

THE NATIONAL MUSIC OF SCOTLAND.



THE Scottish nation has in every age been famed for its poetry and music. The poems of Ossian, written at a period when Scotland had hardly assumed the garb of civilisation, bear testimony to the conspicuous part she has played in the cultivation of the muse, and her poets, more than those of any other country, embody in their works the leading

characteristics of their nationality. In her music, Scotland fills a no less honoured place than in her poetry. The wild and pathetic beauty of the Scottish airs has everywhere been acknowledged and admired, not less by those of other nationalities than by the Scotch themselves. That these melodies were known and appreciated by not a few of the great composers, may be deduced from the fact that Mendelssohn has drawn upon Scotland for the *scherzo* in his A Minor Symphony, while in Boieldieu's *La Dame Blanche* we meet with several airs from the same source.

The term "national music" has been misunderstood by some. Carl Engel defines it as "that music which, appertaining to a nation or tribe, whose individual emotions and passions it expresses, exhibits certain peculiarities more or less characteristic, which distinguish it from the music of any other nation or tribe." The Germans very appropriately call it *Volksmusik*, a term which we might translate into "folk-music" were such a word permissible. National music, then, may be tersely defined as that which the people themselves have made. It has arrived at what it is through the combined influence of the many minds and circumstances that have united to form it. Hence it is that composers who have attempted to write national airs have nearly always failed, for their melodies have only been an imitation of others which had a previous existence, and have not embodied the essential elements of really national music. A notable exception is to be found in "Rule, Britannia," to which Dr. Arne has given a truly national coloring; but even this popular melody cannot be termed national in the same strict sense as the airs peculiar to Scotland. The latter, as we shall see, have to a great extent grown with the people, and many of them probably had no distinct origin beyond the extemporaneous singing of some peasant or artisan. In this respect they manifestly differ from the formal compositions of trained musicians, and must not be judged in the light of the rules which guide the modern composer in his work.

Of the precise state of national music in Scotland, history affords no information prior to the fifteenth century. The facts which are accessible relative to this period have but slight bearing on the subject of national airs, and afford us no help in determining the origin of many of the melodies which have been handed down to us. No musical manuscripts containing copies of Scottish airs have been preserved of an earlier date than the seventeenth century, and we are, therefore, left without actual proof of any of our known melodies having existed prior to that time. There can be no doubt, however, that many of them had their origin long previous to that date, and were handed down "orally" from generation to generation, gradually assuming more perfect forms as time passed on. The artless simplicity and emotional feeling which characterise several of the older airs would lead to the conclusion that they must have been the product of a very remote age, before any musical instrument was introduced beyond that of the shepherd's pipe, with its plain diatonic scale of full tones, and before the application of any rules of composition such as now prevail. It has been conjectured by some writers that several of the Scottish airs were composed by James I. of Scotland, though there is no positive evidence to lead to such a conclusion. It is well known that the unfortunate monarch was not only an excellent performer on many musical instruments, but was also a composer of some merit. It can hardly be doubted that many of his compositions, of one class or other, have come down to us; but, as history has not preserved the facts, it is probable they pass under other names, or have been allied to modern verse. It is at least impossible now to identify any one of the Scottish airs with King James.

It has been frequently asserted that the Scotch owe many of their melodies to Rizzio; but we think a little inquiry will show that this is nothing more than a vulgar conjecture. Rizzio was by birth an Italian, and is said to have received his education in France. He came to Scotland as a lutenist to the court, and remained only three years. For more than a century and a half after his death there is no hint that Rizzio ever composed any music in any style. It is in Thomson's "Orpheus Caledonius," published in 1725 (Rizzio was murdered in 1565), that we first find the name of Rizzio coupled with some of the Scottish airs. In that collection seven melodies were ascribed to him, but the evidence could not have been satisfactory, for we find that in the second edition of the work, issued eight years afterwards, Rizzio's name was completely suppressed. This was not to be wondered at, when we examine these few compositions with which he was credited by Thomson. Without exception, they are all thoroughly Scottish in character, and bear the most striking resemblance to the undoubtedly genuine melodies of the country. Granting that Rizzio was

a first-rate musician—of which there is no historical evidence—it is extremely improbable that his compositions could have been made to partake of the marked peculiarities of Scottish melody. It may have been that Rizzio's name was first mentioned in connection with the Scottish airs by his countrymen in England, but, in the absence of all proof, we can dismiss the subject by quoting the opinion of Dr. Campbell: "That any one single Scottish air was invented or composed by the unfortunate Rizzio, is only noticed here as an absurd fable, which, having no support, merits no refutation."*

