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The Music of Scott Skinner

Traditional Scots Fiddling
On the original recordings of
J. Scott Skinner
and in new performances by
Bill Hardie



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TOPIC

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Bill Hardie / stereo

- 1 **The Marquis of Huntly's Snuff
Mull/Mrs Chree/Carnie's Canter**
- 2 **James F. Dickie's Delight/The
Laird o' Drumblair/James F.
Dickie's reel**
- 3 **MacPherson's Rant/
Tullochgorum/The East Neuk o'
Fife**
- 4 **Master Francis Sitwell &
variations/Newcastle Hornpipe**
- 5 **Hornpipes: The North Shore/The
Liverpool**
- 6 **The Dean Brig o' Edinburgh/
Banks Hornpipe**

Bill Hardie is accompanied by his son, Alastair Hardie, on piano on tracks 1, 2, 4, 6 – tracks 3 and 5 are solo.

Scott Skinner / 78rpm discs / mono

- 7 **The Laird o' Drumblair (1683e)
(Zonophone X-47905)
(The Laird o' Drumblair/The
Baker Reel/Will ye no come back
again?)**
- 8 **The Freebooter (Is Your War Pipe
asleep) (26746) (Rena Double Face
1285)(MacPherson's Rant/
Tullochgorum & variations/
The East Neuk of Fife &
variations)**
- 9 **Birlin Reels (26749) (Rena Double
Face 1283)
(The Auld Wheel/Spinning
Wheel/Bride's Reel/MacKenzie
Frazer/Fairy Dance)**
- 10 **German Schottische (26760)
(Rena Double Face 1286)
(Bohemian Melodies)**

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
- 11 (a) Goodbye Gramin (b) Johnny Steele (strathspey) (c) James Hardie (reel) (73072) (Regal G8021)**
- 12 Highland Schottische (26761) (Regal Zonophone G6617) Maggie Cameron/Athole Brose/ The Devil in the Kitchen/Forbes Morrison**
- 13 Sean Trews and Whistle o'er the Lave O't, and Wha widna Fecht for Charlie? (Antique Dance) (26764) (Regal G6625)**

Scott Skinner is accompanied by his niece, Mrs Ethel Key (nee Stuart) on piano on track 11. Other piano accompaniments unidentified. Discographic information including matrix numbers, label and issue numbers follow each item in the track listing.

It is very appropriate that the artistry of William Hardie should be featured on this disc along with that of J. Scott Skinner, for many authorities believe him to be the finest living exponent of the Scott Skinner style.

William Hardie, accompanied on this record by his son, comes from a family with a long and honoured place in Scottish musical life – his great-great grandfather, Peter Hardie, (1775 - 1863), was a pupil of Niel Gow and a violin maker and composer of note; Peter's cousin, Matthew Hardie (1755 - 1826), is widely regarded as the doyen of Scottish violin makers, and Charles Hardie (1849 - 1893), the grand-uncle of the present artist, was considered one of the best violinists in Scotland in his day, and held by Skinner to excel particularly in slow airs, light reels and hornpipes.

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The Marquis of Huntly's Snuff Mull (a Niel Gow reworking of a William Marshall tune) is remarkable for its formal repetitious simplicity. The remaining two tunes in this group are by J. Scott Skinner – the strathspey **Mrs Chree** and the reel **Carnie's Canter**; this reel (dedicated to a celebrated horse owner) makes a particular feature of 'birlin' notes', a rhythmic embellishment  performed with a flicking movement of the bow.

J. Murdoch Henderson, the composer of **James F. Dickie's Delight** and **James F. Dickie's Reel** died at Aberdeen in 1972 at the age of seventy. Although a schoolmaster by profession, Henderson achieved eminence as a composer and arranger of, and authority on, the national violin music of Scotland. Both these tunes are taken from his *Flowers of Scottish Melody*, an imaginative and scholarly collection published in 1935. **The Laird o' Drumblair**, one of Skinner's most celebrated compositions, was dedicated to William McHardy on whose Drumblair estate Skinner used to spend his holidays.

