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Scotland: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice

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The contemporary performance of Scottish traditional and folk musics is a rich and plural phenomenon that takes place in a wide range of contexts, from the most intimate family performances to the highly commercial live and recorded musical performances. What is unmistakable is that Scottish traditional music has, since the widespread folk revivals of the Anglo-American world in the 1950s and 1960s, become deterritorialized and is now performed throughout the world with *Scottishness* largely embedded within the modal and sonic structures of musical performance. A highly literate tradition yet with an unbroken and vigorous oral tradition, Scottish traditional music has emerged since the 2000s as a vibrant cultural activity increasingly commoditized yet with a deep and wide constituency of people making social music to enrich their lives within a staggeringly diverse range of musical styles and aesthetics. Scottish traditional music encompasses a very wide range of social practices, artists, and sounds including hybrid forms that feature traditional, orally transmitted tunes and songs blended with electronic dance music, popular musics, and many other traditions from around the world. This entry provides an overview of modern and contemporary solo and group performance practice of Scottish traditional music.

Solo Performance

Much contemporary Scottish traditional music continues to be performed solo, and this includes the canonical core of the authentic repertoire of ballads, lyric song, bagpipe music, fiddle, harp, and other traditions. Prior to the folk revivals of the mid-20th century, the central canon of Scottish traditional music was essentially a solo performance tradition. However, many solo performers also perform in groups, bands, or choirs, and group performance is an essential part of the modern tradition. There are three languages that are constitutive of Scottish traditional music: Scots, English, and Gaelic. Various vocal genres are shared by Scots, English, and Gaelic singers: lyric songs, lays, lullabies, dandling songs, and work songs (e.g., harvesting songs), but Scots song features many orally transmitted ballads and the unique genre of *bothy* ballads, while Scottish Gaelic song retains some preindustrial song genres (e.g., *waulking* songs, *puirt à beul*, panegyric song, and Gaelic psalm singing) in contemporary performance practice because of their important affective and cultural heritage value.

The Scottish ballad tradition is internationally renowned as a strongly supernatural tradition with an unbroken practice of performance, particularly among the Scottish traveler community. Scots ballads, often called the *muckle sangs* (i.e., *big songs*, literally, in Scottish), is one of the key repertoires of traditional song in Scotland today and much of the repertoire was recovered during the folk revival from the traveling community who recorded their indigenous Scottish ballads for the University of Edinburgh's School of Scottish Studies folklorists during the 1950s and 1960s. A ballad is simply a narrative song (i.e., a song that tells a story), and the Scottish tradition continues to be performed by solo singers today in a variety of contexts. Many of the Scottish ballads are contained in the Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection and in Professor Francis James Child of Harvard's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Scottish ballads tend to feature significant stories of love, loss, war, betrayal, and the supernatural. Key singers of this genre include the late traveler singers Jeannie Robertson and Sheila Stewart as well as more contemporary figures such as Andy Hunter, Sheena Wellington, Steve Byrne, Dick Gaughan, and Archie Fisher. The ballads themselves often feature common or ballad meter (i.e., lines of 4 then 3 stresses) with strong motivic traditions that metaphorically contain much of the Scottishness of the song tradition. Motifs such as "the green, green grass" and "long yellow (or golden) hair" are used within traditional ballads to signify deeper cultural tropes in song. For instance, the color green almost always signifies the supernatural and yellow signifies marriage. Numbers are also significant: 3 is usually associated with supernatural elements, 7 is often considered mystical and refers to time in years, and 9 is associated with objects or numbers of men. The motivic content of traditional Scottish ballads (e.g., *The Twa Brothers*, *Alison Cross*, and *The Battle of Harlaw*) uses textual and melodic motifs as traditional material embedded within highly particularized narratives, and the motivic content is also important for memorization and orally transmitted narrative structures (e.g., question and answer and framing devices).

Another unique musical genre in Scotland is the *bothy ballad* song tradition. A *bothy ballad* is a narrative song

that deals with the subject of agricultural life, in a predominantly mid-19th-century North East Scottish context; it is basically a song that tells a story about farm life. Both ballads were part of the social life of farm workers and were most popular between 1840 and 1880 in North East Scotland. Many of the best known songs such as *Drumdelgie*, *The Hairst O Rettie*, or *The Muckin O Geordie's Byre* relate the conditions and practices of agricultural life in 19th-century Scotland. There was a strict hierarchy on the farms in which ploughmen retained a high status because of their ability and knowledge to work with horses. Both ballads form both an entertaining genre of traditional Scottish song still sung in contemporary times, yet they also contribute to the oral history of North East Scotland and agrarian life. Key performers of this genre include Jock Duncan and Scott Gardiner.

