

# Geikie's *A Blind Fiddler* and Two Associated Traditions

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Walter Geikie's etching entitled *A Blind Fiddler*<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1) gives us an interesting insight into two traditions associated with fiddle playing in Scotland: the blind fiddler and playing the fiddle and singing at the same time. Geikie (1795–1837) was born in Edinburgh and must have sympathised with the character here portrayed, since he himself also suffered from disability, being deaf and dumb. A page of commentary can be found adjacent to the etching. The text of this page is reproduced in its entirety below:

It was not to be supposed that Mr Geikie's keen and observant eye would overlook the sightless street minstrel of our Scottish towns and villages. He is an important personage, and his presence is indispensable at 'kirns', fairs, trystes, and penny weddings; he is often in request at casual merry-makings, and by no means to be sneered at, even by the aristocracy of a decayed burgh; but when some feudal lord, in the plenitude of his goodness, gives his numerous retainers an annual feast, 'tis then he shines forth in all the glory of his profession, imparting happiness, and receiving that applause which is only due to genius.

The musician, on the present occasion, is performing in an ancient street of some large city; this we know from the acute wooden gables over his head. He is surrounded by an heterogeneous group, who appear to be fascinated by his musical efforts, and is labouring in his vocation with an untiring energy. His whole soul seems concentrated in his bow-hand, whose every joint appears instinct with musical enthusiasm; there is animation in his rayless countenance, and the parted lips bespeak the ardour of his spirit more fluently than words. The dulcet notes of the violin has attracted the ear of a vender of ginger-bread, whose wife has recently coaxed him out of a dram-shop; he is groping in his capacious pocket for the change of his last sixpence, to be given in guerdon to the harmonist, while a nondescript, with a 'shocking bad hat', is patting him on the shoulder for his generosity. Two truant boys, who were trundling their hoop, have been arrested in midway career by the 'concord of sweet sounds', and are listening with breathless attention. A musical dog has joined chorus with all his might, but it would appear, that, like all intruders, he is marring, instead of adding to the interest of the performance, for 'the mistress' has elevated the family staff over poor collie's back, which, when it descends, will produce a *cadenza*, or rather a *finale*. A fishwife and her customers appear at a little distance, but they are so intent upon overreaching each other, that the strains of a Paganini would fall discordant on their ears. Such is the subject of this excellent etching.

We have now to inform our readers, that the principal figure in the group is a faithful portrait of the Glasgow Homer, Alexander M'Donald, *alias Blind Aleck*, who for many years

