

Strathspeys, Reels, and Strathspey Reels: Clarifying Dance Music in Lowland Scotland 1750-1833

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Introduction

Players of Scottish music have long recognized the strathspey as “the most essentially characteristic form”¹ of Scottish music—and even “the only authentic Scottish type of tune”²—but there is a lack of scholarship on the development of its own essential character, namely, its performance style in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries³.

In modern usage, writers clearly distinguish between reels (consisting of running quavers played quickly) and strathspeys (consisting of dotted figures—pairs of a dotted quaver and semi-quaver in either order—played more slowly⁴). However, this simple taxonomy does not accommodate many tunes found in early collections. Reels can have dotted figures, strathspeys can have even quavers, and the tempo markings, time signatures, and bass lines frequently suggest that a more nuanced understanding of tempo and beat hierarchy is necessary.

William Lamb has written a series of papers on strathspey origins. In them, he persuasively argues that:

1. “Strathspey” as a term of art emerged by the mid eighteenth century, with the first known instance being the Menzies MS of 1749⁵.
2. “Strathspey” was initially an adjective referring to a particular performance style for playing and dancing reels, hence the term “strathspey reel” (a reel performed in the strathspey manner)⁶.
3. This performance style, featuring highly dotted rhythms, is a product of Gaelic song⁷.

¹James Scott Skinner, *A Guide To Bowing* (London: Bayley & Ferguson, 1900), p. 9

²Melinda Heather Crawford Perttu, ‘A Manual for the Learning of Traditional Scottish Fiddling: Design, Development, and Effectiveness’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2011), p. 151

³The dates in the title merit some explanation. The strathspey begins its development in earnest in the 1750s, and was championed by a set of fiddler-composers, most famously the members of the Gow family, William Marshall, and Robert Mackintosh. Marshall was the last of his generation to die, and the year of his death—1833—seems like a sensible date to choose for the end of this era of early strathspeys. However, the bulk of the printed material under discussion was published between 1780 and 1820.

⁴Francis Collinson, ‘Strathspey’, in *Grove Music Online* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.26909>> [accessed 25 March, 2019]

⁵William Lamb, ‘Reeling in the Strathspey: The Origins of Scotland’s National Music’, *Scottish Studies*, 36 (2013), 66-102, p. 68

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 88

⁷*Ibid.*

4. The highly dotted rhythms are also present in Gaelic-based renditions of the reel, but reels are performed quickly enough that the dotting tends to be much less obvious. In other words, strathspeys are reels performed slowly; reels are strathspeys performed quickly⁸.
5. Strathspeys, being an outpouring of Gaelic song culture, were accordingly not strictly a product of the Strathspey region of Scotland *per se*. Rather, Strathspey served both as a synecdoche for the Gaelic-speaking Highlands as a whole and as a prime location for Lowland reels (the form) and the Highland strathspey style to mix⁹.

In this paper, I examine the spread of the strathspey to the Lowlands and England. I then survey seemingly-anomalous features in printed early-modern strathspeys (in comparison to the modern-day strathspey) and identify trends in their notation. Those trends, combined with contemporaneous descriptions of strathspey playing and dancing, then illuminate important aspects of historic strathspey performance practice.

Strathspeys in the Lowlands

As Highland-Lowland cultural exchange increased post-Culloden, strathspey reels (the tune type and the associated dances) became popular outwith Highland and Highland-adjacent areas, ending up in Edinburgh and eventually London¹⁰.

The first printed tune that self-identifies as a strathspey is “A new Strathspey Reel”¹¹, published by James Oswald in the 1750s, and there are several other early examples published in Robert Bremner’s 1759-61 collections of dance music¹². Printed strathspeys are still rare in the ’60s and ’70s, being found in Bremner’s 1768 set of dances¹³ and Alexander McGlashan’s 1778 collection¹⁴, but being conspicuously absent from Charles McLean’s posthumous collection of *Scots Tunes* (1772)¹⁵. This collection was likely edited by a young Robert Mackintosh¹⁶, and Mackintosh’s debut collection under his own name a decade later features a variety of Continental dance forms, an Italianate sonata, and a handful of even-quavered reels—but no strathspeys¹⁷.