The first of the unaccompanied groups opens

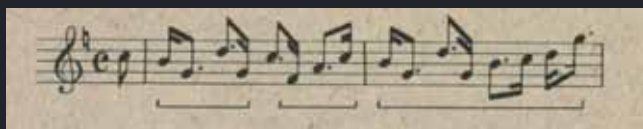
with **MacPherson's Rant**. James MacPherson was a fiddler and freebooter whose illegal activities finally ended in his being sentenced to the gallows at Banff in 1700. The story goes that a reprieve was on the way but the local sheriff, determined on revenge, had the town clock moved forward in order to carry through the sentence. As his musical memorial, MacPherson played this poignant melody, breaking his fiddle over his knee before the sentence was carried out. Robert Burns made a significant contribution to the romantic legend with his poem "M'Pherson's Farewell":-

*Sae rantingly, sae wantonly,
Sae dauntingly gaed he,
He play'd a spring and danced it round,
Below the gallows-tree*

Tullochgorum (from the Gaelic "tullach gorm" meaning "the blue-green hill") first published in Bremner's 1757 collection, was a key piece in the repertoire of both Gow and Skinner. This tune typifies the influence that bagpipe music has had on much fiddle writing; the bagpipe scale enables triads on A and G (a tone below) to be constructed and thus used in sequence when

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this principle – transposed down to G and F – is applied in **Tullochgorum**.



The East Neuk o' Fife is likewise a very old tune (James Oswald's 1752 collection). Commencing in the major and ending in the relative minor, it shows a characteristic of many old Scottish tunes.

Master Francis Sitwell a slow strathspey attributed to Niel Gow's son, Nathaniel, is here accompanied by two variations composed by James F. Dickie, the Aberdeenshire violinist now in his eighties. Dickie, a dedicatee of the two Murdoch Henderson tunes mentioned above, is described in the *Flowers of Scottish Melody* as "a player of great taste and polish, his rendering of E ♭ airs and slow strathspeys being inimitable'. The group concludes with James Hill's **Newcastle Hornpipe**. Continuing with two further hornpipes, the second unaccompanied group features **The North Shore** and **The Liverpool**.

The Dean Brig o' Edinburgh and Banks Hornpipe must be one of the best known 'groups' in Scottish fiddle music. Wrongly ascribed in the past to Davie (of Aberdeen) and Peter Milne, **The Dean Brig** was actually composed by Archie Allan of Forfar whose original title for the tune was *Miss Gray of Carse*. **Banks Hornpipe**, described by its composer Parazotti as a classical hornpipe, has some effective syncopations, and the second strain employs the device of saltando bowing – a staccato arpeggiated effect. The idiomatic arrangement used here was made by Gavin Greig, the celebrated folklorist from the northeast of Scotland.

James Skinner was born in Banchory on the 5 August 1843 and died in Aberdeen on the 19 March 1927 in his eighty-fourth year. It was Skinner's brother Sandy who provided his early musical education – in violin playing and also in the eminently practical skill of vamping accompaniments on the 'cello. This ability soon earned him the honour of accompanying the esteemed Peter Milne (1824 - 1908) and it was this artist who undoubtedly provided him with his early grounding in the art of strathspey

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bowing. In 1855 Skinner joined “Dr. Mark’s Little Men” – a youthful band of touring players. It was during this time that he received tuition in violin and theory from Charles Rougier, a French violinist and member of the Halle Orchestra.

On concluding his six years’ apprenticeship with Dr. Mark’s band, Skinner decided, following the precedent of his father and brother, to establish himself as a teacher of dancing, and to this end he studied with “Professor” William Scott. As a tribute to his mentor, Skinner subsequently styled himself James “Scott” Skinner. However, his vocation as violinist was not neglected as is proved by his success in an open violin competition held in Inverness in 1863.

Skinner’s repertoire combined the music of the Scottish violin composers of the past, the Gows and Marshall for example, with his own prodigious output of compositions – he produced over six hundred items, the first published piece being a polka of 1860. Numerous collections followed, the most important being the *Miller o’ Hirn Collection* (1881), the *Elgin Collection* (1884), the *Logie Collection* (1888), *The Scottish Violinist* (1900) and his magnum opus *The Harp*

and *Claymore Collection* (1904). Individual pieces were published in the *Monikie* and *Cairngorm* sheet music series. The composer’s *A Guide to Bowing* should also be mentioned as his attempt to elucidate the mysteries of strathspey bowing.

In addition to his concerts throughout Britain, Skinner made two trips to the USA – in 1893 and 1926. These, coupled with his many photograph and gramophone recordings, made the Strathspey King an international celebrity; indeed, he was one of the pioneer recording artists both with his cylinders for Edison and his discs for Emile Berliner. On many of these early recordings Skinner is using a ‘Stroh’ fiddle – so called from its invention by Charles Stroh who designed the metal horn and soundbox to produce the volume of sound required for the insensitive recording apparatus then in use. Skinner’s ‘Stroh’ fiddle is now in the possession of Mr John W. R. Junner from whose record collection we are indebted for all the historic old 78s used on this LP.

