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THE SCOTCH SONG COMES TO LONDON

Purcell - Geminiani - J. C. Bach

It surprises no one today that Scottish musicians are often in London and English musicians often in Edinburgh, but it was not always so. Italian composers sometimes settled in eighteenth-century Edinburgh but English musicians hardly ever did, and I can think of only one English composer of any repute who set foot in Scotland in this period; Lampe, if you can count him as English, went to Edinburgh in 1750 and died there. But before then Handel, Arne and possibly Boyce had all worked in Dublin, as had a number of English actors and actresses; conversely Irish singers, actors and playwrights came flooding into London looking for work and usually finding it. There were hardly any such musical or theatrical contacts between the Scots and the English, not at least until late in the century. Yet Irish songs made hardly any impact in England until the 1780s, whereas Scotch Songs of a popular type were reaching London at least by Cromwell’s time, and eventually in astonishing numbers. It must have been ordinary citizens rather than professional musicians who brought them south.

Until the second half of the eighteenth century, the English crossed the border very seldom. One reason was the dreadful roads, much improved after the passing of the Turnpike Act in 1751. But suspicion and indifference also played their part. Lack of contact made the English sadly ignorant about their neighbours. Tate Wilkinson, manager of the Theatre in York and writing late in the century, remembered that in his youth Londoners had thought of Scotland as ‘a dreary place, distance [sic] almost as the West Indies’, whereas by 1790 you could ‘with the utmost ease dine early in the week in Grosvenor Square, and without discomposure set down at table on Saturday or Sunday in the New-Town of Edinburgh’. Time was when a ‘Cockney’ thought ‘green peas were never seen in Scotland, and supposes all the inhabitants live on barley-broth, haggass, and crowdy’ (porridge), yet by 1790 Edinburgh’s ‘new streets, hotels, superb squares etc. are astonishing,’ and ‘well lighted’ too.
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There may be a touch of exaggeration here, but the implications are true enough: the English were at last repairing their ignorance, and Scotland’s cities and large towns were becoming astonishingly prosperous considering their state at the beginning of the century. Back in 1700 traditional dislike and distrust prevailed on both sides of the border. ‘The Scot was either a Jacobite or a presbyterian, and in either capacity he alienated four-fifths of English sympathy.’ On the other hand the diarist John Evelyn was told on 9 March 1690 by ‘the famous lawyer Sir George Mackenzie (late Lord-Advocate of Scotland)’ of ‘the inveterate hatred which the presbyterians show to the family of Stuarts’, and of their ‘implacable hatred to the Episcopal Order and Church of England’. The Scots found that a parliament in far-off Westminster took no notice of their grievances and increasing poverty, and they attributed their lack of cultural achievements, almost total in Queen Anne’s reign, to the removal of royal patronage from Edinburgh once their king became James I of England and took to living there.

Thus the early eighteenth century was a most improbable time for Scotch Songs to become the rage in England. Reasons will be suggested for the onset of this enthusiasm, but we can only guess as to why it increased and persisted after the Act of Union in 1707. The best of them were the ‘standards’ of the age, reprinted time after time, the equivalent of those comparatively recent Scottish successes, The bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond and The road to the Isles. They were seldom rivalled by songs of any other kind, and they held their own right through the century. Much of the attraction lay in the piquancy of their Scots characteristics, but perhaps also the English were aware of an uneasy conscience, and felt it was time to show a neighbourly liking for something from over the border (so long as this put them to no trouble).

Oliver Cromwell did far more than King James I/VI to bring together the people of the two countries, though he was not much prompted by friendly feelings. In July 1650 he himself crossed the border with 16,000 men, defeated the Scots at Dunbar and showed no mercy to those forced to run for it. A year later the Prince of Wales, who had been crowned Charles II at Scone, invaded England and got as far as Worcester where Cromwell annihilated his army. Cromwell then tried conciliation. He established one parliament for the two countries, and even made gestures towards religious toleration, a concept the Scots found no easier to implement than the English. Cromwell had to keep a considerable army in Scotland to deal with the fighting that kept break-
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ing out. However, the money the English soldiers spent there did bring a measure of unexpected prosperity, and inevitably there was some fraternizing; when the English soldiers returned home some must have brought with them song tunes they had come to like north of the border.

