On first hearing: the John Junner Collection of Scottish and Irish music recordings

Stuart Eydmann

Excerpted from:
Ôn gCos go Cluas
From Dancing to Listening
Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

Edited by Liz Doherty and Fintan Vallely

First published in 2019 by The Elphinstone Institute,
University of Aberdeen, MacRobert Building,
King’s College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA
ISBN: 978-1-85752-073-6

About the author:

Stuart Eydmann is a musician, academic and heritage consultant from Edinburgh, Scotland. He received the Glenfiddich Living Scotland Award for his oral history on free-reed instruments in Scotland which was the basis of his subsequent doctoral thesis. A lecturer at Edinburgh College of Art and a post-doctoral research fellow at the School of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, he is active in field recording and curates the rareTunes.org online archive of traditional and popular music of Scotland. A presenter at the inaugural NAFCo event in 2001, he was also a member of the Scottish culture minister’s Working Group on the Traditional Arts which reported in late 2009. He has played fiddle with the Scottish traditional music band the Whistlebinkies since 1980.

Copyright © 2019 the Elphinstone Institute and the contributors.
While copyright in the volume as a whole is vested in the Elphinstone Institute, copyright in individual contributions remains with the contributors. The moral rights of the contributors to be identified as the authors of their work have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1998.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.
On first hearing: the John Junner collection of Scottish and Irish fiddle music

STUART EYDMANN

John Junner was born in the northwest of Scotland in 1919 and died in Aberdeenshire in 2009. His service in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War was followed by college in Aberdeen, after which he worked all his adult life as a school teacher in rural Scotland; he played fiddle, piano and tin whistle. His father’s family can be traced back to the Black Isle, to the north of Inverness, where his great-great grandfather, William Junner, was a merchant at Cromarty. His great-grandfather, Colin Junner, a house painter, married Isabella Kirkness there in 1838. John’s grandfather, John William Paterson Junner, a journeyman tailor, married Mary Williamson at Fauldhouse, West Lothian, a rural mining village between Glasgow and Edinburgh in Central Scotland.

Such migration from the Highlands to the rapidly industrialising Lowlands was commonplace in the second half of the nineteenth century as able and displaced people alike sought new opportunities in the developing towns, cities and coalfields. These places also attracted large numbers from Ireland, and so the resulting communities were culturally diverse, with social and musical consequences. The town of Fauldhouse, originally an agricultural settlement, grew following the exploitation of local coal and ironstone reserves and the manufacture of paraffin from oil shale. It had a parish church by 1866 and a Roman Catholic chapel, the first in the county, in 1873; by 1887 the population was around 3,000. The unattractive, industrial character of such ‘new desultory and unplanned communities’,1 from Ayrshire in the west to Fife in the east, would appear at first glance to offer little to interest scholars of Scottish music. But, they supported a lively and varied music culture, both informal and organised. It was in these locations, for instance, that the Scottish tradition of button accordion playing was developed by the Wyper Brothers, William Hannah, Jimmy Shand and others.2 There were many opportunities for communal music in bands of all types: dance ensembles were in great demand, the pipe bands of the former colliery villages are still known for their excellence, and the brass and silver bands here in Central Belt have given music training and experience to thousands. The hammer dulcimer3 and concertina4 flourished too and there were choirs, amateur orchestras, flute bands and songwriters who produced new industrial folk songs.5
John Junner’s father, Colin Kirkness Junner, trained to be a teacher. He took up a post of assistant teacher at Oldshore, and in 1910 became head teacher at Fanagmore, both places in Sutherland, in the north-west. Just why he moved there might be explained, in part at least, by his family links to the north and the area’s great natural beauty. It was there that he married Margaret (Maggie) MacLeod (or McCallum), sewing mistress and daughter of John MacLeod, gamekeeper of Oldshoremore, Kinlochbervie. Margaret was a Gaelic speaker, as were most of the pupils at the school. The couple had two sons, Colin and John William; the latter is the subject of this paper.