However, the floodgates open in the 1780s, likely catalysed by the publication of Angus Cumming’s *Collection of Strathspey or Old Highland Reels* in 1780. Among its subscribers were the Duchess of Atholl, patroness to Niel Gow, and the Duke of Gordon, an amateur fiddler and William Marshall’s employer. All of the musical Gows (Niel; his sons Nathaniel, John, Andrew, and William; and Nathaniel’s son Neil Jr.) would go on to publish a number of tune collections containing strathspeys, as would Marshall. Joining them was a now strathspey-literate Robert Mackintosh, his son

⁸Ibid.

⁹William Lamb, ‘Grafting Culture: On the Development and Diffusion of the Strathspey in Scottish Music’, *Scottish Studies*, 37 (2017), 94-104, p. 97

¹⁰See, for example, *The Times* (London, 8 April 1801), wherein Mr. Allen teaches the dancing of “Strathspeys and Reels” with music from “[Robert] Mackintosh, from Edinburgh”

¹¹James Oswald, *The Caledonian Pocket Companion, Book III* (London: Printed for the Author), p. 23

¹²Robert Bremner, *A Collection of Scots Reels or Country Dances* (London: Robert Bremner at the Harp & Hautboy, [1759]), p. 38, 61, 63, etc.

¹³Robert Bremner, *For the Year 1769, A Collection of Scots Reels or Country Dances* (London: Robert Bremner at the Harp & Hautboy, [1768]), p. 100

¹⁴Alexander McGlashan, *A Collection of Strathspey Reels* (Edinburgh: Neil Stewart, [1778])

¹⁵Charles McLean and other Eminent Masters, *A Collection of Favourite Scots Tunes with Variations for the Violin* (Edinburgh: Neil Stewart, [1772])

¹⁶David Johnson. *Scottish Fiddle Music in the 18th Century: A Music Collection and Historical Study*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2005), p. 9-13

¹⁷Robert Mac[k]intosh, *Airs, Minuets, Gavotts and Reels* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Author, [1783])

Abraham, Malcolm MacDonald, Robert Petrie, John Riddell, Joshua Campbell, John Bowie, Duncan MacIntyre, and many more¹⁸. The majority were published in the 1780s and '90s, with a few substantial volumes (notably, most of the Gows' output) coming in the first few decades of the 1800s.

Along with the explosion of printed dance music was an explosion in the popularity of dancing itself. Both the "Scotch Reel" (a Highland invention) and English-influenced country dancing were popular among all levels of society in the Lowlands and England. Alexander McGlashan led a popular dance band in Edinburgh for a number of years¹⁹, as did Nathaniel Gow²⁰, who among other exploits performed for an annual ball in Edinburgh. Dance and music experts were drawn to the cities: Nathaniel Gow, William Gow²¹ and the Aberdonian dancing master Barclay Dun²² moved to Edinburgh, for example, and London attracted Perthshire natives Andrew Gow, John Gow²³, and Robert Mackintosh²⁴ (who become a favourite performer of the Prince of Wales²⁵ and was recognised in newspapers as "the first performer in England for strathspeys and reels", among other accolades²⁶).

The end of the eighteenth century also marked the strathspey's emergence as an entity distinct from a reel. Increasing numbers of printed collection of dance music begin to refer to "strathspeys and reels" as opposed to the earlier convention of "strathspey reels". Their separation is perhaps best exemplified by the invention of the strathspey and reel medley. An early newspaper advertisement for the Gow family's *Complete Repository* proclaims that "the arrangement of the tunes in [the] Book are in a new style [. . .] they are arranged as Medleys, a Strathspey and Reel following alternately"²⁷. The style spread to London, where in 1805 Robert Mackintosh's dance band performed a medley of "Lady Charlotte Campbell's Strathspey and Reel" for almost two hours at a ball²⁸.

