

Systems music on Spiro's *Pole Star*

Balancing musical experiment and tradition in folk revival

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Abstract

Theoretical frameworks of folk revival applied by folklorists and (ethno-)musicologists have related revival to identity formation of social groups (divided by class or race), local communities and national “imagined” communities. New theoretical models extend this framework with a transnational, post-revival perspective in which the focus lies on what happens after music traditions are revived. Instead of playing arbiter between “authentic” and imagined/reconstructed music practices, artists and scholars now re-explore creative balances between tradition/innovation, national/international, past/future, and even low/high art. Progressive revival genres have abandoned the concern for “authenticity” by merging traditional and modern musical idioms. Nonetheless, modern folk artists remain connected to an initial revival impulse because they depend on its commercial infrastructure and musical source material.

In this thesis I investigate the combination of British traditional music and American minimalism through the post-revival lens. A case study of the album *Pole Star* by English folk band Spiro demonstrates what compositional techniques of systems music play a role in Spiro’s arrangements, and how they interact with historical melodies. The analysis exposes what musical characteristics of these opposite worlds blend together, coexist or clash with one another. The extended length and lyrical characteristic of historical melodies prove to be crucial factors in determining the crossroad between tradition and modernity in Spiro’s approach.

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Introduction

Until recently, the image of Steve Reich enchanting the audience of a village pub's backroom stage with his captivating, interlocking, pulsating motives and rhythms would have mainly proven my mind's peculiar desire to unite two musical ambiances of personal interest. Folk and minimal music to me always seemed worlds apart. However, exactly this (still unlikely) image is a comparison made by journalist Rob Fitzpatrick regarding the music of English folk band Spiro.¹ The band debuted in 1997 with the album *Pole Star*, on which they reworked historical tunes rooted in British music traditions. In this thesis, my main focus will be on the compositional techniques derived from American minimalism that Spiro used on *Pole Star* to shape their experimental arrangements. What role does systems music play in Spiro's arrangements of traditional British tunes?² In order to answer this question, I will approach this case study from both the "traditional" and the "minimal" point of view. What aspects of Spiro's arrangements are traditional? What techniques are clearly derived from minimal music? I aim to demonstrate both the compatible and conflicting aspects of this musical marriage, while at the same time evaluating the usefulness of terminology evolving around all-purpose words such as "minimal" and "folk revival."

In the first chapter I will shortly address the relevance of folk revival models to this case study, by showing Spiro's contribution to the reintroduction of rediscovered source material. The study of folk revival is a game in which one must disentangle several historical and contextual layers of revived sources. Scholarship on folk revival in Western Europe and the United States has mainly focused on social movements protesting the rise of the capitalist and consumerist society. Within these movements, revived and reconstructed music traditions contribute to the construction of a unified (often "imagined") past.³ However, this framework does not suit Spiro's modern approach to traditional music. Instead, the post-revival model of Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill will serve as a useful theoretical frame for this case study,

¹ "Press," Spiro, accessed May 23, 2020, http://www.spiromusic.com/newsite/?page_id=1254.

² Because the music traditions addressed in this thesis are spread over multiple geographic regions (Northumberland, the Scottish Lowlands and the border area) I will use "British" as shorthand.

³ Tamara E. Livingston, "Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory," *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 1 (1999): 66-85; Neil Rosenberg, "A Folklorist's Exploration of the Revival Metaphor," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, ed. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 94-115; William G. Roy, "Aesthetic Identity, Race, and American Folk Music," *Qualitative Sociology* 25 no. 3 (2002): 459 - 469; Philip Bohlman, "Folk Music and Canon-Formation: The Creative Dialectic Between Text and Context," in *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 104-120.

shifting attention more towards experiments with both traditional and modern musical idioms.⁴

The second chapter discusses the three basic musical ingredients on *Pole Star*: historical melodies, repetitive blocks and the foundational layer. It demonstrates what aspect of Spiro's arrangements is considered "traditional" by comparing their melodic material to tune compilations and publications of revivalists such as Matt Seattle and John Offord.⁵ Characteristics of repetitive blocks are presented in order to clarify the crossover to the minimal techniques presented in chapter three. The role of harmony in British music traditions is examined in order to interpret Spiro's choices of harmonization.

