4.6. "Pimp your Pipes!" Knowledge, networks and DIY practices in the revival(s) of bagpipes

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between people and musical instruments, meanings of artefacts and knowledge in musical revivals and issues of heritage and identity. After disappearing during the 19th century folk instruments, such as the bagpipe, have (re)gained interest in the last decades. Music scenes mostly formed by amateurs, dedicated to the revitalisation of musical repertoires, emerged all over Europe. Since the 1970s musicals instruments, commonly perceived as traditional and rural, have entered urban spaces, stages and styles. Bagpipes in particular appeared at the intersection of discourses on heritage and modernity, authenticity and regional collective identities. The absence of professional instrument makers gave rise to Do-It-Yourself initiatives, organising festivals, workshops, construction classes and assembly kits. Self-made instruments and self-taught bagpipe players were essential in the early years of this movement. My ongoing research – focusing on the labour and musical skills of the pioneers and amateurs as well as the formation of international networks – is based on ethnographic methods, media and archive materials. The collaborative collecting and assembling of knowledge and materials has to be analysed as a precondition for revivals and as an alternative form of agency. Moreover, the (re)production and improvement of traditional musical instruments in altering technical and cultural settings created new social and musical practices. The making and playing of Bagpipes in the 20th and 21st century shows the ambivalence of revivals as recourse and development in music scenes and networks.

Keywords: revival, bagpipes, instrument makers, knowledge, craft, heritage

"It´s a long way…" The revival(s) of a musical instrument

Already in 1975 the Australian rock band *AC/DC* used a set of bagpipes on the first track of their second studio album. The song "It's a long way to the top" is just one famous example for the re-appearance of such traditional instruments in popular music. Since the 1990s punk bands like *The Real McKenzies* or the *Dropkick Murphys* have played with images of Celtic heritage and musicians like *Carlos Núñez* and *Hevia* performed with their acoustic or electronic gaitas, an Iberian type of this instrument, in big concert halls worldwide. Currently you can hear different kinds of bagpipes anywhere: during medieval fairs and folklore festivals, during parades and in the streets. Still, it was a long way for a musical instrument – perceived as traditional or historical – to celebrate a comeback under altering sociocultural circumstances.

After having been played all over Europe the bagpipe was gradually replaced by other sound devices and disappeared from the musical landscape during the 19th century and – with the exception of some solitary regions in Eastern Europe and in Scotland, where it survived

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due to the fact that it became part of a military tradition and therefore spread throughout the British Empire. Jonathan Swayne, a well known bagpipe maker and musician from England, stated in an interview (2013), that only since the last decades of the 20th Century we find that a considerable number of people has been able to make a living by producing bagpipes. Yet this instrument remains surrounded by an ancient, somewhat archaic aura.

The principal question governing my research is connected to the relation of material culture, music and time: How did musical instruments end up in museum collections and how did they re-enter contemporary musical scenes and stages?

In a previous project I analysed the potentials and functions of musical instruments in museum exhibitions, arguing that the impermanence of things and the ephemeral qualities of sounds challenge common museum paradigms (Kühn, 2014). My current inquiry explores the revival of musical instruments and bagpipe making in 20th century Germany. The first attempts of reconstruction and revitalisation of bagpipes in Germany had already begun in the 1930s as a result of the rediscovery of Early Music and the emergence of historically informed performance practices. However, it was in the course of the folk music vogue since the 1960s that seemingly vanished musical instruments gained significant interest. During this revival, local folk scenes, formed mostly by amateur enthusiasts, emerged and made a huge effort in re-establishing musical traditions by collecting and assembling information, knowledge and materials.

This paper, as well as my PhD project, is about the pioneers of these German scenes and their practices of networking, researching and tinkering, strongly influenced by the DIY attitude of these decades. My ongoing research is based on ethnographic methods. Participant observations during concerts, festivals and workshops, self-conducted and archival qualitative interviews with musicians and instrument makers as well as media and archive materials are combined in order to create a nuanced multi-perspective view in terms of a "thick description" (Geertz, 1987). The main part focuses on amateur instrument makers and their handling of knowledge, networks and materials. I conclude my analysis by summarizing the social dimensions related to the making of musical instruments and the DIY ethos of revival scenes.

