

Reeling in the Strathspey: The Origins of Scotland's National Music

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ABSTRACT. According to the conventionally held view, the strathspey or 'strathspey reel' was an eighteenth century innovation instigated by fiddlers of the Speyside region, such as the Browns of Kincardine and the Cummings of Grantown. However, the basic rhythmic characteristics inherent to the strathspey – a series of long and short notes, organised within two or four strong beats per bar – are found in Gaelic songs thought to be much older. Using a range of data from early fiddle collections and transcriptions of twentieth century audio recordings, this paper explores the musical and semantic connections between the strathspey and Gaelic song, suggesting an alternative developmental path for Scotland's national music.

There needs na' be sae great a fraise
Wi dringing dull Italian lays –
I widna gie our ain strathspeys
For half a hundred score o 'em.
*Rev John Skinner (1760) 'Tullochgorm'*¹

The Strathspey is to Scotland what the jig is to Ireland, the contra dance or the hornpipe to England, the Czardas to Hungary, the Tarantella to Italy, or the Cachucha to Spain – it enshrines the gayest spirit and life of the nation.

William C. Honeyman (1922)

Every old reel and strathspey, being originally a 'port-à-beul,' has its own words. Now, if you wish to play with genuine taste, keep singing the words in your mind when you are playing the tune.

*Charles Stewart (1884)*²

For two hundred and fifty years at least, the strathspey has been the most iconic variety of Scottish music. Celebrated as national music by Skinner and Honeyman, it is even said to have formed the basis of the *écossaise* compositions of Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin (Thurston: 15). Today, it is recognised as a slower, rhythmically dotted variety of the common reel. However, there has been confusion and debate over its origins for many years and even its basic nature: is it best construed as a dance, a musical form, a type of song, a rhythm or something else entirely? Although it is usually taken to have been the innovation of eighteenth century Speyside fiddlers, the rhythm inherent to the strathspey is commonly found in Gaelic songs thought to be much older. In this paper, I attempt to assess and integrate the diverse strands of evidence regarding the origins of the strathspey and to classify it as a form of music and dance.

In Section 1, I provide a brief diachronic overview of strathspeys and reels in Scottish music and their musical characteristics. Readers who already have expertise in this area may wish to proceed directly to Section 2. There, I assess the standard account of the strathspey's origins – that it is a form of fiddle music that developed in the Speyside region. In Section 3, I suggest an alternative thesis in an attempt to rectify inconsistencies in the standard account and incorporate new evidence. I propose that the strathspey is a rhythmic matrix that developed directly out of the Gaelic dance song tradition. Although I am not the first author to link the strathspey and Gaelic song,³ none has explored the topic in any depth to date. Finally, in Section 4, I broaden the focus and suggest that both the work and dance song genres developed out of an earlier innovation in Gaelic culture: the pairing of rhythmically-co-ordinated human movement and song. At the core of this innovation, and extending through its various evolutions, was the rhythm that we identify today as the strathspey.

1 Strathspeys and Reels in Scottish Music: A Brief Overview

The word ‘reel’⁴ is defined by Collinson (2012a) as ‘a rapid but smooth-flowing quaver movement in *alla breve*’ (i.e. cut time or 2/2). The ‘smooth-flowing’, or rhythmically consistent way in which reels are commonly played today is referred to as a ‘round’ style (see Example 1).⁵ This contrasts to a ‘pointed’ style, which has a more dotted nature, as discussed below. In modern Scottish music, reels tend to be played at about 105 beats per minute (BPM) if notated in cut time, or 210 BPM if in common time (i.e. 4/4).

The term ‘Reel’ originally referred to dancing. (NB: Henceforth, following the convention of the Fletts, capitalised forms will refer to dances, while lower-case forms will refer to musical types.) The Reel is first attested in Scottish sources from the proceedings of a 1591 witch trial: ‘Geilles Duncan did goe before them playing this reill or daunce upon a small trump, called a jew’s trump, until they entered into the kerke of North Barrick’ (see Thurston: 20). However, there is nothing in this account to indicate that it was a specific kind of dance *per se*, and a more general semantic sense appears to have prevailed – as far as we can determine from written evidence – until the eighteenth century, with the appearance of the first collections of instrumental dance music.⁶

Example 1: The beginning of ‘*Ruidhle Thulaichean*’ (‘Reel of Tullach’: from Lamb: 40)



The first time in writing that the word ‘Reel’ denotes a particular dance is in Playford’s 1700 collection, which contains the title ‘The Comers of Largo Arell [sic]’. However, as it was set in 9/4, it was not a Reel in the modern sense of the word (Alburger: 26). Indeed, even in the late eighteenth century, there is more rhythmic variety associated with the word than Collinson’s definition would suggest. As Alburger (77) says about Cumming’s (1782) collection of reels, for instance, ‘There is rhythmically ... an embarrassment of riches’. Most of the tunes in the collection feature dots and semi-quavers to some extent, and thus resemble strathspeys more than a ‘smooth-flowing’, round variety of tune. The same quality can be observed in other collections from this period, such as McGlashan (1786).

The strathspey (or ‘strathspey reel’) is a moderately slow reel in 4/4 time.⁷ When played for dancing, the strathspey tends to be at a tempo of 160-170 BPM. Unlike the common reel, it is played with a combination of dotted rhythms and their inversion, known as the ‘Scots snap’ (Collinson 2012b). These qualities are illustrated below in Example 2. In Scotland, dance music that exhibits these features is referred to as ‘pointed’,⁸ contrasting to the rhythmic consistency of a ‘round’ musical style.

Example 2: The beginning of ‘Let’s to the Ard’:⁹ with dotted notes and a Scots ‘snap’



It is the ‘snap’¹⁰ that most typifies the strathspey, as opposed to other dance tune varieties in common time – for example, faster reels and hornpipes. Johnson (32) says that the earliest written tune in strathspey rhythm is ‘Macpherson’s Testament’, in the 1710 Sinkler

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

manuscript (see Example 3 below).¹¹ Although the snap is missing from the original notation, Johnson indicates (*ibid.*) that it would have been present in performances of the tune.

The Menzies manuscript of 1749, which describes a set of dance figures, gives us the first mention of the word ‘strathspey’ in connection with a specific type of music or dance: two selections are described as ‘strathspey reels’. The first compositions clearly exhibiting both snaps and dots, and called ‘strathspeys’, are two items in *The Caledonian Pocket Companion* (Oswald: Vol 3) named ‘A New Strathspey Reel’. Finally, Bremner’s 1757 collection gives us the first anonymous tunes described as strathspeys, such as ‘Let’s to the Ard’ (62: see Example 2).

Example 3: Macpherson’s Testament (taken from Sinkler: 5), the earliest written strathspey



To summarise, although the reel and strathspey – as forms of music and dance – appeared in print or manuscript in the early eighteenth century, the terminology associated with them was ambiguous. In other words, whilst the division between round and pointed music serves us well today, it was not so clear in earlier times. This observation will become important in the sections to come. Having now introduced the musical characteristics of the strathspey and reel, and their early history, we are in a position to assess the standard account of the strathspey’s origins.

2 The Origins of the Strathspey: A Critique of the Standard Account

In general, the literature concerning the origin of the strathspey adopts a consistent ‘standard account’, or avoids espousing any particular point of view due to a perceived paucity of evidence.¹² The standard account can be summarised as follows: 1) the strathspey, first and foremost, is a type of fiddle music (Collinson 1966: 206; Bruford: 74; Newton 2009: 253),¹³ 2) it was originally conceived in the Speyside area of the Highlands, in the eighteenth century (Doherty 1999b: 385); and 3) its earliest players are reputed to have been the Browns, of Kincardine-on-Spey, and the Cummings, of Grantown, who were hereditary musicians in the area (Bruford: 74). Whether acknowledged or not, this narrative is based on a 1791 source, Thomas Newte’s *Prospects and Observations; On a Tour in England and Scotland*.¹⁴

Newte was the pseudonym of Rev. Dr William Thomson (1746-1817), a Scottish-born, fiddle-playing minister. His book details his 1785 tour of northern England and Scotland (under Anon. 1788 in reference section). In one respect, being a Scot and a fiddler, one might consider him to be a reliable source. However, in another – being a non-Gaelic speaker¹⁵ – he is less than ideal, for the Highlands were predominantly Gaelic-speaking at the

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

time,¹⁶ including Speyside, which he apparently did not visit on his trip.¹⁷ The relevant excerpt from Thomson's book follows:

Strathspey is celebrated for its reels, a species of music that happily unites gaiety with grace, moving now with measured step and flow, and now at a quick and sudden pace. Music, in general, was divided by Macrimmon the piper, principal of the musical college in the Isle of Skye, into four kinds: music for love, music for sorrow, music for war, and music for meat. By the last of these he must have meant reels, among which the strathspey is as highly distinguished among the reels of the North-Highlands, the Islands, Argyllshire and Perthshire, as the plaintive melody of the southern counties, is among the slow tunes that arose in the other parts of the Lowlands of Scotland.

With regard to the first composers, or even performers of strathspey reels, there are not any certain accounts. According to the tradition of the country, the first who played them were the Browns of Kincardin: to whom are ascribed a few of the most ancient tunes. After these men, the Cummings of Freuchie, now Castle-Grant [i.e. Grantown-on-Spey], were in the highest estimation for their knowledge and execution in strathspey music; and most of the tunes handed down to us are certainly of their composing. A successive race of musicians, like people of the same caste in Hindustan, succeeded each other for many generations. The last of that name, famous for his skill in music, was John Roy Cumming. He died about thirty years ago and there are many persons, still alive, who speak of his performance with the greatest rapture ... Before I quit my present subject, I shall just take notice, that the Strathspey is to the common Scotch Reel what a Spanish Fandango is to a French Cotillon (Newte: 163-165).

