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'A History of Fiddle Music in the Highlands'

talk by

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Thinking about the title, 'Fiddle Music in the Highlands', my first thought was: definitions.

Firstly, 'fiddle music'. I well remember when the late Hector MacAndrew died, probably the greatest Scots fiddler who lived in the 20th century. I wrote a tribute to him in the *Northern Times.* It was headed up (not my heading, but the editor of the *Northern Times* headed it up) 'Death of Great Fiddler'. I sent it to Hector's widow, Elsie, and she wrote back, thanked me for it and said, "But Hector would have hated to be called a fiddler. He called himself a violinist." I think there's a slight element of snobbery there, because all professional musicians that I know in orchestras talk about their fiddle. There really is no difference between the two instruments. It's a question of how you play, what music you play, and I suppose what your background is. I hope to show that although the paths were parallel at one point, they eventually began to converge.

The second definition is 'the Highlands'. At present, you come across Drumochter and you're just coming past the summit when you see 'Welcome to the Highlands'. Well, that's not the Highlands as I know it, because the Highlands as I think of it in terms of music includes Perthshire, a great deal of Argyll and Bute, and certainly right down the

Spey Valley, right to the sea. They're all in the Highlands, because the great composer William Marshall, who was born in Fochabers, would have classed himself a Highlander. He was a Gaelic speaker and brought up in a croft, so what more Highland can you get than that? Perhaps the Highland [football] League has got more to do with it. We've got Deveronvale and teams like that.

However, a word first of all about the early instruments. 'Fiddle' is a name that goes way, way back, spelt f-e-d-y-l, fiddle. The other instrument is the 'rebec', or as it was called in Scotland, the 'ribid'. And another instrument is called the 'crowd', or the 'cruth' in Welsh.

A few years back I started up a little chamber music ensemble and we were looking for a name for it. And I said to the late Margaret MacArthur, "Can you give me a Gaelic name for minstrels?"
She thought about it and she came back and said, "It should be pronounced 'Cruthurun'."
Now that comes from the same root, the 'cruth', or 'crowd', and it's people who played that instrument. I was a little bit nonplussed later on, speaking to a Gaelic teacher who said, "Yes, it can also mean humpy-backed old men!

But the 'crowd' or the 'cruth', the 'rebec' and the 'fiddle' were used and, in polite society in medieval times, the 'viol'. Now the viol is not the same as the fiddle. It was not even a precursor of it. It had a flat fingerboard and it was played in this manner [demonstrates cf double bass]. And it had a very refined tone. So the viol is nearer to the double bass. The double bass is a member of the viol family, but it has become modified. The viol was used throughout Europe in polite society, not for entertainment by professionals always, but by ladies meeting and playing viol music. They had what was called a 'kist of viols' or a 'chest of viols' and they took out different sized instruments and they played together.

Now that was what was used in Mary Queen of Scots' court and in the Stuart courts in general. But it was overtaken by the fiddle, which later developed into what we have now, the violin. There is a record from when Mary Queen of Scots first arrived at Holyrood House, of a crowd gathering beneath her window to serenade her with fiddles, and so on. I don't know whether she liked it or not. John Knox said she was well pleased with it. But suffice to say, she changed her apartments to the other side of the building immediately.

So, we had in parallel the refined music probably played on viols and this pop music of the time played on fiddles and rebecs, and so on. It was the development of the fiddle, I think, that brought the fusion of the two. The first violin, as it might be called, was developed in the 15th century in Italy. The earliest great maker was a man called Gasparo Bertalotti. He was obviously Spanish, but then the King of Naples was also the King of Spain, so there was a link between the two countries. He lived in Salò in Italy, so he's known as Gasparo da Salò, and that's all we know about him. His violins are still extant and in use, though they are getting very frail now. They have to be looked after very carefully.

Those who followed after Gasparo were people like the Amati family. The Amati family stretched for a long, long number of years, from the 1500s right through until the end

of the 17th century, and it was one Andrea Amati in Cremona who taught the famous Stradivarius to make violins. Antonio Stradivari was an apprentice in the Amatis' workshops.

My violin that I have here was made by a Cremonese maker, but he lived in Paris, and it was made in about 1734. I got it from a maker and repairer in Glasgow, a remarkable man. I'd had a violin that he had made, and when I needed something better, because I'd got to know him, he homed in on this and said, "This is the right violin for you."

