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A CONTEMPORARY TRADITION

An Interview with Dr. David Johnson, by Steve Sweeney Turner

When I visited David Johnson at his Edinburgh flat, I found this stalwart of the Scottish music scene hard at work on yet another collection of fiddle tunes, and more than generous with a variety of caffeine-bearing liquids and excellent Indian cuisine. As we sat in his sparse kitchen watching the curry bubble, he instructed me to ask "the hard questions" which face the contemporary collector of traditional music.

Why should we, at the end of the twentieth century, care at all about this traditional music from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

Well, this stuff isn't "historic" in the way that some types of classical music are; I think that once one gets into traditional music, the division between past and present isn't so great. The past is still alive, and the present is connected to the past. After all, we are the descendants of the people who wrote and played this at the time it was new. We tick in the same way that they did. And the music keeps developing; for example, there's a set of *The Hen's March Ower The Midden* which we've got in

the new collection that's derived from the set in Jim Hunter's book published in 1979, but in the course of the last twelve years it's had edges rubbed off it, it's had things smoothed out. People have simplified the Hunter version without losing the essence of it, so we're picking up something that's been creatively modified during the eighties, and publishing it again.

In this sense, your work isn't motivated by a feeling of nostalgia which leads you backwards to try and discover some kind of authentic original which should be held up as an unassailable truth, but much more the presentation of contemporary image of a living genre.

Certainly, yes! And there are bits of creative work which have gone into the book; the piano accompaniments are my own work, apart from borrowing a few hints from earlier accompaniments.

How would you say that this aspect of your collections relates to your

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work as a composer per se? Is it on a similar level?

Yes, I think they form a spectrum. Obviously, arranging is easier - you're not starting from a blank sheet of paper in the same way. I think I learn a lot from editing, which feeds my compositions, and certainly being a composer already makes editing a lot easier.

You've also spent a lot of time performing these pieces as a cellist with the McGibbon Ensemble; how would you say that practical experience has influenced your research?

Oh, well, enormously. You could sit in a library looking at pieces of music and hearing them in your head until the cows come home and get all sorts of things wrong. Also, I have to confess that the joys of sitting in libraries have worn off by this time in my life, whereas getting up and playing it to an audience, having the fun of meeting people for rehearsals, and finding out what a piece sounds like - this is similar to the fun of having composed a new piece that you haven't yet heard. Finding one in a library and taking it along to a rehearsal and getting it played is very exciting, the feeling of the stuff coming alive off the page.

Your present collection is very eclectic. For instance, as well as the reels and stuff you'd expect, there's also an arrangement for four fiddles of a psalm tune, and so forth. This kind of practical eclecticism seems characteristic of all your work. Where would you say it comes from?

I suppose a general interest in Scotland, and feeling that I myself was not brought up in any one bit of Scotland - this is what comes of being born in Edinburgh; if one had been born, say, in the Western Isles, you'd know you belonged to a particular bit of Scotland, but Edinburgh is "cosmopolitan". From another point of view, this collection is not setting out to be a "national monument", it's not trying to include everything. It's only got quite a small number of tunes in it, really. Some volumes run to a hundred tunes, but we've only got twenty per volume. I wanted to make the contents as varied as possible, remembering that some of the users will be young children who are not going to sit down and play a hundred tunes one after another; they're going to have to learn them one at a time rather slowly and perhaps painfully, and I wanted to make sure that all the tunes were first class, that each one was worth having, and there would be variety.

What contribution would you say these tunes make to expanding the technical repertoire of people learning the fiddle?

I would have thought they'd be very useful. All Scottish fiddle music is good stuff, technically. Playing Scots fiddle music couldn't do anything to anyone's technique except improve it, and we've got them graded, so the book starts with the easy pieces. There are one or two of the transcribed piobaireachds of which my violinist colleague, Edna Arthur, has kept saying, "this is a marvellous bowing exercise - we must put this in!" Once you've mastered this you could play nearly anything. Apart from that, I think it might draw Scottish music to the serious attention of children in the kind of families where they would not get Scottish music thrown at them. Perhaps showing, among other things, that the Scottish way of writing for the violin is just as good as the classical ways, and is nothing anybody need be ashamed of, or try and push into the corner or sweep under the carpet.

Are there any new pieces in the collection?

Yes, there are one or two, actually. The main one is a piobaireachd called *Fàilte MhicGilleain* [McLean's Welcome], which has come out of a manuscript made in Edinburgh in 1740, in a violin arrangement. This itself is far older than any surviving bagpipe text, and has never been published until now. So here we're putting something new onto the market which no-one has had access to except readers in the National Library of Scotland.

Do you see yourself as some kind of representative or ambassador for the Scottish Folk Tradition?

Not exactly; I think in some ways, I'm simply doing my own thing as a creative artist, using Scottish traditional music as the medium in which I'm doing it. In other ways, making a collection like this would be no use unless it were of use to other people. So it's got to hold together as a collection which lots of people in Scotland would appreciate, would want to use, which would give them things they otherwise wouldn't have, putting my knowledge of the Scottish past to some sort of use, so that it becomes something that will be useful to the people at the other end. Particularly, this is a book for children. In one sense, I suppose I'm trying to make something, to give something to the people of Scotland.

David Johnson is the author of *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, and *Scottish Fiddle Music in the Eighteenth Century*. He has recently been seen on STV's arts programme *NB*. His latest collection, *Scots on the Fiddle*, will be published on 1st November in two books; Book 1 (Grade II-IV) at £5.00, Book 2 (Grade V-VIII) at £6.00. Copies can be ordered from David Johnson, 1 Hill Square, Edinburgh.
