

Burns and His Love of Music

This article has a twofold purpose. Firstly, to give a better understanding of the man and his love of music. Secondly, to heighten the enjoyment of listening to them when played and sung. At present we know of 368 songs which Burns has written, although more are coming to light over the years.

It is known from Burns' various biographers that Robert had an interest in music. Anecdotal evidence from his youngest sister, Isabella, Burns Begg, suggests that Robert tried hard to learn to play the fiddle by teaching himself to play, but obviously not very successfully. She had many memories of Robert playing the fiddle, including, his asking her **"to sing his songs so that he would hear how they sounded"**.

In August 1787, he recounts **to Dr John Moore**, that he attended 'a country dance school', when he was 17, where he would have learnt common country dances accompanied by a solo fiddler. Dr. John Moore was first introduced to Burns by **Mrs. Frances Anna Dunlop** - the poet's most regular correspondent and critic. She had sent Dr. Moore a copy of **Burns's 'The Kilmarnock Edition' (Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect)**, which was first printed and issued by **John Wilson (1758-1821)** in July 1786. John Wilson was the printer and bookseller in Kilmarnock.

Burns love of the fiddle manifested itself with him and his brother Gilbert playing at the Bachelor's Club in Tarbolton, which they established and ran between 1781 and 1783. It is known that Burns had both a musical ear and musical knowledge and there is evidence that he even tried his hand at musical composition. In his first **Common-Place Book**, he refers to two musical fragments written when he was twenty-four, and records that he **"set about composing an air in the old Scotch style."** **He did however go on to say that "I am not musical scholar"** At any rate it is quite evident that Burns' knowledge of music was sufficient to account for the unequalled mastery he acquired over the difficult art of writing words to old Scots national airs. It is undoubtedly this talent that provides a great measure for his success as a songwriter.

We also know that Burns used lots of contemporary fiddle tunes as the melodic inspiration for his songs and that he admired and used fiddlers as key characters in his poetry and songs. Examples being, from the extreme derogatory term, **the 'pigmy scraper' in *The Jolly Beggars***, (a pigmy scraper being a little fiddler and a term of contempt for a bad player, who also happens to be little fiddler), to his wonderful song to match the spiky fiddle tune **'Whistle o'er the lave o't' created in 1785**, to the fiddle-playing Devil in **'The Deil's awa' wi' the Exciseman,** first published in ***The Scots Musical Museum* in 1792**. This latter song used the tune **'The Hemp Dresser,'** which Burns had probably found in the collection of fiddle tunes entitled **'*The Caledonian Pocket Companion*'**, by the 18th century dancing-master and fiddler **James Oswald (1710–1769)** Oswald was well known as a Scottish composer, arranger, cellist, and music publisher, who was appointed as Chamber Composer for **King George III** and also wrote and published many Scottish folk tunes. In fact, in one of Burns's letters to **James Johnson** in 1791 he reveals his excitement at purchasing an **'entire copy of Oswald's Scots Music**. He anticipated that he would **'make glorious work out of it'** and so he did, choosing many of Oswald's tunes in his book the **'Companion for Oswald**.

Turning now to Burns ability as a songwriter. He provided his own lyrics, sometimes adapted from traditional words. He put words to Scottish folk melodies and airs for which he collected and composed his own arrangements of the music, including modifying tunes or recreating melodies. He wrote in many of his letters that he preferred simplicity, relating songs to spoken language and which should be sung in traditional ways; these songs being mainly be played on the fiddle.

Dr Moore was particularly intrigued by Burns and asked that Mrs. Dunlop arrange for Burns to get in touch with him. Moore was an academic of some note, who studied medicine both in Scotland and in Paris. He was also an author, having written a number of authoritative books on culture, medicine, the French Revolution (which he witnessed) and a novel called '**Zeluco**', which Burns particularly admired. Initially, Burns was hesitant to contact Dr Moore, feeling out of his depth with such an intellect. They did eventually made contact and spent much time discussing the works of Burns. It is interesting to note that Moore tried to persuade the poet to stop writing in the **Scottish dialect** - a piece of advice which Burns thankfully ignored!

More importantly however, Burns wrote a letter to Dr. Moore in August 1787, which turned out to be a short autobiography of the poets' life. This document is considered to contain the most revealing information on Robert Burns and gives the reader great insight into his mind, perceptions and life.

