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The music of Scotland has both a strong oral and literary tradition that has been handed down through the generations and heavily mythologized from the late 18th century. In contemporary times, Scotland is a nation of around 5.3 million people within the United Kingdom. The traditional music of Scotland is performed in three main languages: English, Gaelic, and Scots. The Scottish Gaelic and Scots languages are central to Scottish traditional music, and in relation to other European countries, Scotland has had a long tradition of scholarship and collection of traditional music. Scotland's political position as a stateless yet devolved nation within the United Kingdom has also been constitutive of much political song that sits comfortably alongside its substantial ballad and lyric song traditions and some other unique indigenous song and tune types such as *waulking songs*, *piobaireachd*, and *strathspeys*. Often internally characterized as a *bookish* tradition in relation to other European and North American traditional music, Scottish traditional music is performed in social contexts ranging from intimate family situations to formal, mass-mediated television and radio performances. This entry provides an overview of the history of Scottish traditional music, from its roots in the 16th-century reel to contemporary expressions in communities in Scotland and around the world.

Overview

There are, and have been historically, strong social ties and a shared musical repertoire between Scotland and Ireland. However, Scottish traditional music is distinct both sonically and socially, and as Gary West has suggested, in the highly innovative Scottish tradition, these historical “roots are not tethers.” Like all traditional musics, Scottish traditional music serves as a fundamental means of social belonging for Scots both at home and abroad, and the legacy of past British Imperialism and emigration has led to a wide dispersal of Scottish traditional music in the Anglo-American world where there are still strong performing communities in countries including Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and South Africa.

The Scottish bagpipes are often seen and heard as a symbol of Scottishness throughout the world, and they are certainly the most widespread Scottish musical tradition on a global scale. Scottish bagpipes also have provided the unique indigenous musical genre of *piobaireachd* (i.e., a form of theme and variations played by solo pipers mainly in competitive contexts). There are other uniquely Scottish traditions still performed, and still more shared with other regions and nations that are performed in Scotland with a Scottish *accent* (e.g., lyric songs, lullabies, and laments). Scottish traditional music was largely pursued (with some notable exceptions) as a shared, local social practice, often for dancing, until the revival of the 1950s. However, as a result of a widespread folk revival in the 1950s and 1960s, increasing commodification of Scottish traditional music in the 1980s and 1990s, political devolution in 1999, and the growing cultural confidence that developed in between 2000 and 2010, Scottish traditional music is present in the media and public institutions as never before, with formal school qualifications in traditional music for children, specialist tertiary higher education degrees, central state funding, and targeted cultural policy for the traditional arts widely acknowledged as an important part of Scotland's culture.

Enlightenment and Music in the Modern Period (1760–)

Early modern Scottish traditional music was not known as such, and in common with most Western nations, the textual discourse that emerged in the 18th century used the term *national music* in relation to what is termed *traditional* music. Crucially, Scotland has always had a distinct traditional culture that has been separate from England, Ireland, and Wales, and this is reflected in the scholarship and discourse of traditional music across the British Isles. There is no real category of “British traditional music” with the possible exception of some bagpipe music composed and performed within the British military imperial context. Much of the 16th- and 17th-century traditional music in Scotland was performed as dance music and orally transmitted song, and it is really only in the 18th century that the discourse surrounding a *national* music emerges as part of the enlightenment growth of the national idea. The Reformation from Catholicism to Protestantism

was fast and vigorous in mid to late 16th- and 17th-century Scotland, but it did not really have much impact in the *Gaelteachd* (i.e., Gaelic-speaking region) until the later 18th century. Importantly, the Reformation was conducted in Scotland mainly in English and Latin, which left Gaelic society largely Catholic. But in general, one of the principle effects of the Reformation was to break the link between religious and musical identities in communities across Scotland.