Two Types of Strathspeys: Slow and for Dancing

As the strathspey became a distinct entity, it also loosened its hold on dancing. There is no real evidence that strathspeys were ever not considered dance music before the 1780s, but beginning then they joined the pantheon of music intended just for listening, not dancing. In the four volumes of the Gow family's *Complete Repository*, for example, there is an initial section of airs (or, per the title, we should perhaps call the entire section one of "Scots Slow Strathspeys") featuring many tunes explicitly labelled "Strathspey" and with a tempo indication of "Slow" or similar, then a second section of dance music ("best original Scotch Dances"), with similar-looking strathspeys *not* marked

¹⁸Charles Gore, *The Scottish Fiddle Music Index* (Musselburgh: The Amaising Publishing House Ltd., 1994)

¹⁹David Johnson, 'McGlashan, Alexander', in *Grove Music Online* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.17327>> [accessed 25 March, 2019]

²⁰David Johnson, 'Gow Family', in *Grove Music Online* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.11554>> [accessed 25 March, 2019]

²¹Ibid.

²²Patricia H. Ballantyne, 'Regulation and Reaction: The Development of Traditional Dance with Particular Reference to Aberdeenshire, from 1805 to the Present Day' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Aberdeen, 2016) (p. 78)

²³Johnson, 'Gow Family'

²⁴David Johnson, 'Robert Mackintosh, in *Grove Music Online* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.17361>> [accessed 25 March, 2019]

²⁵*London Courier and Evening Gazette* (London, 23 July 1804)

²⁶*The Morning Post Gazeteer* (London, 17 March 1801)

²⁷*The Caledonian Mercury* (Edinburgh, 3 August 1799)

²⁸*Morning Post* (London, 20 May 1805)

as slow²⁹. In fact, many of them have a mark indicating that they “may be played Slow when not danced”, and its aforementioned newspaper advertisement indicates that “Besides the Dancing tunes, there are a good many most beautiful Slow Strathspeys”³⁰.

William Marshall, too, adopted this language in his 1822 collection, marking many pieces as “Slow When not danced”³¹. And later editions of Gow collections add “Slow”-related tempo markings where none existed before³², likely reflecting the wider-spread trend towards playing slow strathspeys, or, perhaps, now making clear to the book-reading audience what had previously been merely assumed by the Gows in their playing.

Unlike dancing, which requires a fairly uniform tempo (see discussion below), different slow strathspeys seem to call for different tempi. Tempo markings suggest “Slow”, “Slowish”, “Very Slow”, “Slowly”, and “Very Slow With Expression”, among other similar designations, and the bass lines include much more rhythmic diversity than their dance-oriented counterparts, from luxuriously long minims to contrapuntal quaver runs to dotted figures precisely imitating the rhythm of the melody line. One imagines that the tempo of a slow strathspey, like the tempo of so much other eighteenth-century listening music, depends more on the whim of the performer than on prescriptive rules.

Notation and Metre

Eleven popular tune books (ten printed and one manuscript) were surveyed for this project, with particular attention paid to hints about tempo and metre. Two main trends stood out. First, the shift from tunes labelled strathspeys containing a mixture of dotted and even rhythms in earlier collections to having a heavier concentration of dotted rhythms in later collections, with the same trend happening in reverse for tunes labelled as reels: first a mixture of even and dotted rhythms, and then a heavier concentration of even quavers. This corresponds with the above claim that “strathspey” transitioned from a style of playing reels to a tune type of its own. As it became a distinct entity, it was more important to clearly assign it the characteristic rhythmic matrix—and to distinguish its rhythms from those of the reel (even though, as William Lamb notes, slowed-down field recordings of Gaelic reels feature the same distinctive dotted rhythm and in fact sound like strathspeys³³).