Schooled in the Highlands, John followed the parental path and he too became a dominie (Scots for ‘village schoolmaster’), living in Aberdeen during the 1950s and 1960s before becoming head teacher of the small school at Strathy, a scattered community on the north coast of Sutherland, until 1966. He then served as headmaster of Strachan Primary School in Aberdeenshire until his retirement in 1985. Colin, a Church of Scotland minister, was also settled in Aberdeenshire, at Bucksburn.

Rural northeast Scotland, including Aberdeenshire, is widely recognised as a heartland of traditional music and song. Here, in the mid to late nineteenth century, a healthy and settled local economy supported a substantial population of reasonably well-remunerated and comfortably-housed agricultural workers, trades people and professionals with a shared interest in instrumental music, as a form of ‘rational recreation’. There was a clear local preference for both the violin and piano; the suitability of the violin for playing both Scottish and classical music encouraged the development of a local tradition in which the fiddle had a central role in the home, the village hall and on the concert stage and competition platform.

During the nineteenth century, the older, less-tutored, country fiddle styles were marginalised by this emergent ‘respectable’ music of those committed to self-improvement through dedicated practice, musical literacy and a familiarity with the popular classics and internationally-published exercises and tutors; indeed, many players would talk of playing the Scottish ‘violin’ rather than the ‘fiddle’. Musicians aspired to owning quality instruments, repertory was drawn from printed collections and there was a strong emphasis on the creation of new, and often challenging, material within the tradition. Sophisticated technique was articulated with a repertory that embraced classical, Scottish and popular elements to the extent that boundaries were often blurred. There was great emphasis on personal expression that sometimes verged on the sentimental – as in the playing of airs and slow strathspeys with very pronounced vibrato and a strident tone. In dance music, particularly reels and strathspeys, there was an emphasis on standardised bowing and a favouring of exaggerated, dotted rhythms. This development of a regional style was reinforced through formal teaching, competitions and orchestrated fiddle bands and, over time, it crept into fiddle music played for dance also.

The genre had its own leaders and celebrity fiddlers, such as the touring theatre violinist Peter Milne (1824–1908), the fiddle prodigy and subsequently Manchester classically-trained James Scott Skinner (1843–1927), and collector/player John Murdoch Henderson (1902–1970). These musicians worked to modernise the fiddle tradition through their performances, compositions and published settings of older tunes, many of which
were given variations and colourings that drew on contemporary popular classical models. This new, hybrid fiddle music was facilitated by the Royal household’s enthusiasm for and patronage of all things respectably Scottish, including piping, fiddling and dance. Also, its advocates were at pains to associate themselves with the creative and artistic legacy of the master player/composers of the so-called Golden Age of Scottish fiddle in the late eighteenth century while, at the same time, denigrating contemporary ‘country’ or ‘folk’ players and their styles. Skinner sought a modern, ‘national’ school of Scottish violin music, in the manner that developed in Hungary, and would have been delighted if his concerts had achieved the high status enjoyed by those of the professional Hardanger fiddlers of Norway in the same period. Such fiddlers developed a preference for the concert platform rather than the dance hall or house ceilidh, and, given the demand for music for the eclectic programming of the emerging music halls, it became necessary for the fiddle soloist to develop a distinct persona by emphasising national, ethnic or other eccentric characteristics in order to be noticed. Thus, a touring Scottish stage fiddler was required to compete commercially and musically with a range of virtuosi, including classical, Gypsy, Hungarian and Irish fiddlers as well as acrobatic and dancing players; the musical consequences of this were emulation and absorption of elements of others’ styles and techniques. With the arrival of the gramophone record and its international dissemination, this became even more acute. Thus it can be seen that there is ample evidence that music was performed for the pleasure of playing and listening well before the revivals of the late twentieth century in Scotland.

