Fuinn air an inntinn: A case study in the composition of eighteenth-century Gaelic song

ELLEN L. BEARD

Nam b' e gibhtean mo chinn-sa, chuireadh fonn dhomh air m' inntinn.
If I were gifted myself, a tune would come to my mind.[1]

<div align="right">Rob Donn MacKay (1714–1778)</div>

Even the most of the airs to which he composed are original.[2]

<div align="right">Mackintosh Mackay (1829)</div>

The claim has sometimes been made for several of the Gaelic bards that they composed the airs of their own songs, but for this there is no evidence whatever. It is doubtful whether conscious composition ever contributed much to the development of Gaelic vocal music.[3]

<div align="right">William Matheson (1970)</div>

These three quotations illustrate the challenges of analysing musical composition in the field of Gaelic song. The bard himself tells us virtually nothing of his compositional methods. Mackintosh Mackay, his first editor, overstates his musical originality. The scholar William Matheson, in contrast, flatly dismisses the possibility that any Gaelic bards ever composed music. The only way to test the validity of such contradictory statements is through systematic empirical study, collecting and analysing a large body of songs by a single bard in order to identify their probable musical sources and assess the likelihood that particular melodies were his own. That research – into one hundred songs – shows that Rob Donn composed about a third of his melodies and borrowed the rest.[4] To explain how he did so, the first section of this article will describe his musical environment, including his musical influences and the principal sources of his borrowed tunes. The next section will outline concepts from folk-song scholarship and ethnomusicology regarding composition and traditional music. The third section will examine a number of his original song airs classified by compositional method: (1) new melodies based on metrical models; (2) new melodies adapting musical motifs; and (3) new melodies with no known sources. The underlying research was done for the author's 2016 Ph.D at the University of Edinburgh; all Rob Donn songs referenced can be found in her 2018 songbook.[5]

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[1] '*Iorram do Rùpard*' ('To Rupert') in Beard 2018: 197.

[2] Mackay 1829: xlii.

[3] Matheson 1970: 152.

[4] Beard 2016; Beard 2018.

[5] In that regard, she would like to thank her Ph.D supervisors Anja Gunderloch and Katherine Campbell, as well as her editor Christine Martin at *Taigh na Teud*. She is also grateful to the anonymous reader who provided a number of helpful comments, questions, and points of clarification on the first draft of the article.

1.0 The musical world of Rob Donn

1.1 Musical influences
Rob Donn was born into a poor family in a rural, Gaelic-speaking agricultural community in Durness Parish, northwest Sutherland. At an early age he was taken into the family of the local tacksman Iain mac Eachainn (John MacKay of Muiseal), himself a poet and patron of the arts, working initially as a herd-boy and later taking cattle from the Reay Country on the drove roads to Crieff and Falkirk.[6] During the Seven Years' War (from 1759 to 1763), he spent another four years on the road, visiting many parts of Scotland as informal regimental bard for the Sutherland Fencibles. After a brief residence at Freisgill on Whiten Head, Loch Eriboll (where he was reportedly banished for poaching deer), he ended his days working as a cattleman at Balnakeil in Durness, where he is buried with his wife Janet. [7] Because Rob Donn was not literate, he relied entirely on his own voice to communicate his poems and songs to his contemporaries. The other instruments mentioned regularly in the poems were the fiddle and the bagpipe, often in the context of wedding celebrations or dances.[8]

Rob Donn was particularly fortunate that his local manse was home to one of the most remarkable musical families in eighteenth-century Scotland.[9] Rev. Murdo MacDonald, parish minister in Durness from 1726 until his death in 1763, was 'an accomplished musician' and 'a most melodious and powerful singer' who reportedly 'composed many Gaelic airs'.[10] He also encouraged his children to pursue musical studies, especially the violin or fiddle, and two of his daughters excelled on that instrument. Flora (1736–1805), who later married Rev. John Touch, minister of St. Cuthbert's Chapel-of-Ease in Edinburgh, reportedly composed airs to several of Rob Donn's poems.[11] Another daughter, who died a Mrs Gordon in Golspie, was known locally as Fiddlag and often played reels and strathspeys for dances at the manse of Kildonan when Donald Sage was growing up there in the 1790s and early 1800s.[12]

Even more important for their legacy to Scottish music were two of Rev. MacDonald's sons, Patrick (1729–1824) and Joseph (1739–1762), widely recognised as pioneering collectors, analysts, and mediators between the oral musical traditions of the *Gàidhealtachd* and the literate, more cosmopolitan musicians resident in the Lowlands and the homes of the Highland gentry.[13] Both had studied in the Lowlands (Patrick at Aberdeen, Joseph in Edinburgh and Haddington). And while Patrick was remembered primarily as a violinist and

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[6] Tacksmen were the large tenants and middle managers on eighteenth-century Highland estates, often related to the clan chief and playing multiple roles as landlords, military recruiters and entrepreneurs, especially in the cattle trade. See, e.g., Thomson 1994: 282-83.

[7] For more detailed biographical information, see Grimble 1999; Gunn and MacFarlane 1899; Morrison 1899; Mackay 1829.

[8] See, e.g., Beard 2018: 55, 106, 107, 131, 132, 136.

[9] See Donaldson 2000: 43 (describing this family as 'leading tradition-bearers in Highland music during the second half of the eighteenth century').

[10] Scott, *Fasti* 1928, VII: 102.

[11] Morrison 1899: 20; *Fasti* VII: 102; *Fasti* I: 22.

[12] Sage 1889: 136. Sage lived from 1789 to 1869. Thomson 1994: 254. 'Fiddlag' is simply the Gaelic feminine diminutive for a fiddle player.

[13] See generally Johnson 1972. Other examples in the Highlands were Elizabeth Ross in Raasay and the Maclean Clephane sisters in Mull. See Cooke, MacLeod and Ó Baoill 2016; Sanger 2010: 23–34.

Joseph as a piper, both were excellent all-round musicians, combining familiarity with the traditional music of their own community with sufficient formal musical training to be able to transcribe what they heard into staff notation and to explain the musical principles upon which it was based. After Joseph's premature death in India, Patrick published both their collections, his own *Highland Vocal Airs* (*HVA*) in 1784, and Joseph's *Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe* in 1804.[14] Rob Donn knew this family well, composing an elegy and lament for the father, and a poem describing a visit to his home by Patrick.[15] It is also likely that the brothers learned a number of the song airs they collected from his singing; seven melodies in *HVA* can be readily identified as settings for Rob Donn songs, including one he composed himself.[16]

Another noteworthy local musician was Rob Donn's friend George MacLeod, official piper to Lord Reay, Chief of Clan MacKay. According to Cannon, there were three generations of MacLeod pipers in Tongue and Durness, the eldest of whom was George MacLeod, Rob Donn's contemporary. Next were Donald MacLeod, piper to Lord Reay in 1760, and his son George MacLeod, Pipe-Major of the Reay Fencibles from 1796 to 1798, who succeeded his father as piper to Lord Reay. The elder George MacLeod may well have been Joseph MacDonald's first piping teacher, and a melody in *The Angus Fraser Collection* is titled '*Seòras Leòdach* (George MacLeod the piper)'.[17]

Of course, these were far from the only musicians – good, bad, or indifferent – that Rob Donn heard. His own wife Seònaid was remembered as a fine singer, and Tongue schoolmaster Iain Thapaidh (John Sutherland) was viciously satirised as an inept one.[18] Singing was an important means of communication in a society with limited literacy and no alternatives to oral transmission, and several poems refer to this explicitly.[19] Metrical psalms were sung in church, led by a precentor, people sang working in the fields, and bards, pipers and fiddlers performed at weddings and other occasions, for listening and for dancing. Rob Donn also heard music when he was on the road, herding cattle on the drove roads and later in the Sutherland Fencibles. It seems he was always listening, and the quality of his aural memory and the variety of his musical sources can be traced in his own songs.

