upped the acceptability of bluegrass in the concert hall.

Would we be up for listening to some of this concerto? I'd love to get your responses. We'll start with the first movement; I'm gonna play a 30 second snippet of the opening.

One of the things that Michael Torke said was that for the first movement, he was trying to express a banjo role on the violin; to which my reaction was, that's why this is so incredibly difficult to play!

Kristin Weber:

I think I know exactly what part you're talking about.

[The opening of the first movement plays]

Kristin Weber:

That's exactly what it sounds like.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

It's interesting. Because to me, I listen to that and it's not a fiddle tune, yet it still comes across coded as fiddle. I'm fascinated to try and figure out why.

Kristin Weber:

The flat sevens, I think.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes, I think I think so too. I also think the persistent backbeat is significant.

Kristin Weber:

Yep, you have a tambourine, and then eventually a triangle playing the back beats ahead of the beat, which is what you would do in bluegrass.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes. Almost rushing.

Kristin Weber:

Almost rushing, but not actually rushing.

I felt that a lot throughout this piece, it doesn't feel classical because the melodies aren't exactly linear. They feel more choppy, the way I think someone listening to a fiddle tune would interpret the melody.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's actually a good point, the melody keeps spinning out.

There's a section in here where it flips, and the violin takes over the back beat situation. It's almost a chop, but it never quite goes there.

Kristin Weber:

That's what I'm saying. It's fiddlesque, we're touching on that. Yes, we hear fiddles do something like that, but with a little more grit in the bow. I wonder if that choice was a live performance consideration, getting the sound to carry through a hall.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That could certainly be a factor.

Kristin Weber:

The chop would probably just translate as percussion, and you wouldn't get a whole lot of the chordal tone.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

This moment relates to what you were talking about earlier: here's this fiddle thing, now let's make it nicer.

Kristin Weber:

I'm gonna shine this up a little.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Here is the last excerpt from the first movement that I want to play for you. I love this moment, because I feel like this is some genuine fiddle action. It's got a little bit of a hoedown or breakdown feel to it, and there's a lot of backbeat double stops and articulation things make me say, "Yes, I buy that." And it's paired with one of the few times where the soloist has any lyrical material in this movement. That pivot, where we're going from fiddle to violin is really well done.

I happen to know from seeing the score that there are slides indicated for a lot of those double stops, but I think the slides that she [Tessa Lark] performs there are fiddle slides.

Kristin Weber:

Yes. If you're gonna break it down, it's a rhythmic thing: she's leaning into it a little bit more. Leaning into the down beat a little bit. [Weber sings an example of the slide placement]

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I think there's an articulation thing to it as well, when you lean into the placement of it you're leaning in with the weight. And sometimes it verges on getting a little gritty, which I love.

So with the second movement, Michael Torke took a jig that he liked and expanded it into a slow reel. I've been searching all over trying to find this tune, and I haven't been able to find it yet.

Kristin Weber:

Maybe you dreamt it.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Maybe! Well, I think the fact that I was looking for a reel, and it was actually a jig means I need to go back and do some more digging with that piece of information in mind, and see if I can find it.

Let's listen to this next section, I'd be curious about your thoughts on what things are coding it as fiddle. It's a very beautiful lyrical melody, and this one doesn't have quirky little double stop slides to say, "Oh hey! Look! I'm a fiddle." So what are we dealing with here?

[The opening of the second movement plays]

Kristin Weber:

This is really pretty. I'm guessing this was Tessa deciding to be very intentional about where she was going to put in slides and mordants. It feels well thought out and planned in a really lovely way that honors traditional Irish playing.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I love the fact that she's non-vib for that whole opening section.

Kristin Weber:

Very good point. Yeah, that can be a big pitfall for classical musicians approaching fiddle playing: every note has this rich vibrato on it. That's one of the big tells, and a hard habit to break. And you have to get comfortable with understanding that a non-vibrated note has a lot of emotion and beauty in it, and that comes from the lilt of your bow.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah, that's a point where I think the fiddle world and the baroque performance practice world align really beautifully.

Kristin Weber:

The way you stretch out a long note feels very baroque.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Based on the score, those ornaments aren't written; it's all extemporaneous. There are no slides indicated, whereas in the outer movements there are written slides galore. But with this movement, the instructions say, "Bow in the Irish style."

Kristin Weber:

I have to say, this section was the one that felt the most authentically fiddle to me, probably because she got to inform all of her own decoration.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah, I think so too. Let's listen to a quicker section.

[The middle of the second movement plays]

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I feel like this section gets into movie soundtrack territory.

Kristin Weber:

Yeah, that felt far more classical to me. But I guess you could say, this whole piece is meant to be a classical composer's impression of fiddle music. What an interesting perspective.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Moving on to the third movement, I'm going to play a little bit of the opening. This one probably reads like fiddle music the most at first glance. I keep going back and forth, is there blues in this? I can't quite tell.

[The opening of the third movement plays]

Kristin Weber:

I think one of the reasons it feels like blues, and yet isn't blues as we would hear it in bluegrass, is the precision of her rhythms in regards to the swung eighth notes. These sound like triplets rather than a true swing.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah. I think that is informed by the notation, because it is notated as triplets. But I agree with you on that, it is far more precise.

There's another section, it's a transitional spot where she [Tessa Lark] is doing lots of really virtuosic triplet runs, and it switches back to the swung motive. And then they [the motives] start to talk to each other. Let's listen to this spot: where does the violin occur, and where does the fiddle occur? And how are they overlapping one another?

[The middle of 3rd movement plays]

Kristin Weber:

I went to fiddle land there. I felt like she was swinging her eighth notes in a more traditional way. It makes me think that everything is very intentional.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

One of the things about that section is, again, in the notation. the double stops are notated on the offbeats or coming off the end of the triplet and tied into the main beat, and if you allow yourself to play it in a slightly more loose way, it comes to life and feels good, whereas if I'm trying to hold myself to a really rhythmically pure subdivision, it feels awkward.

Kristin Weber:

This feels like a piece that is good for putting on programs to coax people into enjoying fiddle music; a good piece for putting on to draw an audience.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Agreed.

Kristin Weber:

It’s very approachable, could we say that it's the Hamilton of the violin concerto world?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

You know, maybe we could say that.

Kristin Weber:

I think this piece is interesting, because, as I was listening to it, it did not commit to one style or the other the way that I feel like a lot of classical compositions that are trying to imitate fiddle do, where they are right at a number two on the fiddle dial. And this one’s like “We're fully classical. Now we’re pretty fiddle. Now we’re just kind of in the middle. Now we’re here.” The dial is constantly changing as you listen to it as far as fiddle genre authenticity.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Do you think that comes from the way that it’s written, or the way that it's performed?

Kristin Weber:

Good question. It sounds like it happened in the collaboration between the composer and the performer.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I think it was a joint effort. But I do think that there are compositional elements that support the presence of the fiddle happening, even if they're not contributing directly to the fiddle part itself.

Kristin Weber:

It's the things we noticed in the first movement with the presence of the offbeats just moving through different parts of the orchestra. But they're always there, while the bass is playing what sounds like a typical bluegrass bass pizzicato part, at least briefly.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah. And there are moments in there where he's given the violin the banjo role by giving somebody else the melody while the violin is just noodling away, holding down the middle space that the banjo occupies. While there's something else arguably more interesting happening.

Kristin Weber:

Right? That's a cool thing. Those are good questions. Good stuff to ponder.

APPENDIX C

Interview between Tessa Lark and Sarah Wilfong Joblin

March 4th, 2024

Violinist Tessa Lark is one of the most captivating artistic voices of our time, consistently praised by critics and audiences for her astounding range of sounds, technical agility, and musical elegance. In 2020 she was nominated for a Grammy in the Best Classical Instrumental Solo category, and she is also a highly acclaimed fiddler in the tradition of her native Kentucky. Highlights of Lark's 2023-24 season include the world premiere of Carlos Izcaray's Violin Concerto and performances of Michael Torke's violin concerto, Sky—both pieces written for her—as well as her European orchestral debut with the Stuttgart Philharmonic. She also

performs with the Virginia Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, England's City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and others; and gives duo concerts with double bassist Michael Thurber and jazz guitarist Frank Vignola.

Lark's newest album, The Stradgrass Sessions, was released this past spring. Her debut commercial recording was the Grammy-nominated Sky, and her discography also includes Fantasy; Invention, recorded with Michael Thurber; and a live recording of Piazzolla's Four Seasons of Buenos Aires. In addition to her performance schedule, Lark champions young aspiring artists and supports the next generation of musicians through her work as Co-host/Creative of NPR's From the Top. Lark plays a ca. 1600 G.P. Maggini violin on loan from an anonymous donor through the Stradivari Society.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So where do you situate yourself in the fiddle/violin continuum?

Tessa Lark:

Yeah, I would define myself—if I had to define myself—as a classical violinist that was born and raised in the Bluegrass State. I was a Suzuki kid also, and my dad plays banjo. Bluegrass was my first foray into playing music. But my training was primarily classical, and being in Kentucky just naturally I was playing bluegrass and loving it, loving the culture behind it. I'm primarily of Irish/British heritage, so I've always been drawn to that style of music as well. But I've found more and more as time goes on, it's just a natural inclination for me to try different

styles. I'd been exposed to improvisational American styles when I was younger and over time. I've just tried to find the relevance of that within classical music.