However, the textual tradition surrounding Scottish traditional music goes back into the early modern period, and it is in the 16th century that the tune type *reel* is mentioned as a particular form of dance music. It is quite widely accepted that the dance form of the reel was invented in Scotland before it spread widely to Ireland, England, and then across the world. This form of tune type is a fast dance tune played in the split common time signature (2|2) and is very commonly heard in both Scottish and Irish traditional music. This development reflected the transformational process of political and economic establishment of Scotland within the larger context of Britain. The process began with the Union of the Crowns in 1603 after Scotland had lost its monarchy when James the VI, “King of Scots,” who was protestant, became king of both England and Scotland. It continued when Scotland became part of the United Kingdom in 1707 with the Union of the Parliaments between England and Scotland. The effects of the Union have been far-reaching and were part of the cultural process that led to the discussion of Scottish *national* music and later to the romanticization of Scotland and in particular Gaelic culture.

In the 1760s, a proper public discourse around a Scottish *national* music emerged, just before Johannes Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) coined the term *volkslied*, or “folksong,” in an essay about the Scottish Gaelic legend *Ossian* and song in the collection *Von Deutscher Art und Kunst: Einige Fliegende Blätter* (Of German Style and Art) in 1773. However, Herder had been preceded in Scotland and England by several key publications of *Scottish* music such as James Oswald’s various *Collections of Curious Scots Tunes* published in the 1740s in London. Crucial to understanding this and other modern publications of Scottish traditional music is the deep romanticism of Scotland as a *Celtic* other within the United Kingdom that could be said to have begun with James MacPherson’s publication of *Ossian*. This was a published book of *translated* ancient Gaelic oral poetry. This book and others constructed a romantic nationalism which colored most of the antiquarian publication and collection of Scottish traditional music in the modern period. Much of MacPherson’s book was fictional, but it had at core authentic vernacular elements of orally transmitted Gaelic poetry which led to substantial controversies in the 18th century over its veracity. This spirit of romantic nationalism or *Celtic* romanticism surrounding the culture of Scottish Gaelic society led to their positioning as a key internal other within the newly forged Britain. Several other key publications of the 18th century included Allan Ramsay’s *Tea-table Miscellany* in 1723, James Oswald’s *The Caledonian Pocket Companion* in 1745, and William Napier’s *A Selection of the Most Favourite Scots Songs* in 1790. However, the key publication of Scottish music of the 18th century that was to have a profound influence upon the construction of national music was *The Scots Musical Museum*. This was a three-volume collection of music published in Edinburgh by James Johnson (1754–1811) between 1787 and 1803. It contains around 600 songs of which about a third were contributed by Robert Burns.

Robert Burns (1759–1796) has now an iconic status as a poet, composer, and collector of Scottish traditional music throughout the world. He was during his lifetime a notable autodidact and is renowned as a singer, poet, farmer, egalitarian humanist, exciseman, and fiddle player. Burns was not only a fantastically creative composer and arranger of songs but was also deeply embedded in the oral traditions of his native Ayrshire in the South of Scotland. This lends his tunes and lyrics an authenticity for many performers and listeners, and some of his better known songs include “Green Grow the Rashes, O” (thought to be one of the oldest Scots tunes from oral tradition), “A Man’s a Man for a That,” and “My Love is Like a Red Red Rose.” His best known song, which has become the most widespread Scottish song in the world, is “Auld Lang Syne.” This song, whose title roughly translates from Scots language as “long time since,” essentially reminds humanity of the value of friendship between people and is often sung at Burns suppers (i.e., very popular annual celebrations of the life of Robert Burns that take place on January 25) and at the end of parties across the world. This song is typical of Burns in that it delivers a universalist human message via an attractive melody and accessible

language.

In a noted meeting in a pub in Dunkeld, Robert Burns met Niel Gow, Scotland's most iconic and famous fiddler of the 18th and 19th centuries. Gow was the preeminent composer-fiddler of his day and was employed by the Duke of Atholl as many 18th- and 19th-century traditional musicians were. He performed at dances for the Duke and for many of the Scottish aristocracy across Scotland and in London to widespread acclaim. His sons Nathaniel and John carried on the family tradition of compositional and performative success as musicians and published many of Niel's tunes to widespread acclaim.

