

# **BLENDING TRADITIONS**

## **Creating organ music with a Scottish flavour**

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Scottish or Scottish-style melodies can be a great resource, both for hymnody and solo organ music. Witness the number of examples in hymnody in CH4, using original traditional melodies or modern creations written in traditional style.

I hope to provide a few suggestions on how you could bring a distinctive Scottish colouring to your organ interludes, whether composed or improvised; also show how within this idiom music can be created that is eloquent, appropriate and fully able to exploit the inherent qualities of the organ.

Composed or improvised organ music in Scottish style not only provides a characteristic flavour, but being often based around a single melodic line also provides opportunities to use solo voices such as flutes or soft reeds. Being essentially modal in character, Scottish-style music avoids some of the harmonic and contrapuntal challenges of diatonic music, yet can provide ample opportunities for creating richness of harmonic expression and texture.

Distillation of any style of music into a few statements always raises the danger of over-generalisation and even caricature. Many aspects of traditional Scottish music can also be found in various degrees in other European traditions, including medieval and renaissance ‘classical’ idioms. Nevertheless, certain traits are predominant and can be used as a basis for creating distinctly Scottish-style music; regular phrasing and clear overall structure, underpinning their frequent use for setting to texts or dance; also, certain characteristic rhythms, e.g. the short-long ‘Scotch Snap’. Melodies can also incorporate implied cadences, even modulations, which make them not only self-sufficient as melodies but also help guide any added harmonisations. The fact that, as with many traditional melodies, they survived over time initially at least by aural transmission is a test of their inherent character. Many Scottish melodies are based on the pentatonic mode, and its various transpositions. The absence of the fourth degree of the scale emphasises the third and fifth and thereby the triad and a single bass note or bass patterns. (This contrasts with the much more linear and less harmonic

nature of plainsong, for example). Within the melody and a single bass note (drone) we can create added harmonies. The use of the pentatonic mode also greatly reduces the potential for dissonant intervals within the harmonic or contrapuntal texture. Using notes purely from the pentatonic mode will therefore create the most euphonious combinations. *Ex. 1 Pentatonic Melody and drone.*

**EX. 1****Andante**

Solo

Bass note may be played by optional pedal part.

6

etc.

Another very useful mode is the Dorian mode. If combined with the adjacent Ionian mode we can get a contrast of 'major' and 'minor' sounding harmony. *Ex. 2 Dorian and Ionian melody.*

**EX. 2****Andante**

Solo

7

'B' section

etc.

Scottish-style modal melodies can also be placed within a diatonic harmonic structure; as mentioned before a good melody will often already have the seeds of this within it. Why not try and fill some of the empty parts in the second section? *Ex.3 Melody with three chords.*

## EX. 3

## Andante

1  
I V I V I

6  
IV Ic --- V7 I I IV I

12 etc.

V I IV I V I

However, whilst the pentatonic mode can lend itself to harmonisation by I IV V bass notes or chords, it is also sufficiently ambiguous in diatonic terms to be free from many of the strictures of diatonic harmony, opening the way for chords that are parallel with the main notes of the melody, i.e. ‘melody-led’.

At its simplest, a series of parallel fifths, which can lend a attractively archaic feel to the melody. *Ex. 4 Lament*

**EX. 4**

**Adagio**

Solo

We can also add more complex parallel chords, using notes that are outside the modes and their transpositions, and thereby creating greater levels of dissonance. This adds something of a ‘modern’ spice whilst retaining something of the original modal and regional flavour, for example in the reworking of the same melody, as in Ex.3. *Ex. 5 Melody with parallel sevenths*, (over).

5

EX. 5

Andante

Solo

The musical score for Example 5 is written in 3/4 time and consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 1-7) features a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a harmonic accompaniment. The second system (measures 8-13) includes a repeat sign and continues the melodic and harmonic lines. The third system (measures 14-17) also includes a repeat sign and ends with 'etc.' indicating further continuation.

Many composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have done this with various traditional styles and material, for example folk and original material in modal style, chorale melodies and plainchant, to create a stylistic ‘mongrel’ of old and new. Langlais and other French composers in particular have created distinct styles by a successful blending of plainsong, modality and modern harmony.

In these examples, the focus has been on more reflective styles, suitable within the liturgy; (a reel during the taking of the collection might be a little unsettling for those present – and indeed the collection plate!) However, the techniques described above could equally be applied to a lively reel, waltz or march, perhaps in a private or concert context. Perhaps also, consider creating alternative or modified harmonisations to some of the Scottish melodies used in CH4.