

RATTLIN ROARIN WILLIE — FIDDLE — I

GENERAL INFORMATION ON PIPE & FIDDLE SETTINGS

- Time signatures and Tempi

Scores are written in either 9/4 or 9/8 according to source, but the meaning is the same, reflecting conventions at the time of writing, so the 9/4 scores are not to be played at half the tempo of the 9/8 ones. The tempo of the “listening” versions is at the performer’s discretion (Oswald’s instruction is *Brisk*, Riddell’s is *Allegro*), while the tempo of the dance versions is naturally determined by the dance in question. Atkinson’s and Dixon’s sets may well be dance sets, but with a higher note density than modern slip jigs they would play at a slower tempo than Strip the Willow.

- Repeats

It is difficult to be certain whether repeat marks in the earlier texts indicate an actual repeat or simply a strain-end marking. Later sources are not consistent, some indicating repeats, some not. This tune may be an exception to the general observation that 8-bar strains in 9/8 tunes are not repeated. The choice is again at the performer’s discretion.

- Key signatures

The prevailing mode of all versions except Wright’s D minor set is Mixolydian, the major scale with a minor 7th leading note. This is spelt differently in the different texts, some opting for a major key signature with natural signs for the minor 7ths, some for a modal key signature with sharp signs where major 7ths are required. So, a setting in D may have a D major signature (2 sharps) with C naturals indicated by accidentals, and a setting in A may have the same apparent key signature, with any G sharps indicated by accidentals.

- Midis

A basic midi file is given with each score. The limitations of the midis are obvious, both in the lack of ornamentation and in the flatly literal reading of rhythm values, with none of the rhythmic weighting within note groupings which gives the lilt or lift essential to performance. Their only advantage is that those who do not read staff notation can hear at least something which relates to the discussion.

THE FIDDLE TUNE

The many fiddle settings of the tune fall into two categories, those in D, which use all four strings and most of the range of the fiddle’s first position, and those in G and A, which use a smaller range more like that of the song version, with most of the tune keeping to the highest pair of strings.

The D sets are closely related to each other. Covering a time span of one century, they have the appearance of episodes in the development of a single vigorous strand of the tune which grew as it travelled. With the G and A versions there is a broad consensus

among the many short sets, but no indication of an overall pattern shared by the two longer ones. This also applies to the longer pipe sets.

THE D FIDDLE SETS

Five D sets have been found, three in manuscript sources:

Henry Atkinson, Northumberland, 1694

James Gillespie, Perth, 1768

William Vickers, Newcastle (probably), 1770

(There is in addition a two-bar fragment of the tune, probably an aide-memoire, in the Gairdyn manuscript, NLS Glen 37, which David Johnson dates 1700-c.1740.)

and two published:

Daniel Wright, London, c. 1713

Robert Riddell, Edinburgh, 1794

The three English sets are comparatively plain versions while the two Scottish sets are much more ornate.

It is clear from the Atkinson manuscript that the writer (Atkinson's book is the work of several hands) was struggling with his notation in this tune. It is metrically erratic and has some bars missing, so a reconstruction in the light of other versions is offered. The order of strains is unchanged but later versions suggest the sequence 1, 3, 4, 2.

ATKINSON SCORE AND MIDI FILE

Daniel Wright's *Rantin Bille* is next in date. It is the odd one out of all versions in that it appears to be in a mixture of D minor and D major. It is given as published, but is highly suspect; as a London publisher Wright was further from the action than the other sources here.

WRIGHT SCORE AND MIDI FILE

Vickers' three strains are remarkably close to the corresponding ones in Atkinson, but the musical idiom is now recognisably modern in sound and appearance and this setting would be at home at a dance or a fiddlers' session today.

VICKERS SCORE AND MIDI FILE

In both Atkinson and Vickers the accidentals have been edited here to conform to the more literate published Scottish versions. Both originals are reproduced on the FARNE website.

Although close in date to Vickers, and close in geography to Niel Gow, Gillespie's set is very different from both. It appears to be a direct descendant of something like the Atkinson version, but cast in what we might call the Native Baroque style. Blending distinctly Scottish (and elsewhere, Irish, English and Northumbrian) melodies and harmonic structures with European methods of variation and decoration, this is a musical current which flowed strongly in Scotland throughout the 18th century but is now all but invisible. Not to be confused with the very different, and presumably much older, method of elaboration used in *piobaireachd*, it is of course the same musical idiom as that of the pipe tunes in the Dixon manuscript and Peacock's *Favorite Collection*.