And big heroes of mine are Edgar Meyer, Chris Thile, *The Appalachian Waltz* project, that [album] so informed who I am as a musician today. And really, besides Edgar, I would say that there are people from the folk world who have come into the classical world and have garnered respect from the classical scene. And conversely, classical musicians who have collaborated with other non-classical players like Yo-Yo Ma (but he doesn't actually play the style necessarily). And a lot of the non-classical folks don't really play the classical style; they'll play Bach and those things. But they aren't gonna get up and play, you know, the Brahms violin concerto. I see myself as — hopefully — maintaining a professional classical soloist standard while really practicing musical styles as authentically as possible.

I would say I feel more like an imposter in the bluegrass and jazz zone, but those communities are so welcoming that I've been able to play with incredible people. And I feel like I've gotten my training through being on the ground and on stages with superheroes of mine. So I hope that answers the question. I feel like I'm exploring Americana and jazz styles from a classical standpoint.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Did you end up participating in any fiddle camps growing up? Was that part of your exposure?

Tessa Lark:

Yes. I went to the Mark O'Connor fiddle camps a few times and met a lot of people through that program. I have actually stayed in touch with him, and a lot of other folks. Fiddle camps were a big thing. I went to a lot of bluegrass festivals with my dad, and played in his gospel bluegrass band when I was younger. We played in a lot of churches when I was just starting out, so yeah, I was definitely in the culture.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's really cool. I'm finding it really interesting that with the rise of the fiddle camp there seems to be a generation of people who are high level classical musicians, who also have this multi-stylistic awareness. It is becoming much more mainstream and like less, "Wow! You're play fiddle. You're such a weirdo." kind of vibe, which is kind of what I remember experiencing like in youth symphony in the nineties.

Tessa Lark:

Yes, Amen. Yeah, I love it. And I feel like it's great for the education system of classical music, too, because it's actually most traditional to be a player, performer, improviser, composer. That's what all of those dudes — since they were mostly dudes- — that's what they were doing hundreds of years ago. So I feel like though we call it the new, modern day

musician, it's actually paying even deeper respects to our tradition. So I'm really excited about that. And there's been way more interest. But what makes me happy is just the respect for folk and jazz artists and what they're really able to do.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah, definitely. It's heartening.

So I talked with Michael a bit about his perspective on the collaboration between you guys. What was that like from your end?

Tessa Lark:

It was amazing. It was the first time I've really collaborated so closely with a composer. I had had commissions before, and had people write things for me in the past, but he's probably told you the whole story. I commissioned him to write *Spoon Bread*, this violin piece for me, and he eventually 'fessed up to not actually being inspired by folk music for that, and offered to right his wrong with this *Sky* concerto, and I was just thrilled. It's a weird type of flattering that somebody would be fascinated by not just your playing, but your upbringing and your musical life, and to want to write a whole concerto about it.

And knowing Michael's style of writing, I had a feeling that it would match really well, because he has a romantic tonal sense of harmony. It's like maximal minimalism in a way. And since, as you know, with Irish music there's this transcendental element to that music and its

repetition, and only subtle embellishments and adjustments that just completely parallel Michael Torke's writing style. So I was really excited to see that come together, and it was also cool that he didn't really know a thing about bluegrass or Americana music.

And then, a few months later, he just starts throwing me all these little bits of the concerto, and is asking me what I think about it. I'm not good at giving input to composers, because I really want them to write something that they feel. You know, my friend James Ehnes, we've talked about this so many times; I love what he says, that there's a fine line between inconvenient and impossible when it comes to getting new music.

And so even if something is weird, I haven't seen it before, or it's super awkward. Just like the first movement in general. I told Michael, "I don't know if this is gonna sound good, but it's possible. But it's not gonna sound like a banjo." And he's like, "Yeah, I'm gonna keep it the way it is." And I'm so glad he did, because nothing sounds like it. And after enough time with it, it feels like a familiar technique and has actually improved my own playing and my virtuosity with the right hand. So there are little things like that. I was so excited that he created this new language that sounded sincere, and at the same time audiences responded to it right away. They can relate to it, but it's still a real concert piece that stands on its own in a symphonic performance. So it's really cool. And I mean, here's a testament to it that: somebody's writing their thesis on the piece. It's so amazing.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

When you did the premiere in Eugene last winter with the Oregon Mozart players, I had a couple of friends who were in that orchestra, and one of them was like, “Sarah. We’re doing this concerto, and there’s fiddly stuff all over. You have to come and hear it.” I’m like, oh, sure, sure! Twist my arm, I’ll come, that sounds fun!

My impression from the very beginning was, how is this coded as fiddle/folk music? Because it’s not in the violin part. And after hearing the story about how it’s supposed to represent a banjo roll, I’m like, yeah, okay, I get that idea.

I guess what I'm coming away with is the fact that the violin is fulfilling the banjo function of just noodling along while other instruments carry the melody in certain places, and a persistent back beat is what drives that impression. I’m curious, what are your thoughts on that?

Tessa Lark:

Wow! It’s interesting, isn't it? Like, that’s actually the way it’s written in the music. It is clear that it’s based on banjo picking patterns, and that the melody is buried within all of this kind of Morse code. On occasion I added different bowings, and I don’t play every single note staccato that’s written staccato to add more of a fiddling flair, like the offbeat feeling that’s not necessarily written into the music. So I tried to add a little bit of those elements that people would relate to as fiddle-style playing.

I think also the fact that the harmonic language never veers to a really modern place is helpful. It's definitely more sophisticated than your typical bluegrass music. But in the beginning, it just starts out…

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah, it just hangs on the one.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah. And he and he touches upon the modal sound, and the major minor ambiguities that you hear a lot in in fiddle music with like C natural C sharp, and so I feel like he found some idioms of the music and has it in there just enough that people can say, yeah, that is fiddle music. But then the rest of it, he has gone through whatever his compositional process is to illicit music that's purely his own. And the structures are fascinating because he'll add half a bar or something to a phrase, and slightly extend it. And I think the micro effect, especially as a player is like, "Whoa! Like where am I?" It's very disorienting, but I'm not sure as a listener you ever really feel that because the offbeats, the downbeats, they're always there, which is also a very folksy thing; there's plenty of jazz music that's in odd meters. But it's grooving, and that's what you feel. So there's a humanity to that. But then there's this mathematical complexity in his music when you're playing, it is confusing. But then, once you get that he

named it *Sky* right? And I feel like the overarching feeling is so expansive as a result of these micro evolutions of the different phrases, if that makes sense.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, especially looking at the score, he has sort of this almost fractal way of developing the material that he's working with The first movement in particular, and maybe some in the third as well. And it's such an interesting thing to visually watch the permutations evolve.

Playing it is a different story.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah. You need your Wheaties before you play this piece!

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes, yes, I am discovering that!

One of the things that I love about your performance of the third movement is some of the slides and bends happening there.

Tessa Lark:

How would I approach that kind of a slide as a fiddler, as opposed to a violinist?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

…By the amount of grit applied with the right hand, but also, the timing of the slide and where the maximum slide velocity happens. This is such a ridiculous way to describe it, but where it bends is different than where I might make a similar choice if I saw a slide in a classic piece. Something where you'd look at that and go, oh, it's a portamento, of course I'll just kind of glide there, and it'll be beautiful. And this has got some grit to it.

What was your thought process when you were going through and figuring out those places where you could put those types of influences versus places where, clearly, we're sitting in classical violin land?

Tessa Lark:

Uh huh. Well, there is a practical element that some things go too quickly to add anything else, for clarity's sake, and the phrase is just like, let's get this done. And then you have the score. He often writes where he wants those bends. One thing I find fascinating with playing composed music in a fiddling style is, for me, I have to go through a process of looking at it first and understanding aurally what I'm seeing visually, and then eliminating the visual part of the music. Because when you look at the page, it looks complex and modern, almost Second Viennese School. If you look too literally, it's not gonna sound like fiddle music. And fiddle

music? It’s passed down by ear. It's not a music to be written down, you know; I feel like it’s almost a disservice to the style to write it down, but you have to in this case. There’s no disrespect.

So in that first slide that he writes down with the C natural to the C sharp, if you actually played it with a start pitch and an end pitch. It’s not gonna sound the way… I don’t know, they call it garbage, sometimes right? Those little fills that you put before the start of a note? And so I just had to do my own reverse engineering, looking at the music and then thinking, okay, he was looking for this sound I’m guessing. And then just like going to another part of my brain and trying to access that.

But it's interesting you brought up these slides, because I’m actually the same way with portamento and slides in classical music. There are thousands of ways you can go about it, and I love a good slide for a vocal effect, or that sort of thing.

But there are very few times when I hear other people like playing a slide, and I’m like, yes, that says something expressively. I feel like if you just plop your finger down and go, it sounds like a smear and a technical thing. But it’s a lot like how you can speed up later on in the slide, or earlier. And so I’m going for a feeling and a visceral effect more than any accuracy to the score, because when I play these slides I’m not starting on the written first note. Some of these slides are written as whole steps, and I don’t always do that because it’s gonna sound too grotesque. I know Michael actually likes that raunchy sound, but it starts sounding like a new music effect. You know what I mean? So there’s a little bit of interpreting in terms of

knowledge of the style when you look at Torke's music, and I'm not sure there's any right way to write it down.

I don't think there's any better or worse way to write it down, it's just a challenge of the style of the music. So there was a little bit of that, and there was also Michael's ear that he developed so quickly. So when I played it with him because he plays piano, and we worked through it together for a month or so before the premiere, he would ask for more. I tend to do a little less. Just because I — you probably are, too — I'm allergic to classical violinists who try to imitate fiddle music and just make a caricature of the different sounds and idioms, and slide into everything. And it's like, well, no, it's not quite that. So I was actually doing less at first than Michael was wanting, and we found our happy medium, where I felt like it was true, but still respectful and refined enough.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Well, I cracked up when I looked at the instructions for the second movement, and it says, "bow in the Irish style." And that's it. Well, okay then, clearly you exceeded that mandate by a mile. And Michael was like, "Yeah, you'll have to ask Tessa about the second movement. I didn't do anything with that one."

