
James Scott Skinner: A Guide to Bowing

Reviewed by Stuart Eydmann

FIDDLERS' CONTAGION

James Scott Skinner, *A Guide to Bowing*, ed. Alistair J. Hardie. Hardie Press, 32 pp.

Despite having been ousted by the modern accordion as the principal instrument for the accompaniment of traditional dance, the fiddle has retained a great popularity in Scotland. David Johnson has shown how Scottish violin playing has never been a wholly peasant activity, always embracing 'art' as well as 'folk' aspects and this tradition combined with the move from the dance floor to the concert platform or recording studio had led to changes in styles of playing and repertory. Dance tunes still figure largely in performances but along with other 'listening' tunes often played in a manner closer to what would be expected from the conservatoire-trained musician and therefore contrasting with the more ethnic playing to be found in parts of Ireland, Scandinavia, Canada and the United States of America.

The fiddler, composer and dancing master James Scott Skinner (1843-1927), has probably had more influence on modern Scottish violin

playing than any other individual, having carried the tradition into the era of commercial gramophone recordings and international concert tours. Although his popularity has never waned, in recent years the only hard information readily available regarding the man was his collection *The Scottish Violinist*, a few leaves of sheet music and some short biographical sketches in general texts on Scottish music and song. In contrast legend, anecdote and personal recollection abounded, making it particularly difficult, especially for the younger players of the folk revival, to appreciate the awe and respect which the older generation held for the man and his art.

More recently we have seen an exhibition on Skinner at the National Library of Scotland, the re-issue by small independent companies of his gramophone recordings and printed collections, a number of illustrated radio programmes and a comprehensive biography in Mary Ann

Alburger's *Scottish Violinists and Their Music*. As a part of this trend a new music publishing house has, as its first venture, presented in a corrected form Skinner's fiddle manual and manifesto which first appeared around 80 years ago.

In this guide Skinner offers advice to his many emulators and justifies his own highly individual technique, which resulted from early years playing in the family dance band combined with a rigorous classical training under the French violinist Charles Rougier of the Halle Orchestra. Although standards of popular music education were increasing Skinner was aware that the ancient character of the native violin tradition was being lost, and much of this book is an attempt to instil in the player a genuine national sensibility. Taking the title 'The Strathspey King', he clearly saw himself as part of the great line of Scottish fiddlers but with the advantage of sound classical training, which he regarded as entirely compatible with the performance of his national and traditional music:

Of course there were natural geniuses, such as the immortals: Knockie (Captain Simon Fraser), who sang Gaelic on the Fiddle, Neil Gow, who electrified a Ballroom, Marshall,

with his sweet Ingleside 'Woodnotes Wild', Reid Rob, Duncan Macintyre, Airchie Menzies, Peter Milne, Drumnagarrow (John Strachan), Geordie Donald, James Young, Alexander Skinner, Charles Hardie. All those men did good work, but would have soared even higher had they received a good sound training in manual equipment, and still remembered to render their country's music by the light of nature, maintaining its ruggedness and character, and not making it insipid and genteel.

The strathspey is singled out as the ultimate in Scottish music and advice regarding the technique, style, expression and ornamentation relevant to good execution is offered with the qualification that:

The tune in the book is simply a skeleton.

You must catch the character by contagion.

Reels are given less attention and these he suggests should be

... played crisp and birlie like a weel gaun wheelie

while with regard to hornpipes he surprisingly

acknowledges the contribution of the untrained expert when he recommends:

to aquire the cross bowing listen to street players

although followed by:

go to Kreutzer to enable you to staccato and arpeggio.

Scordatura, an ancient technique which has been receiving attention of late, he frowns upon, while the lost tradition of cello accompaniment which he practised as a child is recommended. It is difficult to know how many of these technical aspects will be absorbed by readers, although few can fail to be affected by the commitment and enthusiasm for the subject to be found on every page:

A good violin, a good bow, Papini and Kreutzer, plenty of energy and eight hours a day. The violin without a Master? Never!

The guide is not just about bowing, advice on the selection of instruments, bows, repertory (usually music from his own collections!) and the author's views on key colour in Scottish music ensure that the book stands beside Carl

Volti's *Reminiscences* as a valuable picture of music making in late Victorian Scotland. This edition has been reset in a modern face with the result that the eccentricities of the Victorian language are exaggerated although the high standard of the design must be commended, the traditional arts too often suffering from poor presentation.

It is only recently that an assessment of the contribution of James Scott Skinner to the fiddle traditions outwith Scotland has been possible. Paddy Tunney, in his autobiography *The Stone Fiddle* and Feldman and O'Docherty in *The Northern Fiddler* draw attention to Skinner's influence on the musicians of Ulster, commercial recordings from Nova Scotia and Quebec show his special place in the repertory of Canadian fiddlers and no doubt the eagerly awaited Pelicula Films documentary for Channel Four Television will unearth further North American links. The republication of this small book will help further an appreciation and understanding of this complex and interesting music maker.

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A Scottish Musical Miscellany

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