To date, I have found little information on the development of John Junner’s early interest and involvement in music, although it is likely that it had its foundations in his school years in Alness in the Highlands. However, we do know something of his personal tastes; in a rare interview, he described how he was surprised and disappointed when he participated in Scottish country dancing as a student in Aberdeen in 1947 and found that none of his fellow dancers had any knowledge of, or interest in, the actual tunes they danced to, being more concerned with having correct steps and tempi. He also indicated that he saw himself as a listener rather than a dancer, and a devotee of the fiddle with a distaste for the accordion-led dance band ensembles that had come to permeate the Scottish dance hall and media broadcasts:

The forties, the fifties, after the war. And then we got this Jimmy Shand obsession [...] immediately they all went like sheep. Jimmy Shand [...] to my mind he’s got the balance wrong. He loaded it with accordions, two accordions to one fiddle [...] Now they all follow that, like sheep.

We can deduce from his music collection and know from surviving family members that his interests went beyond the traditional to embrace popular and light classical music and that his general taste was conservative. Yet John was a defender of the centrality of the fiddle in Scottish music, and advocated the rehabilitation of aspects of the Scottish tradition that he felt were being lost in the period immediately after the Second World War. He was a champion of the playing of the James Scott Skinner school as was still practised by many of its first-generation adherents, and he had a deep interest in and admiration for certain living
fiddlers whom he felt merited greater appreciation; these included James F. Dickie who had been a pupil of Skinner and had evolved his own distinct ways with idiosyncratic variations and bowing, as described by Alastair J. Hardie:

If one had to single out the strongest feature of fiddling in the Northeast of Scotland it would have to be its predominant concentration on the rhythmic and associated bowing characteristics of the strathspey. This bias towards the dotted rhythm so strongly permeates the spirit of J. F. Dickie’s playing that it intrudes into the strains of more even-rhythmed tunes.13

Emmerson, in his 1971 history of Scottish dance music, wrote on Junner and Dickie:

John W. R. Junner, now of Banchory, whose authority and judgement I respect in these matters, found it thrilling to hear Jamie’s renderings of his ‘specials’ even in more recent times, when he was past his best. ‘He was in a class by himself’, Mr Junner tells me, ‘in such grand tunes as “The Dean Brig o’ Edinburgh”, “Madame Frederick”, “Millhills”, “The Braes o’ Auchtertyre” […] ’ He did not turn his hand to composition, but he had his own variations on tunes, which Mr Junner describes as ‘absolutely fascinating’.14

John was also an associate of Bill Hardie of Aberdeen (1916–1995), whose style was very much rooted in the traditions of the North-East of Scotland, and who provided piano accompaniment for him on many occasions, including a concert tour in Ireland in the 1950s and on his 45rpm extended-play disc for Beltona recorded in 1956.15 Hardie came from a dynasty of Scottish fiddlers, his great-great-grandfather Peter Hardie, having been taught by the legendary Niel Gow in the eighteenth century. Through his enthusiasm, John Junner came to be regarded as an authority on Scottish fiddle music at a time when there were no ethnomusicologists or trained collectors working in the field. He became the champion of the fiddler Hector MacAndrew (1903–1980), an exceptionally talented and sensitive performer of Scottish fiddle music, but one who Junner felt was overshadowed by the popular taste for Scottish dance band and variety entertainment. For example, in late 1954 or early 1955, MacAndrew turned to John to help him devise his programme for a special BBC Home Service radio broadcast he had been asked to make of the music of eighteenth-century fiddler Niel Gow.16 John duly provided a list of suggested sets of tunes and sheet music from copies of the published Gow collections, and it was through this exercise that MacAndrew learned (and made popular) ‘Niel Gow’s Lament for the Death of his Second Wife’, which was subsequently included on his first LP recording in 1963.17

Junner also hosted house sessions with the afore-mentioned fiddlers and with many other musicians from, or who passed through, his home area. He recorded a large number of these events, a consequence of his interest in the latest recording and playback equipment. He also recorded regularly from radio. In addition, he was a hoarder of anything related to music: published music, commercial recordings, instruments, machinery and ephemera, especially material relating to the Scottish fiddle. He collected cylinder recordings and
players, 78 rpm discs and gramophones, and was an early user of the compact cassette recorder for both teaching and the exchange of audio letters and music with friends.