The final chapter provides an analysis of Spiro's compositional techniques related to American minimalism. Writings of Timothy Johnson and Dan Warburton offer usable definitions of minimalism, systems music and related techniques.⁶ The tunes "Joyful Days is Coming," "The Lily," and "Heartsease" are subjected to a detailed analysis. The remaining tunes are discussed more generally in relation to specific minimalist techniques. Transcriptions of Spiro's arrangements are based on the record's audio and are simplified to highlight specific musical processes (time marks are provided for reference).⁷ Lastly, a connection is made between the concept of group expression in minimal music articulated by K. Robert Schwarz and Spiro's comparable artistic concept.⁸

In conclusion, I will answer the main question of this thesis by showing where Spiro has drawn the dividing line between musical characteristics of revived British music traditions and minimalism. The post-revival model will lead towards further suggestions regarding this research, taking into account global transformational processes that affect traditional music cultures in general.

⁴ Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill, eds., "An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4-43.

⁵ Matt Seattle, ed., *The Master Piper: Nine notes that shook the world. A Border Bagpipe Repertoire prick'd down by William Dixon AD 1733*, 3rd ed. (Newbiggin-by-the-Sea: Dragonfly Music, 2011); John Offord, comp., *John of the Green: The Cheshire Way*, 3rd ed. (London: Green Man Music, 2017).

⁶ Timothy A. Johnson, "Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?," *The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (1994): 742-773; Dan Warburton, "A Working Terminology for Minimal Music," *Intégral*, vol. 2 (1988): 135-159.

⁷ Spiro, *Pole Star*, recorded October 1997, Real World Productions Ltd. CDRW204, reissued 2014, compact disc.

⁸ Robert K. Schwarz, "Music as a Gradual Process: Part II," *Perspectives of New Music* 20, no. 1/2 (1981-1982): 225-286.

1. Revival and post-revival

One of the important dichotomies that lay at the heart of revival studies is that of modernity and tradition. The juxtaposition of modernity and tradition in music, according to Philip Bohlman, is an inevitable and realistic mechanism that demonstrates the adaptability of musical cultures.⁹ Until recently, post-war scholarship on folk music practices in the modern world has been centered on the metaphor of “revival” to describe processes of change that entail a preservation of traditions otherwise gone extinct.¹⁰ Initially described by Livingston as a “social movement,” revival proved to be one of many possible metaphors that describe transformational processes of music traditions in a web of cultural politics.¹¹ Even though the concept of revival has become more fluid for both scholars and artists, revival agents still share a general concern for historical heritage and “(new) authenticity.”¹²

Spiro, on the other hand, does not show any concern for preserving or reviving a particular music tradition. This becomes clear not only in the musical analysis presented in the following chapters, but also in the band’s effort to move away from the association with the folk genre in the press: “We’ve got more to do with minimalist classical and dance music than we have with folk.”¹³ When the band is directly asked about their particular choice of folk tunes in an interview, violinist Jane Harbour and guitarist Jon Hunt sidestep the question by stating that the British tunes primarily function as a backbone and are not “integral.”¹⁴ Therefore, studying this music through the lens of folk revival seems unsuitable.

Their debut album *Pole Star*, however, reveals a connection to folk that is perhaps stronger than the band wishes to acknowledge. Twelve out of fifteen tracks contain historical vernacular melodies that are at least two hundred years old, some of which have only become accessible to Spiro by virtue of recent revivalists’ efforts. For example, Matt Seattle’s first edition of the William Dixon manuscript (1733) was published in 1995.¹⁵ It contains unique settings of tunes that most likely originated from a Border pipe tradition in Northumberland, the Lowlands of Scotland and the Anglo-Scottish border area. Spiro’s reworkings of tunes from the manuscript, such as “Have a Care of Here Johnny”, have not gone unnoticed by the

⁹ Bohlman, “Folk Music in the Modern World,” 121-140.

¹⁰ Livingston, “Music Revivals,” 66; Bithell and Hill, “An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change,” 7.

¹¹ Livingston, “Music Revivals,” 66; Rosenberg, “A Folklorist’s Exploration of the Revival Metaphor,” 9.

¹² For the meaning of “authenticity” in revival, see: Roy, “Aesthetic Identity, Race, and American Folk Music,” 466; Livingston, “Music Revivals,” 74; Rosenberg, “A Folklorist’s Exploration of the Revival Metaphor,” 101; Bohlman, “Folk Music in the Modern World,” 130.

