



Discussion of the Music for Scottish Country Dancing

(Technically Speaking)

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Ian Price started Scottish Country Dancing in 1974 only after coming to Canada from Ullapool, Ross-shire, via Edinburgh.

Musically, he started taking piano lessons at age 6 - it was some time before his feet could reach the pedals, but a decade later he was running a high school rock 'n' roll band, destroying both his hearing and the chance of a university education.

He led the Schiehallion Scottish Country Dance Band from 1975 to 1987, and now conducts the Vancouver Fiddle Orchestra from behind a large black piano accordion.

Not a technical virtuoso, other interests keep him from the necessary investment in time required to be a brilliant instrumentalist. However, he has applied his analytical skills as an engineer, to the assembly and arrangement of music for Scottish Country Dancing, as a substitute for his shortcomings as a player. Here is a summary of some of the elements of his approach. Goto top

-2.0 STEPS

2.1 Skip Change, Pas de Bas & Slip Step

All steps suited to a 2/4 time signature, i.e. 2 beats to a bar, at approximately 112-120 beats per minute. 2/4 is played with the first beat of the bar stronger than the second. Beats can be halved or quartered.

Also used with 6/8 time signature. Again two beats to a bar but each beat consists of 3 notes rather than 1, 2 or 4 notes. Again 112-120 beats per minute. Both beats of equal strength however.

Style of skip change step varies slightly depending on 2/4 or 6/8 time. Pas de bas better suited to 2/4 time - 6/8 promotes a 2-beat pas de bas! Slip step better suited to 6/8 time; best for teaching 8 hands round and back!

2.2 Strathspey Travelling & Setting

Unique to Scottish Country Dancing. Especially suited to a 4/4 time signature, i.e. 4 beats to a bar, at approximately 120 beats per minute. The four beats in each bar are played with the first beat of the bar strongest, followed by a weak second beat, then a medium-strength third beat, then a weak fourth. This mirrors the dance step, supporting and reinforcing it. Beats can be halved or quartered, played in even or uneven triplets, 'dotted' or 'reverse-dotted', the latter giving rise to the characteristic "Scottish Snap".

The importance of supporting strathspey steps with a VERY strong 'push' on the first beat of every bar of music, cannot be overstated.

2.3 Running steps and others

Not common or 'official' steps of the RSCDS, although quite legitimate in the broader scheme of things. Suitable for use with 9/8 time signature, used in triple jigs, and certain English and other country dances of the British Isles. Will not be elaborated on here.

-3.0 COUNTRY DANCE SETS

3.1 Longwise Sets

A basic formation for country dancing whereby (usually) 4 couples face each other in a line of 4 gentlemen facing four ladies. (Mere 'Men' and 'Women' would lack the social finesse to participate in such an elegant activity!).

On a dance floor, longwise sets join end-to-end down the length of the room with the gentlemen on the right-hand side, looking down the room from the bandstand. Several such lines can form, depending on the width of the ballroom, but dancers will only perform within their 4-couple group. The overall setup is really just to get the maximum number of people onto the floor.

Dances performed in longwise sets are usually 'iterative' whereby a pattern of steps is performed which results in two or more of the couples having changed places. The pattern is then repeated as many times as necessary to enable all the couples to return to their original places.

"Mairi's Wedding" is an example of a dance performed in a 4-couple longwise set. Its iterative pattern is 40 bars in length, and this pattern must be repeated 8 times before all the dancers return to their original places in the set. This is shorthand to "8 x 40".

"Polharrow Burn" is an example of a dance performed in 5-couple longwise set. It is a 5 x 32 dance.

"Moray Rant" is an example of a dance performed in 3-couple longwise set. It is a 3 x 48 dance.

3.2 Square Sets

Another popular formation for country dancing whereby 4 couples (gentleman standing on lady's left) face each other from the four sides of a square.

Dances performed in square sets do not have the progressive nature of the longwise set dances. They may however have iterative components in which individual dancers, dancing couples, or opposite pairs of couples successively take the lead position in an iterative pattern, retaining the same place in the set all through the dance.

"The Eightsome Reel" is an example of a dance which includes an individual iterative pattern performed by each of the eight participants in the set. Its numerically coded form could be written as $40 + (8 \times 48) + 40$

"Farewell to Auchterarder" is an example of a dance in which the four ladies dance an iterative pattern at the beginning, and the four men dance a similar but mirror-imaged iterative pattern at the end of the dance. The middle of the dance consists of another iterative pattern performed first by one pair of facing couples, then repeated by the other pair of couples. Its form is often written as 2×64 but this is strictly incorrect, as there are four distinct components. $32 + (2 \times 32) + 32$ would be better, even if pedantic.

3.3 Round-the-room Sets

These are good social mixers in which 'sets' are formed by individual couples facing each other. These 'sets' then assemble in a large circle around the perimeter of the ballroom.