So I guess with that one, obviously you're reaching into the Irish bag of ornamentation. We've mentioned Martin Hayes, but who are some of the players that you were listening to in order to capture that sound?

Tessa Lark:

Martin Hayes is the main person I was inspired by. And then you know, just fiddlers in general, because this is a hybrid piece, and I'm a hybrid player, and there's no way that I'm gonna be able to sound exactly like Martin Hayes. And there's no way that this music, even if you bowed exactly like him, it's something different. And there's also this element, I'm sure Michael mentioned to you, that a lot of what Martin does would not be heard over an orchestra, because it's so intimate. It can only be done in a quiet way. So a lot of it [Martin Hayse's style] was just impossible in terms of projection issues. I sort of had to find my own way about it.

And it's a fascinating movement, because it's poignant and peaceful. But when you listen really closely to a lot of these Irish players, even though it [the music] has a transcendent and tranquil quality a lot of times, their inflections are extreme; the accentuations and the dynamic change, and it just doesn't hit you that way, because it's so natural. And I suppose it's very much like speaking as well. It's rhetorical in a way. So that was an interesting journey. In terms of it being a classical piece and adding what's not on the page, I added a whole lot of ornamentation that I felt was authentic to the sound that he was looking for, and this, probably more than any of the other movements, was one where I had to define for myself when I felt that it — the piece — was really calling for more of a traditional style of playing, and when I should morph back into a more classical, romantic sound. And it was really fun to try and put

that together and make it all make sense together and feel like a natural transition from one to another.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Listening to it, I think you accomplished that beautifully. My favorite moment is the opening where there's no vibrato, and I'm like, "Yes!" It's such a brave choice, but I love it. And then as soon as it goes in a higher register, of course you have to start vibrating, or it's gonna sound rough.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

But it hooks you in, and then you can suspend disbelief as everything else unfolds in a very convincing way. And then and then it's almost like three tunes for the price of one with the other two middle sections. You get to perk it up and be really, really be nimble

Tessa Lark:

And not just me, either. It's the entire orchestra, especially the winds, when you get to that double time section near the end.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yeah, I'm sure the flutes and oboes were having a heart attack.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah. I looked at that, and I was like, are you sure this is possible? Also, there's really fast pizz for the cellos in the last movement. And Michael was just like, "Oh yeah, they can do anything, they just need to hear it once and have somebody do it once, and then it's fine." He was not worried about it. It's just, "No, they have to be able to do what I want."

Sarah Wilfong Joblin

I love that he's got convictions and confidence.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah, I mean his orchestration is phenomenal. That's one of the many things that I love about this piece: the sound worlds and the textures he creates in the orchestra are surreal and so magical in the whole piece, but in in the second movement, with the three different groove and sound worlds, he morphs it so beautifully and so cleverly, with different doublings and pairings of instruments. I think it's quite unique. And actually, when I was working with the Albany Symphony (and with other orchestras), the string players actually followed my lead with non

vibrato and vibrato a lot of times, which adds a subtle — but I think detectable — change in the sound for the audience. I think that's what brings that magic to the bookends of the movement, too. And it's so fun playing the piece and hearing the audience at the end of the movement [audible gasp] because it really feels magical.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes, absolutely. I will say the second movement is my favorite one to play at the moment.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah, it's the most technically pleasant.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Also that! I'm not gonna lie, that definitely plays into it. But also, that's the music that got me into fiddle playing in the first place. So that one hits home pretty deeply.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah, I feel that.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin

This is perhaps a little bit more of a scholarly question, but when you've got two different types of music that are commingling, there's always some kind of unspoken power dynamic between them. In this case, we have a concerto with an orchestra behind it which has centuries of tradition and prestige attached to it, and we venerate this as a form of high art music. And then we have fiddle traditions which have their own path of prestige and claims to ancient heritage. Is the classical music sort of reaching down to the fiddle music and saying, "Come on, friend, I'm going to elevate you to the concert hall." Or is it possibly the other way around, with the fiddle music coming in and going, "Hey, friend, look! I can enliven you a little bit."

I feel like you being who you are, with your background, kind of mitigates that conversation since you embody both sides of this. You're the perfect person to be able to play this because you can authentically speak to both [genres]. Is this anything that you have given any thought to? Or is it just, we're going to play some great music, the end.

Tessa Lark:

I've given a lot of thought to this topic. And I guess I'm not yet quite sure how to talk about it, because classical music is such a sophisticated music. It is one of the most sophisticated. And its history is one that involves class; class has such a big role in it. And folk music does not [relate to class] as much until more recent years.

And I would say I'm drawn to the good. You know if there's good and bad music, I like playing good music. So many people have said that in the past about music in general. I think elevation of an art form has everything to do with personal agendas and is entirely subjective except the fact that classical music and jazz, and maybe some Indian classical music, are

simply more complex than folk music. So there's inherent complexity, and sophistication in that way. But I don't think that should have any bearing on how it's received. For me, culturally, playing both the styles, they inform one another. All these styles of music are niche. But folk music by nature is going to have interest for the folks, it's just gonna have more popularity amongst the people, because that's what the music is designed for: a common person.

And so I think folk music is doing a favor for the classical community by being introduced onto the concert stage, it doesn't demean it by any way. It actually brings the audience into the concert hall and helps out an art form that's struggling to fill their halls, you know. If classical music doesn't want to compromise in terms of the space of their halls being 3,300 seats, they feel like they need to fill it all the time, they're gonna have to update the music to be relevant. Especially in the United States.

I would also argue that classical music has a very young history in terms of being directly involved in America, and so I think American classical music could almost have its own genre in a way. And I feel like that's what we're seeing, because we're not even 250 years into the United States, and classical music has been going on way longer than that. We've seen over the last 100 years or so, we have our own styles of music that have come from the States with blues and bluegrass and jazz and acoustic styles of music. So I have a feeling that if we have to stick with genres — which I really don't believe in — then a new genre is sort of forming within composed symphonic music or the more sophisticated composed music. But I have a hard time

with classifying in terms of different social classes, different music. I'm in music for the expression and the community that it builds. I do understand that in classical music there is this assumed pretense with it, but I guess for me, because I grew up in the foothills of Kentucky as a country bumpkin and fell in love with classical music, it's a shame that people would think that classical music is only available to a certain group of people.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Well, I think part of the work of our generation of players is to demonstrate that you can do both. Look at that, it's all possible.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah. I think the other thing that I'm on a crusade about is that you can be an exquisite deep artist without alienating your audience. And I find that it's hard. I understand and can sympathize with it, but it seems hard for a classical listener to even accept the fact that somebody who is casual on the stage could also be making extremely complex, sophisticated, deeply rehearsed and well-thought music, you know what I mean?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I think that the opposite end of the spectrum is true as well. I have encountered this some with the average Irish session players, where there's a certain level of unease about having classical people — not that they would use this word — infiltrating their space. Why are these people coming to try and claim ownership? Just because they can play the tunes doesn't mean that they understand the tunes, or understand the nuance or the history behind them. And I've watched some people get really grumpy about it and feel kind of protective and affronted by people moving in on their cultural heritage.

I think that it has probably lessened quite a bit in the last twenty years or so. The Riverdance effect really broke Irish music wide open to a lot of people who weren't particularly aware of it before then. And, you know, some of them ended up being surface level practitioners who enjoy going to a Celtic jam now and then, and some people took the deep dive, and really went whole hog educating themselves and becoming stunning trad players. It's an interesting thing to watch.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah, but that's a good point that you bring up. Another hope of mine is that in folk music, there is a deep reverence for where the music comes from. Who taught it to whom? Especially in bluegrass, that history is still fresh, and there are people who knew all of these guys that founded the music. And so there's a very alive and well community that's directly associated with it. That would be a great thing to maintain.

All these classical players, they develop crazy technique. You could plop music in front of them, and they could sight read it perfectly without any knowledge of what they're actually

doing. Folk music has the opposite set of values. You come from the family, or the place, or the town, therefore you learn the music because it's part of your heritage or you are part of the culture.

I think that folk music, in a way, is elevating classical music to a relevance to the people. I think this message of honoring the communities that have created the music is an important element that a lot of people that are classically trained are missing. They feel like they need to be stuck in their practice rooms, nailing their intonation or whatever. I'm a fan of that too, of course, but it's ideal when you can do both.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

It's an interesting mixture of things to consider. And it's lovely to have your thoughts on it. I feel like we've really covered most of the questions that I had. Is there anything else that you would like to share about either the performance side or the collaborative side, or just thoughts on the state of music at large?

Tessa Lark:

Yeah, we could have many meals over that topic. Yeah.

I guess the other little detail that's interesting is that after the Premier, a few months before the recording was to be released, he [Torke] was talking to me about adding a cadenza at the end of the piece, near the very end of the last movement. And I pushed back a lot because I was busy

and wouldn't have time to learn it well and record it. I told him, I'm playing the whole time like in this piece. They don't need more violin playing. And then I ended up trying a cadenza that was slightly what he wrote, but also just improvised on my part in a concert, and I sent him the recording. The reviewer, much to my dismay, was like, "Impressive cadenza!" and it's like, no! I don't wanna!

