Bass Culture in Scottish Musical Traditions by Karen E McAulay

You might wonder what ‘bass culture’ has to do with Scottish musical traditions - it’s a concept more usually associated with Reggae. However, senior music lecturer David McGuinness (also director of the Concerto Caledonia group) adopted the term for a three-year long research project looking at accompaniment styles in old Scottish fiddle tune-books used by dance musicians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He had noticed that very early books had completely different basslines to those in the late eighteenth century or those compiled in the mid nineteenth to early twentieth centuries; and he felt the genre merited more attention.

I’ve been seconded for two days a week from my job as Music & Academic Services Librarian at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, to join the research team. My own PhD examined Scottish song-books of the same era, but my library skills were crucial, because David planned to launch a website which would give extensive details and commentary on nearly 300 fiddle collections, and I’ve been responsible for the ‘metadata’ (cataloguing).

We’ve digitized books from Glasgow University Library and Perth’s A K Bell Library, and transcribed the opening strains of each tune in these books. We’ve also logged the links where other people have digitized tune-books, so the website will give you full access to a lot of fascinating sources, and details of many more, also telling you where actual copies can be seen. We’ve noted interesting features such as particularly ornate or static functional basslines; some more akin to Italianate baroque music; or others meant for piano rather than fiddle and bass. Some were also intended for harp! Others included dance instructions or illuminating introductory remarks, or changed markedly in later editions.

David has been producing recordings using some of the music that caught his eye, and these – like the Historical Music of Scotland website ([www.hms.scot](http://www.hms.scot)) – will be available around mid-October 2015 when the project ends. Until then, the Bass Culture blog reveals some of our discoveries and challenges, at <http://bassculture.info/>.

I’ll be talking about it the whole project at the Scots Fiddle Festival in Edinburgh on 30th November. Maybe I’ll see you there!