In search of ~~authenticity~~ creativity

According to Tamara Livingston "[m]usical revivals can be defined as social movements which strive to 'restore' a musical system believed to be disappearing or completely relegated to the past for the benefit of contemporary society." (Livingston, 1999, p. 66) Recent studies on musical revivals mainly focus on protagonists, audiences and ideologies by examining repertoires and performances. In contrast my approach has its starting point in the material culture – the things, requisites and tools, which are necessary for the revitalisation of any musical phenomenon. The cultural study of a musical instrument in particular offers a broad perspective; as Kevin Dawe puts it: "Musical instruments are formed, structured, and carved out of personal and social experience as much as they are built up from a great variety of natural and synthetic materials. They exist at an intersection of material, social, and cultural worlds […]." (Dawe, 2003, p. 275) From this point of view the ethnographic research on amateur bagpipe makers contributes to a deeper understanding of revival processes; the motivations, interactions, experiences and actual practices in underground music scenes.

Apart from a few exceptions such as the exemplary case studies gathered in Neil V. Rosenberg's anthology *Transforming tradition* (1993) the study of musical revivals was widely

neglected by folklorists and ethnomusicologists until the recent decades. Scholarly notions in German and American Folklore Studies were strongly affected by national causes and the desire to find 'authentic' expressions of the past (Bendix, 1997). Cultural phenomena like the folk revival were seen as imitations, manipulations or forgery, often described as "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992). Research programs were (and often still are) dominated by the "assumption of musical continuity" and "questions of authenticity" (Feintuch, 2006, p. 14) – ideas, which were coined in the 19th century. In a side note on this matter Burt Feintuch asks an important question: "Sometimes, though, I wonder what would happen if our work began with ideas of creativity and change at the local level rather than emphasizing continuity." (ibid.)

I will take this objection seriously, because even the attempts to revitalise a musical instrument or to revive a musical genre from an imagined past are innovative processes, which involves a huge amount of creativity. For research into musical cultures like revivals the "invention" is a more striking feature than the mere surveying of "traditions". Not only the punk scene but also the folk music revivalists in the 1960s and 1970s were driven by commitment and the belief in improvisation, tinkering and one's own initiative. I argue that reconstructing, reproducing and improving traditional instruments such as the bagpipe in changing technical and cultural contexts has created new social and musical practices, which affect various cultural domains up to the present day.

Making bagpipes: handling of knowledge, networks and things

The first contact with a bagpipe exemplifies the obstacles which revivalists in Germany faced in the beginning: In absence of resources like trained instrument makers, teachers or manuals on instrument making and playing, the acquisition of a bagpipe was a complicated undertaking. An example from my fieldwork illustrates possible strategies of appropriation. Joachim, an artist, musician and instrument maker from Hamburg, told me in an interview (2013) about his first encounter with a bagpipe. In the early 1970s he knew the sound of this instrument from records only. His interest in Scottish and Irish folk music triggered his desire to learn how to play the pipes. He went to an average music store, a place stuffed with guitars and amps. In a corner he found a Scottish Highland Bagpipe, which was manufactured in Pakistan, where cheap instruments of this kind were made due to the British Empire's legacy. Neither Joachim nor the shop assistant knew how to assemble the instrument. He bought it anyway, but even after many attempts of repairing it, he was still not able to put it into an operational state. Although the insufficient instrument from Pakistan did not become part of his musical practice, the object encouraged him to examine the technical and musical principals of bagpipes. He looked for other bagpipe enthusiasts, met other players and became engaged with the German folk music revival. After acquiring a functioning set of bagpipes and learning how to play it he went to the British Isles, learned how to build historical woodwinds and returned to Germany to make a living as a bagpipe maker and musician.

Without access to experiences of other members of the scene and the exchange of information Joachim's encounter would have come to an end before played a single note. That demonstrates that the collaborative collecting and assembling of knowledge, experience and materials is a necessary precondition for revivals and can also be considered an alternative form of agency. Acquiring knowledge by joining networks and making own experiences seem

to be key aspects of such collaborative agency. Actively collecting information about the instruments, the repertoire and the ways of performing, knowledge about regional or historical circumstances were essential – not only for the ideological agenda behind the revival, but also for its practical realisation. Hence it seems to be appropriate to borrow Mitchell G. Ash's classification of spaces of knowledge in order to describe the physical, social and symbolic locations and correlations of knowledge (Ash, 2000). In the three following sections I will describe the different levels of my research; after distinguishing different scenes within the revival I will draw attention to the networks and their ways of collaboration, followed by some insights into the concrete spaces of manual work and the DIY practices of German bagpipe makers.