He [Torke] was really gunning for it, and that was one moment when I was like, I don't know the history of this piece will unfold, or how I'll go down in history, but it's one of those things where somebody might read in the future that there was a cadenza and the violinist was against it. And so it ended up not being there. But I thought that was an interesting moment where, after the world premiere, we did have this back and forth of if there would or wouldn't be a cadenza, and I was voting against it. And eventually it wasn't there. And I don't know if another violinist had played it if there would be a cadenza. I mean he wrote a whole cadenza and it's really hard, like lots of crazy left hand pizzicato that I would have had to spend months figuring out what to do, and if I had had more time I would have loved to have included it. But that might just be a fun little trivia fact.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's really interesting. I mean, I don't miss there not being a cadenza. I don't listen to that piece and go, man. You know what that thing needs is a cadenza! That never once entered my mind. It's fascinating to contemplate what that would be like.

Tessa Lark:

Yeah, it's great as is, isn't it? Truly it is plenty long. Plenty of notes to play. It's a workout, for sure.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Well, thank you so, so much. This has been so lovely, and you've had some wonderful insights. I'm just delighted, I truly appreciate your time and energy, and words of wisdom.

Tessa Lark:

Thank you, truly this is one of the coolest things that ever popped in my inbox. A thesis on this piece! So cool.

APPENDIX D

Conversation between Matt Glaser, David Wallace,

and Sarah Wilfong Joblin

March 4th, 2024

Matt Glaser is jazz and bluegrass violinist best known as the founder and artistic director of Berklee College of Music's American Roots Program, which he founded after serving for

twenty-eight years as the chair of the Berklee's string department. He has collaborated with a range of artists from Yo-Yo Ma to Ken Burns, and has released two albums as the bandleader of the Wayfaring Strangers. Glaser has authored numerous books, including Bluegrass Fiddle and Beyond, and Jazz Violin.

David Wallace embodies the eclectic spirit of Berklee College of Music as the current chair of the string department. With backgrounds in Texas contest fiddling, baroque performance practice, free jazz, and a doctorate in viola performance from Julliard, Wallace is well prepared for whatever is musically asked of him and performs internationally in multiple genres. Wallace also has credentials as a composer, having been commissioned by the Juilliard School and Rachel Barton Pine, among others.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So, the Torke concerto. I'm researching this piece because I find it really interesting that we're in a moment where we can have a respected composer with a reputation for doing innovative things like Michael Torke write a violin concerto and then say, "I'm not just going to write a violin concerto, I want to include fiddle elements into this concerto, and I'm going to collaborate with somebody who's not only a violinist but also a credible fiddle player in the person of Tessa Lark." And then have this concerto do really well: it was nominated for a Grammy, and it has had excellent reception in live performance. What an interesting moment. What is the convergence of forces that have caused the stars to align to allow this to happen?

I'd be curious to get your thoughts on where we're at with the hybrid violinist-fiddle player. How common is this in your experience?

David Wallace:

Obviously, we live in a little bit of a bubble at Berklee. It's interesting to see that Tessa [Lark] is having this kind of career, because that was not possible in the late nineties. It just wasn't. I mean, she's the real deal. That's part of what I mean in terms of what made it possible.

I think you have to look at the *Appalachia Waltz* projects with Yo-Yo Ma, Mark O'Connor, and Edgar Meyer; I think that's what broke things open. Yo-Yo is such an extraordinary musician and person; he can make things happen, and he can make things acceptable. Even before Mark's concerto, I think his string quartets were already being done, and there were some other figures who helped with that. Carter Brey, who is a cello soloist and eventually principal cellist of the New York Philharmonic, is a good friend of Mark's and I think he had a fairly integral role in some of the early commissions, like the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. So I think Yo-Yo's projects were really pivotal; that collaboration also gave Edgar Meyer a platform as a composer, and his collaborations after Mark — collaborating with Joshua Bell — gave him much, much more classical credibility. It's really fascinating to hear Tessa [Lark] play this stuff that was initially Josh Bell playing, because she's someone who's uniquely positioned to play [this] music from an insider's perspective.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I feel like she sidesteps some of the possible appropriation concerns.

David Wallace:

Yes. People weren't talking about appropriation in the nineties. I think it's complicated, because you have a lot of composers where, if you're creating music, you want to be able to work with whatever materials you can. You don't want to think about things as being off limits. But you can get into complicated territories, and you can also get into situations where the results are bad.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Matt, do you have anything to chime in with?

Matt Glaser:

I'm just listening to this fascinating conversation. It makes me think about all of the players who have mastered various idioms, and the effect that their multifaceted mastery has had.

For some reason the story of Harry Lookofsky entered my mind. Harry Lookofsky, this amazing classical violinist, who was the concertmaster of the NBC Symphony under Toscanini, also learned how to play jazz without ever improvising. He would have people write jazz charts

for him, and it was totally incredible jazz playing. He somehow learned how to play the lines with the articulation and appropriate absence of vibrato, and all kinds of things that are characteristic of jazz players without himself having to improvise, and because of his existence as a person who could play classical violin on a very high level, and written jazz on a very high level, that stimulated all kinds of arrangers and composers — not in a classical sense, in a pop and jazz sense — to write for him.

Edgar Meyer, in his own performing life is able to play fiddle tunes and play in a bluegrass context, and he hung around enough with those people that he could function in that way, playing melodic material in a fiddly way on the bass. So his experience as a performer informs his own compositions. The fact that he learned enough about these things by ear to be able to play them with some degree of vibe and accuracy. I confess that I haven't listened to this piece yet, I tend to be suspicious of these things. I'm suspicious of them, because I remember hearing Yo-Yo Ma — who we all love — on the Johnny Carson show, or Itzhak Perlman, and hearing these cats playing "jazz" on TV. There's also a video of Perlman playing fiddle music, "Bill Cheatham" or something like that. And the idea that these other styles of music are so easy to learn that you could just play [them]. If you have good chops, you could just play some jazz, you could play some fiddle music.

For myself, I always say, "I've been trying to play old-time fiddle for fifty years, and I suck at it." I'm not as good as any old-time fiddler at Berklee, so to go really deep into any one of these styles is a lifetime's work. And so the dilettantism aspect of this is troubling to me, because I

know from my own experience that any style is a lifetime's work, and even with a lifetime you're not really going to get there. I would say there are no jazz violinists on earth; all these amazing people are not yet at the level to be called jazz violin players. I could listen to Bruce Molsky the rest of my life, but I'll never, ever get to that level. There are these people now who are great classical players, and really have absorbed quite a bit of these other styles. I'd love to hear Michael Cleveland play a concerto, you know.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's funny, because I interviewed Michael Torke a couple of days ago, and he was suggesting that it might be an interesting thing to hand Michael Cleveland this concerto.

Matt Glaser:

He's playing with the Louisville Symphony, I've been seeing Instagram clips. I don't know what he's doing, but there's a great clip of all the violin players in the orchestra with their eyes open while Michael is taking a solo.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Would you be up for me playing a couple of audio clips for you? Let me put a little bit of context around this first one. The backstory is, I heard Tessa play this piece last year in Oregon, because the Oregon Mozart Players, which is a local orchestra, was one of the groups that commissioned the piece. A friend of mine was in the orchestra, and was like, "Sarah. You have

to come to this concert. It's a fiddle concerto. This is so up your alley. Be there." And I'm very grateful.

And so the piece starts, and I was perplexed because this is not fiddle music. And yet, something about this is evoking that sense for me so strongly. And in discussing it with Michael Torke, he said he was expressing a banjo roll on the violin. Understanding that, and then listening further along in the piece, I realized he's actually following the banjo function: the soloist is just noodling along, but the other instruments are carrying the melodic material. But this is the opening, and I'm curious to get your gut reaction.

[The opening of the first movement plays]

Matt Glaser:

You know, another thing to put into the mix is Jean Luc Ponti's *New Country.* Instead of classical concerto meets fiddle music, jazz meets fiddle music, and the attempt of other styles to blend. Or there's a Michael Brecker piece, "Itsbynne Reel," that Mark O'Connor played on. There's a similar thing going on with this, where people are hearing some elements of the folk music and translating them into this higher-level technical version of the thing. Anyway, that's interesting. It's great. It sounds great.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So, is there anything that stands out to either of you in terms of how this is coded fiddle for the listener?

David Wallace:

I think a lot of it certainly goes to the syncopated rhythms. My belief is that Southern fiddling owes a profound debt to the musical traditions of Western Africa. You can listen to folk fiddle traditions north of the Mason-Dixon line versus south of it, and the real difference is a profound amount of cross rhythm and syncopation. And that's what fed into the black string band traditions which fed into bluegrass. Is that the reverse cakewalk rhythm? [Wallace chants "Boobop she-bam" rhythmically]

Matt Glaser:

It's just a regular cakewalk rhythm.

David Wallace:

So that's not going on in Celtic music. There is a lot of African rhythmic DNA in Southern fiddle traditions, and I think that's part of what we're hearing. There's also a lot of pentatonicism, which is also very present in Appalachian music, in a lot of fiddle tunes and

things. And so I think those two things are some of the coding that you're hearing, or the strands of the musical elements that are feeding into it.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I definitely agree with the pentatonicism. There's a mixolydian aspect to it as well, which again, feels very much like your Irish or Scottish tune.

David Wallace:

Plenty of flat sevens in bluegrass, too. Think "Wheel Hoss."

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes, indeed.