1.2 Borrowed tunes

Since approximately two-thirds of Rob Donn's songs reused older melodies, one way to appreciate the soundscape of his musical world is to consider the kinds of music he recycled. We begin with pipe music, easily identifiable by its distinctive nine-note scale (GABC#DEF#GA), although pipe tunes could also be played on the fiddle or sung. Rob

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[14] For accessible modern editions, see Martin 2000; and Cannon 1994.

[15] Beard 2018: 31-35; Grimble 1999: 140.

[16] The composition (discussed later in this article) is his praise song for Sally Grant, identified by its refrain '*Ribhinn, aluinn, aoibhinn òig*' in *HVA*: 29, #86. The other six melodies he used – sometimes more than once – are '*Keapach 'na fàsach*' (*HVA*: 25, #61); '*Cia iad na dèe 's na dùile treun*' (*HVA*: 34, #106); '*Òran an Aoig*' (*HVA*: 48, #162); '*An Gille dubh ciar dubh*' (*HVA*: 42, #142); '*A Robaidh, tha thu gòrach*' (*HVA*: 45, #152); and '*Latha siubhail sleibh dhomh*' (*HVA*: 38, #128).

[17] Cannon 1994: 1, 109 n. 16; Martin 1996: 20.

[18] Mackay 1829*:* lviii; Beard 2017: 1–21.

[19] Beard 2018: 141; Morrison 1899: 19.

Donn composed two extended praise songs based on the *pìobaireachd* '*Fàilte a' Phrionnsa*' ('The Prince's Salute').[20] He also borrowed pipe jigs and reels from the *ceòl beag* ('light music') repertoire, several of which appear in William Gunn's 1848 pipe collection, such as '*Banis Inneradhra*' ('The Inverary Wedding' or 'The Campbells are Coming'), '*Crò nan Gobhar*' ('The Goat Pen'), '*Fhear nan Casan Caola*' ('The Man with the Skinny Legs'), '*Gillun an fhèilidh*' ('The Lads with the Kilt'), '*Nul thar nan Eilanun*' (To America we go'), and '*Tha lidh' 'san abhinn 'san allt*' ('The Inundation').[21]

The fiddle tunes in Rob Donn's repertoire can often be identified by their extended range, running passages, semitones, and the dotted strathspey rhythm that Joseph MacDonald called a 'violin reel'.[22] These tunes – reels, jigs and strathspeys – were often (but not exclusively) used as dance music, and could also be sung, typically as settings for satires and humour. In this group, some of Rob Donn's favourites included 'Flowers of Edinburgh', 'Highland Donald kiss'd Kitty', 'John Roy Stewart', 'Johnny's grey breeks', and 'Roy's wife of Aldivalloch'.[23] But singing a fiddle tune was no mean feat, requiring both agility and a considerable range, up to two octaves in one case.[24] This suggests that Rob Donn's own voice was highly versatile, as he had no reason to compose a song he could not communicate to others by singing himself.

The bard's song repertoire was even more varied, including melodies from the Gaelic, Scots, Irish and English traditions. Beginning with Gaelic *òrain mhòra* ('big songs'), he seems to have known '*Alasdair à Gleanna Garadh*' ('Alastair of Glen Garry') by Sìleas na Ceapaich, '*Latha siubhail slèibhe dhomh*' ('One day travelling the hillside') by Lachlan MacKinnon, and classic laments such as '*Cia iad na dèe*' ('Where are the gods?'), '*Ceapach na fàsach*' ('Keppoch a wasteland') by Iain Lom, and '*Murt Ghlinne Comhann*' (The Massacre of Glencoe').[25] Rob Donn used each of these melodies in its original form at least once, and employed some as metrical models for new tunes as well (discussed below).

Another important category of Gaelic melodies is waulking songs: women's work songs identifiable by their strong beat, repetitive structure and vocables. John MacInnes has suggested that the melodies and vocables of these songs are often older than their words, and that the genre was once common throughout the *Gàidhealtachd*.[26] In this case, two of the waulking songs Rob Donn borrowed were widely known – '*Hè an clò dubh*' ('Hey, the dark cloth', a Jacobite song by Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair), and '*Dhèanainn sùgradh ris an nighinn duibh*' ('I would sport with the black-haired lass', a praise song for a boat).[27] The other two are probably local, as they do not appear in the Campbell and Collinson collection from the Western Isles.[28] And while they could have been composed by the bard, it seems

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[20] Beard 2018.: 172–78.

[21] Gunn 1886: 76, 20, 52, 84, 10, 59 [Gunn's spelling].

[22] Cannon 1994: 86.

[23] Beard 2018: 116, 70, 147, 55, 153.

[24] *op. cit.*: 55.

[25] *op. cit.*: 52, 60, 179, 28, 22.

[26] MacInnes 2007: 412-26.

[27] Beard 2018: 160, 97.

[28] Campbell and Collinson 1969–1981.

more likely that he followed the general pattern of adding new words to the tunes he heard sung by his own industrious wife and daughters.[29]

Rob Donn also heard (and composed) *puirt-à-beul* ('mouth music') although the term itself was not current in the eighteenth century.[30] Such borrowed tunes offered ease of composition for the bard and intertextual references for listeners who knew the originals. One handy model was '*Robaidh dona gòrach*' ('Poor foolish Robby'), convenient for insulting anyone with a two-syllable name who did something particularly stupid.[31] Another was '*Màiri mhìn mheallshuileach dhubh*' ('Fine Mary of the bewitching dark eyes'), handy for satirising a young lady unable to decide which of two men she would marry.[32]

The last group of borrowed Gaelic song tunes is comprised of slow sad melodies. Two of these are well-known love songs, '*An gille dubh, ciar-dhubh*' ('The dark, black-haired lad') and '*Faillirinn, illirinn*'.[33] Others include '*Ged is socrach mo leapaidh*' ('Although my bed is comfortable'), '*Moch sa mhadainn 's mi làn airtneil*' ('Early in the morning I am full of melancholy'), and '*Throid mo bhean*' ('My wife scolded').[34] These tunes were all suitable for sad songs, although Rob Donn was perfectly capable of using them for satires as well.

Turning to song melodies from non-Gaelic traditions, the largest group – as might be expected – is Scots songs. Several of these he used more than once – 'Barbara Allan', 'Lochaber no more/Lord Ronald my son', 'Logan Water', 'Over the water to Charlie', and 'There's nae luck about the house'.[35] Others include 'Andrew and his cutty gun', 'O as I was kist yestreen', 'Through the wood, laddie', 'Wha'll be King but Charlie', and 'Woo'd and married an a''.[36] These tunes were all popular enough to cross the language barrier without difficulty, and Scots versions can be found readily in large eighteenth-century collections such as *The Caledonian Pocket Companion* and *The Scots Musical Museum*.[37]

At least two of Rob Donn's borrowed melodies have strong Irish connections. One is the lovely '*Tha mi nam chadal*' ('I am sleeping'), which he probably learned indirectly from Sìleas na Ceapaich; another is 'The pearl of the Irish nation', which he may have learned indirectly from a song by John MacCodrum.[38] 'The jolly miller' may have an English origin.[39] The key point is that many tunes crossed language and national boundaries on multiple occasions, and a traditional bard or singer would happily adapt a good tune for his or her own purposes, regardless of origin, just as composers of art music often did.

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[29] Beard 2018: 101, 68.

[30] Lamb 2012: 22.

[31] Beard 2018: 157.

[32] *op. cit.*: 133.

[33] *op. cit.*: 122, 48.

[34] *op. cit.*: 92, 140, 112.

[35] *op. cit.*: 50, 198; 98, 187, 191; 118, 145; 138, 196; 143, 144.

[36] *op. cit.*: 161, 120, 191, 124, 114.

[37] See Purser 2006–2007; Pittock 2018.

[38] Beard 2018: 56, 24. For the originals, see '*Do dh'Arm Rìgh Sheumais*' ('To King James' Army') in Ó Baoill 1972: 234; 'Òran na h-Aoise' ('Song of Age') in Matheson 1938: 325.