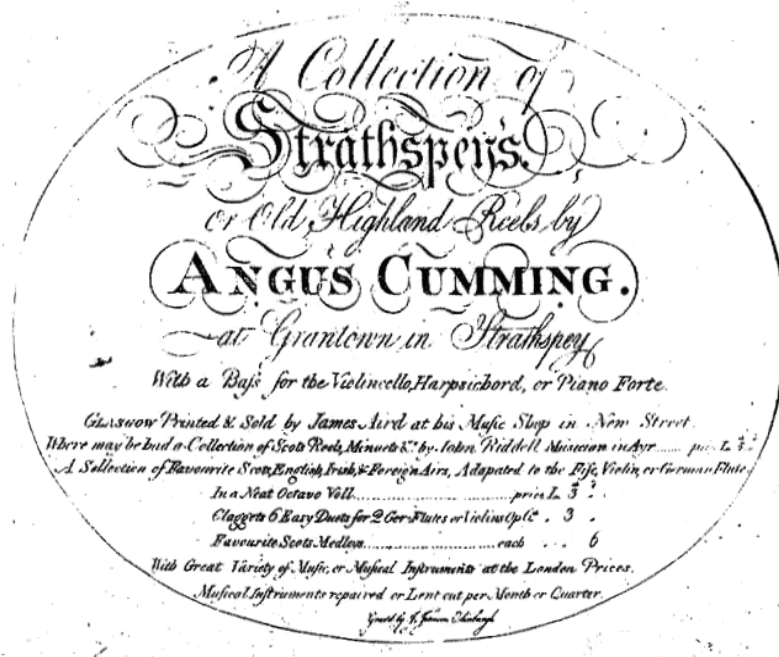
Despite the fact that Thomson might not have been acquainted with the Speyside area himself, it is worth examining this passage closely for the influence that it has had. First, he does not specifically link the fiddle with the 'strathspey reel'; its proponents are merely called 'musicians'. He is also indefinite about its origins, apart from saying that it has been handed down for many years via intergenerational transmission and that the Browns and Cummings were prolific composers in the idiom. He says that it was, in some way, a more desirable¹⁸ or marked form of the reel in comparison to other areas, including the Islands, which he also did not visit on his tour (Rackwitz: 245). Finally, and crucially, he is evidently discussing a musical form that incorporated a *tempo change*, for he says that it was 'a species of music that ... [moved] now with measured step and flow, and now at a quick and sudden pace'.¹⁹ It follows from this that the strathspey reel was a dynamic music-dance complex and that the term 'strathspey' had not been fully conventionalised, by this time at least, to mean only the slower section of this complex.

When contrasting what Thomson actually wrote with how it has been interpreted by other authors – whether first or second hand – it is clear that there is no direct basis for claiming that the strathspey was fiddle music *per se*. Furthermore, Thomson provides no indication that it originated, specifically, in the Speyside area at a particular time. In fact, as the dance master Francis Peacock tells us (89-90), the strathspey was found 'in many parts of the Highlands'. Bolstering this, Alburger (67) points out that Alexander McGlashan's second collection was entitled *A Collection of Reels, Consisting Chiefly of Strathspeys, Athole Reels, With a Bass &c*, which implies that the type of tune beginning to be known elsewhere as a strathspey was still known in the Athole district as a reel. Finally, Thomson does not even suggest that it was a fixed musical form.²⁰ This intriguing point is substantiated by what we find in Angus Cumming's 1782 collection, about which Collinson says, 'here for the first

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

time is the real fiddle music of the Strathspey country, compiled or composed by one of the important names for fiddle music in Strathspey’ (1966: 207).

Figure 1: Title plate of Cumming (1782)



The title of Cumming’s book, in full, is *A Collection of Strathspeys or Old Highland Reels by Angus Cumming at Grantown in Strathspey* (see Figure 1).²¹ Cumming (c1750 – c1800) maintains in his preface that he was from a long line of Speyside musicians. Curiously, however, he never uses the word ‘strathspey’ within the actual collection itself; the tunes were simply all ‘Old Highland reels’ to him.²² As can be seen in Table 1 below, most of them are unambiguously dotted in nature, as we would expect: only 12 of 60 could be described as predominantly ‘round’. However, only 17 tunes show clear signs of the Scots snap. This is surprising, given that the snap is considered a defining quality of the idiom. Mistakes in notation make some of the rhythms difficult to interpret, but it is clear, to Angus Cumming, that Strathspeys could be danced to tunes with a range of musical features. Take, for instance, ‘Carron’s Reel’, given as Example 4 below. Apart from the fact that it is written in *alla breve*, it is immediately recognisable as a strathspey. In contrast, however, ‘Arndilly’s Reel’ (Example 5 below) looks more like a reel. By today’s definitions, these are two different tune types but, to Cumming, they were both ‘strathspeys’. Indeed, other tunes appear to be a mixture of both forms (see Example 6 below).

Example 4: Carron’s Reell – or *U Choira Chruim* (from Gore *et al*)



REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

Example 5: Arndilly's Reell – or *Bittac air Mac'homaich* (*ibid.*)



Example 6: Kilravock's Reell (*ibid.*)



Interestingly, about one half of the time signatures (28/60) in Cumming's collection are marked *alla breve*, which indicates a faster tempo.²³ This accords with Thomson's comment above regarding a tempo shift.²⁴ To Cumming as well as Thomson, the strathspey could be performed at either a 'measured step and flow' or a 'quick and sudden pace'. In any case, and confusingly, it is evident that neither author considered the strathspey to be a discrete variety of tune.

Table 1: Statistics from Cumming's collection

Aspect	Frequency	Percentage
Dotted notes	48	80%
Scots Snaps	17	28%
'Round' tunes ²⁵	12	20%
Common time	32	53%
<i>Alla breve</i>	28	47%

As mentioned above, a similar degree of ambiguity is found in other collections from the time. This is perplexing for the modern scholar. However, the confusion can be cleared up by changing the way in which we delineate the semantic boundaries of music and dance and their interrelated associations. In the eighteenth century, music and dance were not as conceptually dissociated from one another as they are today. To writers at the time, the words 'reel' and 'strathspey' meant both dance *and* music. The 'strathspey', in other words, was not a tune type, *per se*. Rather, it was a semantic fusion, a dance-music complex featuring pointed rhythm and a tempo change. Through the process of synecdoche, the word increasingly came to denote the musical side of the equation. However, in earlier times, and over a large swathe of the Highlands, a 'strathspey' (or 'reel') – musically speaking – would have been any tune that could have been performed for dancing a Reel. Although this appears, *prima facie*, to be tautological, it merely restores the original, superordinate category: music and dance were a unified notion.

Fused semantic categories are well represented in the Gaelic tradition, and further afield, in the sphere of music and dance. For instance, among the Tiwi people of northern Australia, there is no direct translation for the English word 'dance'. The closest word is *yoi*, but it has a more holistic meaning:

Yoi is defined by the Tiwi not only as the dance, to dance, and the social event (that includes dance), but also as the songs used for dance, the rhythm of these songs, and to sing for dance. Thus *yoi* denotes the whole event, the act of dancing, the music associated with dance, and the performance of that music (Grau: 32).²⁶

The same type of semantic unity obtains in the way that Scottish and Irish Gaelic speakers viewed song; a song's melody was inseparable from its words:

I never heard my friends in Glendale [South Uist] hum or sing an old tune without words. To them the words and the air were inseparable. I once mentioned that I thought a neighbour had the air of a song, and the reply was, 'How could she have the air and not the words?' (Shaw 1955: 76).

A. Martin Freeman, who collected songs in Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, provides an Irish parallel:

If you tell [a traditional singer] that two of his songs have the same tune, he will answer that that is impossible, since they are different songs. If you then say, that the tunes are very much alike, he will agree, and look upon you as a musical genius for having noticed it. 'What a marvellous thing,' he will exclaim, 'for a man who was not brought up in Irish to know so much about our songs!' For – may I repeat it? – the tune without the words is as a voice without a mouth. He thinks that you understand the song (that is, the words) so perfectly, that you have got the tune (xxv: in Blankenhorn).

It is generally the case in indigenous cultures that informants are unable to dissociate the words of a song from its respective melody (Nettl: 21). In any case, to return to the problem at hand – that is, how such a diverse group of rhythms could be subsumed within a single rubric – it is apparent that music was defined in terms of dance and not vice versa. However, in earlier times, we know that dancing was not done to instrumental music primarily, but to *song*.

3 The Strathspey as Song

Until the explosion of instrumental dance music in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'dance tunes... customarily assumed the name of the songs to which they were set' (Emmerson 1971: 12). For example, in 1531, Sir Thomas Elyot (*ibid.*, 6) tells us that the names of dances popular at the time were taken from the first line of the song associated with them. This was also the practice of Gaelic-speaking musicians, as we shall see below. The earliest hint of the Gaelic dance song genre comes in 1593, when three Elgin women confessed to the Kirk to have danced 'gillatrype'²⁷ whilst singing 'a foull hieland sang' (Henderson and Cowan: 134). Elgin was a Gaelic-speaking area in the sixteenth century²⁸ and the modifier 'hieland' suggests that the song was in the language (cf. MacInnes 2006b: 260).²⁹ We know that Gaelic dance songs were performed throughout the Highlands and Islands in earlier times. They persisted into the 20th century in remote areas (Lamb: 26), sometimes even being used in preference to instrumental music (Rhodes, in Flett and Flett 1996: 189).³⁰ As Logan tells us in *The Scottish Gael*, 'Dancing, among the Gael, does not depend on the presence of musical instruments. They reel and set to their own vocal music or to the songs of those who are near' (440). While some Gaelic dance songs were local compositions and never travelled far, others have been recorded from one side of the *Gàidhealtachd* to the other: dance song was a pervasive and important tradition.³¹

Newton (2009: 253)³² states that the melodies associated with Gaelic dance songs, particularly those in the form of strathspeys and reels, were composed originally on the fiddle and that words accreted to them *ex post facto*. However, I think that this is unlikely in the wider context of what we know about dancing in Britain – as seen in Elyot's quote above – and throughout the world. As in the Celtic tradition of Brittany (see Wilkinson: 123), instrumental dance music is often parasitic on an earlier song tradition. Indeed, it is a commonly expressed belief amongst Gaelic speakers that their dance music originated as

song.³³ Gaelic dance song has the appearance of being an old and once widespread tradition that, like other genres of verbal art, predates the European-led instrumental innovations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁴ Indeed, Cumming's collection – the earliest collection of strathspeys by a native of the area – features unambiguous references to Gaelic dance songs.

3.1 The Importance of Titles

When looking at Example 4 and Example 5 above from Cumming, one finds adjoined Gaelic subtitles in a non-standard, English-based orthography. Interestingly, 42% of the items published have Gaelic subtitles (25/60). This is not surprising, given that Speyside was Gaelic-speaking in the eighteenth century, but the key point is that some of these titles are immediately recognisable as the internal lyrics of Gaelic dance songs. For example, 'Carron's Reell' has the Gaelic subtitle '*U Choira Chruim*'. This is a reference to a lyric that appears in the song '*Tha Bann' Aig na Caoraich Uile*' (i.e. 'All of the Sheep Have Milk'). Also, the Gaelic title given for 'Arndilly's Reel' is '*Biodag air Mac Thòmais*' ('Thomas's Son Wears a Dirk'), another instantly recognisable dance song that was once distributed throughout the *Gàidhealtachd*.

