

Must every fiddler play a fiddle?

Abigail Ann Young's cautionary words about glossing Latin *fistulator* as 'piper' ('Plays and players: the Latin terms for performance' [part 2], REEDN 10, #1 (1985), 9–10) prompt me to mention a similar problem which exists in English, and of which REED workers should be aware. The OED glosses *fiddler*, in the musical sense, only as a player on instruments of the violin family. Some texts falling within REED's purview serve to cast doubt on this.

The first is Henry Burton's *A divine tragedie lately acted*, in which Example 45 (1641 edn, p 20) recounts that

Also at Battersey near London, the last year [1634] a notable example of God's judgement befell a fiddler, the youth of the town of both sexes, being assembled solemnly to set up a garland upon their May-pole, and having got a tabor and pipe for the purpose, he with the pipe in his mouth, fell down dead and never spake word.

The second is mentioned by J.A. Sharpe in 'Crime and delinquency in an Essex parish 1600–1640,' (in *Crime in England 1550–1800*, ed J.S. Cockburn (1977), 90–109). He writes that at Kelvedon Easterford John Ayly, an alehouse-keeper, was presented in the archdeacon's court in 1613 'for suffering of a fiddler to play with taber and pipe in his house upon the 9 of May, being the sabbath day, in time of divine service' (102).

A third is in OED itself, under *morris*: 'The Fidler comes in with his Taber and Pipe, and a whole Morice after him with Motley Visards' (Harsnet, *Pop. Impost.*).

In each of these cases it is perfectly possible that the text is meant to be read literally – ie, that a person known for playing the fiddle was on each occasion playing the pipe-and-tabor. However, there are other indications that 'fiddler' may be used generally in reference to a pipe-and-taborer.

The pipe-and-tabor was the traditional accompaniment to the morris dance. If we go beyond REED's dates for a moment, we find that when in the nineteenth century the pipe-and-tabor was at last supplanted by the fiddle, commentators remarked on the fact, and older dancers complained that they could not dance to the fiddle accompaniment. For example, *Jackson's Oxford Journal* of 29 May 1858, p 8, reports on the Whitsun morris dancing at Bampton, Oxfordshire: 'The dancing was very creditably performed, but we cannot approve of the substitution of a squeaking fiddle for the appropriate, and to our mind, orthodox "tabor and pipe".'

The following example from the same period confirms both the dancers' preferences and the fact that musicians were often proficient on both instruments. C.J. Sharp, collecting from nineteenth-century dancers, noted from a former dancer of Leafield, Oxfordshire, that 'Their musician, John Williams, played fiddle and whittle and dub, but all preferred to dance to the latter' (Sharp, *MS Folk Dance Notes*, Clare College, Cambridge, vol I, p 79).

Certainly from 1730 to 1840 the pipe-and-tabor is the *only* instrument mentioned in connection with the morris dance (see J. Forrest, *Morris music: some questions* (1985), 29). The strong association between pipe-and-tabor and morris dance is confirmed by references throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; for example, in *The puisne's walks about London* (c 1620) the hero relates, 'And when I came unto the route / Good Lord! I heard a tabor play / For so, God save me! A morrys-daunce.'

There are just two references before 1840 to 'fiddlers' accompanying morris dancers. One, from Canterbury in 1589, is recounted by Peter Clark in his *The English alehouse* (1979), 129–30. Mr Clark has kindly supplied me with more details from his transcript of the original manuscript (Canterbury Cathedral Library, JQ 1589): one H. Parkes, a musician accompanying a group of morris dancers, is referred to as 'the fiddler' by the Vice of the dancers. The second reference is from the manuscripts of the geologist William 'Strata' Smith, in the University Museum, Oxford, in which are to be found the accounts of a Whitsun Ale held in Churchill, Oxfordshire, in 1721. Morris dancers are hired as an essential part of the proceedings, but the only musician hired is referred to as a 'ffidler'. While one may perhaps have doubts about the uniformity of morris dance accompaniment in its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century heyday, there can be no doubt that the only legitimate accompaniment for morris dancing at Oxfordshire Whitsun Ales in the post-Restoration period was the pipe-and-tabor; so there are very strong grounds for believing that this particular fiddler played the pipe-and-tabor, and that the designation 'ffidler' was sufficient to indicate this.

An interesting comment on terminology can be found in Thomas Wilson's *Companion to the ballroom* (1816), in which he writes (215–16) that musicians engaged to play for balls

are treated worse than ... servants, and never, or seldom spoken to, but in an imperious haughty manner, generally addressing them, and speaking of them, by the names of fiddlers, endeavouring thereby to shew a superior consequence in themselves, and the dependance of the Musicians: or otherwise, adopt the other extreme, and become very familiar and ply them with Liquor, in order to make them drunk, being with those persons a common opinion and saying, that nothing is so amusing as a drunken fiddler, the whole of the Musicians coming under this title whatever instrument they may play.

Although late for our purposes, this description (for which I must thank Mr Dave Townsend, who brought it to my attention) is the most explicit indication that 'fiddlers' need not play fiddles. In general it seems that the term was used loosely to refer to any musician, especially a musician low on the social scale, or, perhaps, a musician playing to accompany dancing. It therefore follows that no presumptions can generally be made about the instrument played by any 'fiddler' where the instrument actually played is not mentioned.

Communications

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