Mediating the Scots Song Abroad

By Sarah Clemmens Waltz

It is not easy to determine what educated Germans knew of the various musical cultures in Britain between 1770 to 1830, but certainly their knowledge was mainly mediated through literature. Germans were quite up-to-date on Thomas Percy's 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* as well as the contemporaneous *Works of Ossian* with its accompanying controversy. But in the case of Scots song, German knowledge was far less complete than often supposed, and a coincidental lack of musical examples caused by the quirks of cross-continental circulation in this period meant that images of Scottish music were formed first through literature, which were then difficult to dispel in the face of the music itself.

The German reception of Scotland is complicated by a German nationalist search for origins in the late eighteenth century and a self-identification with the barbaric, northern 'other' that Scotland represented. Germans used descriptions of Scottish (or, rather, Celtic) music to postulate the characteristics of an ancient, pre-literate German music. The affective power which had always been attributed to the music of antiquity merged with new ideas of the noble savage, the value of untutored natural genius, and the new possibility of oral transmission of poetry and music to suggest a vision of ancient music stretching far beyond or circumventing the Greeks. These cultural comparisons shaped the expectations of Scottish music as primitive, powerful – and universal.

Given that folksong collection and interest was rampant in England, it can be particularly hard to accept that German musical enthusiasm for Scotland was not similarly driven by folksong interest, since we know that Haydn and Beethoven set hundreds of Scots songs between them in the decades around 1800, and many London pianists were including popular Scots tunes in their sonatas published abroad (Waltz). This article examines how German-speaking intellectuals repeatedly chose the imagined music of antiquity, derived from literature, over the actual music they encountered.

Four ways in which continental enthusiasts could acquire knowledge of Scottish music include:

1. Literary descriptions such as those in the *Works of Ossian* or the surrounding secondary literature
2. Publications of tunes – either exported from London or, less frequently, printed on the continent
3. Travelogues
4. Traveling virtuosi capitalizing on the London vogue for Scottish tunes

Of these four, tune publication and travelogues came up short; of the remaining, it is important to note that they deal with different kinds of music – descriptions of Highland or Celtic music in literature, versus the rather different and less ancient (seventeenth- or eighteenth-century) Lowland Scots tunes used by virtuosi. Yet as both were often described by the German word *altschottisch* (the words *gaelisch* and *keltisch* not yet being in common usage) the two descriptions were often collapsed for German readers, who then rejected the more recent Lowland Scots tune as insufficiently antique to be authentic.

I. Literature

Germans would probably not have been much interested in Scotland were it not for the *Works of Ossian,* collected and highly edited by James Macpherson (most commonly read in its third, 1765 two-volume edition). Ossian was supposed to be a third-century Celtic bard whose mythic tales of battle and musical prowess were claimed to be extant in manuscript and oral tradition. German Ossianism amounted to an obsession which, in conjunction with ballads from Percy's *Reliques,* dominated the image of Scotland from 1765 at least until the 1820s. (Scottish enthusiasm would receive another boost by translations of Walter Scott in the 1820s – many by the Gebrüder Schumann, including composer Robert Schumann's father and uncle. Robert Burns, considered too difficult to translate, did not really enter the German repertory until between 1835 to 1840. This is rather different from the shape of Anglo-American reception.)

The explicit claims made for Ossian were sweeping: that the Ossianic tales had been communicated essentially unchanged via oral tradition since, possibly, the third century; that they were thus still extant in essentially the same form in the Highlands and Western Islands; and – most tantalizing of all – that the music that accompanied them still existed. The implicit claims of Ossian were equally sweeping: that natural genius could exist in the 'illiterate' north and, moreover, that the north was not barbaric as Tacitus claimed but displayed elevated moral

values. This new, northern vision of ancient music stretching far beyond or circumventing the Greeks, was embraced in Germany (that is to say, German-speaking lands), which had been made to feel inferior over its own illiterate past.

The belief that fragments of music for this Celtic poetry were still to be found in Highland oral tradition is reinforced by Macpherson's footnotes to Ossian: part of Berrathon is 'set to music, and still sung in the north, with a great deal of wild simplicity' (I, 371) and 'has that melancholy air which distinguishes the remains of the works of Ossian' (I, 371). An episode of Cath-Loda is 'in Lyric measure, and set to music, which is wild and simple' (II, 243) and a later episode is 'in the original, extremely beautiful' and 'set to [a] wild kind of music …' (II, 259). The terms 'melancholy', 'wildness', and 'simplicity' (or their equivalents) are repeated frequently.