Table 2: Gaelic and English titles from Cumming's collection

English	Gaelic (corrected)	Translation
Dutchess of Gordon's Reell	<i>Ceann Loch Àlainn</i>	Lochaline Head
Dutchess of Athole's Reell	<i>Tiugainn Dachaidh Null 'n Àird</i>	Come Home by Way of the 'Ard'
Acharnac's Reell	<i>Bail' nan Granndach</i>	Town of the Grants
Arndilly's Reell	<i>Biodag air Mac Thòmais</i>	Thomas's Son Wears a Dirk
The Wedding	<i>'S ann A-raoir a Bha a' Bhanais</i>	The Wedding Was Last Night
Dr Wm Grant's Reell	<i>Seann Triubhais Uilleachain</i>	Willie's Old Trousers
Carron's Reell	<i>A' Chaora Chruim</i>	The Crooked Sheep
Muchard's Dream	<i>Bruadar Fear Mullach Àrd</i> ³⁵	The Dream of the Man of the 'High Peak'

It is incontrovertible that the Gaelic titles in Cumming's collection, overall, have an earlier provenance than the English ones. About 70% of the English titles are dedicatory, presumably to honour a subscribing patron (40% of these explicitly name a titled personage, i.e. with the prefixes 'Lady', 'Lord', 'Sir' etc.). As Emmerson (1971: 61) tells us, the majority of music publications during this time were financed by subscription; patrons' contributions were acknowledged in the form of personalised tune titles.³⁶ In contrast, the Gaelic titles in Cumming are of a completely different nature, as can be seen from the sample in Table 2. They are declarative and descriptive, as would be expected from song lyrics; not one is transparently dedicatory.

Purely instrumental tune titles – that is, those devoid of lyrical associations – are arbitrary and, unless committed to print, ephemeral: they are subject to change, re-appropriation and abandonment.³⁷ Music, on its own, has little or no underlying semantic basis (Stravinsky: 53-54);³⁸ however, when music and words are associated with one another, they create a dynamic, unified matrix, and cue each other synergistically (Rubin: 109). Crucially, because of this, they are more likely to be transmitted from person to person, and over time and place. In other words, a title based upon a song lyric is more likely to persist in an oral tradition than one based upon an idiosyncratic, dedicatory reference. It is logical that some, if not all, of the other Gaelic titles in Cumming's collection refer to songs. Indeed, William Gunn tells us in the preface to his collection of dance tunes for the pipes, that the titles he gives are:

... the original Gaelic designations by which the [pieces] have been known in the Highlands ... [they] consist generally of something peculiar or striking in the *verse or verses to which they were composed* [emphasis added] (1848).

Thus, it is probable that the oldest melodies described as ‘strathspeys’, by a native of Speyside in the eighteenth century, are actually Gaelic dance songs. This conclusion is reinforced by an historical survey of the melodies in Keith Norman MacDonald’s *Puirt-a-Beul* (MacDonald 1901). In this book, which contains 85 complete dance songs (i.e. with both music and lyrics represented), the earlier that a melody associated with one of them entered into a musical collection, the more likely it was to be printed as a strathspey (Lamb: 28). As I will argue in Section 3.3, this is the case simply because the rhythmically pointed style that we associate with the strathspey was the way in which Gaels tended to sing and play for social dancing in general. Before discussing this, however, it is important to consider the context of social dancing in the *Gàidhealtachd*, in which the dance song was a key element.

3.2 Reel Dancing in the Highlands and Islands

We have few descriptions of social dancing in the Highlands before the nineteenth century, but there are indications that it was so well established, by the point that it was observed by expert commentators, that it was deemed worthy of emulation. Dance master Francis Peacock (1723-1807) was so impressed with the Highlanders’ command of Reel dancing that he wrote:

The fondness the Highlanders have for ... [Reel dancing] ... is unbounded; and so is their ambition to excel in it. This pleasing propensity, one would think, was born with them, from the early indications we sometimes see their children show for this exercise. I have seen children of theirs, at five or six years of age, attempt, nay even execute, some of their steps so well, as almost to surpass belief. I once had the pleasure of seeing, in a remote part of the country, a Reel danced by a herd boy and two young girls, who surprised me much, especially the boy, who appeared to be about twelve years of age. He had a variety of well-chosen steps, and executed them with so much justness and ease, as if he meant to set criticism at defiance. Circumstances like these plainly evince, that those qualities must either be inherent in the Highlanders, or that they must have an uncommon aptitude for imitation.

Our Colleges draw hither, every year, a number of students from the Western Isles, as well as from the Highlands, and the greater part of them excel in this dance; some of them, indeed, in so superior a degree, that I, myself, have thought them worthy of imitation (85-86).

The fact that young, Gaelic-speaking children were proficient in Reel dancing in the eighteenth century signifies a widespread and advanced culture of social dance.³⁹ Another indication of this is the likelihood that the *Branle d’Écosse*, a dance popular in sixteenth century France, originated in Scotland (Emmerson 1972: 41). The primary step of this dance replicates the Strathspey setting step still used by Scottish country dancers today (*ibid.*). Similarly, the survival of the Old West Highland circular Reel in former Clanranald territories, the basic form of which was ‘one or more strathspeys followed without pause by one or more reels’ (Flett and Flett 1964: 157), strongly suggests that Reel dancing in the *Gàidhealtachd* was an early, pre-Reformation development.⁴⁰

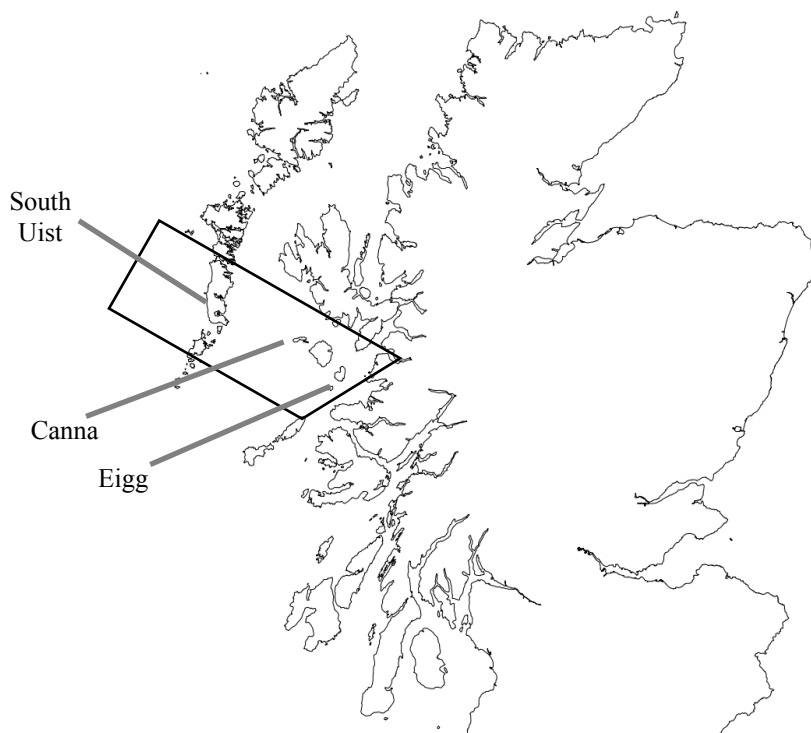
The circular reel ... is an unsophisticated dance which could be of very great antiquity ... [M]any parts of the West Highlands and the Western Isles retained their Catholic faith throughout the Reformation period, so that social dancing would have taken place there in an unbroken tradition dating back to

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

medieval times, and the circular reel could be part of this tradition (Flett and Flett 1972: 111).

Some of the informants to whom the Fletts spoke in the 1950s – in places like Eigg, Skye, South Uist and Barra – said that they could remember when the Foursome Reel was unknown,⁴¹ and when the circular Reel was dominant (*ibid.*, 156). The fact that the travelling figure was a simple circle, rather than a ‘figure of 8’, is noteworthy, for the circle figure is an attested, ancient form of social and ritualistic dance.⁴² Knowledge of the circular Reel was only found, in the 20th century, in areas within or bordering the former territories of Clanranald (see Figure 2),⁴³ as previously mentioned – ‘an area noted for its cultural conservatism’ (Shaw 2007: 254).

Figure 2: Clanranald Territory (from Shaw 2007: 253)



Gaelic dance songs were no doubt influenced by native fiddle and pipe traditions, as well as the swirl of art and folk music trends characteristic of Enlightenment-era Scotland. However, we must assume that if people in the Hebrides and other remote areas were dancing Reels or something similar in the early seventeenth century, that these dances were primarily fuelled by song. It is interesting that the circular Reel is noted by the Fletts to have been danced to ‘strathspeys’ followed by reels. However, the distinction being made here – between strathspeys and reels – is an artefact of modern sensibilities. What we take to be the strathspey was simply the way in which Highlanders sang and played for Reels more generally; the pointed quality we associate with it was a widespread rhythmic matrix for Gaelic dance music in general, at least when in non-compound time signatures.⁴⁴

3.3 Pointed Rhythm and Tempo in Gaelic Reels

As discussed previously, the Reel was associated with a tempo change in the Highland area, including Speyside, but there is no evidence that the strathspey had become conventionalised as a ‘tune type’ by the end of the eighteenth century. Emmerson (1972: 166-7) suggests that

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

the segue from slower ‘strathspeys’ to quicker ‘reels’ began in the nineteenth century, with the creation of the Foursome Reel.⁴⁵ However, what we have seen above points to an earlier date for the tempo change, perhaps one as far back as the pre-Reformation period. There are copious examples in the sound archives of Scotland and Nova Scotia of Gaelic speakers singing and playing one or more strathspeys followed by one or more reels. What is curious is that when one listens closely to the way in which many of these sets are performed, the pointed rhythm that we associate with the strathspey is often maintained as a sort of rhythmic palimpsest after the tempo change (i.e. during the ‘reel’). This is obscured by the sudden acceleration: It only becomes obvious when the reels are slowed down to be at the same tempo as the strathspeys, such as with audio software. Take, for example, a set of dance songs sung by Hugh Duncan, from Islay: ‘*S ann an Ìle*’ – ‘It was in Islay’ (strathspey) – followed by ‘*A Chur nan Gobhar às a’ Chreig*’ – ‘When Putting the Goats off the Hill’ (reel).

Example 7: ‘*S ann an Ìle*’ (Strathspey: TAD 6905⁴⁶)*

$\text{♩} = 160$

'S ann an Ì - e 'n Ì - le 'n Ì - le 's ann an Ì - le ru - gadh mi

'S ann an Ì - e 'n Ì - le 'n Ì - le 's ann an Ì - le bhòidh - each

Example 7 sounds unambiguously like a strathspey. However, when the reel following it (Example 8) is brought to the same tempo, it is revealed to have the same pointed rhythm:

Example 8: ‘*A Chur nan Gobhar às a’ Chreig*’ (Reel)

$\text{♩} = 210$

Nam faigh-inn - sa mo rùn 's e an t-èil - eadh beag bu do - cha leam nam

faigh-inn - sa mo rùn 's e an t-èil-eadh beag a b' fheàrr leam

This same characteristic is found in another set of dance songs, sung by Jonathan MacDonald, of Kilmuir, Skye. Although the reel ‘*Nuair a Bha Mi ’n Cùl a’ Bhealaich*’ (‘When I Was Behind the Gap’) begins in a slightly rounded fashion following the strathspey, it returns to a fully pointed rhythm in the third part (see Example 9 below):

* An audio companion for this paper containing the cited examples is at <http://youtu.be/LP188D6Phlo>.

