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The musical landscape of Scotland in the nineteenth century

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1 Introduction

"It is somewhat remarkable", declared *The Musical Times* in January 1886, "that while Scotland can show a long line of illustrious names in every department of art, literature, science, mechanics, and philosophy, the number of composers of music has been very few." [MT 1 January 1886 p. 14] The author names none but the secretary to Mary, Queen of Scots – David Rizzio – as an example, now reckoned a dubious one, of an earlier Scottish composer of songs, showing a lamentable ignorance of more eminent composers of several previous centuries, before proceeding to his main subject: "It may therefore be asserted, with some degree of unstretched truth, that Alexander Campbell Mackenzie is the first distinguished composer Scotland has had" [ibid.].

Scotland's place in the nineteenth-century musical landscape is largely vicarious, her presence brought about mainly by the popularity of her writers among European composers. Ossian's epic contributed to an enthusiasm for mythology, for collecting the lore of heroic deeds of tribal or national predecessors, bearing fruit in every field of musical composition. The historical novels of Sir Walter Scott supplied plots, characters and settings for many an opera. The lyric poetry of Robert Burns found favour with song composers including Schumann, Franz and Brahms. Roger Fiske's book provides an admirable catalogue of the appearances of Scotland in nineteenth-century music (see bibliography).

In that century Scotland was part of Great Britain, and the circumstances of the richest and most populous part of that United Kingdom – England – were such that it was long claimed that it took an English Musical Renaissance to bring about improvement. A. C. Mackenzie with his contemporaries Parry and Stanford were crucial figures in that movement, even if later historians have seen their work as that of precursors of the true renaissance which occurred in the compositions of Elgar and in the next generation with those of Holst, Vaughan Williams and others. Some aspects of the low state of composition in the nineteenth century were common to England and Scotland, and probably also to Ireland and Wales. These factors include:

- (a) The deficiency of musical training within the United Kingdom.
- (b) Undue hero-worship of composers of other nationalities, including Handel, Mendelssohn, Spohr and Gounod.
- (c) Some kind of social complex against British-born composers and musicians generally, with an associated preference for Italian or German birth and musical upbringing; suffice it here to mention the names of the Drechsler family and Julius

Seligmann who at the mid-point of the century played leading roles in the musical life of Edinburgh and Glasgow respectively [Farmer pp. 484-486].

(d) Foreign training in some cases led to a concentration on the repertory studied abroad and lack of sympathy with native efforts.

Other factors apply to Scotland alone, or with special force:

(e) The powerful antagonism there of the established, majority Presbyterian church to theatrical entertainment of all kinds, and an over-attachment to Sunday observance. Mackenzie's *A Musician's Narrative*, which will be frequently cited here, describes an incident in the Edinburgh of the early 1850s when a group of Mackenzie's father's friends gathered.

"The surreptitious pleasure of ensemble playing could only be indulged in [by keen musicians and busy men] on Sunday mornings during church hours in some friendly back drawing-room. Such desecrations of the Sabbath being liable to be visited by the rigour of the law, the ire of landladies and neighbours, the fearful joy of quartet playing had frequently to be snatched in our house. On one occasion a sharp-eared policeman interrupted the harmony. 'But this is sacred music', said my father, showing him a quartet by Haydn. Whether this undeniable fact, or the half-crown [a sum of money] and a dram [of whisky] convinced the departing constable, remained purely a matter of conjecture. Often have I seen my father writing his pantomime and other theatre works on Sunday mornings with a violin on the table in case a gentle pizzicato had to be resorted to when the pianoforte had to remain closed" [Mackenzie: op. cit. pp. 14-15].

(f) Lack of ambition in church music, with its exclusive reliance on unaccompanied singing, most of it congregational, held back developments there, and precluded the existence of almost any organ culture. Dominant Calvinism fostered a wider suspicion of music, a hostility which began to be overcome in the second half of the century.

