

Scotland's Music © BBC 2007
Programme 43 04.11.07
Nursery and Playground
Writer/presenter: John Purser
Producer: David McGuinness

James Scott Skinner - Cradle Song
James Scott Skinner, Stro violin
LP The Strathspey King
Topic 12T280 S2T5

Reader (Fiona Fraser):

“Spirits that guard young children,
Enter here tonight,
O'er my fevered darling,
Watch till morning light.

Oh! My life is lonely,
Oft my thoughts are wild;
Ah, my heart were broken
Did I lose my child.”

John Purser: The renowned Scottish violinist, James Scott Skinner, playing his own Cradle Song, recorded nearly a century ago. The tune was inspired by Skinner's having entered the wrong hotel room and getting a glimpse of a beautiful woman nursing a sick child. The verses were written for the tune by Alexander Hastings of Huntly and Skinner thought them very appropriate. Sentimental? Absolutely – but still a winner. Children themselves, however, are a tad more down-to-earth:-

Anon - When Suzie was a baby

children of Carleton Primary School (P6), Glenrothes, recorded by Lynn Hendry
CD Scottish Tradition 22 Chokit on a Tattie: Children's Songs and Rhymes
Greentrax CDTRAX 9022 Track 18

JP: The children of Carleton Primary School with the brief history of life and death. Theirs is probably the cleanest version of what was originally a First World War soldiers' song, but it's quite explicit about the consequences of leaving your knickers in your boyfriend's car. The same kind of frank acknowledgement is to be heard in Robert Burns's Babbie Clouts – the wistful song of a pregnant girl longing for the return of her lover. The girl was Betty Paton; “the rantin' dog, the daddy o't” was Burns himself, and their daughter Bess was brought up by Burns's mother. Betty Paton meanwhile happily married someone else and took on her own child after Robert's death. But this isn't the tune Burns used for the song. This one was composed by F.G.Scott, and the melody is so fine that Jo Miller has dispensed with its piano accompaniment.

F.G. Scott - Babbie Clouts
Jo Miller, voice
BBC recording 1991

JP: Babbie Clouts – F.G.Scott's setting of Robert Burns.

Anon - Robert Burns was born in Ayr

children of Noblehill Junior School, Dumfries (Dec 1980)
CD Children's Singing Games
Saydisc CD-SDL 338, Track 9

JP: Children from Noble Hill School, Dumfries giving out useful tourist information in the form of a two-ball game. Kids games are for fun, but throwing and skipping games keep you fit and teach many skills, and so too do dandling songs. Of course you learn them on your mother's knee, but they come in useful when you have your own kids. This next one's in Gaelic and you bounce the baby up and down faster and faster because you're on horse-back trying to beat the incoming tide as you ride across the sands to Vallay – a tidal island on North Uist. "The high-tide will catch us – it'll cover our feet, it'll cover our heads. Huish huish on the horse, the horse riding to Vallay." From the sound of the "huish huish" from the children in the Gaelic Unit at Broadford Primary school, the horses's hooves are already in the water.

Anon - Huish huish
Children of Broadford Primary School Gaelic Unit
private recording

JP: This next song is also for a very little child. It's the lullaby for the son of the Chief of the Clan MacKinnon, his foster-mother imagining the child's future prowess. It's sung by a hall full of MacKinnons in my own village hall in Elgol on the Isle of Skye, and led by Christine Primrose.

Anon - Giulan geal-ò Cradle Song for the MacKinnon
Christine Primrose and Elgol audience
private recording

voiceover (Fiona Fraser):
 Precious little lad, turn to me.
 My joy and love, climber of peaks,
 A boy following thee, with his dog on a leash.
 You would climb the Mam, high crests,
 Sure is your hand in Blaven of the streams.
 What has left my mind sorrowful, and my heart sore
 Is that your ancestors here are so scarce.

JP: Giulan geal-o is a song for a child, but what follows is a piece of imaginative childishness which captures its strange fantasies. The man in the moon's got a crick in the back – he's in a rage and won't come out to play. The poem's by Maurice Lindsay and the music by Thea Musgrave.

Thea Musgrave - The Man-in-the Mune, (A Suite o Bairnsangs)
Linda Darnell, soprano Michael Neaum, piano
CASSETTE "Rejoice Greatly"
(privately released) LD1

Erik Chisholm, Scottish Airs for Children: 11 'Cagaran O! – A Nurse's Song'; 14 Pastorale
Murray McLachlan, piano
CD Erik Chisholm Music for Piano Volume 1
Dunelm Records DRD 0222 Tracks 14 and 17

JP voiceover: This is Cagaran O – Little darling – a Gaelic nurse’s song from Argyllshire arranged by Erik Chisholm for children to play, and it’s followed by a North Highland Air – also for children.