¹³ “Spiro,” Real World Records, accessed May 23, 2020, <https://realworldrecords.com/artists/spiro/>.

¹⁴ Jane Harbour and Jon Hunt, “All Together Now: An Interview with Spiro,” interview by Alyssa Lobo, Riff Diaries, n.d., accessed May 23, 2020, <http://riffdiaries.com/all-together-now-an-interview-with-spiro/>.

¹⁵ Seattle, *The Master Piper*, 9.

editor. In his third edition (2011), Seattle places an image of the band next to this tune's musical score and expresses gratitude towards Spiro for playing it "back into circulation."¹⁶ Spiro, in turn, includes Matt Seattle in the acknowledgements on the CD sleeve of the album's reissue.¹⁷ Presumably, not all the tunes on Spiro's debut album were equally obscure at the time of *Pole Star*'s initial release (1997). However, intentionally or not, Spiro has become an actor in this music's revival.

Given these circumstances, it is arguably fitting to look at this case study through the lens of the post-revival model proposed by Bithell and Hill.¹⁸ The framework of post-revival gives rise to a new field of inquiry that includes folk artists who explore "their individual creativity alongside experimenting with a more eclectic palette of musical idioms."¹⁹ The model is meant to extend existing models such as Livingston's, but it shifts the attention towards what happens at the end of the revival process. Bithell and Hill place their post-revival perspective between two opposite views regarding revival as either an infinite (circular) or finite process. Instead of choosing one side or the other, they refocus on artists and styles that to some extent are still indebted to their "original revival impulse," but move away from conservative views of traditional music practices. Relevant questions arise, one of which forms the core of this thesis: "How do they [artists] reposition themselves in terms of genre or style?"²⁰ I will solely address Spiro's musical repositioning, saving an analysis of commercial repositioning for future investigation.

2. *Pole Star*: musical ingredients

My main objective here is to investigate experimental arrangements of British historical melodies. I have therefore limited my analysis to the tunes that I have been able to identify as such (see Appendix 1 for an overview). The three basic ingredients of every track are the historical melody, repetitive blocks, and the accompaniment or foundational layer.

a. Historical melodies

According to Bohlman, both oral and literate transmission within music cultures plays an

¹⁶ Ibid., 4, 36.

¹⁷ Spiro, liner notes on CD sleeve, Spiro, *Pole Star*, Read World Productions Ltd. CDRW204, reissued 2014, compact disc.

¹⁸ Bithell and Hill, "An Introduction," 28.

¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 30-31.

important role in the consolidation of a music tradition.²¹ Written sources discovered and published by music revivalists are therefore by no means “traditional versions”: they represent only half of the dichotomy posed by Bohlman, bound to their specific temporal and geographical location. Comparing a modern-day performance of such a melody to historical manuscripts will therefore not automatically show the artist’s loyalty to or deviation from a music tradition. The outcome of a comparison between the melodies of Spiro’s reworkings and (re-)published tune books, however, reveals to what extent the band has musically attempted to reposition themselves (see Appendix 1). It appears that Spiro has left the majority of the source melodies unchanged, making a further investigation of the tunes’ variations caused by oral transmission or the band’s compositional choices unnecessary. There is one exception: the arrangement of “Gillan Na Drover.” Spiro’s version melodically and rhythmically resembles a tune of the same name in John Peacock’s collection of adaptations of Northumbrian tunes.²² In this source, “Gillan Na Drover” consists of strains with two groups of four measures. Spiro does not repeat the motive at the end of each group, but plays strains of two times three measures instead. Overall, variations of pitch content and rhythm are rare and differences are negligible. Thus, the melodies are clearly not the place to look for Spiro’s experimental approach.

b. Repetitive blocks

These passages continuously repeat one or several measures throughout larger sections of a composition. Warburton’s definition of the term “blocks” is applicable here: “a predetermined and unchanging time frame (a measure of 4/4 or 3/4, for example).”²³ The blocks often form the introduction of the arrangement, after which they are exchanged between different instruments. Sometimes they are paused and/or implemented in later sections of the same tune. Even though pitch variations occur incidentally, block transformative processes are scarce. The content of the blocks can roughly be divided into three categories: continuous rhythmical pulse, a combination of pulse and long notes, and short melodic motives. Pulsating blocks have a narrow range and often contain dyads of minor or major seconds. Single blocks are subdivided by metrical and dynamic accents. Dynamic accents either adhere to the meter’s subdivision or form cross-rhythmic patterns that add texture. The combination of pulse and

²¹ When considering instrumental music, one may assume aural transmission falls under the “oral” category. Bohlman, “Folk Music and Oral Tradition,” 28.