[39] Beard 2018: 141.

In short, Rob Donn recycled melodies from Gaelic, Scots, Irish, and English songs, as well as traditional Scottish bagpipe and fiddle tunes. But his borrowing did have some limits. I found no evidence that he used psalm tunes – even for elegies or laments for the dead – despite the fact that he heard and sang them every Sunday he attended church. This implies that he and his community made a strict separation between sacred and secular music, so that melodies sung in church were not considered appropriate elsewhere. Nor is there any evidence that he was influenced by the music of the Italian Baroque, unlike residents, students and visitors in Lowland cities like the MacDonald brothers.[40] While traditional music filtered up the social scale, imported art music did not filter down (or north) as far as Rob Donn and his typical audience in rural Sutherland.

2.0 Composition and traditional music

This brings us to the topic of musical composition, which has attracted surprisingly little analysis from Gaelic scholars despite the general recognition that most Gaelic poetry from the seventeenth century into the twentieth was actually song. As William Gillies noted in 2006, 'there is very little criticism that is expert in musicological and literary terms at the same time.'[41] This can be explained on several grounds, the simplest perhaps being the nature of the profession. Most Gaelic academics and commentators are word people more than music people, with interests and training primarily in language and literature, and several – such as Derick Thomson, Donald MacAulay, Donald Meek and Meg Bateman – have been published poets as well.

Another possible factor is the Gaelic language itself, which has no term equivalent to 'compose' in the sense of creating a piece of music. In standard English to Gaelic dictionaries, 'compose' is translated as *dèan* ('make'), *cuir ri chèile* ('put together'), and *sgrìobh* ('write'), but none of these terms distinguishes between words and music.[42] The term *òran* ('song') is equally ambiguous, as Gaels attributing authorship to song-poetry (including those writing in English) rarely explain whether they mean the words only, the tune only, or both. For instance, Rob Donn's editor Hew Morrison generally used the term 'song' to mean words, but at least once used it to mean music but not words.[43] Evidence also exists that many traditional Gaelic poets, song-makers and singers made no conceptual distinction between the words and music of a song.[44] But others did, such as Rob Donn's patron and friend Iain mac Eachainn, who said, comparing his own work to that of his protegé:

> *Tha m' obair-sa air dol gu làr;*
> *Thèid i bàs do dhìth nam fonn.*
> *Ach leis gach britheamh dan eòl dàn*
> *Bidh cuimhne gu bràth air Rob Donn.*

> My work has fallen to the ground;
> It will perish for want of airs.

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[40] See Johnson 1972 for the Lowlands in general, and Donaldson 2000: 29-62 for the MacDonald brothers in particular.

[41] Gillies, William 2006: 22.

[42] Robertson and MacDonald 2015: 143; Watson 2005: 74; Thomson 2003: 34.

[43] Morrison 1899: xliii, lv, 408.

[44] Lamb 2013: 66-102 (72).

> But with every judge who has a knowledge of poetry
> Rob Donn will be remembered forever.[45]

The main problem in my view, however, is that no one (including Matheson) has previously attempted to apply basic ethnomusicological principles to the composition of Gaelic song. As a result, unstated assumptions and undefined terms abound, lurking in the underbrush as traps for the unwary. For that reason, a brief theoretical detour into the two principal twentieth-century approaches to understanding composition in traditional music may be in order before we return to Rob Donn.

2.1 Folk-song scholarship

In the first half of the twentieth century, the dominant model in Anglo-American folk-song scholarship was the evolutionary approach articulated by Cecil Sharp in 1907, with its three formative principles of continuity, variation, and selection. Although Sharp acknowledged some role for individual invention in creating new variants of old tunes, he did not emphasize individual creativity or formulate a theory of oral composition.[46] This was still the consensus in 1954, when the following definition was adopted by the International Folk Music Council:

> Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved
> through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the
> tradition are: (i) continuity which links the present with the past; (ii)
> variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or
> the group; and (iii) selection by the community, which determines the
> form or forms in which the music survives.[47]

While Gaelic scholars do not typically cite Sharp, they have sometimes expressed similar views regarding continuity and selection: 'The transmission and survival of the verse, primarily within the oral context of song, depended on its acceptability within the community.'[48] But this statement (by Donald Meek) does not address the sources of musical variation; that is, are they individual or communal, conscious or unconscious, and when should they be treated as composition?

While Sharp himself was later criticised for shortcomings such as disregard of individual creativity and overstating the musical isolation of the rural peasantry, he is also credited with establishing an important tradition of 'analysis and classification' in Anglo-American folk song studies.[49] That tradition led to the work of later folk-song scholars such as Samuel Bayard and Bertrand Bronson on melodic classification and tune families, as well as major publication projects such as Bronson's collection of tunes for the Child ballads, the Greig-Duncan collection from northeast Scotland, and the Campbell and Collinson collection from the Hebrides.[50] It also developed concepts for analysing the components of and

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[45] Grimble 1999: 107–108.

[46] Sharp 1972: 24–41.

[47] *op. cit.*: xvi–xvii.

[48] Meek 2007: 95-116 (p. 96).

[49] See Porter 1991: 113–30 (114).

[50] Bronson 1959–1972; Shuldham-Shaw and Lyle 1981–2002; Campbell and Collinson 1969-1981.

relationships among folk melodies, including (from smallest to largest) the motif, the phrase, the strain, the melody, the variant and the tune family, as well as scale types based on the number of tones (pentatonic, hexatonic, or heptatonic), modes (the sequence of semitones and tones in a scale), and melodic contour (the shape of rising and falling pitches within a phrase).[51]

In 1984, James Cowdery proposed a new twist on the tune family concept, based on his fieldwork in Ireland, identifying three principles to analyse the relationships among tunes in a particular repertoire.[52] Tunes grouped by the 'outlining' principle show similarities in overall melodic contour. Tunes grouped by the 'conjoining' principle have sections in common, while other sections differ. The 'recombining' principle highlights the fact that smaller melodic segments or motifs can be combined or recombined in many ways, so that two tunes may contain common elements although their overall melodic contours and sections do not correspond.[53] He also suggests convincingly that recombining is how traditional musicians actually compose, drawing from a 'melodic pool' of motifs to 'make new melodies which still conform to the traditional sound.'[54]

Before leaving this topic, two further points should be noted. First, the analytical methods outlined above have been applied only sporadically to Scottish Gaelic melodic material. The earliest example is probably Annie G. Gilchrist's 'Note on the Modal System of Gaelic Tunes' in a foreword to Frances Tolmie's 1911 collection of Skye songs.[55] Fifty years later, Francis Collinson utilized a similar approach in his wide-ranging survey of Scottish traditional music and the three-volume collection of Hebridean waulking songs he co-edited with John Lorne Campbell.[56] More recently, Peter Cooke applied similar methodological tools in analysing the melodies in the 1812 Elizabeth Ross collection from Raasay.[57]

Second, this tradition of Anglo-American folk-song scholarship (while very useful to the present author) largely ceased being productive in ethnomusicology and related fields by the late twentieth century. For instance, a book-length 2014 survey titled *Theory and Methodology in Historical Ethnomusicology* does not even mention it.[58] Nonetheless, its potential in the Scottish Gaelic context is far from exhausted, and the work of Collinson and Cooke shows that it is well-suited to comparing, e.g., Highland and Lowland melodies, tunes for voice, bagpipe and fiddle, and traditional melodies from different parts of the *Gàidhealtachd*, such as Sutherland and the Western Isles.

2.2 Ethnomusicology

In distinct contrast to Sharp and some of his successors is the approach to composition adopted by scholars of traditional music in the later twentieth century. Ethnomusicologists now generally take the position that there is no essential difference between composition in a

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[51] See, e.g., Bronson 1946: 37–49; Bayard 1950: 1–44; Adams 1976: 179–215.

[52] Cowdery 1984: 495–504.

[53] *op. cit.*: 496–98.