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

Example 9: 'Nuair a Bha Mi 'n Cùl a' Bhealaich' (Reel: TAD 63475)

$\text{♩} = 220$

Nuair a bha mi ga mo chos - nadh 's olc am fear nach pòs - ainn

Nuair a bha mi ga mo chos - nadh 's olc am fear nach pòs - ainn

nuair a bha mi ga mo chos - nadh 's olc am fear nach pòs - ainn ged

tha mi 'n diugh aig I - ain Dubh Mac Iain 'ic Aoidh 'ic Dhòmh - naill

A final example of a dance song reel sung in a 'strathspey' style is Peggy MacRae's⁴⁷ rendition of 'Ruidhlidh Mo Nighean Donn' ('My Brown Maiden Will Reel'). The first four bars of part one are sung in slightly rounded style (Example 10), however, the rhythm of bars 9-12 is virtually indistinguishable from a strathspey (Example 11):

Example 10: 'Ruidhlidh Mo Nighean Donn' (Reel: TAD 34864), Bars 1-4

$\text{♩} = 164$

Ruidh - lidh mo nigh - ean donn bha thu 'raoir an cùl a' ghàr-aidh

ruidh - lidh mo nigh - ean donn bha thu 'n cùl a' ghàr - aith

Example 11: 'Ruidhlidh Mo Nighean Donn', Bars 9-12

bha thu raoir an cùl a' ghàr-aidh 's nam fac - a tu 'n gill' aig Cal - um

gre - u - saich - e nam bròg - an ta - na 'b e mo leann-an gràidh - ein

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

The same trait is found in the piping of many Gaelic speakers. In the following transcription, taken from the third part of the reel, ‘Pretty Marion’, Rona Lightfoot, from South Uist, plays in a pointed style that sounds almost identical to the strathspeys in the first part of her set:

Example 12: ‘Pretty Marion’ (Reel: TAD 53524), Third Part



Scores of other examples could be given of reels that resemble strathspeys when slowed down. Although the faster tempo pieces tend to be rounder than the slower ones to a varying extent, this is probably due, at least in part, to the tempo increase itself; as one increases tempo, the note values are proportionately shortened, making the articulation of minute rhythmic intervals more difficult. Thus, one would expect that both Scots snaps and dotted notes would naturally gravitate towards each other in correlation with a tempo increase.

Given the generally pointed quality of dance music amongst Gaelic speakers, could it be, for common time metres at least, that tempo is a more operative factor than tune type? In other words, as is suggested by Cumming’s collection and Peacock, could it be that there was no rhythmic difference between the strathspey and reel in earlier times in the Highlands? Emmerson (1971: 144) says that the strathspey was ‘a way of playing reels *andante*’. However, based upon the evidence, perhaps it would be more proper to say that the reel, for Gaelic speakers, was a way of playing strathspeys *allegro*.

In the archives of the School of Scottish Studies,⁴⁸ there is an enlightening conversation on this subject between two experts of Gaelic song and music, Rev. William Matheson and Iseabail T NicDhòmhnaill. They are discussing a dance song that had just been sung by Iseabail T, known as ‘*A Chaorain, a Chaorain*’ (‘O Little Peat, O Little Peat’):⁴⁹

Original

WM: *Srath spè tha siud. Bha a’ chiad fhear na bu luaithe na siud, nach robh? A robh e ... robh e na bu luaithe, a’ chiad fhear a ghabh thu?*

ITM: *Bha.*

WM: *An e ruidhl’ a bhiodh ann? Chan e. Bidh mise ... bidh mi uaireannan, nach bi mi glè chinnteach an e ... Agus ... bruidhinn mu dheidhinn seo, chan eil mise cinnteach ’l fhios a’ d gu robh iad o chionn fhada a’ dèanamh eadar-dhealachadh eadar strathspey and reel ...*

ITM: *Tha feadhainn de phuirt ann a ghabhadh sinne air a’ phìob na strath spè’s na ruidhle.*

[*an dèidh tacain...*]

WM: *Bidh mi a’ gabhail iongnadh uaireannan ’l fhios a’ d nach e ruidhleachan a bhiodh ann ta air fad o chionn fada ... Seo an dràsta, Lord MacDonald’s Reel, ’l fhios a’ d, tha feadhainn a’ ràdh an-diugh gun e ... bidh mise dìreach*

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

*ga ghabhail a's an tìm a tha freagairt air na faclan, chan eil dragh orm dhe
[is e ga ghabhail mar 'srath spè']*

Translation

WM: That is a strathspey. The first one was faster than that, wasn't it? Was it ... was it faster, the first one that you sang?

ITM: Yes.

WM: Would it be a reel? No. I'm ... sometimes, I'm not very sure if it is ... And ... talking about this, I'm not sure, you know, that they used to make a distinction a long time ago between a strathspey and reel ...

ITM: There are some tunes that we used to play on the pipes that can be both a strathspey and a reel.

[further on ...]

WM: I sometimes wonder, you know, if they weren't all reels a long time ago... Here now, Lord MacDonald's Reel, you know, some say today that it is a ... I just sing it in the time that most suits the words, I don't bother with it [and then he sings it as a strathspey]

Matheson indicates that he is sometimes unsure whether dance songs are meant to be sung in reel or strathspey time. He says, at least for 'Lord MacDonald's Reel' (i.e. '*Bidh Eòghann is Fear a' Chiubha*'), that he does not concern himself with tune types, but, instead, allows the words to dictate the rhythm. The fact that he does actually sing 'Lord MacDonald's' as a strathspey supports the thesis that this is the default rhythm of Gaelic dance music in non-compound meters. He speculates that all of the reels and strathspeys were originally the same type of tune. Although he suggests that they were all 'reels', his lack of clarity over the musical distinctions between a reel and strathspey recalls the semantic issues raised at the end of the previous section: should we, perhaps, transcribe the word 'reel' here with a capital 'R'? Does his statement, to some extent, betray the older way of viewing dance music, as discussed above?

Iseabail T's comment regarding tunes that can be played as both strathspeys and reels on the pipes⁵⁰ strengthens the position that, in earlier times, the only difference between them was one of tempo; they shared the same rhythmic matrix. As discussed above, music was defined previously in terms of dance: these tunes – pointed or not, slow or fast – were all 'reels' because the dance itself was known as a Reel. However, the basic musical form, in Gaelic speaking areas, was *not* the 'rapid but smooth-flowing'⁵¹ quaver movement in *alla breve* time' à la Collinson, but one containing a high proportion of dots and snaps. This is seen in Cumming's collection and others from the time (e.g. McGlashan's), as well as in the transcriptions of dance songs and pipe music from the Western Isles in the 20th century. It is also seen – to an extent at least – in the Scottish-derived music of Cape Breton Island. In the second section of the Reel, in much of the Highlands and Islands, there was a tempo change with a concomitant degree of roundness, but the music did not lose its underlying pointed nature entirely. Consider the following example:

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

Example 13: 'Brà brà bleith', from Miss Annie Johnson, Barra (TAD 62331)

♩ = 120

Brà brà bleith brà brà bleith Beil a chaill-each a' bhrà

1. 's gheibh thu fhèin am bonn-ach bràth-ann, Cha bheil a chiall, cha bhuin siud dhomh

2. gheibh thu cùil càis - e Cha bheil a chiall, cha bhuin siud dhomh

3. 's gheibh thu fhèin mac fir an taigh-e, beil-idh a-gus bi-adh-aidh bia' - aidh a-gus beil - idh

♩ = 84 more quickly

'Brà brà bleith'⁵² is a quern song from Barra, recorded in 1951. Although we have no way of knowing how old this song is, not to mention the genre as a whole, it is thought that querns were introduced to Scotland around the time of the Roman occupation (Grant: 115). Whatever the case, the practice of milling by quern is antiquated (see Figure 3) and was actually legislated against in early modern times (Gauldie: 215).⁵³ What is of most interest here is that the first part of the song above displays the three qualities that we associate with strathspeys – common metre, dotted notes and snaps – and the coda features both a tempo increase and more rounded quality.⁵⁴ It is a Reel in miniature. The theory that the strathspey was an eighteenth century mainland development that subsequently spread throughout the *Gàidhealtachd* seems incongruous with its appearance, in its basic form, in an antiquated work song from Barra. Indeed, this example suggests – in tandem with the other evidence above – that both the strathspey rhythm and the tempo change proposed to have become associated with the Foursome Reels in the nineteenth century, were already a feature of Gaelic song in earlier times.

Figure 3: Two women from South Uist working a quern in 1953 (© School of Scottish Studies⁵⁵)



REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

The Gaelic work-song genre is replete with examples of songs performed in a strathspey-like rhythm.⁵⁶ As I intend to demonstrate in the next section, its ubiquity can only be explained by there having been an ancient association in Gaelic culture between rhythmically joined-up human movement and song.

4 The Strathspey as Movement Song: The *Luinneag*

The lullaby known as ‘*Griogal Cridhe*’ can be dated on a textual basis to about 1570.⁵⁷ Although it is normally sung in a slow, plaintive fashion, if sped up,⁵⁸ it would suffice – on a rhythmic and melodic basis – as a strathspey for dancing.

Example 14: The lullaby ‘*Griogal Cridhe*’ (‘The Glen Lyon Lament’): from Jessie MacKenzie, Lewis

♩ = 50

Ó bà— bà mo lean-abh bà mo lean-aibh bà 's

3

chan eil duin - e chì mo lean-abh nach can - adh bà bà

Although many versions of ‘*Griogal Cridhe*’ were collected by the School of Scottish Studies (see Thomson 1954: 7), the chorus remains relatively consistent across them. Unless the way in which it is sung has changed radically since its composition, it suggests that the basic rhythm inherent to the strathspey goes back at least as far.⁵⁹

Figure 4: Waulking the tweed in Eriskay, 1934 (© School of Scottish Studies)



Of course, lullabies and quern songs are an important part of the Gaelic work song tradition, but waulking songs form the greatest and, one can argue, most important part of this tradition (see Figure 4). On a rhythmic basis, many of them are remarkably like strathspeys. Take, for example, ‘*Cò Sheinneadh an Fhìdeag Airgid*’ (‘Who Would Play the Silver Whistle’), from the Barra tradition (Example 15):

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

Example 15: 'Cò Sheinneadh an Fhìdeag Airgid'⁶⁰

♩ = 60

N'ur thig mac mo rìgh gu fear-ann hì rì ill iù ill eo

's a chur fàilt' air Mac—'ic Ail-ein hò ro hù o hò ill eò

In earlier times, waulking singers appropriated almost any song rhythmically suitable for the purpose, regardless of its origin. The Arthurian ballad, 'Am Bròn Binn' ('The Sweet Sorrow'),⁶¹ for example, can be found as a waulking song. In Campbell and Collinson's transcription of one rendition,⁶² the section from Refrain A through Refrain B is, again, rhythmically similar to the strathspey, showing short and long notes:

Example 16: 'Am Bròn Binn' (from Campbell & Collinson 1977: 272-273)

♩ = 72 Verse A

Chunn - aig Rìgh Bhreat - ainn 'na shuain,

Refrain A (a) Verse B

Iol - air' ó, ò — ro hó, 'N òig - bhean 's àille

Refrain B (b) Fine

snu - adh fon ghréin Iol - aire - ean is hò ro hì.