An illustration of his international sharing of information and music with other enthusiasts is found in the William (Bill) L. and Margaret (Gowan) F. Merson Smith Collection 1957–1976 of recorded material. This archive of Scottish music, mainly on open-reel tape, was compiled by the Scottish-born couple while living in Palo Alto, California. Bill was a mason by trade and also made violins. They prepared and exchanged tapes with people in Scotland and in Canada where Bill had cousins. An examination of their collection catalogue shows much material with a John Junner connection, although the precise contents will only be known through detailed listening and comparison with the Scottish holdings; this collection is now housed by the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University.18

John Junner is also known to have exchanged tapes with Tom Anderson in Shetland, and he also corresponded in writing and on tape with music friends in Ireland, particularly the fiddler Sean McGuire (1927–2005). This was, of course, common practice in many modern traditional music contexts during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.19

It was material – recorded, photographic and manuscript – lent by John Junner that led to the production of the Topic LP, J. Scott Skinner, The Strathspey King: Classics of Scots Fiddling,20 a record that did much to rehabilitate and promulgate the Skinner legacy, one of Junner’s aims; manuscript material from the Junner Collection relating to Skinner was also included in the more recent Aberdeen University web resource dedicated to that fiddler,21 and John’s collecting work, too, was recognised by George S. Emmerson in his history of Scottish dance music.22 The BBC Scotland broadcaster Robbie Shepherd, indeed, has credited him with being a major encouragement in his early broadcasting, including generously providing material as required.

On his death, Junner left a substantial archive of personally-made recordings. Although he had attempted to organise it, the collection was, and remains largely uncatalogued. He expressed the wish that the archive be known as ‘The John Junner Collection’ and that it should stay in the Northeast of Scotland where it might be made available for educational use. Shortly before he died, a report on his collection was prepared by Patrick Cadell (1941–2010), retired Keeper of Records of Scotland, in June 2007. This concluded, among other things, that ‘the BBC material may not have survived anywhere else’, that ‘the Primrosehill and Strathy recordings are almost certainly unique’, and that ‘as a source of information on the playing styles of Scottish fiddlers in the second half of the twentieth century, these tapes are potentially of the first importance’.23

In conjunction with Junner’s trustees, his cousin Molly Millan and her husband Bill took advice on cataloguing, and worked tirelessly with the collection in late summer and autumn 2009 to itemise and organise the commercially-released material systematically.24 Around 3,500 78s, mostly of Scottish traditional music recorded between 1910 and 1960, were catalogued and placed into conservation storage.25 Their work confirmed that this aspect of Junner’s collection is, in itself, of considerable significance, and complements the Bill Dean-Myatt Collections of 5,000 Scottish 78s lodged with the National Library of Scotland26 and the substantial Will Forret Collection of commercial recordings in the School
of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. Of particular importance are a number of Pathé discs of James Scott Skinner from the early twentieth century. 1,530 commercially-produced cylinder recordings were also catalogued and put into special storage. Almost all of these are of music-hall or light classical music and therefore their interest to the scholar of traditional music is limited. There are, however, recordings among them of Harry Lauder and of James Scott Skinner.

The first steps were also set in train by John Junner’s trustees to establish an appropriate, accessible home for the collection in compliance with the collector’s wishes. The author of this paper has provided a Statement of Significance to build upon Patrick Cadell’s report for use in this regard, in liaison with potential funders or acquiring organisations. In early 2012, I also undertook a sampling of forty from the hundreds of compact cassette recordings in the collection. These were found to contain a wide range of material including listening copies dubbed from open-reel recordings, off-air recordings of fiddle music programmes (some of which may be the only surviving copies), personal audio diaries and audio letters from friends in music. In one of these, an Irish voice, most likely the fiddler Sean McGuire, refers to an accompanying letter and talks to John about recent commercial recordings by Irish fiddlers John Vesey and Tommy Peoples. This modest sampling illustrates how even the too-easily-dismissed compact cassette can be an important carrier of invaluable musical data.

