

RATTLIN ROARIN WILLIE — FIDDLE — II

THE G & A FIDDLE SETS

Like the song melody in the *Museum* and the lyra-viol setting, the G and A sets have a relatively restricted range and keep mainly to the A and E strings, especially the shorter versions. These sets were evidently elaborated independently from the D sets. They are all unmistakably Rattlin Roarin Willie, but they differ both in the basic tune and in subsequent strains. There are, though, two key elements common to many versions. These are

- 1/ the descending scale figure in bar 4, which does not feature in the D versions in the same form, and
- 2/ the repeated descending arpeggio which begins strain 2. Although this forms the B-strain of a 2-strain or A-B tune, it can also be seen as an elaboration of strain 1; in the D versions it usually occurs in strain 3 and is perceived not so much as a B-strain as a variation of the A-strain, as A2 in an A1-B1-A2-B2 sequence, where the B-strains contrast in register with the A-strains.

There are several 2-strain dance versions in early English and later Scottish publications, including one from the Gows, and two longer Scottish sets, one composed by [William Forbes of] Disblair, in the MacFarlane manuscript (David Young, Edinburgh, 1740), and one published and presumably composed by James Oswald (*Caledonian Pocket Companion*, vol. 7, London, c. 1756).

The earliest of the short versions are in English dancing master publications of the post-Playford period; two, identical and apparently printed from the same plates, are in Johnson's and Wright's collections, both published by John Johnson, and the other, which supplies a correction to this (last note of bar 5 = G), is in *Walsh's Twenty Four Country Dances for the year 1736*. (In the Walsh example here, bar 1 note 5 has been corrected from A to G.)

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for two fiddle tunes. The left page is titled 'Ratling roaring Willy. Longways for as' and the right page is titled 'The Widdow Lady. Longways for'. Both are in 6/8 time. The notation includes treble clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and various musical symbols like slurs and ornaments. Below the notation on the left page are dance instructions: 'The 1st Man go' & Hey between 2^d and 3^d Men in to 4th Man's place, 1st Wo. do & same as 1st Man did, 1st Man back to back with his own Wo. and cast up in 2^d place; 2^d 1st Man cros's over into 2^d Wo. place, and 2^d Wo. at & same time cros's over in 1st Mans place, meet and sett, cast. of in 2^d Cu. place; go half figure in 2^d Cu. place so turn their own the rest doing the like ::'. Below the notation on the right page are dance instructions: 'The 1st and 2^d Cu. back to back and turn partners - the 1st Cu. go the hey with the 3^d Cu. :: the 1st Cu. sett, 1st Man cast of, the 1st Wo. at the same time cast up to the top, then take each hands with the 2^d and 3^d Cu. and go half round :: the 1st Cu. meet in the Middle and turn half round, take hands with the contrary Cu. and go half round, which brings the 1st Cu. into the 2^d Cu. places. ::'. The page number '65' is written in the top right corner.

WALSH SCORE AND MIDI FILE

The first Scottish dance version was not published until 1792, in the *Third Collection of Niel Gow's Reels*, with a few more following in the 19th and 20th centuries.

GOW SCORE AND MIDI FILE

The longer sets, meant for listening rather than dancing to, are in the Native Baroque style already referred to, with many semiquaver passages decorating the melodic outline. Oswald's is concise at four strains; he has structured the set, with strains paired by opening notes, but the melodic fabric of the variations is flimsy in comparison with some of his other work.

OSWALD SCORE AND MIDI FILE

With William Forbes of Disblair we enter different territory. David Johnson describes him as an Aberdeen bailie who "seems to have taken up composing in his old age, when he was left almost penniless through paying extravagant sums of alimnt to his ex-wife... Twenty-one of his Scots-tune settings survive... They are quirky, but full of original methods of mixing Italian and Scottish ideas in the same piece." This may be true of Disblair's work as a whole, but his *Ratling Roaring Willy* is less notable for Italian ideas than for passages which recall the musical vocabulary of William Dixon (strain 3) and John McLachlan (strain 7).

The most surprising feature of Disblair's 11-strain marathon is that it is written down at all. With its melodic inventiveness, relative harmonic flexibility and lack of any obvious formal coherence it has the character of a fluent virtuoso improvisation rather than a composed variation set. As such it has its dull moments, and it would be extremely difficult to learn, but it remains outstanding for its stamina and its many inspired passages.

DISBLAIR SCORE AND MIDI FILE