Matt Glaser:

You know, it's so interesting. She [Tessa Lark] is threading the needle very finely, because there's that banjo roll element. But if Michael Cleveland, Bruce Molsky, or Darol Anger had done it, it would sound more fiddly. She's vibrating in a certain way, so it sounds like a classical violin gloss on a banjo roll, not a not a bluegrass fiddling gloss on a banjo roll.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Can I play you another excerpt here? This is a spot where I think she does some phenomenal code switching on a dime, because it goes from one of the only truly melodic parts for the violin in this movement — we get about eight measures of a really pretty melody — and then it pivots, and this is the moment where she starts flexing some some real fiddle chops. And it's just stunning to see the hairpin turn.

Matt Glaser:

It's an interesting thing. This is not that far from Bernstein's violin concerto, *Serenade After Plato's Symposium*. It's just a few inches away from it.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

The second movement is very much rooted in the Irish tradition, and this one is really interesting to me because there is no ornamentation represented in the score. Yet when you listen to Tessa play it, she's incorporated a whole bunch of ornamentation, and I would say this feels like an authentic personal voice.

David Wallace:

It makes me happy to hear that she's ornamenting and embellishing it. You know that that also goes against his program notes, where he says everything is written out, nothing is improvised. He needs to change that.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

She's all over this thing!

David Wallace:

When I listen to that, it's very natural, very Irish.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

She's got the dialect down, it felt very natural. I think one of my favorite things about it is the fact that she chose to go without vibrato for a good chunk of it. Later on it goes to places where it's in a higher register and you need to vibrate, or you're gonna sound like a squeaky mouse. But it's interesting to work on this piece myself; it's fun to listen to the ornamentation choices she's made, and feel that I have quite a lot of freedom to make my own ornamentation choices, because it's not written down.

Matt Glaser:

Aoife Ní Bhriain, she's a classical violin virtuoso. She recorded the Shostokovich violin concerto, but she comes from a traditional Irish music family. Her father's a piper, and she's doing a whole lot of work on Tommy Potts, that's how I know her. I keep coming back to individuals in my mind who have embodied these two different traditions; she's a person who

could play that concerto really beautifully. One thing I was struck by in the recording you played, Sarah, was that she [Tessa Lark] never took her bow off the string for one microsecond. That's very weird, it was just a constant bow on the string. I'm always looking for a break in the sound, a momentary breath. This is the commercial recording of this concerto? It won a Grammy, you said?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

It was nominated. Strangely it went up against the Wynton Marsalis violin concerto that also has some fiddle elements, as well as an entire blues movement. And that's the one that won. Two of them in the same year.

David Wallace:

The Torke concerto was also a runner up for the Pulitzer. So it's been getting some acclaim.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So the third movement has the most generalized fiddle things involved. Lots of slides, lots of double stops. Let's listen to this and see what your reactions are.

[The opening to the 3rd movement plays]

Matt Glaser:

Anytime anyone goes, “Daa-da daa-da daa-da daa” [Matt Glaser sings “Tarantella Napoletana”] I want to punch them in the nose.

David Wallace:

You’re okay with tarantellas, but not with the approximate notation of swing.

Matt Glaser:

So it's pretty good, but it's edging in that [tarantella] direction rhythmically.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I will say that it is notated as triplets, so I think she’s being faithful to the notated page. I have another excerpt where I feel like it loosens up a little bit, and it feels a little more natural. Let me play this one for you. [Excerpt from the 3rd movement plays]

Matt Glaser:

But this is fascinating. Really, I’m shocked at how it’s much less modern sounding than I would have thought a modern classical concerto could get away with being in terms of linguistically, orchestrally. This is an orchestral language that existed forty years ago.

David Wallace:

Well, part of it is who Torke is, you know. A lot of his stuff kind of comes from minimalism or post minimalism, whatever you want to call it. And I feel like that essence of him is still very much in this concerto. But it's also funneled through the vernacular music language that's possible, given Tessa's background. But you're right, it's not pushing any sort of harmonic envelope at all.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I feel like that's probably deliberate, in service of marketability, if nothing else.

Matt Glaser:

Yeah, yeah, that's totally reasonable. You want your shit to be heard, and this is a piece that anybody would dig listening to. It's not going to alienate anybody.

David Wallace:

I think from that perspective he nailed the commission: "I'm writing for this artist, and I'm also writing for these orchestras," and he wrote a piece that lets her do what she does, and that every single audience loves — I mean looking at some of the reviews you have ovations in between movements and things — and so I think from that standpoint it's very successful. Another thing I think is worth mentioning is that concertos get short shrift when it comes to rehearsal, with

most orchestras. And so, as a composer, if you are writing really hard or complex stuff, unless it's a really great orchestra or a commissioning orchestra that is guaranteed to spend a lot of time on it, you've got to plan for this piece to get one rehearsal. And not only that, but the concertmaster and the principals are gonna be in their dressing rooms, because in most of the big orchestras they get to take the concerto off for the concert because of their other responsibilities.

And so in a sense, if you're composing for success, you're going to avoid doing extraordinarily difficult things with your concerto. I mean, this is not necessarily a simple piece, and I haven't studied the score, but that's very much the reality. If I'm composing a concerto, I've got to keep in mind that I'm not going to get a lot of rehearsal time.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

From the score study that I've done, rhythmically, it's quite involved. Harmonically, less so. As a symphony player, I can appreciate that. If I have that one rehearsal to look at for something, if you're gonna toss something at me, pick one. Give me something that's difficult rhythmically or give me weird harmonic passages. But please don't make me do both if I've got a week to learn this thing.

I really appreciate you taking the time and giving some perspective on the Torke concerto. It's been fascinating to talk to different people and hear what they think about it, kind of pulling together a mosaic picture.

David Wallace:

I think it's really enjoyable. I appreciate the fact that he did the commission. The one thing that I kind of wish is that, when I read the program note and he talked about how "Every note is composed," no improvisation, immediately I was flashing back to John Adams who said something similar when he wrote *The Dharma at Big Sur* for Tracy Silverman. It's almost this composer thing of wanting to control every note, or write every note, or get credit for every note. Of course, in the composer's defense, I know people will ask how much of that is improvised or not, and there might be some pieces where nothing is improvised, but it's intended to sound that way. But you know part of me was like, what if you gave Tessa an improvised cadenza moment?

The person who plays *The Dharma at Big Sur* the most, I think, is Leila Josefowicz. She doesn't improvise, as far as I know. You know, if it were required for the performer to improvise, that would have excluded her from playing it. But I think we're also getting to a point where there are enough people who are improvisers; it's coming back as something that's done. I think there could be a lot more potential to give the soloist some more freedom there.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Tessa said yesterday that after the first premiere, Michael came back to her with a cadenza for the third movement. And so, at a subsequent concert she did a hybrid of some of the material that he had written with some improvised material. I guess it got a really good response. But in her estimation it made things too long. She's playing from top to bottom on this piece, she's like, "Why do I need a cadenza in this?"

David Wallace:

Yeah, it is a pretty big piece. That was something that struck me, most of the movements are fairly substantial.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

But it's an interesting thing to imagine. What could that be like? And is there the possibility, knowing that a cadenza has existed, could you, as the performer, make the choice to just insert a cadenza here? To write your own?

David Wallace:

Now, that's an interesting thing, because the question is, is, do the soloist and composer have the final word on that? Or do you open it back up? When I first moved to New York there were still two opera companies at Lincoln Center. You had the New York City Opera and the

Met. And City Opera had to find a way to make a company work when you had the Met next door. So in addition to featuring young up-and-coming singers, or doing commissions or baroque opera, they would do unusual versions of things. I don't remember the exact year, but they did an earlier version of Madam Butterfly that Puccini had later revised. And I was really curious! There's this scene at the wedding where this drunken uncle shows up and sings a sort of weird song, and I guess Puccini later thought better of it. And you wonder if you were able to ask him, "Hey! Guess what, they're bringing the drunken uncle back!" if he would say, "No! Not the drunken uncle, please."

Or you have the Sibelius violin concerto. Sometime in the nineties there was a Finnish violinist who recorded a previous version, which is now getting recorded and performed. One of the interesting things about having a concerto that multiple people interpret is seeing how different people approach things, what is their own take on it, their own signature. As soon as there's a second performance, in terms of a different soloist or a second recording, that starts to open up the box a lot more. Because when it's just one person and just one recording, then you have something that's definitive, and that may be what it is.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I'm really curious to see where this ends up going, how much longevity it has, and if other people pick it up.

David Wallace:

There's no way of knowing. When Mark O'Connor wrote his first violin concerto, I want to say there were about forty orchestras that signed on; for one of his concertos, there was a huge consortium. So when you have a lot of orchestras behind something that helps. But as long as Tessa loves playing it and wants to champion it, there are possibilities. But I think a challenge with orchestras is that you have a finite number of soloists per season. And not all of those are gonna be violin, so how dedicated are you to giving your audience something they don't know, or something more recent? Or how much do you wanna play it safe and just program another Brahms concerto?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin

Well, I so appreciate you giving me this much of your time, I really have enjoyed getting a chance to talk to you. Hopefully I'll be in Boston sometime, and we can meet in person.

David Wallace:

This was wonderful. I wish you all the best with it, and enjoy the rest of the interviews and the lecture performance and everything else.

Matt Glaser:

Sarah, it's so great to see you. You've never changed your fanatical interest in all things musical, and God love you for that.