We should not imagine any conflict between variation sets and dance sets, even of the same tune. Gillespie himself certainly saw none, and his manuscript makes this clear, with sections devoted to each. Interestingly, he classes his variation sets as "Scots Tunes" and they form the largest section of his substantial collection. (For an excellent overview of the variation style and its relationship with 17th century art music see Dick Hensold's article on the subject in *Out of the Flames*, published by and available from LBPS.)

Gillespie barred his *Roving Willie* incorrectly in 6/8, the same lapse in musical grammar which makes many of Dixon's tunes all the more trustworthy as a record of what was actually played rather than copied from a printed score. I have also corrected here, without listing them, some obvious inconsistencies in the original.

GILLESPIE SCORE AND MIDI FILE

The last of the D sets was published by Robert Riddell of Glenriddell in his *Scotch, Galwegian and Border Tunes* (Edinburgh, 1794). Riddell was a keen musician, antiquarian, and a friend of Robert Burns, and his is the first collection to give much in the way of contextual information on the tunes, "Collected in various parts of Scotland, and on the Borders, for the Selectors amusement, and chiefly wrote from Performers, who could not write or read Music." It was a brave publication, for by this time the market was swamped by books of dance tunes, effectively driving the more extended pieces underground.

Riddell's set is very close to Gillespie's. While there are many differences of detail between them the thrust of their musical narrative is the same: they are not sets of different variations, but different sets of the same variations, and much can be learnt about the flexibility of the idiom by comparing them closely. Riddell has two more strains than Gillespie, his last being based on familiar filler phrases. His note on the tune is illuminating:

"This Air (of which a very fine set is here given,) is said to have been the composition of JOHN COWAN, a very noted performer on the Fiddle, at Newton Stewart in Galloway. He died (as I have been informed,) before the middle of the present Century, having obtained longevity in its plenitude — old PETER MACNAUGHTON Fiddler at Monniehive told me he was taught by JOHN COWAN about the year 1725, and he was then an old man."

Riddell does not claim that the set he publishes is as John Cowan or Peter MacNaughton played it, and this is doubtful considering the consistency of the earlier known versions; it seems rather to be "traditional" in that it is the work of more than one hand, especially given

its close relationship with Gillespie's earlier version.

Riddell's bass line, given for strain 1 only, is not reproduced in the score but is included in the midi file.

RIDDELL SCORE AND MIDI FILE

Taking the D sets together, some interesting musical characteristics emerge. These are inextricably interwoven in the tune but they can be considered as a series of four layers of patterning, and while these do not tell us everything about the tune they are useful guidelines as far as they go:

- Rhythmic structure (foundation)
 - Harmonic pattern (framework)
 - Melody (fabric)
 - Overall design (form)
- Rhythmic structure: whether scored as 9/4 or 9/8, strains are 8 bars long rather than the more common 4 bars repeated or 8 bars unrepeated (some versions call for repeats, some do not). Versions tend to be more or less rhythmically busy; expressed in 9/8, some are mainly crotchets and quavers while others are mainly quavers and semiquavers. The simplest explanation for this difference is that it reflects their purpose, whether they are for dancing or listening to.
- Harmonic pattern: this is implicit in all versions and explicit in those where a bass line is given. The bass lines from three disparate sources in different keys all agree, showing that all the 18th century arrangers who wrote a bass line heard the same pattern, and in Riddell's case, where the bass line is given for strain 1 only of a variation set, assumed that it would underpin all following strains. Expressed as chord symbols in the key of D, it is:

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||: D // | C // | D // | D // |  
D // | C // | D // | D A D :||
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and for the sets which follow

in G:

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||: G // | F // | G // | G // |  
G // | F // | G // | G D G :||
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and in A:

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||: A // | G // | A // | A // |  
A // | G // | A // | A E A :||
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(The bass E on beat 1 of bar 8 of the Gow version below makes a 2nd inversion A chord with the melody.)

Line 1 has the very common 3:1 ratio of “home” and “away” chords in one of its two simple forms, XYXX (the other simple form is XXXY). Line 2 is a close echo apart from the last bar. In the 2nd beat of the last bar the dominant or V (rather than the subtonic or bVII) chord is important in relation to the pipe versions which follow: the literate Scottish sources are nearly all in agreement in this respect, and anyone who might think that they were using the dominant to make the tune more harmonically “respectable” will find plenty of examples where the same sources are happy to stay in the mixolydian mode throughout. (Disblair is the partial exception in that his melody at this point implies the subtonic chord in some strains and the dominant in others.)

