

'The Devil once a fiddler made': the connection between Manx, Scottish and Norwegian fiddle music

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Introduction

Even today, music is the principal cultural activity in the Isle of Man. No true Manx event, however large or small, is complete without a live performance of a song or two. So it is almost inevitable that my childhood experience of such a society nurtured my main research interest, which is to place music in its social, political and religious context. The results often offer an insight to the lives of the majority of the population whose cultural activities were otherwise relatively unrecorded. This paper is a summary of some preliminary research that looks at the problems of identifying one form of popular, secular, instrumental music-making in the Isle of Man before 1700. As there is very little documentation, much of what follows must be surmise but it is undoubtedly the basis for further discussion and work.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, two visitors to the Island published accounts of their impressions. Chaloner (1656: 5) and Clarke (1656: 111) commented that 'the Manx ... are much addicted to the Musick of the Violyne, so that there is scarce a family but more or lesse can play upon it.' To this Chaloner added, rather caustically, 'But as they are all ill composers, so are they bad players.'

The instrument they had heard was almost certainly not a modern violin. The 'violyne' was clearly well established in the Island, suggesting that this was an instrument with its roots in earlier times. The comment about the standards of playing would seem to bear this out. As gentlemen of culture, both writers would have been more accustomed to the gentler sounds of the courtly viol and the music of Monteverdi and Lully, then fashionable in London. Chaloner's criticism also suggests that the repertoire was unfamiliar to him, even bearing in mind the fact that novelty was more highly prized then than now. But whatever they had heard was recognisably an instrument that was somehow a member of the family of stringed, bowed instruments,

although the sound might not have been to their taste. Chaloner also added the comment that 'it is strange that they should be singular in affecting this Instrument before others, their Neighbours: the Northern English; the Scots; the Highlanders, and the Irish, generally, affecting the Bag-Pipe.'

Why, when surrounded by countries famous for harps and pipes, does the Isle of Man apparently have no tradition linked with either instrument? The Irish use the harp on stamps, coins and Guinness, the Scots are world-famous for their bagpipes, while the northern English have the gentler Northumbrian pipes. The Welsh are principally renowned for their harp playing, although the *crwth*, which was really a bowed lyre, was a popular folk instrument with a 'harsh' tone (Baines 1983, 520). This description perhaps ties in with Chaloner's comment about the tonal quality of the Manx 'violyne'. There is only a single image on a Scandinavian-period cross (Kermode 1907, 69) that suggests harps might have been used in the Isle of Man but this rudimentary image could equally have been representative of an early *crwth*. Three hundred and fifty years ago the Manx were noted for fiddle music, at a time when there is little evidence for the instrument in any of the surrounding regions. Indeed, the modern violin was only introduced into southern England in the first half of the seventeenth century (Arnold 1983, 1930) and Johnson (1972, 111) suggests that the modern violin arrived in the Lowlands towards the end of the 1600s as a classical instrument before replacing the bagpipes as the most popular folk instrument. Purser (1992, 132, 136) confirms that the violin only gained a foothold in Scotland during the early 1700s. So it is fairly unlikely the modern instrument could have become sufficiently commonplace in the Isle of Man for a mid-seventeenth century commentator to be able to remark, 'there is scarce a family but more or lesse can play upon it'. As there is a lack of eyewitness descriptions, we must therefore turn to other types of evidence to try to discover what this tradition might have been.

Given the close trading and social links between Man and its neighbours during the whole of this period, a number of questions arise. Why were there no bagpipes and harps on the island? Why were 'violyne's, whatever they were, not widespread in the surrounding regions? And why had the tradition before the eighteenth century apparently been so different in an island within sight of the surrounding countries?

These are questions that had long puzzled me. It was not until I read a history of Norwegian music (Grinde 1991) that I began to find some clues to a possible solution. Writing about the High Middle Ages, Grinde (1991, 13) notes that 'The instruments mentioned most frequently in old Norse literature are the fiddle and giga'. He also comments that 'Bagpipes, barrel organs and keyed harps were also well known in neighbouring countries during the middle ages but there is nothing to indicate that they were used in Norway' (Grinde 1991, 15). Given the strong Scandinavian elements of government, language, place-names and superstitions that have survived in the Isle of Man right up to the present day, is it not possible that a musical tradition familiar to Norway and Man had also continued for some hundreds of years?