²² John Peacock, comp., *Peacock’s Tunes: A Favorite Collection of Tunes with Variations Adapted for the Northumberland Small Pipes* (Newcastle: W. Wright, n.d.; repr., n.p.: Northumbrian Pipers Society, 1980), 12.

²³ Warburton, “A Working Terminology for Minimal Music,” 148.

long notes as a repetitive block can be found in “Gillan Na Drover” and “Have a Care of Her Johnny” (see Examples 1 and 2). Motivic blocks contain short repeated motives that are not melodic material. They are only repeated in parts of sections and often sit in the range of the tune. Due to their stable repetition, melodic blocks bridge the gap between the lyrical tune and the pulse-block texture of the background.



Example 1. “Gillan Na Drover”



Example 2. “Have a Care of Her Johnny”

c. Foundational layer: harmony and chords

Because of the ambiguous role of chordal instruments in British music traditions, it is common for chordal players nowadays to extract chord progressions from both arpeggios in the melody and the intervals in accordance to a possible drone.²⁴ The majority of Spiro’s harmonizations are generally congruent with the modes and suggestive melodic contours (taking into account arpeggios and metrical accents). Repetition of a single chord sequence accompanying different strains is unsurprising, since individual strains could be considered to be “variations” belonging to a “variation set” with a single harmonic pattern.²⁵

The following examples show Spiro’s less straightforward harmonizations. The chord sequence in “Gingling Geordie” is half the length of a melodic strain, ending on the Mixolydian seventh chord. As a result, the two layers never end together: every strain ends with the tonic in conjunction with the lowered seventh chord. In *John of the Green*, “Heart’s Ease” is notated in Dorian mode (g minor with one flat).²⁶ The chords suggested by Offord follow the mode’s characteristics (a C major chord in g minor). Spiro’s accompaniment

²⁴ Hard evidence on chordal instruments is lacking. The repertoire discussed in this thesis is mostly associated with violin, Border Pipes, and Small Pipes. See: Seattle, *The Master Piper*, 10, 120-122; Peacock, *Peacock’s Tunes*, “Foreword” by Colin Ross; Offord, *John of the Green*, i.

²⁵ Seattle, *The Master Piper*, 9, 15.

²⁶ Offord, *John of the Green*, 29.

continuously repeats a lower sixth (a G major chord in b minor) instead, without altering the melody. Other changes of mode are more obvious, such as in “Gillan Na Drover.” Judging by Peacock’s score the tune is arguably in G major with a G drone. Spiro’s melody is transposed up a minor third after which it is harmonized in the relative minor key. As a result, the tune is transformed into the Aeolian mode.²⁷ Independence of the foundational layer is most present in “Joyful Days is Coming,” where chords are replaced by a bass line in the guitar part. The line has an independent melodic motion that neither follows the harmonic structure nor the rhythmical division of the melody’s second strain. Instead, it follows the cross rhythm of the violin’s repetitive block (see Appendix 2).

The changes of modes and slight variations in chord patterns are of limited significance when it comes to detecting minimalist techniques (although one could argue playing chords is a modern by-product altogether). Nonetheless, two aspects resemble characteristics of minimal music: the shortened chord pattern and the independent bass line. These features increase the repetitiveness and density of the musical texture.

3. Spiro’s use of minimalist techniques

Needless to say, the musical influences expressed by the band itself are plentiful, ranging from “punk-infused” to electronica and classical music.²⁸ In order to provide enough depth to this study of limited scope, I will focus on what seems to be the leading inspiration for Spiro’s experimental approach on this album: minimal music. What follows is a consideration of appropriate terminology regarding minimalism, after which I present an analysis of Spiro’s arrangements.

