

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Funeral Fare

Nullus Funus Sine Fidula (No Funeral without a Fiddle) reads the motto of the Guild of Funerary Violinists, an ancient musicians' organization dating to the Reformation, having received a royal warrant in the year 1580 from Queen Elizabeth I of England. The guild was established to provide music to the public to honor a deceased individual and to recognize the grief of those in mourning. It flourished for centuries, reaching its zenith in the early 19th century before being wholly dismantled by Pope Gregory XVI, acting through Cardinal Pacca, in a virulent campaign of disinformation, discredit, and deliberate suppression.

"Historic records, books and sheet music were all seized; paintings were burnt, retouched or cropped to remove the offending images; instruments with the traditional death's head scroll were either "restored" or destroyed; the performers were forced into monastic orders, and in time the entire notion of a Funerary Violinist was forgotten."

So writes Rohan Kriwaczek in his 2006 book *The Incomplete History of the Art of Funerary Violin*. If by now one recognizes the premise of the book to be P.D.Q. Bach-like¹, and wholly the imagination of Mr. Kriwaczek, then one correctly characterizes it as a work of fiction. One can also understand the dilemma bookstores faced in displaying the book, as it was not a typical fictional narrative; but neither was it able to be placed in the arts history section as the "historical" facts had been invented. Mr. Kriwaczek argued in a statement he issued soon after the entertaining book's release that it was neither a hoax nor an attempt to mislead. Rather, he sought to "expand the notion of musical composition to encompass the creation of an entire artistic genre, with its necessary accompanying history, mythology, philosophy, social function, etc."

Like many such "plausible" fictions, there is just enough of a truth to give pause before rejecting the premise (as music historians quickly did). It rests on the facts that art music has a long tradition of funerary music, and that violinists and fiddlers have been playing music at funerals for as long as the instrument has been around, just as they have for weddings, festivals, dances, balls, and just about every other human social event. As any psychology of music text will attest, music is a conduit to emotional experience, and the accompaniment to human conditions and where it helps to structure and organize strong emotions.

In fact, many cultures support the process of mourning with musical accompaniment. In Ghana, music and dance move the funeral from communal grief to celebration, a process sometimes taking days:

The Ashanti of central Ghana perform songs in the adowa style, among others, that focus on themes of loss and the chaos caused by death. The second day of the funeral is much livelier, and its music contributes to a greater goal of bringing the community together.

¹P.D.Q. Bach, fictional composer and son of Johann Sebastian Bach, invented by musical satirist "Professor" Peter Schickele.

This funerary tradition was transported to the New World by slaves where, in New Orleans, it mixed with French and Spanish martial musical traditions. The derivative can be seen in the traditional jazz funeral, performed by a Dixieland band that accompanies the coffin to the cemetery playing dirge-like music, while playing (often the same tunes) in the upbeat "hot" Dixieland style on the way back from the interment. Hymns such as "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" and "When the Saints Come Marching In" are typical melodies played. In fact, so ensconced has "When the Saints..." become in the public mind with Dixieland that it is often the only tune people can recall when making a request of a band.

A similar tradition was codified by none other than the United States Army during the American Civil War (and likely derivative, as it does not appear earlier than the 19th century). A quick-step march (in 6/8 time) called "Merry Men Home from the Grave" appeared in Bruce and Emmett's *Drummers' and Fifers' Guide*, published in 1862 to help codify and train the hordes of new musicians needed for Union Army service early in the American Civil War (although Confederate musicians played much of the same repertory). Therein it is directed: "After having deposited the body in its final resting place, and the Escort having fired the customary salute over the grave, the musicians will not play again until outside the enclosure,--when they will strike up a lively air; the 'Merry Men Home from the Grave' being considered the most appropriate." George Bruce was a drum major in the New York National Guard, 7th Regiment, and had served in the United States Army as principal drum instructor at the installation at Governor's Island in New York harbor. Emmett was none other than Daniel Decatur Emmett, a principal figure in the mid-19th century minstrel craze and composer of "Dixie" (ironically turned into a Confederate anthem during the war) and "Old Dan Tucker," among other favorites. Emmett had been a fifer for the 6th U.S. Infantry in the mid-1850s. "Merry Men Home from the Grave" appears to have been a 19th century melody and I have yet to find it in publications from before the mid-century.