Romantic Nationalists and *Last Leaves* Collectors (1870–1950)

The key figure in the early 19th century in the discourse surrounding Scottish traditional music and *Scottishness* more broadly was Sir Walter Scott. The publication in February 1802 of Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsey of the Scottish Border* deepened and made more public the romanticization and mythologization of Scotland and Scottishness that still has a profound effect upon the image of Scotland at home and abroad. Scott had a genuine interest in *Border Ballads* (i.e., the oral ballads and songs of the Scottish Border region with England), and during his lifetime, he collected many songs and used them freely in his invention of a romantic Scotland. Like many that came after him, Scott saw himself as collecting the *last leaves* of oral tradition, *rescuing* it from certain oblivion. This trope had such a powerful effect in Scotland both because of the huge commercial success of Scott's *Minstrelsy* and later his series of *Waverley Novels* but also because of the very rapid urbanization and industrialization of that period in Scottish and British history.

The 19th century also saw the instigation of music competitions, the start of commercial recording of Scottish traditional music, the Celtic Twilight collectors movement, and the effects of the industrial revolution on instrument manufacturing throughout Europe and in Scotland. Scotland, along with England and Poland, had some of the fastest urbanization of any country in Europe and this, combined with the huge clearances of Gaelic-speaking populations from the rural Western edges of Scotland, had the effect of altering completely the social basis for traditional music. Although the 18th-century failure of Jacobitism had led to a London-led cultural and legal attacks on Gaelic society, it was the population movement that came after this and the socio-economic shifts in modernity that changed the transmission and function of traditional music in Scotland forever. Gaelic society had previously idealized pipers, bards, and harpists, according to high-status, elite individuals in Scottish Clan society; however, as their own society shifted from an agrarian to a capitalist system, the status and usefulness of these cultural roles lessened and changed the social function for traditional music in the Gaelteachd. Mass industrialization in Europe brought with it the widespread adoption of cheap mass-produced instruments such as the diatonic accordion in the latter half of the 19th century. One of the significant changes in this period was the formal adoption in 1854 of pipers into The British Army for each of the Scottish regiments. This led to the widespread dissemination of bagpipe music and pipe bands around the world as the British Empire expanded and then contracted leaving infrastructure and cultural traces behind them. The romantic nationalism that had its genesis in the 18th century was brought to culmination toward the end of the 19th century in the last leaves collection and *Celtic Twilight* movement in which many higher status individuals attempted to collect what they believed to be the dying remnants of oral tradition largely from working-class populations across Scotland. The first recording of Scottish traditional music was made by the cornettist John Mittauer when he played the tune "Within a Mile of Edinboro Town" in 1889. However, prior to this, Alexander Graham Bell, the famous Scottish inventor of the telephone, had been using the song "Auld Lang Syne" to demonstrate his novel invention in the 1870s. Soon after this, various early recording companies such as Beltona, Parlaphone, and Columbia began to record and sell records of key Scottish pipers, singers, and music hall artists. The period in the opening decades of the 20th century was dominated by the World Wars and many musicians were killed in action, including tens of thousands of Scottish pipers who were killed on the battlefields of France.

The Folk Revival (1950–1970)

The folk revival in Scotland was part of a wider revivalist movement in the Anglo-American world. It is generally agreed that the first major event of the Scottish folk revival took place in August of 1951 in the Oddfellow's Hall in Edinburgh. This event was a kind of *céilidh* (i.e., Gaelic for an informal house party usually involving music and dance) called *The People's Ceilidh*; it was instigated by the late folklorist Hamish Henderson of the School of Scottish Studies at The University of Edinburgh. This event was a catalyst for the widespread growth of the folk revival among young urban Scots in the 1950s and 1960s. The Scottish folk revival was founded both upon a committed postwar political form of socialism and broad egalitarianism and upon a particular claim to the authenticity of the traveling people of Scotland, who were (and are still) thought to have carried many indigenously Scottish ballads, songs, tunes, and stories in their discrete oral tradition that had been lost to the settled, urban, and modernized Scottish society. This claim to authenticity largely holds up when one considers the vast corpus of orally transmitted music that was passed from the Scottish travelers to the Scottish revivalists. Their status as a kind of internal other to the settled population also underlined their authority as members of an unbroken *carrying stream*. This was reflected in the language of revival that emerged from metaphorical references to the past performed authentically in the present: *the living tradition*, *source singers*, and *revivalists*. Much of the instrumental music of the revival was recovered from 19th- and 18th-century manuscripts.

