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Highland Folk-Song

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His wound he bound, and to the loch did he,  
 And drank his drink, and wash'd, and made no moan.  
 Then came the brave Cuchullin forth to die,  
 Sublimely fearless, strengthless and alone . . .  
 He wended to the standing pillar-stone,  
 Clutching his sword and leaning on his spear,  
 And to his foemen called, 'Come ye, and meet me here.'

A vision swept upon his fading brain—  
 A passing vision glorious and sweet,  
 That hour of youth return'd to him again  
 When he took arms with fearless heart a-beat,  
 As Cathbad, the magician, did repeat,  
 'Who taketh arms upon this day of grief,  
 His name shall live forever and his life be brief.'

Fronting his foes he stood with fearless eye,  
 His body to the pillar-stone he bound,  
 Nor sitting nor down-lying would he die . . .  
 He would die standing . . . so they gather'd round  
 In silent wonder on the blood-drench'd ground,  
 And watch'd the hero who with Death could strive ;  
 But no man durst approach . . . He seem'd to be alive . . .

### HIGHLAND FOLK-SONG<sup>1</sup>

Rev. M. N. MUNRO

IN this paper I wish to offer some remarks on Gaelic music, in its relation to Art Music, and with regard to its past history and present condition. Considerable progress has been made in recent years in reviving interest in Gaelic Folk-Song, and I shall refer to workers and gleaners in the rich field of Gaelic music who have helped to preserve and perpetuate among the Highland people, in earlier and more modern times, their national heritage of musical treasures.

The folk-songs of the North must have reached a pretty high stage of artistic development many centuries ago. In our oldest collection we find tunes that have remained among the people with little change to the present day. If variants or different versions do occur, they are frequently not im-

<sup>1</sup> Delivered in part at the Pan-Celtic Congress, Edinburgh, 1907.

provements but changes for the worse on the early form of the air, caused by the defective ear or imperfect musical memory of the transmitter. In Gaelic music, on the whole, one seldom finds anything musically crude or uncouth. This cannot be said of the folk-song of all European countries. Grieg remarks on the uncouth character of many of the native tunes of Norway. Refinement and tender beauty characterise most of the songs of the Highlands.

There are some who profess not to care much for folk-song of any kind. They have developed a taste for the modern ballad or classical song, and one finds it difficult to interest them in the simple songs of the people. They 'have only time for the best,' they say. In argument with such people the question naturally arises, 'In what relation does folk-song stand to the best modern art-song—the undeniably fine compositions of composers of world-wide fame?' There are some who say that the best and truest type of song is the direct and artless expression of the people, and it is claimed that the genuine *naïve* character of a folk-song appeals more powerfully to the feelings than does any vocal composition fashioned by art. On the other hand, there are some who despise the songs of the people as trifles of little value. The truth lies somewhere between these two extreme positions.

No doubt the modern song composer has great advantages. He has behind him all the infinite resources of modern music, harmony, orchestration, and modulation, as well as melody. The folk-song chiefly depends for its effect on melody pure and simple, and the direct power of noble words. In no class of song is distinct enunciation of the words so needful as in the folk-song or ballad. But in the modern song the accompaniment is almost as important as the song itself. The harmonies and air are so closely wedded together that one is not complete without the other. Every note is a part of the whole, and harmony does undoubtedly give an immense reinforcement to the power of melody. The composer can thus express every variety of modern feeling: the yearnings and regrets of the mind, the sense of the infinite mystery

of life, its pain and sadness, its joy, even to blank pessimism—all intellectual and emotional experiences are suggested by such masters of song-craft as Schumann, Wagner, and Schubert. They can express thoughts that defy the poet's art to body forth in words. Some cultivated minds find modern music as an interpreter of the unutterable yearnings of the human soul superior even to poetry. To hear noble music well rendered is to them a treat of the highest order. Did not Carlyle say of music: 'It leads us to the verge of the Infinite, and bids us for moments gaze into it.'