The earliest of these dates from late January 1905 and features **The Laird o’ Drumblair, The**

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Baker reel and concludes, unusually perhaps, with **Will ye no come back again?** – more familiar as a Jacobite song to words by Lady Nairne.

Groups two, three and four were all recorded around January 1910. **The Freebooter** (another name for **MacPherson's Rant**), **Tullochgorum** and **The East Neuk of Fife** offer an opportunity for contrast with William Hardie's interpretation. Apart from being accompanied, Skinner's version also includes a rather melodramatic minor introduction to the **Rant** and some highly virtuosic variations to **Tullochgorum**. Of the group of five 'birlin' reels' (cf. **Carnie's Canter**) the first four are by Skinner himself. These are **The Auld Wheel** – the wheel in question being that of the Mill o' Hirn near his native Banchory, the **Spinning Wheel**, **The Bride's** (written to toast the future Mrs Skinner) and **Mackenzie Fraser**, the second strain of which makes effective use of melodic tenths. Incidentally Murdoch Henderson was the first to publish **Mackenzie Fraser**, appearing in 1957 in his *Scottish Music Maker*.

Nathaniel Gow (1763 -1831), son of the famous

Niel, was the composer of **Largo's Fairy Dance** and the tune appeared in his father's 1809 collection. As with so many other great artists, straightforward repetition was anathema to Skinner, and the variations on Gow's tune are just one example of his notable abilities in this respect.

The **German Schottische** track begins with a tune sometimes known as *The Girl with the Blue Dress On* – this features the use of polonaise hook bowing. Admirers of Skinner may feel that this group shows a less committed, more commercial aspect of his recorded output, for certainly the standard of both music and performance do not match that of his finest work.

1922 saw the close of Skinner's recording career and from late November of that year we have the group **Goodbye Gramin, Johnnie Steele** and **James Hardie**. Mr George G. Ingram wrote verses to Skinner tunes under the name 'Gramin'; the composer took this musical farewell of his friend on his emigration to America. Also known as *Bob Steele* and *The New Brig o' Dee*, the strathspey **Johnnie Steele** was composed by James Barnett (1847 – 1898) of Kirkwall and

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appeared in Book II of Kohler's *Violin Repository*. Written specifically to follow **Johnnie Steele**, Skinner's reel **James Hardie** is dedicated to the grandson of Peter Hardie. James Hardie (1836 – 1916) was born near Ellon in Aberdeenshire but set up his violin maker's business in Edinburgh where he became famous both for the quality and quantity of his instruments.

January 1910 was the recording date for the concluding two groups. Fiddlers intent on an authentic rendition of the pipe strathspey **Maggie Cameron** would do well to give attention to Skinner's footnote in *The Harp and Claymore* which advises performers to "give one bow to each bar, as a rule, pressing hard with the fingers (in order to stimulate a bagpipe-like tone) and taking care not to omit the grace-notes." Son of the more famous Robert Mackintosh, Abraham Mackintosh (born 1769) was the composer of **Athole Brose**. The tune as performed here, however, substitutes Skinner's major version of the opening strain for the original which was in the minor. **The Devil in the Kitchen** is the work of William Ross, piper to Queen Victoria. Skinner's **Forbes Morrison**, a true fiddle strathspey in contrast to the three pipe

tunes, immortalises a younger contemporary of the composer who, similarly, chose to follow the profession of violinist and dancing master.

The **Sean Trews** is an ancient highland dance in which sporran and kilt are replaced by tartan trews (trousers). **Whistle o'er the lave o't**, described by Skinner as "Scotland's finest rhythmic air in G" is attributed to the Braemar musician John Bruce (1720 – 1785), whose claim to the authorship of *Whistle and I'll come to you* was supported by Robert Burns. Structurally it is interesting to note the importance which the four note ascending scalic figure (bar 2) plays in the development of the air. **Wha widna fecht for Charlie?** Is a quick strathspey which bears a close resemblance to the tune *Highland Donald*. Although played here as a violin solo, this Jacobite air is probably better known in its version as a song.

Alastair J. Hardie,
September 1975.

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Recorded and produced by Tony Engle
Bill Hardie recorded in Aberdeen, October 1974
Scott Skinner – an EMI Records recording
Sleeve design by Tony Russell
Sleeve notes by Alastair Hardie

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Topic would like to thank Mr John Junner of
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the discs for tracks 7 – 13 and all his assistance
in the production of this record

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Bill Hardie

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Scott Skinner

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