



The Forgotten Scottish Composer

It's an unlikely story – a Jacobite earl's son from Fife, who introduced a modern Classical music style to Britain in the mid-18th Century, gained notoriety for his rakish lifestyle, died at age 49 in Belgium and who was then largely forgotten – until a manuscript was discovered in a Highland castle 200 years later. However, this is an apt summary of the life of Thomas Alexander Erskine, the 6th Earl of Kellie (Kelly), Lord Pittenweem, Viscount Fenton or 'Fiddler Tam', as he was known to many.

Born at Kellie Castle, Fife, on 1 September 1732, Thomas Erskine was the first-born child to Alexander Erskine, 5th Earl of Kellie, and his second wife, Janet Pitcairne – the daughter of renowned physician, poet and Jacobite sympathizer Dr Archibald Pitcairne. The 5th Earl was generally thought of as a fool and an alcoholic. He was also a Jacobite supporter who tried and failed to raise a regiment to support Prince Charles when he landed in Scotland in 1745. It was reported that his regiment consisted of four people: himself, his manservant, his chaplain and an old lieutenant colonel. Although titled, the family were rather poor.

At an early age, Thomas developed a passion for music and began to learn to play the violin. His first lessons were likely given by the family chaplain, Samuel Thom, before he was later under the tutelage of the well-reputed violinist Thomas Pinto, who regarded Erskine as an unpromising student at this early stage. It is thought that the young boy later studied violin with William McGibbon, the Scottish composer and violinist.

Thomas Erskine attended the Royal High School, Edinburgh, for two years but his education ended with the 1745 Jacobite Uprising. His father had fought with the Jacobite army at Preston, Falkirk and Culloden. Captured, while hiding in a tree on his estate, he was never tried but was imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle, in fairly comfortable conditions, until his release in 1753, having been deemed not to be a threat.

Musical activities and composition benefited from the more stable social and economic situation during 18th-Century Britain, which resulted in the widespread founding of musical societies and the promotion of concerts. Many major cities saw the influx of foreign musicians; Handel, Mozart, and then Haydn were all resident in Britain at some point during the 18th Century. Edinburgh was no different and also attracted foreign musicians, especially Italians such as Francesco Barsanti, Domenico Corri, Nicolo Pasquali and Giusto Tenducci.

Other musicians to arrive in Edinburgh were Johann Schetky and Joseph Reinagle. An unfortunate aspect of this influx of foreign musicians was that they tended not to stay in Edinburgh for many years and most seemed to suffer from a drying up of musical inspiration during their time there. A possible reason for this is that most musicians in Edinburgh had to either teach or perform – or perhaps do both – to earn a living. This left them with very little time to

focus on composing. The Edinburgh Musical Society was founded in 1728, replacing the St Cecilia's Society, and provided musical concerts throughout the 18th Century to its members.

Thomas Erskine joined the Edinburgh Musical Society aged 17 and continued both his violin and general musical studies. He closely studied contemporary orchestral composition, with works by Barsanti a particular focus. Having eagerly followed musical developments and advances in Europe, Erskine set out in 1752 on his grand tour and his intention was to take advantage of any situation to develop his musical skills. He visited Mannheim, Germany, where the court orchestra practiced revolutionary orchestral techniques and resident composers wrote music that would be played by the orchestra. The young Erskine was energetically enthused by what he had discovered and, on meeting the Czech composer and violinist Johann Stamitz, he began a few years of intensive musical enlightenment – both instrumentally and in the art of composition.

At this time he embraced the Mannheim techniques, such as sudden whole orchestra crescendos and the separate treatment of the wind section, and shut himself away to master his violin playing. All the while, he absorbed as much as he could from Stamitz, who contributed greatly to the development of Sonata Form and was to later greatly influence both Mozart and Haydn. It was a great tribute to Erskine that Stamitz dedicated his Six Grand Orchestra Trios Opus 1 (1755) to 'The Right Honorable Lord Pittenweem'.

Thomas Erskine's concentrated musical advancement during four years at Mannheim and, it is likely, a year in Paris with Stamitz was to come to an abrupt end when his father died in 1756, which caused him to return to Scotland to assume the title of 6th Earl of Kellie. The new earl's enthusiasm for the Mannheim tradition is evident in his own Opus 1 – six overtures that are written in the style of Stamitz and comprise three movements – which was published by Robert Bremner of Edinburgh & London in 1761. Written for strings, oboes and horns, with a figured bass for harpsichord, they featured fast first and third movements with a slower second movement that would become the symphonic standard.

The Opus 1 overtures were probably the first written in the modern symphonic style by a British composer and the British public were unaccustomed to hearing these techniques, which were soon to become an embedded feature of symphonic music. In November 1763, Bremner published a collection of 'six symphonies in four parts, proper for great or small concerts, composed by Signor Stamitz, his pupil the Right Honorable Earl of Kelly and others'. In 1763 there was a pasticcio opera, *Il Giacatore*, produced in Edinburgh with an overture composed by Kellie and two years later a very popular comic opera *The Maid of the Mill* was produced at Covent Garden with an overture composed by Kellie.