This man, Mick Dooley, had an Irish sounding name but he was born in Castleford in Yorkshire. He told me that he'd been in the Merchant Navy, and he remembered one occasion when they were in Lerwick and, not being a drinker, he went walking round the streets of Lerwick while all the rest of the crew went to the pub. As he walked he heard, as I'm sure would be very easy to hear in Lerwick, the fiddle being played. He listened to it, and having a good ear for the quality of a fiddle, he was very impressed with it. So he knocked on the door and asked if he could see it. He was invited in and I suppose a ceilidh took place. He said the instrument was a Stradivarius in mint condition, just as it had been when it left the maker's hands. But of course, the people weren't really interested in what this was or its value. It had been in the family for two or three hundred years and they wanted it to stay in the family.

As well as Amati violins, Guarneri violins also came to this country. In fact you'll hear a recording of Hector MacAndrew later. His violin was a Pietro Guarneri, a member of that same family. Pietro lived in Venice and was one of the great makers of that family.

What happened, I think, was that this instrument, the violin, proved so successful that it has lasted from the 15th century and is still the foremost stringed instrument. There are more violins in an orchestra, a symphony orchestra, than there is any other kind of instrument. But it wasn't only in 'classical music', but throughout all music that the violin excelled. It had the quick response that people like from stringed instruments. You could play very fast, it had a wide range, and it had power.

The viols, the rebecs, and so on, were limited in the power they had. The violin has quite considerable power, as you'll hear later on. It's got even more power now, of course, because they stick microphones on it, or they make a special electronic violin and then it's very powerful because it comes out of a loudspeaker. But to me, that's not real violin tone. A violin tone is an acoustic sound that comes out of this box.

Coincidental with the rise of the violin in Scotland, we had the rise of the great performers. I think perhaps the first great performer that we can talk about is Macpherson. Many of you will know the story of Macpherson who was a freebooter and fiddler - the two often go together. He was tried on a trumped-up charge, sentenced to be hanged, and then he was hanged in Banff. The story goes that his pardon was coming through, and they knew it was coming through, but they put the clock forward and hanged him just the same. He played a tune, known as Macpherson's Rant', and the words are to the effect that he played a tune and they danced a rune beneath the gallows tree. Now, there are umpteen versions of it, and I'm going to play a fairly slow one, which I think is probably more appropriate for somebody who's about to die, about to be hanged.

‘Macpherson's Rant’, as you can hear, has an old-world sound about it, and I'll try to explain what that sound is. The characteristics of folk music, particularly Scottish Gaelic folk music, are that it uses not an eight-note scale like you learnt at school when you went do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do, but a five-note scale called the pentatonic scale. In fact the bagpipe scale is an overlaying of three pentatonic scales, one on top of the other. That's why it sounds out of tune. It does sound out of tune because it's meant to. It is not an ordinary scale such as we know. The pentatonic scale has a particular characteristic sound, and that's what colours so much Highland music.

Highland music

Now, that's a modernised version because the original sounds like this.

Highland music. That's only one version of it because, like most folk music, which is an oral tradition or an aural tradition, you can take it either way. It varies a little bit from one singer to another, one part of the country to another. But it has... I like to think of it as a... land of the ever young, a sort of mystic sound. This scale is also, incidentally, what gives Chinese music its characteristic sound, but it emphasises a different part of the pentatonic scale, so it sounds oriental. Anyhow, the pentatonic scale is one of the things which has coloured most Scots fiddle music of the earlier type. It has been elaborated upon, extra notes have been put in, but it still gives a particular colour or flavour to the music.

The other thing is the Scotch snap. My colleague in Golspie, the piping tutor, George Stewart, loathes the term ‘Scotch snap’ because it is overused. Scotch snap is not peculiar to Scots music. It's very common in Hungarian music, for instance. But it is a particular characteristic of Scots fiddle music, and it's particularly so in marches and strathspeys. You all know the rhythm in a strathspey... where you get the quick note before the long note. The basic rhythm is... but the snap is... And that gives a very distinct flavour to Scots fiddle music. Strathspey, I've never quite understood the name... the original term was a strathspey reel. I've never quite understood why it's called a strathspey reel, unless, of course, it relates in some way to the number of distilleries on Speyside. So the reels slowed down and they staggered a little bit as they did it. But it is the ultimate tune form of Scots fiddle music.