Both composers associated with the “minimal” genre and scholars addressing this topic have come to acknowledge minimal music as, in Warburton’s words, an “umbrella term” that is of questionable use when it comes to categorizing and analyzing music associated with it.²⁹ In this analysis I will use a definition of minimalism suggested by Johnson: a technique.³⁰ This definition, as opposed to minimalism as an aesthetic or style, allows the association of minimalism with music containing similar but less rigid processes than “classic minimalist works.”³¹ Spiro, perhaps being aware of this debate, sensibly refers to

²⁷ Peacock, *Peacock’s Tunes*, 12.

²⁸ Spiro, “About.”

²⁹ Warburton, “A Working Terminology for Minimal Music,” 142; Johnson, “Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?,” 759, 771.

³⁰ Johnson, “Minimalism,” 750.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 751.

their minimalist approach as “systems music.” Warburton associates this term with minimal music of the seventies that departed from composers’ rigorous “single process” approach of the sixties.³² Characteristics of minimal techniques offered by Johnson may already hint to what extent Spiro’s music can be associated with minimalism: “a continuous formal structure, an even rhythmic texture and bright tone, a simple harmonic palette, a lack of extended melodic lines, and repetitive rhythmic patterns.”³³

As Johnson rightfully points out, occasional presence of these characteristics does not automatically prove the use of a minimalist technique. It is safe to say that the British music traditions addressed here have a simple harmonic palette by nature, which does not automatically prove Spiro’s predilection with minimalism. What’s more, in some ways Spiro seems to have passed up the opportunity to take advantage of this music’s static qualities, shifting sustained notes to the background, leaving out drone instruments and in some cases implementing more harmonies than suggested by the melodic contours. Although I agree with Reich and Watkins, referred to by Johnson, on the fact that characteristics of minimalism have been present in various music genres for centuries, it is not my objective at this moment to point these out in the British music traditions discussed.³⁴ For now, I will focus on the techniques specifically implemented by Spiro based on a number of musical examples.

How far does the use of musical systems on *Pole Star* actually go? Aspects such as repetitive rhythmic patterns and bright tone are present on the majority of the tracks discussed here. Some tracks are more or less continuous in form; others are divided into separate sections that in turn show a form of continuity. One could interpret the source melodies as repetitive segments, since they are variations on a single shorter idea. However, I prefer to interpret the tune as a separate layer of extended length, because in Spiro’s presentation the tunes are foregrounded to such an extent that there is a clear difference between repetitive patterns and melodies.

The musical systems in “Joyful Days is Coming” demonstrate the interplay between melody and repetitive patterns. In Vickers’ manuscript, the tune has a 9/8 meter and every bar consists of three groupings of three beats (3, 3, 3).³⁵ Both strains (for now “A” and “B”) are repeated and respectively consist of two and four bars. In Spiro’s arrangement, a repetitive block is introduced after one round of the tune (0:41). The block consists of pulses and long

³² Spiro, “About;” Warburton, “A Working Terminology for Minimal Music,” 140.

³³ Johnson, “Minimalism,” 751.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 770.

³⁵ William Vickers Manuscript, (c.a. 1770), Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne. I thank Matt Seattle, editor of the published edition, for sharing images of the original manuscript with me.

notes and extends an extra grouping of three beats over the barline (3, 3, 3, 3). This four-against-three cross rhythm creates a shifting pattern that returns to its starting point after four measures, which means the cycle is only half completed after a full presentation of A. The guitar part adds another layer over the B section that follows the division of the repetitive block (2:16). However, the pitch content is only repeated after four full measures, making it a block of independent length. The B section of the tune itself also repeats every four measures, but in this case I argue that the reoccurring motive in the first three measures causes a perceptible repetition every single measure (see Appendix 2).

When analyzing the pitch content of these various layers, a different shifting pattern arises. The melody and the repetitive block have in common an alternation of two features: c'' and d'' quarter notes, and diatonic successions of sixteenth notes. The diatonic successions in the two different parts can be considered to be each other's extension: b'-a'-g'-a'-b' in the block overlaps with the melodic run b'-c''-d''-c''-b'-a'. What's more, they mirror each other's melodic motion. Because of the rhythmic shifts, these motives pass over each other, weaving a fabric of diatonically ascending and descending lines ranging from g' to d'' in a pulsating rhythm. Additionally, the structure is even more tightly knit by pulsating notes g' and d'' in the repetitive block and by the similarity in tone color of the violin and accordion. The quarter notes c'' and d'' transcend this texture, conveying their own process of rhythmical displacement in the whole in contrast to the continuous pulse.