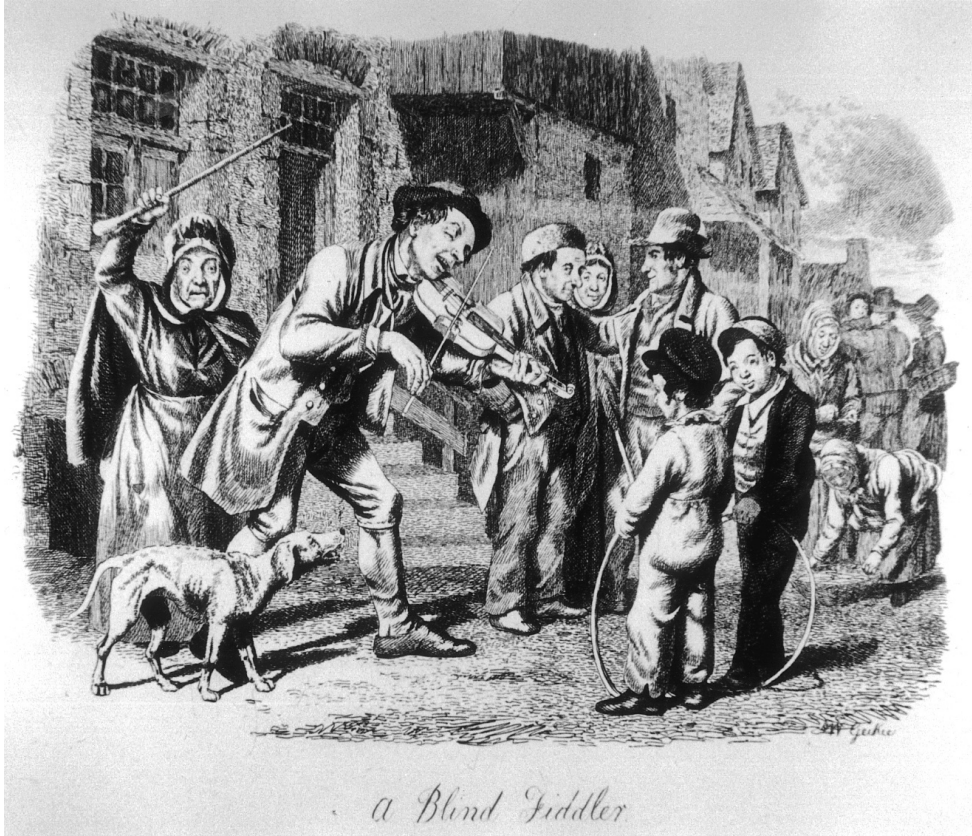


Fig. 1. *A Blind Fiddler*, from Geikie (1841), no. XXXV.

perambulated the streets of Glasgow, and with dexter hand directed the movements of his violin, while his lips gave out the *measured* accompaniment.

Aleck was, perhaps, one of the readiest improvisators of his class, and it was, says a contemporary, 'greatly to his advantage that he was not distressed by a very delicate ear for either numbers or harmony. Whether his lines had a greater number of feet than consisted with ease and grace, or limped in their motion for want of the due proportion, these defects were amply compensated for by a rapid articulation in the one case, and, in the other, by a strong dash or two of the bow.' To illustrate the truth of the above quotation, we shall give a specimen of Aleck's extemporaneous effusions:-

I'm the author of every word I sing,  
 And that you may very well see;  
 The music alone excepted,  
 But just the poetree.

Only *one* specimen more and we have done.

(*Blind Aleck Loquiter*) – ‘Ladies and gentlemen, any of you that has a friend in the army, just give me their Christian name and the regiment to which they belong, and I’ll mak’ you a song as fast as my tongue can repeat it.’ (*Voice from the crowd*) – ‘Well, Aleck, try your powers on the Glasgow Volunteers, Colonels Hunter and Geddes, and Major Paterson.’ (*Symphony*) – Fierce dash or two of the bow!

RECITATIVO STACCATO

‘For they’re the men, I do declare,  
I mean the loyal Lanarkshire volunteers.’

AIR – ‘*O’er Bogie*’

The first comes Colonel Hunter,  
In a kilt see he goes;  
Every inch is a man,  
From the top to the toes:

He is the loyal Editor  
Of the Herald news-pa-per,  
And no man at the punch bowl,  
The punch can better stir.

Like the fiery god of war,  
Colonel Geddes does advance,  
On a black horse that belonged  
To the murdered king of France.

And then comes Major Patterson,  
You’ll say he’s rather slim,  
But it will take a clever ball  
For to hit the like of him!

I’ve travell’d the world all over,  
And *many a place beside*;  
But I never did see a more beautifuller city,  
Than that on the banks of the navigatable river, the Clyde!

The turf has recently covered the remains of the ‘Glasgow Homer’, but he will live in Mr Geikie’s inimitable etching for ever.<sup>2</sup>

THE BLIND FIDDLER

The fiddle seems to have been commonly played by blind people in Scotland both historically and in times nearer to the present day. David Wilkie depicts such a musician

in his well-known painting entitled *The Blind Fiddler* dated 1806. Duncan Macmillan (1996: 171) describes the scene:

Wilkie's blind fiddler, the heir of Orpheus as of Homer, can only find an audience among the very poorest members of society and is himself beyond even that margin. He is homeless and so impoverished that, for his family, luxury is the simple warmth of a fire around which they huddle, oblivious to the music. The simple pleasure of his audience on the other hand, including the children, is a further reminder of Wilkie's belief that it is sophistication that has corrupted taste.

One of these children is mimicking the fiddler using a bellows for a fire in place of the instrument and what appears to be a poker for the bow, emphasising the impact that the fiddler is having on his audience. A blind fiddler also appears along with a bagpiper and a boy playing a jew's harp in Wilkie's *Pitlessie Fair* (ibid.: 170). Macmillan notes that Pitlessie was Wilkie's home village and states that, according to Wilkie himself, 'most of the figures are portraits of the inhabitants' (ibid.), which suggests that the blind fiddler was a real rather than an imagined person.