JP: You never know with children. The reason those two piano pieces - for children - came into existence, was because of a gift to a child. The gift was Patrick MacDonald’s *A Collection of Scottish Airs*, published in 1784. It was bound in leather alongside “Home Sweet Home” and the like. Little Erik Chisholm was ten years old and on his summer holidays on the island of Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde when thoughtful neighbours gave it to him. Little as he was, he knew that this was something different – something precious. It accompanied him throughout the rest of his life and he set practically every tune in the book. In a sense these beautiful settings which he made for his own three daughters, were a gift from his own childhood to theirs. Here’s another:-

Erik Chisholm - Scottish Airs for Children: 9 Ground

Murray McLachlan, piano

CD Erik Chisholm Music for Piano Volume 1

Dunelm Records DRD 0222, Track 9

JP: One of Erik Chisholm’s contemporaries was a music teacher in Huntly – Ronald Center. He’s largely forgotten these days. His widow has passed on and they’d no children, but at least one of his pupils remembers him well and with admiration:

James Naughtie: I knew him as someone whom I visited once a week for a piano lesson and he was always somebody who had a great impact on me. You know I was a 7, 8, 9, 10-year old boy when I went to see him first, but there was something embedded there which has remained.

I only knew him as a teacher of piano, once a week, and that’s how he made his living by the time I was around – he’d given up school-teaching, and he simply had pupils and we used to give a terribly nerve-wracking concert once a year where we all got up and played our party piece, and proud parents (or less than proud parents) sat and dutifully listened, and his pupils would play and Evelyn Center’s pupils would sing.

And, I have to say, we used to dread this evening. I did once go to the National Library of Scotland and look at a box of memorabilia, some scores and some notes that he’d written which are kept there. I was looking through them and came upon a sort of cyclostyled sheet and on the blank side of it he’d done some composition – scribbled a few notes and there was a staff and a fragment of music and I turned it over and on the back there, typewritten - and this leapt out at me - was a programme for one of these concerts with, you know, James Naughtie aged six playing I don’t know – Turkey in the Straw or something – on the back of a piece of paper on which he’d subsequently composed something. And I found that, I suppose thirty years later, terribly moving, and it took me back to those Thursday nights when I would walk up through the garden of the old manse in Princes Street, Huntly, and climb up to the first floor where I would sit outside while the pupil before finished plodding through whatever it was, and the door would open and he would say hello and we would have half-an-hour of, I think, quite profound conversation sometimes after I became a teenager, about music. It didn’t feel profound at the time, it felt perfectly normal and natural, but afterwards I realised how lucky I’d been.

JP: Jim Naughtie talking about his old piano teacher, Ronald Center. Although Center had no children of his own, as a school teacher and a private piano teacher, he knew them well enough, and his piece “Children at Play” is both haunting and disturbing. It swings in mood from Nursery to

Playground, from the world of Peter Pan to the cruel ritualistic world of the Lord of the Flies, with almost obsessive childish militarism – and then back to a world of innocence that stares you wide-eyed in the face, demanding not to be questioned.

Ronald Center, Children at Play

Murray McLachlan, piano

CD Piano Music from Scotland: Scott, Center, Stevenson

Olympia OCD 264 Track 19

JN voiceover: He was very good with children. I think he'd found school-teaching in front of mass classes pretty awful really. I think he much preferred to sit alone with someone and try to impart something of his love for music – that's really what it was about. He much preferred simply to teach you to play to the standard which you could reach, but most of all to understand why music moved him. And he imparted a kind of reverence for the music which wasn't at all pompous, which was perfectly natural and instinctive, and he taught me at least that it was a human instinct to try to open your mind to these sounds, these rhythms, and to the magic that it could impart. That to me was a gift in a teacher, and I think it was a gift which lurked under the surface of a shy personality, a withdrawn personality, in some ways a slightly eccentric one.

Anon - Down in the Meadow

children in Hilltown, Dundee recorded by William Montgomerie 1952

CD Scottish Tradition 22 Chokit on a Tattie: Children's Songs and Rhymes

Greentrax CDTRAX 9022 Track 9