In examining the melodies of Scotland we are struck by the almost complete absence of semitones, and the general elimination from the scale of two of its notes. These peculiarities are not to be looked upon as the result of ignorance or barbarity, but are conformable to the principles of composition which prevailed in Scotland in the remote period at which these airs were produced. The common major scale, as now used, was unknown in Scotland until a comparatively recent date. With the perfection of harmony, and the general cultivation of music, came the use of the present scale, and the old flat seventh of the minor gave place to the raised seventh of modern times. There seems to us, however, to be an intimate connection between the earlier Scottish melodies and the musical instrument—if such the bagpipe may be called—so greatly in use at that time among the people. The difficulty of producing the fourth of the scale in proper tune and of fingering the seventh in quick passages was admitted; and it is not improbable that this may have acted as a deterrent against the use of these notes in the construction of the popular airs. It is evident at least that the limited scale of the national instrument had considerable effect in determining the style of music in general use. Such melodic forms as G, F, G, at the end of lines, or even A, G, A, need not have been so persistently employed had the voice been the only consideration. But while to modern ears such progressions sound inartistic, it is partly from their use that the national music of Scotland receives its peculiar colouring. Modern arrangers have in many cases destroyed these rough and weird cadences by altering them to suit the exigencies of harmony, forgetting that they were composed without reference to the rules of part-writing. In this way the beautiful air "John Anderson, my jo," has suffered by the penultimate note having been changed from a natural to a raised seventh, in order, we are told, to form a true leading note! To alter an old melody to suit modern requirements is undoubtedly wrong, and if it is not possible to clothe it with an accompaniment without tampering with the air, it would be better to refrain from adding parts to it. The older melodies, written in what is technically termed the Æolian mode, never introduce the sharp seventh of the key, and if it is inserted the whole character of the composition is changed.

Another peculiarity of Scottish music is the frequent use of what has been termed the "snap." This consists of a short note followed by a longer one, the former receiving the accent. The dance music of Scotland overflows with this characteristic device, but many vocal pieces also contain specimens more or less marked. Examples may be found in the well-known airs, "Comin' thro' the Rye" and "Whistle o'er the lave o't," in both of which a semiquaver on the accented part of the bar is frequently followed by a dotted quaver. Imitators of Scottish music have seldom failed to seize upon this peculiarity, and so unsparingly have some of them used it that their productions at once become wearisome and monotonous. The "snap" is now seldom employed, except in "strathspeys" and other forms of Scottish dance music.

The excessive popularity of Scottish music in England during the reign of Queen Mary led to many unprincipled Londoners concocting Scotch tunes, and despatching them over the Border as melodies of native composition. At several of the places of amusement in London, it was customary for those in charge of the musical affairs to manufacture their own Scotch songs. It may be readily imagined that both the words and music were of a very inferior character, and bore only a faint resemblance to the genuine productions of Scotland. The following, taken from one of these spurious songs, is contemptible, not only as an imitation of the Scottish dialect, but as simple poetry:—

"Woe is me, what *mum* I doe?
Drinking water I may rue;
Since my heart *soe muckle* harm befel,
Wounded by a bonnie lass at Epsom well.
Ise ha bin at Dalkeith fair,
Seen the charming faces there;
But all Scotland now *geud feth defye*,
Sike a tipp to show, and lovely rowling eye."

The italics are ours. Many more songs of a like character may be found in D'Urfe's "Pills to purge Melancholy," and Mr. Chappell has referred to the subject in his "Popular Music of the Olden Time."

The music of Scotland is of a much more extensive nature than might at first be supposed. If we were to reckon up all the vocal pieces—including many traditional ballad airs—pibrochs, strathspeys, reels, marches, hornpipes, jigs, and battle-pieces, the number would probably reach 7,000 or 8,000. Much has been done to preserve many of the finer melodies in book form, but there are numberless airs which have never yet appeared in musical notation, and are only to be heard in the secluded rural districts of the country. It is to be hoped that these will yet be rescued from the oblivion into which otherwise they are certain to fall with the spread of education, and with extended means of intercommunication among the people. A collection embracing all that is worthy of preservation in Scottish music would be of great value, and would meet with acceptance from all lovers of genuine, heart-stirring melody.

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* "Philosophical Survey of the South of Ireland."