APPENDIX E

Conversation between Mari Black and Sarah Wilfong Joblin

March 4th, 2024

Mari Black has enough fiddling awards to fill a bookcase, but she is most known for winning the Scottish Glenfiddich Fiddle Championship, the U.S. National Fiddle Championship (twice), and the Canadian Maritime Fiddle Championship all within the same three year period. While fiddle is her primary performance vehicle, Black is an accomplished violinist, having earned a Doctorate in Education from Colombia University and a Masters in Violin Performance from Yale School of Music. She is also a skillful educator, teaching at fiddle camps around the country and training the next generation of fiddle champions.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

So to kick things off, part of my research question revolves around a concept I'm calling "the third path," as a designation for hybrid violinist-fiddle players. And I was wondering if you'd be willing to talk a little bit about your background and where you see yourself on the continuum of violin and fiddle, or if you even see it as a continuum.

Mari Black:

Yeah. So I grew up with joint interests: the folk fiddling was primarily the Down East Canadian styles to begin with, and then that grew into the Irish, Scottish, Texas styles, and everything else. I was trained in the conservatory for classical music. I went to the Yale School of Music for graduate school, and I competed internationally in a bunch of different styles.

And today I tour, perform, and teach in all different styles. So, my students will play Vivaldi concertos and Piazolla tangos; not transcriptions, but the real thing. And they hold titles with the US Scottish Fiddle Championship, and they're improvising blues. It's all just music. And so I don't really see this line between violinist and fiddler, I think that's a modern construction.

I get asked all the time at shows, "What's the difference between a violin and a fiddle?" I know you know this well! Whoever put out the idea that they're different instruments… When I find them, I'm not going to be very happy with them. They're probably dead now.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Go! Make a time machine, and then you can give them a piece of your mind! And please give them a piece of mine as well.

Mari Black:

I have a feeling I will be taking a piece of many minds with me on this time-travel journey. But it appears to me to be a very modern American concept. It just doesn't exist in, say, the UK or in Canada. Everybody does RCM [Royal Conservatory of Music] levels, and asking what level RCM you are is sort of like asking what grade you are in school. It's like, of course we're doing that. And then, of course, we're playing fiddle in the summer, why wouldn't you?

So stylistically, it comes down to their different traditions with different values, different beliefs, and how music is learned and passed down, and ideas about what is important to retain. That it's important to have your own individual artistic voice. And so I look at every style like that. It's not, "Here's classical, and here's everybody else." That's just not how the scale is balanced, when you look in the music world and see what's actually going on. They're just cognates in different languages.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I agree, a hundred percent on that track.

When you talk about growing up with fiddle styles, how did you interact with them? Was it through fiddle camps? Was it through local community jam sessions?

Mari Black:

Yeah. So the camps were leader for me. My first one was when I was fourteen or so, I went to the old Mark O'Connor camp. But I was fiddling from when I was six, seven, maybe five, I don't know, what is time?! I grew up in Maine, and New England had a totally vibrant folk music scene. While I was growing up, my mom would play for contra dances, and I would go and dance myself sick for the first half of the dance, and then fall asleep under the piano during the second half. We were involved in this group called the Maine French Fiddlers, and they played for dances and community events. There were fiddle contests. As long as you were willing to drive a few hours you could go to a fiddle contest every weekend, which is just a bunch of fiddlers in the field all day, usually attached to county fairs and things like that. We would perform our three tunes, but the rest of the day we would hang out and we'd jam.

I was adopted by the senior fiddlers — I mean, all the kids were — the sixty-five-and-over crew. They called themselves the Fiddle Geezers. I loved them, because they would sit and play tunes with us for hours and hours and hours and hours, and they made us feel like rock stars. And I was so amazed with their repertoire, they knew hundreds of thousands of tunes, and it didn't matter if some of them were making kind of a scratchy sound, or had arthritic fingers that couldn't move as fast anymore. They had this wonderful sense of it being folk music: we play for dances, and we play for each other, and we pass it down. So that tradition was real, and vibrant, and venerable to me. As you know, my mom is a classical cellist and pianist, and so every couple of weeks we'd be driving down to New York. She was playing at Carnegie Hall or the Radio City Music Hall, and I was touring with junior chamber groups at a high level very young, and so it seemed like two different versions of the same thing.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I love the idea of the geezer fiddler squad. I had a similar experience in Chicago with the Irish music scene and session culture. My mom was taking me to pubs when I was eleven and twelve, and I just hung out with the old dudes. But they're the ones with the best tunes, so you hang with the old dudes.

Mari Black:

Yep, the best tunes! It's funny, when I was young, six or seven, people would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I'd be like, "A fiddle geezer!" So I was the kid who just couldn't wait to be eighty, and I still feel like that. The journey goes slowly, but I guess you gotta learn all those tunes somehow.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's amazing. I want to adopt that as a life goal! That's such a beautiful lens to view aging through.

Mari Black:

Yeah, and it seems pretty attainable. I bet I could do that. All you gotta do is stay out of traffic and keep learning tunes: done and done!

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I don't know if you're at all familiar with this Michael Torke concerto, have you had an opportunity to hear it performed anywhere, or is this the first time it's hit your awareness?

Mari Black:

I hadn't heard of it before you contacted me, but I listened to it a couple of times and did some research. When there's a new piece I like to just listen for impressions first, and then do a little digging, and then listen again to see how the facts align with my initial impressions. I didn't know *this* piece, but I've done a lot of work with fiddle pieces crossing the fiddle/classical line. I played the first Mark O'Connor fiddle concerto way back in the day. I did *The American Seasons* [also composed by O'Connor] with orchestra when I was competing internationally with classical stuff. One of my signature pieces was the *3 Country Fiddle Pieces* by Paul Schoenfield, which is fantastic. So I know the genre; I guess it's a genre to itself. But no, you're the first person to bring it to me. Have you performed this?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I'm currently working on it; I'm going to be using it for my lecture recital, and my final DMA recital. I am in the weeds with it currently, and I'm like, dang. Tessa Lark is a beast.

Mari Black:

Yeah, yeah, she is. It's a great performance. And there are a lot of weeds to get through.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

I first heard this piece performed because one of the orchestras that commissioned it is a Eugene-based orchestra, and so a friend of mine gave me a comp ticket. And I was listening to it and thinking, this is a fiddle concerto, but why? Because this is not a fiddle tune.

So after listening to it and reading some stuff that Torke had written, and then later interviewing both him and Tessa Lark, I have a sense of their perspectives and motivations. But I would like to play a couple of excerpts for you and quickly bounce them off of you and get your reaction: what are we hearing that codes this as fiddle in our brains? What's actually going on?

Mari Black:

These are the questions that I ask when I listen. Absolutely.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Uh-huh, yeah. I figured you would. So this is the opening of the first movement.

[The opening of the first movement plays]

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

According to Torke, this is supposed to simulate banjo picking, which I think is an interesting choice. So if he's simulating banjo-picking, then what I'm hearing is somewhat orchestration based, but also related to rhythm, tonality or mode. What's hitting you?

Mari Black:

Yeah, there are a few layers of things going on here to me. I think a lot of how fiddly pieces come across comes down to the performance. My first questions are always about who the player is, and right away this is very clearly bluegrassy, a country fiddle kind of thing, the one eighth two sixteenth pattern — what some people call a single shuffle — that's a characteristic thing on repeated pitches.

I think that "Boil Them Cabbage Down" feel flags this as fiddle in our heads. The use of slides, as well. I often talk about slides as being wet or dry, and these slides, they're kind of wet, but quick, right? So it's about the speed and how juicy it is. And that flags it as more American for me. A drier slide would be more Irish to me, more to the Celtic side, and the juicier ones are a little more to the American side.

The tension for me always comes up right away with the bow stroke. And that's where it was interesting to realize he is thinking of this as banjo picking. Okay! Because what could potentially code it as banjo picking would be a more off-the-string stroke, like a thick marcato or spiccato. And she [Tessa Lark] is using that here.

But that [using a spiccato stroke] *also* a thing that classical violinists do when they're trying to make a fiddle sound! I'm sure you know, because you've taught—as many of us do—a lot of classical people [how to play] fiddle. And when the classical players—really experienced advanced classical players—come to me, their goal is to pass as a fiddler without getting flagged as a classical violinist. The first thing we have to go after is the bow stroke, because it is an interesting thing that a lot of fiddling is on the string. Nearly 100% of it, we almost never come off the string.

But it *sounds* off the string because of the groove. When the stick is really engaged, there's a certain thing that can happen, especially in the Celtic styles: the Cape Breton style especially, there's a sautillé-like effect that can happen. Everybody thinks that it's off the string. None of the Cape Bretonners have the technique to take the bow off the string, it's never gonna happen! It's a sautillé -like effect, but one that is very commonly misheard. Right away, before reading anything, I knew she [Tessa Lark] was bluegrassy, or that was her sensibility. But I thought she was a classical person who was imitating that sound and falling into that standard trap. Turns out that's not true, she knows more than that; and so the banjo picking would be off the string.

Now, if I think about imitating a banjo, which I've spent way too much time doing while transcribing Bela Fleck and arranging *Strength in Numbers* tunes for string quartets and quintets for festivals (it's a blast and I usually am the one stuck with Bela Fleck's part because it scares the living daylights out of everybody else, which I'm totally fine with), I'm really locked into banjo lines, which is hilarious because I don't tour with banjo players. I don't get to play with them very often, but in banjo picking there's much more noodling string crossing stuff. And that's not represented in this figuration very prominently. If he [Michael Torke] had that, the bow stroke wouldn't be as red flaggy for me. It's got half of the end of the stick that would make me go. Aha! Banjo picking!