Signifying practices: space, time and musical identity

The motives behind the reanimation of a musical instrument are as manifold as the associations which are connected with the historical meanings of bagpipes. It is possible to distinguish a least three different groups of bagpipe revivalists with differing aims, making it difficult to speak about one single revival movement. In order to understand the production of meanings – the signifying practices (Hall, 1997) in different scenes – it is inevitable to follow the trajectories of cultural artefacts like musical instruments into the spheres of their actual use: "Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context." (Appadurai, 1986, p. 5). The division of contrasting scenes is not only a result of my heuristic approach, but is in line with a contemporary description of the bagpipe revival in Germany (Junghänel, 1979).

First of all there is the folklore music scene. In the 1960s, cultural and political initiatives began to devote themselves to local traditions. Especially in the south-east of Germany individual activists promoted the heritage of a certain region – the Upper Palatinate – and argued with an assumed unbroken bagpipe-tradition in a neighbouring area in the Czech Republic (Eichenseer, 1980). The idea of regionally bound music gave the impulse to revive an instrument, which was declared to be specific for this district's distinctive culture.

In contrast, re-enactment scenes were focusing on the music in different periods. On the one hand, access to historic instruments or replica was the key for many ensembles to play medieval, renaissance and baroque music as authentically as possible. Historically informed performance groups emphasized the accuracy of reconstructions. On the other hand, idealized imaginations of the Dark Ages gave rise to a completely new kind of instrument, which is played on medieval fairs. The so-called "Marktsackpfeife" resembled partially to medieval descriptions and paintings, but regarding aesthetic features and sound intensity the result was a somewhat exaggerated creation: This independent development took place first of all in the GDR in the 1980s and was driven by a punk attitude – this new instrument had to be loud, aggressive and provocative in order to materialize the imaginations of the supposedly wild and untamed Middle Ages (Gehler, 2014).

The third scene – the international folk music scene – is driven by the "nostalgia for another culture's idealized past" (Livingston, 1999, p. 82). Mats Hermansson (2003) has shown in his study on Pipes and Drums in Scandinavia how the Great Highland Bagpipe became a "strong national iconic symbol of Scotland" (ibid., p. 347) and how it was adopted as an expression of musical identity all over Europe.

These different horizons of interpretation – time, space and cultural identity – are affecting musical and social practices. Of course activists were taking part in different scenes and shared agendas, but each group operated primarily through one of these three lenses. Not only the instrument itself, but the attribution of meanings forms its use and the experience made with it as well as its public perception (Waksman, 2001). Bagpipes in particular appear at the intersection of discourses on heritage and modernity, authenticity and regional collective identities. As a result of these signifying practices they serve as material and visual representations of spatial, temporal and cultural imaginations.

Networks, media and collaborative production of knowledge

By definition revivalists are sharing an "overt cultural and political agenda" (Livingston 1999, p. 66). But as a matter of fact there is a wide range of motivations supporting the revival. Workshops, festivals and concerts were – apart from personnel overlaps – mostly organised and frequented by members of a single scene. Still, despite their differing aims and interests the various scenes worked together on another level. Individuals started to collect information about bagpipes in general, gained experience and shared them with others. The collaborative production of a stock of knowledge was a precondition for the reconstruction and development of an abandoned, mostly unknown instrument.

Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer argue that consensus "is not necessary for cooperation nor for the successful conduct of work" (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 388). It seems appropriate to use the concept of boundary objects to describe the value of the instrument in revival scenes: According to Star and Griesemer boundary objects "have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation" (ibid., p. 393). The concept "bagpipe" is steady and sufficiently structured to create a common ground for various scenes. The basic principles and functionality are similar enough to discuss solutions for technical problems. On the other hand the object offers interpretative flexibility. It is possible to adapt different models of the same instrument for ambiguous musical and ideological purposes.