In London there was a music publisher with an unusual interest in tunes of the kind now known as ‘traditional’ – John Playford. In 1651 he brought out the first edition of The English Dancing Master; it contained 105 tunes for violin or recorder. As the title made clear, the tunes were for dancing, and dancing instructions were printed under each of them. Some in fact were song tunes but Playford provided neither words nor accompaniments. The publication became a best-seller. By 1713 there had been fifteen editions each larger than the one before; the fifteenth contained as many as 357 tunes. The number of Scotch tunes increases from edition to edition. Originally there had been only two or three, and the Scotchness of these is not certain. The tune Playford called Broome: The bonny bonny broome is given in ex. 1.

Ex. 1

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\begin{array}{c}
\text{Ex. 1} \\
\end{array}
\end{align*} \]

Much of the attraction lies in the off-key ending, a typically Scottish feature which was to worry tidy-minded musicians for many years. About 1720 words were added to the tune and it became lastingly popular as The broom of Cowdenknows. By the time Gay borrowed it for The Beggar’s Opera (Air 18: The miser thus a shilling sees) it had been altered in small details, as were all such tunes as the years went by. There can never be a ‘correct’ version of a Scotch Song tune.

Most Scots were happy about the Restoration in 1660. Charles II was a Stuart and more Scottish than English. But his secret determination to further the cause of Roman Catholicism became divisive as it became less secret, and there was nothing secret at all about his appointing bishops in Scotland and thus taking away the right of congregations to elect their own ministers. The Covenanters made a vow or covenant to resist this intrusion which to them smacked of Popery, and under James II/VII several hundred of them were imprisoned and even tortured in Dunottar Castle for sticking to their beliefs. Divisions of opinion were
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now not only between one country and the other but also between factions common to both, and this did something at least to break down traditional animosities.

The English and the Scots were meeting each other a little more often, and sometimes in an atmosphere conducive to the singing of songs. Not that they always found each other easy to understand or even to like. Here is Pepys a little puzzled by an evening at Lauderdale’s on 28 July 1666, when he found

some Scotch people at supper – pretty odd company; though my Lord Brouncker tells me my Lord Lauderdale is a man of mighty good reason and judgment. But at supper there played one of their servants upon the viallin, some Scotch tunes only – several – and the best of their country, as they seemed to esteem them by their praising and admiring them; but Lord, the strangest ayre that ever I heard in my life, and all of one cast.

Yet on 2 January that year Pepys had heard a Scotch Song he enjoyed very much: ‘To my Lord Brouncker’s, and there find . . . my dear Mrs Knipp, with whom I sang; and in perfect pleasure I was to hear her sing, and especially her little Scotch Song of Barbary Allen’ (see ex. 2).\(^5\)

Ex. 2

\[ \text{[Musical notation]} \]

This contains an example of a recognizably Scottish characteristics – the implied shift of a key down by one tone in the second phrase. It is a little surprising that Pepys was not worried by this touch of Scottish ‘strangeness’; perhaps he did not have his mind entirely on the music, for he had earlier described Mrs Knipp as ‘pretty enough, but the most excellent mad-hum[ou]rd thing; and sings the noblest that ever I heard in my life . . . I spent the night in an ecstasy almost.’ But at Lauderdale’s Pepys had complained that all Scotch tunes seemed to be ‘of one cast’, and the opinion is not necessarily to his discredit. Most of us today would think that all Turkish folk tunes sound alike, and fifty years ago we might have thought the same of Hungarian. That Pepys also complained of the ‘strangeness’ of Scottish tunes must mean that to him they sounded recognizably different from English tunes. Only a minority from this early period sound recognizably different to us, and it
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seems to follow that in his day Londoners were aware of distinctions between Scottish and English songs that have become imperceptible in ours.