A young Mozart and his family arrived in London in 1778 and *The Maid of the Mill* was one of the outstanding successes of that particular season. Whether young Mozart heard a performance is unknown, but what can be said is that Kellie's use of contrasting motifs was later to become a feature of Mozart's compositions. What's more, JC Bach borrowed heavily for his Symphony in B Flat Opus 9 from Kellie's first movement of that piece. Kellie's Opus 2 was published in 1769 and comprised six sonatas for two violins and a bass which reverted to an older musical form.

Kellie quickly established a reputation as a composer of note, with his compositions often being heard at London concerts. When writing of life in Edinburgh in August 1775, Tobias Smollett, the Scottish author, poet and surgeon, commented, 'There is one nobleman whose compositions are greatly admired' – referring, of course, to Kellie. Another critic wrote that 'while others please and amuse, it is his province to rouse and almost overset his hearer. Loudness, rapidity, and enthusiasm announce the Earl of Kelly'. Unfortunately, the earl's reputation for gambling and high living was also gathering notoriety.

He was unique and unmistakable; noted for the coarseness of his wit, he was known for loudly making outrageous puns in his Fife accent at some of the best restaurants in Edinburgh. His drunken and boorish behavior was notorious, even in an era when such exhibitions of oafishness rarely drew much comment. One of Kellie's friends, James Boswell, the famed diarist, wrote on Thursday 20 October 1762 that he had borrowed five guineas from Kellie

at the Kelso Races and noted 'the romantic conceit of getting it from a gamester, a nobleman and a musical composer'. The pair often dined together, even though Boswell was dismayed by Kellie's non-religious and anti-clerical statements. Boswell also noted in his diary, on October 6 1764 from Cassel, Germany, that 'at six I went to the Comedie. On entering the house I was surprised to hear the Orchestre play one of Lord Kelly's concertos. They however played it very ill.'

The Maid of the Mill was performed in New York (1769), St. Petersburg (1772) and Jamaica (1779), thus expanding Kellie's reputation. However, he had been criticized by some for relying too heavily on and even copying European composers. In May 1775, Captain E Topham wrote of 'Lord Kelly, whose admirable talents and genius in this science have been corrupted and restrained by his poorly copying the compositions of other masters'. Topham went on to suggest that Erskine composed better when he was drunk, 'I refer you to these wilder compositions, where his proper genius has broken forth, where his imagination heated by wine, and his mind unfettered by precept, and unbiased by example has indulged itself in all of its native freedom.'

During the 1760s, Kellie appeared to have spent much of his time in London. He had become a member, in the late 1750s, of an elite musical society called 'The Temple of Apollo' which mainly consisted of Scots. Other members included James Oswald, the Scottish cellist, composer and publisher, Captain (later General) John Reid, who founded the Chair of Music at Edinburgh University, and Dr Charles Burney, the English Music Historian. It was while in London that Kellie became the fourth Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of the Ancients – a post he held for six years. He also was the 24th Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Scotland between 1763 and 1765. Holding both posts simultaneously was something of an honour and he is the only man to have done so. Indeed, at the time there was a strong link between freemasonry and the Edinburgh Musical Society.

Back in Scotland, Kellie also founded the Capillaire Club, which was 'composed of all those who were inclined to be witty or joyous' and whose only rule was that members drank Capillaire – an infusion of maidenhair fern flavored with orange flower water. He wrote a minuet dedicated to the club called the Capillaire Minuet. A copy can be found in Dundee's Wighton Centre in the Central Library, along with a volume of other dedicated minuets written by Kellie for Lord Stanley's Fête Champetre, at The Oaks near Epsom, in 1774.

Lord Kellie was also a member of a libertine club called the Beggar's Benison of Anstruther, which was also active in Edinburgh and eventually had a branch in St Petersburg. This unusual society's full title was 'The Most Ancient and Puissant Order of the Beggar's Benison and Merryland' – a name derived from the story of a meeting between King James V of Scotland and a young female beggar who gave him a benison (blessing). Whether the story is true or not is open to debate and is discussed in the book *The Beggar's Benison: Sex Clubs of Enlightenment Scotland* (2001) by David Stevenson.

The Beggar's Benison practiced dubious sexual rituals and initiations. Much eating, drinking and the singing of obscene songs were a feature. In addition to his fondness of puns, Lord Kellie took great pleasure in inventing toasts to bizarre causes and events. These toasts became a feature of the Beggar's Benison and, although it appears that many contemporaries found him tiresome in his habitual toast proposals, King George IV was reputed to possibly be a member.

Erskine's involvement with the Edinburgh Musical Society continued in 1756. He was director from 1757 to December 1765, when he possibly never paid his subscription fees and was described as 'gone out of the society'. Nevertheless, he was re-admitted in June 1767 and became deputy governor from 1767 until his death in 1781.

