Cassettes of Fiddle Music from the Simon Fraser Collection

Music from the Simon Fraser Collection - Volumes I and II
- as played in the homes of Cape Breton musicians.

These are two 90-minute cassette tapes made to accompany Paul Cranford's recent re-edition of the Simon Fraser Collection of Scottish tunes. Mr. Cranford is a dedicated traditional musician in Cape Breton style and has made this material and the Skye Collection (republished in 1979) available as his personal contribution to a still thriving folk culture.

Simon Fraser was himself a fiddler and composer of tunes who notated many melodies in the late 1700's from the playing of pipers, fiddlers and singers around him in Scotland. Originally published in 1816, his book is one of a number of collections which travelled widely with Scottish immigrants to North America and Australia. Although a few old copies are still floating around in private collections, they have all been long out of print until Mr. Cranford's welcome editions.

Many tunes from these collections are still played in Cape Breton, largely passed on by ear. However, Mr. Cranford tells me that the Simon Fraser Collection is less well-known than others even in Cape Breton. Thus, as most traditional players are accustomed to learning by ear rather than by note, the tapes were made to inspire more musicians to tackle them. For those of us outside Cape Breton who are either unfamiliar with the style or have lost touch with it because of time and distance, the tapes are an invaluable resource. It is impossible to capture the real sound of old Scottish fiddling in print, with its snapped bowing, its "shakes" (a sort of richochet action of bow on string), its accents and rhythmic drive. Even the tapes will not be enough for those who have never had the opportunity to watch a Scottish player at close range, but for those with at least some personal experience, they go a long way towards bridging the gap. Also, tunes are never played exactly as written. My playing and teaching experience has convinced me that books should be used only as sources for those who already have the sound of the style in their heads.

Although some of the playing on the tapes is rough, they contain the most fascinating cross-section of Cape Breton music likely to be gathered in one place, including fiddle, piano, whistle and banjo as solo instruments with some guitar and mandolin in ensembles. These tapes are not meant for those who prefer a studio-manicured listening experience, but for those who might enjoy "having a few tunes" in the living room and don't know who to invite. Sometimes the accompanists do not quite find the rhythm of the melody. Different versions of the timing happily coexist and intonation is often a little suspect. On the good side, some of the best traditional playing you'll ever hear is also to be found. In short, the tapes express all the features of a music which is still the emotional expression of a whole culture and not a commercial enterprise.
Many of these tunes can be played either as slow unmeasured airs or in standard rhythms of strathspey, march, hornpipe, jig and reel. Not all players play the tunes in the same tempo and the taped versions are not necessarily definitive as players are in some cases reading the tunes through for the first time. As ornamentation and phrasing vary so much from one instrument to another, it will be easiest to learn from the playing of your own instrument for a while. Fiddle with piano accompaniment is the core of the tradition. However, I would especially recommend the solo violin playing on the tapes as the clearest models for fiddlers.

For the most common approach, piano players should listen to selections of violin with piano accompaniment. Frequently, the piano player will double the violin melody in the right hand, a practice fairly unique to Cape Breton style. #100 on side I is a wonderful example of the dramatic effect this can create.

The books are written in what looks like straight piano scoring, but it is doubtful that they were ever played literally. The title page of the Simon Fraser states that the bass lines were meant for piano, harp, organ or violincello which explains their sparseness. There are several literal renditions on the tapes ie. #94, #97, #95 on side I, which are reminiscent of some 19th century parlour pieces. However to my ear, they are quite anaemic in comparison with the rich chordal style which has been the common practice since at least the turn of the century (see #179, side II for a fuller left hand sound under right hand melody). Modern players will at the very least play the left hand in octaves, and generally prefer to make up their own bass lines and chords altogether, which is evident in most of the piano accompaniments on the tapes. I would like to add that although many revivalists dislike the "old-fashioned" sound of the chording piano, I believe the variety of Cape Breton practices has much to offer even to the "Celtic Rock" movement.

Whistle and banjo are not common in Scottish music, but Paul Cranford's playing on the tapes demonstrates their possibilities. Whistles are so clearly associated with Irish music that one tends to adapt Irish style ornamentation to Scottish tunes as Paul does here. This is musically quite effective but does change the feel of the tunes somewhat. The alternative I have heard to this has come from the hands of Scottish pipers who adapt their piping ornamentation with great success to the whistle, and thus keep a more typically Scottish sound. However, although it helps to be aware of the differences, I am not one to draw rigid boundaries between styles. In general, wind instruments are much more highly ornamented than strings and therefore difficult to follow by ear. I would suggest #44 on the tapes to start with.

The tunes on the tapes are grouped by key and with an ear for what makes an exciting medley, often following the traditional dance set of slow strathspey or air, fast strathspey and reel. Thus, with aesthetics (and rightly so) as the guiding principle they do not follow the numerical order of the book, and only about half the book is recorded. Hopefully the beauty of the tunes offered will encourage players to explore the rest of the book for further gems. In spite of the popularity of bands such as Silly Wizard and the Battlefield Band, Scottish music is not as widely played in revivalist circles as Irish. Hopefully Paul's work will encourage more young players to explore this rich tradition.

Tapes and books may be ordered at the following address:

Simon Fraser Collection
Box 1654
Sydney, Nova Scotia
Canada B1P 6T7

or check your local music stores.

Prices are as follows:

Simon Fraser Collection

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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
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<tr>
<td>Spiral bound</td>
<td>$12.95 ppd.</td>
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<td>Hard cover</td>
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<td>Tapes from the Simon Fraser Collection (includes 2 90-minute cassettes)</td>
<td>$9.95 ppd.</td>
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<td>Skye Collection (book only)</td>
<td>$14.95 ppd.</td>
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Anne Lederman