There are also a number of written references relating to blind fiddlers. Robert Hutton was one who, along with a number of other musicians, was hired by the Edinburgh Assembly in 1746. Reference is made to him in the Assembly Minutes of 1750 regarding the question of having his salary augmented, his playing apparently having improved through study with a teacher for several years:

The directors considering that the said Robert Hutton was blind and had no way of living and that their funds were designed for charity agreed to give him the same allowance with the rest of the music.<sup>3</sup>

Playing the instrument, then, served as a way of making a living for this particular fiddler. Further reference to a blind fiddler comes from Thomas Macqueen, a nineteenth century folksong collector:

In looking back upon the days of our boyhood we remember an old man familiarly known by the name of 'Blind Harry' – who for many years sat daily (Sundays excepted) upon the 'New Brig' of Ayr torturing cat-gut to the old quaint Scotch tune 'Keep the Whigs in Order'. And when the mischievous school-boys would insist upon the propriety of changing the tune the poor good-natured fiddler would smile and reply, 'Weel I was ay thinkin o' learnin anither, whan I was young, but time gaed by and I'm now ow're auld to learn onything new.'<sup>4</sup>

Whilst there is no mention of money being given to the fiddler by passers-by, one suspects that this was the reason for his almost daily performance in the town.

Greater detail exists regarding payment to blind fiddlers in the instance of John MacGregor. He is mentioned in the work of Margaret Fairweather Michie (1905–1985) who founded the Glenesk Museum and made a large collection of materials regarding life and people in the Glen (Fenton and Beech, 2000). MacGregor, who died in 1916, was a very tall man who always wore a kilt of the MacGregor tartan, and was a well-

known figure in Glenesk in Angus. He was an itinerant fiddler who travelled as far as Braemar, Glenshee and Dunkeld and commonly carried the instrument from place to place by hanging the fiddle round his neck with a piece of rope. MacGregor, who was known as the 'Blind Fiddler', was thought to have been blinded by an explosion in the quarry where he worked, although there is some doubt whether he was in fact completely blind (*ibid.*: 212). A photograph clearly shows a tin box in his possession, and the following extract relates to this:

Alex. Robertson met him one day just as he was preparing to go [from the quarry at Gleneffock where he slept], and lifted up the tin box which he found to be extremely heavy. Noticing that this did not please, Alex. asked what was in the box, to which the Fiddler replied, 'Oh, some things for makkin' sovereigns!' Probably he had meant the pennies he had collected. (Michie, n.d.: 34)

Presumably, these pennies had been collected from his performances in the locality, although he also received payment in kind, such as food and drink, from people in the glen.

Blind itinerant fiddlers were also to be found in northern parts of Scotland. Charles A. Mollyson, in his description of the parish of Fordoun in Kincardineshire (1893), for instance, mentions blind fiddlers playing at Paldy Fair (Morris, 2000: 96). Peter Cooke discusses the visits made by George Stark of Dundee to Shetland, where he was known as 'Da Blin' Fiddler' (Cooke, 1986). Stark was often accompanied by a guitarist, and commonly played out of doors in the summer months (*ibid.*: 17). Bobby Peterson, a Shetland fiddler born in 1916 recollected that, when he was young, 'he [Stark] stood in the street . . . and then he passed around the hat' and that he apparently made 'a lot o' money' from his efforts (*ibid.*: 17–19).<sup>5</sup> He also played for dancing during winters. Stark must have been a very good fiddler since Peterson mentioned that he 'would have a great audience', and he clearly inspired other players.