Puirt-a-beul (i.e., “music from the mouth”) is a very old Gaelic vocal genre which features tunes that are sung for dancing or simply for pleasure. Generally, these songs are fast, set in reel (i.e., split common) or jig (i.e., 6/8, 9/8) time, and make substantial use of non-lexical vocables (i.e., nonsense words performed to enhance the rhythmical and melodic elements of a song). The meaning of song verses is often satirical or lighthearted, and many popular Gaelic tunes have simple puirt-a-beul song texts. In contemporary times, this genre is still very often sung by Gaelic singers but is most often heard in concert settings with instrumental backing. Many *puirt* (i.e., *tunes*, literally, in Gaelic) also feature tunes known as *strathspeys*, a unique indigenous Scottish tune type. These tunes, named after the Highland region of Speyside, are in 4/4 time and feature a highly polarized, bouncy rhythm, ideally suited to dancing.

The Scottish bagpipes represent one of the best known and most widespread Scottish musical traditions in the world. The tradition is most widely performed in Scotland, Canada, and New Zealand, with significant piping communities in South Africa, the United States, France, Germany, and Australia as well. There are three principal performance contexts for bagpipes today: (1) solo competitive piping, (2) pipe bands, and (3) folk band piping. Of these three performance contexts, pipe bands are the most widespread throughout the world with large concentrations of bands in Scotland, Canada, Australasia, and South Africa. Pipe bands tend to have between 6 and 20 pipers and a drum section that includes a majority of high-tension snare drums, several tenor drums, and usually one bass drum. Often military pipe bands also include a *drum major* who carries out a ceremonial and figurehead role at the front of the pipe band with a mace which can be used to perform a visually spectacular performance in time with the music. Pipe bands perform at community celebrations including gala days, festivals, and most commonly at large Highland Games, where they compete against each other for prizes. The same can be said of solo competitive pipers whose numbers are smaller but who perform usually at dedicated solo piping competitions throughout the world, with the most prestigious annual events being held in Oban and Inverness in Scotland. They play canonized music with tightly controlled performance practices that change slowly through time but that allow for individual brilliance to emerge both in the rhythm and phrasing of the music and the sound of the individual bagpipes. The two main performance genres for solo pipers are *piobaireachd* (i.e., *piperling*, literally, in Gaelic), the march, strathspey, and reel, often termed *light music*. Piobaireachd is a unique Scottish musical genre that is almost exclusively performed today in solo bagpipe competitions. It is a long form musical genre based upon a basic initial melody usually called the *ground* (*urlar* in Gaelic) followed by highly stylized and increasingly skeletal ornamental variations that usually include specific ornaments such as the *taorluath* and *crunluath*. A piobaireachd itself usually lasts between 7 to 25 minutes, with many tunes in the 10- to 16-minute range. The repertoire is ancient and was orally transmitted until the 19th century, and competition ensures that the canonical repertoire of around 320 distinct piobaireachd is still regularly heard. Most tunes fall into several categories differentiated by their original social function in medieval and early modern Gaelic society, and therefore, there are laments, battles, salutes, marches (not in the literal sense), gathering, and other miscellaneous tunes. Some tunes feature an esoteric note only found in the piobaireachd genre on the bagpipes called *the piobaireachd G*. This involves a slightly altered fingering for the 7th note of the scale that is meant to produce a wailing or *keening* sound against the drone tonic, and it is notoriously difficult to achieve. The bagpipes feature nine notes performed authentically from a tonic (which the three drones are also tuned to) called *low A*. There is however no standardized bagpipe scale unlike almost all other instruments in Scottish traditional music which today use an equally tempered scale, yet pipers have a socially shared conception of relative pitch and intonation. Key per-

formers in the solo competitive tradition include Pipe Major Donald MacLeod MBE, Iain MacFadyen, William McCallum, Angus MacColl, and Roddy MacLeod MBE.

Folk group piping is the most recent bagpipe performance practice that emerged in the 1970s out of the folk revival in Scotland. It was partly inspired by the organological innovations surrounding rediscovered bellows pipe tradition in Scotland and by the desire of revivalists to play bagpipes with other instruments. Since the 1970s, many Scottish folk groups such as The Battlefield Band, Ceolbeg, The Finlay MacDonald Band, and Breabach have adopted bagpipes as part of their instrumentation. Many pipers play both Highland bagpipes and smaller, bellows-blown smallpipes or border pipes with other instruments. The invention of the small public address (PA) system in the 1970s also made it easier to incorporate louder instruments (e.g., bagpipes) and quieter ones (e.g., *Clarsach* [i.e., Scottish harp]) into the lineup of various groups. Players such as Fred Morrison, Dougie Pincock, Hamish Moore, Gary West, Iain MacInnes, and Finlay MacDonald have reinvigorated this tradition and experimented with older, recovered repertoires and invented new music specifically for this bellows-blown instrument.