In the Ossianic ballad tradition, which is demonstrably archaic,⁶³ there are also songs that exemplify strathspey-like characteristics. Apart from the straight quavers at the end of bar one and in bar two, Example 17 could be easily interpreted as a strathspey. Peacock himself (n 89-90) suggested that there was a relationship between the rhythm of Ossianic lays and of Gaelic dance music:

It is curious to observe, that [the] division of time corresponds with the measure which predominates in the heroic stanzas of Ossian, and in many pieces of remote antiquity, still repeated in the Highlands ... It is probable the time of the Reel and Strathspey may have been regulated by [these]⁶⁴ circumstances.

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

Example 17: ‘Laoidh a’ Choin Duibh’ (‘The Lay of the Black Dog’): from Marion Campbell, South Uist (TAD: 45572)⁶⁵

♩ = 77

Chaidh Caoil - te lath - a dhan bheinn sheal-(a) - gair-eachd gu taobh Loch Lear
Chunn-ac - as e tèar - nadh le gleann Fear Ear - ra Dheir-(i)g 's a' Choin Duibh

As the above examples establish, the rhythm associated with the strathspey is ubiquitous in Gaelic song, even in the earliest examples of its vernacular tradition. Perhaps the reason that this has not been more obvious is that the practices of transcription vary between collectors due to the underlying rhythmic ratio in the songs (and instrumental music) itself being so labile. For instance, in many Gaelic song collections, songs exhibiting long and short notes within two or four beats per bar are often presented in compound (i.e. 6/8 or 12/8), rather than common metre. Presumably, this is to illustrate the ‘looseness’ of the rhythm:

Characteristic of much Gaelic song is a dotted rhythm which is neither the dotted quaver of 2/4 rhythm ... nor the more flowing long-short rhythm of 6/8 time ... but which is something between the two. In the course of a single song, dotted rhythms will seem to vary in approximating more nearly to the one figure than to the other (Campbell and Collinson 1969: 226).

Dunlay and Greenberg detect a similar phenomenon in the way that older Cape Bretoners play strathspeys on the fiddle:

[O]ne of the complexities of old-style Cape Breton bowing technique is the constant shifting of ... strathspey rhythms ... In a strathspey, the ratio of the note lengths [i.e. short-long – the ‘snap’ – and long-short] should not be interpreted strictly as written⁶⁶ ... In Cape Breton, the rhythm of the Scots Snap ... is quite variable; the rhythmic lengths of the two notes range from sharply different to almost equal. The long-short pattern is usually executed with the long note played only a little longer than the short note. (13)

They continue by saying that the longer, dotted note is usually played somewhere between a straight quaver and a triplet, thus closely echoing the sentiments of Campbell and Collinson above:

i.e. between and

Given the rhythmic affinity between Gaelic work songs, dance songs and instrumental dance music, the obvious question becomes, could they have a common musical ancestor? Moreover, what it is about the Scottish Gaelic language, and its interaction with music, that produces the ‘strathspey’ rhythm? As Shaw (1992/93: 44-46) indicates, one can observe a sort of linguistic analogue operating in the playing of older Gaelic-speaking fiddlers in Cape Breton: the long and short notes in their strathspeys tend to correspond to the long and short vowels of dance songs known to be associated with them.⁶⁷ Therefore, one might posit that languages for which there is a phonological distinction between short and long vowels are

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

more likely to feature strathspey-like rhythms. However, as the strathspey is only found in Ireland⁶⁸ on loan from Scotland – despite the phonological similarity of Irish and Scottish Gaelic – it must have been motivated by something else.

Some have speculated that the Scots snap is more likely to occur in languages favouring short, stressed syllables. Temperley and Temperley (59) suggested this, after examining collections of nineteenth century song in English, Scottish⁶⁹ (hereafter, ‘Scots’), German and Italian. They found that the Scots snap was not represented in the German and Italian songs at all; German and Italian do not have as many short, stressed words as English and Scots. There were more snaps in the English sample, but the greatest proportion was in the Scots collection (see the first four numerical columns in Table 3 below):

Table 3: Scots snaps in song collections⁷⁰

	English	Scots	German	Italian	Gaelic	Waulking songs
Songs in corpus	100	100	100	100	72	29
Songs with snaps	18	32	0	0	49	25
Percentage with snaps	18%	32%	0%	0%	68%	86%

The authors concluded that the snap is ‘characteristic of musical settings of the English language in general, but is more marked in Scottish songs’ (*ibid.*, 56). Although pioneering in many ways – especially in its attempt to pair musical characteristics with linguistic ones – the study did not include any data from Gaelic collections. To provide a comparison for Gaelic song, I applied the criteria used by Temperley and Temperley (54-55) and counted up the number of Scots snaps in Margaret Fay Shaw’s *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* (Shaw 1955). This is presented in columns 6 and 7, of Table 3 above. Although Shaw’s collection is not from the nineteenth century, it is a representative and reliable collection of Gaelic songs from the mid-twentieth century.

On the basis of this investigation, it would seem that the snap is much more common in Gaelic song than in either Scots or English song: as seen in Table 3, it occurs twice as often in Gaelic songs as in Scots songs, and nearly four times more often than in English songs. It is particularly intriguing that it is even more common in waulking songs: out of 29 waulking songs in Shaw’s collection, only four did not have the snap.⁷¹ Like strathspeys, waulking songs present with two to four strong beats per bar, and feature dots and snaps as a fundamental rhythm. It is tempting to speculate that strathspeys and waulking songs could be linked in some way. This might have been on the mind of Keith Norman MacDonald, when he says in the notes preceding ‘*Hill-ean is Hog Ù*’ (see Lamb: 49): ‘I shall now give a specimen of a song that ... suits for strathspey dancing, or an *òran luadhaidh*, waulking song’ (see Example 18). However, as demonstrated above, these rhythmic characteristics are found across a wide variety of work and dance song. If the strathspey, as song, were linked to an earlier tradition, it would have to have been one that encompassed various functions and contexts, but with a basic commonality at its core.

Example 18: ‘*Hill-ean is Hog Ù*’ from KN MacDonald’s *Puirt-à-Beul* (Lamb: 50)



REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

As discussed earlier, the Tiwi do not have a native word for ‘dance’. The word *yoi* has a more holistic connotation. The words for dancing in Scottish Gaelic, *dannsa* ‘dance’ and *ruidhle* ‘reel’, are transparent loans. However, given the universality of dance in human culture, we must assume that dancing took place in Gaelic society before these words were assimilated. From the more inclusive way in which the word ‘Reel’ was used by eighteenth century writers, and the fact that Gaels found it difficult to disassociate the verbal and melodic component of song, it would appear that the compartmentalised semantics to which we are accustomed in the domains of dance, song and music are a recent development.⁷² Perhaps the reason that we find no native words in Scottish Gaelic for dance is not that the activity was novel to Gaelic speakers at the point that *dannsa* and *ruidhle* were assimilated, but that the association of song with rhythmically joined-up activity was lexicalised in a different way (cf. MacInnes 2006b: 262). The word *luinneag*, today, tends to mean a ‘ditty’, a song of little significance.⁷³ However, in earlier times it meant a choral song⁷⁴ for accompanying work, specifically one with vocal refrains.⁷⁵

The *luinneags* are often very happy in their construction and cheering in their effect, especially with the natives of the Highlands, who formerly sung them at all kinds of work, - rowing, reaping, fulling, milling, grinding, haymaking, &c, *keeping in time with great exactness*, one person singing the verse while the remainder struck in on the return of the chorus, which in general consisted of words of no meaning [emphasis added] (Fraser: 188).

The link between the *luinneag* and dance has been suggested by MacInnes (2006b: 262), who points out that the root of the word has the connotation of ‘vehemence’ and ‘ferocity’. This implies that it could have stemmed from an ‘ecstatic performance of dance’ (*ibid.*, 262). Dwelly (609) gives the additional associations of ‘impetuosity’, ‘mirth’ and ‘melody’, which also suit this interpretation. Indeed, the word *luinneag* meant a dance song to at least some Gaelic speakers in recent times. As part of the Turnaig collection of Gaelic dance song, held in the National Library of Scotland, there is a letter from Norman MacLeod to Major N T MacLeod dated 25 July 1951 that makes this association explicit:

... I knew Alasdair Camshron, Bard Thùrnaig, when he was hale and hearty, some 27 years ago. I had heard him, evening after evening, entertain his young grandson, another Alasdair, with *port danns*’ [dance song] after *port danns*’ from a seemingly endless store. I wrote to the Bard’s son Roddie, to enquire if he could remember and write down for me some of the many *luinneags* that his father had been accustomed to sing to his young grandson (MacLeod).