And we see this a lot anytime somebody crosses into a genre that's not theirs, and it's very cool when they do well because we get these neat hybrids. But often you'll latch onto a specific feature and then leave half of the equation on the table. So there is an interesting hybrid going on here: if I were playing this piece I would probably never play it off the string. (Gosh! I hope he doesn't cut me down!) If my goal is to stress that it's a fiddle concerto, I would keep it on the string and say, it's banjo flavored. I wouldn't try to make the literal sound of the picking without the string crossings that go with it.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

From a practical standpoint, coming off the string seems necessary to navigate some of the string crossings, because it jumps around a lot.

Mari Black:

Yeah, you'd either have to do that, or shift up to a position where you're out of the timbre that you need. If it were me, having trodden this path in other pieces, often what I end up doing is choosing to keep it on the string but I will introduce extra double stops. It supports both the banjo and the fiddle in this case, and it helps me make the string crossing. I'll keep it as clean as I can, but just a little bit. That's usually the compromise I personally end up making.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

It was really interesting to listen to both Michael and Tessa talk about their experience with the collaboration; he came in without any preconceived notions of what fiddle is, and did a bunch of self-education. And this is what resulted.

Mari Black:

It's very much of the Copeland kind of vibe, American folk sound in the classical genre. I think there's a very strong tradition and precedent for doing things like that. Do I call it a fiddle concerto?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

He’s not making that claim himself, he's calling it a violin concerto. But he’s been very open about acknowledging fiddle music as his inspiration.

Mari Black:

I think it’s really cool. I was reading a little bit of what he said about the piece this morning, and he’s not pretending to know anything he doesn’t know. He’s saying, “This is a violin concerto, heavily influenced by these things.” 100% correct, that is what it is!

But if we're talking about a style guide, how do we approach something like this? I think that is an interesting question, if your goal is to reach generations of violinists who are trained in the classical tradition, and who are trying to learn about fiddling styles. Throughout this piece, the consideration of how to handle the bow stroke is a big deal. It’s a big deal with every single one of these pieces, and so that’s a category where I always have decisions to make.

Another category is rhythm, right? Because we associate the word “groove” with traditional fiddle styles. And this doesn’t have the same kind of groove. People tend to associate very strong offbeats with fiddle styles, which is another one of those sonic versions of an optical illusion, like the bow stroke. It is almost never off the string. The downbeats are very strong in the Celtic and Canadian dance styles because it has to be that way for the dancers. Same for the Scottish and the English country dancing. There’s a heavy bounce onto the offbeat, but we’re not emphasizing the

offbeat. It’s not a swing feel like blues and jazz, where it is offbeat-based. We do not clap on two and four in fiddle styles, we clap on one.

But this idea of it being swingy, there’s an emphasis that can happen through the bowing that’s often clave based. Just little nudges. And within that, allowing pairs of running notes to be a little bit unequal. This is another big difference between the classical genre and the other dance-based genres of fiddle music. Classical players, as we all know all too well, train hours and years and months and lifetimes to be able to equalize the upbow with the downbow to have an even détaché [stroke]. And fiddlers don't do that, that we instead use gravity. We want a chuga-chuga-chuga-chuga feel; we’re allowing gravity to take the downbow, and then the upbow bounces off of the downbow. We don’t work the upbow. We don’t put any juice into it to try or equalize what gravity is giving us on the downbow. And that’s one of the toughest things to unlearn. If you’re coming from classical music and you want to pass as a fiddler, you have to get that in your body, or else you will always be flagged as a classical player.

So she [Tessa Lark] is playing very even eighth notes here and that pushes it more towards that classical sound. When I play these kinds of pieces, I usually choose to groove them, to un-equalize the upbows and the downbows. Now, I don’t have problems with that in this section, because another thing about the offbeats is he [Michael Torke] is starting things on the offbeats. The rests on strong beats, which you would never find in fiddle tunes, it’s interesting. We go back to the [banjo] picking that's always [picked] down, up, down, up, down, up. They very rarely have double strokes, because you can’t do it. So there are always running notes going, but the grooves

are created, based on which notes are strengthened and weakened. We wouldn't leave a rest, it's too tough at that tempo.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

It's freaking amazing, right? I would be coming late nearly every entrance, and you can hear some of those places that the orchestra is working hard to keep up.

Mari Black:

Yes, I don't blame them. It's not even that they are entering late, it's just hard to make it not speak late, especially for woodwinds. That's very difficult. And that's another argument for being off the string, right? Because when you do that, you get a "pah" sound -like a hard consonant- and it will speak faster. So there's tension there.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

And I wonder, too, about the decision to be off the string partially because of that possibility for a percussive beginning to the sound and the ability to project over the orchestra. That's probably a practical consideration as well.

Mari Black:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Looking at this piece and just based on gut instinct, I would spend the first week trying to figure out how on the string I can get without losing the projection, the speaking, and the rhythm. Also the string crossings and double stops. And again I would feel very differently working on a piece with a living composer than with one who's no longer with us, because I can't ask for clarification. I can ask neither forgiveness nor permission.

But you know, if this were a piece that was written fifty or sixty years ago, 100 years ago, I would probably be filling in some of those rests. And again, these are liberties that I would never take with a standard canon classical piece: they are liberties that are taken as a matter of tradition with the fiddling pieces. So it's about which value do I place first? Is this, first a violin concerto with fiddle sensibilities, or this is a fiddle concerto that happens to be with an orchestra and requires that kind of technical virtuosity.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Since you bring up the two different value systems, I have a question about the power dynamic between those two groups. I feel like we could make some assumptions about these two styles like commingling in a piece like this, such as we've got the tradition of the orchestra. We have the tradition of the concerto. We have this established lineage, heritage, concertizing practice, concert space, all of these things. In the United States we tend to believe that special people play this music, and fancy people go to concert halls to hear this music. And then we have the fiddle

traditions which have no less of a pedigree, they just come from a different space and have different set of values. Are we looking at a situation where the classical music is "reaching down" and elevating the fiddle music, or are we looking at fiddle music infiltrating the classical space and enlivening it? I think you could make an argument either way. But who has the power in this dynamic? I'm not sure that I have a clear answer.

Mari Black:

Your phrasing of power dynamic is really interesting, because I have spent almost no time thinking about that. Any time somebody starts to get precious about, "This is how it's done," I'm the first one to be irreverent and be like, "Dude! chill out. I'm gonna pull 300 examples out of the top of my brain that are counter to what you're saying." I'm that guy. I've been thrown out of every traditional Irish session in Boston for misbehaving, and it's like, whatever, you don't like harmonies, fine. I'll go do them somewhere else. If you don't want somebody to chop, fine. Whatever.

You'll also find nobody who venerates tradition more than I do like. I want to know every lineage, every player who passed this tune down, and every possible version: I'm gonna transcribe every one of them, and pick apart why they're different, what choices they make, and why they do it. Tradition is important, but it should never be precious. When it gets precious I start to get very rebellious.

So to me, the living composer changes things because with composers, intentions are important. Composers are subject to the same balance of values that performers are. Many years ago I started using the idea of a fraction—a numerator and denominator—to classify styles on a spectrum. From how much we religiously go with what the composer's intent: what is shown on the page (whether there's a literal page or not), to what is for the artist to decide? Because that's the central question with every style. What am I meant to respect, and what am I meant to take ownership of as a part of the performance?

And so in my fraction the top is what is up to the artist, and the bottom is what the tradition says we are supposed to stick with. And everybody's got a slightly different view on it. What is not up for grabs for me: in classical music, the denominator [is what] you cannot touch. If it is written, you must do this: notes, rhythm, dynamics, and any expressive markings there are. If it's on the page, you do it.

There are a couple of caveats like knowing your editions, and knowing the different composers; who really means what they say, and who's kind of wishy-washy. The numerator is phrasing, direction, and nuance; gradient of dynamic and expression; that's for you. Color of sound, that's for you.

If you go all the way to the opposite end of the spectrum, you get more improvised styles like jazz. But if you look at bebop, underneath is rhythm and chord changes which serve as the denominator. And now even that has a caveat, because you can substitute chord changes, but I think of them as chord change tubes: if it says G7 I actually have these six or seven different

options. But for the numerator, we have melody and rhythm. These things are up for grabs, you can make up your own melodies. Those are the rules, right?

So I think I would have questions for Michael Torke about how he sees himself: does he see himself as a composer of classical music? What is he in love with about his melodies? What does he want to make sure we really protect over the generations? What does he want our help as the performers protecting, and which parts would he feel okay or even enthusiastic about if somebody reinterprets it? In the Scottish tradition, we don't talk about jigs and reels and airs. We talk about 4/4's and 6/8's. Neil Gow, the Bach of Scottish fiddling, if he writes a tune in 4/4, it's not necessarily a reel. It could be a reel, a strathspey, a march, or an air, and you could play it as all four. He did, and he expects us to as well. As a composer, you're not even in control of what kind of tune the melody is.[167] And that's just a part of the tradition, and it is considered cool. Nobody is saying, "What have you done with my tune?" So I think the value of asking what are we protecting from the composer's intention, and what does the composer leave to our discretion is great. If the composer is living, I want to know where they place themselves on the spectrum.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Well, to speak to that point, I want to play you a little excerpt from the opening of the second movement. The interesting thing about this is that the score literally says, "Bow in the Irish style." There is no marked ornamentation. There are bowing suggestions which I actually think are pretty

[167] In the Scottish tradition, the same tune can be performed at different tempos with different feels.

on point in terms of beat groupings or partial beat groupings that make a certain give a decent feel. But it's interesting to see liberties that are being taken.

[Opening of second movement plays]

Mari Black:

I was curious how much of that was marked. In the score, what are the suggested bowings? Is he slurring threes or fours?