Although professional musicians were available, he often played the first violin part himself and his works were often placed at the end of concerts because he was playing and thus was afforded the opportunity for an encore. After his death, none of his chamber music was played at concerts – probably because he had led the chamber group. Charles Burney was to praise Kellie's musical skills by saying, 'His ear was so correct, and his perception so acute, that in the midst of a turbulent and tumultuous movement of a symphony of twelve or fourteen parts, if any instrument

failed in either time or tune, though playing a difficult part himself, he instantly prompted the erroneous player with his voice, by singing his part without abandoning his own.'

The Edinburgh Musical Society built St Cecilia's Hall, in Niddry Street, in 1762. Robert Mylne, a fellow freemason and an old school friend of Kellie, was the architect and it seems likely that Kellie played a part in the construction, as he was the director of the society at the time. St Cecilia's, with its oval shaped concert room, is the oldest purpose-built concert hall in Scotland and the second to oldest in Britain.

Due to his reckless lifestyle, Kellie fell into a mound of debt and had to sell all his estates in 1769 – with the exception of the Kelly mansion. At this time, his health was also suffering and he made various trips to spas on the continent to find relief from his ailments. His dissolute lifestyle had effect on his appearance and he developed a particularly ruddy complexion. It was on his return from a continental trip in November 1775 that he narrowly escaped death when his ship was wrecked in the English Channel. His relative, well known lawyer, MP and Lord Advocate of Scotland, Henry Erskine is thought to have composed the following lines relating to the event:

In ancient story this I've found,
That no Musician e'er was drown'd.
A harp was then, or I mistake it,
Much better than the best cork-jacket;

The Grecian harpers went abroad
The lockers well with liquor stor'd,
For harpers ever had a thirst,
Since harping was invented first;

They in the cabin sat a drinking,
Till the poor ship was almost sinking;
Then running nimbly to the poop,
They gave the scaly brood a whoop;

And sudden as they formed the wish,
For every harper came a fish;
Then o'er the briny billows scudding
They car'd for drowning not a pudding.

Methinks my Lord, with cheek of rose,
I see you mount your bottle-nose;
Or firmly holding by a whole fin
Ride déagé upon your dolphin.

'Twas thus the tuneful Peer of Kelly
Escap'd some whale's enormous belly;
And safe in London, thinks no longer
He'll prove a feast for shark or conger.

Kellie's escape from the clutches of death, coupled with the passing of his mother in June of the same year, appeared to have a sobering effect upon him. Boswell noted that 'he was more sedate and well balanced, and not like Mount Vesuvius, as my uncle the Doctor described him formerly'.

Kellie's untimely death in 1881 occurred following a continental spa visit. His obituary in Gentleman's Magazine recorded that 'he was one of the finest musical composers of the age, and esteemed by the cognoscenti as the first

man of taste in the musical line, of any British subject'. Acknowledging his sizeable reputation as a devotee of Bacchus, it added 'he loved his bottle but was a worthy social character'. Despite his fondness of the fairer sex, he never married nor had any children and his title passed to his brother, the Honorable Major Archibald Erskine. He was given a memorial concert by Edinburgh Musical Society on 21 December 1881 and for three weeks after the concerts ended with a performance of one of his overtures.

In the years following his death, how often his compositions were performed is uncertain. Certainly, from the Edinburgh Musical Society's performance plan books between 1782 and 1786, there were 70 performances of his overtures or symphonies – the most popular being his Periodical Overture No. 13 and his Overture No 4, but all the chamber works seemed to be lost. Indeed, it is estimated that only around one sixth of his music was published in his lifetime. There is only one surviving truly Scottish piece, Largo, which is based on the ballad The Lowlands of Holland.

One reason why a great part of his work is lost stems from the character of the man. He was renowned for his ability to write music very quickly and often took only a few hours to compose an elaborate piece. Thomas Robertson said of Erskine that 'being always remarkably fond of wind instruments, whenever he met with a good band of them, he was seized with the fit of composition and wrote pieces in the moment, which he gave away to the performers, and never saw again; and these, in his own judgment, were the best he ever composed'.

In 1839, his minuets were republished with two of his songs and a biographical note, but his music was largely forgotten by concert programmers and music writers alike. It wasn't until the publication of Dr HG Farmer's History of Music in Scotland (1947) that his compositional qualities were discussed. David Johnson, the Scottish composer and musicologist, further promoted the work of Kellie through his doctoral research and, latterly, John Purser wrote of the earl in his book Scotland's Music: A History of the Traditional and Classical Music of Scotland from Early Times to the Present Day (2007).

A further advancement in the appreciation of Kellie's work was made in 1989 when Kilravock Castle was sold. At this time a manuscript, composed for the Rose family, from around 1770 was found. It contained 19 works attributed to the Earl of Kellie, 16 of which were assumed lost: six string quartets, nine trio sonatas and a sonata for two violins. The discovery enabled the recording of some of the earl's 'lost work'.

Henry Erskine summed up his relative thus: 'Still, it is certain, that of all the boisterous free livers of the age, no-one was so free or so boisterous as Lord Kellie. His rough good nature is said to have been very attractive to men younger than himself; and to them his manner of life was dangerous in a high degree, in an age when a coarse joviality was apt to be looked upon as a sign of good fellowship.'