Although the meaning of *luinneag* has changed over time, it is possible that dancing was amongst its original denotations. Bolstering this, neither the *strathspey* – a type of dance tune – nor songs that are performed in a rhythmically joined-up fashion with work – i.e. *luinneags* – are found as native developments in Ireland. As Breathnach says (28-29):

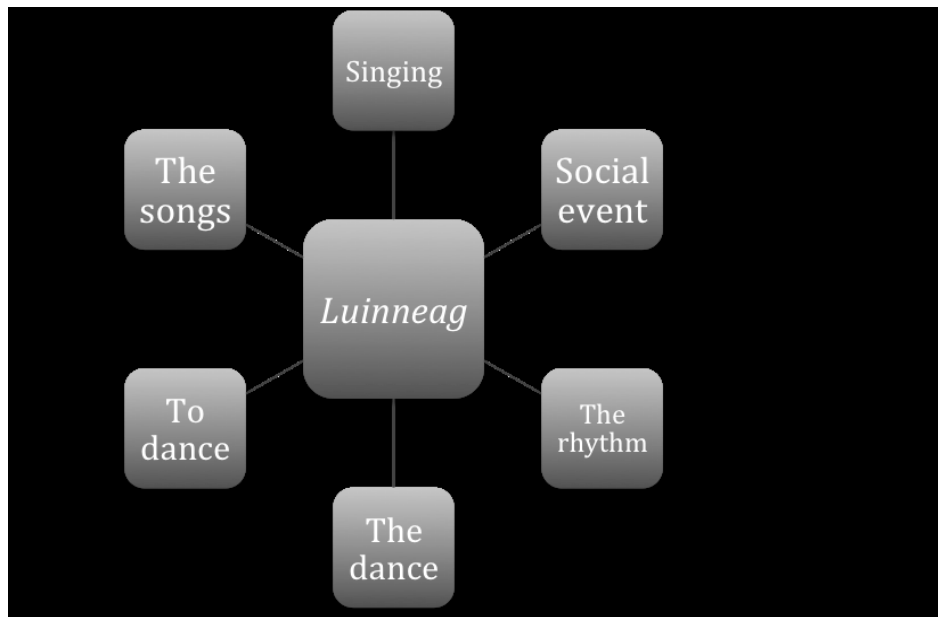
Labour or occupational songs, with rhythms to match the physical actions to which they were the accompaniment, are not common in Ireland. This is remarkable when we compare our music to the related music of Gaelic Scotland, and remind ourselves that the social conditions of the two communities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were much alike ... The process, known as waulking ... was, naturally, performed in Ireland, but evidently no songs were composed to relieve the tedium of it ... Although there

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

are some beautiful examples of the lullaby, this is another type of song which is not very well represented in the national store.

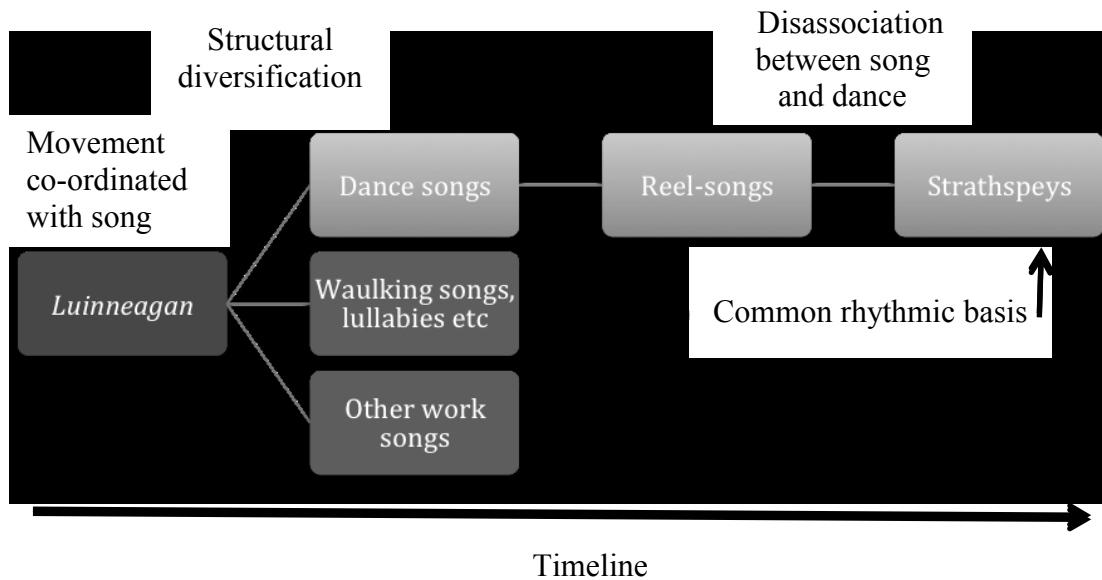
This is a glaring difference, when there is so much commonality between the two countries' Gaelic cultures. It suggests a strong link between the strathspey and work song. Of course, in both, keeping time 'with great exactness' is of utmost importance.

Figure 5: The earlier semantics of *luinneag*?



Could the word *luinneag* once have had a meaning similar to that of *yoi* (see Figure 5)? This seems possible, given the aforementioned musical discrepancy between Scotland and Ireland, the etymological evidence above, the greater tendency towards semantic fusion in earlier times and the fact that the rhythm that we associate with the strathspey is ubiquitous in both Gaelic work and dance song. If we accept this proposition, which appears to explain some important features of Scottish music and song, then the 'strathspey' could be said to hark back to an historical association of language, melody and movement that once existed in Gaelic society.⁷⁶

Figure 6: Proposed evolution of the strathspey



It is likely, at some point after the Scottish and Irish Gaelic cultures began to diverge from one another (perhaps in the middle of the first millennium AD), that a rhythmically-paired association of song and activity began in a specific work or dance setting, and spread to other similar contexts. This might have been an externally influenced development, such as via the Picts, early Britons or Scandinavians, or one native to the Scottish Gaels. Over time, structural distinctions would have occurred in tandem with the functional requirements of each context. For instance, the waulking song needed to be sustained over a prolonged period, and two features noted for the genre served this purpose, namely extempore versification and the repeated line, interjected by a vocable refrain. A circle dance, which featured shuffling or simple, repetitive movements only (e.g. *An Dannsa Mòr*: see Flett and Flett 1953: 120), could be accompanied by such a song as well,⁷⁷ but a dance with more complex sequences of movement would require one that was, itself, more involved. The Old West Highland Circular Reel, for instance – a dance for sets of two couples – favours verse-chorus structures of 4 bars with repeats, such as ABAB or ABAC.⁷⁸ The structure of the songs or tunes used for the Reel both constrains and allows for the movements within it. If it had an even more complex structure, or were a dance for a different number of people, it would require a different type of tune.

Although the Gaelic work-song tradition survived intact until the middle of the twentieth century in the Outer Hebrides, the dance song tradition had become largely dissociated from dancing a generation or two earlier. Presumably, this occurred due to the greater availability of musical instruments, the growing number and popularity of parish halls – in which instruments were necessary⁷⁹ – and the disappearance of dances that had been, previously, closely aligned with dance song. On the mainland of Scotland, these cultural attritions took place much earlier. It is difficult to know to what extent Gaelic dance song was still alive in Speyside in the eighteenth century, but it seems as if the use of instrumental music had eclipsed it. With the ascent of instrumental dance music, the waning of the Gaelic language, the appropriation of Highland culture by outside commentators, and the subsequent adoption of non-native categories by the Highlanders themselves, the origins of a once ubiquitous musical form, as song, were forgotten. Although there will never be a discrete material artefact or written source to prove, beyond any doubt, that the strathspey originated in Gaelic song, the multiple strands of evidence presented here point strongly to this conclusion.

Summary and Conclusions

The central hypothesis of this article is that the rhythmic qualities associated with the strathspey (i.e. dotted notes, Scots snaps and common time) are so profusely represented in the Gaelic song corpus that the strathspey must have developed as part of that tradition. The discussion began by examining the standard theory of the strathspey's origin, as a tune type instigated by eighteenth century Speyside fiddlers. This was abandoned on the basis of weak and conflicting evidence: a survey of early accounts indicated that it was a style of playing and singing for Reels, rather than a discrete musical variety, and that it was actually widely distributed across the Highlands.⁸⁰

The connection between the strathspey and the Gaelic song tradition was made in two ways: first, through an analysis of the tune titles in the earliest collection of strathspeys by a native of the Speyside area, and second, by a survey of 'pointed rhythm' in Gaelic dance song. The oldest tune titles in Cumming's collection are, demonstrably, those in Gaelic, and it was argued that most of these, if not all, derive from dance songs. After a short discussion about the performative context of the genre, which established that Reel dancing could have been a pre-Reformation development in Scotland, it was argued that the 'strathspey' was a rhythmic matrix underlying a large proportion of dance songs. Notably, it was demonstrated that when audio recordings of reels performed by Gaelic speakers were played back at a slower tempo, they were virtually indistinguishable from strathspeys. Along with the fact that a great proportion of traditional Gaelic tunes are known in both strathspey and reel time, this observation was deployed to reinforce the argument that the strathspey, as a tune type, did not exist in earlier times. Rather, it was a general style of playing and singing for Reels amongst Gaelic speakers and that Reels encompassed two tempos.

The final major point of this paper, covered in the last section, was that this same, pointed rhythmic matrix is seen across a number of different types of Gaelic work song. Examples were given of songs exhibiting the 'strathspey rhythm' from early stages of the vernacular record. Given what we know about the semantics involved in music and dance from older periods of European history, not to mention amongst aboriginal peoples in recent times, it was proposed that Gaelic work and dance song stem from a common root. This position is bolstered by the absence of both the strathspey – as a native tune type – and rhythmically joined-up work songs in the Irish tradition, which is similar to its Scottish counterpart in other ways. It was proposed that the word *luinneag* could have once had a similar meaning to the Tiwi word *yoi*, in which 'dance' and 'song' are merely parts of a greater, holistic category of communal activity. This was supported by the word's etymology, and its having been used to refer to both dance and work song genres in the recent past.

To return to the question posed at the beginning of the article, that is, what is the nature of the strathspey, the answer depends upon one's point of view. If denoting a 'tune type', then one must clarify the relevant period involved, not to mention geographical and performance style. The strathspey evolved into an art form of great expressive potential in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was conventionalised in various ways. It is not the purpose of this article to weigh up the validity of these forms in the 21st century: its focus is entirely diachronic. To answer the question at hand in this diachronic context, the strathspey is a rhythmic matrix pervading a number of different types of Scottish and, particularly, Gaelic music. If taking a synchronic view, there are no grounds for devaluing any child of the strathspey, regardless of how distant a shoot may be from its root. Such is a matter of personal taste and, for that, there is no accounting. However, in a country still struggling with its linguistic history, it is ironic that its national music probably originated in a variety of song known to a diminishing number of citizens along its northwest periphery.⁸¹ For most of its life as a nation, Scotland is likely to have had a higher proportion of Gaelic speakers than

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

any other language.⁸² The strathspey appears to be one of the many inheritances engendered by this legacy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks to John Shaw, Gary West and Virginia Blankenhorn, who read and commented on a draft of this paper. My thanks also to Jake King, who provided the outline of the map on page 75.

NOTES

¹ In Ford: 147-150.

² *Blas* ‘taste’ in Gaelic is often used in the sense of ‘good style’: see Falzett: 323. Stewart is quoting another gentlemen, ‘one of our very best reel players’, with whom he had had a conversation a few days prior (Stewart: x). Thank you to Michael Newton for this source.

³ For instance, in *Puirt a Beul* (see Lamb: 135), Keith Norman MacDonald wrote ‘there is very strong evidence to show that much of our strathspey music was taken originally from the Gaelic’ (cf. Emmerson 1971:145).