As with longwise sets, these dances are progressive in that a choreographed dance pattern consisting of a fixed number of steps concludes with each couple progressing one set around the room (half going clockwise, the remainder going anti-clockwise, and forming a new set with a new couple coming the other way round the room. This pattern is repeated as many times as desired, but not usually often enough to get back to ones original set, since the point of exhaustion would long since have passed, particularly in a large ballroom!

"The Dashing White Sergeant" is an example of a round-the-room dance in which the 'couples' are in fact 'menages-a-trois', either a gentleman between two ladies or a lady between two gentlemen. Strictly speaking, the one-gentleman menages should all progress anti-clockwise, and the one-lady menages should go clockwise, but in reality the only balls at which this would be likely to happen would be those with royalty in attendance - I've never seen it! Goto top -->>

4.0 REELS (2/4)

4.1 Scots Measure

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 8-bar phrases
- 2 notes per beat
- has 'melody' (often words too!)
- oom-cha oom-cha rhythm

Examples: Bratach Bana

Johnny Cope

Mairi's Wedding

Dashing White Sergeant

4.2 Rant

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 4-bar phrases
- 4 notes per beat
- simple primary harmonies
- grasshopper/alligator/crocodile rhythm

Examples: The Stuart's Rant

Mrs. Anderson's Reel (Round Reel of Eight)

The Fairy Dance

4.3 Hornpipe

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 8-bar phrases
- 4 notes per beat
- moderately complex cadencing
- grasshopper/alligator rhythm ending every phrase with POM-POM-POM!

Examples: Flowers of Edinburgh

Clutha

Circassian Circle, and of course

The Sailor.

but Note Corn Riggs is a Scots Measure in spite of the POM-POM-POM.

4.4 Other types Pipe Reels

Have the 'feel' of a Rant, but aren't always quite what they seem.

e.g. Reel of the 51st Division (The Drunken Piper)

e.g. Reel of the Royal Scots.

4.4.1 Irish Reels

Similar to hornpipes and pipe reels, but quite recognisable on their own

e.g. Bonnie Kate

e.g. The Teetotaller

e.g. The Merry Blacksmith

4.4.2 Marches

Have the 'feel' of a Scots Measure, but the beat somehow seems stronger, and the tempo is ever-so-slightly slower.

e.g. The Gay Gordons

e.g. Australian Ladies

e.g. Cameron Highlanders

4.4.3 Polkas

Sort of a cross between a Scots Measure and a Hornpipe. Some dances have been devised around polka tunes, but purists shudder ...

e.g. Trip to Bavaria (Hamish's Tune)

e.g. Fraser's Favourite/Shiftin' Bobbins

4.4.4 Novelty tunes

Anything for a laugh - can be pigeonholed by stretching the imagination.

e.g. Jingle Bells as a Scots Measure ?

-5.0 JIGS (6/8)

5.1 Single Jig

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 8-bar phrases
- 2 notes per beat
- has 'melody' (often words too!)
- rump-te-tump rhythm

Examples:

e.g. Off She Goes (Humpty Dumpty)

e.g. The New Rigged Ship

e.g. The Frisky (Humber Jumber)

5.2 Double Jig

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 8-bar phrases
- 3 notes per beat
- diddley-dee rhythm

Examples:

e.g. The Laird of Milton's Daughter

e.g. Argyll's Fancy

e.g. Bees of Maggieknockater (Rose Wood)

e.g. Waverley (The Lowland Lads think they're Fine)

5.3 Triple Jig

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 8-bar phrases, with THREE BEATS IN A BAR
- 3 notes per beat
- diddley-dee rhythm

Suitable for dances for three-legged people or with running step.

Examples:

- e.g. Rocky Road to Dublin
- e.g. Strip the Willow
- e.g. Drops of Brandy

5.4 Other types

5.4.1 6/8 Marches

Relate to jigs as 2/4 Marches relate to reels. Really swing!

- e.g. The Glendaruel Highlanders (Bonnie Anne)
- e.g. The Athole Highlanders (Duke of Atholl's Reel)
- e.g. Dovecote Park

5.4.2 One-steps, two-steps and three-steps

Combination of marches and single, double and triple jigs respectively.

Examples: 'Old-tyme' feel.

- e.g. The Directors
- e.g. Six-twenty Two-Step (White Heather Jig)
- e.g. Waggle of the Kilt.