²⁹Niel Gow & Sons, *Part [First, Second, Third, Fourth] of the Complete Repository of Original Scots Slow Strathspeys and Dances* (Edinburgh: Robert Purdie)

³⁰*The Caledonian Mercury* (Edinburgh, 3 August 1799)

³¹William Marshall, *Marshall’s Scottish Airs, Melodies, Strathspeys, Reels, &c* (Edinburgh: Published for the Author), p. 3

³²Seen, for example, when comparing the first and second editions of Niel Gow at Dunkeld’s *A Collection of Strathspey Reels* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Author). Thanks to Michael Bacchus for helping this come to my attention

³³Lamb 2013, p. 76

³⁴William Marshall, *A Collection of Strathspey Reels*, (Edinburgh: Neil Stewart, [1781])

³⁵Robert Mackintosh, *Sixty eight New Reels, Strathspeys, and Quicksteps, Also some Slow Pieces with variations* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Author, [1793])

³⁶Robert Mackintosh, *A 3d Book of Sixty eight New Reels and Strathspeys, Also above forty old Famous Reels* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Author, [1796])

³⁷Robert Mackintosh, *A Fourth Book of New Strathspey Reels, Also some Famous old Reels* (London: Printed for the Author, [1803])

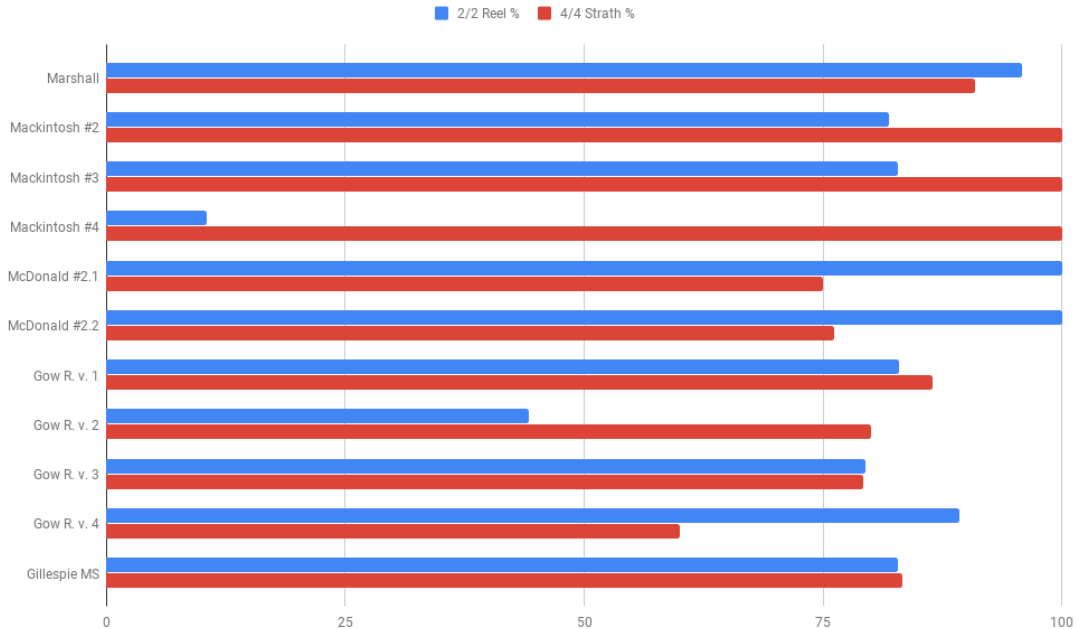
³⁸Malcolm M[a]cDonald, *A Second Collection of Strathspey Reels, &c*, 1st edn (Edinburgh: Printed for the Author)

³⁹Malcolm M[a]cDonald and Niel Gow, *A Second Collection of Strathspey Reels, &c*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Corri and Company)

⁴⁰Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 808

Table 1: Metre distribution of strathspeys and reels in eleven Scottish tune collections