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

A combination. There are a lot of fours, but there are some spots where he's got little hemiola figures where they're slurred in threes. No other ornamentation is marked at all, that's just her [Tessa Lark].

Mari Black:

So she got the "tap between two repeated notes" grace note move. That's a move I talk about with my students; you can get very deep into styles, but it's also a little like doing imitations; other accents with your voice. If you say, "Eh," that's a big flag that you're Canadian. If you could put one ornament on the Wheaties box to represent Irish music, what would it be? Because you've got to make sure you're hitting those. She got that one big time, really good move.

“Bow in the Irish style.” If I were editing this piece, I would probably have a little asterisk and a guide that explains the tiniest bit of what the heck that is.

The thing that I would specify is that Irish bowing—you can speak to this as well, cause you're also in that tradition—but four note slurs are very rare because it's too smooth. That’s how we lose our offbeat feel. They [Irish fiddlers] phrase with their bowing, so there is more slurring than in other Celtic traditions, but it tends to be groups of threes.

I have developed what I call the Bowing Index, which shows bowings that are commonly used in different styles of fiddling. So if you’re trying to make one style or another, you would usually pick two of those as the mascots, and one as a counter. So my group calls this the Smooth Hook Three: three slurred, three slurred, two separate within the bar. We also get a lot of what I call palindrome bowings: three slurred, two separate, three slurred. Very typical Irish sounds.

So I would give a couple of examples and say that these are gestures that are commonly used in Irish music. That’s an easy win, right? You don’t have to know a thing about Irish music, you just have to make the appropriate noise. It’s like saying, “Eh,” at the end of a sentence.

However, when people start to give concrete examples it’s easy to get pedantic and over-interpret. There are a lot of things—like we’re saying about playing on versus the off the string—where you hear something, you imitate the sound of the thing that is most obvious to you, and it becomes

overly present. There's very little that's actually accented in folk music. You can't accent too much, because it's like bashing the dancers in the face with a frying pan. And then you wonder why it doesn't groove.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Well, since you brought up groove as a concept. I've got a couple of examples from the third movement, which is the one that's most obviously coded "generic fiddle."

[Opening of 3rd movement plays]

It's notated in triplets, so I feel like she [Tessa Lark] was making a deliberate choice to follow the written material. Later on, she leans more into a groove feel. It's interesting to hear the switch.

Mari Black:

I had a feeling he was writing triplets, he mentioned triplets when he was talking about the movement in some of his written material.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

And why would you write it as swung eighth notes unless you're living in that world? It *sounds* like loose triplets. But there are a lot of, as you called them, juicy slides in this example (which I think is a really excellent visual descriptor, by the way).

Mari Black:

So to me, a lot comes down to the rhythm, which is very much affected by the bow stroke. She's using a heavy, long, brush stroke here, and so that will always make it sound more square. There's space in between the notes, so you're rounding off everything. If she were to play that on the string, it would swing more. It comes off as a very heavy swing feel: it's *too* heavy, and that's what makes it sound almost artificial. When people start playing [fiddle styles], it used to be that the classical world's way of notating swing was to use a dotted eighth and a sixteenth, which is way too exaggerated! And then somewhere, post-late Copeland, they started using triplets. That's closer, but it's still too literal. Swing is the space in between. Not quite a triplet, and not equal eighth notes. It's not about a specific rhythmic measurement, it's about a gravitational measurement. I'm speaking as a violinist obviously! But it's about a natural positive inequality between pairs of notes, that is based on a gravitational principle. You can't put that on a page. But I can see why he chose triplets if he's trying to present this to the classical world. That is currently the best option available to us.

Now, if I was writing as a performer-composer, I would include instructions where I would say these triplets are meant to denote a swing feel, they are not to be played as literal triplets. [The triplet] is used to show that in the group of two, there's a strong and a weak. Please play on the string for best results. Because then, at least, it's a grayer area.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That's a good point. And I do think the opening is a really good opportunity for that, because the orchestration is so thin: it's just bass. You could really play with the rhythmic interpretation there, and I"s not going to throw anybody else out of whack.

Mari Black:

Yeah, absolutely. I would note that swing is a concept that is undefinable. Obviously, I'd have to find a very succinct way to say this, people have been trying for decades to describe swing! The best description is Fats Waller, which (and I paraphrase) is, "If I have to explain it to you, you don't get it." But I think a word that's really important for people coming from non-swinging traditions is subtlety. There's a subtlety to swing, when we hear it coming from the classical world where everything is squared off rhythmically, swing sounds very dramatic to us, and then we over dramatize it.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

What is your feeling on the amount of bow grit that you find acceptable to use in hybrid pieces like this?

Mari Black:

Great, great question. It depends on the section, because a lot of that comes down to—you said it earlier—projection. If it's a concerto, there's a very practical projection concern: I have to get on top of the orchestra. I'm not gonna do that by being loud, I'm going to do that by being clear. The top of the note has to speak and so I don't have a lot of room for that Cape Bretony, old-timey grit that I would use for pieces like the Schoenfield *Three Country Fiddle Pieces*. [I] put a lot of grit into that, but the accompaniment is piano.

There is a practical technique to concerto playing that doesn't leave a ton of room for grit, but it would depend on the orchestration. This excerpt [the opening of the third movement], you nailed it, because it's a little sparser. This is probably where I would do a grittier, more country kind of sound.

I definitely would look for easy wins, and also easy things to give up. I'm going to have to make compromises and play with a less fiddly bow than I would like because of things that we talked about: string crossings, tempo, offbeats, and concerto projection. But something I can give up without any difficulty at all is vibrato.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

Yes! I think the fact that she [Tessa Lark] opens the second movement without vibrato is great.

Mari Black:

It’s a good choice, because it’s an easy thing if you’re balancing the scale between the classical sensibilities and the fiddle sensibilities. You need to think of easy things that each side can give up without losing their identity, because it’s important that both identities be present. And there are some things that are compatible, and there’s some places where you’ve gotta pick. Groove: you gotta pick. Am I on the string or off the string? Am I equalizing my pairs of running notes or de-equalizing them? You can’t have both.

Vibrato is an ornament in every style including classical, it’s just a pity that we don’t talk about it like that. We would have better vibrato if we talked about it as an ornament with different shades and colors, as opposed to, “if you don't vibrate, your teacher will yell at you.” But when I’m compromising things, I will often hedge; if I don’t want any ambiguity, I will make stricter choices about a certain element than I would in the wild when I’m fiddling. If you watch one of my shows, I use quite a lot of vibrato, because it adds natural sparkle and extra sheen. But if I’m already getting that from an off-the-string bow stroke (which you’re not gonna hear me play in my fiddling), I will get much stricter with not using vibrato as much. And in this passage I would use none. A lot of times I would vibrate at the end of a slide like that, particularly if I’m going more Texas fiddle: they have that very wide slow vibrato; that's how you say howdy on the violin! I would give that up here, though if I were playing a similar passage in a Texas tune I would do it because again, balancing values.

Sarah Wilfong Joblin:

That’s a lovely and succinct way of looking at it: practicality. What do you have to do in order to make it read the way you want it to read?

Well, we have managed to talk for an entire hour, and I feel like I should probably let you go and move on with your day. But I so appreciate your time, and this has been absolutely lovely, and you have such marvelous insights.

Mari Black:

This is phenomenal, it's really fun to talk with you, and I can’t wait to hear what everybody else has to say. It sounds like you get a whole crew full of marvelous insights and if you put us all together, you're gonna get an overly complicated and wonderfully dimensional view of things.

APPENDIX F

Analysis of Common Figures between the Second Movement of *Sky* and Thirty-two Reels from *Irish Session Tunes: 100 Irish Dance Tunes and Airs selected by Matt Cranitch.*

Tune	Quarter note on 3rd beat	Octave leap	5th leap	6th leap	Low pedal, upper motion	High pedal, lower motion	Broken thirds	Tonic on 4th beat at cadence	3 reps of same pitch
Providence Reel			X		X			X	
Wise Maid		X	X	X			X	X	X
Sligo Maid	X			X	X		X	X	
The Congress	X		X	X	X	X		X	
Dinny O'Brien's			X		X		X		X
Eileen O'Callaghan	X				X				
Pigeon on the Gate			X		X	X			
Killavil Reel			X		X	X			
Far from Home	X						X	X	
The Volunteer	X				X		X	X	X
Boys of Malin			X	X		X			
High Road to Linton							X	X	
Monsignor's Blessing	X	X	X			X	X	X	
Wild Irishman			X	X	X		X	X	
Andy McGann's			X		X			X	
Humours of Scariff	X		X		X			X	
Maid behind the Bar				X	X	X		X	
Paddy Ryan's Dream		X					X	X	
Crib of Perches	X						X	X	

Tune	Quarter note on 3rd beat	Octave leap	5th leap	6th leap	Low pedal, upper motion	High pedal, lower motion	Broken thirds	Tonic on 4th beat	3 reps of same pitch
Broken Pledge	X	X			X	X		X	
Master Crowley			X	X	X			X	
Roscommon Reel				X	X			X	
All Hands Around	X						X	X	
Bantry Lasses						X	X	X	
O'Dowd's Favorite	X					X	X	X	
Sean Reid's			X				X	X	X
Tullagh Reel	X		X				X		X
New Policeman	X	X				X		X	
Rattigan's Reel		X			X			X	
Bunch of Keys			X	X	X		X	X	
Jenny's Welcome to Charlie	X		X	X	X		X	X	
Lord Gordon			X	X	X	X	X		

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