

What are the musical and historical connections between Scottish traditional fiddle and American traditional/folk fiddle?

By Sara Ann Cull

The connections between Scottish and American music are vibrant and undeniable. By examining the roots of American folk music, one can identify the strong influences of Scottish playing styles and is able to better understand the musical and historical link between the two.

The early 1600's saw the first arrival of the Scots-Irish in America. A second, much larger migration followed during the late 1800's. Many of these settlers arrived in Pennsylvania via Ireland and from there went on to populate several other states including Georgia, Kentucky and Tennessee.

There are varying reasons why the Scots-Irish travelled to America. Some were transported with no choice other than to be sent to prison or executed, others travelled to America due to poverty seeking a better life, and some were sent with their British Army regiments. It was during this period that Scottish Fiddle tunes made their way across the Atlantic.

Scottish music and the homeland musical heritage of immigrants into America formed the foundation of much American folk music. Among the many traditions taken to America, two which have been influential are the language and music of the settlers. The musical influences included early balladry and fiddle music, particularly influential in the Appalachian region.

At the time of these migrations the travellers had to make their own entertainment. Song and dance, together with playing music were the popular forms. Many of the settlers carried their fiddles on board the boats as they were easily transportable and allowed for entertainment when travelling and upon arrival into America. Both Scottish and American traditional music has remained community based, large gatherings or dances were usually lead by a fiddler who would provide the evening's music for the dancers, there could often be large numbers of dancers and only one fiddler who would have to play very loudly to be heard over the noise of the dancers.

Traditionally, Scottish songs and tunes were passed on through aural tradition. Settlers would play and exchange music with the local Americans and as the tunes and songs were passed from person to person the names or sequences of the tunes were often forgotten or changed with the result that a century or two later, musicians crossing the Atlantic often find themselves playing similar tunes which have differing names or melodies.

The two forms of American music which were heavily influenced and have remained deeply rooted in the fiddle influences of the Scottish settlers are Old time and Bluegrass music. Whilst Old time music has remained close to its roots with much of the repertoire and technique reflecting those of Scottish

traditions, Bluegrass music has grown independently from Old time into a unique style which is now recognised, studied and played worldwide. Despite the parallel metamorphosis, similarities which have remained between Scottish and American fiddling remain vast. These are highlighted below:

- Both are taught aurally, without music. Tunes often develop or change as they are remembered differently, this is an important part of our tradition as it allows for freedom of musical interpretation and development of our traditions.
- There is often a crossover in repertoire between the two countries, as previously mentioned there are many tunes which are common with both American and Scottish musicians and although they may have started as the same tune, have since developed with only traces of the original tunes remaining.
- The purpose of the music is another key similarity which has remained between both styles of music. The main purpose of traditional music was for entertainment and dancing, this has not changed, if anything this has developed with many music festivals across the world hosting musicians performing Scottish, Old time and Bluegrass music for large audiences. Musicians today are travelling and collaborating with each other and influences of varying genres can often be heard in their playing, the use of internet has also allowed for music to be exchanged in a way that would not have been possible at the time of the early settlers.
- Sessions are an extremely important part of both cultures and may well have been where the cross over of Scottish and American music began. A session is when musicians informally meet and play music together, it is not a rehearsal or a performance, but simply an opportunity for people with a shared passion to meet, exchange tunes and play together. For some it is a chance to learn new material and for others it is a chance to have fun playing material which they may not use in a performance. Sessions welcome musicians of all abilities and it is not uncommon to see a beginner playing alongside a professional. A typical Scottish session will be lead by one musician who will then prompt another musician, usually whoever shouts out the key of another tune they want to play, to lead the next tune and so on. The session can last for hours and musicians will come and go as they please, joining in for tunes they know and sitting out on those they are not sure of. A typical American session usually takes one tune at a time, and rather than the musicians moving onto a new tune, they will each take an instrumental break, a time for the musician to show their own interpretation of the tune being played with improvisation being a key feature of the music.

It is clear to see the many connections between Scottish and American traditional/folk fiddle with American music maintaining the influences of

the settlers who travelled from Scotland to America in the 1600's. The music has remained deeply rooted in it's origins with much of the technique and repertoire strongly reflecting that of its Scottish influences. The transition, purpose and practice of the musics are still closely similar and continue to show the strong relationship between the two styles of music.

Scottish Partnership for Arts and Education

Scots Song Artists in Residence

Benjamin Franklin on Scotland and Scottish Music

From *THE COMPLETED AUTOBIOGRAPHY* by Benjamin Franklin Compiled and edited by Mark Skousen,
Ph.D. (and Franklin descendent)

MY FAVORITE COUNTRY

No part of our journey afforded us a more pleasing remembrance than Scotland. The many civilities, favours and kindnesses heap'd upon us while we were there made the most lasting impressions on our minds, and have endeared that country to us beyond express. On the whole, I must say, I think the time we spent there, was six weeks of the densest happiness I have met with in any part of my life. And the agreeable and instructive society we found there in such plenty, has left so pleasing an impression on my memory that did not strong connections draw me elsewhere, I believe Scotland would be the country I should choose to spend the remainder of my days in. (*During one of Franklin's Scotland travels, he stayed for nearly a month with David Hume {1711-76} who was a philosopher and economist of the Scottish Enlightenment.*)

The following February [1759] I was honoured to receive a Doctorate of Laws from the University of St. Andrews at Edinburgh [*this location is Franklin's*], the oldest university in Scotland, for my inventions and experiments in electricity, and another Doctorate of Civil Law from Oxford University in 1762 that was conferred the summer following.