The revival in Scotland was highly successful in that it produced many new, young enthusiasts and advocates of traditional music, a substantial network of folk clubs, a nascent recording industry, a new public awareness of the value of the travelers to Scottish culture, and a huge canon of traditional music and song. Much of the source material of the Scottish revival was recorded by folklorists from the School of Scottish Studies such as Hamish Henderson and Callum MacLean and is now publicly available via their digital archive.

Key traveler performers such as Jeannie Robertson MBE, Flora MacNeill MBE, and Belle Stewart found a new respect in Scotland and internationally, and they gradually contributed to a shift in the public perception of travelers in Scotland and to a greater appreciation for their significant contribution to cultural life.

Contemporary Scottish Traditional Music

The success of the Scottish and other Anglo-American folk revivals of the 1950s and 1960s effectively laid the groundwork for the commodification and professionalization of Scottish traditional music in the 1970s and beyond. It was in the 1970s that several key factors emerged that supported the emergence of a professional and commercial tradition that continues to grow and pay tribute to the shared tradition of social music making in homes and pubs around Scotland. The development of small public address systems meant that many genres of music could tour independently to venues that might not have had amplification systems which had previously limited touring venues. This was combined with industrial depression in the United Kingdom as the socioeconomic shift from manufacturing to a service economy left many young people without obvious means of employment. This caused not only a Britain-wide countercultural movement which was manifested in new musical genres such as punk rock and folk rock but also provided the financial incentive for many young Scottish musicians to begin capitalizing on their innate aesthetic interest in Scottish traditional music. Bands such as The Battlefield Band, Silly Wizard, Ossian, and The Clutha began touring across Europe and later North America performing traditional material with new instrumentation and arrangements derived from popular musical styles. The success of these bands and the now consolidated network of folk clubs with a ready-made audience of young urban Scots led to a new field of record production in Scotland that built upon the earlier successes of labels such as Topic Records and provided a distinctively Scottish catalog of performers. The most enduring and successful of these labels is *Greentrax* founded in the 1980s.

In the 1990s, Scottish traditional music experienced a new post-revival phase, in which Scottish music entered the public imagination and the political arena. The most significant political change in the UK Consti-

tution began in 1997 with the election of “New Labour,” and then in 1999, a new devolution settlement for Scotland was delivered with the reopening of the first Scottish parliament in 300 years. This change was also accompanied by a broad-based Scottish cultural renaissance which began to flower in the 1990s with various cultural shifts across the literature, music, and the arts more widely. Traditional music was adopted into the Scottish school curriculum, and state money funded peripatetic (i.e., traveling) instrumental teachers in various regions across Scotland. Simultaneously, the Scottish Arts Council and the newly established Scottish Executive in Edinburgh recognized the cultural and economic value of traditional music and then began supporting it through ring fenced funding for music projects in the 2000s. The year 1996 also saw the establishment of the first degree program in Scottish traditional music at Scotland’s national conservatory, The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland), and the funding for Gaelic music and drama was increased substantially in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This was partially a result of the success of the Feisean movement which is a widespread Gaelic medium music and arts program for children and teenagers that has spread throughout Scotland since the 1990s.

These changes, alongside the growth of an international touring and music industry, have led to the continuing professionalization and commercialization of Scottish traditional music and increasing experimentation with other styles of music and art. Key artists such as Capercaillie, Runrig, Dick Gaughan, Fred Morrison, The Old Blind Dogs, Martyn Bennett, KAN, The Treacherous Orchestra, and many others have demonstrated that Scottish traditional music can be performed and hybridized with great aesthetic and commercial success. There continues, however, to be a strong informal music culture for traditional music in Scotland with many people performing weekly in their homes, in pubs, and in community clubs across Scotland. The deterritorialization of Scottish traditional music continues: Many of the world’s best pipers and fiddlers were born outside Scotland and make a professional living from Scottish traditional music in countries such as Canada and New Zealand.

See also [Ballads](#); [Education](#); [Folk Music](#); [Schools and Universities](#); [Scotland: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice](#)

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Further Readings

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Scotland is internationally known for its traditional music, which remained vibrant throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, when many traditional forms worldwide lost popularity to pop music. In spite of emigration and a well-developed connection to music imported from the rest of Europe and the United States, the music of Scotland has kept many of its traditional aspects; indeed, it has itself influenced many forms of music.