

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Rustic Dance



Nebraska/Missouri Valley fiddler
Uncle Bob Walters (1889-1960)

Photo: www.missourifiddling.com

When we think of the handful of traditional tunes that have transcended regional boundaries to achieve wide dissemination over wide geographic and genre boundaries, we generally think of seemingly ubiquitous reels such as “Soldier’s Joy,” “Devil’s Dream,” and “Miss McLeod’s,” or perhaps hornpipes like “Speed the Plough,” “Fisher’s,” or “Ricketts” (which, often as not, are played as reels). Versions of these ancient warhorses can be found in traditional repertory throughout the English-speaking world. Jigs such as “Haste to the Wedding” have had lesser success as “transcendent” (or, if you prefer, “cross-over”) tunes, but it’s not their fault—triple-time dance tunes have not been as successful in oral transmittal across genres as have duple-time tunes.

One type of this “transcendent tune” category, albeit a modest one, often seems to be overlooked: schottisches. They are perhaps unique because of their rhythmic ambivalence—their jaunty dotted rhythm contains aspects of both duple- and triple-time tunes. In fact, schottisches have been noted as jigs (or vice-versa)—particularly single jigs and slides—and slow schottisches have been played as fast waltzes! Consider, for example, a tune familiar to most of us, “If I Only Had a Brain,” sung by the scarecrow in the film *The Wizard of Oz*. How easily this melody, a perfect schottische (example one below), with little change in tempo, can be rendered as a waltz (example two below).

Another reason schottisches tend to be overlooked in traditional music as “crossovers” is because the schottische is a relative newcomer to traditional dance, imported from Bohemia but popularized in Victorian-era ballrooms. The steps have been described as a “partnered country dance” or a “slow polka” but refer to a form of couple dance that spread throughout the world in various forms: reinlander, schottis, jennka (Scandinavia); chotis, chamamé, chotiça (South America); schottische (Germany); sciortis, sciotzè, sòtis (Italy), xoutiça (Portugal). The dance is closer to the ballroom than the cabin in many national musics, and the tunes more closely aligned to the written page than aural memory than are jigs, reels, and hornpipes. Nevertheless, some schottische melodies were widely disseminated in tradition in the late 19th century, into the early 20th century, albeit sometimes in disguise.

Finally, their “rhythmic ambivalence” means that all kinds of tunes have been adapted as a vehicle for schottische steps, with only a little variation to make them fit. The dotted, skipping rhythm particularly lends itself to tunes being employed that are perhaps more properly hornpipes or highland flings, barn dances, strathspeys and the like; all genres that have rhythmic similarities. Indeed, the German word *schottische* means only “Scottish” and is a reference to the dotted rhythms prominent in that country’s music. As all of these musical genres have become more and more distanced from their original purpose as accompaniment to a specific dance, there has been more blending of these kinds of tunes, so that the dance title is often mere nomenclature, divorced from purpose. That being said,

schottisches are often 32-bar tunes, although 16-bar tunes have been employed, and many schottisches tend to sound Victorian as well, having a dated, antique quality to them, although some are quite charming.

In a past issue of *Fiddler Magazine* I wrote about the “Glenbeigh Hornpipe”/“Military Schottische”/“Bielbie’s Hornpipe”/“Curlew Hills Polka” family of tunes that has the same crossover characteristics and confusion of genres. The tune at the heart of that group was originally a schottische tune, given flight; however, the tune was disseminated primarily in Ireland and Britain. In this article I’d like to focus on another group of tunes built on a particular schottische melody, and to see how musicians from widely dissimilar places and circumstances employed it, and for what purpose, focusing on a North American dissemination.

There is a strain—one part of a binary melody—that appears in the unlikeliest of places. It can be heard played by Midwest fiddlers and upland South/Appalachian ones. Fiddlers from New York and Pennsylvania played it, as did New England musicians. Finally, it formed part of the repertory of Canadian fiddlers and singers.

Where did the melody originate? As with a number of traceable tunes, its recorded history begins with William Bradbury Ryan’s *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* (1883), a publication of the Boston-based Elias Howe music publishing company. That volume contains the “Nightingale Clog,” an unattributed melody probably meant to be a vehicle for a variety stage dance. The volume contains numerous clogs, hornpipes, “sand jigs,” and similar tunes that were popular as accompaniment to various forms of solo exhibition dancing, precursors to the modern tap dance. The



“Nightingale Clog” seems a typical tune of this genre, with a I, IV, V, I chord progression in the first strain, but with a more modern modulation to the relative minor for the first half of the second strain before returning to the main theme outlined in the first part of the tune. The entire tune can be mapped AA’BA’. The first strain of “Nightingale Clog” is the memorable one and the subject of this article, with a chromatic lead-in to an interval jump of a major sixth, mirrored, but not copied in the second measure (where the interval jump is an octave, not a sixth).

