

EQUATING TRADITIONAL SINGERS' TERMS WITH MELODIC ADAPTATION

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Abstract: This paper addresses the difficult question of musical aesthetics, analysing how singers describe melodic qualities in a textually conservative ballad tradition. Drawing on fieldwork in the North East of Scotland, it begins to compile a basic vocabulary for melodic description from *within* the tradition.

Keywords: Scottish ballads, musical rural term, aesthetics

In one of his major projects, cantometrics, Alan Lomax attempted to describe the vocal qualities of traditional singers objectively. For the last few years, I have been looking at this question from the other side, trying to understand Scottish traditional singers' aesthetics from the inside: how do they create a good performance and what makes a performance good in their eyes? Elsewhere I have noted a partial list of native terminology for melodic decoration and for general melodic character (MCKEAN 2001). In this essay, I want to look more closely at a few of these terms – 'lilt', 'good goin', 'jaunty', 'gran', 'sweepin', 'curly bits', 'twiddly bits' – and try to get at their meanings through the words of the singers themselves. Perhaps then we can pinpoint some tune types and melodic devices to which the terms specifically apply. The phrases range from the very general, describing the overall contour and colour of the melody itself, to the apparently specific, describing particular melodic turns, or decorative features peculiar to a singer's delivery. Naturally, they often apply to several aspects of a song – tempo, melody and performance style – which makes defining them difficult. They are all closely intertwined and to separate them impossible and quite artificial. I shall therefore try.

These terms were elicited while discussing ballads, or narrative songs that could be said to be ballads in a traditional singer's definition. (Traditional singers in the North East of Scotland do not much differentiate between ballads in the academic sense and other kinds of songs with narrative content, meaning and association (see SHIELDS 1993: 125).) I make no claim for this being a comprehensive list; it is simply a collection drawn from recent fieldwork involving ballad singers. In fact, these words do not apply exclusively to ballad singing. All of the singers involved in my larger study sing other kinds of songs, from lyric to romantic, from Country and Western to Music Hall. They undoubtedly use many of the same techniques in the singing of songs of many genres, and may well use many of the same descriptive terms. It may therefore be incorrect to call these ballad terms, but they

are ballad singers' terms and, as such, they apply to the ballad as well as any other form, though it is hard to imagine a term like 'grand' applied to songs of some genres.

MELODIC QUALITIES

Let us start with a qualitative term, lilt, which applies as much to the tempo of the tune as to a specific form or contour. But that is not the whole story, for lilt really applies to the overall way a tune is performed. The Irish, of course, have an entire subgenre of tradition called *lilting* where a tune is sung with meaningless syllables (e.g. *deedle daddle dum*). This tradition also exists in Scotland, though, curiously, with less of a lilt to it, as it were. Nevertheless, the tradition of 'diddling', as it is also called, gives us some insight into the meaning of lilt when used to describe song melodies. In a nutshell, it means the lively turning of the melody, the way in which the tune, and indeed the performer, moves from note to note, from beat to beat and from phrase to phrase. Elements that contribute are the tempo, rhythmic or even martial, the notes often sung with an upward swoop, an attacking glissando, and the famous 'Scots snap' of dotted eighth note and two thirty-second notes which is usually applied to fiddle tunes. Compare, for example, the way Lucy Stewart sings the 'Jolly Beggar' (CHILD 279) (STEWART 1989) and the way Elizabeth Stewart, her niece, sings it with a lilt, or lift, as it is sometimes called (STEWART 1994). The latter is an extreme example, where the lilt of the tune *and* the performance takes precedence over Elizabeth's desire to emulate her aunt's traditional version. It is also a prime example of three other terms on my list of descriptive terms, *good goin*, *jolly* (as in the title of the song) and *jaunty*, words that Stewart applies to this melody and to this rendition of it in particular. In most cases, the narrative itself calls for this sort of jaunty treatment, so lilt can also be seen to derive from the meaning, the text, of the song as well. Of all of the terms discussed here, some apply more to melody, others to performance, but none can be said to apply to only one aspect of a song, and therein lies the complexity of discussing such issues in the first place.

In this song, performed in this way, a singer's use of the term lilt is analogous to the Shetland fiddler's, for it is not simply the tune structure itself, but the rendition of it. Shetlander Gilbert Gray says, 'There's something you can't get in if you play aff o' the notts – it seems to be too plain – some of those old Shetland tunes, you have to get in some kind of a lilt with them' (COOKE 1986: 40). Another Shetlander, John Henderson, reinforces that the term refers as much to what Peter Cooke calls the 'rhythmic flow' of a tune as to the contour: 'Unless you can play the fiddle wi' a lilt in til it, then that was no use even grapping a bow – it's the bowing and lilt that [makes] you feel like dancing' (COOKE 1986: 98). Pairs of notes of equal duration in standard staff notation are played at 4:3, or 5:3, or occasionally 2:1 ratio in Shetland fiddle tunes, adding the lilt that listeners expect and enjoy: 'It is such variation in the infra-rhythmic structure of the tune, combined with variation in dynamic accents achieved with the bow, that make good performances – playing that makes Shetlanders "feel like dancing"' (COOKE 1986: 98). While this is extreme in the Shetland case, it is less