Similar language is used in the first German-language discussion of Scots song, a 1794 translation of William Tytler's 1792 *Dissertation on the Scottish Music* in the journal *Bragur* (a literary journal concerning 'German and Nordic Antiquity'). Unfortunately, no musical examples were printed with the English original, yet Tytler's essay projects Scottish music into remote antiquity principally on the evidence of the tunes themselves, which he assumes his readers will know. Without the tunes, the remarks concerning their 'wild pathetic sweetness' (Tytler 1792, 246), 'plaintive melancholy strain' (248), 'artless simplicity' (246), and 'remote antiquity' (246) become hopelessly vague. The similarity to Macpherson's statements about music is also striking. Such statements become downright misleading in their culmination:

> *All our old heroic ballads, such as Hardiknute,[1] and others, were undoubtedly sung to chants composed for them, which are now lost. Among those still preserved, are the episodes of Ossian, which are at this day sung in the Highlands. Gill Morrice—The Flowers of the Forest—Hero and Leander, &c. are still sung to their original pathetic strains. (Tytler 1792, 251).*

When Tytler says in the same breath that Ossian is 'at this day sung in the Highlands' and names several Scots songs 'still sung to their original pathetic strains', it seems to imply equal antiquity for both. In the absence of the melodies, then, these tantalizing associations took on an unjustified significance, attributing the power and antiquity associated with Ossian to the Scottish folksong.

The principal editor of *Bragur,* Friedrich Gräter, shows both a keen interest in Scots song and a frustrating inability to obtain it. As he notes:

> *The other[s] …, like so many Scottish songs spoken of thereafter, I can presently not trace, although they are doubtless printed in other works. Besides Percy's edition there are several, of course, such as [d']Urfey's, Ramsay's, Pinkerton's, and Ritson's etc.—all of which, just like a London edition of Percy I have ordered, I have not yet obtained. (Bragur, 127n).*

No doubt Gräter's disappointment was severe if he ever did get them, because most of those collections did not include melodies either (certainly not those mentioned by Tytler): d'Urfey's *Wit and Mirth: Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1719–20) includes mostly imitation tunes; Ramsay's *Evergreen* and *Tea-Table Miscellany* (1725), Pinkerton's *Scottish Tragic Ballads* (1781), and Ritson's *Pieces of Ancient Popular Songs* (1783) all lack melodies, although Ritson's quite new *Scotish Songs* (1794) did have them. This introduces the problems with tune collections.

II. Tune Collections

The publication of Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* in 1802 – yet another source without music – invites a similar lament from a contributor to the Leipzig *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (*AmZ*), the first and at that time only journal devoted solely to music, that the music of Scottish songs seems not to have been published.

> *We must lament, if that Scotsman [i.e. Scott] has left the music by the way, but excuse him also—in his essay, he holds our music for an empty amusement, and if he thus knows and treasures it too little, he at least knows that it is too much for him…. May our request, for the transmission of such songs with their melodies, just as they are in the mouth of the people, by whom one might find the means to bring this request to fulfillment! (AmZ IV/52, 853–54)*

A month later, the *AmZ* updates readers that the desired publication 'of the Scottish folksongs with their music' was fulfilled by Napier's *A Selection of Original Scots Songs* with parlor-song settings by Joseph Haydn (*AmZ* V/3, 53). Such a celebration indicates that no more complete collection (such as Johnson's

and Burns's *Scots Musical Museum*) had yet been seen in Germany. The *AmZ* published two of Haydn's songs in 1802; these are apparently the first Scottish folksongs published in Germany. They anticipate a publication of Haydn's settings for Napier in 1803–04 by Breitkopf & Härtel: the *Alt-schottische Balladen und Lieder* (Old-Scottish Ballads and Songs). Note the use of the confusing term 'alt-schottische' for these eighteenth-century parlor-song settings. Haydn's collection was fairly obscure, though certainly Beethoven knew it; so did composers Felix Mendelssohn and Carl Friedrich Zelter, Mendelssohn's teacher and Goethe's friend. Zelter and Mendelssohn very much distrusted that these works were actual Scots song, and when Mendelssohn traveled to Scotland in 1829 Zelter exhorted him to find the real folktunes, not these which were 'more Haydn than heathen' (Schmidt 1996, 95).

Beethoven similarly contracted with the Edinburgh publisher George Thomson to provide settings of Scots tunes for British consumption. Difficulties in shipping abounded; Beethoven had to send his songs to Edinburgh in three copies by three different routes, and at least once all three were lost (Cooper, 12). Further, the confusion between Gaelic Ossianism and Scottish folksong complicated both their publication and their reception. The eventual publisher of Beethoven's Op. 108 *Twenty-Five Scottish Songs,* Schlesinger, evidently assumed that the texts were old Scots (i.e. Gaelic); Beethoven negotiated by offering a translator and saying, in a letter dated 30 April 1820: 'You will see from the following song which I am sending you that the text is English and not old Scottish… They are quite easy compositions and therefore eminently suitable for performance in small circles of music lovers' (Cooper, 52). By contrast, the instrumental variations of the same tunes ('Bonny Laddie, Highland Laddie', 'O Mary, at Thy Window Be', 'Oh! Thou Art the Lad of My Heart' and 'The Highland Watch') had already been published in Opp. 105 and 107, indicating that it was indeed the language that posed difficulty. The German preoccupation with Ossian and the Gaelic language legitimated the publisher's fears that the words of Scottish folksong would be Gaelic, and the music antiquarian and unsingable.

