

GAELIC PSALM - SINGING AND THE LOWLAND CONNECTION

A 'Church Sound' new to many has come with the advent of the weekly radio Gaelic Service and occasional television Gaelic worship. Some have already heard this style of singing in its own habitat in the north and west of Scotland, either to appreciate it or dislike it. Whether new or recognized, it is different from any other contemporary praise form, and may suitably lay claim thereby to more particular attention than hitherto.

Simply, it is an expression of folk-singing in worship. Because it is different, it is variously found curious, fascinating, off-beat, even uncouth. It can quickly be written off by those who are appreciative only of church-singing of the received forms and standards.

This style of Gaelic praise differs more obviously from the metrical psalm-singing of the non-Gaelic areas (which itself dates from the Assembly of 1746 when the dropping of the use of the precentor's 'lining out' of the praise was authorized) in two ways:

- (a) in the recitative, the singing of each line of the psalm-portion by the precentor; and
- (b) the drawn-out and decorated manner of congregational participation in singing the line after the precentor.

Two additional and obvious differences are the seeming undisciplined, individualistic contributions to the body of song, and the absence of harmonic arrangement. On top of this, to the Lowland ear, there is the strange and quite unfamiliar language, the whole adding up to what we have called a 'new' sound to many, though it has been heard in Scotland both Highland and Lowland for many generations.

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Historically, there is affinity with the old singing of the Scottish kirk before the 1746 Assembly and the rise of the Choir Movement (see *Four Centuries of Scottish Psalmody*, Millar Patrick). Affinity lies in the origin of the 'lining out' of the psalms as sung in church and family. The reading of the psalm-portion line by line was forced upon the Scots commissioners to the Westminster Assembly of Divines (see *Worship and Offices of the Church of Scotland*, G. W. Sprott). The Scots objected to this provision, placed in the Directory for Public Worship for English worshippers who could not read,

authorising a practice engaged in in some English parish churches. The Scottish commissioners looked on this as an indignity hard to swallow by an educated people. They would also be aware that the French Synod of the Reformed Church had condemned the practice as 'unfit and improper'. Nevertheless the practice was accepted, and in due course was regarded as an indigenous form.

Dr. Millar Patrick declared acceptance to be a 'disastrous compromise', and Duncan Fraser, a former General Assembly precentor, maintained that it had 'done much, along with almost universal clerical apathy, to injure the musical part of Presbyterian worship in Scotland, taking the better part of the following century to recover from the blow' (*The Passing of the Precentor*).

The most notable principle with reference to Reformed praise was the engagement of the people over against the specialist or exclusive use of choirs: 'The people sing a Psalme and depart. . . . This done, the people sing a Psalme all together in a playne tune . . .' (Scottish Book of Common Order: quoted *Scottish Metrical Psalter of 1635*, Neil Livingston). Livingston says that as well as laying down the principle, the means of working it out also obtained some attention, and the first requisite was the provision of psalm books. It would appear, he suggests, from the Inventories of publishers of the time (Bannatyne Miscellany) that 'this was to a large extent attained'.

Given all the necessary psalm books, could the people in general use them? If not, the indignation of the Scots commissioner at Westminster would appear artificial. It is common knowledge that the money which could have been applied to mass education was appropriated for other use, both by Crown and nobles. Schoolmasters were thin indeed on the ground, and ill-paid at that. It would seem a more accurate description of the situation (also quoted by Livingston) comes from Stewart of Pardovan: 'It was an ancient practice of the Church, for the Minister or precentor to read over as much of the psalm in metre together as was intended to be sung at once, and then the harmony and the melody followed without interruption, and the people did either learn to read, or got most of the psalms by heart' (*Collections*, Bk II, I, par. 6). Perhaps the use of the word 'ancient' begs the question somewhat, and while appreciating that reading the portion to be sung at one time would be preferable to a line by line progression, it is worth noting the appearance of ambiguity in the various references. Dr. Sprott's reference says: 'it is a custom used in most, if not all (English) parish churches . . . that the Clerk alone reads aloud every verse, one after another, of the psalm . . . and that all the people should sing after him . . .' (quoting Durel, *Government and Worship of God in the Reformed Churches beyond the Seas*). We have a choice of interpretation of the psalm-reading duty of the precentor in the early