so in mainland Scottish music and song. I refer to it here only to borrow from its analagous understanding of rhythmic flow. Something similar goes on in Elizabeth Stewart's 'The Jolly Beggar'. Clearly Henderson and Cooke are talking about dance music, but perhaps we have drawn too firm a boundary between song and dance in the mainland Scottish tradition. As scholars will be well aware, ballad and dance are often one and the same thing in many European cultures. I would not make a case for Scottish ballads to be considered dances, only that we have a good deal to learn from the way people talk about instrumental music, with an awareness, insight and vocabulary singularly lacking in their usual approach to discussing traditional song. (Elizabeth Stewart, for instance, is an accomplished instrumentalist as well as a singer; she talks about melody and text with equal facility.)

Let us turn to two other terms that apply to tunes with lilt: good goin and jaunty. Good goin refers mainly to the forward drive of a tune, the way the emphasised beat, and the pointed phrase, draws the singer, and the listener, inexorably on to the next one. Through rhythmic emphasis and pitch control, the tune settles into the pulse, the momentum, of a good goin tune. This is only half the story, however. To qualify as a good goin tune, a melody must have a smooth contour, with relatively small melodic progressions, typically limited to a fifth up or down, often by way of transitional notes. In this way, one is lead smoothly through the tune, without having to gather one's power, emotion, or breath, for a big jump. This is not to say that the overall range of the song must be thus limited, simply that the means of getting there is incremental, allowing for a smoother forward progression. Rhythmic emphasis – like that in Elizabeth Stewart's piano opening to 'The Jolly Beggar' – can make even one note jumps appear greater than they are, and when she arrives at the song, she eases back and emphasises less pointedly.

This brings us to jaunty. Where good goin refers to the melody itself, how it develops and progresses, jaunty applies almost entirely to rhythm. To be sure, it can only really be applied to major tunes, coupled with fairly cheerful narrative content, but given that proviso, it is pointed rhythmic emphasis, and to some extent tempo, that makes a song jaunty. A ballad like 'The Aul Beggarman' (also ascribed to 279 by CHILD, inaccurately I think) can easily be sung in a leisurely, a-rhythmic style, but in that form it is neither good goin, nor jaunty. If one introduces a swing to the rhythm, however, pointing the down beats and emphasising every other beat through volume, modulations of timing, and sliding pitches, we get an entirely different impression of the tune (see, for example, Norman Kennedy's version on *Folk-Songs of North-East Scotland* (1995)). Jaunty, therefore, is largely a term of performance expression rather than inherent melodic structure.

Next, I would like to address the terms gran and sweepin, which Norman Kennedy, and others, apply to the ballad 'Lord Donald' (a version of CHILD 12, 'Lord Rendal'). When Norman describes this melody as grand, he is focusing on two elements (1) the tempo which is slow, relaxed, and dignified; and (2) the melodic steps, the actual musical intervals of the tune, which are striking. Though the overall range is exactly the same as that of 'The Jolly Beggar' (an octave and a major third), the effect is totally different.

Let us look first at the tempo. Norman, Stanley Robertson, Jeannie Robertson, and most traditional singers, 'take out' these ballads, that is to say, they take their time singing them. Perhaps the single most common feature of what is considered good traditional singing in Scotland is the tendency of the artist to sing at a leisurely pace, giving precedence to the words, and giving the tune room to breathe, as Norman would say. The grandeur of the tune and the emotion of the song derive from this simple unspoken rule. (Sometimes spoken when someone contravenes it.) Imagine singing or playing the tune to 'Lord Donald' with a bit of a lilt, up-tempo and jaunty. No, the words demand a slower approach. So here we have a definite correlation between tempo and the adjectives *gran* and *sweepin*, and again the line is blurred between the inherent qualities of the tune and the singer's rendition of it. From this uncertainty emerges a question: If we play or sing the same melody to a faster beat, is it really the same melody, as scholars would have us believe? I think not, actually. By extension, therefore, I think it incorrect to say that two different texts use the *same* melody. We generally accept that traditional song makers use pre-existing melodies, but, to my mind, when they mould them to their own texts, they are creating new entities, new songs. To say that they are reusing a melody is to deny the unity of text and tune that defines song. Having said that, I think we can say that melodies may be of the same family, sharing a common ancestor, and are closely related if the songs have emotionally similar texts. In most cases, scholars continue to consider ballads as texts, sometimes as texts with tunes, or even sung texts, but in fact they are not, they are *songs*.

Apart from tempo, it is the intervals that set apart a *gran* or *sweepin* tune like 'Lord Donald'. Can these features be used to define more closely what Norman means by *gran* and *sweepin* and what Stanley Robertson means when he says that you can hear the cliffs and the mountains in certain melodies and the wind in others? Naturally such visualisations, where melodic progressions are identified with emotion and meaning, have a lot to do with the words themselves, but even deliberate timing and phrasing do not automatically create grandeur. The tune 'Villikens and His Dinah', for instance, may be sung in jauntily, as in 'Sweet Betsy from Pike', or in a slower, more emotional way, as called for in 'Lord Ronald', another North East Scottish version of 'Lord Rendal'. The melody is slowed down to accord with the tragic import of the words, but we still are not left with *gran* or *sweepin* tune.