Another tune of which the melody is directly subjected to a rhythmic process is "The Lily." In one particular section the tune is played against itself in double tempo in the mandolin part (1:27, see Appendix 3). The mandolin repeats every strain, so that the entrance point of every strain is aligned with its (unrepeated) slower version. Even though diminution is not a compositional device associated with minimalism per se, it is a means by which a texture is created with limited material. The diminution rather approximates than strictly follows the pitch content, but the overall correlation is obvious.

The majority of the musical systems on *Pole Star* rather embed than directly involve the tune melodies, creating a clear distinction between patterns and melodies as noted earlier. Nonetheless, these patterns include many of Warburton's described techniques and alterations of them. The patterns especially draw attention in sections where the melody is temporarily paused, foregrounding repetitive motives. Overlapping pattern work occurs in almost all the arrangements, although the amount of repetitive blocks played simultaneously is limited due

to the quartet's line-up.³⁶ For example, "Heartsease" contains several repetitive blocks that are augmented, played against themselves and exchanged between different instruments. The arrangement starts with a main motive: a pulsating d' accented by several upper notes that form dyads. The placement of these upper notes causes the pattern to be open to multiple rhythmic interpretations. Because of the accented upbeat, the listener possibly experiences a slight metrical confusion once the melody is introduced (see Example 3).

The same motive becomes a subject of canon technique later in the arrangement. All instruments but the guitar play the four-bar motive, each starting from a different position (2:44). The result is a pulsating texture reminiscent of the displacement found between the phase shifts in Steve Reich's phase pieces.³⁷ Once the canonic section is exited, the rhythmic structure has transformed from a triple meter with a cycle of four measures into a quadruple meter with a cycle of three measures (3:10). A new repetitive pulse block is introduced in the mandolin part that mainly outlines the harmonic progression provided by the guitar (3:23). This pattern is augmented with doubled note values after five repetitions, while the guitar part remains in the original tempo. The identical harmonic motion in these two parts is no longer synchronous: the underlying chord progression is stretched out and played against itself (3:56).

Example 3. "Heartsease." This fragment shows the introduction with upbeat.

Block additive processes are scarcely implemented, but can be spotted in the "Joyful Days is Coming" bass pattern and the mandolin pattern in "Gillan Na Drover" (2:35, see Example 4).

³⁶ Warburton, "A Working Terminology for Minimal Music," 144, 152. The band does not use loop pedals or studio overdubs, see: Riff Diaries, "All Together Now."

³⁷ Warburton, "A Working Terminology for Minimal Music," 144.

In such processes, rests within a block are permanently replaced with beats after a certain number of repetitions. Textural additive processes are more common, mainly in the introduction of the arrangements: each voice is introduced separately. “Gingling Geordie” qualifies for at least a comparison Warburton’s definition of solid state music, since all of the repeating motives remain unchanged throughout the entire composition. Continuous form can be found in “Gillan Na Drover,” but the majority of transitions between sections in other arrangements are reminiscent of the splicing technique Warburton refers to: hard cuts between sections.³⁸

The image displays five staves of musical notation in G minor. Each staff begins with a measure number: 50, 53, 56, 59, and 62. The notation consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. Vertical double slashes with a diagonal slash through them (//) are placed above the notes, indicating a block additive process where rests are replaced by notes over time. The music is written in a single melodic line on a treble clef.

Example 4. “Gillan Na Drover,” 2:35. Measures 50, 53 and 56 show the block additive process.

Finally, Spiro’s performance style can be related to minimalism. There is notable neutrality to be observed: a constant (bright) sound, straight and rigid timing and lack of ornamentation.³⁹ This directness relates to their artistic concept:

³⁸ Ibid., 140, 148, 156.

³⁹ Spiro deliberately refrains from ornamenting melodies, in order not to attract attention to individual instruments. See: Real World Records, “Pole Star.”