In order to examine this theory, and in the absence of eyewitness accounts, it was necessary to turn to customs and traditions, folklore and, of course, the music itself.

Customs and traditions

There are numerous accounts of the fiddlers who travelled the length and breadth of the Island, carrying not only new songs but importantly, new stories and the local gossip. In the days before recorded music, anyone with a new song must have been the hero of the evening. In spite of the disapproval of the Church, dancing was popular. Waldron, in his *Description of the Isle of Man in 1726*, commented, in rather dismissive tones, 'Dancing, if I may call it so, jumping and turning round at least, to the fiddle and base-viol (sic), is their great diversion'.

Fiddle music played a part in every aspect of Manx life. No wedding was complete without music, and the fiddler was valued as highly as the parson (Clague 1911, 97). The musician's fee was known as the Unnysup¹; dancing was kept up till a late hour and there was plenty of ale for everyone, which might possibly be one of the reasons that the Church frowned on dancing. The bridal couple were 'preceded by musick, who play all the while before them the tune 'The Black and Grey' and no other is ever used at weddings'. Manx historian A W Moore (1891, 157-159) comments that the 'Black and Grey' was 'a popular tune at the time of Charles II and it continued in vogue until the end of the eighteenth century'. It certainly appears in Playford, (Barlow 1985, 239) but there is no trace of this melody in the Manx nineteenth-century collections. Was this because the melody was so closely linked with the 'violyne' and had consequently disappeared with the introduction of the modern instrument? On the way to church, the fiddler might play on his own or, according to a 19th-century writer, be accompanied by a 'clarionet', or even a piper (Caine 1896, 4). The musicians went ahead of the bridegroom and his friends, who carried wands of willows to show they were more important than the bride and bridesmaids, who followed them. After the ceremony, the party would leave the church, this time led by the women (Moore 1891, 158). Nineteenth-century folklorist Dr Clague noted that 'in old times people came to the wedding on horseback, and sometimes there would be as many as sixty horses' (Clague 1911, 95). Similar customs were observed in Scotland (Johnson 1972, 112) and Norway, where the fiddler rode on horseback and was an important member of the bridal party.²

Fiddlers were often present at funerals too. It was usual for neighbours and relatives to sit through the night with the body; there was ale and tobacco and often a fiddler and singers to provide appropriate music (Clague 1911, 107).

But the fiddler really came into his own at Christmas. The traditional Manx Christmas lasted over a fortnight, beginning on 21 December and finishing with Twelfth Night. Only essential work was carried out, and it was a chance to relax. Every parish hired fiddlers at the public charge, and there was dancing and music every evening during the festival (Douglas nd, 25). This translation from the Manx of verses 19-21 from a seventeenth-century carval³ describes the fiddler's role in the Christmas celebrations:

¹There are several tunes with the title 'Unnysup' said by Miss A G Gilchrist to be a corruption of the term 'The hunt is up'.

²See Fig 2.

³A form of popular sacred song, usually sung in church on Christmas Eve after the officiating parson had left. Carvals could run into 30 or 40 verses. They often drew on biblical ideas and stories. A particular favourite was the story of the prodigal son. Before the late 18th century they were usually the province of

What great blessing will come upon us in the beginning of the New Year;
 The fiddler coming before daybreak and enquiring "Are you alive?"
 And calling, by their own names, all the household,
 And filling every soul of them with the raptures of love.

The fiddler's wife comes early, with a face healthy and clean,
 To get a brave cut of meat or a big present of wine,-
 That is what they give to the fiddler for an offering or reward,-
 When thou dost observe this thou art blest for ever.

She will leave the place happy in her heart,
 With the big gifts which they have given her,
 uttering her blessing on the cattle and also on the calf,
 When these blessings have been said, she will go, laden, home.⁴

The tradition seems to have continued into the 1800s, although an account of an incident in the middle of the nineteenth century suggests that the coming of the fiddler early on Christmas morning did not meet with the same rapturous joy. Mr. John Gell, a mason, was awakened by a well-known Douglas character, and commemorated the occasion in verse.