Collection	2/2 R	4/4 R	2/2 S	4/4 S	2/2 R %	4/4 S %
Marshall ³⁴	23	1	1	10	95.8%	90.9%
Mackintosh #2 ³⁵	18	4	0	24	81.8%	100%
Mackintosh #3 ³⁶	53	11	0	30	82.8%	100%
Mackintosh #4 ³⁷	6	51	0	33	10.5%	100%
MacDonald #2.1 ³⁸	12	0	5	15	100%	75%
MacDonald #2.2 ³⁹	11	0	5	16	100%	76.2%
Gow <i>Repository</i> vol. 1	34	7	5	32	82.9%	86.5%
Gow <i>Repository</i> vol. 2	19	24	5	20	44.2%	80%
Gow <i>Repository</i> vol. 3	27	7	5	19	79.4%	79.2%
Gow <i>Repository</i> vol. 4	25	3	6	9	89.3%	60%
The Gillespie MS ⁴⁰	48	10	1	5	82.8%	83.3%



The second trend is in metre. As seen in the table and chart above, strathspeys were overwhelmingly printed in 4/4 or common time, and reels (with one exception) were overwhelmingly printed in 2/2 or cut time. The one exception is Robert Mackintosh’s fourth collection, which notates most reels in 4/4 instead of 2/2. However, it’s anomalous in several ways: first of all, it’s the only of his four surviving books of dance music to have been published in London (the rest are from Edinburgh). Additionally, despite being his last book, it uses the earlier-style designation of “strathspey reels”, unlike his previous two collections, which use the new-fashioned terms “reels and strathspeys”. But notably, it does keep strathspeys in 4/4. Therefore, barring further evidence, it seems safe to dismiss its differences as the whims of a London music engraver out of date with Scottish conventions.

Reels being printed in 2/2 is unremarkable in itself: there has never been a suggestion that Scottish reels should be played any differently. However, the use of a different metre for strathspeys and reels indicates an intentional choice, and strathspeys being overwhelmingly in four is much

more interesting.

In discussing modern regional styles of playing strathspeys, Melinda Crawford Perttu notates West Highland strathspeys in 4/4 and suggests a tempo of 132 crotchet beats per minute⁴¹. Her next section, on North-East strathspeys, maintains the 4/4 notation but notably indicates the tempo as 54 *minim* beats per minute (equivalent to only 108 crotchet bpm)⁴². Similarly, West Highland strathspeys are used for Highland dancing, where the footwork depends on crotchet beats. But North-East strathspeys are used for country dancing, where modern style (as regulated by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society) is indeed predicated on minim beats: dancers put a weight-bearing foot down on only the first and third crotchet of each bar. The RSCDS themselves indicate the tempo in minim beats (60 per minute⁴³, noting that it has slowed down in the twentieth century⁴⁴). The bass line is also much different: eighteenth century sources exclusively write strathspey bass lines with even crotchets, frequently in repeated groups of four, whereas RSCDS convention (which is followed by modern dance bands) is to have bass notes on the first and third crotchet of the bar, punctuated by crotchets played several octaves higher on the offbeats (second and fourth crotchets of the bar).



Figure 1: A comparison of the strathspey “Delvine Side” as published by the Gows (*Complete Repository*) and by the RSCDS (*Book 2*)

Despite the modern-day association of the Gows, Mackintosh, Marshall, and others with the North-East style, there is no indication that the modern North-East beat hierarchy of two strong beats per measure was used in the eighteenth century.

Tempo

The situation is similar with tempo. Modern players of North-East strathspeys tend to follow the guidelines of Crawford Perttu and the RSCDS, with 54-60 minims per minute. The RSCDS notes that “within the RSCDS the strathspey [tempo] has undergone considerable changes” since their

⁴¹Crawford, p. 151

⁴²Ibid., p. 153

⁴³The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, *The Manual of Scottish Country Dancing* (Edinburgh: The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, 2011), p. 29

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 30

beginnings in 1923⁴⁵.

In 1900 James Scott Skinner wrote that reels should be played in about 15 seconds⁴⁶. Assuming he means a 16-bar tune, that corresponds to approximately 120 minim beats per minute, which is in the same general range as his own metronome markings, most modern practice⁴⁷, Crawford Perttu’s guidelines (104 bpm—slower than her own playing on commercial recordings), and the RSCDS’s (112 bpm). More controversially, Skinner, the self-styled “Strathspey King”, also writes that strathspeys should take approximately 20 seconds⁴⁸. Assuming a 16-bar strathspey—by analogy to the earlier assumption of a 16-bar reel—that corresponds to 96 minim beats or 192 crotchet beats per minute, which is supported by Skinner’s recordings of 1910 and 1922 and significantly faster than the modern day (54-60 bpm, as discussed above).

