
Strathspeys and Reels

THE fame of Neil Gow is a cherished heirloom in Scottish tradition. What those qualities, which have won such celebrity for him as a musician, exactly were, it is difficult now to ascertain. Many of the airs he composed are still popular; but in his own generation and in the next, there were Scottish musicians—Marshall, for instance—who surpassed him as composers. In such records as we have of him, we read of the extraordinary vigour and precision of his up-bow and of the exhilarating shouts with which he was wont to encourage the dancers. But there must have been something about Neil more than this—something of the magical quality we call genius, which illumines not only its possessor, but all his surroundings. That he was a striking personality, who exercised a powerful influence in moulding our national music, will scarcely be denied, even in these days when everything is called in question—when no established reputation is safe from cavillers and assailants; when certain superlatively clear-sighted people have proved to their own satisfaction that Shakespeare himself was a fool and a fraud. We must be content, however, to accept his merits as a performer on hearsay, as we do the flights of great orators that can never be reproduced. There were no phonographs in Neil's days. No doubt there were good players and performers before his time.

"Vixere fortes ante Agamemnona"; but they are now dwarfed and lost behind his great stature. Just as Burns gathered up all the fitful fountains and slender rills of

Scottish song and sent them forward in one broad permanent stream—altering, amending, appropriating, if you will, with a sort of sovereign assumption—so did Neil Gow take possession of the province of Scottish dance music, collecting, rejecting, creating, and, as some think, not scrupling to plunder a little. Followers or rivals of Neil arose, and the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century form a period prolific in the production of that class of music associated with the name of Neil Gow—the reel, the dancing strathspey, and the slow strathspey, which adapts itself to words, and in several cases has been permanently wedded to well-known songs.

In the first fifty years of the last century, almost every parish in Scotland could boast the presence of at least one first-class performer of that kind of music—he might be the laird himself, or some erratic minstrel "hanging loose on society"; but of late the increasing cultivation of the so-called classical music seems to have had a discouraging effect on the national style, and when these scattered stars of the first order sank new ones have not arisen to shine in their place. In Edinburgh and Glasgow there are associations which, with praiseworthy and patriotic zeal, try to keep the flame alive; and the welcome with which their public performances are greeted shows that the heart of the people beats still true to the national strains. One signal exception to the decline of Scottish music stands forth at the present day; but, before speaking of Mr. Scott Skinner, there is what may be called a previous question for discussion. Have these national strains a genuine value? Are they gold or tinsel? Are they nothing but what a gross, uncultivated taste has produced and taken delight in, and are now deserving