But, while we cannot have too high an opinion of the great composers, it does not follow that the folk-songs have not a very high place of their own. Look into Schubert's songs and you will find that much of his music was inspired by the folk-songs of his own people. His weird and wonderful songs, so full of melody, seem to have a special affinity for the Celtic nature. Haweis speaks of them as 'sad eyes looking out into the sunset over some waste of measureless waters.' But the point to note about Schubert is that his music had its roots in the past of his own race. Of course, he composed a great many original pieces, yet much of his material was Hungarian or Austrian folk-song. As a consummate artist he refined this material and worked it into better technical form, with the result of full development, increased charm, and subtlety of effect, at one and the same time retaining the national flavour and yet making the music a delight to musicians of every nation in the world. So it may justly be said that 'the artist's feeling is in no wise different in its nature to that of the people, only it goes deeper, and he is more enlightened as to its nature and its origin.' To sum up in the words of Reissmann: 'The art song may be viewed as an ennobled and perfected people's song.'

What I have said of Schubert and the source of his musical inspiration is equally true of Weber and Grieg and Dvřak. These great musicians were too wise to think the songs of their own country unworthy of their notice.

The great masters of music have the very highest opinion of the songs of the people, and pay them the compliment of imitating their sweet and simple style. They have frequently developed these airs as themes with variations into the highest and most difficult forms of orchestral music, the sonata and the symphony.

In the case of Grieg, whose recent death all musicians deplore, and whose work in idealising the Scandinavian music is so notable, it is remarkable that for a time he was quite insensible to the charm of national folk-song. His earnest study of the great German masters had blinded him to the value of the songs of the common people. Fortunately he emerged from this stage through the influence of Nordraak. 'The scales fell from my eyes,' he confesses, 'and so I first learned to appreciate the popular melodies of the North, and to be conscious of my own nature.' This was great gain not only to music but to Grieg himself. Constant imitation of the great composers was paralysing his own originality. Now, under the influence of folk-song, he came nearer to nature, and found the true stimulus and outlet for his great original talent.

From these facts we Celts may learn a lesson of respect for our own folk-song. If we put together the closely related Irish and Highland folk-song, there is no nation in Europe with a richer musical heritage than the race of the Gael. In a real sense it is classical music. By virtue of intrinsic merit it has stood the test of time for many hundreds of years, written not on paper but on the very hearts of the dear old people of the glens and the islands. Our Highland folk-song will be remembered when the mushroom crop of modern fourth-rate music that suits the west-end drawing-room taste for sickly sentimentality, or the fifth-rate songs that suit the rank imbecility of music hall and pantomime, will be utterly forgotten. It is the folk-songs of the cities I am referring to, not the noble works of the great masters, but the songs that arise among a race of bounders and degenerates, who are tired of the

simple virtues of homely rural life, and who find a strange pleasure in coarse comic ditties crammed full of vulgarity, and often spiced with indecency.

Let Highlanders cherish their own music; it is well worthy of their intelligent enthusiasm. If any Highlander claims to be musical, and yet neglects the songs of the North, then I should say that his musical education has been neglected, or is in a state of arrested development.

The folk-songs of the Highlands should make a strong appeal to the native Gael from their richness in association with the memories of youth, alike in words and music. It has been said that the whole voice of a people's past speaks through their songs, and that is a great element in their power. Besides, and most important of all, there is their intrinsic musical and poetic merit. One of our accomplished Highland singers, who has sung Gaelic round the world, informs me that the simple Gaelic song has never failed to make its appeal to the most cosmopolitan of audiences. At the same concert the Gaelic song often followed the classical, and there was never the smallest sense of incongruity. It should be pointed out that one of the great merits of Highland folk-song is the generally high poetic value of the words. Many modern English songs have words of the most trivial character, while the music may be quite good. At the risk of digression, let me say that Gaelic poetry is full of music in itself, is remarkably rich in assonance, and possesses an astonishing variety of original and beautiful metrical forms. Professor Geddes remarked, in his brilliant address at the Pan-Celtic Congress, on the marvellous qualities of Welsh poetry in this respect, and said there was nothing in English like it except some indications in Swinburne's poetry. Without much exaggeration the same might be said of Gaelic verses.

It is an impressive fact that this high creative talent existed in the past in the Highlands, and is indeed by no means yet extinct.

