

About the Music.

by *Kier GoGwilt*

This concert is an assemblage of airs, songs, and dance tunes drawn from collections published under the name of Niel Gow, a Perthshire-born Scottish fiddler who lived from 1727 to 1807. Gow's fiddle-playing was widely respected and earned him the patronage of the Duke of Atholl. At the time, it was rare for a folk musician to make a living from playing (though Gow was originally trained as a weaver); most Scottish musicians, such as the dancing master James Oswald, turned to classical-music publishing to pursue professional careers.

Gow's reputation as a genius fiddler was noted by several writers, including Robert Burns. His reputation as an authentic Scottish musician gave his name a certain cachet among English, French, and German audiences, who were captivated by literary depictions of an ancient Celtic world as popularized in James MacPherson's purported collections and translations of epic poetry by the Gaelic bard Ossian. Niel Gow's son, Nathaniel, understood and capitalized on this Romantic, European image of Scottish otherness; it was Nathaniel Gow, in fact, who assembled and published the Niel Gow collections in Edinburgh around the turn of the 19th century, deliberately blurring the lines between ancient and contemporary tunes.

This Romantic imagination for Scottish folklore also had the

effect of marking Scottish music as primarily "folk"—a categorical distinction foreign to the hybrid variations of Scottish and Italianate classical music played out in the 18th-century dance hall. The Gow collections include a continuo bass line and classical instruments like the harpsichord and cello. And the fact that the tunes were notated indicates their use for a musically literate audience, even as audiences for the music encompassed a range of social classes. These collections represent the canonization, monetization, and professionalization of folk music through print culture. They preserve a snapshot of an already centuries-long process of musical hybridity and exchange.

It is possible to trace the transformation of certain tunes in the collection across printed and recorded sources. For example, "The Broom of Coudenknowes," which appears in Nathaniel Gow's collection, *The Vocal Melodies of Scotland* (1816), also appears in John Playford's dance manual of 1650, simply called "Broome." The tune appears again in Richard Brome's comic opera, *The Northern Lasse* (1632), in the Italian violinist Francesco Geminiani's arrangements of Scottish melodies (1749), and in a recording by Silly Wizard (1978). Another song in the 1816 collection, "Lord Gregory," also known as "The Lass of Roch Royal" or "The Lass of Augrim," appears in many recordings, including one

by Peggy Seeger. The song portrays the anonymous lass as the ill-fated mother of Gregory's illegitimate child. In the instrumental version provided in the Gow collection, only the basic meter and contours of the melody remain. Contemporary recordings of "Galla Water" such as the one by Old Blind Dogs (1992) more closely resemble the melody written down in the Gow collection. However, certain notated ornaments, counterpoints, and expressive markings in the printed version of "Galla Water" reveal the editorial preferences of Nathaniel Gow, who perhaps felt the need to legitimize the songs to an audience accustomed to reading classical music.

It is harder to track down recorded versions of the instrumental jigs, reels, strathspeys, and airs. "Lady Charlotte Murray's Jig" has a number of different names and has been recorded by contemporary folk musicians including the Chieftans ("O'Mahoney's Frolics," 1989) and Martin Hayes and Dennis Cahill ("The Cat in the Corner," 1997). Jordi Savall's two-volume release, *The Celtic Viol* (2009, 2010), includes selections from Nathaniel Gow's collections, perhaps conjuring the mythologized Scottish past through the viol's unique timbres and tunings. Laura Risk's recent performances of "Niel Gow's Lament" also bridges baroque conventions, ethnographic and archival knowledge, and a living practice of Scottish and Québécois fiddling. These examples attest to the ways in which the Gow collections continue to keep alive a vibrant

hybridity between folk, popular, and baroque music-making.

Given that Ruckus is a baroque continuo band, some of the 18th-century Italianate influences visible in Gow's collections are baked into our sound: gut strings, short bows, and instruments like the harpsichord, baroque bassoon, and viola da gamba. Rather than accepting the notated versions in Gow's collection as authoritative texts, we play these melodies with an ear to their cumulative historical and contemporary soundings, and we have performed these tunes in both concert and dance-hall settings. Precisely because these books played a significant role in the selective canonization of Scottish folk music, it has been a gratifying journey to work our way through and beyond these texts, and to find a sound unique to our own hybrid paths through these musical traditions..