

CHAPTER XXVII.

STRATHSPEY MUSIC.

“ What needs there be sae great a phraise
Wi’ dringing dull Italian lays ;
I wadna gi’e oor ain Strathspeys
For half a hunder score o’ ’em.
They’re dowf and dowie at the best
Compared wi’ Tullochgorum.”

WE cannot fully realise how much our highest and purest pleasure is to be found in music. This divine gift is universal, but its manifestation varies in different nationalities and races of men. There is no better illustration of this adaptability of music to a people and climate than in our own national music. Strathspey music, compared to the creations of the divine masters, is rude and simple in the extreme to people of a refined musical taste, but it has to a Scotchman a soul-stirring power, and awakens emotions in his heart that can only be stirred by the matchless melodies of his native land. Even heart-stirring as many of them are, they would lose half their charm were they divorced from the words that accompany them. No nation is so rich in melodies that stir all the emotions of the heart. What Scotchman does not feel his patriotic blood stirred by “Scots wha hae wi’ Wallace bled?” and can anyone join in singing “Auld Lang Syne” without having the memory of many a sweet and dear remembrance awakened in his heart? And the person that can listen unmoved to the mournful strains of “The Flowers of the Forest” is not to be envied. We possess a rich and priceless inheritance in our national melodies.

The Scotchman who, through force of circumstances, voluntarily leaves his country poor in worldly substance, carries with him an inheritance in the matchless melodies of his native land. They never fail to be a source of pleasure no matter how varied and chequered his lot may be. Strathspey music, like our national poetry, has been made famous by men who have enriched

it by their genius and patriotism. Amongst them Neil Gow must take his place in the front rank. Although he was not born in Strathspey, he early imbibed the spirit and love of Highland music. It may be that the matchless scenery around the native home of the humble plaid-weaver of Dunkeld had an elevating and refining influence upon the man, whose magic bow stirred the hearts of his countrymen with emotions too deep for words to express. Our native Strath can boast of having had men who caught the mantle of the peerless Neil.

Burns, in writing to his brother Gilbert, says, in reference to his Highland tour, "I crossed Spey and went down the stream through Strathspey, so famous in Scottish music, till I reached Grant Castle, where I spent half a day with Sir James Grant and family." His excursion extended to the Fall of Foyers, Colloden Moor, Inverness, returning south by Nairn and Forres, where Mr. Brodie showed him the famous "Forres stone." At Elgin he viewed the venerable ruins of the Cathedral. "Cross Spey to Fochabers—fine place (Gordon Castle, the seat of the Duke of Gordon), worthy of the generous proprietor—dine. Company—Duke and Duchess, Ladies Charlotte and Magdeline. . . . —the Duke makes me happier than ever great man did—noble, princely, yet mild, condescending and affable, gay and kind—the Duchess, witty and sensible—God bless them!" Lady Charlotte was at the time of Burns' visit nineteen years of age; she afterwards became the Duchess of Richmond, and was the mother of the present Duke. Lady Magdeline married Sir Robert Sinclair of Murkle. On 30th of October, 1787, Burns wrote to Mr. James Hoy, Gordon Castle, who acted as librarian to the Duke—"My request is—'Cauld Kail in Aberdeen' is one intended for this number (second volume of Johnson's Museum), and I beg a copy of his Grace of Gordon's words to it, which you were so kind as to repeat to me. You may be sure we won't prefix the author's name except you like." In a second letter to Mr. Hoy he writes—"The Duke's song, independent totally of his dukeship, charms me. There is I know not what of wild happiness of thought and expression peculiarly beautiful in the old Scottish song style of which his Grace, old venerable Skinner, the author of 'Tullochgorum,' &c., and the late Ross, at Lochee, of true Scottish poetic memory, are the only modern instances that I recollect,

since Ramsay with his contemporaries and poor Bob Fergusson went to the world of deathless existence and truly immortal song. The mob of mankind, that many-headed beast, would laugh at so serious a speech about an old song; but, as Job says, 'Oh, that mine adversary had written a book!' Those who think that composing a Scotch song is a trifling business—let them try. I wish my Lord Duke would pay a proper attention to the Christian admonition—'Hide not your candle under a bushel,' but 'Let your light shine before men.' I could name half-a-dozen Dukes that I guess are a devilish deal worse employed; nay, I question if there are half-a-dozen better: perhaps there are not half that scanty number whom Heaven has favoured with the tuneful, happy, and, I will say, glorious gift."

One cannot wonder that with the encouragement of such a patron as the music-loving Duke of Gordon, his retainer, Mr. Marshall, developed into one of the greatest composers of Strathspey airs that the North of Scotland has produced. As long as the Spey and Deveron run to the sea the airs and marches that he composed will be played and sung. His son, the late Mr. Marshall, Newfield, Dandaleith, was a man whose exquisite ear lent a refinement to the touch of the bow that few could equal. Our Strath music has not only a soul-inspiring influence, but it lends dignity to the bearing of the man that is endowed with it. Mr. Marshall was, in the fullest sense of the word, a gentleman. Tall and erect in figure, he had a dignity in his bearing that commanded respect. In his private life he was loved and esteemed. He had a habit of taking long walks alone, no doubt to drink in the varied sights and the music made by the rippings of his beloved Spey.

There was another famous violin player of Strathspey, the notorious freebooter M'Pherson. He frequently found a safe retreat in the rocky crags that overhang the burn of Carron, opposite the old romantic mill. Sixty years ago his exploits and his daring deeds were told by old people around many a fireside in Strathspey, and it was strange to see the amount of sympathy evinced for his ignominious death. It would appear from a song that he failed to find sympathisers to plead for him, while another freebooter named Brown escaped the gallows through the intercession of the "Laird o' Grant"—

“ The Laird o’ Grant, that Hielan’ saunt,
 Wi’ a’ his majesty,
 He pled the cause o’ Peter Broon
 And lets poor M’Pherson dee.”

James M’Pherson was a man of uncommon strength. Along with some gipsies that he consorted with, he was seized by Duff of Braco, ancestor of the Earl of Fife. On November 7th, 1700, he was tried before the Sheriff of Banffshire. On the 16th of the same month he was executed along with some of the gipsies on the Gallows-hill of Banff. Before his execution he played the tune, “ M’Pherson’s Rant ;” he had composed the air and the song while he lay under sentence of death. The words of the song show clearly what manner of man he was—

“ I’ve spent my time in rioting,
 Debauched my health and strength ;
 I squandered fast as pillage came,
 And fell to shame at length.

“ But dantonly and wantonly
 And rantonly I’ll gae ;
 I’ll play a tune and dance it roun’
 Beneath the gallows-tree.”

On finishing the tune he asked if anyone would accept the instrument as a gift at his hands. No one came forward ; he then indignantly broke the violin on his knee and threw away the fragments, and submitted to his fate. His sword, preserved at Duff House, shows what a powerful man he must have been. His bones, which were disinterred some years ago, were allowed by all who saw them to be much larger and stronger than the bones of ordinary men.

It is not surprising that Burns composed a stirring song to the tune of “ M’Pherson’s Rant ”—

“ Oh, what is death but parting breath ?
 On many a bloody plain
 I’ve dared his face, and in this place
 I scorn him yet again ! ”

A learned writer says—“ It is beyond question that what is called Scottish music has been derived from the Gaelic race. Its characteristics are purely Celtic. Scottish Lowland music, so much and so deservedly admired, is a legacy from the Celtic muse throughout. There is nothing in it which it holds in common with any Saxon race in existence. Compare it with the common melodies in use among the English, and the two are proved totally distinct.”