Skinner’s suggestion is supported by earlier dance treatises. Barclay Dun writes:

As I have before observed that the dancing should be in strict conformity with the music, it is necessary to accompany the Strathspey by steps of more alacrity and promptitude than those generally used in any of the dances before mentioned [including the Reel]. There ought to be little or no genuflection used in these steps when the dancer sinks, as the rapidity of the music and dancing will not admit of much yield or bending of the legs⁴⁹.

He then proceeds to explain how as a result, dancing the strathspey must be done on the toes. Reconstructing the travelling step involved⁵⁰, one quickly sees how adopting such a gait requires a tempo much faster than the modern 54-60 minim beats per minute. Indeed, a crotchet beat is immensely preferable, as each of the first three crotchets correspond to a footfall, and tempi from the 150s up to Skinner’s suggestion of 192 bpm feel comfortable⁵¹. The paradox of the reel being faster but the strathspey requiring more “alacrity and promptitude” is easily explained by this scheme: strathspeys have more *beats* per minute, but reels have more *notes* per minute.

The connection between early strathspeys and those of Skinner’s time (the turn of the twentieth century) is made more concretely by William Honeyman. He echoes countless Regency-era newspaper accounts regarding dance length in saying:

[F]ormerly this music [strathspeys] was almost the only music of the ballroom. In those days there was a great deal of spirit in the dancing—including whisky—and little mercy was shown to the poor fiddlers, who were often kept tearing away at this heavy music for twelve hours at a stretch. Little wonder, then, that they discovered the easiest ways of producing the desired effect⁵².

The “easiest way” he describes is a “peculiar laziness” in bowing strathspeys. For most fiddlers, it’s easier to play a strathspey quickly than slowly: the former requires less muscle control. Crawford

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Skinner, p. 21-22

⁴⁷Francis Collinson, ‘Reel’ in *Grove Music Online* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.23050>> [accessed 25 March, 2019]

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Barclay Dun, *A Translation of Nine of the Most Fashionable Quadrilles [...]* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Author, 1818), p. 27

⁵⁰Francis Peacock, *Sketches Relative to the History and Theory, but More Especially to the Practice of Dancing* (Aberdeen: J. Chalmers & Co., 1805), p. 91

⁵¹I am indebted to the members of The Chicago Reel Dancers, who enthusiastically served as test subjects for the reconstruction of eighteenth-century strathspey dancing

⁵²William C. Honeyman, *The Strathspey, Reel, and Hornpipe Tutor* (Newport: Honeyman Music Publishing Company, [n.d.]), p. 4

Perttu echoes this, writing that “The techniques needed to play strathspeys in the North-East style are generally more physically demanding than those of the West Highland style”⁵³. The West Highland style, of course, features both a quicker tempo and a crotchet beat.

In the absence of metronome markings or similar concrete indications of the relationship between music and time⁵⁴, it is virtually impossible to claim that a particular tempo corresponds to historical reality. It is exceedingly unlikely, even, that a single tempo was used throughout all of Britain for a period of decades—surely there was fluctuation based on the mood, taste, and background of the band leader, the skill of the dancers, the region, and even the position of the dance in a ball programme. It seems clear, however, that the tempo then was much quicker than the modern North-East tradition of 54-60 minim beats per minute, and that the beating itself was by crotchet, not by minim. Indeed, the modern West Highland style seems to recall the strathspey’s Highland origins, echoing eighteenth-century strathspey style throughout Britain.

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⁵³Crawford Perttu, p. 48

⁵⁴Though several contemporaneous pieces of British chamber music indicate tempo by specifying the length of a pendulum that swings in time, I am unaware of anyone doing so for Scottish dance music.