Cease, catgut scraper, thy vile trade,
 My ears no longer tickle,
 The Devil once a fiddler made,
 And called him Tommy Nichol (Cowin 1902).

At the winter solstice in Shetland, fiddlers presented themselves at the doors of the houses, playing 'Da day dawis', a tune which according to musicologist John Purser had been 'long consecrated to Yule day, and is never played on any other occasion' (Purser 1992, 79). Our seventeenth-century Manx carval-writer noted that the fiddler's visit 'filled every soul of them with the raptures of love'; the Shetland commentator made a remarkably similar comment, writing that 'the interesting association of which (tune) thrills every soul with delight' (Purser 1992, 79).

Fiddle music and folklore

There is a rich vein of Manx folklore linked to music. Magical forces, if not resisted, could spirit people away to other worlds. Many of the stories were linked to fiddle

the educated clergy but were taken over in the 19th century by men who often had little education but felt strongly about their beliefs. This is a similar custom to the Welsh *plygain*.

⁴Isle of Man Examiner, 24.12.1926.

music which is perhaps to be expected, as the violin was the instrument in most common use. Strong supernatural powers were ascribed by the author of the carval to both the fiddler and his wife. That same supernatural quality is to be seen in 'Mylecharane's March', a remarkable stick-dance traditionally performed by a men's team on Old Christmas (6 January). At the close of the performance, the dancers:

linked in a circle around the fiddler, the sticks were drawn closer and closer around him until they 'cut off the fiddler's head' and he fell down 'dead'. Capering around the dancers came the *Laare Vane* (White Mare), a girl draped in a white sheet and holding a horse's head made of white-painted wood, with hinged jaws which snapped at any of the company. Finally, it 'raised' the fiddler and led him to a seat, where the *Laare Vane* sat down, in her lap the fiddler's head, which then became an oracle, answering questions mainly about marriage (Douglas nd, 27).

This is just one of the numerous occasions in Manx folklore in which the apartness of the fiddle player is emphasised and he is linked with powerful magical forces, both during life and after death. Such beliefs linger on. Tom Taggart, a well-known player of the cello, which he generally referred to as 'the fiddle' or 'Herself', died in the 1930s. After his death, the person who had moved into his cottage moved out again very swiftly, on the grounds that his playing kept her awake all night.⁵

Many of the stories probably have their roots in an ancient tradition, as they often refer to a people who were living underground. Parallels exist in the Hebrides (Kennedy-Fiaser 1921, xxi, 126-8), the Western Highlands (*Journal of Folklore* 1911, 228), as well as regions which also have a long fiddle tradition such as the Shetlands and parts of Scandinavia.⁶ In Shetland, ferrytuns could be heard issuing from hills at night, although to hear the trows in the Hebrides playing and singing could cause a man to lose his wits (Saxby 1936, 65). These are all areas which have stories of tunes that were learned by listening to the music of the 'trows' or 'trolls', which could be heard drifting up through the earth from their underground dwellings (Lifton 1983, 49). Other stories may simply be explained away by the habit of many fiddlers of taking a drop too much to drink, combined with a vivid imagination. Such 'explanations' might also have been a means of giving greater status to a newly-composed tune.

Evidence for Scandinavian and Scottish influence in Manx music

For the strongest evidence linking Manx and Norwegian music we have to turn to the melodies themselves. Although those who heard them rarely remembered these wonderful magical tunes, there are a few examples of the elusive melodies heard by musicians as they made their way home late at night over the mountains. There are several sources for one particular Manx story (Gill 1932, 308-313). Three of the accounts agree on the principal element of the tale: the difficulty of remembering a fairy tune heard during a night-time journey through the hills near Ballaugh:

⁵Told to me by Miss Gwen Collister, a relative of Tom Taggart's, in 1996.

⁶I am indebted to Professor Crossley-Holland for drawing these to my attention.



Figure 1: Comparison of tune from Western Norway and the Manx melody 'Bollan bane'.