Professor Geddes refers in an article to the 'paralysis of

modern culture' in its tendency to acquire and memorise, and its comparative failure in original and creative work. He contrasts this with the distinct creative impulse existing in the Celtic countries among many humble and poor people who owe little to modern education, and he pours scorn on the mere 'accomplishments' of our conventionalised middle-class or upper-class life.

The wealth of Gaelic poetry and music affords ample evidence of the creative power inherent in the Celt. Is it not after all a higher thing to originate even one first-rate poem than to spend years in mere 'acquisition and memorising' until one becomes a mere dungeon of learning, without ever having developed creative faculty? True education should stimulate originality, not crush it. The late Mr. William Sharp, who was keenly interested in Gaelic literature, was once asked how many poets did he think there were in the English-speaking world. He said, 'There may be as many as a hundred.' Then he added, 'That is just about as many for English as I should say there are for Gaelic now between Cape Wrath and Cantire.' When that was the opinion of one of the foremost literary critics of our time, it is surprising that Highlanders generally do not show a little more enthusiasm for the Gaelic language and literature.

While in the Highlands and in Ireland the folk-music has not yet developed into art music, the day may not be very far distant when this may take place.

The old Celtic creative talent must be lying latent somewhere. Already in Wales there are signs of the advent of native composers whose work is said to be full of promise. We note with much pleasure the effort being made by Mr. Roddie of the Northern College of Music, Inverness, to raise a fund to enable Highland music students to study abroad, and we trust his scheme may receive hearty support.

While we long for the advent of some composer of genius who can do for Celtic music what Grieg did for Norwegian, meantime very much has to be done by ourselves in collecting every scrap of the old music, and

properly editing and publishing the large amount already rescued.

The old people are fast going to their graves, and unless collectors are active much material of value may be lost for ever. There is an urgent need for trained workers.

Ireland I think has been more fortunate than the Scottish Highlands in having competent men like Bunting and Petrie at work long ago among the people. The noble Petrie Collection is a monument to that gentleman's untiring industry and skill, and also to the wonderful musical talent of the Irish people.

Lowland Scottish song has a large literature all to itself, but while the characteristics of Lowland and Highland songs are very similar, yet the Highland field has not been so thoroughly explored. Burns's brilliant outburst of song helped to make Lowland Scottish music fashionable and widely known. He also helped to preserve many tunes of Gaelic origin by wedding them to immortal verse. Yet in the North people of education and position seemed for long to take little or no interest in the songs of the people. The barrier of language would no doubt partly account for this neglect. In the house of the laird the spinet would jingle to Italian music learnt in London by the ladies. Some attention was paid to pipe music undoubtedly, in a martial age; but the music of the harp, and vocal music generally, seem to have been neglected. Probably the gipsies and the packmen knew more Gaelic songs than those who by their position ought to have valued and preserved them.

Patrick MacDonald says that Highland tales and music were a subject of mockery among the Lowland wits of the sixteenth century. We know that repressive laws were passed against the wandering bards or 'Cliar Sheanchain.'

There were scholars who hunted the Highlands for old poetry, Ossianic or otherwise, but probably they were not able, even if they wished, to take down the music; and what was a commonplace, an everyday thing, like the music of the people, was little prized by those who might have recorded



them if they chose. Then at last, within comparatively recent years, when the day of the people's song seemed to be nearly over, the antiquary and the musician began to bestir themselves. When the artist dies people struggle to get possession of copies of his paintings; when the *cruisic* went out of use everybody wanted to have one; just so the folk-songs suddenly began to be valued when the folk had almost forgotten them and were fast becoming Anglicised. So now at long last we find that the old songs are studied with respectful and tender care. Better late than never!

It was so also with regard to the ballads of England and Scotland. Dibdin says that 'it was not until the ballad died that Percy and Scott undertook the office of embalmers. The too long delayed activities of collectors have become almost an evidence of the passing of the popular song.' Let us hope that the passing of Gaelic song may never become an actuality. The growing success of the *Mod* in Scotland, and of the *Oirereachtas* and *Feis Ceol* in Ireland, makes such a contingency appear exceedingly remote.