What is it, then, about the 'Lord Donald' tune that is *gran* and *sweepin*? I think it is the first line that leads Norman to his description:



Music example 1: Lord Donald

The first phrase of the song is in a very narrow range (only a major third), and suddenly, using the fifth as a stepping stone, we leap more than an octave up to 'Don-ald'. It is a startling leap, whether you have heard the song before or not, and it immediately grabs the attention, particularly as most singers gather themselves a little bit before such a leap, emphasising its drama. The jump is also quite hard to sing, reinforcing the idea that there is something a little special about this tune. In fact, there is very little special about the rest of the tune. Its grandeur, and characterisation as sweepin, relies on this one leap, this one phrase. I think this is probably how we always listen, caught by a 'hook': an interesting melodic or textual phrase, a turn, a chord progression, a chorus that gets our attention and gets stuck in our heads, much to the distress of our family and friends.

In summarising traditional singers' use of these qualitative words, let us say that they are used impressionistically, rather than rigidly. Yet I think they *can* be calibrated to specific melodic structures and melodic families that have the characteristics outlined above, particularly in the area of dramatic interval leaps.

MELODIC DECORATION

So far, I have discussed the overall arc or contour of a tune and its rendition. Moving on to descriptions of melodic decoration, that is the melodic adaptation that takes place on a micro level, within note phrases and pairs, let us consider the descriptions 'curly bits' and 'tiddly bits'. These decorations combine with tempo, attack, vibrato (ranging from true vibrato to what Hugh Shields calls glottal vibrato, or, less kindly, but accurately, bleating (1993: 122)) and, of course, an emotional commitment, to put what singers call 'hairt-feelin' into a song.

Curly bits and tiddly bits are as much an attitude as a musical feature in traditional singing. Here we tread on even less secure ground than we did with gran, sweepin and lilt, because where it exists at all, the vocabulary used to discuss melodic decoration, or ornamentation, is almost wholly individual to each singer. That is not to say that every singer uses entirely unique ornamental techniques, but that when we discuss them, the terms they use and what they mean by them are idiolectal in nature. My list, therefore, may be seen as a collection of words and phrases used, but not as a *universally* accepted vocabulary for use in discussion with each and every singer. It therefore behoves us to try to define the meanings of each of these terms for an individual and then try to group them in families of reference.

I will try to do that with Jane Turriff for the aforementioned curly bits, though Jane sings in a relatively undecorated style. She has said she prefers singing to accompaniment (usually her own on harmonium or accordion) as it 'draws oot' her singing. It allows her voice to soar, and take its time with certain notes, and thereby with the story itself. She does, however, sometimes put in turns, curly bits, perhaps more often when accompanied. At the end of the first verse of 'Ma Wee Doggie' (TURRIFF 1995), for example, we can hear a hint of these curly bits, a linear run up the melody line:



Here — I've got none

Music example 2: Ma wee d

Now this decoration is not truly *curly* in the sense of turning back on itself, but it does come under that heading for Jane and it gets one around the awkward, pedestrian progression of



a — maid

Music example 3: Ma wee d plain

For curly bits that really curl, we must look elsewhere, like the last line of a verse of 'Bonnie Udney' (TURRIFF 1995).



you- ng and fair

Music example 4: Bonnie Udney

This is a simple turn around the first note. Similar examples may be found in Elizabeth Stewart's 'In London Town' (STEWART 1993).



and — gone

Music example 5: In London

(Notice the general tendency to avoid decorating over word boundaries.)

To go back to the idea of creating families of reference, then, we might place curly bits in a matrix something like this:

My term	Jane Turriff	Lizzie Higgins	Norman Kennedy	Elizabeth Stewart
grace notes (to be replaced with more specific terms as the project continues)	curly bits	curly bits	twiddly bits some sort o' grace notes	grace notes decorations

My simple heading, grace notes, will be expanded in future work to delineate different types of decoration, such as those used to describe Irish instrumental ornamentation (e.g. cran). Such a chart could then be expanded to encompass a wide range of useful terms and ideas.

With this essay, I have tried to model an approach to eliciting native terms for melodic qualities and modes of decoration, as well as started to establish accurate and clear meanings for these terms. I have not properly tackled the question of key, minor or major, though I have made a start on finding native descriptors for them. Nor have I yet explored all the phrases I have heard, like 'aul fashioned' and 'singin wi nae taste or smell'. The examples discussed only scrape the surface; eventually I hope to correlate a range of native phrases for each phenomenon with the effects being described. The next stage will be to test these terms to be sure they accord with the singers' internal conceptualisations. Though song decoration and ornamentation are so idiosyncratic as to be difficult to discuss in general terms, I hope this work will create tools that enable us to discuss North East traditional singing styles in detail with those who know most about it, the singers themselves.

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