Other references to blind players include the blind writer, J. Haldane Burgess (1862–1927) who used Shetland dialect in many of his writings and who was a self-taught fiddler (Cooke, 1986: 9); John Riddell of Ayr (1718–95), 'the earliest-known fiddler-composer to have issued his own works in Scotland' (Alburger, 1996:137) who was believed by some to have been blind from infancy, and the father of the fiddler-composer Archibald Morrison (1820–1895) of Falkirk. Morrison's father was blinded by an explosion during the Peninsular War, and he supplemented the pension he received from the army 'by playing the fiddle at various functions, particularly for entertainment on the canal boats which were a feature of the [Falkirk] area at the time' (Neil, 1999: 181). A judge at a competition in which the famous Perthshire fiddler Niel Gow (1727–1807) took part was also blind. Collinson notes that blindness was quite common in Scotland amongst competition judges, and in my opinion it is probable that the judge was a fiddler, given that 'he could distinguish the stroke of Niel's bow among a hundred players' (1966: 214).

One possible reason why the fiddle has commonly been played by the blind in Scotland is that the instrument is portable, which is particularly important if one is travelling from place to place and earning a living by playing to onlookers (what we might nowadays call 'busking'), as many of these blind fiddlers appear to have done. Another is that fiddles were relatively inexpensive and would thus be within the price range of many people.

A further reason for the popularity of the instrument amongst the blind may relate to the harp tradition. It is well known that the harp was played by blind people in Scotland. Sanger and Kinnaird (1992: 56) suggest that one reason why it was common was that the nail-playing technique used on the wire-strung *clarsach*, common to the Highlands of Scotland, was particularly suited to blind people who were able to keep their finger nails long through not being engaged in manual labour. Many of these harpists were employed as professional musicians and received patronage from the great Highland families. However, by the eighteenth century, there were only a few such musicians still in existence. One reason for this was the disappearance of patronage 'linked with the waning fortunes of a number of the great Highland families who were involved in the Jacobite Risings' (ibid: 153). This is best exemplified in the case of the blind harper, Rory Dall (Roderick Morison, c.1656-c.1713), who was in the service of the MacLeods at Dunvegan in Skye and was one of the last professional harpers (ibid.: 129). His poetry survives, giving us an important record of what it was like to be a harper in the clan household (see Matheson, 1970) as well as of his departure from Dunvegan. Another reason for the decline in harp playing was changes in musical fashion (Sanger and Kinnaird, 1992: 153). Indeed, in the sixteenth century, the viol was becoming popular, and in the seventeenth, the fiddle or violin, both having an impact on the harp tradition (Grant and Cheape 1987: 180). Thomson (1968: 70) also notes that the piper had 'usurped the place of the harper' well before the 1730s.

It seems possible that harpists in the Highlands of Scotland, particularly blind ones unable to work in some other professions, may have taken up another instrument such as the fiddle as a way of making a living. There is further likelihood of this as Sanger and Kinnaird note that it was relatively common for harpists to play a number of instruments (1992: 168–9). Ranald MacAilean Og (c. 1662–1741) of Cross on the Island of Eigg, for instance, could play harp, fiddle and pipes well (ibid.: 153) as could Alexander Grant of Shewglie (c.1675–1746) (ibid.: 154). Rory Dall Morison (already mentioned) was also a multi-instrumentalist (Collinson, 1966: 236). The fact that a number of writers note the likelihood that the harp repertoire was taken on board by other musical instruments (Collinson, 1966: 243; MacDonald, 1784: 3–4; and Matheson, 1970: lxxiv), particularly fiddle, which was becoming more popular at the point when the harp playing was in decline (Sanger and Kinnaird, 1992: 133), also suggests the possibility that harp players may have moved to the fiddle in order to make a living.

Mrs Judith Dean, a retired music teacher at The Royal Blind School, Edinburgh, with some twenty years service at the school, has given some insight into the playing of musical

instruments by the blind and partially sighted.<sup>6</sup> She has found that blind children tend to enjoy music very much, particularly singing, which to them is the most accessible and social form of music making. As a result of being without sight, the visually impaired child tends to have highly developed senses of touch and hearing, which together with an excellent sense of rhythm, pitch and harmony, means that there is in place a lot of innate musical potential. Mrs Dean made the following observations:

Visual impairment is frequently accompanied by a wide ranging set of additional disabilities, so while there are indeed pupils who very successfully learn to play a variety of instruments, for many, the obstacles to be overcome may be too great to allow the skills to develop which will enable the pupil to independently play instruments. The fiddle does present practical problems concerning the care, handling and management of the case, bow and instrument. The playing position and relationship of the bow to the instrument are difficult, together with the obvious difficulties of co-ordinating fingers as well. Visually impaired children, perhaps as a result of the advanced level of aural skills, are able to anticipate what comes next in the music, so the ear can lead the fingers to find the correct sounds. The child may find his best way to access the notes he wants (even if in a very idiosyncratic and unorthodox way) but at the same time may find it very difficult to learn 'sighted' technique, which in the longer term will lead to greater fluency.