⁴ Cognate with the Swedish Gothic *rulla*, ‘to whirl’ (Collinson 2012b), and *ruidhle* in Scottish Gaelic, which is likely to be a medieval or early modern borrowing. An early use of the word in Gaelic occurs in the song ‘*Siùbhlaidh mi ’s fàgaidh mi ’m fearann*’ (Campbell and Collinson 1969: 138), which appears to be from the eighteenth century on the basis of its Jacobite references. (NB: *Mac ’ic Dùbhail* is MacDonald of Morar):

<i>Soiridh uam gu Mac ’ic Dùbhail,</i>	My farewell to <i>Mac ’ic Dùbhail,</i>
<i>Dhomhsa b’aithne beus do thùrlaich,</i>	I knew your household’s custom well,
<i>Pìob mhòr ga spreigeadh air ùrlar,</i>	Great pipes struck up on dance floor,
<i>Ruidhle</i> mu seach air an ùrlar,	Reels in turn upon the dance floor,
<i>Clàrsach ghrinn ’s a cruinn gan</i>	Pleasant harp with its keys uncovered.
<i>rùsgadh.</i>	

It is worth noting that, unlike the word ‘reel’, there is no native Gaelic word for ‘strathspey’.

⁵ However, as seen in the DunGreen collection, reels continue to be played with occasional snaps and dots by some fiddle players in Cape Breton (Dunlay and Greenberg).

⁶ See Emmerson 1972 (151-152).

⁷ i.e. a bar of four quaver (quarter notes) beats, also known as 4/4 time.

⁸ ‘Pointedness’ is not restricted to strathspeys; jigs, reels and other types of tunes can be played in a pointed style.

⁹ Bremner: 62, cf. Cumming: ‘Dutchess of Athole’s Reels – or Tuggin tachi nul ‘n Aird’, which is most likely *Tiugainn Dachaidh Null ‘n Aird*, ‘Come home over the high place’.

¹⁰ Collinson (1966: 29) calls it ‘the very life blood of Scots musical rhythm’. Some have suggested that the combination of short and long notes in Gaelic ‘mouth music’ for strathspeys is indicated by the nature of Gaelic vowels, which can be either long or short (see Shaw 1992-93: 44-46). However, Irish also shares this phonological quality and there is a

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

striking absence of the ‘snap’ in Irish instrumental music, apart from in Northern Ireland, where it is almost certainly from Scottish influence.

¹¹ Of course, MacPherson was a native of the Speyside area (Collinson 1966: 210), so it is conceivable that he played in the style.

¹² For example, see Thurston: 25-28.

¹³ Collinson (1966: 204) says: ‘The strathspey ... though played now as often on the pipes, is essentially *fiddle* music, depending for its full effect upon the characteristic up-bow stroke of the Scottish traditional fiddler, and the capacity of the instrument to stop abruptly’ [emphasis in original].

¹⁴ This was an enlarged and improved second edition of his original book (Anonymous [Thomson] 1788). The original made no reference to Speyside or its music.

¹⁵ He was born in 1746 in Forteviot, Perthshire (Rackwitz: 47 in PDF) and was raised as an English speaker by his mother, the daughter of a schoolmaster from Airtully, near Dunkeld:

To this worthy mother William was indebted for his early proficiency in the rudiments of acquired knowledge. From her he learned to spell and to read English; and perhaps it was no small advantage to his intellects, that he was not born a few miles further among the highlands of Perthshire, as his talents might have been clogged and his ideas encumbered *by means of an additional language*’ [emphasis added] (Anonymous 1818: 76).

¹⁶ There were approximately 300,000 monoglot Gaelic speakers in the Highlands in 1800, out of a total population of 335,000 (MacKinnon: 63).

¹⁷ There is no direct indication in his book that he visited the area. Indeed, Speyside was not even mentioned in the first edition. See Rackwitz for a map indicating that he skirted around the area, taking the north-eastern route from Inverness to Fochabers.

¹⁸ It is not clear if this is his opinion, or one he considered to be the general consensus on the matter. Unless the propensity for Highlanders to feel a sense of local pride has emerged only in the past two centuries, then the belief that they would somehow idealise the form of the reel in Speyside over their own seems credulous to the extreme.

¹⁹ Another interpretation is that he was referring to setting and travelling steps, but his wording indicates that he was referring to the music itself. A further possibility is that he was referring to the triplet and quadruplet runs that occur in some strathspeys, although ‘pace’ indicates something more long lasting, i.e. tempo.

²⁰ I believe that this can be explained by its being appreciated as a dance form rather than a tune type, at this point. As I argue later on, if the dance itself required a tempo shift, then the musical form associated with it would have been ambiguous.

²¹ John Shaw mentioned to me (2012) that this collection, more than any other that he has come across – including *The Skye Collection* – recalls the core repertoire of older Cape Breton fiddlers.

²² Similarly, Peacock makes no distinction between the steps danced for the Reel and Strathspey.

²³ NB: I found no correlation between the time signature and the presence of dotted notes and snaps.

²⁴ He clearly groups them together in his book: in the second half, he presents 16 consecutive tunes that are all in *alla breve* time, apart from one in common time.

²⁵ That is, tunes that are predominantly without snaps or dots.

²⁶ The notion that dancing and singing form a fundamental unit is also found amongst certain tribal groups in India, where ‘singing and dancing are collective endeavours ... there is no audience as such, because the whole community participates in singing and dancing’ (Deogaonkar and Deogaonkar: 9). This recalls the description of dancing to *puirt-à-beul* Alexander Campbell provided, from his trip to North Uist in 1815: the participants danced and sang simultaneously (see Lamb: 22 and 26).

²⁷ As Newton suggests (2006: 231), the derivation of this word might be *gille an troimb* ‘lad of the Jew’s harp’.

²⁸ There were still Gaelic-speakers indigenous to Elgin in 1879, although the language was ‘rapidly becoming extinct’ (Ravenstein: 596).

²⁹ MacInnes suggests (2006b: 260) that it could have been bawdy due to it being called ‘foull’; bawdry is well represented in Gaelic dance song. However, I think it is likely that any song in Gaelic, at this time, would have been deemed uncouth by the English-speaking, Protestant clergy. The climate was such that the Statutes of Iona, one of the first government-sponsored attempts to eradicate Gaelic culture, were brought in just a few years later, in 1609.

³⁰ The unavailability of instruments was probably the crucial factor. For example, there are records of *puirt-à-beul* being widely used for dancing in St Kilda, where the only instrument was the *tromb* or Jew’s harp, and even in Eriskay in the early twentieth century (see discussion in Lamb). It also appears that the older dramatic or pantomimic dances were performed to song preferentially, even when instruments were available (see Rhodes, in Flett and Flett 1996: 189).

³¹ For instance, ‘*Cur nan Gobhar Às a’ Chreig*’ (collected in the Black Isle, Strathglass, Uist, Barra and Skye), ‘*Fear a’ Phige*’ (collected in Perthshire, S. Uist and Lewis), ‘*Biodag aig Mac Thòmais*’ (collected in Sutherland and throughout the Uists: associated with the Dirk Dance – see Flett and Flett 1996) and ‘*Sabhal Iain ‘ic Ùisdein*’ (also known as ‘*Tha Òr aig Coinneach a’ Rubha*’ or ‘*Ruidhle nam Pòg*’, which translates as ‘The Kissing Reel’), which was used for the circle dance in Eigg, known as *An Dannsa Mòr* ‘The Big Dance’ (for information on the latter see Flett and Flett 1953: 120-124).

³² ‘When the modern violin arrived in Scotland in the seventeenth century it came with a new style of dance music which, once reshaped by native musical sensibilities, evolved into distinctly Scottish forms, particularly the reel and strathspey ... As [these tunes] became ‘verbalised’ in song form ... they acquired the rhythms and cadences of Gaelic speech ... these ditties, however, are not considered true poetry ... but mnemonic verbalisations, sung for dancers if instruments are not available’ (Newton 2009: 253).

³³ Falzett (319) quotes Anna MacKinnon, from Sight Point (*Rubha an t-Seallaidh*), Cape Breton: ‘The tunes that they are playing, they were Gaelic songs to begin with at first anyway’. See also Stewart’s quote at the beginning of the present article. Allan MacDonald (1995) postulates that the piping genre known as *ceòl mòr* (‘big music’) or *pibroch* also originated in an older song tradition.

³⁴ I am aware of no attempts to date Gaelic dance songs based on internal, verbal evidence. However, the practice of Gaelic dance song, like the practice of other types of songs that accompanied activity – e.g. waulking songs, milking songs, rowing songs and lullabies – could be as old as the practice of co-ordinated, group dancing amongst Gaelic speakers.

³⁵ This would have probably been *bruadar fear a' mhullaich àird*.

³⁶ ‘Most of the collections were published by subscription and distinguished by a dedication to an important patron ... We can imagine them ... sending for their copy ere the ink was dry, and culling with pride the new tune bearing their name’ (Emmerson 1971: 61).

³⁷ One need only consider the number of melodies in the Irish tradition referred to as ‘*Gan Ainm*’, i.e. without a name. See Emmerson (1971: 75-84) for a discussion of tunes appropriated by the Gows and others.

³⁸ ‘[M]usic is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all ... If, as is nearly always the case, music appears to express something, this is only an illusion and not a reality. It is simply an additional attribute which, by tacit and inveterate agreement, we have lent it, thrust upon it, as a label, a convention – in short, an aspect which, unconsciously or by force of habit, we have come to confuse with its essential being’ [emphasis in original] (Stravinsky: 53-54).

³⁹ One can imagine that they learnt the steps, which they performed ‘so well, as almost to surpass belief’, in the home as part of the traditional *cèilidh*.

⁴⁰ On a related point, while Johnson concedes that the fiddle tradition in Scotland probably had input from European traditions, he says that it was mainly an ‘old-fashioned and insular tradition’ (20). An older form of the instrument pre-dated the modern fiddle, which is estimated to have come to Scotland around 1670 (*ibid.*). Lachlan MacKinnon, a Skye poet who lived from 1665-1734, is said to have been a fiddler (Collinson 1966: 63) and Martin Martin (14) mentions a number of fiddlers in Lewis in the early 1700s. Of course, the piping tradition was another influence on the Gaelic musical mind, although we are similarly unable to establish its age. Campbell (1981: 27) says that the references to musical instruments in Gaelic waulking songs ‘recall the days of medieval Scotland: the harp, the fiddle, the great and small bagpipes, and the jew’s harp (*tromb*)’.

⁴¹ In South Uist, Reels were danced in a circular formation until 1885 and in Torrin, Skye, this date is put at 1900 (Flett and Flett 1964: 156).

⁴² The Fletts surmised that it was perfectly suited to the old black houses (*taighean dubha*), and could have circled the hearth in the middle of the floor. Circle dances often feature an item of symbolic or ritualistic importance in the centre, and the hearth is patently of this nature.

⁴³ My appreciation to Frank McConnell for bringing this point to my attention.

⁴⁴ i.e. those not in 6/8, 9/8 etc.