You have marches, you have reels and you have jigs. But you have jigs throughout the whole of Europe. The French have their gigues, the Italians have a giga. And they're the same thing. It's a fast six notes in the bar. It's not peculiar to Scotland and it's very common in Ireland. The reel, again, is common throughout Europe, and particularly in Ireland. There are a lot of Irish reels. But nowhere else has the strathspey with this particular rhythm. And nowhere else has developed the pipe march.

I'm going to talk later on about how music went to the other side of the Atlantic. The pipe march is one that has gone right the way across to Canada, America, and Australia. Anywhere, I suppose, where Scots regiments went with bagpipes, they accepted the pipe march. And the Gurkhas marched Scottish pipe marches. They take them at a heck of a speed. But then they've got shorter legs than most of us. The other regiment that marched as fast was the Glasgow regiment, the Cameroonians. And they were all wee men as well.

Now, a further word about the strathspey, because I think it's very important. One of the earliest tunes we have is a tune called, 'Tullochgorum'. I can find it in this tome of a book. I'm going to refer to this book quite a lot, in fact to the extent that I've telephoned the man who printed it, published it, and asked if he would mind that I relied heavily on it. And he said he'd be delighted, particularly as one of the last songs of praise services he produced was in Dornoch Cathedral, and he also did an interview in the Castle Hotel many years ago. He interviewed Robbie Shepherd.

This is a tune called 'Tullochgorum', and it's a very, very early Scots fiddle tune…. It doesn't finish with the note you would expect it to… well, it's the note that you would expect it to, but it finishes sort of up in the air. And that is related to this business of the pentatonic scale. As you hear, it's got a very characteristic Scots sound.

You wouldn't mistake that for being a Welsh dance or an English dance or a French dance. It is Scots through and through. And that is the strathspey. It has influenced a great many other forms. I'm going to play you a little bit of a symphonic work, which I'm sure you all know, if I can work out how to make this thing work.

This music is by a very great Scottish composer called Hamish MacCunn, and it's a strathspey. It goes on and develops, but he starts off with a strathspey. MacCunn wrote three overtures. That's' The Land of the Mountain and the Flood', better known to professional musicians as 'The Land of the Fountain and the Mud' and it's part of a triptych of three. The other two are not nearly as well known, which is a great pity because they are tremendous. Particularly the third one. The second overture is based on the Border ballad, 'The Dowie Dens o Yarrow'. It has a strathspey for French horn.

I won't bother to play you that. The third is called ‘The Ship o’ the Fiend’, which is a marvellous overture. But that's beside the point. It's nothing to do with Scots fiddle music. I'm just telling you in order to investigate Hamish MacCunn a little bit further. MacCunn was a native of Greenock, by the way, so he wasn't a Highlander either.

The strathspey has permeated everything to do with Scotland. Whenever a composer, such as Peter Maxwell Davies, wants to sound Scottish, he introduces strathspey rhythm. In the Tam o' Shanter Overture, when Malcolm Arnold has the witches dancing, it's the strathspey they dance to, and I'm delighted to see that one Scots characteristic that he did observe is that it's the bagpipes that old Nick plays, not the fiddle. In Scotland it's not the fiddle. Everywhere else it is, I'm afraid.

Now, to go on to the composers who came into greatness because of this particular instrument. There were various people. Pete Burney was one of the great ones, but he was from Fife, so I'll ignore him a little bit. There were Rankins, Boyds, Witherspoons, and so on, and they were all composing music for the court, the court of James IV onwards. They composed bass dances, pavanes, that's a dance from Italy, from Padua. And the ‘branle’, or ‘brawl’, as the Scots word is for it. It's a sort of a reel. A particularly characteristic version of the branle, or bransle, came into being in Scotland, and all this influence began to bring the court music and the traditional folk music together so that we began to get great composers, great families of composers emerging.

I mentioned James Macpherson earlier on but the thing that came about at the same time was that where James Macpherson's tune that I played is in various different versions because it was an oral tradition, musical literacy started to come into the tradition.