Western art music has a long tradition of funerary music from a great many classical composers for subjects high and low. One of the compositions by British composer Henry Purcell (1659-1695), "Funeral Music for Queen Mary," is among his best and most critically acclaimed works and was written for the untimely death of that English monarch. Mozart composed renowned memorial masses and church requiems as well as the secular "Mureische Tauermusick" (Masonic Funeral Music), K. 477. Georg Philip Telemann was even commissioned in 1737 to compose "Trauer-Music eines kunsterfahrenen Canarienvogels" (Funeral music for an artistic canary), by a bereaved pet-owner to commemorate the death of a pet (and managed to transform the shallow premise into a work of high art).

Perhaps the most memorable classical music funeral compositions to modern ears is the third movement in Chopin's Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor, written in the 1830s, popularly thought of as Chopin's Funeral March. It is thought that he was influenced by the events of the Polish uprising against Russia of that decade, and although the expatriate Chopin was living elsewhere in Europe, he feared for his family and friends in the violence. He was also a passionate nationalist and deeply pained by the events, which some see as captured in the sombre music. Chopin scholar

Jeffrey Kallberg remarks that “His colleagues said that he often played in salons, and the only way to get him to stop playing was to get him to play ‘the March’. He was so caught up in the emotions of it.”



Chopin's funeral dirge (above) has so resonated in the collective Western consciousness that its opening measures are instantly recognizable to nearly everyone. In part this is because its equally long history of parody helped cement its popularity. The musical evocation of doom and gloom has been the accompaniment to myriad songs, cartoons and movies, as well as actual funerals. It can be heard, for example, in the movie “Beetlejuice,” in the Monthly Python television comedies and, almost without fail, in every mock funeral depicted in the Looney Tunes cartoons. Chopin, however, modelled his work after a Rossini opera, “La Gazza Ladra,” that itself served as the basis for parodies...one of which, by Charles Gounod, was employed as the theme music for the old Alfred Hitchcock show (for those old enough to remember!).

The use of the funeral march in early opera is our segway to fiddling, for we must remember that “art” music and popular music were once much closer together than they are today. Nowhere more close were they than in the opera, for the operatic stage of the day was more akin to musical Broadway than Metropolitan Opera. In much the same way as audiences go home humming favorite selections from hit Broadway shows, the opera of the 18th and 19th centuries provided melodies for popular use that found their way into folk culture.

The opera is chock-full of funeral music, as a tragedy was de rigueur for the stage. As one might surmise, the accompanying music was some of the most memorable to audiences, if only by association with the pathos depicted. Typically, funerary music was propelled by descending basslines that have come to represent

sorrow throughout Western music history. A survey of 18th and early 19th century music publications and fiddlers' manuscript books (courtesy of the EASMES² site) reveals that several named operatic dirges, death marches, and incidental funerary music were deemed “noteworthy.” For example, we find “Dead March in Merope” in New Hampshire musician Jeremiah Brown's c. 1782 commonplace book and “Dead March in Saul” [see “Fiddle Tune History,” *Fiddler Magazine*, Summer 2008] in the collections of flute player Henry Beck (1786) and that of keyboard player Ann Winnington (1810), and English publisher Walsh issued “Funeral March from Coriolanus” in *Music Bellicaos, or Warlike Music*, vol. 1 (London, 1733).

Unnamed funeral music also can be found with some regularity in old manuscripts and publications. Unspecified “Dead Marches” appear in the manuscripts of Connecticut fifer Giles Gibbs (1777), Massachusetts woodwind player Silas Dickenson (1800), and New Jersey fifer William Morris (1776). Brown also had a “Funeral March” in his copybook, and the collection of the Belamy band (Hamden, Conn.), had a “Funeral Dirge.” Cambridge, Mass., flute player Joseph Cabot penned a “Funeral Thought” in his 1784 music copybook, and fifer Giles Gibbs had the same music in his collection as “Funeral Thought, to Be Playd at the Burying” [sic]. Scottish publisher James Aird had a “Funeral March” in vol. 6 of his *Selections of Scotch, English, Irish and Foreign Airs* (1803), and there are a plethora of “Dead Marches” in other period publications.

Nor was this only an 18th century phenomenon. Funeral music continued to appear in musicians' manuscripts and the collections of amateur music groups into the 20th century. Professor Samuel Bayard, for example, collected extensively from fifers and fiddlers in southwestern Pennsylvania in the mid-20th century and found several funerary pieces in active repertoire, particularly in community martial bands. The “Ellsworth Funeral March” was the best-known “dead march” in the repertoires of southwestern Pennsylvania martial bands, he found, although the melody seems to have been strictly regional, with no cognates with the exception of a solitary “cradle song” from a Northumbrian piper. There is a resemblance to the revival hymn “Shall We Gather By the River”

Merry Men



(1864), and although evidence is scant, Bayard speculated the composer of the funeral march may have been strongly influenced by the hymn. It is likely the “Ellsworth” of the title commemorated Colonel Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth, who had the “heroic” misfortune to be the first young Union officer to be shot dead in the war (by an elderly civilian while in the act of tearing down a Southern flag from a house in Alexandria, Virginia); the Northern papers of the day lionized him as a hero, notwithstanding the fact that he barged into a civilian residence and was confronted as an intruder, the result being martyrdom but not heroics.