The earliest collection of Scottish Gaelic music was made by a clergyman, Mr. Patrick MacDonald of Kilmore, near Oban, about one hundred and thirty years ago. He was born in 1729 and died in 1824, ninety-five years old. This after all is not so very long ago. Had there been a large collection made in 1500 or 1600, how very valuable it would have been. His book only contains one hundred and eighty-six tunes, without any words at all. Compare this with Petrie's Collection, which contains seventeen hundred tunes. Still MacDonald deserves great credit for his work, which was carried out under much difficulty, as means of locomotion were very primitive in his day. It is now a rare and valuable work. I do not think any of the Glasgow public libraries has a copy, which is rather a slur on Celtic Glasgow. Any one curious to see this book may have a look at it in the Edinburgh Public Library (Ref. Dept.). It contains specially interesting tunes which used to be sung to the old Ossianic ballads.

Captain Fraser of Knockie in 1815 published a collection, also tunes without words, two hundred and thirty-two in number, with interesting notes on each. It is also valuable, but is somewhat disfigured by the false musical taste of his period, in that he indulges to excess in ornamentation and embellishment. The old folk-tunes when unadorned are then adorned the most.

*Albyn's Anthology* followed. Sir Walter Scott wrote words for Gaelic airs in this book when he was plain Mr. W. Scott. Comments on the later books, of which there are a good many of varying merit, are unnecessary here.

One of the most instructive books we have on Lowland Scottish and Gaelic music is Colin Brown's *Thistle*. It is out of print, and a new edition is much to be desired.

Brown was a musical expert in all the technique and science of acoustics, and made original research in several lines. He was a well-known figure in the Glasgow musical world, and was of Highland descent. He had a passion for the songs of the Highland people. A lady who knew him well as an elder in Dr. Bonar's church remarked to me at the Glasgow Mod: 'How Colin Brown would have rejoiced had he lived to see this day!' He was the first to make fairly intelligible the relationships of the folk-tunes of the various parts of Britain to one another, and to show clearly their great musical merits by scientific analysis of the melodies. He strikingly remarks that 'not a flaw in form or tune can be found in the construction of most of these old tunes, by humble, uncultivated men, thus showing that what is truly natural must also be scientifically true. It is remarkable how quickly and surely the ear of the untaught musician recognises the mental effect of tones, and how the scientific laws of melody gradually develop.'

Is not this true of our folk-tales in a different sense. When we read these prose stories collected from uneducated men, we find to our surprise all the laws of the best prose composition faultlessly kept by men who knew nothing of these laws. The same is true of our poetry. What did

Duncan Ban know of the laws of Gaelic grammar?—a man who could not write; and yet his grammar is faultless.

So also with regard to music. Our tunes were not composed with rule and pencil according to the technical laws of musical grammar. They were the products of natural genius, and they often excel the laborious products of analytic and imitative art. They knew nothing of the laws of composition, and yet they observe them all instinctively. If we could ask them how they got their tunes they would probably say that they just 'came to them.'

Colin Brown says: 'The laws and principles of musical construction are exemplified in the very earliest forms of these melodies with mathematical precision. The devices of *contrast*, *imitation*, and *reply* are beautifully exemplified in every one of our folk-songs.' The authors of our old songs, whoever they were, deserve a tribute of praise and respect.

Since the time of Colin Brown, a great deal of progress has been made in various departments. Mr. Henry Whyte of Glasgow has been indefatigable. He has a special knowledge of the historical and romantic lore associated with Gaelic songs. Mr. M. MacFarlane of Paisley is another leading worker in this department. Like Mr. Whyte he has the bardic gift, and has written many good songs for the old airs. He is now preparing a large collection of songs and music entitled *Bardic Melody*, which will be awaited with much interest. We are all familiar with Dr. K. N. MacDonald's excellent Gesto Collection.

Until the early 'seventies *choral song* was almost unknown in Gaelic music. All the singing was in unison in the old days. Joyce, however, states that the old Irish Harpers had a system of harmony when they played on the harp, something like our alto part. Whether this was applied to the voice I cannot say. However, there was very little four-part singing in Gaelic until the St. Columba Gaelic Choir led the way about 1875. Their annual Gaelic concerts gave a considerable impetus to Gaelic choral singing. This has been

greatly developed in recent years by the Mòd, and by the choirs which the annual competitions have called into existence in most of the Highland centres.