However, these Scottish qualities soon lost their strangeness and became a positive attraction. In the last fifteen years of the century a liking for Scotch-style music became a positive craze. Scotch Songs, genuine and imitation, were sung in the theatres and at concerts, and Scotch ‘ayres’ were played as theatre entr‘actes and at balls. Among the leading instigators of this enthusiasm was Thomas D’Urfey (1653–1723), whose French-Huguenot parents had fled to England shortly before he was born. A prolific playwright and poet, D’Urfey was undisturbed by the Catholic leanings he must have noticed in Charles II and James II; he cheerfully wrote adulatory odes for both. A contemporary remembered Charles ‘leaning on Tom D’Urfey’s shoulder more than once, and humming over a song with him’. He had a talent for bawdy lyrics, many of which were sung as decorations for his plays, and in 1698 he began to publish an anthology of songs by himself and others called Wit and Mirth, or Pills to Purge Melancholy. By 1719 Pills had grown to over a thousand songs in six volumes. In nearly every case the melody was given, but there were no accompaniments. Most are ‘art’ songs by Purcell and his contemporaries, but there are folk and traditional songs too.

Nearly all those in the first two volumes have words by D’Urfey himself, and as many as seventeen of those he wrote before 1700 are in an attempted Scots dialect. The earliest comes from a Drury Lane comedy of 1676, The Fond Husband (see ex. 3).6

Quite often D’Urfey ventured to write this sort of lyric for tunes that were not in the least Scottish, but this one sounds genuine if only because of the flattened seventh in the third strain, which is where it

Ex. 3

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\begin{align*}
\text{In January last, on Monday day at Morn, As I along the fields did pass to view the Winter's corn, I leaked me behind, and I saw}\end{align*}
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\begin{align*}
\text{come o'wer the knough, Yan glinting in an Apron with bonny bent Brow.}\end{align*}
\]
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occurs so often. (The first note in bar 8 should perhaps be E, a third lower.) D’Urfey’s Scotch lyrics strike Scotsmen today as laughable, but at least he knew enough to include in this song such words as spear’d (asked), sike (such), twa and ganging. He must have had Scottish friends.

Three of his bogus Scotch Songs proved far more popular than this one. The tunes turned up in numerous ballad operas and later in increasingly sophisticated arrangements by such unlikely composers as J. C. Bach and Boieldieu. It is a pity that they are now forgotten, for whatever we may think of D’Urfey’s words the tunes are excellent, and in the eighteenth century almost everyone in Britain knew them.

Corn riggs owes its title to the new lyric Allan Ramsay wrote for the tune nearly fifty years after its composition. D’Urfey’s words had begun ‘Sawney was tall’ and he wrote them for his comedy The Virtuous Wife (1680). Thomas Farmer wrote the music for the other songs in The Virtuous Wife and probably wrote the music of this one as well. Only the first half is given in ex. 4; there are no discernible Scots characteristics apart perhaps from the last bar of each half. Scarcely anything is known of Farmer. When he died in 1688 Purcell wrote An Elogy [sic] upon the death of Mr Thomas Farmer, B.M. which begins ‘Young Thrisis’ Fate ye Hills and Groves deplore’; we may deduce that he had been to a university, that he died young, and that Purcell liked him.

Ex. 4

Farmer certainly composed the beautiful tune of She rose and let me in which was published in 1683. D’Urfey’s lyric begins:

The Night her blackest Sable wore,
And gloomy were the Skies;
And glittering Stars there were no more,
Than those in Stella’s Eyes:
When at her Father’s Gate I knock’d
Where I had often been,
And Shrowded only with her Smock,
The fair one let me in.
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Fig. 1 A Scotch Song by Thomas Farmer from *Choice Ayres and Songs*, III (1681). One of the earliest examples by an English composer and of unusual quality
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Fast lock'd within her close embrace,
    She trembling lay ashamed;
Her swelling Breast, and glowing Face,
    And every touch inflam'd:
My eager Passion I obey'd,
    Resolv'd the Fort to win;
And her fond Heart was soon betray'd,
    To yield and let me in.

In later verses the girl 'prov'd with Bern', curses the 'fatal hour/That e'er she let me in', conceals the crime by marrying, and thus finds happiness. Apart perhaps from the word 'Bern' there is no attempt at a Scottish dialect, and the song would never have had a Scots nationality foisted on it had not Allan Ramsay included the words forty years later in his Tea-Table Miscellany. To help them pass as Scottish he changed Stella to Nellie and Gate to Yate, and he ended the first verse 'Arose and loot me in'. The combination of an excellent tune, interesting words under a title with two meanings, and Ramsay's seal of Scotchness ensured the song's lasting popularity.