[54] *op. cit.*: 499, 502.

[55] Gilchrist 1997: 150-53.

[56] Collinson 1966; Campbell and Collinson 1969-1981.

[57] Cooke 2013: 103-21.

[58] McCollum and Hebert 2014.

literate and an oral context, and that notation, while permitting the development of more extended musical structures, merely reflects musical ideas after the fact.[59] Bruno Nettl describes several continuums that apply to all composition, written and oral: (1) inspiration and perspiration; (2) composition and improvisation; and (3) the three stages of precomposition, composition, and revision.[60] This analysis largely parallels one in a standard mid-twentieth-century textbook on musicology, which describes composition as a three-stage process involving preparation, inspiration and revision.[61]

It is also instructive in this context to consider the views of Leo Treitler, a leading scholar of medieval chant, another musical tradition (like eighteenth-century Gaelic song) that developed in a transition zone between orality and literacy:

> Like the practitioners of any traditional music the singers of chant composed their melodies following overall formal models and patterns and calling on specific formulaic units of melody at appropriate points, all of these having emerged from the practice itself, and all as native and natural to the singers as their mother tongues. [...] In any case uniqueness and originality seems not to have been singled out by them as a special value, as it has been in other cultures. Many of the melodies cluster in types marked by common features. [...] Differences between individual melodies of a type can very often be recognized as responses to details of the words they were made to intone. The makers of chant followed quite specific principles in adapting melodies to words, paying attention to all parameters of language — semantic, syntactic, and phonetic.[62]

Treitler's description of chant as 'sung language' matches very closely the aesthetic of traditional Gaelic singers; it also resembles Cowdery's description of folk composition as the recombining of musical motifs to create something new that still sounds traditional.[63]

In other words, what Sharp called 'variation', Nettl would call 'composition'. On this topic, it seems clear that Matheson's views are closer to Sharp's than to Nettl's, as one might expect for a scholar of his generation. That is, Matheson assumed (in the quotation at the beginning of this article) that only 'conscious' composition counts as real composition or creative endeavour. This cannot be correct; among other things, it unjustifiably privileges composers trained in a written tradition who can articulate verbally or illustrate in staff notation how they have constructed a piece of music. Nettl argued instead that all musical composition involves both unconscious inspiration and conscious craftsmanship.

> To some extent, music is inspired, in the sense that we cannot analyze the way in which it finds itself into the thinking of a musician, but perhaps more important, it is also the result of manipulation and

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[59] Nettl 2015: 49-62; Blacking, 1973: xi; Merriam 1964: 165–66.

[60] Nettl 2015: 51-53.

[61] Haydon 1941: 104–05.

[62] Treitler 2007, Chapter 6: 2 of 67 (www.oxfordscholarship.com).

[63] See, e.g., Gillies, Anne Lorne 2010: xxvii; Cowdery 1984: 499.

rearrangement of the units of a given vocabulary, of hard work and concentration.[64]

That is, every composer works with an existing set of musical materials, modifying them in various ways according to individual ability and inclination as well as the rules of musical grammar or norms of musical style available within the culture. What is 'given' and what is 'added' depends on the culture; in traditional music, the 'given' is larger than the 'new.'[65] In our case study, Rob Donn was recognised as a creative musician by his contemporaries, but the content and enduring popularity of his musical corpus show that he never strayed outside the cultural boundaries (previously discussed) considered acceptable by his audience.

3.0 Compositional methods
Given this background, we now consider three compositional methods used by Rob Donn, with several detailed examples of each. They are: (1) new melodies based on metrical models; (2) new melodies adapting musical motifs; and (3) new melodies with no known sources.

3.1 New melodies based on metrical models
Rob Donn used this compositional technique repeatedly for his serious elegies, in each case borrowing a well-known melody for one and using its metrical model for others. His three models were '*Murt Ghlinne Comhann*' ('The Massacre of Glencoe'), '*Ceapach na fàsach*' ('Keppoch a wasteland'), and '*Latha siubhail slèibhe dhomh*' ('One day travelling the hillside').[66] The first two are laments for notorious seventeenth-century murders and the last an early eighteenth-century *òran mòr* ('big song'); what they share is powerful melodies with widely-recognised associations in the *Gàidhealtachd*, making them intentional and culturally appropriate choices for a bard working in that tradition.

3.1.1 First metrical model – *Murt Ghlinne Comhann*
Rob Donn borrowed this melody for one elegy and used its metrical model in another four. The original melody is shown here in two forms, first in 6/8 time as a setting for his elegy to the factor Kenneth Sutherland, and then rewritten in 4/4 time to illustrate its use as a metrical model.

Marbhrann do Choinneach Sutharlain/Elegy for Kenneth Sutherland[67]

'S e do bhàs, Choinn-ich Suth-ar-lain, Dh'fhàg na h-àit-ean seo dubh-ach gu leòr,

'S a chuir caoidh a-gus mul - ad Air gach mnaoi a-gus duin - e dam b' eòl.

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[64] Nettl 2015: 51.

[65] Blacking 1973: 106; Nettl 2015: 54-57.

[66] The original poems can be found, respectively, in Ó Baoill 1994: 190–99; MacKenzie, Annie M. 1964: 82–93; and Black 2001: 28–37.

[67] Beard 2018: 22.

Fhir gun mhear-achd, gun fhoill-bheart, Fhir nach tuirt 's nach d' rinn ach a' chòir;

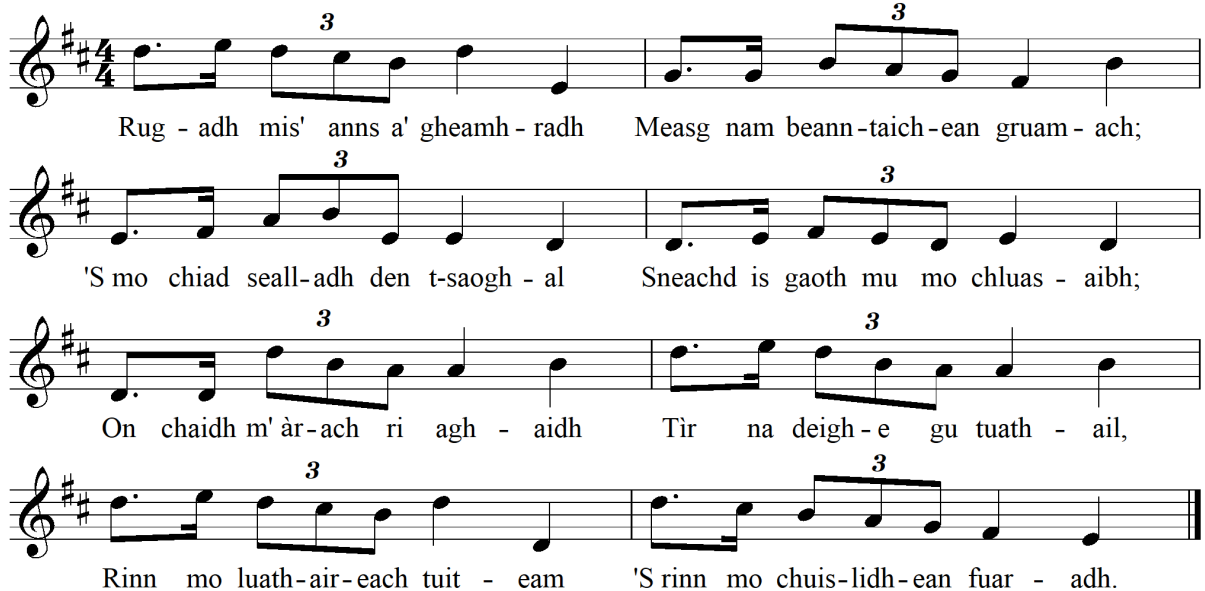Bu shluagh borb sinn gun bhreith-an-as, Nuair a dh'fhal-bh thu, mur sgath-adh sin oirnn.