stages of Reformed praise. There is little essential difference whether line, verse or portion is read, the difference is in degree rather than in form. People could not read, they had to be instructed in order to praise God in worship. The Westminster Assembly clearly legislated for a specific situation which time would condition. The reading out of the psalms before they were sung was 'for the present only'.

It would appear that the Gaelic singing of today with its line by line style, stems from the historic situation of Scotland as a whole.

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The decline in the standards of Scots psalm-singing as from around the mid-seventeenth-century reflected in the publishing by the General Assembly in 1650 of a version of Rous without tunes, or directions as to the correct music, corresponds in time with the publication by the Synod of Argyll of the *First Fifty Psalms in Gaelic*, put into the metres of the Lowland kirk. The Gaelic people had to take the translation and its alien metre, against the same background of lack of education and get on with it. Right from the start it laboured under musical standards and practices foreign to its culture, and seemingly practices not of the best at that. The Lowland congregations had had since 1564 the Psalter of Sternhold and Hopkins, and others, where 'words were accompanied by the melody line of the tunes and the singing was in plain song' (W. D. Maxwell, *Liturgical Portions of the Geneva Service Book*). Even though musical instruction seemed to have been abandoned for the time, a near-century of musical psalmody could not have been altogether lost. The Gaels, however, had not this long period of preparation, and were given Gaelic words, and oral aids only, it would seem. It is only too likely that they would require to lean heavily on the line-by-line system, which, foreign and all as it was at first, has come to be regarded as of the very essence of true Gaelic psalm-singing, and as indigenous to the Highlands as the Scots in non-Gaelic areas once thought of their own old style.

The Reformed provision for the Gaelic part of the kingdom leaned to the indoctrination of the people in theology, rather than to the end of worthily praising God in church. The first printed book in Gaelic was Bishop John Carswell's translation of Knox's Liturgy, or the Book of Common Order, in 1567. The second was a Gaelic translation of John Calvin's Catechism by an unknown scholar, and published by Iohn Wreittoun of Edinburgh in 1631. The Shorter Catechism came out in 1653, and it was not until 1659 that the Synod of Argyll issued its 'Caogad', or the first 50 psalms in metre, without music. Not until 1694 were all psalms published in Gaelic by the Church, though there was a translation of all the psalms in

1684 by Robert Kirk. It is a long period, 134 years from the year of the Reformation 1560, or 120 years after the Lowlands were given their psalter. Many influences could come to bear on Gaelic church praise in that long space, and it is not surprising that its development has been along lines sufficiently independent of the Lowland ways to entitle the Highlands to regard its singing-form as peculiarly its own.

The Highlands got rather a raw deal from the national religious revolution, resulting in some parts in a departure from singing in the church service. The Rev. Angus MacQueen Minister of Sleat was deposed at a visitation of the Synod to the Isles in 1695, charged that . . . for several years he had 'quitted the singing of psalms in public worship' (D. McTavish, *Introduction to the Gaelic Psalms of 1694*). At the same time there is an almost desperate effort indicated behind the words of the injunction of the 1694 General Assembly regarding the proper use of the Gaelic Psalter, that in some areas the new psalter was taken so seriously that the people sang in an alien tongue (Scots) and prayed and read in Gaelic.

How much did the ambitious Lowland Psalters really mean to the people in general?