Harmonising folk-tunes for choral purposes is rather difficult, though the melodies seem so simple. It is necessary to give them such natural harmonies as will be in accordance with their tonality and character, and to avoid modern harmonic colouring, or whatever would injure the character of the tune. Some think that the old tunes are better without any harmony. Leading authorities in England recommend the use of folk-songs in school sung in unison. The flavour of the old song is more perfectly retained when sung in the old style; and, though the element of harmony is very charming, it sometimes obscures the simple, unadorned beauty of the folk-song.

Mr. Fuller Maitland, musical critic of the *Times*, said lately to the Folk-Song Society: 'Why put in harmonies at all? It would be better to leave the tune in a state of pristine innocence, but our ears were accustomed to the harmony as our eyes were used to seeing people with their clothes on. The unspoiled rustic could enjoy much that was outside the enjoyment of the class that must have rich harmonies.'

Another authority compares melody without harmony to a line engraving, and melody with harmony to a picture in oil or water-colour. The moderns, any way, lay stress on colour, or chromatic effects in harmony, and are not so strong in melody as the ancients. However doctors may disagree on the abstract question, there can be no doubt that choral singing has greatly helped to popularise Gaelic music, and was a move in the right direction. Gaelic is a fine vocalic language, well adapted to give the massive effects of choral singing, and equally good for the soloist.

A musical gentleman remarked on this, saying that on paper the language seemed all consonants, but in singing there seemed to be no consonants at all! It is a language eminently adapted for musical purposes, and in the opinion

of an English-speaking musician comes next to the Italian, for vocalic qualities, among the languages of Europe.

The system of *accents* in any language has a great influence on its poetry and music, for it determines the rhythm. It is a curious fact that in Gaelic the accent or beat is always on the first syllable of a word. For this reason there are few poems or songs in Gaelic ending on the strong accent, while the reverse is true of English. If you are writing Gaelic verses, and wish to end on a strong accent (or long syllable) you must take a monosyllable, which is not always easy. The usual rule in Gaelic is that the line should end in a strong accent followed by a secondary or weak accent. This is the reason why the rather silly 'O' and 'Sir' is introduced into English translations—just to add an extra short syllable to the line to fit the Gaelic tune. In Irish music and poetry this ending is not nearly so common as in Scottish Gaelic, because the law of Irish accents is different. In one Irish song-book (Mr. Graves'), out of 118 songs only 18 have the soft ending. Now, in *Coiser Chiuil*, out of 100 songs 63 have the soft ending and 37 the strong ending. Out of the same collection of popular songs 58 are in the mode of the first of the scale (Doh mode), 18 in the Lah mode, 14 in the Ray mode, and 10 in the mode of Soh. There are Gaelic and Scottish songs in all the possible modes, even in the Te and Fah mode. I am rather surprised to find so many on the Doh mode, and so few on the Lah mode. Yet it is worth noting that in the Doh mode airs the note Lah often gets prominence and accent.

None of the seventh mode, or Lah tunes, contains the 'se' or the 'bah' of the modern minor scale, though these are sometimes introduced in the harmonies, as also the 'ta' and 'fe' that mark passing modulation to the first flat or sharp related key.

Mrs. Kennedy-Fraser has got a large number of songs in Eriskay lately taken down by means of the phonograph, and she says none of them are in either the major or minor modern modes. She has also hit upon a most interesting discovery

with regard to the scale used by the Eriskay singers. Its intervals do not exactly correspond to the modern diatonic scale. I have long suspected this to be the case, especially when taking down airs from traditional singers who had no theoretical knowledge of music. Certain intervals did not fit in exactly to the piano scale. One might say that this was owing to the defective ear of the singers, or perhaps to the modern tempered scale, but I rather think we must go deeper into the past history of music for the reason. At any rate, the phonograph records should throw some light on the subject.<sup>1</sup>

Irish fiddlers, I am told by Dr. Henebry, play their tunes with two notes differing by a quarter tone or so from the modern diatonic scale.<sup>2</sup> This gives a curious pastoral effect to their music that cannot be imitated except by playing in their scale. Instruments like the harp or zither could be tuned to this old scale, but I am afraid ears trained to the modern intervals could never learn the old style accurately.