'Only one musician claimed to have remembered the tune long enough to get it home safely. Bill Pheric was coming home late one night across the mountains from Druidale and heard the fairies singing just as he was going over the river by the thorn tree that grows there. The tune they had was the 'Bollan bane'⁷, and he wanted to learn it from them, so he went back three times before he could pick it up and remember it, but after the third time he had it by heart. Just then, the sun got up and the fairies went away, for they always go at sunrise. He came home whistling the tune, and since then it has been popular and much played on the fiddle. Many people think that Bill Pheric invented the tune, but he hadn't, he got it from the fairies.¹⁸

Apart from the obvious magical elements in this account - the crossing of water, a thorn tree, the recurrence of 'three' and the resumption of normality at sunrise - it is odd that such a good traditional musician as Bill Pheric should find it so difficult to memorise a melody. Maybe he was tired or inebriated, or both, or perhaps the story was simply a way of explaining the difficulty of learning a tune that was in an unfamiliar idiom.⁹

A fourth version places the story nearer Laxey and touches on the search for sheep lost in snow, another well-known story celebrated in song.¹⁰

There are at least two tunes with the same title. One has all the characteristics of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century violin melody, with the spiccato technique, which appears in the first two bars and, again, towards the end. The other (Figure 1) is in a less familiar idiom and was sung to non-lexical words, which may be a remnant of an earlier, half-remembered language or a protective incantation. The tune was also used as part of a cante-fable¹¹, in which the narrator used the repetition of a short snatch of melody to punctuate events in the story. Only a few survive and those that do, all include references to the powers of a supernatural world that was believed to coexist in parallel with the everyday, humdrum life. I noted with interest that the Shetland

⁷In Moore, Morrison and Goodwin *Vocabulary of the Anglo-Manx Dialect*. On page 18, the *bollan bane* (the white wort) is said to be the mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*). This is also known by the name *bollan seall'Eoin* (St John's plant) and is traditionally worn on Tynwald Day, St John's Day in the Old Calendar. It was believed to be a specific against the Evil Eye and witchcraft.

⁸Noted from Miss A M Crellin, Orrisdale in *Yn Liooar Manninagh* ii. 195.

⁹For a further discussion of this tune and its associated stories, see Gilchrist, A G in *Journal of the Folk Song Society* 28 (December 1924) 107-9.

¹⁰*Ny kirree fo'n niaghtey'* ('The sheep under the snow'), a story set in the hills above Laxey, which describes an unsuccessful, large-scale search for sheep buried during a sudden and harsh snowstorm.

¹¹The French term is used by A G Gilchrist in her commentaries on Manx music in *Journal of the Folk Song Society*, 1924, 1925 and 1926.



Figure 2: Wedding Procession, Voss, Western Norway

musician Andrew Poleson sang the first line of a tune before striking it up on the fiddle.¹² Could this be a remnant of such cante-fables, or even, perhaps, the sagas?

A similar example from Bergen (Grinde 1991, 92-3) concerns a group of friends who hear wonderful music on a mountainside on Christmas Eve. The halling-type tune¹³ (Figure 1) associated with this story bears a remarkable similarity to the '*Bollan Bane*', both in its melodic shape and range, rhythmic pattern and phrasing.

The important social role of the fiddle-player is celebrated in a handsome bronze plaque in Voss, not far from Bergen (Figure 2). The melody reproduced on the plaque is a traditional wedding tune, which has a distinctive rhythmic pattern and melodic line (Figure 3).

There is a group of Manx tunes with very similar characteristics and which are, interestingly, rarely performed by Manx musicians today (Figure 3). The greatest similarity is the rhythmic pattern but the opening bar of the melody and the range of the tune overall are strikingly alike. Norwegian tunes often have unusual structural features, such as three-bar phrases, a pattern which is shared by 10% of the melodies contained in the principal Manx collection¹⁴, and which rarely occurs in other folk-music of the British Isles. In this case, the tune from Voss has regular 4-bar phrases but the Manx mocking song '*Arrane ny mummeryn*' ('Mummer's song') has an irregular 11-bar structure. Another related Manx tune '*Bwoaill Baccagh*' shares the triple time signature and has 26 bars, broken into the following phrase pattern: 4, 4, 9, 4, 5. What appears to be a development (or debasement) of this variant is '*Booil Backel*', which has been transformed into an 8-bar melody in duple time and is used as a popular courting dance with the title 'Return the blow'.