Early on the Scots had their Proper tunes to the psalms, or had directions as to the singing of certain psalms to other tunes. In later versions beginning in 1615 a number of Common tunes were added. The psalms could now be sung to a limited number of tunes, according to the metre. People always like shortcuts, and tended to use the Common tunes instead of the Proper, so that the 'ordinary members of a congregation would not require to learn and know more than a comparatively small number of tunes' (Wm. Cowan, *Early Scottish Psalm Books*). Under the circumstance, we think, a sensible enough development, but likely to anticipate and ease the way for universal acceptance of the Twelve Common Tunes which held sway for a century, and paralleled by the Gaelic practice of singing the Six Long Tunes over a similar period.

True, as Cowan says, in the later 1635 editions all the tunes, both Common and Proper are harmonized in four parts, something 'which would seem to make a degree of musical culture in congregations much higher than obtained in the succeeding period'. Neil Livingston, however, adds, 'either there was a difference in musical aptitude of the two countries (England and Scotland), or the English formed a juster estimate of what was practical'. It was the succeeding stage of Lowland Scots singing which was later to shock and repel people of developed musical tastes. Since there are only verbal descriptions of the sound (various accounts are given by Millar Patrick) perhaps fastidious people's imaginations rather ran away with them. We could the more heed Robert Burns whose musical discrimination and bardic sense are acclaimed:

'They chant their artless notes in simple guise;
 They tune their hearts, by far the noblest aim:
 Perhaps Dundee's wild warbling measures rise,
 Or plaintive Martyrs, worthy of the name,
 Or noble Elgin beats the heavenward flame,
 The sweetest far of Scotia's holy lays'

(Cottar's Saturday Night)

Was Burns being true to his bardic sense of music in so delighting in the 'rude' praise of his day? Was he being insincere, or just naive? Do we have a more sure ear and more delicate apprehension of what is poetically and musically seemly in the way of praise offering to God?

The critical approach to the Lowland singing of the later seventeenth century and after, is to some extent extended to contemporary Gaelic psalm-singing. It does not follow that Gaelic did not have a separate development and has only a vestigial value. The Gaels took the Lowland style, and interpreted it in their own fashion. Their singing today may be heard, at least in part, as an authentic echo of mid-seventeenth-eighteenth centuries and so does for the period, to some extent, what tape-recording is now doing universally.

The Long Tunes of the Highlands

Music available for the Caogad and of the later 150 psalms was of the plain homophonic kind seen in the Lowland psalters. Rather different music was developed in the Highlands with six tunes called the Long Tunes. The melismatic treatment of simple airs like Dundee and Stilt was found so persistent by Dr. Henry Farmer that he half-suggested that it was a relic of pre-Reformation days (*History of Music in Scotland*), and also that the 'quaverings' of the later singers of the Presbyterian Church up to about 1760 may even be an off-shoot of a Roman practice.

On the Highland side of this at any rate, William Matheson of the Celtic Department at Edinburgh University indicates that the very long style of Gaelic psalm-singing was not found in all parts of the Highlands. 'It first attained its full development in the eastern Highlands from Inverness to Dornoch, because this was the only part of the Gaelic-speaking area which could afford to subsidise church music before the Reformation – Inverness, Beaulieu Priory, Fearn Abbey, Fortrose and Dornoch Cathedrals.' Reformation plain-song was still remembered when the Gaels took up the Reformation psalm-singing. 'Here in those parts this melismatic singing of Gaelic psalms had its first flowering, and spread elsewhere,

especially with the advent of the S.P.C.K.-appointed psalmody teachers to the Highland area.'

There is also significant relevance in the Highland ability to transmit orally and accurately the ancient traditions of the race. This could have importance in assessing the influences that went to the creation of the praise form known as the Highland Long Tunes, viz., Dundee, Elgin, French, London, Martyrs and Stilt.