Like the bagpipes, the Scottish fiddle tradition has had many reinventions and mythologization in the modern period. There are no material differences between a fiddle and a violin in Scotland; the difference comes purely from the performance practices associated with each tradition. In Scotland, more so than in Ireland, the fiddle and violin traditions have been more porous, and contemporary top Scottish fiddle players, such as Chris Stout, are often equally proficient at classical violin technique as they are at performing traditional fiddle music, although the two demand quite different physical techniques. There are at least four distinct principal fiddle styles maintained through strong teaching lineages and sociocultural proximity, and they correspond to four different regions of Scotland: North-East, Shetland, West Highland, and Border. Each has a distinctive sonic style embodied in the playing of leading fiddlers. It is difficult to point to distinctive sonic markers of *Scottish* fiddle performance given that they incorporate elements of performance practice found throughout the world (e.g., double stopping, ringing strings, and highly polarized rhythmic couplets), but it is the total stylistic impression of an individual performance combined with the contextualization of that performance that leads to stylistic identification. Two particular techniques are identified with Scottish fiddle players: the *up-driven bow* (i.e., a difficult maneuver in which the player draws one long down bow and three short but loud up bows adding to the rhythmical drive and accentuation) and the highly polarized dot and cut performance of strathspeys and reels.

The idea of a *national* fiddle tradition in Scotland is really the product of the 19th-century mythologization that went in tandem with the romantic nationalism prevalent in that era. Key performers included Niel Gow, an 18th-century fiddler who invented the *up-driven bow* technique; James Scott Skinner, the self-styled *Strathspey King* of the late 19th to early 20th centuries; and Hector MacAndrew, a leading 20th-century exponent of North-East Scottish style. Contemporary fiddle tradition is burgeoning, and the Scottish fiddle is played in bands such as Fiddlers Bid and Blazin Fiddles. Fiddlers such as Duncan Chisholm, Ian MacFarlane, Catriona Macdonald, Pete Fraser, Patsy Reid, and Alasdair Fraser perform solo and teach throughout the world.

The Scottish harp, or Clarsach tradition, is one that was reinvented in the late 19th century and has seen a remarkable revival (instigated by the Clarsach Society founded 1931) in the 20th century. Traditionally, harps were gut strung, but since the 1970s, most performers play synthetic strings on small harps with approximately 34 strings. There has been great innovation in this reinvented tradition, and research has uncovered previously lost harp tunes from oral tradition that survived in bagpipe and vocal music collections and manuscripts. Key players including Patsy Seddon, Wendy Stewart, Catriona MacKay, Alison Kinnaird, Karen Marshalsay, and Corrina Hewat have contributed innovative techniques and practice-based research that has allowed this instrument to regain a central place among Scottish traditional musicians.

Group Performance

Like other traditional and folk musics, particular social and cultural conditions of life have given rise to specific musical practices. Scotland was no different: The need to develop a shrinking process for warm tweed clothing for islanders in the Outer Hebrides led to the development of the uniquely Scottish vocal genre waulking songs. These songs are highly rhythmically emphatic Gaelic songs that were traditionally sung by women while sitting around a table, beating freshly spun tweed cloth onto a table or old door, to shrink the cloth and make it more water and windproof. The cloth was traditionally soaked in urine and beaten against the table, while singers sang specific songs. Many of the songs satirized local men or individual people or incidents and often contained non-lexical vocables that supported the emphatic rhythmic beat of the cloth on wood. The performance practice survived industrialization and is often heard in concert settings sung by individual performers.

Another indigenous Scottish group vocal genre is the Gaelic psalm singing still found in a small number of Gaelic churches in the Outer Hebrides. This is a sacred tradition that developed in the early modern period where singing the psalms enabled illiterate congregations to perform the Christian psalms. The precentor (i.e., leader of the congregation) sings a line of psalm which is then repeated by the congregation. Scottish Gaelic psalm singing is known as an incredibly rich sonic experience because the congregation does not sing in direct unison but adapts the precentor's melodic line in a highly melismatic, heterophonic style.

One of the most popular forms of Scottish traditional music since the beginning of the 20th century has been the Scottish dance band performing for country dances and *Céilidh* (i.e., "to visit," literally, in Gaelic) dances around the country and throughout the North American and Australasian diaspora. The lineup usually includes lead piano accordion, second piano accordion, fiddle, piano, and a minimal drum kit. Bands perform for dancers, and traditionally bandleaders such as Jim Johnstone, Ian Powrie, Fergie MacDonald, Alasdair MacCuish, and the legendary Sir Jimmy Shand have been renowned not only for the precision and tightness of their bands but also for their signature tune and harmonic arrangements. Dance bands reflect the broad tune repertoires of Scotland and compose sets for dancing that are focused around jigs, reels, waltzes, and marches. The reel is thought to be an indigenous Scottish tune type along with the strathspey and the bagpipe genre *piobaireachd*. The strathspey, reel, and jig all originated in dance music forms and feature question and answer two-bar phrasing, usually in the form ABAC where each two-bar phrase is represented by a letter. Scottish traditional tune types have much in common with the structure of Irish traditional music but in general are performed quite differently. Generalizations are of course difficult, but Scottish traditional music tends toward a greater degree of rhythmic polarization and movement by leaps rather than by steps, which is common in the more fluid Irish tradition.

