A Grand Tour of Scottish Fiddling, Part 1: Aonghas Grant of the West Highlands

By Peter Anick

Last summer my wife, Connie, and I made a “grand tour” of Scotland, a nearly thousand mile road trip that took us weaving through the Scottish Highlands, far west to the windswept Isle of Lewis, north to the megalith-strewed Orkney islands, and back south to the rollicking Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Our plan was to trace family roots on the Isle of Skye, explore Scotland’s vast prehistoric landscape, and, of course, sample the region’s fine fiddling. I am happy to say that — in spite of a few mishaps and one of Scotland’s wettest summers in recent memory — we were amply rewarded on all counts. In this series, we’ll introduce you to some of the fiddlers we met along the way.

Our first musical destination was the home of Aonghas Grant, the renowned left-handed fiddler living in the western Highlands in the shadow of Britain’s highest peak. Aonghas would soon be celebrating his eightieth birthday and had recently released a first volume of his extensive repertoire in Mel Bay’s *The Glengarry Collection*.

Having not quite mastered the art of driving on the left side of the road, our car struck a curb just as we pulled into Fort William and we arrived at the Grants’ Bed and Breakfast as deflated as our front tire. Hearing of our predicament, the soon-to-be octogenarian Aonghas immediately sprang into action, fetching a lug wrench and capably supervising the changing of the tire. The crisis averted, Connie set off to find some fish and chips while Aonghas and I retired to his patio to turn our attention to the main purpose of our visit.

Growing up in the West Highlands in the 1930s, Aonghas had experienced a way of life that has largely disappeared in the 21st century. Throughout our conversation, he often noted the contrasts between then and now, musical and otherwise. Over the last thirty years, his increasing involvement in education has helped to pass along the musical heritage of the Glengarry region, a fiddle style that reflects the piping and Gaelic song traditions long popular in the area.

Aonghas: On my father’s side of the family, they were very musical. There were pipes and fiddles and Gaelic songs, singers. I never had a lesson in my life, really. I got a fiddle from my uncle when I was about twelve or thirteen. I was at the pipes before that and within half an hour I could play two or three tunes I’d already played on the pipes. My uncle showed me how to hold it and tuned it up for me. And my son (Angus), some forty years later, is the same. He got a little fiddle from my brother. He just started and never actually got any lessons and then just played tunes. That was it, you know. All the old-timers had a tremendous repertoire of tunes. Hundreds and hundreds of tunes! And I’ve never ever seen a sheet of music between any of them. My uncle was born about 1875 and my father was born in 1880. And they probably learned from their father in just the same way, you know? Just picked it up and played. No formal lessons at all.

A lot of the older fiddlers took a great interest in me because I was the only one of my generation to play the fiddle. There were quite a few pipes and the accordion was starting to come in after the war. But I was on the fiddle and I used to watch just what they were doing, watched the bowing and the fingers. I never read a sheet of music till way in my fifties. I went down to a fiddle competition and played and the famous Tom Anderson of Shetland, he was down judging. I won the competition and some months later he phoned me and said he planned on doing a summer school at Stirling University and wanted me to come down and teach. I said I never taught anybody at all, but he said, “Oh, you’ll come down. I like your style of playing.” And I ended up teaching there for twenty-seven years. A lot from America, Norway, Japan, all over. And then some years at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. They started doing a BA degree course in Scottish fiddle and I was a part-time tutor there for about ten years.

Music has been in your family for how many generations?

My grandfather, he was born about 1835, he played. And my great grandfather, he played the pipes. He was born in the 1790s. Mostly in the Highlands area, music followed families. I don’t know if there’s such a thing as a musical gene but if you just grow up
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hearing music and if you’re inclined to be musical, you’ll play something. Our three children all play. My oldest daughter is a good piper. My son is a very famous fiddler, and my youngest daughter is an equally good fiddler. They all just picked it up and played, you know.

Was it in a professional role that your grandfather played or was it a hobby?

Oh, just a hobby. I mean, if my father was alive now, he would be amazed to think that you actually got paid for playing the fiddle. And to think that his grandson was full-time earning a living playing the fiddle! Even when I was young, to play all night at a dance, we would get the equivalent of a dollar. Right into the ’80s, you’d play from 9 till 1 in the morning. And you’d get about a pound fifty in today’s money. Thirty bob.

