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King, Earl, Outlaw and Chieftain

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John Purser: I've called this programme "King, Earl, Outlaw and Chieftain" and we're going to hear music for harp to soothe a Countess and an Earl, magical music from the gypsies, Gaelic lament, and the aristocratic music of the pipes - but we start in London, with this:

Monteverdi: Toccata

Concerto Vocale/ René Jacobs

CD Orfeo

harmonia mundi HMC 901553/4 CD 1 Track 1

JP Voice-over: This is the kind of music you might have heard in London, celebrating the Union of the Scottish and English crowns in 1603. It's actually by Monteverdi - but in case you think this is a fearful cheat on my part, we know that there were Italian trumpeters in the Scottish court and that James VI brought his own state trumpeters from Scotland to join up with the English state trumpeters – so there was easily enough of them to make this splendid sound using exactly the same conventional flourishes used by Monteverdi.

Playing these high trumpets was a specialised business and in that recording they were joined also by sackbuts – the early form of the trombone. Scotland had sackbuts too. We called them draucht trumpets. The Drummond family of trumpeters had emigrated to Italy and returned to Scotland, quite probably bringing this instrument with them. Julius Drummond is named by his instrument – the “draucht trumpet” in the Treasurer’s Accounts of 1505, but he was only to be paid if he didn’t marry for a year. Trumpeters had to move around but they didn’t have their own horses so this same man is also paid for a horse to take him to Dunfermline. Another decidedly charitable payment was made when he had a “sair lip” and couldn’t play. Sore lips are a natural hazard of the profession. So we had a long tradition of skills in the trumpet and sackbut department.

Ruairidh O’Cahan: Tabhair dom do Lámh (Give me your hand)

Grainne Yeats

CD The Belfast Harp Festival

Gael-Linn CEFCD 156 CD 1 Track 4

JP Voice-over: We also had skills in other departments, not least on the clarsach or wire-strung harp. These were skills we shared with the Irish, the clarsairs regularly moving between the two countries – and they also visited King James the 6th and 1st’s court in London where this kind of music would have been heard as if it were an exotic import from an alien culture.

This is a tune by an Irish harper, Blind Ruairidh O’Cahan; but he composed it in Scotland, where he spent most of his life. James VI made only one return visit to Scotland after the Court moved south, and it was probably on that occasion that O’Cahan composed this tune – Give Me Your Hand. Some say it was written in reconciliation for Lady Eglintoun after she apologised for commanding O’Cahan to play instead of asking him kindly. Others maintain it was composed for the reconciliation of James VI and Lord Eglintoun in Glasgow in 1617 where the music would not have been alien. The tune is still popular today.

That was Gráinne Yeats playing Give Me Your Hand in a version taken down from an old harper in Belfast in 1792, who, like O’Cahan, was also blind. It was collected from oral tradition - and you can hear just how conservative oral tradition can be, because a century and a half earlier young Lady Margaret Wemyss wrote her version of it into her lute book and there’s not much difference between the two versions. So here it is on lute, played by Jakob Lindberg – and, yes, we had expertise in Scotland on the lute as well.

Trad (Lady Margaret Wemyss book, c.1644-48): A Scotts Tune
Jakob Lindberg
CD Lute Music from Scotland and France
BIS CD-201 Track 5

JP: The sound of the lute was common all over Europe – and indeed the Middle East whence the instrument came.

Trad (Rowallan Lute MS): Gypsies Lilt
Robert Phillips (Rowallan Consort)
CD Notes of Noy, Notes of Joy
Temple Records COMD 2058 Track 22

JP Voice-over: But sometimes there came with it music that was less familiar and as often as not it came with the gypsies – the Spanish gypsies. This exotic tune with its strangely haunting repeated chord is like nothing else – nothing else at all.

Trad: The Spanish Gypsies
The Harp Consort/Andrew Lawrence-King
BBC live recording 21 January 2006

JP Voice-over: Well, here they come, the Spanish Gypsies, with their exotic costumes and dances and dangerous winning ways.

There were plenty of gypsies in Scotland – indeed King James VI had banished the lot of them!

Fat lot of good it did him. “As the song says, we go on and ne’er come back!” – so they vanished into the glens and woods and became even more mysterious and dangerous than before.