In an ideal world, a lot of teaching with constant reinforcement and supervision are therefore of great importance, but realistically these are difficult to achieve in a school when there are so many other demands made on a child. Everything does take longer and is more difficult for visually impaired children, despite the innate skills they may have.

The fiddle is an instrument, which presents problems before the practice even begins! Until such time as the pupil is able to manage the tuning etc., it is necessary to have someone on hand who is able to either do it for the child or help him with the preparation and the practice.

However, Mrs Dean suggested that, historically in Scotland, blind fiddlers might have had a tradition of fiddle playing in their families or in their local communities, that made it quite easy for them to learn to play the instrument. In such a context, learning would be part of 'ongoing life' rather than a more formal activity. Blind fiddlers learning in this way would also have the advantage of knowing their home environment, and possibly of knowing the location of a fiddle in the home if there was an instrument present. Mrs Dean also suggested that they might have begun learning simply through someone handing them a fiddle and showing them how to hold it. In addition, she noted: 'There must have been a lot of time to fill for a blind person in a rural community and I would think that the fiddle could have been a lifeline – something that he could do with others and also something that others could not do.'

Whilst playing the fiddle has constituted a means of livelihood for a blind person historically in Scotland, welfare legislation in Britain in the early years of the twentieth century (Ford and Ford, 1969) would have signalled the end of the period when it was essential for the blind to support themselves financially.

## PLAYING THE FIDDLE AND SINGING AT THE SAME TIME

Another tradition illustrated by Geikie's etching is that of singing and playing the fiddle at the same time. The commentary tells us that Blind Aleck is improvising song at the instrument and, rather surprisingly, aspects of his bowing seem to have been used as a way of covering up problems inherent in the poetry. These are taken to the point where 'defects were amply compensated for . . . by a strong dash or two of the bow.' This style of playing also suggests that Blind Aleck was a rather flamboyant character when performing; something that would no doubt have helped to attract him an audience. Interestingly, too, the commentary implies that the singing is an accompaniment to the violin rather than the other way round, stating: 'with dexter hand [he] directed the movements of his violin, while his lips gave out the *measured* accompaniment'.

The etching goes some way to showing us how singing and playing simultaneously is physically achieved. The fiddler plays standing but leaning heavily forward towards his audience and his head is tilted slightly to the left so that his chin rests on the fiddle. His mouth is open as though he is singing at that very moment. This position is particularly noteworthy for one might expect the fiddle to rest further down on his chest, thus freeing up the head and neck for the purposes of singing.<sup>7</sup>

There are further references to this practice among fiddlers. Miss Minnie Lindsay of Glenesk noted, for instance, that John MacGregor would 'play on the fiddle and sing, "The Lass of Glenshee"' (Fenton and Beech, 2000: 212), suggesting the possibility that this was done simultaneously. Indeed, singing and playing the fiddle simultaneously appears to have had a long history in Scotland. The description by the French historian Pierre de Brantôme of Scots musicians playing for Mary Queen of Scots at Holyrood in Edinburgh, for instance, mentions that there 'arrived under her window five or six hundred scoundrels from town to serenade her with unrefined violins and small rebecs, which are not wanting in this country; and then they started to sing psalms, ever so badly sung and badly in tune.'<sup>8</sup>

The following quotation from *Vox Borealis, or the Northern Discoverie* (1641), a pamphlet satirising English bishops, particularly in their dealings with the Scots, also mentions this possibility. The account tells of a fiddler and a fool who are employed by General Rathwen, governor of Edinburgh Castle:

When he [General Rathwen] and they are almost drunke, then they goe to singing of *Scots jigges*, in a jearing manner, at the *Covenanters*, for surrendring up their Castles. The Fidler he flings out his his [sic] heels and Dances and Sings: Put up thy Dagger Jamie, and all things shall be mended, Bishops shall fall, no not at all, when the Parliament is ended.<sup>9</sup>

A more recent Scottish reference comes from Miss Anne Graham Horsburgh, of Kirkton Farm, Manor, Peebles, originally from Stobo, who was born in 1901 and lived in Manor Valley from 1914. She remembered Adam Horsburgh, her father's cousin's son who lived in the area, playing the violin and singing at the same time. Part of her



recollections are presented below, taken from an interview conducted by Emily Lyle of the School of Scottish Studies and Catherine Shoupe<sup>10</sup>:

EL: And did he sing and play the violin at the same time?

AGH: The same time, yes.

EL: Burns songs?

AGH: Mostly Burns songs. Of course, you see, there were none of these other . . . songs writers and people like what you get nowadays. . . .

EL: And would he be standing up while he was playing the violin and singing?

AGH: No, he usually was sitting on a chair.

EL: Just, in a room?

AGH: Yes. . . .

EL: Yes. And did other people do this, sing and play the violin?

AGH: Oh yes.

CS: Was it just men you were saying?

AGH: Oh no. There was the odd woman. Yes. I remember I had a schoolteacher and she was a very good violinist. . . .

EL: And did it affect the singing when they played with the violin? . . .

AGH: Well, they always sung in harmony with their violin. Their voice was in harmony with what they were playing.

EL: And how did this affect the way they sang?

AGH: Well, it usually made the song sound sweeter or sadder or whatever the music was.

EL: Yes. Were you saying something about it being a higher . . . ?

AGH: Women . . . who sing to a violin. You'll always find their voices are high set.

CS: Just the women?

AGH: Just the women, yes. Because, you know, I always say violins are horrid, screeching things. Well voices are just the same . . .

This interview illustrates several points. Firstly, instead of the voice and fiddle being in unison, the two were in harmony, meaning that the fiddle was playing different notes to that of the voice. Secondly, this practice was engaged in by both men and women, although Miss Horsburgh indicated there was something about the pitch of women's voices that changed when they accompanied themselves. It is possible that women had to sing a little more loudly, and perhaps pitch the song a little higher than normal (pitch is often associated with loudness in music; the higher one sings in one's comfortable range, the louder one tends to get) in order to cut through the sound of the fiddle. This is especially true given that the fiddle has a similar lower range to the lower range of a woman's voice (beginning on the note G below middle C). In the case of a man's voice, however, the fiddle usually would be playing higher than the voice for most of the time. Thirdly, the accompaniment enhanced the mood of the song, indicating that fiddle accompaniment added an aesthetic dimension to the performance.

We also have a present-day example from Scotland of singing and playing the fiddle

at the same time. Tom Spiers, who was born in Aberdeen in 1947, is well known for giving this type of performance, both whilst he was in a band called 'The Gaugers' and nowadays in groups called 'Harestane' and 'Flash Company'. Tom was brought up in Aberdeen and now lives in Fife where he is a technical manager in the paper industry. He received lessons in classical violin at school, and then at the age of about fifteen or sixteen began attending the Aberdeen Folk Song Club, having been invited along to the club by a friend who knew that he played the fiddle. He described how he began singing and playing the fiddle at the same time, which came about primarily through playing in groups which performed at the club:

I think what happened really was because the groups I was playing with were singing groups as opposed to instrumental groups, . . . I just started joining in the choruses. And the fact I was playing the fiddle didn't matter, I could still sing along in the choruses and then it just sort of went on from there. And I discovered I quite enjoyed singing and started learning a few songs, and to begin with I would just sing the songs without accompanying myself and possibly take the fiddle in for a chorus or something like that. [It] just seemed a natural progression that I just carried on playing the fiddle and singing. It didn't seem as though – there was no conscious decision made to actually play fiddle and sing.<sup>11</sup>