However, the overwhelming favorite of musicians providing music for latter 18th/early 19th century funerals in the English-speaking world was the very haunting but exquisite melody “Roslyn Castle” (which is variously given as Roslin, Rosland, Rosline,

Roseland, and Rosslyn Castle), occasionally called “The House of Glamis” (Glamis—pronounced “glahms”—is a village in Angus, Scotland, and is associated with the play MacBeth). Roslyn Castle does in fact exist in Angus, Scotland, and has since the early 14th century (c. 1304), when it was built by Sir William St. Clair soon after the Battle of Rosslyn, when, as part of the Scottish War of Independence, the English army of Edward I was decimated by the Scots. It is a castle of the rock and waterfall, lying high above the north bank of the River Esk a few miles southwest of Edinburgh, and features a small but magnificent chapel founded in 1446 by the Earl of Orkney and Roslin (recently featured as a setting in the book and film *The DaVinci Code*). Added to through the years, it survived two fires but was ultimately destroyed by Cromwell’s troops in 1650. It has been likened to a “Camelot” of its day.

Roslyn Castle

Musical score for "Roslyn Castle" in G major, 2/4 time. The score consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in a simple, flowing style with eighth and quarter notes. The second staff starts at measure 5, the third at measure 9, and the fourth at measure 14. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

The Mist-covered Mountains

Musical score for "The Mist-covered Mountains" in G major, 3/4 time. The score consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in a simple, flowing style with quarter and eighth notes. The second staff starts at measure 5, the third at measure 9, and the fourth at measure 13. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

J. Murray Neil³ remarks: "It is on record that one of the princesses of the castle had 75 ladies-in-waiting and 53 of them were also members of the nobility, all of whom were beautifully dressed in gowns of velvet and silk and who also wore gold and other jewels. When this princess travelled to her house in Edinburgh, she was accompanied by 200 men on horseback and, if at night, by a further 80 carrying torches. There is also the legend that the castle is haunted by the 'Sleeping Lady' who guards a vast treasure. If awakened by the sound of a trumpet, to be heard in the lower apartments, she will appear and reveal the treasure, whereupon the castle would rise from its ruins to its former glory."

The air "Roslyn Castle" is often attributed to the expatriate Scottish music publisher, composer and dancing master James Oswald (1711-1769), who lived in London for much of his mature career. His multiple-volume *Caledonian Pocket Companion* of the mid-century proved one of the most influential music publications of the era, and contains his "Roselana Castle." However, the melody had appeared a few years earlier in William McGibbon's (2nd) collection of 1746 under the title "House of Glamis." Scottish music historian John Purser believes it possible that Oswald could still have composed it, as he and McGibbon may have played together, and had Freemasonry in common. It was wildly popular. The EASMES site lists an astonishing seventy-eight different period music volumes and musicians' manuscript collections in Britain and North America that contain the melody.

Sir Walter Scott referenced the playing of "Roslyn Castle" by the renowned Scots fiddler Niel Gow in his book *St. Ronan's Well* (1824):

Gow's fiddle suddenly burst forth from where he had established his little orchestra. All were of course silent as through his dear strathspeys he bore with highland rage. He changed his strain to an adagio, and suffered his music to die away in the plaintive notes of Roslin Castle...

One of the oddest (and certainly oldest) sound rendition of "Roslyn Castle" can be heard played by the late 18th century music clock crafted by John Smith of Pittenween, Scotland, on exhibit in the National Museum of Scotland.

By the time of the American Revolution the air was universally famous and was routinely being played for funerals in North America, Ireland, and the British Isles. It was perhaps in a funereal state of mind that British troops in 1781 played the tune as they marched out the small Long Island, New York, village of Hempstead Harbor. The oppressed residents, however, rejoiced at the sound, and, remembering this, in 1844 their descendents changed the name of their village to Roslyn. The Continental forces also employed the tune as a memorial air, followed in popularity by William Billings' home-grown hymn "Chester." During the 1779 campaign against the Iroquois Six Nations two men had been dispatched by tomahawks and left to lie. After they were found, a Colonel Proctor ordered his musicians, in passing the spot, to play "Roslin Castle," whose "soft and moving tones" silenced the regiment and awakened pity for their comrades (*Rev. William Rogers' Journal*, p. 35). After the American Revolution the melody appears to have continued to have been associated with funerals; Rocellus Guernsey stated that it was always used as a dirge during the War of 1812.

