

SCOTTISH
TRADITION
9
THE FIDDLER
AND HIS ART



SCOTTISH TRADITION

Recorded and documented by
the School of Scottish Studies,
University of Edinburgh

9

THE FIDDLER
AND HIS ART

DAVID ALLAN'S RUSTIC SCENE, depicting Neil Gow and his brother David playing for a wedding dance amidst Perthshire scenery, illustrates well the major role of the violin since its arrival in Scotland some time during the 17th century – a provider of marvellous music for dancing. But Niel Gow himself was only one of many fine Scottish fiddler-composers who also explored the instrument's potential for sounding sweet, expressive listening airs. Both kinds of music are presented on this disc by musicians who, without exception, learned their art before the ubiquitous tools of the mass media – radios and cassette players in particular – became all-powerful homogenizing influences on Scotland's local musical traditions.

THE FIDDLE MUSIC of five different regions of Scotland can be heard here, each with its own distinctive style. The most northerly is that of Shetland, or more precisely the island of Whalsay (Side 2 Band 1) and although Andrew Poleson's playing is already featured on an earlier disc in this series (Scottish Tradition 4: Shetland Fiddle Music) no excuses are offered for including more of his music. His quartet of "fine dancing springs", though played in the style of his native island of Whalsay, are examples of Scots dancing tunes whose words have survived in oral tradition right down to the present day, long after they had been laid aside in mainland Scotland. They pose the old unanswerable chicken-and-egg question – Which came first, the words (as dancing songs) or the instrumental tunes?

Further south in the Orkney isles one is aware of a gentler style of bowing, more in harmony with the kindlier farming landscape, but, in the case of older players, overlaid with finely fingered ornamentation. Orcadian Hugh Inkster's contribution (Side 1, Band 5) is unusual in that he plays on a Stroh fiddle – the violin with a horn which was patented in 1900 to help make possible the earliest phonograph recordings of violin music. This was the machine used by the legendary James Scott Skinner for his earliest recordings. If, on listening to those early Skinner recordings, one forms the impression that it was impossible to play in tune on such a machine, let alone make attractive music, the late Hugh Inkster's performances are an enjoyable corrective. The playing of Pat Shearer is perhaps more representative of the best of present-day Orcadian fiddling, with its crisp rhythms and delicate ornamentation (Side 1, Bands 6 and 7).

SCOTTISH FIDDLE ENTHUSIASTS have often debated the existence of a "west Highland" style. Similarities between the performances of Donald MacDonell, a master of amazingly intricate pipe-style ornamentation

(opening Side 1) and those of other musicians from the Lochailort area (such as Angus Grant – featured on Topic 12TS347), suggest that there is such a style. On the other hand they may simply underline the fact that in the Highlands more than elsewhere in Scotland bagpipers and fiddlers have for centuries shared in the making of a common repertory of Gaelic airs and dance tunes, and hold a common conception of how they should sound, whether on fiddle or pipes.

Over in the east of Scotland claims used to be made for a variety of regional styles, though James Honeyman of Dundee, author of the well-known Strathspey, Reel and Hornpipe Tutor, published around 1906, confessed in it that he could hear no difference between the so-called Perthshire, Angus and Forfarshire styles. The earliest recording on this disc comes from Angus, from the bow of one of the last of the fiddler dancing-masters, John Reid, who taught the arts of music and dance around the towns and villages of Scotland up until World War II. His playing, taken from an old 78rpm disc rounds off Side One.

Two Aberdeenshire musicians complete this survey, for the north-east is justly famed for its distinctive snappy Strathspey rhythms and for elegant, at times 'learned', renderings of slow airs. Albert Stewart's contribution (Side 2, Band 2) reminds us that the hardy Scots traveller-folk can, when they choose, make themselves masters of any instrument they lay hands on. But the doyen of Aberdeenshire fiddlers, the late Hector MacAndrew – known to millions through his television appearances, particularly the occasion when he gave a lesson in strathspey bowing to Yehudi Menuhin – distances us a little from the "unschooled" styles of the other fine musicians presented here. Hector MacAndrew blended in masterly style an intimate knowledge of traditional practices with the skills of classical violinists.

HERE then are musical offerings from seven different Scottish fiddler-musicians. What they show in common is the ability of each to put his own personal stamp of creative individuality onto a tune regardless of its provenance and unhindered by a feeling that one should be bound to any notated setting. This must be the principal virtue of what has for long been a lively and essentially oral tradition.

PETER COOKE

SIDE 1

- BAND 1 Lady Madelina Sinclair (strathspey) and Sandy Cameron (reel) DONALD MACDONELL
- BAND 2 Mackintosh's Lament (pibroch air) DONALD MACDONELL
- BAND 3 The Atholl Highlanders' March to Loch Katrine, The Inverness Gathering (march), Corriemonie's Rant (strathspey) and Alexander Duff (reel) DONALD MACDONELL
- BAND 4 Gabhaidh sinn an rathad mor (We will take the high road) (march) DONALD MACDONALD
- BAND 5 The Renfrewshire Militia (march) and Inganess (march) HUGH INKSTER
- BAND 6 The Stronsay Waltz and Jock Halcrow (waltz) PAT SHEARER & DAVID LINKLATER (piano)
- BAND 7 The Headlands, the Caledonian March and The Standing Stones of Stenness (marches) PAT SHEARER & DAVID LINKLATER (piano)
- BAND 8 The Braes of Tullymet (strathspey) and Captain Keeler (reel) JOHN REID SNR. & JOHN REID JNR. (piano)

SIDE 2

- BAND 1 Jenny Nettles, Cam you here to coort and clap, Mither put me to the well, The High Road to Linton (reels with words) ANDREW POLESON WITH WILLIAM WILLIAMSON
- BAND 2 Niel Gow's Lament for Whisky (slow air) ALBERT STEWART
- BAND 3 Mill Hills (slow strathspey, Pipe Major J. Stewart (march), The Lodge of Glentana (slow air), Gavin MacMillan (reel) HECTOR MACANDREW & SANDIE EDMONDSTONE (piano)
- BAND 4 James F. Dickie's Delight (slow air) and J.F. Dickie (reel) HECTOR MACANDREW & ANDIE EDMONDSTONE (piano)
- BAND 5 My Heart is broke since thy departure (slow air) HECTOR MACANDREW & SANDIE EDMONDSTONE (piano)
- BAND 6 Mrs Major Stewart of the island of Java (slow air), Madame Frederick (slow strathspey, Earl Grey (strathspey, Waverley Ball (reel) HECTOR MACANDREW & SANDIE EDMONDSTONE (piano)

Cover picture 'The Highland Dance': pen and wash (c 1780)
by David Allan (private collection)
Series editor – PETER COOKE



Tangent
records
50 Stroud Green Road
London N4 3EF

WARNING Copyright subsists in all Tangent records. Any unauthorised broadcasting, public performance, copying or re-recording in any manner whatsoever will constitute infringement of such copyright. Licences for the use of records for public performance may be obtained from Phonographic Performance Ltd., Ganton House, Ganton Street, London, W.1.

This disc is dedicated to the memory of Hugh Inkster, fiddler, of Kirkwall, Orkney, a valued friend of the School, who died in May 1988 while the record was still in preparation.