The revival of bagpipes was far beyond the cultural mainstream, so the gathering and sharing of historical, musical and especially technical knowledge required alternative forms of media. A striking example is the creation of a fanzine: About 80 issues of the Dudlpfeifer, a non-professional and non-commercial magazine, were published between 1981 and 1993. By setting up a self-made magazine, German revivalists created a network and their own space to share and discuss knowledge and experiences, which was acknowledged even in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. The ongoing discourses and the objectification of knowledge led at the same time to "simplification", "standardization" and "homogenization" (Ronström, 2010, p. 320).

Materials, knowledge and body: practices of making things

During the first decades of the revival there were almost no commercially produced bagpipes available in Germany. So, in addition to the import of bagpipes from other countries many pioneers of the revival scenes started to make their own instruments; the Do-It-Yourself spirit

in the 1970s encouraged amateur instrument makers. Through the networks, in workshops and craft classes it became possible for enthusiasts to obtain the necessary information, to find the appropriate materials and develop useful skills in order to build their own instruments. Annual meetings and small festivals were described in my interviews as very important events, where the amateur instrument makers and musicians met, discussed and learned from each other. Some entrepreneurs, like the *Early Music Shop*, tried to make use of the DIY trend and offered assembly kits for historical instruments – even for different kinds of bagpipes.

By analysing pictures, archive materials, publications and interviews I was able to understand the inventive handling of knowledge and the exploration of new arrangements of available materials, tools and techniques. Lévi-Strauss (1991) characterizes this creative mode of production using a heterogeneous repertoire of resources as "bricolage". But in attempting to grasp all aspects of DIY projects like making or repairing a musical instrument I faced a methodological problem. Besides the level of discourse and appropriation there is also a vital, non-verbal experience level in manual work, often described as "tacit knowledge". Douglas Harper (1987) has shown in his study "working knowledge", how skills like "kinesthetic sense", "knowledge of materials" and ways of "learning by doing" interact in actual working practices, which also have to be regarded in the context of revivals.

In order to include these aspects of embodied knowledge and manual work into my study, in 2013 I conducted ethnographic research in the workshop of a young bagpipe maker in Berlin. He is the first (but not the only) officially trained woodwind maker specialised in bagpipes in Germany. So my research material covers the time from the first pioneers of the bagpipe revival to the increasing professionalisation and commodification of this trade. This empirical account aims at filling the gap in the literature concerning crafts, knowledge and networks in underground music scenes as well exploring the interdependency of musical and material matters in revival movements.

The social dimensions of making things

It is striking that in the case of the revivals of bagpipes in Germany amateur instruments makers gained a more profound knowledge about a specific musical instrument than academically trained music historians, conservators or museum professionals. The formation of networks and scenes with different agendas, their collaborative production of knowledge, their signifying and crafting practices all arise from the urge to revive and to enhance a musical instrument. In conclusion, I will reflect the role, which material culture – specifically the making of musical instruments – plays in social interactions and revival scenes.

To understand interrelated forms of individual appropriations of physical and social environments, practices of crafting and cooperation appear as cardinal issues (Sennett, 2008 & Sennett, 2012). In his book *Making is Connecting* David Gauntlett (2011) highlights three social dimensions in Do-It-Yourself cultures, which – in case of my study – characterise the relationships between people and musical instruments in processes such as the revival of bagpipes.

(1) Making a musical instrument virtually means connecting things from diverse fields. Materials, knowledge and experience are brought together in the development, production and use of things.

(2) The DIY makers of musical instruments are mostly working alone in their workshops. But as I have shown, they are involved in networks by exchanging information, discussing ideas and sharing experiences. The bagpipes serve as a shared focus or as a boundary object.

(3) The instruments themselves are connections. As manifestations of ideas, imaginations, knowledge and practices they appear as interfaces between different temporal, spatial and social contexts (Kühn, 2014).

The practices of revival scenes are apparently driven by a strong DIY ethos. The appropriation and mobilization of a relegated instrument like the bagpipe has to be seen from this point of view not exclusively as a regression, but as a creative process and a form of empowerment. In opposition to the cultural mainstream, not only the playing but also the making of instruments is part of the DIY ethos of underground music cultures.

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