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Ronnie Gibson

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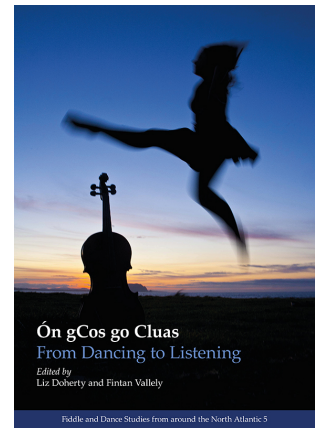
From Dancing to Listening

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The status of the master fiddler in eighteenth-century Scotland

RONNIE GIBSON

Eighteenth-century Scotland was witness to changes in the reception and function of fiddle music. While dance remained the primary motivation for performance, alternatives were gaining in popularity. In a parallel movement, the emergence of art and folk as categories of music was shaping the way music was heard and understood. This paper will consider the implications of these phenomena by interrogating the categorisation and aestheticisation of fiddle music in eighteenth-century Scotland. In addition, the status of the master fiddler and the development of the instrumental slow air will be assessed as indicators of these phenomena.

I intend to weave two arguments together in this paper: first, that our modern ideas about Scottish fiddle music have shaped the writing of its history; and second, that in the course of the eighteenth century, Scottish fiddle music was increasingly used for purposes other than accompanying dance. To emphasise the first point, I want to examine the definition of 'Scottish fiddle music'. The Scottish aspect is relatively unproblematic as even when the nationality of a composer was not Scottish, there was, and is, a distinctive Scottish idiom of melody. The 'fiddle' aspect is more problematic. James Hunter in 1979 was the first to publish a book in which the title identifies 'fiddle music' expressly. Previously, the term Scottish 'violin music' or 'dance music' was preferable, and in the eighteenth century publications were titled as being for whichever instrument was in vogue at the time. Of course, the focus on publications is only one perspective, with the title of Alburger's *Scottish Fiddlers and their Music* offering another perspective which avoids the problem by emphasising fiddlers rather than fiddle music.¹ However, the issue remains valid and reveals a change in the reception of the music between the eighteenth century and now.

The 'music' aspect is also worthy of comment. The exclusive identification of music notation as 'music' is unsatisfactory, especially for a practice which featured, as it still does, literate and non-literate traditions. Indeed, it is for this reason (among others) that the categorisation of Scottish fiddle music is difficult. And it is to categorisation that I now turn. The categories 'folk music' and 'art music' emerged in the course of the eighteenth century

and shaped subsequent ideas about music, but eighteenth-century musicians focused on the function of music rather than its origins:

Back before the folk-art split, a composer such as Oswald could straddle Scottish and international styles without worrying about being a ‘folk composer’ or an ‘art composer’, he was just a composer [...] But by the time the Scottish Fiddler Niel Gow was flourishing, to be a great Scottish musician meant to be a great ‘folk’ musician. Gow and his ilk are today studied in ‘world music’ or ‘folk music’ classes rather than in surveys of ‘Western music’.²

While it is my contention that the ‘folk-art split’ has had more impact on us in the present than it did on Niel Gow and his contemporaries, Gelbart’s survey of the intellectual history behind the categories highlights their historical contingency. Johnson’s definitions of folk music and art music (see Figure 1) also highlight the difficulty of categorising Scottish fiddle music, something that he investigates³ in his book by examining the interplay between the two:

Folk music	Art music
Transmission oral	Transmission notational
No definitive texts	Definitive texts
Composers soon forgotten	Composers recorded
Limits of complexity set by powers of memory	Limits of complexity set by powers of intellect
Monodic	Polyphonic or harmonised
Dependent on amateur performers; few professionals	Dependent on professional performers and composers
Inexpensive, non-commercial	Expensive, uncommercial, requires patronage to survive
An unselfconscious part of the way of life	A selfconscious recreational activity for which a taste must be cultivated; not equally valued by all members of the community
Can fit into all classes and ways of life; flourishes in poor communities with little leisure	Cannot flourish outside an affluent spendthrift community
No formal education needed for its propagation	Formal education necessary for all concerned with it – the more the better
Repertory relatively static	Repertory ever-changing; subject to fashion
Widespread	Localized in main cultural centres

Figure 1 Johnson’s definitions of folk music and art music.⁴

Looking at the aspects Johnson identifies in his definition – transmission, texts, musical complexity and texture, economics, function, social order, training, repertory, and location – it is clear Scottish fiddle music, even as we understand it today, is an ill fit under either heading. The identification of ‘cross-currents’ among these factors is equally inadequate because the historically-contingent categories cannot inform us on the eighteenth-century *reception* of Scottish fiddle music. It is to the functions of Scottish fiddle music in the eighteenth century, and the second of my two arguments, that I now turn.