The third of D'Urfey's bogus Scotch Songs to become widely known was De 'il tak' the wars that hurried Willy from me, and it was among the first to attempt a subject that exercised many lyric-writers during the war-ridden eighteenth century. It was first published about 1698 (in sheet-music form) as 'A song in A Wife for any Man, the words by Mr Tho: D'urffey set to Musick by Mr Charles Powell'. There can be no reason to doubt that Powell composed both tune and competent bass though he is not otherwise known, but when publishing the song in Pills D'Urfey made no mention of Powell and described it as a Scotch Song, its Scotchness being flimsily supported by the word 'muckle' and the indifferent couplet:

    My Love well might think me gay and Bonny,
    No Scotch Lass was e'er so fine.

In the following century the tune gained steadily in popularity, being widely regarded as Scotch, and by the time it reached Sheridan's The Duenna it was bringing tears to many an eye (see ex. 5).

Some of D'Urfey's would-be Scotch lyrics were set by Purcell, and I

Ex. 5

\[ \text{Music notation} \]
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have listed all his Scotch pieces with full details in Appendix A. The
tune later known as Peggy, I must love thee for which he provided a
bass in Music's Handmaid is not only beautiful in itself but brings us a
little nearer to a realization of what it was that then made Scottish
music sound Scottish (see ex. 6). The tune is given here without Pur-
cell’s ornamentation, as he found it in Apollo’s Banquet. As so often,
there is a flattened seventh in the third of the four strains, but here the
flattened seventh is carried over into the fourth strain as well, in a
piquant and delightful way. This little harpsichord piece must have
sounded very odd in the 1690s.

Ex. 6

It was William III’s wife, Queen Mary, who inadvertently made Pur-
cell drag Cold and raw into a Court Ode. The story is vividly told by
Hawkins.

The queen having a mind one afternoon to be entertained with music . . .
Mr Gostling and Mrs Hunt sang several compositions by Purcell, who
accompanied them on the harpsichord; at length the queen beginning to
grow tired, asked Mrs Hunt if she could not sing the old Scots ballad ‘Cold
and Raw’; Mrs Hunt answered yes, and sang it to her lute. Purcell was
all the while sitting at the harpsichord unemployed, and not a little nettled
at the queen’s preference of a vulgar ballad to his music; but seeing her
majesty delighted with this tune, he determined that she should hear it
upon another occasion; and accordingly in the next birthday song, viz. that
for the year 1692, he composed an air . . . the bass whereof is the tune to
Cold and Raw.11

The first half of this song from the 1692 Birthday Ode, as given in
Purcell’s Orpheus Britannicus,12 appears in ex. 7. It is impossible to
believe that either Purcell or his librettist was taking his usual pains,
and very hard to decide what harmonies Purcell can have intended in
the fourth bar.

After Purcell’s death in 1695 there was a noticeable increase in the
number of Scotch tunes reaching London, and the reason was partly
political. William III had not been widely welcomed north of the border, and indeed his claim to the throne was worse than dubious. Around 1700 Scotland suffered a series of dreadful harvests owing to unremitting rain, and the resulting hunger and starvation increased people’s dissatisfaction with their rulers. Furthermore it was not clear who those rulers would be in years to come. William had no children, and his obvious successor, Anne (half-sister to James II/VII), had none which survived infancy. There were grave doubts as to what would happen when Anne died. An additional complication was that war with France seemed inevitable, and troops could not be deployed on the continent if there was any danger of a stab in the back from the north. For all these reasons William and his advisers felt that Scotland should be offered parliamentary union, in the hope and belief that this would prevent her breaking away from the Crown altogether and welcoming the Catholic James II/VII with open arms; it was all too likely he would seize any chance that was offered to land there and claim the Scottish throne.

In 1702, the year Anne became Queen, England and her allies declared war on France, and commissioners were appointed to work out a union with Scotland. As part of the terms, the English insisted that the Scots should accept the Hanoverian succession; George might be more German than British but at least he was a Protestant. It took five years for the English and Scots to reach agreement; the Act of Union became law in 1707. The two nations were to share one flag, one parliament and one coinage, but the church, the law and the judicial system were to remain separate. The English tended to regard these terms as a favour to poor relations, whereas most Scots saw them as the lesser of two evils and were far from enthusiastic. Hatred for the traditional enemy was not yet dead, and England’s smug condescension was much resented. However, the Scots benefited in the end much more than they had foreseen. Their opportunities for trading with England and other