JP: The Spanish Gypsies – we go on and ne’er come back. But they came back for the beautiful Lady Cassilis. Right to her hall door, and they charmed her away, perhaps with this very tune, Lady Caddilis Lilt, played on a Mandora by Ronn MacFarlane.

Trad (Skene Mandora Book): Ladie Cassiles Lilt
Ronn MacFarlane
CD The Scottish Lute
Dorian DOR 90129 Track 43

JP: But let’s hear the story of Lady Cassilis from Jeannie Robertson in the ballad of The Gypsy Laddies, making use of a tune from the same stable.

Trad: The Gypsy Laddies

Jeannie Robertson
CD The Voice of the People
Topic TSCD Track 17

JP: The Earl eventually finds his lady with the gypsies but, despite the discomforts of her new life, she has no desire to return with him.

Jeannie Robertson singing the story of Johnny Faa or The Gypsy Laddies, which she has shifted from Ayrshire to Aberdeenshire. It gives you an idea of just how exotic the appeal of the gypsies must have been if you know that they had been formally expelled from Scotland in 1609 and in 1611 four of them were hung for “abiding within the kingdom, they being Egyptians”.

If the Gypsies were banished totally, it was little better for Clan Gregor. In 1603 – the year in which we started with all that splendid trumpeting, the MacGregors were not only outlawed – their very name was prohibited. The Campbells were behind it. They wanted the MacGregor lands of Glenorchy, and when, back in 1570, the daughter of Duncan Campbell fell in love with and married a MacGregor, her father had him executed. They beheaded him at Taymouth Castle in front of his wife, and they stuck his head on an oak stob. Her lament survives in the tradition – she sings it as she rocks her baby to sleep – and its uncanny beauty is, I trust, haunting the ghosts of those two men to this day. It’s sung here by Anne Lorne Gillies.

Trad: Griogal Cridhe
Anne Lorne Gillies
LP Songs of the Gael
Lochshore Records LOCLP 1014 Side 1 track 6

Gaelic Reader voice-over (Alyth MacCormack):

“Ba Ba My baby, ba hu ho my baby. Many’s the night, wet and dry, or in the wildest weather, Gregor would find me a cranny and we would sleep together in its shelter.

I climbed to the highest room, then went to the lowest, but beloved Gregor was not at the table.

Greatest treasure in all the world, they spilled your blood yesterday, and put your head upon an oak stob no distance from your body.

When the young women of the township are sleeping peacefully tonight, I shall be beside your grave wringing my two hands.”

JP: Beloved Gregor, sung by Anne Lorne Gillies.

For all that Scotland’s King had gone south, outlawing the MacGregors and regarding his Gaelic-speaking subjects as little more than vermin, there remained in the West an aristocracy and a pride, that had its own ways of proclaiming its majesty.

Trad: **Taladh Choinnich Oig**

James Campbell

LP Scottish Tradition 8: James Campbell of Kintail

Tangent TNGM 140 Side 2 Band 3

JP Voice-over: Here's James Campbell of Kintail singing a lullaby for a boy chief of the MacKenzie's, possibly from the early seventeenth century. But no child was ever meant to sleep to this so-called lullaby! The young chief will give wine to his horses and shoe them with gold. He will command the Lothians. He will hunt and kill like his grandfather.

JP: A song for a young Highland chieftain, already full of authority. As for the big occasions of gathering and celebration, the Highland chieftains had no need of imported trumpets, or bands of musicians playing in great halls: they had highly prized and splendidly accoutred bards, harpers and pipers – and the music of the great Highland pipes could outdo any troupe of trumpeters, the pipes sustaining and proclaiming their power to the four quarters of the winds.

Trad: **The MacDougall's Gathering**

Gordon Duncan

CD The Circular Breath

Greentrax CDTRAX 122 Track 11

JP Voice-over: That's precisely what this piobaireachd does. It's the MacDougal's Gathering and the piper turns to face North, South, East and West with each of the insistent high repeated phrases of the opening urlar, or ground, the basic theme on which the whole piece is based. This is music with its own magnificence and, having MacDougal blood in my own veins, it stirs me mightily.

This is the doubling of the crunluath – the crowning variation. It will lead into the return of the opening urlar, rounding off the music absolute assurance. This is not some peremptory call to people nearby. This is music to gather an entire clan from miles around. It takes its own pace and its own time. Expansive and commanding, these are sounds a whole people will obey.