Massacre of Glencoe/Elegy for Kenneth Suthlerland in 4/4 Time

This particular rhythm is so distinctive and recurs so often in Rob Donn's elegies that I labelled it his funeral march rhythm before I identified its source. Musically, the most interesting of the related elegies is the following:

Marbhrann don Iarla Chatach/Elegy for the Earl of Sutherland[68]
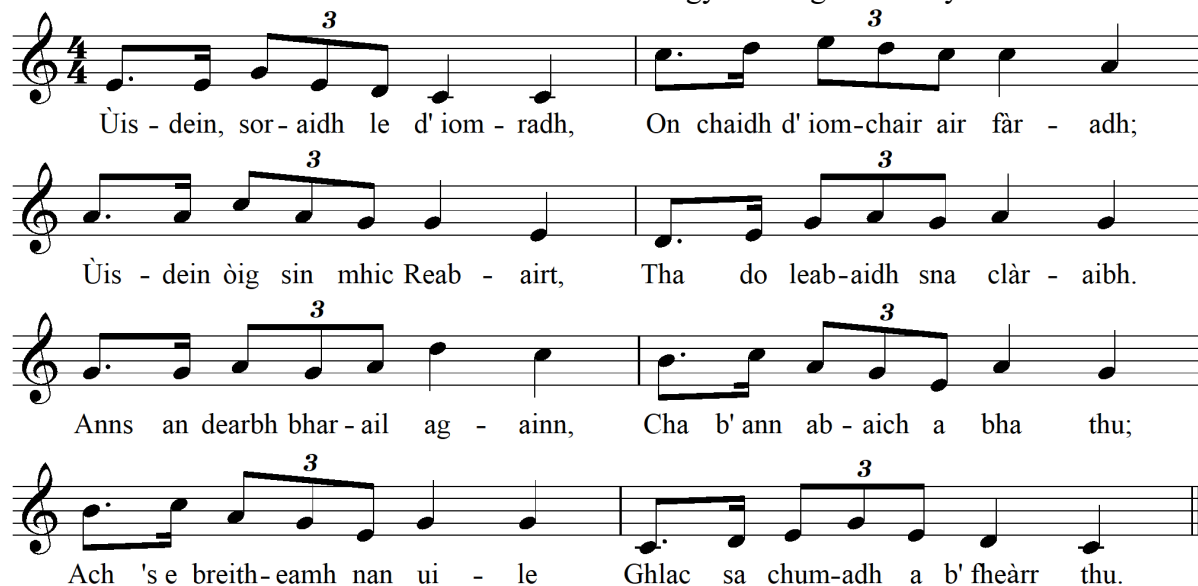
Rug - adh mis' anns a' gheamh - radh   Measg nam beann-taich-ean gruam - ach;

'S mo chiad seall-adh den t-saogh - al   Sneachd is gaoth mu mo chluas - aibh;

On chaidh m' àr-ach ri agh - aidh   Tìr na deigh-e gu tuath - ail,

Rinn mo luath-air-each tuit - eam   'S rinn mo chuis-lidh-ean fuar - adh.

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[68] *op.cit.*: 36.

The internal evidence for composition is the word painting in the last two lines of this verse, which is autobiographical and unrelated to the Earl.[69] The melodic line echoes the text by placing an ascending octave leap between the words *chaidh* and *m' àrach* ('I grew up' or 'was raised') and a corresponding descending octave in the middle of the word *tuiteam* ('declined' or 'fell'). This cannot be accidental; in a sense it is Rob Donn's own swan song, with a striking and haunting melody to match its words.
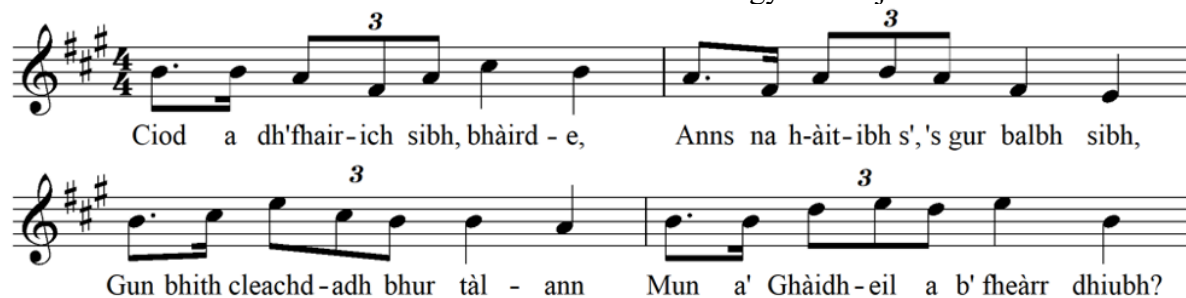
The other three elegies are reproduced below. All four share the same rhythm, but their pitch sequences and tonality differ. The elegy to the Earl (shown above) uses a full heptatonic major scale; the elegy to Hugh MacKay, son of a local tacksman, is pentatonic with a major tonality. The next, to a Major MacLean who died in the Seven Years' War, is hexatonic with a missing third and a minor seventh; while the last, to Ewen, is heptatonic in the Dorian mode (minor third, major sixth and minor seventh). Musically, then, their only obvious commonality is their metre.

Marbhrann Ùisdein MhicAoidh/Elegy for Hugh MacKay[70]

Ùis-dein, sor-aidh le d' iom-radh, On chaidh d' iom-chair air fàr-adh;

Ùis-dein òig sin mhic Reab-airt, Tha do leab-aidh sna clàr-aibh.

Anns an dearbh bhar-ail ag-ainn, Cha b' ann ab-aich a bha thu;

Ach 's e breith-eamh nan ui-le Ghlac sa chum-adh a b' fheàrr thu.

Marbhrann air Màidsear Mac'Ill'Eathainn/Elegy for Major MacLean[71]

Ciod a dh'fhair-ich sibh, bhàird-e, Anns na h-àit-ibh s','s gur balbh sibh,

Gun bhith cleachd-adh bhur tàl-ann Mun a' Ghàidh-eil a b' fheàrr dhiubh?

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[69] Word painting is 'The expression through music of the ideas presented or suggested by the words of a song or other vocal piece'. Apfel 1972: 928.

[70] Beard 2018: 14.

[71] *op. cit.*: 20.

Fhuair sinn naidh-eachd à Sas - ainn Gun chaill sinn fleas-gach sa Ghear- mailt, Am

Màid - sear òg Mac-'Ill'- Eathainn   Bu tearc a leith-id san arm - ailt.

Marbhrann Eòghainn/Elegy for Ewen[72]

'S ci - an fad-a, gur fad - a,   'S ci - an fad-a gu leòr,

On là bha thu fo sheac-theinn Gun aon ag ac-ain do bhròin.

Ma tha 'n tìm air dol seach-ad, 'S nach d' rinn thu chleach-damh air chòir,

Ged nach dàil dhuit ach seach - dain, Dèan droch fhas-an a leòn.

3.1.2 Second metrical model – *Ceapach na fàsach*

Rob Donn set his 1761 elegy for Donald, Lord Reay, to the melody of Iain Lom's song on the Keppoch murders of 1663. This setting shows the continuing strength of Gaelic oral tradition in this domain, as both are laments for clan chiefs, and Rob Donn must have chosen the tune at least in part for that reason.

Marbhrann do Dhòmhnall, Morair MacAoidh, Morair MacAoidh/Elegy for Donald, Lord Reay[73]

'S i   seo Noll-aig   as cian - ail' A chunn'-cas riamh le mo shùil;

'S soill - eir eas-bhaidh ar Triath oirnn An àm den bhliadh-na tigh'nn ùr;

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[72] *op. cit.*: 39.

[73] *op. cit.*: 28.

Ceann na cuid-eachd 's na tàbh-airn, Luchd nan dàn is a' chiùil, Na

luigh-e 'n eag-lais Cheann t-Sàil-e, San rùm th' a-bhàn fon ùir.