The alternatives to the performance of Scottish fiddle music as accompaniment to dance include its use as accompaniment for song and, expressly, exclusively for the pleasure of performing or listening, pre-empting the Kantian aesthetic of the century’s close. With the introduction of the violin to Scotland in the late seventeenth century, new expressive opportunities were afforded to the nation’s fiddlers. The tone quality of pre-violin fiddles was suited to a rhythmic rather than lyrical effect, but the violin was more versatile, permitting also a rhythmic drive in addition to a fuller tone quality. A consequence of this was what

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Johnson has labelled the ‘Scots Drawing-Room Style’ – stylised settings and variations of Scottish tunes.

Slow & Pathetick

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled 'Niel Gow's Lament for the Death of his Second Wife'. The score is written for piano and is in the key of D major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. It is marked 'Slow & Pathetick'. The score consists of five systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system begins with a treble staff containing a trill (tr) and a fermata (~) over a note, followed by several measures with trills. The bass staff provides a simple harmonic accompaniment. The second system features a treble staff with a fermata and a trill, and a bass staff with a fermata. The third system continues with trills in the treble and a fermata. The fourth system shows a treble staff with a fermata and a trill, and a bass staff with a fermata. The fifth system concludes with a treble staff containing a trill and a fermata, and a bass staff with a fermata. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Figure 2 ‘Niel Gow’s Lament for the Death of his Second Wife’.⁵

Inseparable from this aestheticisation of Scottish fiddle music was the commercialisation of the music that, though focused on London, also effected music-making in Scotland. Growth in the number of amateur music-makers created a market for sheet music which, when combined with the fashion for all things ‘Scotch’, had a big impact on Scottish music. As a result of these changes, three dichotomies emerged as traditions of performance: professional/amateur, urban/rural, and literate/non-literate. Of course, these are far from straightforward, with practices being much more grey than black and white. However, in

light of them, it is helpful to consider the functions of the many collections of music published by Scottish fiddlers in the final quarter of the eighteenth century. Printed collections of tunes were probably little-used in actual performance by professional fiddlers. Rather, they functioned as a fiddler's 'calling card' in the patronage-driven economy of which he was a part. They also served the middle-class music-makers, but would have been too expensive for many itinerant fiddlers who learned their tunes aurally. In highlighting the manuscript *culture* in which these printed publications played a part, I will look at two producers of these publications, master fiddlers William Marshall and Niel Gow.

Marshall was described by Robert Burns as, 'The First [meaning the best] Composer of Strathspeys of the Age'⁶ Marshall's posthumous reception has emphasised his 'classical credentials', with the nurturing of his status as an art composer, in contradiction to Gelbart's claims of fiddlers being 'folk musicians'. In his memoir of Marshall, Joseph MacGregor describes him as 'a distinguished Composer of Scottish Melodies'.⁷ Similarly, the subtitles of Bullock's biography of Marshall, *The Scots Composer*, and J. A. F.'s article in *Scottish Notes and Queries*, 'Violinist and Composer', further support the depiction of Marshall as an art music composer rather than a folk fiddler.⁸ Since he was factor⁹ to the Duke of Gordon, Marshall's portrait was painted in 1817, depicting him in a stately stance with fiddle on knee and a quill on the table beside him¹⁰ as a symbol of his erudition; the portrait depicts nothing identifiably Scottish, but does portray him as a figurehead of the Scottish Enlightenment. The characteristics of his music include the choice of less-familiar keys and the use of positions other than the first on the violin. However, it is misleading not to acknowledge the technical challenges also posed by tunes made by other fiddler-composers. The present-day expectation that Scottish fiddle tunes stay in first position and the keys of G, D, or A major is misrepresentative of a significant part of the repertoire.

A comparison of Marshall with Niel Gow is revealing. Gow more than any other fiddler experienced celebrity status both during his lifetime and after his death. The romanticisation of him after his death – most publicly by Murdoch in *The Fiddle in Scotland* – has resulted in more myth than fact.¹¹ However, certain sources provide an insight into his reception in his lifetime, among them this description by Burns: 'A short, stout-built Highland figure, with his greyish hair shed on his honest social brow – an interesting face, marking strong sense, kind open heartedness mixed with unmistrusting simplicity'.¹²

A survey of depictions of Gow in art reveals how popular a figure he was, from the famous portrait by Raeburn to the dance scenes by David Allan (both dating from Gow's lifetime), and other depictions in the years after his death, in the frontispiece to Fraser's *The Airs and Melodies Peculiar to the Highlands of Scotland and the Isles* and David Wilkie's *Penny Wedding*.¹³

What emerges most prominently, especially in contrast to Marshall, is Gow's links to Highland culture. As Helen Jackson explains, the parish of Little Dunkeld in which Gow was born and lived was divided between Highland and Lowland regions, with the language of Strathbrann where he was born being Gaelic, and the language of Inver where he lived being English.¹⁴ Additional features, like his being depicted by Raeburn in tartan trews and the Highland musical fingerprint in his compositions, provide a clear context for his music,

to which I turn now. ‘Niel Gow’s Lament for the Death of his Second Wife’ is today the most popular of his compositions.