Bar 4 of strain 3 of the Gillespie and Riddell sets can be harmonised:

| D G D |

or, transposed to A:

| A D A |

This is a common minor deviation from a strong basic pattern, and is also hinted at by the harmony in the lyra-viol version at this point. Disblair’s and Oswald’s sets (see: Fiddle - II) are less tied to the sequence than any of the others, but while their melodic invention frequently carries them away from it, mainly at strain-endings, it is still felt as the background or default pattern.

- Melody: this is both more sophisticated and more consistent in the D sets than in the others. Bar 1 consists of a melodic shape or phrase (M1) on the tonic chord, and bar 2 of a contrasting melodic phrase (M2) built on the subtonic chord. Bar 3 is as bar 1, while bar 4 repeats the melody of bar 2, but a step higher on the tonic chord. Bar 5 is as bar 4, bar 6 as bar 2, and a concluding or tag phrase (T1-2) forms bars 7 and 8. This sounds complicated, but it is very easy to hear and sense. It can be expressed diagrammatically:

||: M1 | M2 | M1 | M2 |

| M2 | M2 | T1 | T2 :||

It is noteworthy that in many of the lyrics given earlier line 5 is an exact repeat of line 4, just where the tune repeats a bar, with the same melody on the same chord. The recurring M1s and M2s are not of course exact repeats of each other, and they are more obvious in some strains and in some versions than in others. In strain 1 of all the D sets, for example, M1 begins on the 5th of the relevant chord, and M2 on its high tonic, and the end of the bar changes according to what follows it. In Vickers’ strain 2 (Atkinson’s strain 3) M1 and M2 are the same. There is variety in the tag phrases between versions, but beat 2 of T1 is nearly always note 6 of the home key (B in D, F# in A).

- Overall design: this is as much a practical as an aesthetic consideration. A listener may be mystified, hearing a variation set, as to how the player remembers his or her place, but a formal template held before the performer’s mind keeps the content and its sequence in place. Of course, whether the listener is bored or interested at any one time depends not only on the listener’s quality and span of attention but also on the musical detail; once a workable design or form is established, the detail can be varied or improved just as in

telling a story, where the narrative outline is known by the teller but the detail changes from one telling to the next. Form can of course degenerate into formula, so some variety of form between different tunes is desirable.

With this tune we need to look beyond the individual versions and try to read between the texts to discern a formal design. It is possible to discern a pattern of alternating odd- and even-numbered strains where the first complete bars of the odds begin on the 5th degree of the scale and the evens on the 8th or 1st, the high or low tonic. We might then expect all these sets to be comprised of multiples of two strains.

Wright and Vickers have three strains, but as these three begin, in both cases, on 5, 8 and 5, the alternation is still present as far as it goes. Gillespie and Riddell are interesting in that their strains 1-4 begin on 5, 8, 5, 1, but thereafter they do not keep to an alternating pattern. I would suggest that their strains 1-4, whose ancestors are in Atkinson's version in a different sequence, and in Wright's and Vickers's versions in the same sequence as far as they go, represent the core of this strand of the tune, and that it has a satisfying and easily memorable formal pattern; the composers who added extra strains followed the harmonic framework, but placed them in simple pairs of alternating lower and higher registers.

We may make a guess at the date when this strand originated. If we suppose that the song tune with its relatively restricted range is the earliest form of the melody, dating from or soon after the time when Rattlin Roarin Willie was alive, then as well as being piped and sung, it could have been played on a variety of instruments including the older "fiddle", the instrument that was displaced in Scotland by the modern Italian violin around 1670-80. The strain which uses the bass string seems to be made for the new stronger-toned violin rather than the old fiddle, but this is of course conjecture. If John Cowan of Newton Stewart was an old man by 1725, he might well be the fiddler who, some time around 1680-90, composed ("put together") not the original tune itself but a version of it which moves the main melody to the middle two strings and gives scope for contrasting strains, higher and lower, on the outer pairs. This version could easily have found its way to Atkinson in Northumberland. Cowan's claim to authorship, supported by the tradition that Riddell recorded, is plausible but not provable. Whoever designed the setting, the written record shows it to have been durable, mobile and fertile.