⁴⁵ Known variously as the Strathspey and Reel, the Highland Reel or the Scotch Reel (Emmerson 1972: 167).

⁴⁶ This is a reference to a track ID from the *Tobar an Dualchais/ Kist o’ Riches* website (www.tobarandualchais.co.uk), which can be used to retrieve the original audio recording. Go to the site, and click on the ‘advanced search’ tab at the top of the screen. Then, input the number in the first search field. Pull down the tab saying ‘All Fields’ and select ‘Track ID’.

After pressing ‘search’, you will be offered information about the item as well as the opportunity to listen to it.

⁴⁷ i.e. *Peigi Anndra*, of South Uist, who gave many songs to Margaret Fay Shaw.

⁴⁸ The original School of Scottish Studies sound archive number (SA) for this recording is 1975.82.B4-B5: see TAD 87023 and 87035.

⁴⁹ Logan (439) speculates that this song might have been used for some kind of dramatised fighting in earlier times. See Shaw (1955: 173) for text.

⁵⁰ There are a vast number of tunes still played by traditional musicians in both tempos. To name just a few: Miss Lyall, The Devil in the Kitchen, Stumpie, *Chuir i Glùn air a’ Bhodach* (‘She Put Her Knee on the Old Man’), The Back of the Change House, *Cabar Fèidh* (‘Stag Antlers’), Maggie Cameron, *’S Iomadh Rud a Chunnaic Mi* (‘Many Things I Saw’), The Reel of Tulloch, Farewell to Erin (Highlander’s Farewell to Erin/ Highland Harry), Mrs Ramsay of Barton, Beaton’s Delight, *Ho Ro Bu Siud an Fhidheall* (‘Ho Ro That Was The Fiddle’/Hoch Hey Johnnie Lad) and *Tha Dìth nam Bròg air Donnchadh Dubh* (‘Black Duncan Lacked Shoes’/The Earl of Hume’s Strathspey). It is surely no coincidence that so many of these pertain to the Gaelic tradition and have dance song versions (see the Index in Lamb). My thanks to Eilidh MacKenzie, Alasdair White, Deirdre Morrison, Ronald McCoy, Ruairidh Pringle, Decker Forrest, Mike Kennedy, Ben Miller and Allan MacDonald, who provided many of the tune names above.

⁵¹ It is worth observing that Joseph McDonald, in his piping tutor, indicates that reels on the pipes were played in a rounder fashion than ‘violin reels’. Cannon (86) says that McDonald did not consider ‘violin reels’ to be a different tune type *per se*, but a musical style, which eventually became conventionalised as the strathspey. McDonald linking this style to the violin, indicates that the way in which the pipes were played for dancing had diverged further away from the song tradition than that of the fiddle. As most of the early bagpipe versions of strathspeys, such as those in the Gunn collection, were of Gaelic dance songs (Forrest 235), this appears, at first glance, to be a curious notion. However, we find an analogous situation in *ceòl mòr* (i.e. pibroch), which is proposed to have had diverged significantly from an earlier song tradition by the same period (MacDonald 1995), so it is quite possible that the same thing happened in regard to dance music on the pipes.

⁵² *Brà* is the Gaelic for ‘quern’. A partial transcription of the song was originally published in Collinson (1966: 82). The current transcription is taken from the recording available at TAD 62331, which is, presumably, the same version that was used by Collinson (*ibid.*).

⁵³ In Uist, as in other parts of Scotland, once water mills had been built, millers were legally entitled to enter houses and seize querns (Gauldie), which they viewed as a threat to their livelihood. There were attempts to bury family quern stones or otherwise hide them (see TAD 64250); those that came into the hands of the miller were frequently smashed or thrown into lochs.

⁵⁴ The note values of the coda are not entirely even; there is still a degree of pointedness. It is difficult to notate the rhythms of Gaelic song. As Campbell (1969: 233) says, the dotted rhythms tend to be slightly shorter than indicated and the semiquavers, slighter longer.

⁵⁵ Available at www.scran.co.uk.

⁵⁶ See Campbell and Collinson’s exhaustive treatment of the waulking song genre in their three-volumes of *Hebridean Folksongs*.

⁵⁷ It is thought to have been composed by the wife of Gregor Roy MacGregor of Glenstrae – who was beheaded in 1570 – to their young child (see Gillies: 140).

⁵⁸ Not that this is to be generally advised, of course! However, readers with access to an instrument can try playing this at 160 BPM.

⁵⁹ Another example of a lullaby from the sixteenth century, which features the same rhythmic qualities and, like most dance songs, a two part musical structure, is ‘*Tàladh Choinnich Òig*’ – ‘Young Kenneth’s Lullaby’ (TAD 34822; transcribed in Shaw 1955: 152-153).

⁶⁰ The original recording is from the album *Waulking Songs from Barra* (Greentrax/ School of Scottish Studies). However, readers can find a similar version at TAD 39093.

⁶¹ For a study of this interesting ballad, see Gowans. See also TAD 39131 and Campbell and Collinson 1977: 18-26; 271-274.

⁶² From Mrs Anna MacDougall and Annie Johnson: see Collinson and Campbell (1977: 272-273).

⁶³ See Thomson 1974: 99-105 and Campbell 1872.

⁶⁴ He refers here to a statement he made prior: ‘Those who have acquired a little knowledge of Music, and are acquainted with Reels and Strathspey tunes, cannot but know that they are divided into two parts, each consisting of four bars, which severally four crotchets, or eight quavers; and that, in the generality of Strathspeys, the notes are, alternatively, a dotted quaver, and a semiquaver; the bar frequently terminates in a crotchet’ (Peacock: 89).

⁶⁵ A related version is found in Matheson (22-25).

⁶⁶ Patrick McDonald was well aware of the inability of music notation to capture the true nature of the transcriptions that he edited: ‘In the present state of musical notation, little more, than what may be called the elements or ground-work of an air, can be conveyed by it.’ (5).

⁶⁷ Joe Neil MacNeil, an exceptional Cape Breton tradition bearer (see MacNeil), said that the post-Gaelic style of playing these fiddle tunes, which does not observe such a distinction, is like a foreign language (Shaw 1992/93: 44-45).

⁶⁸ Where it became known as the ‘Highland’, short for ‘Highland Schottische’ (Doherty 1999a: 187). The Schottische had been taken over to Ireland by migrant workers in the mid-nineteenth century (*ibid.*)

⁶⁹ Taken from *Songs of Scotland* (Pittman, Brown and Mackay).

⁷⁰ As mentioned, the non-Gaelic data is from Temperley and Temperley: 56. This is only a summary of the first two rows of their table. However, as it subsumes the other data, it is the most important aspect under consideration.

⁷¹ This is comparable to what I found from another, related collection: in the first two volumes of Campbell and Collinson (1969; 1977) – comprised entirely of waulking songs – snaps are found in 72% of the transcriptions, or 90%, if triplet forms are included, i.e. ♪♪.

⁷² For instance, the word ‘carol’ once meant both dance and song, and ‘ballad’ is said to be from the Latin *ballare* ‘to dance’ (MacInnes 2006b: 262). Of course, the word ‘ballet’ also derives from the same root (*βαλλίζειν* in the earlier Greek – thank you to John MacInnes for this) Curiously, the Icelandic word *danz*, at one point denoted the words sung for a dance,

rather than the dance itself (*ibid.*), showing how the synecdochic process can develop differently in related languages and cultures.

⁷³ Perhaps the reason that the *luinneag* became devalorised is that its worth was not tied up in its musical and lyrical attributes alone: it was only fully realised when paired with activity. This could also help to explain the devalorisation of *puirt-à-beul* (see Sparling: 146). They are both, it seems, instances of the proverbial whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

⁷⁴ The chorus, as a repetitive lyrical structure, encourages synchronised group activity. Perhaps it came about for this very purpose.

⁷⁵ See discussion in MacInnes 2006a and 2006b.

⁷⁶ If this cultural innovation was instigated prior to the sixteenth century, as seems likely, then it would be, perhaps, more appropriate to use the words ‘Scottish society’ here than ‘Gaelic society’: at least one-half of Scotland was thought to still be Gaelic speaking in 1521 (Withers: 21-22).

⁷⁷ Necker de Saussure gives us an approximate description of this from a dance he witnessed in Iona, on 17 Aug 1807:

Between one reel and another, they sang Gaelic songs in chorus ... Men and women sat in a circle around the room, and held each other’s hands, or held two by two the corners of a handkerchief which they moved in time with the music during the choruses. We were told that such a movement imitates the operation of waulking the cloth, and that these songs, as their name indicates, formerly used to accompany this kind of work (in Campbell and Collinson 1969: 6).

Although de Saussure says that the party was sitting down, there are accounts of people singing waulking songs in Cape Breton whilst standing up, and shuffling slowly in a clockwise direction (MacInnes 2006b: 257).

⁷⁸ However, some dance songs collected in the nineteenth and twentieth century evince a refrain structure similar to waulking songs: e.g. ‘*E Ho Rithill Àill*’ (see Lamb); ‘*Hill-ean is Hog Ù*’ (*ibid.*); and ‘*Arsa Nighean a’ Mhuileir*’ (Flett and Flett 1953: 122-123).

⁷⁹ Interestingly, singers could have possibly matched the volume of instruments in some situations, as the following comment indicates, from an anonymous collector of the early nineteenth century:

Cainntearachd’s pronounced Canderach’s are I believe a species of Music peculiar to the Highlands of Scotland. Before Piano’s became general they were universally used for dancing at small merry meetings. At larger ones Weddings &c. there was a Piper. Two or three females sing together and seldom the dancing drowns the voice for they bawl [sorry about that!] in their loudest key. This ancient custom like many others has nearly worn out, but I am happy to say that Cainntearachd, are still used in the Islands and some few parts of the mainland. I have often danced to them and liked it as well, perhaps better than a Reel performed on an instrument. The Pipers have picked up the tunes. I have given both sets. The words have in general no meaning and are merely used to bring out the air (Anonymous 1823: 10n).

REELING IN THE STRATHSPEY

Although the collector uses the word *canntaireachd*, which is generally taken as the practice of using vocables to represent pipe music, he is clearly referring to dance songs here. My appreciation to Roderick Cannon for making me aware of this quote, and this collection.

⁸⁰ In a future paper, I will suggest that the reason that it was first noticed in Speyside was the opening up of the region through major military roads and its proximity to Anglicised commerce centres.

⁸¹ Of course, one might say that Cape Breton Island is the furthest removed member of this periphery.

⁸² There are 678 years between the time that Scotland was united under Kenneth MacAlpin (*Cináed mac Alpín*) in 843 and 1521, when the country was reckoned to be, still, more than 50% Gaelic-speaking. It will not be until 2199 that we will be able to say that it is likely to have been mainly English (or Scots) speaking for most of its known history.

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