Schlesinger published these settings in 1822, but through the 1820s Beethoven's tunes were still taken to be not arrangements but his own composition – presumably because few authentic sources existed for comparison. Of the six reviewers of Beethoven's folksong settings, only one, Gottfried Wilhelm Fink, understood that they were pre-existent Scottish song. Yet Fink deeply distrusted

the authenticity of both Haydn's and Beethoven's collections, observing that these folksongs 'could not possibly be real ancient Scottish melodies'. The tunes' great fault, though they were in fact the very songs discussed in treatises such as Tytler's, was that they were not ancient in the Ossianic sense – thus 'neither Beethovenian nor old Scottish songs' (Fink, 99).

III. Travelogues

Travelers are often assumed to be the most important method of spreading information about Scottish song in this period. Yet travelogues seemed to have been written by singularly unmusical individuals. Of the few dozen travelogues appearing in German between 1775 and 1845, only a very few discuss music (Thomas Garnett in 1802, James Macdonald in 1808, and L. A. Necker de Saussure in 1821). In 1808 a disappointed Carl Friedrich Zelter wrote to Goethe that travellers have given such unsatisfactory descriptions of songs of the far North 'that we are more impressed with the meagreness of their knowledge, than with the true spirit of the songs, for none but good musicians can describe such things correctly' (Goethe, 55).

Travelers from Britain to Germany are, of course, another source, but despite some individual cases, travelers do not seem to have made much of a dent in the confusion and difficulty concerning Scottish music.

IV. Traveling Virtuosi
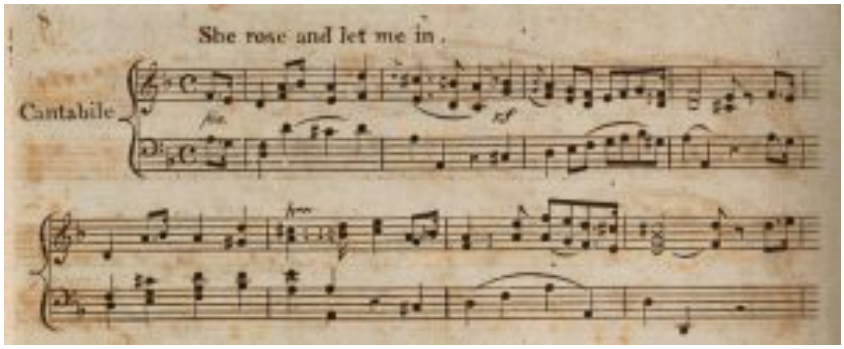
Fig. 1

The exception might be the touring virtuoso, a special kind of traveler. The London craze for Scottish folksongs extended to including them in variation sets or as the basis for sonata movements, which were sometimes published and played on the continent as well. Yet these tunes rarely overlapped with those

otherwise available, and the continental-published sets (unlike the London ones) avoided tune names, perpetuating the confusion. For example, sonatas by London pianist Johann Baptist Cramer that employ folktunes, such as the sonata referred to in Chapter 28 of Jane Austen's *Emma,* typically name the tune (as in **Fig. 1**). Frequently when published abroad, however, the name of the tune is obscured, such as a Mainz-published example by Ignaz Pleyel which simply identifies an 'Adagio eccossois' without naming the tune (which is 'The Yellow-Hair'd Laddie', see **Fig. 2**).

It seems a particularly sad omission because 'The Yellow-Hair'd Laddie' is one of few tunes that ought to have been recognizable on the continent. Johann Christian Bach had first used it in a London piano concerto in 1777, and it was sung in a Stephen Storace opera, *Gli equivoci,* in Vienna in 1786 (though, again, only as 'aria scozzese' – Link, xi–xii). French pianist Daniel Steibelt had picked up on the vogue for this tune in London in 1798, as J. C. Bach had, and included it in the second movement of his Op. 33 Concerto (though popular – Jander, 592n – copies are now rare; one is in the Austen family music books). Steibelt performed this concerto on the continent in 1799, including in Vienna where he famously dueled with Beethoven. Once more, however, the tune was identified only as 'Scotch Air', and furthermore was overshadowed by the 'Storm Rondo' of the third movement (*AmZ* III/3).
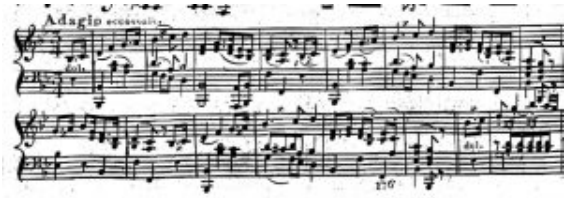
Fig. 2