The first of the great families was the Gow family. Niel, Niel Junior, Nathaniel, Daniel, and so on. They could write their own music, and they stole other people's music as well. That was not uncommon in those days. Niel Gow, incidentally, if you see his name written, it's always spelt N-i-e-l. He never varied from that. I've often seen that being corrected, but Niel himself always used the spelling N-i-e-l. Now they were a Perthshire family, from the Dunkeld area and they were in receipt of patronage from the Duke of Athol. Because of that, I think, and because they mixed in the society that was visiting Athol, the castle there in Blair Athol, they started to play, not individually (though they did plenty of that), but as a trio. What we call a harpsichord trio. Now that would be a cello, which would double the bass line of the harpsichord, the harpsichord filling in harmony, and the fiddle playing the melodies. And from that, they moved to Edinburgh, and they actually were in great demand playing in the drawing rooms of Georgian Edinburgh.

Many, many years ago, more than I care to think of, I played during the Edinburgh Festival in Gladstone's Land for the Saltire Society. We played a programme of music of Georgian Edinburgh, and it was full of music by the Gow family, and the kind of music they would have played. It was very, very interesting because we were joined by singers and by a flute, but the basis of it was violin, harpsichord and cello. I'll play a Gow tune in a minute. You can hear in this tune that I'm going to play, that although it has become somewhat more refined - classical in the broadest sense of the word - it is also a little bit strange in musical grammar. It doesn't seem to flow in nice four-bar

phrases quite as we have come to expect. For the uninitiated, don't worry about it. You'll understand what I mean when I play it. This is ‘Niel Gow’s Lament for the Death of His Second Wife’. He didn't write one for his first wife, so we don't know anything about her, but this is one of the great tunes of Scots fiddle playing.

It's a wonderful tune, but I hope you saw what I meant by the musical grammar. It didn't quite follow the contours of a normal tune as we know it. It seems to go somewhere, and then not quite go there, but go somewhere else.

Almost contemporary with Niel Gow was the composer I spoke about many years ago to some of you, William Marshall of Fochabers. He, in many ways, was the great genius of Scots fiddle music of the north east of Scotland, and an under-rewarded genius. He left home at the age of twelve to work for the Duke of Gordon as a houseboy. He rose within the family and I think he became really friendly with one of the children of that family. He was taught by the tutor within the castle in Fochabers and was a very apt pupil. He obviously learnt the fiddle, but he also learnt a great deal about mathematics.

If you go round Speyside, look at Tomintoul to start off with and see the layout of the centre of Tomintoul, then go to Dufftown, and you'll see that there's a similar layout there. In fact there's a similar layout in a lot of Speyside towns and it was Marshall who designed them. Indeed, he rose eventually to become, first of all, butler to the Duke of Gordon, and then to be the factor. Eventually, when he retired as factor, he took over his own farm.

Later on I'm going to play you a strathspey by Marshall. I think personally that it’s the greatest strathspey ever written, and it’s called ‘Craigellachie Brig’. It was Marshall’s memorial for the building of the new bridge across the Spey. Marshall wasn't primarily a musician, though he was obviously very interested in music and enjoyed playing the fiddle. He also danced, and he built clocks. There's a marvellous clock somewhere or other which is not working; it’s too old to work, but if it did it tells the time of day, the phases of the moon, and where the high tide is around the Moray coast at different times. It does a marvellous number of things and that was this genius of a man. He was very shy in many ways, strong-minded but very shy. He was also a Tory, and that was not fashionable among the ordinary people of the time.

Once, he discovered that a lot of the tunes he had written had been poached by Niel Gow and published under other names, and he was a little bit miffed but he didn't know what to do about it. So Lady Gordon said, “I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll make an official publication of your music.” She paid for it and this is one of the earliest really long publications that we have of Scots fiddle music.

Now, Marshall’s tunes are a little bit different from most Scots fiddle tunes. For a start they're in keys that no Scots fiddler likes playing in. They're in flat keys. When he was asked why he wrote in flat keys, he said, “Ah, because I didn't write for droolers”.

There's a certain amount of refinement about his tunes. The one I like best is a tune called ‘Chapel Keithack’. He wasn't good at harmony. He could write his music down, but he got the assistance of the priest in Dufftown to help him, and ‘Chapel Keithack’ was one of the chapels that this priest was in who wrote basses for Marshall's music. So this is his tribute to that place.

I think that's a wonderful tune. I think many a great composer would not be ashamed to own that particular tune. But as you can see, it's got something of mainstream European civilisation about it; something of the Enlightenment has flowed into it. However, ‘Craigellachie Brig’ is very much an old-style strathspey. It's very difficult, too. I'm going to say that before I start murdering it. It is incredibly difficult and very tiring to play.