It proved to be a powerful bit of melody, but the second strain was much less so—while distinctive, the first half of “Nightingale’s” second part is but a bridge to the return of the first strain theme. It is a form that is common to many traditional songs and tunes, but it is a form that deliberately highlights the first strain melody, and thus the “glue” of the binary structure (i.e. AABB) is loosened. There were a number of adaptations of the “Nightingale’s” first strain with different partners; like the grand-right-and-left in a square dance, different second strains attach and detach.

One new adaptation is perhaps the most familiar of all, at least to those of us who enjoy Midwest fiddling. Bob Christeson, the mid-20th century collector of Missouri/Iowa/Nebraska fiddle tunes, transcribed one called “The Rustic Dance—Schottische” and noted that the melody was published around the turn of the century as “Evening Pleasures.” His source was Nebraskan Uncle Bob Walters (1889-1960), a regionally-influential fiddler in the Missouri Valley who made a name for himself in the heyday of agricultural broadcasting. He is featured prominently in Christeson’s two volumes of *The Old Time Fiddler’s Repertory*, and so

his output is fairly well known to us.

Walters’ “Rustic Dance” is built upon the first strain of “Nightingale Clog,” with a few small changes—the second large interval jump is not an octave, but a sixth, as in the first measure—but the chord progression, melodic contour, and much of the specifics of the melody are the same. The title is interesting in that it would seem to contain an oblique reference to solo stepdancing or clogging (as an expression of “rustic” dance), as opposed to the community dances that were more familiar to Walters. “Rustic Dance” also has something of the diminutive in it as well; a distancing from the more “cosmopolitan” or modern dance that Walters was familiar with. The title seems to indicate the tune is a relic; nevertheless, it stuck, and most Midwest fiddlers seem to know it as “Rustic Dance.”

Although “Rustic Dance” begins with the “Nightingale Strain,” it eschews the second strain of the tune in *Ryan’s Mammoth* for a different one, retaining the key of the first strain. The relative minor modulation of the “Nightingale” is perhaps hinted at in the second measure of the second strain, a delayed and brief introduction of the relative minor, but it is not a modulation as it is in *Ryan’s* tune. “Rustic Dance” can also be heard on Walters’ protégé Cyril Stinnett’s album *Grey Eagle in C* (MSOTFA 103) [his version can be heard at <http://slippery-hill.com/c/RusticDance.mp3>]. Missouri fiddler Charlie Pashia (1909-1994), a musical influence in the French community around Old Mines, Missouri, also recorded “Rustic Dance” and can be heard on *I’m Old but I’m Awfully Tough: Traditional Music of the Ozark Region* (MFFA 1001, c. 1977). Texas fiddler Ed Gillespie’s version of “Rustic Dance”

Nightingale Clog

The musical score for "Nightingale Clog" is presented in five staves of music. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The melody is characterized by frequent triplet patterns, indicated by the number '3' above or below groups of notes. The first strain consists of the first 12 measures, ending with a double bar line. The second strain begins at measure 13 and continues to the end of the piece. The notation includes eighth notes, quarter notes, and dotted notes, with some measures featuring a chromatic lead-in.

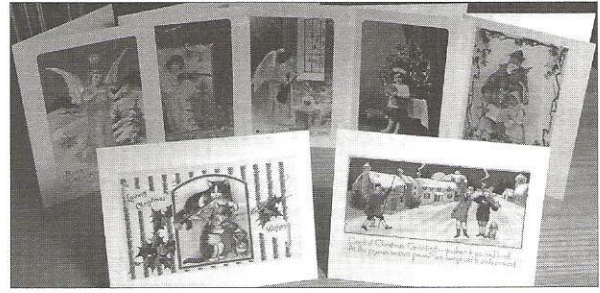
can be heard on Field Recorder Collective's *Texas Fiddle Bands* (FRC 409, 2008). Gillespie was recorded in the field in 1939 by Bill Owens, recording on aluminum discs using cactus needles on a second-hand Vibromaster recorder. "Rustic Dance" was also in the repertory of western North Carolina fiddler Oscar Jenkins, who recorded it on the album *Back Home in the Blue Ridge* (1971, with Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham), backed by the guitar playing of Shag Stanley.

"Evening Pleasures," the turn-of-the-century title alluded to by Christeson for the tune has been hard to track down. There is an "Evening Pleasures—rustic dance" by one M.W. Butler published in 1923, but I have not been able to locate a copy to see if it might be the source; the title would indicate some relationship. Regardless of the original by that title, however, we do have "Evening Pleasures" by Tony Gilmore, legendary contest fiddler of Jefferson City, Missouri, who broadcast in the 1930s. Gilmore's "Evening Pleasures Schottische" (the notation for which can be found in Stacy Phillips' *Traditional American Fiddle Tunes*, vol. 2 (1995, p. 47), transcribed from his 1950 recording found on the 1976 LP *Old Time Fiddler's Repertory*) is a nearly exact duplication of Bob Walters' "Rustic Dance," albeit transposed from D major to a more technically-demanding B flat major.

We will see even more twists of the melody in the next issue of *Fiddler Magazine*.

[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 encyclo-

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pedia "The Fiddlers' Companion" (www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in Irish music sessions.]

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