(g) An aspect which probably did not impede musical progress in nineteenth-century Scotland but which needs to be noted is the weakness of the customary distinction between folk and art music. Let it be said at once that if this factor indeed existed, it did so in the urban areas and the country houses of the gentry rather than in the more remote regions. David Johnson has demonstrated in his book *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford 1972) that folk melodies, whether vocal or instrumental, made their way into the art music of Scotland's composers in that century, whether within individual compositions or concert programmes. The corollary of this, as recently argued by Raymond Monelle in his article *Scottish Music, Real and Spurious* [in ed. Tomi Mäkelä: *Music and Nationalism in 20th-Century Great Britain and Finland* (Hamburg 1997)], is that the drawing-room tended to draw the distinctive teeth of folk music and assimilate it to the art music of polite society. [Monelle, in ed. Mäkelä p. 87] The example of Mackenzie suggests that distinctions between folk and art music were more blurred than we might expect in his day. His father had a wide stylistic range as a violinist, and edited *The National*

Dance Music of Scotland. The son's reminiscences suggest that he inherited the ability to keep a foot in each camp – for instance, in frequent comments about “*our national airs*” [op. cit. p. 5], or when he writes: “*the touching verse and melody [of our national music] always had a fascinating hold upon me*” [ibid. p. 63], or in his statement that “*Despite the many time-honoured jibes at our affection for the pipes, the Scot's favourite instrument is the violin*” [ibid. p. 9] – the instrument, Mackenzie's own, which above all others bridges any divide between art and folk music.

2 Alexander Campbell Mackenzie

What makes Mackenzie's case especially interesting is that he was reared in the two traditions, and saw a need to complement familiarity with folksong with the disciplined study of the science of music. Speaking of violinists noted as exponents of dance music from the first half of the nineteenth century, he notes: “*however striking their natural gifts may have been, their musical education was of a primitive kind*” [ibid. p. 9].

Mackenzie was by no means alone in going to Germany in pursuit of musical education – this was so common as to represent a norm for promising British (including Scottish) musicians. He was unusual in leaving his native land for that purpose at the early age of 10. It was also uncommon, as far as I know, for the destination to be Sondershausen in Thuringia, rather than Leipzig (in particular), Berlin or Frankfurt. That town gave him a remarkable exposure in the 1850s to the music of Liszt and Wagner championed by the Princes of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen with their orchestra. On his move to London, his education was continued at the Royal Academy of Music from 1862 to 1865, while his skills as a violinist (and conductor) were developed through hectic as well as eclectic music-making in London theatres. On Mackenzie's return to Edinburgh in 1865 he earned a living from diverse musical activities and refreshed his acquaintance with Scottish music until in due course composition assumed a larger place in his professional life. Returning to London in 1885, he became Principal of the Royal Academy of Music in 1888, actively promoting music education while simultaneously maintaining a prodigious energy as conductor and composer. He retired from the RAM in 1924.

3 Orchestral works with Scottish themes

Mackenzie's spell based in Scotland between 1865 and 1885 witnessed extensive development in musical infrastructure. The example of Sir Charles Hallé's Manchester orchestra, which made repeated visits to Edinburgh and Glasgow from the 1860s onwards, demonstrated the superiority of the musical results which could be achieved by a permanent ensemble, regularly rehearsing and performing together, over those obtainable from one recruited *ad hoc* for each occasion. Orchestral developments in Glasgow during the 1870s occurred under the aegis of the Glasgow Choral Union, which promoted a move from the ‘Glasgow Scratch Orchestra’ to the ‘Glasgow Permanent (or Resident) Orchestra’ to support its oratorio performances. That development in turn prompted the orchestra to give concerts of purely orchestral repertory without the participation of the choir, and led to the opening of the handsome St. An-

drew's Hall in 1878 custom-built for large-scale concerts. Notable conductors from outside Scotland were engaged, and at that time Arthur Sullivan, August Manns and Hans von Bülow appeared in that role. All of these developments enjoyed the support of Thomas Stillie, in the 1870s the music critic of the *Glasgow Herald*, both in his columns in the newspaper and through participation in public meetings, committees, etc. With those developments, it became more realistic to think that a Scottish composer could find better opportunities for the performance of orchestral compositions.

