

“The Dance Music of Cape Breton”

Presented by Barry W. Shears ©2021

Brief History of Piping in Nova Scotia

- Between the years 1773-1850 an estimated 50,000 Highlanders immigrated to Nova Scotia and Cape Breton from the Scottish Highlands.
- They brought with them a rich tradition of music, song and dance.
- Most of the immigrants were Gaelic-speaking and the 1891 census shows 100,000 Gaelic-speakers living in Nova Scotia.
- Among the early immigrants were over 80 pipers, and during the next two generations the number of pipers in Nova Scotia swelled to over 300.
- To supply the new pipers with instruments, a nascent bagpipe making cottage industry sprang up in the province.
- Most of pipers were unable to read or write music in staff notation. They learned instead from family members or pipers within their community.
- Women were an essential part of the oral transmission of tunes from generation to generation.
- Most settlements remained relatively isolated until the 1930 and 40s, and this helped to preserve regional settings of many dance tunes, as well as archaic fingering technique, which also varied from community to community.

- These community pipers supplied music for any and all occasions, from baptisms, weddings and funerals (hatch, match and dispatch) and most importantly social dance.
- These pipers, male and female, were isolated from the changes to music and dance taking place in Scotland. Since their ancestors landed in Nova Scotia.
- Many representatives of the famous Hereditary or family pipers such as the MacIntyres, Gairloch MacKays, MacNeils from Barra, and Chisholms from Strathglas, all settled in Nova Scotia, but without upper class patronage as in Scotland, this form of music almost entirely died out, by the mid-20th century, but what did thrive was dance music.

Strathspeys and Reels

Strathspeys

There were several dance forms brought to Nova Scotia. Music for these dances was supplied by pipers, fiddlers, and also people singing words to the melodies (*puirt-a-beul*) when no instrument was available. These dances consisted of several choreographed dance forms often associated with specific tunes. This is not unlike the *sean nos* (old-style) dancing still found in some parts of Ireland.

The most popular social dances were the “Scotch Fours” and the “Eight Hand Reel”, sometime known as the “Wild Eight”. Two couples danced the Scotch Fours to Strathspey and Reels, and the Eight consisted of four couples dancing to a group of reels. Another dance brought by the immigrants was the Strathspey Minuet. This was a two-person, to a Strathspey written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time (or in the case of pipers, $\frac{6}{8}$ time). It was obviously a dance influenced by court dances popular in Europe in the 18th century. Scottish dance historians, Flett and Flett, said the dance was dead in Scotland by 1850, but a recent discovery in Cape Breton shows that the dance was still performed as late as just prior to the First World War, while Gaelic words for two tunes which can be described as Strathspey minuets were collected in Cape Breton as late the 1980s.

Differences

There are several differences between traditional dances in Cape Breton and Scotland. In Cape Breton dances like the The Sword Dance, Sean Truibhas, Highland Fling, as well as several others were performed using intricate footwork known as step-dancing. In Scotland, beginning in the 1880-90s these dances were modified and ballet dance technique was introduced. These dances, now so popular at Highland game events the world over, are a treat to watch and their performance require a certain fitness and agility to execute the movements. But they are not social dances; rather they have become an art form.

The second major differences between step dancing and display dancing is elevation and tempi.

The incorporation of ballet technique to these dances requires the performer to jump a distance off the floor. Since the piper plays for these dances at highland gatherings, he and his music have to wait until the dancer returns to the floor in order for the dancer to keep time to the music being played. This has resulted in a slowing of the tune, and a stricter adherence to “pointing” the music.

Musical example: Lady Loudon

For step dancing the opposite is true. The old style step dancers in Nova Scotia keep their foot work “close to the floor”, rarely lifting their feet more than a few inches off the floor, often not letting the heel of one foot extend past the toe of the other. In this way numerous steps can be executed for the Strathspey and reel in a small area and with very little upper body movement. The music for this type of dancing is played in a rounder, less pointed fashion, and the tempi of the music are much faster.

Musical examples: *MacIsaac’s Strathspey, The Devil in the Kitchen.*

High stepping dance styles would necessarily require music to slow down to give more time for higher dance steps. As with any living tradition, some of the older dance forms were eventually discarded as new ones were added and the music changed with them.

Social dances such as the Strathspey Minuet, the Scotch Fours, the Eight Hand Reel and a host of choreographed solo dances were gradually replaced by modern square set, usually danced to Jigs and Reels

221. MacIsaac's Strathspey **Strathspey**
Arr. Barry Shears



The Devil in the Kitchen

Strathspey

Traditional

Arr: Barry Shears

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "The Devil in the Kitchen" in the Strathspey style. The score is arranged in four staves, with the first staff using a treble clef and the subsequent three staves using alto clefs. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The music is characterized by a complex, rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. Several measures throughout the score feature triplets, indicated by a bracket with the number "3" above the notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line.