But, as Patrick Cadell reported, it is John Junner’s open-reel tapes which have the greatest potential significance. From the storage cases of those that are clearly marked (many others are not), it would appear that there are recordings of a number of important fiddlers, including: Bill Hardie, Hector MacAndrew, John Junner, Neil McIntyre, the Orkney Strathspey and Reel Society, Ron Gonella, Scott Skinner (transcripts from 78rpm discs and cylinders), Aberdeen Strathspey and Reel Society, J. F. Dickie, Angus McPherson, Angus Fitchet, Tom Anderson, Robert Christie, Sydney Chalmers, William McPherson, Ian Powrie, Arthur Scott Robertson, and Bert Murray. If this is confirmed by subsequent analysis, transcription and cataloguing, then this supports Cadell’s view that the collection may comprise a unique and valuable snapshot of traditional music-making in Scotland during a key period in the history of Scotland’s traditional music.

In preparing the Statement of Significance, I recognised and stressed the potential importance of the Irish items the collection also appears to contain, an area that was overlooked, or at least underplayed, by Patrick Cadell and others. Several of the tape boxes are marked with the names of Irish fiddlers and the locations where they were recorded, and this led me to research the background to them. I have already noted that John had acted as accompanist to Bill Hardie on a performance tour in Ireland. A concert from this trip was described as ‘outstandin’ and ‘a great success’ in an amusing recollection collected by Fintan Vallely from the Antrim fiddler, Cecil Colville. That tour was also mentioned in a memoir by Kevin McCann published in *Treoir* magazine in 1993:

> In 1953, through the good offices of the late Charles Curry, some Scottish fiddle players were invited and came to Ballymena, County Antrim to play for the Derry and Antrim Fiddle Society. I had the good fortune to meet and hear them and was very
McCann, who was a general practitioner for many years around the Mondeligo, Tooraneena, and Dungarvan areas before moving to Canada in the 1960s, was a founder of his local branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in the 1950s. He wrote of his lifelong admiration and affection for Scottish fiddle music inherited from his father who came from the Trillick region of south Tyrone near the Fermanagh border and was himself a good fiddle player in the Scottish manner. In 1954, he invited John Junner and Bert Murray (1913–2003) to accompany him on a fiddle tour of Ireland ‘so that they could get a close look at and hear Irish fiddle players on their home turf’ and it is worth quoting their itinerary:

We began the Tour in Belfast and spent two days in Jack McGuire’s house in Belfast where the music went on day and night and great music was played by the Scots and the McGuires […] We next met the Ballymena players who included the late George McCrae, David MacWhinney, the late Alex Kerr, John Rea (xylophone [sic.] hammer dulcimer) and the late Sean McLaughlin. Scottish music dominated the sessions with this group, and there was no doubt that Scottish fiddle music is strongest in Co. Antrim. We then travelled to Co. Donegal and spent some time with the late John Doherty who enthralled and intrigued the Scotsmen with his vast collection of Scottish tunes and his great fiddle technique. After visiting Donegal we visited the late Tommy Coen of Salthill and Bean Uí Standúin of Spiddal and ended up in Co. Clare listening to and taping Paddy Canny, P. Joe Hayes and many others. John Junner took hours of recordings of the above named players, and in his house in Strachan, Kincardineshire, he has a pile of spools of tape three feet high of recordings made of Irish fiddlers during their trip.

In return, the Scottish musicians hosted Kevin McCann and Sean McGuire on a musical visit to Aberdeen in October 1954 where they ‘had a week’s non-stop music feast of Irish and Scottish music played by Sean, John Junner, Bert Murray, and Bill Hardie’. McCann recalled: ‘It was a memorable week indeed and John Junner took Sean McGuire and myself to visit Scott Skinner’s grave which to us was a memorable moment and that trip to Aberdeen so long ago still lives vividly in my mind’. Interestingly, it was in 1954 that Bert Murray wrote the now highly popular reel ‘Sean McGuire’s’. This tune, and Scott Skinner’s ‘Spey in Spate’ were subsequently recorded by the Irish fiddler. During subsequent visits to Aberdeen, where he may have had family connections, McCann met the Shetland fiddler Tom Anderson and this led to an invitation to Sean McGuire, fiddler/piano player Josie Keegan and accordionist Joe Burke to visit and play in those islands. The success of this trip led to regular playing visits there:

The talented trio of McGuire, Keegan and Burke, made annual trips to Shetland for a decade. They played in Lerwick to capacity, enthusiastic and knowledgeable
EYDMANN The John Junner Collection of Scottish and Irish Fiddle Music

audiences. Sean McGuire informed me that Shetlanders were the best audiences he ever played to, and Joe Burke agrees with this.37

Sean McGuire subsequently played at the inaugural Shetland Folk Festival in 1981. McCann’s happy recollections of his contact with John Junner, therefore, provides a valuable context for material in the collection and suggests that we might expect to find many Irish gems to complement the Scottish treasures.

Writing in October 2019, ten years after John Junner’s death, it can be reported that his audio collection is now in the care of Aberdeenshire Council Museum Service where its long-term wellbeing, development and accessibility will be guaranteed in accordance with his wishes.38 In addition, the National Library of Scotland is currently facilitating the digitisation of the material as part of Scotland’s contribution to the British Library’s Heritage Lottery funded Unlocking Our Sound Heritage initiative. New Junner material, mainly papers and photographs, that have recently come to light will also be added to the collection. Before long, it is hoped, the detailed study and public enjoyment of this invaluable cultural resource can commence.

Notes
6 From the Latin domine, vocative of dominus, a master.
10 See Hakon Asheim, in this volume.
Ón gCos go Cluas – From Dancing to Listening

11 Interview by Peggy Duesenberry (School of Scottish Studies Archive, University of Edinburgh, Junner SA 1989/154).
12 Mrs M. Millan (cousin of John Junner), personal communication.
16 Duesenberry (Junner SA 1989/154). It is possible that a recording of the 1955 programme survives in the Junner Collection.
17 *Scottish Violin Music, Volume 1*, Waverley Records, ZLP 2009 (c.1964). It is interesting to note that the four 78rpm sides recorded by MacAndrew for Parlophone in April 1952 comprise only James Scott Skinner material (Par F-3466).
18 Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University, (500/App Ms 639).
19 The practice of sending tapes of traditional music to friends abroad was common in Scotland during the 1950s and 1960s. The Scottish accordionist Bill Powrie (1931–1980) sent recordings to friends in the USA during the 1950s. These were discovered many years later and released on CD. Players of the Highland bagpipe also sent tapes around the world, particularly recordings of competitions and radio recitals.
22 Emmerson, p. 182, gives thanks to Junner for his assistance in the preface, p. vi.
25 Mr W. and Mrs M. Millan, *Inventory of 78 rpm Records in the John Junner Collection*, manuscript in possession of Mrs M. Millan.
27 Stuart Eydmann, *The John Junner Collection: Statement of Significance* [typescript in possession of Mrs M. Millan].
31 McCann, p. 27.
32 McCann, p. 29.
33 *Ibid*. A set of photographs documenting the Scottish musicians’ visit to the McGuire home in Belfast are in the collection of Na Piobairí Uilleann, Dublin (NPUAF0587-591). A full list of Irish players recorded by Junner has not yet been compiled and auditioning of the tapes will not be undertaken until safety copies have been made.
34 McCann, p. 29.
35 *Ibid*. The article includes a photograph of the party at Skinner’s grave.
36 In Alastair Clark, *Aly Bain: Fiddler on the Loose*, (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1993), p. 154, there is a photograph of Sean McGuire and Josephine Keegan along with Tom Anderson and
Aly Bain while ‘on their first visit to Shetland’. According to a report of the 2005 Shetland Fiddle and Accordion Festival, [accessed 20 April 2015], Josephine Keegan first visited Shetland with McGuire 30 years earlier. This gives a date of around 1975.

McCann, p. 29.

‘Traditional Scottish music archive is digitally preserved’ [accessed 31 October 2019]. A small number of physical items have already been added to the collection of Banchory Museum, Aberdeenshire. [accessed 20 April 2015].