Hybridity and Commercial Bands

Since the 1960s, Scottish traditional musicians have been experimenting with guitar accompaniment largely initially modeled upon American skiffle and folk revival performance practice. Guitar accompaniment was first used to accompany young revival singers in Glasgow and Edinburgh but was quickly adopted by bands such as The Clutha who experimented with using guitar accompaniment to Scots fiddle and bagpipe tunes. In the early 1970s, the bouzouki and cittern were introduced to Scottish traditional musicians via Ireland where members of the Irish folk group Planxty had brought them home from Greece in the late 1960s. The instruments were, and are, considered highly suitable for accompanying fast Scottish reels and jigs because of their short decay, high upper partials, and open tunings. Guitar accompaniment tended to be firmly diatonic and fingerpicked in the early revival, and subsequently a strummed, rhythm guitar style with more complex and extended chords developed among accompanists.

Similarly, early Scottish folk groups that emerged in the 1970s, including Kentigern, Ossian, Silly Wizard, The Clutha, and The Battlefield Band, began with emphatically on-beat, diatonic performance where fiddle, accordion, and bagpipe tunes were accompanied by guitar, cittern, and bouzouki. Later in the 1980s, bands such

as Capercaillie and Runrig introduced more harmonic layering, cross-rhythms, bass guitar, and syncopated accompaniment which led to the introduction of Scottish traditional music and particularly Gaelic song to new, young, largely urban audience. Both of these bands and others in the 1980s, 1990s, and since, have increasingly relied upon original composition of new songs and tunes in a traditional style. Since the 1980s, technique for performing Scottish traditional music on guitar has been transformed by performers such as Tony McManus who pioneered complex arrangements of Scottish tunes with contrapuntal harmonic arrangements for guitar.

Scottish traditional music is more popular than ever before, both in terms of the numbers of performers but also in terms of educational, festival, and touring opportunities for professional and amateur performers. Since the 1970s, the tradition has grown a substantial professional constituency of musicians, often crossing over and experimenting with popular and other traditional styles of music from around the world. However, alongside this commercialization and commodification, Scottish traditional music is still performed very regularly by many musicians and singers in homes, weekly pub sessions, singarounds, and annual festivals throughout the world. Many young traditional musicians learn to perform both in school where the state education system has formally adopted traditional Scottish music into the national curriculum, and also through the hugely successful Fèisean nan Gàidheal movement, where tens of thousands of children throughout Scotland attend week-long Gaelic-medium traditional music, dance, and drama festivals in the summer months. The higher education sector has now formalized several degree-level programs for traditional music, and the music continues to be closely, but not exclusively, associated with political nationalism.

See also [Ballads](#); [Education](#); [Folk Music](#); [Schools and Universities](#); [Scotland: Music in History, Culture, and Geography of Music](#)

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Further Readings

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11 Anne McLaren, "Queenship in Early Modern England and Scotland," *The Historical Journal* 49 (2006): 935-936, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4091589>.
12 Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2007), 3, 6. Therefore, in order to understand the practice of early modern queenship without the bias of later confessional conflicts, we must consider the queens, like Margaret and Catherine, whose reigns preceded the Reformation and were (mostly) untouched by the religious controversies that would eventually change the nature of British queenship. performance of queenship over many years. My thesis conceptualizes queenship not as a static rank but as an office which was. Scotland: Modern and contemporary performance practice. Lookup NU author(s): Dr Simon McKerrell. Downloads. Published version [.pdf]. Licence. This is the final published version of a book chapter that has been published in its final definitive form by SAGE Publications, Inc, 2019. For re-use rights please refer to the publisher's terms and conditions. Publication metadata. Scotland and Contemporary Art. About GENERATION. The GENERATION exhibitions featured artists whose careers have grown from Scotland during that period, a time that saw dramatic changes in our cultural lives and unprecedented interest in and acclaim for our artists. The entire Modern One gallery was devoted to displaying GENERATION. The works shown ranged from room-sized installations by Ross Sinclair, Graham Fagen, Torsten Lauschmann and Simon Starling to painting and sculpture by Charles Avery, Kate Davis, Jonathan Monk, Lucy McKenzie, Victoria Morton and Alison Watt. Steven Campbell was a Scottish artist who created complex and humorous paintings with roots in performance and installation art. 15 minute read. Scottish Art Artists.