-6.0 STRATHSPEYS (4/4)

6.1 Driven Strathspeys

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 4-bar phrases
- 2 notes per beat, played unevenly
- has a wide 'swing' to it. Played STRONG-weak-Medium-weak
- whoosh-two-three-and rhythm

Examples:

- e.g. Balmoral
- e.g. Frae Scotia's Shores
- e.g. Dalkeith's Strathspey

6.2 Schottishes

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 4-bar phrases
- 2 notes per beat, played unevenly
- has a choppy feel. Played Medium-weak-Medium-weak & a bit quicker.
- whoosh-two-three-and rhythm

Examples:

- e.g. Balmoral
- e.g. Glasgow Highlanders
- e.g. Jenny's Bawbee (Polly put the Kettle On)
- e.g. Struan Robertson's Rant.

6.3 Jig-Strathspeys

Many written by James Scott Skinner "The Strathspey King", 1844-1927

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 8-bar phrases, using counterpoint
- 3 notes per beat, played evenly
- has a wide 'swing' to it. Played DIDDLEY-diddley-Diddley-diddley
- whoosh-two-three-and rhythm

Examples:

- e.g. Our Highland Queen
- e.g. The Laird of Drumblair
- e.g. The Kirrie Kebbuck

6.4 Lyrical Strathspeys

NOT strictly Strathspey music, but many modern strathspey dances set to tunes of this type. Not conducive to supporting good step technique.

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 8-bar phrases
- 1-2 notes per beat, played evenly
- BEAUTIFUL melodies
- Feels like you could sing along with it (many can be)
- whoosh-two-three-and rhythm often suppressed for lyrical effect.

Examples:

- e.g. Bonnie Lass of Bon Accord
- e.g. The Hills of Lorne (Autumn in Appin)
- e.g. The Lea Rig
- 6.5 'Pop' Strathspeys

Again, NOT strictly Strathspey music. Not conducive to supporting good step technique. Good relief for those who don't appreciate 'proper' Strathspey tunes or step technique (!)

Typically, but not exclusively:-

- 8-bar phrases
- 1-2 notes per beat, played unevenly
- Catchy tunes
- Feels like you could sing along (many can be)
- Hippy-hoppy rhythm.

Examples:

- e.g. McGinty's Meal and Ale (Butterscotch & Honey)
- e.g. Pasadena Prom (Drumelzier)
- e.g. Garry Strathspey
- e.g. Our Nancy.

-7.0 PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

7.1 Structure and Length of the Dance

"8 x 40 Strathspey" says a good deal, but not everything.

This tells me:-

- 4-couple Longwise set (almost certainly)
- 2-couple or 3-couple Dance (couples dancing at a time)
- Music will need a total of 4 tunes
- Tune will probably have to be played 2 1/2 times through (more on this later)
- 4/4 Time Signature
- 60 Beats/minute.

However, we just identified (at least) 5 quite distinct styles of Strathspey. We must now search for more clues.

7.2 'Original' Tunes

Most devisers of Dances had a tune in mind when they wrote it, and state which tune with the published notes.

As a general rule, finding the manuscript or a recording of that tune and playing it, will determine the style of the dance, i.e., a DRIVEN strathspey, LYRICAL strathspey, or whatever.

Beware of the term "Any Good Strathspey" - this is a cop-out! Did the deviser mean "Any Good DRIVEN Strathspey", "Any Good POP Strathspey" (are there any good ones anyway?), or what? If you can't get a clue from the specified tune, look at the figures in the dance and use your own interpretation of what would be the best style, or what you want to achieve as a dancer (technique-wise). As a band-leader, I would always prefer to use DRIVEN or JIG Strathspeys, given a choice and all other factors being equal, but that's just my preference.

If at all possible, start and finish the Dance with the Original tune specified, partly as a courtesy to the deviser, but also because it defines the style of the Dance. There are always a few dances however where the chosen original is so bloody awful it should NEVER be played, but a similar style tune substituted (every band-leader has a short list of these!!)

7.3 Supporting Tunes - Compatible Style

The point of all this tune classification now becomes clear. The payoff to pigeonholing every tune is that you now have a short list from which to pick THREE MORE TUNES of the same 'style' as the Original. Mixing tune styles in the same set almost always doesn't work, interrupts the seamless flow of the dance from one iteration to another, and confuses the hell out of the paying customers. Unfortunately, there is still a great deal of this hit-and-miss selection even on well-used and popular SCD records. There are of course exceptions to prove the rule, but usually this is the most noticeable factor in determining the general unsuitability of a set for teaching purposes.

7.4 Key Progressions

In order to keep the dance moving throughout its 'eight-times-through', and to cue the start of the next iteration in the ears of the dancers, it's best to change the tune (and key signature or pitch) after every (in this case) 40 bars. There are a number of ways to achieve this, one popular approach being to select 4 tunes in 4 different key signatures, and play them in the strictly defined order 1-2-3-4-2-3-4-1, thus achieving the objective of starting and finishing with the Original tune as previously specified. Each tune will be played only twice.