Lachlan MacBean denies a pre-Reformation origin, saying bluntly that the Gaelic tunes cannot be older than the psalms to which they are sung (*Fuinn nan Salm*, 1877). He refers to the Caogad of 1659, and the fact that the tunes bear English names. But we plainly make no claim that they are directly and completely descended from pre-Reformation origins, and acknowledge the Lowland connection. A case can still be made out for a specialized treatment of the psalm tunes from wholly other, that is Highland, sources. As already indicated certain areas of the Highlands came strongly under pre-Reformation liturgical influence. The forces making advance in the Lowlands with their modification of church music to the new needs, were slow to do the like in the Highlands, and to a great extent failed to make effective musical changes until much later. Without priests or ministers, memory and tradition must have taken over. Until new forms were provided, folk devotion would carry on as near the old ways as possible. As the Reformed tunes percolated slowly and in oral fashion, probably even before the formal Caogad, tunes would be amplified and amended, and the strongest interest would be the old Catholic plain-song. The absence of official Protestant *imprimatur* or initiative, during the time, makes the suggestion worthwhile. Was there a development from within the people's devotions, a bridge between the Catholic and the Reformed piety without benefit of clergy?

Francis Collinson finds the origins of the Highland Long Tunes in the Common tunes of the Lowland Psalter. He feels the strong Gaelic blas (taste) nevertheless, and believes that the embellishments were introduced 'to bring the tunes more into line with the natural Gaelic practice' and gradually came to be regarded as the norm. The amount of imposed decoration was such, he noticed, that any observable connection with the Lowland tunes would be hard to notice (*Traditional and National Music of Scotland*).

Joseph Mainzer accepted the English tunes as the basis of the Long Tunes (*Gaelic Psalm Tunes of Ross-shire*, 1844). He also recognized how little they have in common with each other and the dissimilarity of their characters. The notation of the Long Tune French was given him by a 'Mr. Brown of Inverness who did not know Gaelic, and Mainzer contributed the harmony and the bar divisions, without having heard the tune for himself! So it is not surprising

that the end product is most misleading with the 'accentuation very much astray and many syllables attached to the wrong notes' (Wm. Matheson). Mainzer's version is sung at the close of every annual National Gaelic Mod, and, though not now sung in church as a rule, it seems to be the sole survivor of the Long Six to be heard.

It is the case, as Mainzer marked when studying the Long Tunes, that the principal notes of the Lowland tune form the essential notes of the Long tune. The repetition of a phrase or line is followed by the Gaelic. The rise and fall in the Lowland is the same in Gaelic. Both start and finish on the same note. But the Gaelic ear sometimes rejects the Lowland notes as inconsistent, according to its own gapped scales.

Also, we may add that the slow tempo contributes almost inevitably to the ornamentation, which is so noticeable a feature of Gaelic singing, whether of the Long tunes or the 'new', and described by Francis Collinson as 'the full flowering of the Scottish Highland genius for musical decoration'.

The Contemporary Gaelic Singing

The introduction of the 'new' psalm tunes would appear to date from about 1760. In a letter of 1844 a Highland minister said: 'It is not above 80 years since the 'new' singing was introduced into this country . . . with much difficulty . . . at Kilmuir several of the pious people left the church . . .' (Rev. H. Macleod, Logie Easter). This singing is better described for us by a non-Gaelic musician at this point in the words of Francis Collinson: 'the congregation sings in unison, unaccompanied as is the custom of the Gael, but with a profuse ornamentation of the melody with grace-notes and slurs, as the Highlanders call them in English, each singer improving his or her own grace-noted decoration of the tune as the spirit moves him. The result is astonishing, for it creates a shimmering kaleidoscopic harmony of its own, against which the unison of the tune stands out in great strength and dignity.'

This is especially so in large congregations, as in Stornoway, and in many Highland Communion gatherings. Choirs cannot catch this 'sound' however much they attempt it. Even in family praise this 'otherness' is evident. Dr. Knudsen of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh comments: 'the overlapping of the precenting, and answering of each line of the psalm by two or three solo singers, displays an astonishing species of free and musically uninhibited counterpoint'.