The popular Gaelic song "O chi, chi mi na mor-bheanna" (The Mist-covered Mountains of Home) was printed in Alfred Moffat's volume *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Highlands* (1907). It tells of a longed-for homecoming, how the protagonist yearns to see the sights of home, and how he wishes to hear the sounds of his birth language. The mournful air was a favorite of King George VI and was played at his funeral⁴, and it was similarly played as a lament for President John F. Kennedy's funeral. Scots Gaelic words were written to it in 1856 by John Cameron of Ballachulish, Scotland. Originally the title was "Dùil ri Baile Chaolais fhaicinn" (Hoping to see Ballachulish), but it is today popular and familiar as "The Mist Covered Mountains of Home." The melody is said to be a dorian-mode adaptation of the English stage hit "Johnny stays long at the Fair" ("Oh Dear! What

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³Neil, J. Murray, *The Scots Fiddle: Tunes, Tales & Traditions*, 1991.

⁴Helen Creighton and Calum MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, 1979, p. 13.

Can the Matter Be?") sung as a famous duet between Samuel Harrison and his wife, the soprano Miss Cantelo, at "Harrison's Concerts," periodic events which he began in 1776. [The English song is still popular as a nursery rhyme and has been endlessly parodied ("Oh, dear, what can the matter be, two old maids were locked in the lavatory...").]

By far the most widely recognized Scottish funerary piece is mixolydian-mode "Flowers of the Forest" ("Flowden Hill"). This ancient melody appears earliest under this title in the *Skene Collection*, a lute manuscript of c. 1615-20. The title makes reference to the Battle of Flodden Field, fought in Northumberland, northeast England, on the 9th of September, 1513, when the Scots army of James IV was soundly defeated by that of their southern neighbors. During the fray a majority of the Scots nobility, as well as the supporting army, were slain. "'Flowers of the Forest' refers to the Scots who came from Ettrick Forest, the name given to the ancient district of Selkirkshire and Peebleshire and possibly part of Clydeside. The town of Selkirk, the 'favoured Forest Queen', dominated the area which was used by royalty for hunting and the 'Forest' boasted the finest archers in Scotland."⁵ The air is considered by some to be the most beautiful Scottish melody extant—the renowned English collector of Scottish songs, Joseph Ritson, thought so, even as he was famous for his "fussy, pernickety and grumpy" personality until he breathed his last in 1808.

Perhaps due to the subject matter of the song, coupled with the stateliness of the air, playing "The Flowers of the Forest" has been a tradition at Scottish funerals (especially military, where it is of-

ten rendered by a lone bagpiper). The tune was played by two pipers in 1903, for example, at King's Cross in honor of the funeral train of General Hector MacDonald (for whom see the back-story of J. Scott Skinner's "Hector the Hero") It was also played by massed pipers at the funeral of Winston Churchill in the 1960s, and it was played at the funeral of Borders fiddler Tom Hughes in 1986, by fiddler Bob Hobkirk.

Finally, Shetland fiddler Tom Anderson's pensive air "Da Slockit Light" has gained some currency in modern times for the last rites of individuals who have been influenced by traditional music. Anderson himself said of his piece: "I was coming out of Eshaness in late January, 1969, the time was after 11 pm and as I looked back at the top of the hill leading out of the district I saw so few lights compared to what I remembered when I was young. As I watched, the lights started going out one by one. That, coupled with the recent death of my late wife, made me think of the old word 'Slock-it', meaning, a light that has gone out, and I think that was what inspired the tune."⁶ The Shetlands have been much influenced by Scandinavia, and many traces of that culture have been retained. In Swedish, the word *släcka* means to quench or turn off, and is related to the English word "slacken" and the Shetland "slockit." "Da Slockit Light" was played at Anderson's own funeral in 1991.

[Andrew Kuntz is the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called *Ragged But Right* (1987) as well as the on-line tune encyclopedia "The Fiddlers' Companion" (www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in Irish music sessions.]

The Flowers of the Forest

⁵Neil, J. Murray, *The Scots Fiddle: Tunes, Tales & Traditions*, 1991.

⁶Anderson, Tom, *Ringin' Strings*, 1983, p. 20.