The 9/8 metre of this melody is unusual in Rob Donn's corpus; it appears only four times, including the two elegies under discussion here. The next example is Rob Donn's most extended composition in this genre, the elegy for his minister Rev. MacDonald, which extends the eight bars of its model to sixteen and uses a series of descending musical phrases to emphasize the weight of the bard's grief.

Marbhrann do Mhaighstir Morchadh/Elegy for Rev. Murdo MacDonald[74]

'S e do bhàs, Mhaigh-stir Mhor-chaidh, A rinn na h-àit-ean seo dhorch-adh,

'S ged chaidh dàil ann do mharbh-rann, Labh-raidh balbh-achd ri cèill. Nam

biodh a' Chrìos-taidh-eachd iom-lan, Cha rach-adh dìo-chuimhn' air d' iom-radh,

No do ghnìomh-ar-an iom-laid, Ach lean-tadh d' iom-chan-s' gu lèir.

Gur h-e chràdh mi nam mheanm-nadh 'S do luchd-gràidh a-gus lean-mhainn,

Meud do shaoth-rach mus d' fhalbh thu, 'S lugh'd a luirg às do dhèidh.

Bheir cuid leas-an-an buadh-ach O bhruaich fhas-an-ta d' uagh-ach,
Nach tug dais-each-an suar-ach Às na chual' iad uait fèin.

3.1.3 Third metrical model – *Latha siubhail slèibhe dhomh*

The metrical model for the last two songs is the *òran mòr* '*Latha siubhail slèibhe dhomh*' by Lachlan MacKinnon. Unlike the previous examples, this poem is not an elegy, and Rob Donn used its tune for an extended satire, '*Am bruadar*'('The dream'), shown below:

Am Bruadar/The Dream[75]

Chunn-aic mi-se bruad-ar, Fhir nach cual-a, thig is cluinn; Mas
breis-leach e, cur caisg air, 'S ma tha neart ann, bi ga sheinn, Nam
b' fhior dhomh fèin gum fac-a mi, Am Freas-tal 's e air beinn, Gach
nì is neach na amh-arc, Is e coimh-ead os an cinn.

But he also used the metrical model for another song, his frequently-anthologised satirical elegy for the Rispond misers:

Marbhrann do Chloinn Fhir Taigh Ruspainn/Elegy for the Rispond Misers[76]

Nan luigh-e seo gu h-ìos-al far na thìodh-laic sinn an triùir; Bha

[75] *op. cit.*: 60.

[76] *op. cit.*: 41.

Again, the metre is virtually identical, and one source indicates that the second poem was sung to the first tune.[77] But the tunes are actually quite different, in melodic line and tonality (the former minor and the latter major). In addition, the elegy for the misers seems to contain two more instances of deliberate word painting: the word *ìosal* ('low') in the first line on the lowest note of the melody, and the word *fallain* ('healthy') on a descending sixth in the second line, probably a bilingual musical pun on the English word 'fallen'. Bilingual puns and word painting of this sort were among Rob Donn's favourite gestures, demonstrating his ability to move deftly between Gaelic, English and music as means of communication with his audience.

3.2.0 New melodies adapting musical motifs

This compositional method is more complex, involving considerable rearrangement and change to pitch sequences as well as rhythm, reassembling musical motifs and elements of the traditional soundscape to create new song airs. Four examples will be examined, each comprised of a possible source followed by Rob Donn's tune. Some resemblances are more obvious than others, but all are explained to the extent possible so the reader may consider to what extent Rob Donn's melodies are derivative or should be classified as variants. In these examples – unlike the elegies – I take no position on the degree to which his borrowings were conscious or unconscious, nor do I consider the question particularly important. All I can offer is circumstantial evidence that (1) the models predated his songs, (2) he could have heard them, and (3) each pair of melodies has demonstrable common elements.

3.2.1 *A' chiad Diluain den ràithe/'S trom leam an àirigh*

This example explores Matheson's contention that the tune for Rob Donn's well-known love song ''*S trom leam an àirigh*' ('Sad is the shieling') is a variant of the air for An Clàrsair Dall's song '*A' chiad Diluain den ràithe*' ('The first Monday of the season').[78] Their temporal relationship is not at issue, as An Clàrsair Dall ('The Blind Harper', Rory Morrison) is thought to have died in 1714, the year of Rob Donn's birth, and the latter probably knew the earlier song. The best way to evaluate the claim is by a direct comparison of the two melodies (using Matheson's source) in the same key:

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[77] MacKenzie, John 1841: 212.
[78] Matheson 1970: 158–59.

A' chiad Diluain den ràithe[79]

'S trom leam an àirigh[80]

There is no question that these melodies have features in common, perhaps enough to place them in a single tune family. Both are essentially pentatonic, constructed on the notes E, G, A, B and D (although '*A' chiad Diluain*' also has an F# in bars 13, 21 and 31). They share a double tonic in E minor and D major with most principal cadences on E and frequent use of G (the minor third) on downbeats. Both are in 2/4 time with a large range, although Rob Donn's is larger. Two short melodic motifs also occur in both: a similar descending pattern from B to E at the end of each tune, and frequent use of the ascending pattern BDE.

On the other hand, the overall structure of the two melodies is distinct and they contain no identical bars or phrases. They also differ in length: '*A' chiad Diluain*' has four 8-bar phrases (32 bars total) while ''*S trom leam*' has only three such phrases (24 bars total). The earlier melody is comprised largely of quavers and stepwise motion with few large leaps,

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[79] Martin 1996: 58.

[80] Beard 2018: 94.

while Rob Donn uses more descending patterns, longer notes and larger leaps, especially the dramatic sequence in bars 17-20 that brings all motion to a complete halt on the low B, followed by an octave leap and rapid ascent to the high G two bars later. In Simon Fraser's words, this passage 'is avowedly Rob Donn's [...] imitating a sneering laugh at his own folly, for trusting so much to the faith of womankind, if a preferable match offers.'[81] This is word painting with a vengeance, and there is nothing remotely comparable in the other tune.

The question is whether the similarities in the tunes outweigh the differences sufficiently to deprive Rob Donn of the honour of composing the melody of his most famous love song. In the version of An Clàrsair Dall's melody in the Patrick MacDonald collection, the kinship to Rob Donn's melody is more evident than in Angus Fraser's version.[82] This suggests that Matheson was arguably correct in treating the two tunes as variants. On the other hand, as the overall shape of Rob Donn's melody is uniquely memorable and closely wedded to its text, I would probably classify it as composition using Cowdery's principle of recombining.

3.2.2 *Briogais mhic Ruaraidh* ('MacRory's Breeks')

The next example – also suggested initially by Matheson – poses more difficult questions of priority because Rob Donn's song was composed for a 1747 wedding in Sutherland and the alleged variant was transcribed by Elizabeth Ross in Raasay in 1812. A further complication is that Rob Donn's song requires sixteen bars, and the Ross tune has only fourteen. Nevertheless, Ross's editors raise the question: 'Could this tune be a version of some older song with the same title, which survived in Raasay for decades despite the likely popularity of Rob Donn's song?'[83] This is certainly possible, although the opposite sequence (that the Raasay tune incorporated part of Rob Donn's original) seems more likely given their respective dates. Again, both are set out below in comparable form.

Elizabeth Ross Melody[84]

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[81] Cranford 1982: 101, #24. This comment refers specifically to the words 'Ha, ha, ha!' in bars 17-18 in verse 4, although two other verses also contain interjections at this point. See Beard 2018: 94-95.

[82] Martin 2000: 49, #166.

[83] Cooke, MacLeod and Ó Baoill 2016: 34–35.

[84] *op. cit.*: 93 (#20).