It was in the 1870s that the compositional skills of Alexander Mackenzie began to be sharpened by regular exercise, and in the 1880s that they were first deployed to produce operas and cantatas, concertos and other large-scale orchestral works. Some of these had Scottish subject-matter: according to the composer's reckoning, "more than 19" [op. cit. p. 160] of his lifetime's tally of compositions had a Scottish connection of that kind. The first of them was the *Rhapsodie Ecossaise*, eventually the first of three.

"Manns, then at the conductor's desk in Glasgow, strongly urged me to adopt the plan (initiated by Liszt and followed by Glinka, Svendsen, Grieg and others) of working up national material into artistic shape... Although I was the occasional recipient of public and private advice not to meddle with the 'auld sangs' ['old songs'], my own inclination led me to contribute several specimens of the kind which were not unfavourably received elsewhere" [ibid. p. 95].

The aspects of the first two Rhapsodies to which Stillie gave attention in the notices where they are discussed are (a) to name the Scottish melodies used, (b) to praise the skill of their orchestration, and (c) to say that they show a fine command of the resources of art music generally. He describes the first as "a work sterling in character, adroitly scored and worked out in a manner worthy of any musician". [*Glasgow Herald*, 7 January 1880 p. 4]; he observes that "Mr. Mackenzie ... has by his pure orchestration [of the second melody] given to it a classical setting" [ibid. 12 January 1880 p. 4]. He refers in the Second Rhapsody to "the scholarly manner in which the work is scored" [ibid. 30 December 1880 p. 4]. Stillie seems to approve of combining Scottish musical material with all the resources of 'classical' music in this fashion.

While willing to represent his sense of nationality in this way, Mackenzie was wary of the danger of becoming typecast: in a letter of 1889 quoted by John Purser he observes:

"My reticence in giving too much national music of my own is chiefly due to an experience which has reached most thinking musicians, viz: that a composer may in it, only too easily become a mere mannerist. Some of the Norwegians and Swedes have taught us this" [Purser 1995 p. 8].

4 Pibroch

Pibroch – one such work – was composed in 1889. It is a Suite for Violin and Orchestra, op. 42, and was frequently performed by its dedicatee, Sarasate. The title refers to the classical music of the Highland bagpipes, the pibroch, as opposed to music

for dancing. A theme and variation technique is used, and certain facets of the idiom are exploited in the composition.

The music examples illustrate the principal idea from each of the work's three sections.



Ex. 1, from the opening 'Rhapsody', demonstrates the bardic or Ossianic harp-like accompaniment, its drone F, the pentatonic core of the solo violin melody beginning in bar 2, and the repeated Scotch snap rhythms.

Example 2 is a musical score for a violin and piano. The tempo is marked 'Meno mosso'. The violin part features a melody in A minor, marked 'p marcato' and 'stacc.'. The piano accompaniment features a double tonic device, marked 'f', 'p', and 'mf'.

Ex. 2, from the following section 'Caprice', uses the Scottish melody *Three Guid Fellows* as the theme for variations. It shows the double tonic device: the home key is A minor, but with an immediate and repeated shift towards G major. The violin's acciaccaturas correspond to the 'cuttings' (or formulaic ornaments) applied in bagpipe music.

The musical score is for a piece in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It is divided into three systems. The first system features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a drone accompaniment. The second system continues the melody and accompaniment, with a '4 Corde' marking above the treble staff. The third system concludes the excerpt with a final cadence. Dynamics include *ff*, *p*, *mf*, and *f*. Tempo markings include 'a tempo'.

Ex. 3, from the final 'Dance', quotes the main theme of this section. Its avoidance of the leading note results in an emphasis on tonic and subdominant harmony, with the dominant playing a lesser role.

5 Scottish music: style and motivation

"Pentatonic melody, sentimental balladry, the 'double tonic', snap rhythms and bagpipe drones – these were the unhappy equipment of any composer who wanted to sound Scottish in the last century" [Monelle, op. cit. p. 93].