From such examples it seems clear that it was occasionally possible to encounter real Scots song on the continent before about 1825, but that either those encounters didn't 'take' or were thwarted by an idealized view of primitive music gained from literature. Unexemplified descriptions of Scots song resembled the claims made for Celtic/Ossianic music, and the term *alt-schottisch* (ancient Scottish) was confusingly applied to both. By the time Scots song appeared in German-speaking lands, the fantastic promises of Celtic primitivism had become so inflated that the comparatively polished and recent Scots song could never satisfy no matter how enchanting in its own right.

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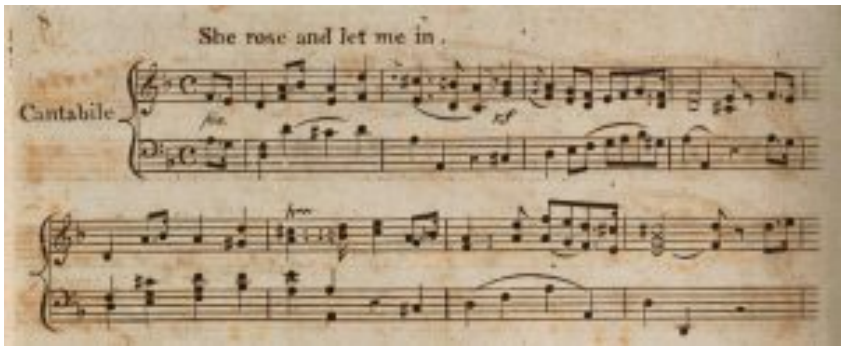
Fig. 1

The exception might be the touring virtuoso, a special kind of traveler. The London craze for Scottish folksongs extended to including them in variation sets or as the basis for sonata movements, which were sometimes published and played on the continent as well. Yet these tunes rarely overlapped with those otherwise available, and the continental-published sets (unlike the London ones) avoided tune names, perpetuating the confusion. For example, sonatas by London pianist Johann Baptist Cramer that employ folktunes, such as the sonata referred to in Chapter 28 of Jane Austen's *Emma,* typically name the tune (as in **Fig. 1**). Frequently when published abroad, however, the name of the tune is obscured, such as a Mainz-published example by Ignaz Pleyel which simply identifies an 'Adagio eccossois' without naming the tune (which is 'The Yellow-Hair'd Laddie', see **Fig. 2**).

It seems a particularly sad omission because 'The Yellow-Hair'd Laddie' is one of few tunes that ought to have been recognizable on the continent. Johann Christian Bach had first used it in a London piano concerto in 1777, and it was sung in a Stephen Storace opera, *Gli equivoci,* in Vienna in 1786 (though, again, only as 'aria scozzese' – Link, xi–xii). French pianist Daniel Steibelt had picked up on the vogue for this tune in London in 1798, as J. C. Bach had, and included it in the second movement of his Op. 33 Concerto (though popular – Jander, 592n – copies are now rare; one is in the Austen family music books). Steibelt performed this concerto on the continent in 1799, including in Vienna where he famously dueled with Beethoven. Once more, however, the tune was identified only as 'Scotch Air',

and furthermore was overshadowed by the ‘Storm Rondo’ of the third movement (*AmZ* III/3).
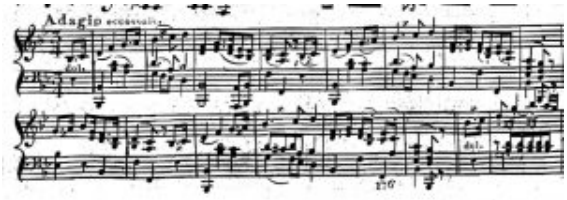
Fig. 2

From such examples it seems clear that it was occasionally possible to encounter real Scots song on the continent before about 1825, but that either those encounters didn’t ‘take’ or were thwarted by an idealized view of primitive music gained from literature. Unexemplified descriptions of Scots song resembled the claims made for Celtic/Ossianic music, and the term *alt-schottisch* (ancient Scottish) was confusingly applied to both. By the time Scots song appeared in German-speaking lands, the fantastic promises of Celtic primitivism had become so inflated that the comparatively polished and recent Scots song could never satisfy no matter how enchanting in its own right.

(c) The Bottle Imp