The development of the fiddle lament – typically in AB form with regular phrasing – only really began in the mid-eighteenth century, with the influence of the bagpipe lament in Gaelic culture, and as the logical progression from accompanying song. In addition, with the post-Culloden romance for all things ‘Scotch’, the London-based Scottish music publisher, James Oswald, was provided with a market to exploit. Contained in the second volume of his *Caledonian Pocket Companion* is ‘The Scots Lament’, and in the third volume, ‘The Highland Lamentation’.¹⁵

A survey of Gow’s output shows that he only published three bespoke laments: ‘Niel Gow’s Lamentation for Abercarney’ in the *First Collection* of 1784; ‘Niel Gow’s Lamentation of the Death of his Brother’ in the *Second Collection* of 1788; and ‘Niel Gow’s Lament for the Death of his 2nd Wife’ in the *Fifth Collection* of 1809.¹⁶ The latter was published posthumously by Gow’s son, Nathaniel, whose role in representing his father to the music-buying public is worthy of more research. It is worth noting the variation between repetitions of material in the score. The subtlety belies the sophisticated aesthetic which governed the performance of what it is easy to think of as rather simple tunes. Variation of rhythm, bowing, articulation and ornamentation are suggestive of a rich and nuanced performing practice.

From one perspective, the advent of the master-fiddler and the development of slow fiddle music in Scotland are indicative of an increasing aestheticisation, but the move from foot to ear was driven largely by the growth in the market for music. What today we consider to be ‘traditional Scottish fiddle-music’ was born in this climate. But, the complex relationship between ‘town and country’ and ‘literacy and non-literacy’ defies straightforward explanation. In striving to adopt an eighteenth-century perspective, recognition of the multifaceted practice of Scottish fiddle music at the time is vital to establishing a more holistic interpretation.

Notes

¹ Mary Anne Alburger, *Scottish Fiddlers and their Music* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1983).

² Mathew Gelbart, *The Invention of Folk Music and Art Music: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 239–240.

³ David Charles Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 111–129.

⁴ Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland*, pp. 14–15.

⁵ Niel Gow, ‘Niel Gow’s Lament for the Death of his 2^d Wife’, in *A Fifth Collection of Strathspeys, Reels, &c. for the Piano Forte, Harp, Violin & Violoncello*, ed. by Nathaniel Gow (Edinburgh, 1809), pp. 2–3.

⁶ Robert Burns, ‘Tune your Fiddles, Etc.’, in *The Complete Works of Robert Burns*, ed. by Allan Cunningham (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1855), p. 514.

⁷ Joseph MacGregor, ‘Memoir of William Marshall, Composer’, in *William Marshall, Volume 2nd of a Collection of Scottish Melodies, Reels, Strathspeys, Jigs, Slow Airs &c for the Piano Forte, Violin and Violoncello* (Edinburgh: Alexander Robertson, 1845).

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⁸ John M. Bullock, *William Marshall: The Scots Composer* (Inverness: Robert Carruthers, 1933); 'William Marshall: Violinist and Composer', *Scottish Notes and Queries*, 2 (1924), pp. 129–132.

⁹ Employed as an agent.

¹⁰ John Moir, *William Marshall* (National Galleries of Scotland, 1817, 2012), <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/artists/john-moir> [accessed 4 July 2012].

¹¹ Alexander Murdoch, *The Fiddle in Scotland* (London: Blockley, 1888).

¹² Robert Burns, cited in John Gibson Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1828), p. 158.

¹³ Henry Raeburn, *Niel Gow* (National Galleries of Scotland, 1787); David Allan, *The Penny Wedding* (National Galleries of Scotland, 1795); Simon Fraser, *The Airs and Melodies Peculiar to the Highlands of Scotland and the Isles* (Edinburgh: Fraser, 1816); David Wilkie, *The Penny Wedding* (The Royal Collection, 1818).

¹⁴ Helen Jackson, *Niel Gow's Inver* (Perth: Perth and Kinross Libraries, 2000), p. 13.

¹⁵ James Oswald, [ed.] 'The Scots Lament', in *The Caledonian Pocket Companion II* (London: Simpson, 1750), p. 19; James Oswald, [ed.] 'The Highland Lamentation', in *The Caledonian Pocket Companion III* (London: Simpson, 1751), p. 24.

¹⁶ 'Niel Gow's Lamentation for Abercarney', in Niel Gow, *A Collection of Strathspey Reels with a Bass for the Violoncello or Harpsichord* (Edinburgh: Corri and Sutherland, 1784), p. 3; 'Niel Gow's Lamentation for the Death of his Brother', in Niel Gow, *A Second Collection of Strathspey Reels with a Bass for the Violoncello or Harpsichord* (Edinburgh: Gow, 1788), p. 18; Niel Gow, 'Niel Gow's Lament for the Death of his 2^d Wife', in *A Fifth Collection of Strathspeys, Reels, &c. for the Piano Forte, Harp, Violin & Violoncello*, ed. by Nathaniel Gow (Edinburgh, 1809).