According to violinist Jane Harbour, it's an approach that means there are never any ego problems in the band "because it's one solo machine, what we do. We are like watch-makers who have made an intricate machine. You just wind it up and let it go."⁴⁰

This machine metaphor, often used by Spiro in interviews, is strikingly similar to that used by critics when describing the mechanical quality of Reich's music and its performance.⁴¹ In Reich's case, critics have used the metaphor to accuse Reich's music of being inexpressive. Countering its negative connotation, Spiro uses the machine metaphor in support of the "sense of collectivism and solidarity" they wish to express in their music.⁴² Schwarz argues along the same lines when countering critics of minimal music, stating the music's expression is achieved by "individual contributions to the ultimate goal of group expression."⁴³ Spiro's nonhierarchical approach explains the lack of ornamentation in the melody and the exchange of parts between instruments. Thus, the characteristics of minimalism detectable on *Pole Star* are not only technical but also conceptual.

Conclusion

The results of the case study presented in the previous two chapters lead to an answer of the main question posed in this thesis: What role does systems music play in Spiro's arrangements of traditional British tunes? The conclusion is tripartite and respectively addresses the use of historical melodies, the indisputable presence of systems and the circumstantial compatibility between folk and minimal characteristics.

The historical melodies remain almost completely intact, considering their clear similarity to published transcriptions. With one exception ("Gillan Na Drover"), the strains are unaltered and uninterrupted. Instrumental sections separate subsequent melodic strains every now and then, highlighting the repetitive texture that surrounds the historical melodies. The tunes themselves are only occasionally subjected to rhythmical processes, remaining mostly an independent layer throughout the compositions. The harmony suggested by the melodic contours is often followed in Spiro's harmonies, but chord structures are transformed into shorter repetitive blocks or bass lines to contrast and contribute to the music's interwoven structure.

⁴⁰ Real World Records, "Spiro."

⁴¹ Schwarz, "Music as a Gradual Process: Part II," 280.

⁴² Real World Records, "Pole Star."

⁴³ Schwarz, "Music as a Gradual Process: Part II," 281.

The presence of minimal techniques is most evident in the overlapping patterns: pulsating repetitive blocks of various lengths create cross rhythms and shifting patterns. Note values of constrained blocks are augmented or diminished and blocks are rhythmically displaced against themselves in canons. Motivic blocks weave through the tune's melodic range and connect the melody to a more pulsating texture. The egalitarian approach to performance, linking mechanical procedure to group expression, shows that Spiro's style is influenced by minimalist concepts of performance.

Aspects such as a simple harmonic palette with a tonal center and repetitive motives within the strains of tunes are compatible with minimal techniques. They contribute to the tonal stasis of the music and accentuate the shifts and transformations of repetitive patterns. On the other hand, certain stylistic elements are not fully exploited to the benefit of a "minimalist" interpretation. The bagpipe's drone is one example; motivic repetition within a tune is another. The decision to play full strains results in a sectional musical form with little room for large-scale additive processes. The band has made a clear effort not to deconstruct the historical melodies. This reveals the (firm) boundary of the musical systems on *Pole Star*.

In conclusion, the notion of post-revival has provided a useful theoretical context for interpreting modern trends in contemporary folk music practices. However, many theoretical layers of this model that may be juxtaposed to Spiro's case remain yet to be examined. The most important issue is the relationship between a repertoire's "initial" revival(s) and the musical experiments that happen thereafter. Bithell and Hill's elementary explanation of post-revival is a creative space that emerges once a revived music tradition (with all its transformations and reconstructions) is "firmly established in a new context."⁴⁴ Since some of the discussed source material has only recently been rediscovered, a more in debt study is required of the current state of this specific music's revival. This could reveal to what extent revival and post-revival currents exist alongside one another. In a more compound sense, post-revival could symbolize a trend of shifting "frames of reference" in cultural politics.⁴⁵ In the latter explanation, the national frame that served the rise of many folk revivals makes place for a globalized, transnational framework. To map out such a shift in British music traditions, further analysis is needed. Among other things, this would mean an investigation of the national framework ("Englishness") and the role of the commercial infrastructure that resulted from British folk revival processes (festivals, magazines, websites and other

⁴⁴ Bithell and Hill, "An Introduction," 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

promotional channels).⁴⁶ Consequently, this context will give a more complete view of Spiro's position between tradition and modernity in the post-revival framework.

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⁴⁶ On the topic of "Englishness" I suggest the following reading: Trish Winter and Simon Keegan-Phipps, *Performing Englishness: Identity and Politics in a Contemporary Folk Resurgence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). The topic of infrastructure is discussed in Bithell and Hill, "An Introduction," 5.

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