When Tom is performing, the instrument sits loosely on his shoulder, just touching his neck, and he does not use a chin rest. He finds that this position does not restrict his breathing whilst he is singing. The fiddle works best, he maintained, in accompanying songs from the North East of Scotland such as 'Grat for Gruel' from the singing of Jimmy MacBeath which have 'very simple melodies but . . . quite good going songs and choruses'. Tom also sings songs from *The Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection*. He has two fiddles, one tuned normally (G D A E) and one tuned in the key of B flat. He explained that, with the pitch of his voice, B flat is a very natural key in which to sing, and is also useful for performing pipe tunes (which are in B flat), since tuning the fiddle in this way allows for drones which are sympathetic to the tune. Instead of playing in harmony to the melody (i.e. playing a different set of notes, perhaps those which lie a fifth below the tune itself), Tom normally plays the notes of the tune. His accompaniment could be described as very harmonic, however, since it utilises double stops and what he termed 'chording' at every opportunity. This is clearly illustrated in the transcription of his playing of 'Grat for Gruel' (Fig. 2). Indeed, this style of accompaniment points up the harmonic potential of an instrument which is normally associated with playing the melody.

Tom mentioned that there was no change in pitch in his singing when he accompanied himself on the fiddle, but that there was probably a change in the sound of the voice: 'I think I possibly push my voice a little more when I'm singing over the top of the fiddle.' Interestingly, the primary function of the fiddle for Tom was as a tool for accompaniment rather than as a solo instrument.

Playing the fiddle and singing at the same time in public performances often evoked surprise from audience members, however. Tom explained that at the end of a concert,

## Grat for Gruel

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Grat for Gruel'. It consists of two staves: 'voice' and 'fiddle'. The music is in the key of D major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The lyrics are: 'Ah there was a wea - ver in the North, Ah but he was cruel, The ve - ry first nict that he got wad He sat and he grat for gruel. For he wid - na want his gruel, Oh he wid - na want his gruel, Aye the ve - ry first nict that he got wad He sat and he grat for gruel.' The fiddle part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with various chords and melodic lines.

Fig. 2. 'Grat for Gruel', from the playing and singing of Tom Spiers.

people might come up and say “Oh, how are you able to do that, . . . I’ve never seen anybody doing that before, how can you possibly play fiddle and sing at the same time?” He felt that it was nevertheless a ‘fairly natural thing to do’ and did not consider it to be different from, for instance, playing the guitar and singing simultaneously. However, Tom knew of few others who employed the fiddle to accompany their own singing and, although he mentioned examples from England (for example, the Dransfield Brothers<sup>12</sup> that he remembered playing in the 1960s and 1970s), and from North America, he did not name any from Scotland. He continued:

So, it doesn’t appear to be very common. As I say, I can’t really understand why. Maybe it’s because fiddle’s not considered to be . . . a particularly good instrument for accompanying voice. I suppose guitar has a much fuller sound and I suppose is more versatile in terms of the type of accompaniments you can do, so . . . maybe that’s the reason that the fiddle’s never been very popular for singing with, because it’s I suppose fairly limited in terms of the sounds you can get from it.

Tom's comments are interesting since they highlight the fact that the practice of playing the fiddle and singing simultaneously is unknown as a Scottish tradition to many fiddlers in present-day Scotland. By contrast, in North America, singing whilst playing the fiddle appears to be common. Burman-Hall (1984: 169), for instance, states that in American traditional fiddling, the performance of the fiddle has often been accompanied by vocal verses, and notes that these are characteristically sung in a 'rapid-fire tense style' (ibid.: 170). A reference from *The New Lost City Ramblers Song Book* (Cohen and Seeger 1964: 11) alludes to the practice of the fiddle being used to accompany the voice of a blind musician: 'In "The Old Fish Song", as done by Blind James Howard, the fiddle and the voice move in unison.' The song was collected from Howard in Harlan, Kentucky, by John and Alan Lomax in 1933, and in this particular instance, the fiddle is clearly playing much the same notes as the voice, rather than harmonising with it. The role of the fiddle as an accompanying instrument is found in other countries too. Cooke (1992: 236) mentions this practice amongst the epic singers of Yugoslavia, Albania and Macedonia and amongst gypsy singers of southern Romania. He also cites a southern Yugoslavian example of singers using a violin tuned to a rather lower pitch to provide such accompaniments. Other examples include the Chianuri, a two- or three-string spike fiddle, from the country of Georgia which, although not common nowadays, was used to accompany song, playing in unison with the voice against a bass drone (Sadie 1984: 1.349) and the Kemeñçe (ibid.: 2.372), the short-necked fiddle of Turkey which sits on the performer's knee and has amongst its functions that of accompanying song.<sup>13</sup> Larsson (1977: 88) also gives an example of singing to a bowed harp in Sweden, a similar instrument to the fiddle which in this case is played on the performer's lap.