Ideally, the key signatures should progress from tune to tune in a 'positive-upward' fashion. This builds excitement with the listener (dancer) and motivates him/her to pursue an emotional climax at the end of each dance. It's an interesting psychological point which should be the subject of a whole different presentation, so I'll not pursue it here. Anyhoo, think of this key-changing as shifting up through the key-signatures like the gears in your car. Going up from C to D 'feels' better than going down from D to C. The music doesn't actually speed up, but just feels as if it did, and another wee shot of adrenaline gets released into the dancer's system.

In our example, a set of 4 tunes in the keys of A major, C major, D major and F major, would always produce the desired 'upwards' effect as follows:-

Play tunes 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 1

In keys A - C - D - F - C - D - F - A

In the real world, this ideal solution isn't always possible because the actual tunes selected might start and finish at the wrong ends of their respective scales and the melodic discontinuity associated with the modulation from tune to tune might be unacceptable. Life is one big trade-off and assembling dance sets is no exception.

7.5 The 'AB' Form of the tunes

Most SCD tunes can be broken into an "A" part and a "B" part, each of which is 8 bars long. This is very convenient since almost every dance figure is also 8 bars long (nice to have at least one factor working in our favour!)

Alterations of a dance can then be assembled to the right length with a combination of "A"s and "B"s - in our example 5 blocks to make 40 Bars. Most tunes like to start with an "A" and end with a "B" (there are exceptions of course). So we have the following options:-

- AABBB - 3 "B"s in a row would be boring
- AAABB - 3 "A"s in a row would be equally boring
- ABABB - straight through twice and repeat the last 8 bars
- ABBAB - as above but the extra "B" part is in the middle.

Sometimes the "A" part of a tune will consist of a 4-bar phrase repeated (Rants and Driven Strathspeys, right?). In such cases even 2 "A"s in a row would sound repetitive, so this combination should also be avoided.

In the above set of options, the last two look to be the best, and the third seems the most logical.

However, a double check of the dance figures might suggest even greater empathy between music and dance if the other option were selected. For example in Mairi's Wedding, an 8 x 40 Reel, the second and third eight bars actually form a continuous sixteen-bar phrase consisting of 4 diagonal half-reels of four with no ultimate progression; this pattern seems to be better supported by an ABBAB form than the more usual ABABB - I've had no complaints in the last 20 years anyway!

7.6 Factors affecting tempo

I saved the best for last. Everyone seems to be an expert on this topic! I've found however that the more one analyses it, the less it can be resolved into black-and-white. The only real rule seems to be to try and play at tempos which are the most comfortable to the greatest number of people at the time and place in question. Beyond that, everything is variable, and I'll try to explain why.

First off, there are of course absolute limits to tempos, governed by the laws of gravity and the limits of agility of the human being. One day we'll no doubt read in the Guinness Book of MOON Records that the record number of high cuts by a Highland Dancer is 25, but not on Earth I fear! It's difficult to dance the RSCDS Reel and Jig steps outside of 112-122 beats per minute, and Strathspeys outside the range 55-65 beats per minute.

Within this range, VERY small differences in measurement of tempo can seem like enormous barriers to optimum performance of the step technique. The bad news is that there are many other factors which can affect one's technique, and the good news is that minor variations in tempo can compensate for this, restoring the optimum for the prevailing conditions. Some of the contributing factors I have identified over the years are as follows:-

Resilience of the floor. A springy wooden floor causes the dancer to jump higher (for the same effort expended) than a hard concrete one. The higher up in the air you go, the longer it takes to come down, therefore the music should be played slower for the same effect than on a hard floor. (The dancer will think it's the same speed as on his regular hard floor, but it will actually be very slightly slower).

Size of the crowd. Dancers on a crowded floor instinctively take smaller steps, and therefore again return to ground zero sooner than if they had lots of elbow room. Play the music a bit quicker in a crowded room.

Start of the programme. Very few dancers do warm-ups at social functions. Don't let yourself get sued for a pulled hamstring (or worse) because you played the first couple of dances ever-so-slightly-too-fast.

Technique level of the dancers. Technically 'good' dancers prefer to dance strathspeys slower than novices, and reels/jigs a bit quicker. It's actually a matter of confidence level.

Age group. It catches up with all of us, and is no reflection, but as we eventually lose our strength and control we can't dance as slowly as before. Plastic hips have been known to cancel this one out though!

Licensed function. Yup, booze relaxes us and loosens our inhibitions. Uptight dancers tend to dance more deliberately. Accelerate the music in proportion to the level of blood in the dancers' alcohol stream.

Stickiness of the floor. A slippery floor makes people careful about how they place their feet. Slower music compensates for this.

'Lift' of the music. The very best music motivates and inspires dancers, and releases adrenaline. If as a musician or SCDJ you can create this mood, be prepared to cater to a room full of 'Generals' who will want to Dance Till Dawn.... and you can play at whatever tempos the traffic will bear!