According to Raymond Monelle, this equipment is "*unhappy*" because it is conventional, because not all of it has uniquely Scottish roots – after all, pentatonic melody, "*double tonics*" and bagpipe drones are not the sole possession of Scottish music – and because sentimental balladry and even snap rhythms are part of the stock-in-trade of "*Scotch songs*" produced in England to satisfy the English market.

Whatever scholarship may tell us of the origins of each of these features, it is clear that to the generation to which Mackenzie belonged these stylistic marks lent Scottish music its character – indeed, defined its character. 'Scottish' is what appeared Scottish to the Scots of the time. Or, in the words of Ilkka Oramo: "*what is accepted as national is national, wherever its roots may be*" [I. Oramo: 'Beyond Nationalism', in ed. Mäkelä, op. cit. p. 35]. For many Scots, then as now, the remoter areas are in

every sense remote from their daily experience of the Scottish central belt (the most heavily populated region) where is located Mackenzie's home town of Edinburgh. If subsequent generations of Scots musicians have discovered their material in musical sources distant from the central lowlands, that is no basis on which to criticize others who found Scottishness in more urbanized music. "*Real Scottish music is enormously various*", as Monelle has noted [op. cit. p. 89].

If 'Scottish' is what appeared Scottish to Scots, then 'Scottish' was also what seemed to others to be Scottish: the authenticity of Ossian's poetry, the historical accuracy of Sir Walter Scott's historical recreations are not what matters. The fact that they struck a chord and established an association with Scotland is important. We must look at Mackenzie's motivation. There is nothing to suggest that he would have subscribed to the view put forward by Helga de la Motte-Haber in the book she edited:

"Im 19. Jahrhundert, als im allgemeinen Bewusstsein die Idee der Nation unter die höchsten ethischen Werte aufstieg, war es zuweilen auch die patriotische Gesinnung eines Komponisten, die seine Musik zum nationalen Gut werden liess" [de la Motte-Haber p. VII].

This is not to question Mackenzie's patriotism, but his patriotism did not take the form of nationalism in any recognizable sense. Little if any Scottish nationalism was discernible in the 1880s in any case. A genuine nationalist would probably not have deflected the possible charge of mannerism by declining to use Scottish musical material more extensively (as we saw Mackenzie doing). Raymond Monelle also describes the five items of equipment listed earlier as "*expressive of the myth of a picturesque and twilight Scotland*" [op. cit. p. 101], a myth perhaps related to Purser's "*romantic image of a Scotland of weeping glens and desolate moorlands*" [Purser 1998 p. 6].

Mackenzie's book shows a British patriotism, which found nothing incompatible in drawing on some local colour from its author's part of the British state. It might legitimately be concluded that Mackenzie is not a composer of the highest talent, but there is no reason to give him a low ranking purely because he conforms to the usage of his time – the only one possible in Scotland then – by using local colour. His compositions should stand or fall on their own merits.

6 Conclusion

We conclude where we began – in *The Musical Times* of January 1886:

"Scotland possesses now a composer [i. e. Mackenzie] who owes his birth and infant nurture to her soil, a composer of its own nationality, who may become the national composer, if the country is as true to its musical children as it has always been to her sons in other walks of art, science, and mental culture" [MT 1 January 1886 p. 14].

Let us leave on one side the question of whether it is desirable to have a national composer. Scotland has often, alas, lost sight of her sons whose success takes them to London. In the case of Mackenzie, there is reason to restore the sound of his compositions to our ears, for they do indeed show how satisfactory and rewarding extended compositions can be created using as raw material Scottish ingredients. Moreover,

whether in Malcolm MacDonald's phrase they represent the "tartan-Romantic style", [Aspects of Scottish Musical Nationalism in the 20th Century, with special reference to the Music of F. G. Scott, Ronald Center and Ronald Stevenson, in ed. Mäkelä: op. cit. p. 112], for their period they are almost all that exists.

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