Briogais mhic Ruaraidh[85]

Comparing the two melodies, both are 6/8 jigs, but no two bars are identical, and the two choruses seem quite unrelated. The Ross tune has a larger range (an eleventh compared to Rob Donn's ninth, the bagpipe range), and larger leaps (four octaves and three sixths), compared to Rob Donn's mostly stepwise motion, plus thirds and fifths. The tonality also differs, as Rob Donn's tune is firmly structured on a double tonic in C major and D minor (in the key shown), while the other tune has a predominant feel of F major. Another oddity is that the Ross melody is marked 'slow' while the Rob Donn tune is marked '*Gu h-aighearach*' ('merry') and is typically sung rapidly in *puirt-à-beul* style. On the other hand, the *rann* ('verse') melodies are closer than the *sèist* ('chorus'), and the existence of a musical model of some kind can probably be inferred from the circumstances of Rob Donn's composition, eleven verses and a chorus during a short walk between Bad na h-Achlais and Muiseal on his way to the wedding. Perhaps the precursor was different from both and the tunes diverged in opposite directions. Using Cowdery's terms, the later composer (whether Rob Donn or a resident of Raasay) employed both conjoining (of dissimilar choruses and similar verses) and recombining (of elements within the older verse) to create a distinct melody. In any case, it is Rob Donn's song that has survived, a good example of Sharp's principle of selection.

3.2.3 O'er the hills and far away/*An rìbhinn àlainn, èibhinn, òg*
In this example and the next, both identified by the author, Rob Donn used a popular tune in both its original and a substantially revised form. 'O'er the hills and far away' is a jaunty tune with a long pedigree that appeared in the Atkinson manuscript of 1694-95 and in a song called 'The Recruiting Officer' published in 1706.[86] Rob Donn liked it well enough to use it twice with his own words, both times in satires. Later, he extracted and recombined elements of the melody to compose a new song praising a young lady named Sally Grant, who was the

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[85] Beard 2018: 127.

[86] Purser 2006-07, VII: 23, notes.

toast of the Sutherland Fencibles in Inverness. The best way to see the resemblance is to compare versions in the same key, without words, the first from *The Scots Musical Museum* and the second from Rob Donn.

O'er the hills and far away'[87]

An rìbhinn àlainn, èibhinn, òg/To Sally Grant[88]

What Rob Donn did here to create a new melody was actually quite sophisticated — he changed the placement as well as the notes of the two-bar phrases, so that only the fourth phrase of the original verse and chorus has strong parallels to his refrain '*An rìbhinn, àlainn, èibhinn, òg*' at the ends of lines 1, 2, and 4. Specifically, the identical bars 7-8 and 15-16 in 'O'er the hills' are transformed into the identical bars 3-4, 7-8, and 15-16 in 'Sally Grant' by removing the quavers but leaving the sequence of crotchets intact. Elsewhere the transmutations are greater. That is, Rob Donn extends the melodic arc in bars 1-2 and 5-6 to D rather than stopping at B, and he varies his bars 9-14 more than the comparable bars in 'O'er the hills'. But the tonality (major, almost pentatonic, with no seventh and an occasional fourth), the melodic contours of the phrases, and even the circular ending on the second are the same in both, so it seems fair to treat 'O'er the hills' as his model for 'Sally Grant'.

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[87] Pittock 2018, II: 108-109, #62.

[88] Beard 2018: 183.

3.2.4 Roy's Wife of Aldivalloch/Mary and Isabel

In this case, like the last, Rob Donn used a popular melody in both its original and a substantially revised form, although here his revision seems to have come first. The borrowed tune is the jaunty strathspey 'Roy's Wife of Aldivalloch', which the bard used for a satire about a schoolmaster who moonlighted as a Peeping Tom.[89] The newly composed melody accompanies an earlier song, a charming dialogue between the two young daughters of Iain mac Eachainn praising and dispraising life at the shielings. This is another intriguing case of folk composition because it seems the bard composed the tune by consciously or unconsciously manipulating the melody of 'Roy's Wife' to create a distinct but recognizable variant. To facilitate comparison, 'Roy's Wife' and 'Mary and Isabel' are printed here in the same key and time signature:

Roy's Wife of Aldivalloch[90]

Màiri agus Iseabail/Mary and Isabel[91]

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[89] *op. cit.*: 153.

[90] Pittock 2018: II: 419, #342.

[91] Beard 2018: 189.

The resemblances between these two melodies appear mainly at the level of the individual bar or half-bar. Specifically, Rob Donn's bars 1 and 3 are similar to Roy's bars 5 and 7, while Rob Donn's bars 5 and 7 correspond to Roy's bars 1 and 3. The even-numbered bars share only motifs and contours: the descending pattern at the beginning of bar 2, the sequence DCDE in bar 4 (an octave higher in Rob Donn), the ascending pattern at the beginning of bar 6, and the pattern that first descends and then ascends in bar 8 to end (more or less) on a C. Other parallels also exist, such as the fact that every odd-numbered bar begins on a G. But the differences are also typical, as Rob Donn extended the range twice to high G and placed most of his cadences on higher notes than 'Roy's Wife', creating a more expansive melody that shows once again his large vocal range. This is another example of the compositional technique Cowdery calls 'recombining'.[92]

3.3.0 New melodies with no known sources

Finally, there are several examples of melodies with no obvious antecedents that are uniformly attributed to Rob Donn. In each case the melody and first verse of the song are reproduced; the complete texts and translations are available elsewhere.

3.3.1 *Do Phrionnsa Teàrlach*/To Prince Charles

The first example is Rob Donn's song welcoming Prince Charles Edward Stewart to Scotland in 1745. Although not his only Jacobite song, it is the only one that may have an original melody.

Do Phrionnsa Teàrlach/To Prince Charles[93]

This melody was transcribed by John Munro in MacKay Country in the mid-nineteenth century, printed by Gunn and MacFarlane in 1899, and reproduced by John Lorne Campbell in *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five* in 1933; no other tune is known. The tune itself is hexatonic and minor, with a double tonic in G minor and F major, and the range of a ninth. The marking in the first edition is '*Gu smearail*' ('vigorous'), and the octave leap in the

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[92] Cowdery 1984: 498–502.

[93] Beard 2018: 46.

middle of the word *dèanamaid* ('let's do it!') strongly emphasizes the feeling of a *brosnachadh* ('incitement').

3.3.2 *Am Boc Glas*/The Grey Buck

This example is a pipe jig credited to the bard by John Mackenzie and Hew Morrison. According to Mackenzie:
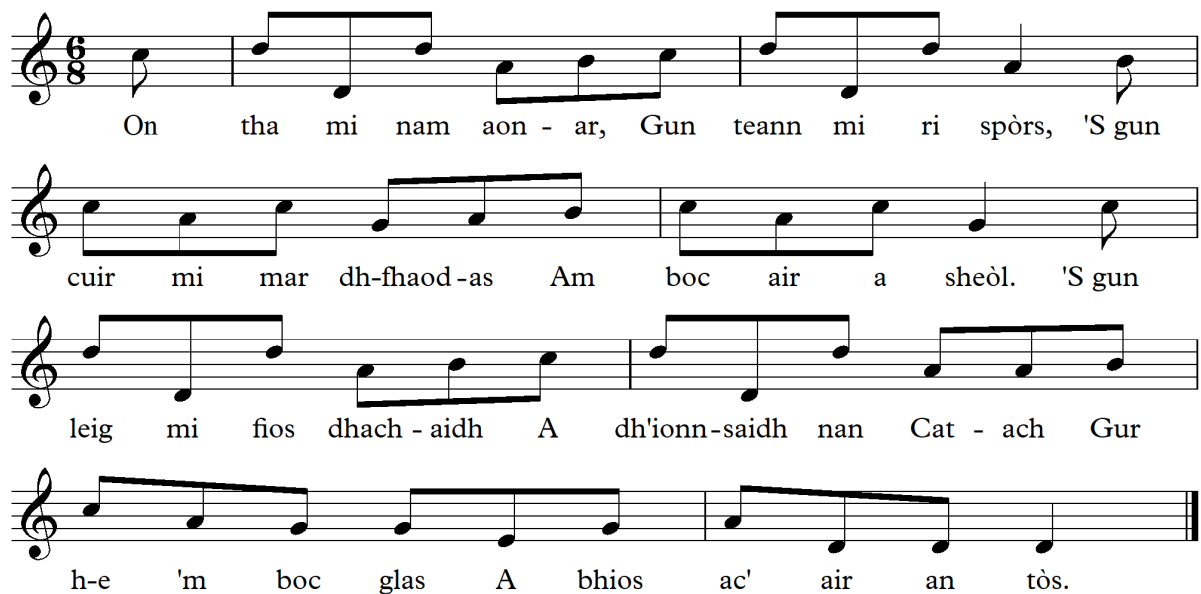
> The tune is excellent and may justly be entitled the first of the Sutherlandshire pipe jigs. It was the poet's own composition.[94]