Burns other contacts included both James Johnson, and later George Thomson. He wrote to both men, discussing the use of fiddle tunes for his songs. **James Johnson (1753- 1811)** was an **Edinburgh** publisher and music seller, best known for publishing the songbook '**The Scots Musical Museum**'. **George Thomson (1757-1851)** was a friend of Robert Burns, who was also a Scottish music publisher and published *Select Scottish Airs*. The first part of Thomson's *Select Scottish Airs*, brought out in June 1793, contained 25 songs by Burns.

Burns kept on providing songs to Thomson until a few days before his death. Thomson became involved in a lot of correspondence with Burns, frequently suggesting "**improvements**" to Burns' poems, which Burns rejected. A particular instance was *Scots Wha Hae*, where Thomson insisted on an alternative tune to the familiar tune, which we know and sing. Thomson wanted Burns to alter his stanzas to suit his needs, but was later forced by public pressure to restore the original version. Once Burns had stated his wishes however, Thomson rarely argued back, but sometimes made alterations without consulting the poet! It is to Thomson's credit however, that he was able to persuade Burns to produce the English verses, as well as his **Scots language** lyrics for which I think we should be grateful! George Thomson, not only published Burns's music, but also contributions, from **Lord Byron, and Walter Scott**. He is also credited with publishing folksong arrangements by **Franz Joseph Haydn, Ludwig van Beethoven, Ignaz Pleyel, and Carl Maria von Weber**.

In addition to Burns' relationship with Thomson and Johnson he maintained contact with his good friend **Robert Riddell of Glenriddell**. Riddell was a keen amateur musician who published his own collection of '*New Music for the Pianoforte or Harpsichord*' in 1787, as well as **A Collection of Scotch Galwegian & Border Tunes for the Violin** in 1794, (both being printed by James Johnson in Edinburgh).

After giving up his farm, at Lochlea in 1784 he moved to Dumfries. It was at this time that, being requested to write lyrics for *The Melodies of Scotland*, he responded by contributing over 100 songs. He made major contributions to **George Thomson's A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice** as well as to **James Johnson's Scots Musical Museum**. Arguably his claim to immortality chiefly rests on these volumes, which placed him in the front rank of **lyric poets**. (A lyric poem being a short verse with musical qualities that conveys powerful feelings.)

Burns chief work for writing his tunes was for **James Johnson's Scots Musical Museum**. The *Scots Musical Museum* was an influential collection of traditional Scottish folk music published from 1787 to 1803. The project started with James Johnson, a struggling music engraver / music seller, with a love of old Scots songs and a determination to preserve them. In the winter of 1786 James Johnson met Robert Burns, who was visiting Edinburgh for the first time and they found that they shared this mutual interest in preserving Scots songs and tunes.

The first volume was published in 1787 and it included three songs by Burns. However, the earliest issues of the 'Museum' did not identify the songs that were written by Burns, as in 1787 his fame had yet to grow and imbed itself. However, in later issues his name was appended to his contributions in the index and the text often had the declaration "*Written for this Work by Robert Burns.*"

We must not forget the immense debt we owe to Burns for recovering many old and neglected songs and airs and writing them to appropriate words in order to prevent them being lost. He contributed 40 songs to **volume 2** of Johnson's **Scots Musical Museum** and in total he contributed about **two hundred and twenty-eight songs and more than fifty old melodies**. It is to Burns' credit that all of these songs have been preserved and would almost certainly have been lost. In the end he would be responsible for about a third of the 600 songs in the whole collection as well as making a considerable editorial contribution. The final volume was published in 1803 and interestingly contained the first printing of **Handsome Nell**, Burns' first song.

It is worth noting that Thomson, as a publisher commissioned arrangements of '**Scottish, Welsh and Irish Airs**' by such eminent composers of the day such as **Joseph Haydn and Ludwig van Beethoven**, but with new lyrics. Burns being included as a major contributor to these lyrics.

Although Burns is primarily regarded as Scotland's national poet, there is strong evidence that he considered himself as much a songwriter as anything else. Burns worked hard as a collector of old Scottish melodies and airs, to which he set his own words or adapted old ones. But he should also be considered a composer and arranger of consummate skill. He could take a jaunty tune and turn it into a smooth air. He was able to detect the basic essence of a melody, and by doing so, most importantly, re-create tunes from fragments and motifs. As an example of this ability, in **Johnson's Musical Museum** most of the arrangements contained therein are for voice and piano, but these arrangements are not as Burns intended. His arrangements were based much more on folk music, in a style which is closer to the way they would have been sung in Burns' time. But there's also the question of different melodies to some of the same songs. For instance, the original melody to **Auld Lang Syne**, which Burns wrote, some people would actually consider to be infinitely better than the one we normally sing and hear today.

