



South East Region Teachers Association

Music for Scottish Dancing (Afternoon)

Robert Mackay

September 2011

Reporter: Barbara Martlew

Eminent musician Robert MacKay's talk on music in SCD was entertaining, informative and well illustrated with many musical and some dancing examples.

In the 1970s there was little interest in music for Scottish Country dancing, as there were so many classes and pianists in Colleges. The pianist just sat in the corner and got on with it, and nobody spoke about music. By the 1980s there was much more awareness of the music, and music talks began to take place. Nowadays the SCD teacher has much more control over the musician. However Robert commented that on a recent Teacher's course only 1 candidate out of 10 had previous experience of working with live music.

Robert entertained us with accounts of pianos he has met. One had blu-tack stuck on many of the notes, which he painstakingly removed before starting to play. He rapidly discovered that the blu tack was there to identify those notes which did not work!

On another occasion he opened the lid of the piano only to

discover that the inside was not there! Thus always check that the piano in the hall actually works!

NINE RHYTHMS COMMONLY USED IN SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING

March – usually 2/4 beat, There are 4/4 marches, some with a lot of notes which makes it hard to hear the beat.

Jig, and also Slow Jigs (e.g. Gentle Shepherd). Robert commented that today people find it too hard to dance that slowly, and thus nowadays this music needs to be played quicker. The dance was originally designed to be danced in heeled shoes. There are also Irish Jigs, where the main difference is 6 notes in the bar.

9/8 Jigs as in Strip the Willow

Reels and Hornpipes. He commented on Reels containing rather too many notes – ‘busy’ tunes – as in the original tune for Montgomerie’s Rant, which can be hard to dance to,

Strathspeys – these used to be played much faster.

Slow Airs, and also Schottische rhythm, as in Glasgow Highlanders.

Robert illustrated the different strathspey rhythms by playing ‘Braes of Breadalbane’ four ways. Each noticeably altered the character of the dance.

WAYS THE PIANIST CAN HELP THE DANCER

Robert gave several instances where the pianist can help to give that clear beat dancing requires.

In ‘Ladies of Dunse’ he feels the 2nd woman needs a send-off from the musician on bar 17, which the original tune lacks.

Sometimes the pianist needs to put in extra notes to achieve the 1,2, 3 beat for pas de basque.

WAYS TO IMPROVE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN PIANIST AND TEACHER .

EYE CONTACT AND PIANO POSITION ARE IMPORTANT. The musician needs to see the teacher and what is going on, and the teacher needs to be able to see the pianist. Robert cited the example of a tiny teacher hidden behind large man, who blocked the pianist's view.

NEVER CRITICISE YOUR MUSICIAN IN PUBLIC. If you have a musician who cannot play a difficult original tune then compromise with a simpler tune he can play. However the principle is always to use original tunes, and not to use these as alternative tunes.

Robert prefers the A,B,C,D, B,C,D, A sequence of tunes as did Miss Milligan.

Remember that it can be easy for the musician to forget the last 8 bars of a 40 bar dance.

DON'T TALK TOO MUCH. In this situation Robert has found the Daily Telegraph crossword useful, and more recently Sudoku. His advice is to stop talking and bring in the music as soon as possible because dancers dance better with music.

PROBLEMS with bringing the musician in – 'ready, ands'. One teacher once asked "Mr MacKay, could I not just place your hands on the keys?" Don't add extra comments once you have said 'Ready And'.

PLEASE GIVE YOUR MUSICIAN MUSIC WELL IN

ADVANCE. This applies particularly to new musicians so that they can get their supporting tunes together.

With non RSCDS dances give the musician the music, as it may be hard for him to source this. There are so many more dances today than formerly, that musicians will not have copies of all the books/tunes required. See questions following Robert's talk below for website help.

Robert commented that with some of the old books the music was not good, and could not be changed while Pattersons' had the copyright. Since then Muriel Johnstone has been able to change tunes to something more suitable.

GET DANCERS USED TO THINKING IN EIGHT

BARS. Robert prefers for teachers to teach the sequences of a dance in order, as he feels learning sequences out of order can be confusing.

RHYTHM – Teach the main step in the correct rhythm, as for example, teaching pas de basque in jig time can lead to a 2 beat step. Then do the dance in the correct rhythm. Robert pointed out that the piano is a percussive instrument which gives rhythm. The violin is not percussive and therefore less good, and the accordion too does not have the percussive element.

BOW AND CURTSY. This is done to a 3 note chord. It annoys the musician if dancers ignore the last chord at the end of the dance.

WARM-UPS. Robert never used to do these. They should not be too long, or too clever.

MAKING UP A DANCE PROGRAMME

Talk to the musicians beforehand, and give them the proposed programme for their comments.

Make sure not to have the same tune for 2 dances, and vary the key that the music is written in.

Flat keys are harder for fiddles.

Start with a jig, which is easier for the musicians when they are not warmed up, and beware of 'busy' tunes.

QUESTION AFTER ROBERT'S TALK

The main question concerned sourcing original tunes.

Ken Martlew commented that there are now good websites, particularly 'ABC' tunes. He will email details to SERTA.

Barbara Martlew October 2011.