But these are not the only musical links between Mann, Scotland and Western Norway. Amongst the tunes collected by the late Mona Douglas is a cow-calling song

¹²'The fiddler and his art', *Scottish Tradition* 9, School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, CDTRAX 9009, 1993 Track 9.

¹³The halling is a lively Norwegian dance-tune in duple time.

¹⁴The Clague Notebooks: mss in the Manx National Heritage Library Mss 448A/449B.

Although there are references to a few tunes in the eighteenth century, the earliest collections of Manx tunes date from the nineteenth century, of which the most comprehensive is in the Clague Notebooks. Most of the melodies in this collection move by step, smoothing out irregular intervals that appear in related tunes from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland (Bazin 1995, 43-9). Another group of Manx tunes from the Clague Notebooks feature not the smooth stepwise movement, but are based on a pattern of thirds, fifths and octaves, a characteristic often found in the Norwegian folk tradition¹⁷, as well as in medieval church music of northern Britain.¹⁸ The mixture of major and minor thirds found in a triad could well have led to the tonal ambiguity sometimes found in Manx music, with an oscillation (if not a confusion) between modes, whether major, minor, Aeolian or Dorian. Tunes often appear in more than one guise,¹⁹ or move between two modes.²⁰ Still other remnants seem to have survived, including melodies that use the 'prip' scale found widely in the music of Western Norway.

By the end of the eighteenth century it is fairly clear that Manx fiddle music was in step with that in the surrounding countries. The merchant classes in the Isle of Man had adopted lifestyles and cultural pursuits indistinguishable from their partners and colleagues in Britain and further afield. The modern violin was employed by musicians who were as familiar with the music of the countryside as that of the concert hall, equally happily playing from the latest tune-books as from the score of a Handel oratorio. The earlier style of 'violyn' playing was probably overlaid by more 'modern' music. But pockets of the old style remained, with tunes that had perhaps survived from the time of the Scandinavian rule.

By the beginning of the twentieth century vestiges of the old style of fiddle playing had all but disappeared, surviving only in the late nineteenth-century collections of folklore and music, and in occasional, tantalising references by early commentators. New, mainstream styles had taken over, driven by the Island's economy, which was based mainly on the burgeoning tourist industry. But these, too, made use of the old Manx tunes, for example in the compositions of Haydn Wood, himself a violinist of some note, and his older brother Harry, who was for fifty years one of the most important figures in the popular music scene in the Isle of Man. However, it seems that small pockets of the tradition survived in remoter rural areas. With a reawakened interest in Manx music from the 1970s, new styles have developed, based on the traditional body of material but borrowing modern styles and techniques to produce an exhilarating new 'tradition' with a life of its own. Many modern musicians in the Isle of Man have been greatly influenced by Irish music. Young Manx instrumentalists could well find inspiration in exploring the other equally rich styles that have close historical links with the Isle of Man, such as Scotland and Western Norway.

¹⁷And used by Greig in, for example, 'Morning' from the Peer Gynt Suite.

¹⁸A famous example is the 12th-century Hymn to St Magnus which uses the interval of a third both in the melodic line and in the part-writing (Purser 49 and De Geer, I: 'Music and the Twelfth Century Orkney Earldom: A Cultural Crossroads in Musicological Perspective' in B E Crawford (ed) *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Aberdeen, University Press, 1988) 242.

¹⁹'Mylecharaine' is a particularly interesting example. See Bazin 'Mylecharaine: a call to nationhood' *Folksong tradition and revival: Centenary Conference of the English Folk Song Society Sheffield, July 1998*. Awaiting publication but lodged as a ms in the Manx National Heritage Library.

²⁰See 'Haink sooreydepr nish gys dorrys ven-treoghe' ('The suitor came to the widow's door') in Bazin 1995. 428.

This paper is simply the first step into a discussion of the pre-eighteenth-century instrumental tradition in the Isle of Man. I feel that the evidence contained in the customs and traditions, the folklore and especially the musical examples are sufficient to pursue and enrich our understanding of Manx musical history.

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