But what exactly is a Burns song as opposed to a Burns poem? The poems he wrote were purely poems, and the songs he wrote were songs. There are certainly poems that can be set to music, but he wrote his songs as songs, and for the most part published them as such, in **Johnson's Musical Museum or Thomson's Scottish Collection**. One of the better known of these collections is *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (the title is not Burns's), a collection of bawdy lyrics that were popular in the music halls of Scotland as late as the 20th century.

He was, however, very capable of producing **'original material'**. A good example of such, being his writing, whilst in Dumfries, of his world famous song **'A Man's a Man for A' That'** which was based on the writings contained in **'The Rights of Man'** by Thomas Paine, one of the chief political theoreticians of the American Revolution. We also know from some of his poems that his believe in radical reform shone through. At the time such a believe was frowned upon. This resulted in him sending his poems anonymously to the **Glasgow Magazine**. Such poems as, **'Parcel of Rogues to the Nation'** and the **'Rights of Women'** would be good examples of his beliefs.

Burns as we know was an educated man. He spoke excellent French and knew the work of contemporary European composers such as **Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn**. If we were to compare Burns' contribution to music compared to that of those renowned, composers, and their semi-classical arrangements of songs, perhaps you could argue there is no comparison. However, it is interesting to note that both Mozart and Haydn are believed to have made use of some of Burns' airs.

There was also the situation where a protege of **Joseph Haydn**, called **Ignaz Pleyel**, who was one of the talented and most composers at this time instilled a sense of rivalry, not only, with Haydn and Mozart, but with Burns. At the time Burns was being lionised in Edinburgh, Pleyell was being lionised in London. The rivalry resulted in quite a situation where Burns decided to **'take him on'**. Burns told Thomson, that he was well aware of the classical manner in which composers like Pleyell and Haydn were writing at the time and that was their forte and should stick to their area of expertise. Burns argued with Thomson about what Pleyell, seemed to be considering. **"If Pleyell changes one iota of the native features of these Scottish airs, I'll have done with him."**

We can therefore argue that Burns was not only Scotland's, greatest poet, but also its greatest songwriter! Many European musicians and scholars agree on this point. Why else would both Mozart and Haydn make use of some of Burns' airs! I therefore concur with Burns's own assessment of himself. He said he was a very capable songwriter, but let's not forget how great a poet he also was.

Turning now to another aspect of Burns's musical ability, his career as a fiddler. Burns, as we all know was best known as a poet, however he was also quite a **'fiddler'**. It was this fact being mostly ignored by the Poet's biographers, until **Captain Charles Gray, R.M.**, looked into the matter in 1847. Gray interviewed **Burns' sister, Mrs. Begg**, and on asking her if the Poet played any instrument, she at once replied, **"Yes, a little on the violin"**.

He continued to play the fiddle and in 1787, he met the great Scottish fiddler, **Niel Gow**, being introduced to him by the Duchess of Athol. Interestingly, Gow too, came of humble origins and

originally trained as a weaver, and was also considered something of a musical prodigy, but eventually giving up the weaving trade to become a full-time musician. As a musician he was widely considered the best fiddle player in Perthshire, an area which was renowned for its musicians.

Scottish fiddler **Neil Gow (1727 – 1807)**



In a letter of 1790, Burns wrote, under a fictitious name to Charles Sharpe of Roddam. Sharpe was a close friend of Burns, being a violinist and a composer of music and verse. He was also a prominent local Freemason, who gave Burns his Masonic apron in July 1781. Burns wrote in the letter: "I am a fiddler and a Poet, and you, I am told, play an exquisite violin and have a standard taste in the Belles Lettres. The other day a brother catgut gave me a charming Scottish air of your composition. If I was pleased with the tune, I was in raptures with the title you have given it, and taking up the idea, I have spun it into three stanzas enclosed."

In conclusion, turning again to Burns's songs. We can ask the question, **'How badly has Scotland treated his songs over the years?** His songs have been basically lying in a heap for two centuries resulting therefore in him being **written off as a songwriter**. It is for this reason why we should give thanks to the work of **Dr. Fred Freeman**, who compiled a collection of over 360 songs by Burns, encompassing ballads, bawdy songs, patriotic and political anthems, and featuring musical performances by some of the leading singers and players in the modern Scottish folk revival.

Ultimately therefore, as good as Burns' songs might be, he will remain to be far better known as **Scotland's Poet and Bard**.