The question of the *old modes* is being frequently discussed at present at meetings of musicians. Mr. Fuller Maitland said lately, at the London Folk-Song Society, that the so-called ecclesiastical or Gregorian modes (ending on any of the notes of the scale) were undoubtedly in active operation up to 1650 in all music. He held that when a song conforming to the cadence rules of the old modes was found amongst village singers, it was clear to him that it had descended from a time before 1650. This, however, was not agreed to by all. Folk-songs were not all of ancient date, and some new ones were even now being composed in the old modes. Mr. Sharp said that they were always being composed, and perpetually changing. 'They were always in a fluid state, always dynamic, never static.' This is certainly true of Highland Folk-Song.

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Kennedy-Fraser will shortly publish these songs in book form. They should prove to be not the least valuable of our collections.

<sup>2</sup> Thus in Key G, the Irish F $\sharp$  is only a quarter tone sharp on F. The Irish C is quarter tone flat on the ordinary C. D E G and A are constant. The Irish F is a perfect fifth below the Irish C.

It appears, then, that the origin and development of our music is full of fascinating and unsolved problems. Had the old pre-Reformation music of the Celtic Church any influence on our folk-song? Did the monks of Iona sing in the old ecclesiastical modes of Italy? Or had we an earlier music of our own? Mr. Carmichael has collected old hymns that may have come down from the Celtic Church. If the words survive for centuries, is it not all the more likely that the music would survive.

There was undoubtedly much intercourse between Ireland and Western Scotland two or three hundred years ago. Irish harpers often travelled through Scotland. Mulrony was called the chief harper of Ireland and Scotland. This was carried on till the close of the eighteenth century. Ireland was for long a school for Scottish harpers, and also for the Welsh. Murdo M'Donald, harper to M'Lean of Coll, studied in Ireland, and was with M'Lean of Coll in 1734. He was called 'Murchadh Clarsair.' Irish and Scottish music are closely akin, and are, in Joyce's words, 'really an emanation from the heart of one Celtic people, and form together a body of national melody superior to that of any other nation in the world.'

The old harper was a bard, a musical composer, a player and singer all in one person. Music was their profession, and it is not to be wondered at that they should have composed beautiful tunes. The ancient Irish were passionately fond of music, and valued good musicians. The old Irish book, *Saltair nan Rann*, says Adam and Eve had a very hard lot after their expulsion from Eden, for they were without food, proper fire, house, *music*, or raiment! Evidently music was one of the necessities of life to the old Irish scribe.

The ancient Highlanders were quite as musically inclined as the Irish. Patrick M'Donald says that the people in his time loved their poetry and music the more that it was despised by some degenerate men of rank. There were songs for the women (*Luinneagan*) for all occupations, such as milking, watching folds, waulking, turning the quern, hay-

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making, and cutting down corn. There were *Iorraim* for the men, rowing songs, though the women sang them also. In harvest, he says, you could hear them on every side singing their woodnotes wild. They were as musical as the Arcadian shepherds.

He remarks that even then, in 1784, 'through intercourse with the Lowlands the custom of singing these songs regularly was declining.' We cannot therefore overstate the value of the work done at the present day to rescue our best folk-songs from oblivion where that danger is impending. We must try and perpetuate them and render them accessible, and bring them again into common use and currency. We should try to collect every folk-tune, be it good or not so good, into one treasury, noting them down exactly as they are sung. After that will come the stage of editing and selection, and it may be the working up of our music into classical forms by the musician of commanding genius for whom we are waiting. Though, indeed, many of us may think that no treatment can enhance the charm these tunes already possess for us, the charm of simple and direct, but deep and tender, human feeling. The very spirit of the Celtic race speaks in its music alike in the passionate yearning of the love-song and in the wild, martial spirit of the war pibroch.

Let us cherish our native music as a valuable possession not only for ourselves, but for the enrichment of the treasures of European Folk-Song.

## SEA-POEMS

(Continued from vol. iv. p. 351)

KENNETH MACLEOD

VIII

AN LAOIDH-AINNE

[THE writer learned this version of the Clan Ranald Dawn-Prayer from old Vincent MacEachin, Eigg, a native of