THE SIMPLE BEAUTY OF SCOTTISH TUNES

Having return'd home my daughter Sally endeavored to collect some of the music of this country production, to send to Miss Janet Dick in Scotland, in return for her most acceptable present of Scotch songs, music being a new art with us, Sally sang the songs to her harpsichord, and I played some of the softest tunes on my armonica, with which entertainment our people were quite charmed, and conceived the Scottish tunes to be the finest in the world. And indeed, there is so much simple beauty in many of them that it is my opinion they will never die, but in all ages find a number of admirers among those whose taste is not debauch'd by art.

I give it my opinion that the reason why the Scotch tunes have lived so long, and will probably live forever (if they escape being stifled in modern affected ornament) is merely this, that they are really compositions of melody and harmony united, or rather that their melody is harmony. By this I mean the simple tunes sung by a single voice. As this will appear paradoxical I must explain my meaning. In common acceptation, only an agreeable succession of sounds is called melody, and only the co-existence of agreeing sounds, harmony. But since the memory is capable of retaining for some moments a perfect idea of the pitch of a past sound, so as to compare it with the pitch of a succeeding sound, and judge truly of their agreement or disagreement, there may and does arise from thence a sense of harmony between present and past sounds, ezually pleasing with that between two present sounds. Now the construction of the old Scotch tunes is that almost every succeeding emphatic note, is a third, a fifth, an octave, or in short some note that is in concord with the preceding note. Thirds are chiefly used, which are very pleasing concords.

SCOTTISH PARTNERSHIP FOR ARTS AND EDUCATION

Fiddle Workshop – Williamsburg, Virginia

“The Tin Whistle Tune Book” musical selections

While visiting historic Williamsburg, VA in 1989, I fortuitously picked up “The Tin Whistle Tune Book”, compiled and arranged by William E. White. Nearly 20 years later, it was a joy to find it again and realize that it provided documentation for several Scottish tunes that are still played today, giving “hard-copy” proof of the enormous influence of Scottish culture on our own North American culture. Nearly all of the tunes in the book have Scottish origins.

The tunes selected for the SPAE Artist-in-Residence curriculum materials from this little book are:

1. The White Cockade
2. The High Road to Linton
3. The Banks of Spey
4. The Bottom of the Punch Bowl

Mr. White states the following: “No attempt has been made to alter or ‘improve’ upon the melodies; they are presented just as they appear in the original sources. This, however, should not inhibit the performer by giving the impression that the music must be played exactly as written. The performance of the music is greatly enhanced by some improvisation. The addition of grace notes, slurs, and other ornaments is basic to the tin whistle style of playing, and as is customary with this type of music, I have chosen to leave such embellishments to the discretion of the performer. Likewise, tempi are left to the performer’s interpretation.....Although this book has been compiled for the tin whistle, the melodies contained herein may also be played on other instruments.”

SOURCES OF THE MUSIC (all quoted directly from “The Tin Whistle Tune Book”)

Aird: *“A Selection of Scotch, English, Irish, and Foreign Airs Adapted to the Fife, Violin, or German-Flute.* In six volumes. Glasgow, Printed and Sold by James Aird; and Glasgow, Printed and Sold by F. McFadyen [1782-1800]. Aird died before the completion of the sixth volume, which was printed by McFadyen along with reprints of the other volumes. This very popular work saw as many as seven editions by various printers.”

Beck Manuscript: “A bound manuscript volume in the Music Division of the Library of Congress. The flyleaf proclaims it to have been ‘Mary Mathers Book. 1810,’ while an interior page bears the inscription, ‘Copied by Henry Beck in the Year 1786.’”

Carr, *“Evening Amusement: Evening Amusement Containing fifty Air’s, Song’s, duett’s, Dances, Hornpipe’s, Reel’s, Marches, Minuett etc., etc., for 1 and 2 German Flutes or Violins.* Printed & sold at B. Carr’s Musical Repositories Philadelphia and New York & J. Carr’s Baltimore [1796].”

Carr, *"Gentlemans Amusement: The Gentlemans Amusement A Selection Of Solos, Duetts, Overtures, arranged as Duetts, Rondos & Romances...* Printed for the Editors and Sold at B. Carr's Musical Repositories Philadelphia and New York and J. Carr's Baltimore [ca. 1794-1796]."

Fentum: *"The Compleat Tutor For the German Flute Containing the Best and Easiest Instructions for Learners to Obtain a Proficiency. Translated from the French To which is added a Choice Collection of ye most Celebrated Italian, English & Scotch Tunes; Curiously Adapted to that Instrument.* Printed for and Sold by Jonathan Fentum at his Musick Shop in Exeter Exchange in the Strand, London [ca. 1765]."

Murphy Manuscript: "A bound manuscript book in the collection of the Library of Congress bearing the inscription 'Newport [Rhode Island?] Edward Murphy October 26 – 1790'."

Orpheus Caledonius: Or, A Collection of Scots Songs. Set to Musick By W. Thomson. The Second Edition. Two volumes. London: Printed for the Author, at his House in Leicester-Fields. 1733."

Oswald: *"The Caledonian Pocket Companion Containing Fifty of the most favourite Scotch Tunes several of them with Variations, all set for the German Flute, by Mr. Oswald.* In six volumes. London Printed for T. Simpson in Sweeting's Alley opposite the East Door of the Royal Exchange [ca. 1745]. This popular work went through several editions and was eventually expanded to include fifteen volumes."

These resources are listed in full for the use of anyone wishing to pursue further study of Eighteenth Century sources of music.

Diane McCullough, September 2, 2007