Morrison takes the position that Rob Donn composed the tune but not the words:

> This poem, although ascribed to Rob Donn in Mackenzie's *Beauties of Gaelic Poetry*, is not usually reckoned as his. Many of the people of the bard's native district aver it is not Rob's. There can be little doubt, however, that the song is Rob Donn's, and one of the very latest of his productions.[95]

If this piece of oral tradition is correct, it may be the only song in Rob Donn's corpus where someone else composed the words. Their target, however, is well-documented in the records of the Kirk Session; he was a serial fornicator named Donald MacKay who sailed for the West Indies in 1778 after being accused of fornication with six different women over a four-year period. As that was the year of Rob Donn's death, it could well be among the last of his compositions.

Am Boc Glas/The Grey Buck[96]

On tha mi nam aon - ar, Gun teann mi ri spòrs, 'S gun cuir mi mar dh-fhaod -as Am boc air a sheòl. 'S gun leig mi fios dhach - aidh A dh'ionn-saidh nan Cat - ach Gur h-e 'm boc glas A bhios ac' air an tòs.

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[94] MacKenzie, John 1841: 208.

[95] Morrison 1899: 408.

[96] Beard 2018: 155.

The tune is in 6/8 time, the range an octave, and the scale hexatonic in D, with a double tonic in D minor and C major; if transposed, it would fit the pipe scale with double tonic in A minor (since the third is absent) and G major. With Rob Donn's signature octave leaps, it could have been composed initially as an instrumental piece for one of the MacLeod pipers, or perhaps as a collaborative effort at the time of the events described in the text. It has remained in the piping repertoire; in 2002, Cannon identified 'The Shaggy Grey Buck' as an old pipe jig that is still 'highly regarded' but was 'extensively reset in the twentieth century', though the connection with Rob Donn seems to have been lost.[97]

3.3.3 *Do Iain MacLeòid*/**To John MacLeod**/*Agus a sheann duin'*

This is another humorous song in the form of a pipe reel. The evidence for Rob Donn's composition is primarily the publication history. Gunn and MacFarlane (1899) took the tune from William Gunn (1848) where it is called '*Fire fara a sheann Duine, 's fhada leam a tha thu agum*. My old man is long a-dying'.[98] Significantly, it appeared with the same title, 'The auld Man is long a dying', in a more elaborate fiddle arrangement published by MacGlashan in 1778.[99] Since that was the year of Rob Donn's death, the fact that the tune was known so early and consistently thereafter in both Scots and Gaelic by a title based on his poem provides some reason to believe that he composed its melody. The setting below (from Gunn) has the range of a tenth, a hexatonic scale (without a fourth) in C major, and a double tonic in D minor and C major; if transposed (and the highest passing note omitted), it would fit the pipe scale in A minor and G major.

Do Iain MacLeòid/To John MacLeod/*Agus a sheann duin'*[100]

3.3.4 *Am Fleasgach is a' Bhanntrach*/**The Young Man and the Widow**

We began our examples with a serious elegy and we end with a bawdy courtship song, featuring Rob Donn in the role of witty older friend accompanying a poor, shy young bachelor to court a propertied widow. This seems to reflect the custom of the *rèiteach* ('marriage contract negotiation') where a certain amount of sexual innuendo was tolerated if not expected.[101] There is no particular evidence that Rob Donn composed the melody, except that it sounds just like him, with its cheery ascending thirds and sixths in the chorus as the two men set out on a brisk walk over the mountains to the widow's home. The melody is pentatonic with a range of an octave and a fourth.

Am Fleasgach is a' Bhanntrach/The Young Man and the Widow[102]

Sèist

Thèid mi cuid-e riut don bhail-e ud thall, 'S nì sinn rud-eig-in mus tig sinn a-nall;

Thèid mi cuid-e riut don bhail-e ud thall, 'S nì sinn rud-eig-in mus tig sinn a-nall.

Rann

'S duin-e son-a, saogh-alt' thu Mun e 's gu dèan i taobh riut,

Cha bhi dad de shaoth-air ort Ach sìn-eadh ris na àm.

The result of the courtship is unknown, but we do know the song was once sung at the Mòd in an arrangement for four-part male chorus.[103]

See Martin, Neill 2006: 77–158 (81–83, 124–26).

Beard 2018: 110.

An Comunn Gàidhealeach 1953: 4.

4.0 Conclusion

Rob Donn himself told us very little about how he composed or selected music for his songs. While the quotation that introduces this article suggests a relatively unconscious process, another song suggests that he first chose a topic and then searched his memory for a suitable melody (or the ideas to construct one):

'S ait leam gun thuit mi air tèis	I am glad I fell upon an air
Aoibhinn le subhachas,	That is pleasant and cheerful,
Gur h-urrainn domh chur an cèill	So that I could express
Beus Churstaidh Sutharlain.	The virtues of Kirsty Sutherland.[104]

No doubt – like other musicians – the bard's creative processes included both unconscious and conscious aspects, and varied from song to song. Unfortunately, we cannot ask him, as we 'cannot do fieldwork in the past.'[105] All we can do is analyse the results and make the best inferences we can.

What we do know is that Rob Donn exercised considerable creativity within the framework of his own cultural tradition. In Nettl's words:

> What is 'given' to the creator of music is the building blocks and the rules of what may be done with them; innovation consists of how the options are exercised.[106]

As this article has shown, Rob Donn utilized the building blocks available to him to create a large corpus of songs in a variety of musical styles suitable to their respective subject matter. Often, like other Gaelic bards, he set his poems to existing tunes. But frequently he composed his own, using building blocks such as metrical models, musical motifs, or merely background principles of organization and tonality that came to him naturally from a sound world familiar to him and his listeners. This musical creativity was recognised in his own lifetime and by his early editors but forgotten in the twentieth century as Gaelic poetry and music began to drift apart.

Two further points should be added. Matheson was clearly wrong – at least for Rob Donn – when he claimed there was 'no evidence whatever' for musical composition by any Gaelic bard. He also opined that it was 'doubtful whether conscious composition ever contributed much to the development of Gaelic vocal music.'[107] This merits two responses. First, composition need not be 'conscious' to be considered composition. To account for variation and innovation within an oral tradition, the test must be objective rather than subjective, i.e., does a substantially new melody result? Second, the evidence adduced in this article (including repeated instances of deliberate word painting and systematic melodic variation on metrical models) suggests that, at least sometimes, Rob Donn composed music for his songs in a very 'conscious' fashion. This was one of his important skills as a bard and song-maker, contributing to the effectiveness of the finished product by unifying the message of the words and the music.

My final comment is to urge other scholars to conduct similar research into the music of other Gaelic song-poets. Until that occurs, it is impossible to know to what extent Rob Donn

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[104] Morrison 1899: 266 (my translation).

[105] Widdess 1992: 219-31 (p. 219).

[106] Nettl 2015: 56.

[107] Matheson 1970: 152.

was unique or unusual among his peers. Even knowing the sources of borrowed tunes for major eighteenth-century poets would provide a fascinating insight into their degree of acculturation, the kinds of music they heard, and which types they considered appropriate for various genres of poetry. This would add greatly to our understanding of their mental worlds, and perhaps enrich our repertoire as well.

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