The example of Tom Spiers drawn from the present-day folk song and folk music tradition in Scotland is particularly interesting since here is an individual who is inadvertently carrying on a tradition – that of singing and playing the fiddle at the same time. Tom has acquired this style of performing not by listening and imitating others in the tradition itself, but instead through his own efforts, performing solo and with other musicians in groups. Further, he has not made a conscious decision to actually play the fiddle and sing simultaneously. The instance of singing and playing the fiddle at the same time also illustrates how closely the song and fiddle traditions can be intertwined in Scottish tradition. In addition to the use of fiddle tunes for song melodies and vice versa, one instrument can complement the other successfully and, as Tom Spiers illustrated, be performed simultaneously by one person with relative ease.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Tom Spiers and Judith Dean for taking part in interviews and to the AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) for sponsoring this research as part of a Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts.

## NOTES

- 1 Reproduced from Geikie (1841). Commentary adjacent to etching no. XXXV.
- 2 Unfortunately, I have been unable to determine who the author of this commentary is. The publisher gives some clue, however, as he gives thanks in his preface, with respect to the letter-press, 'for the valuable assistance of numerous literary friends'. He continues: 'To Mr Thomas Smibert he is indebted for several of the opening pages. His acknowledgements are also due to Mr Alexander Campbell for one or two contributions, chiefly of a humourous character; to Mr James Ballantine for his graphical poetical illustrations of "the Grassmarket" and other subjects; and to Mr W. Skene, Mr A. M'Laggan, Mr James Murray, Mr J. Alexander, and Mr W. Hunter, for occasional articles.' Mr David Vedder is also thanked for prose and verse that he has contributed. It is likely, then, that one of the aforementioned is the writer in question. Further, it is likely that the writer drew on 'The Life of Blind Alick' printed in the *Scots Times* on 6 March, 1830 which was reprinted and privately circulated. Strang (1856: 249) notes that this article was frequently used by writers as a source for material, and there are considerable similarities between the piece cited here and the article that appeared in the *Scots Times*.
- 3 Alburger (1996: 51), quoted from *Edinburgh Assembly Minute Books*, No. 1, Edinburgh Public Library, Y/ML/28/A.
- 4 Lyle (1996: xx), quoted from *The Huron Signal*, 11 February 1848, p. 3, col. 1.
- 5 SA 1977/121/8.
- 6 Interview, 21/3/2000, The Royal Blind School, Edinburgh.
- 7 Cooke (1992: 263) indeed notes that 'it is one of the virtues of the violin that it can be played resting along the left arm or propped against the chest, leaving the player free to sing (if he chooses) while playing.' Several examples of this style of holding the fiddle are pictured in the book on old-time fiddling in Alabama by Cauthen (1989), and the picture of Andrew Poleson (in Cooke, 1986: 30) from Shetland also demonstrates this hold.
- 8 I am grateful to Aude Le Borgne for her translation. The full version in French of this text can be found at Mérimée and Lacour (1890: 127).
- 9 Glasgow University Library (Special Collections), MU10-i.31.
- 10 SA 1974/171/A10. The initials 'EL' stand for Emily Lyle, 'CS' for Catherine Shoupe, and 'AGH' for Anne Graham Horsburgh.
- 11 Interview, 20/2/2000, Auchtermuchty, Fife, SA 2000/01.
- 12 Further information on the Dransfield Brothers can be found at <http://www.futuris.net/linen/feature/72sheets.html>
- 13 Another instrument, the function of which, like the fiddle, is normally considered to be that of playing melodies rather than providing accompaniment for song is the Scottish small or border pipes. There has recently been a revival of this instrument in Scotland headed by the Lowland and Border Pipers' Society, who run a category for self-accompaniment on pipes to singing in their annual competition.

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