Henry Farmer asks (as it were in reverse) if the 'quaverings' of old Scots psalm-signing were perhaps caught from the Gaelic, as by

infection. He describes the difficulty the Highlander was to encounter fitting his Gaelic words to the unusual Lowland metre. 'This factor alone could have created additional notes, although the original prompting for grace notes, and the almost glissando effects that were introduced were due to the unsubdueable decorative art of the Highland singer . . . and since all decorative art is infectious it would certainly be catching to the Lowland ear.'

The common factor may well be the pre-Reformation memory persisting for Highlander and Lowlander alike in Lowland 'quaverings' and Highland 'graces'.

The Precentor's 'Line'

The line-reading at first unwanted and despised by the Kirk commissioners, became in later days in its own way a test of orthodoxy with people leaving their congregations when the precentors' line-reading ceased, as at Johnshaven, Tough and elsewhere, much as the good people of Kilmuir left when the 'new' tunes were introduced into the Highlands. Whereas the Westminster directive was to the effect that the Minister or someone he appointed read the lines successively, the Highlanders, on taking over, gradually evolved a musical run-line for the different tunes. The practice is still maintained and may vary from district to district and precentor to precentor. Collinson describes it as: 'a conventionalized, curious, almost oriental-sounding cantillation which owes nothing to the tune at all'. While the original purpose of the precenting was utilitarian, the 'Gaelic usage has acquired a much more significant function, for just as Ambrose introduced church music in Milan and Augustine feared that the beauty of the music would distract the worshippers' attention from the words, Gaelic precenting can be seen as one answer to this problem' says William Matheson. The precentor does justice to the words, singing them in their free, natural undistorted rhythm, which then leaves the congregation free to adapt and adorn the music, with the words broken up and generally treated in a wholly artificial manner. Matheson compares this procedure with that in the waulking songs where there is a similar division of labour, with words sung by a soloist and then the whole working group 'going to town' on the music, with no words, but only semantically meaningless vocables.

The Gaelic psalm tunes as sung today appear to be simpler and shorter than the old tunes, but there are still instances of long drawn out expression of the music. Fine, taped examples are kept at the School of Scottish Studies, and reveal some tunes as actually longer than those of Mainzer's collection. People interested in following the singing may, by eliminating the grace-notes and

passing-notes, be able to identify the basic notes of the familiar tune (generally speaking).

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We began saying that we regarded Gaelic psalm-singing as an expression of folk-singing in worship, and would like now in conclusion, to enlarge slightly on this.

Bishop Carswell of Carnassary in his foreward to his translation to the Book of Common Order (1567) complained of the secular outlook of the bardic schools and their hold on the people's imaginations. He looked for a more spiritual outlook (see Dr. Neil Ross's Introduction to the *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore*). It was the Bishop's fervent hope that his translation would help offset the bardic influence. Professor D. MacKinnon remarks that in so writing Carswell proved to be speaking for a long line of Highland ecclesiastics who set their face against music-making not directly associated with the religious and devotional life.

It is well known, however, that people must and will sing and make their music in their own particular way, and despite clerical policy. One result – 'the Gaelic hymn is less musical and the Gaelic song less chaste because of the wide gulf that separates the secular and the sacred in our Highland life' (Professor MacKinnon, 'The Old Highlands' – *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow 1895-1906*).

The other, the people's outlet, lay largely in their psalm-singing and religious fervour. Henry Farmer concluded that the florid decoration of the Gaelic psalm-tunes comes direct from the floridity of the toil and social songs of the Gaels.

Certainly, in the developing strictness of religious requirements as to conversion and church membership, when bagpipe, fiddle, harp and such-like man-made 'vanities' were proscribed to the godly and thereby to the wider circle of family and community, the God-given voice could not be. In a man's sadness, joy, fear, wonder, love, midst life and death and thoughts of immortality, the old musical forms served his modes of expression. None hindered when, as it appears, Gaelic musical practices were firmly planted on the Lowland tunes provided, and perhaps even against knowledge, deep-buried liturgical echoes of another day added their quota. In the end, whatever the right of it, the Highlander (while acknowledging the Lowland connection), has a praise medium that can be classed as his own.

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