So your family always played for the love of the music, then.

Most of the old fiddlers I knew in my day, they all worked as shepherds, deer stalkers, farmers, fishermen. You, know, they had a full-time job. In those days, to think that you could support the family playing the fiddle was just a joke, you know! Nobody would dream that you could earn a living playing the fiddle! Our only outlet for playing was dances, particularly in the wintertime when things were slack and there’d be lots of dances to play. You’d see four to six fiddlers and a side drum — that was a band. And an odd piper would play a few tunes. The fiddlers go away for a dram and the piper would play for a few sets. And there wasn’t an accordion in sight, or an amplifier or a mic at all.

Did the fiddlers play unison? Or harmony?

Oh no, they nearly all played in unison. Except some tunes, maybe a couple of fiddlers would drop to the back strings — play the same tune on the back strings.

Play an octave lower?

Yeah. It was all pretty fast stuff we were playing. I wouldn’t say it was a hobby; it was a way of life with you. You know, when I started my working life, I left school at fourteen and all my father’s people were hill shepherds and deer hunters and I just followed that line. A long day in the hills, and then you’d come back at night and pick up the fiddle and you moved into a different world. From the hard work you’re doing out in the hills — wild weather and good weather — and then you picked up the fiddle, you changed places altogether. It was a great comfort to you, playing the fiddle. It was a sweetener. Things have changed so much now. The best thing that happened up in the Highlands was the Feis [music festival] and the Gael movement when they started up in Barra [in 1981]. Things were starting to die out and the local priest and a few musicians, they got together and started things off. And it mushroomed. Every area has a week’s tuition with the kids and they also have ongoing classes that keep it going. I teach twice a month at a school forty-five miles away and a lot of good fiddlers turned up at that. And I also teach at home. When I was young, there was nobody teaching at all.

You were hearing it from family and friends, but nobody actually gave lessons?

No. No. None at all.

Did the pipes date back earlier than the fiddle, then?

The pipe was much older. The fiddle came into the country from abroad about the 1600s. Because it was so cheap, it immediately became a favorite folk instrument. Particularly down south. Up here, the oldest instrument was the clarsach, the small Celtic harp. It just nearly died out and now there’s a great revival of it. Everybody’s playing it, predominantly girls. But in the old days, it was the men that played the harp. The old chieftains employed a harper full-time, and a piper. A lot of the pipers had a bit more knowledge about music because they had been in the army and probably learned music when they were in the army in the pipe band. There was no such a thing as a pipe band until England was in so many wars and there were all these wild Highland men doing nothing and they drafted them into the British army. A lot of chiefs’ sons went with them and they took their personal piper with them. So there’d be a dozen or more pipers and they got together and the army thought this would be quite a good idea to get a band going. The pipe bands were quite a thing. All the Scottish regiments had pipe bands.
So you were saying you had an uncle that played. Were you in his band?

I had three uncles that played. I never actually played dances with my uncles. I was too young at that time.

What did a dance consist of in those days?

It was square dances. The odd waltz. Quadrilles and lancers. Square dance sets.

Was there a caller or did everyone know the dances?

Oh, we always laugh. Anytime I’m in the States, I’m amazed. And somebody says the caller gets more money than the fiddler! Why is it? Why do you need a bloody caller? We grew up; we all knew the dances and the sets. You start young and you know it. Some parts in the south, I think they’ve started having callers.

So in the old days, you’d just name the kind of set?

Yes, there used to be a guy who started announcing the dances — “Take your partner for such and such a dance.” And that was it. Other times, the band leader would just say, “We’re going to play for quadrilles, or ‘Strip the Willow’ or ‘Highland Schottische’;” and that was it. Everybody knew what they were doing.

How old were you when you started going to these dances?

Well, dances and ceilidhs, when you were young you’d be going there just to see and listen to the music and the songs.

Your parents would be dancing and you’d just be coming along.

Yes, that sort of thing. I always think nowadays the kids are still in high school at eighteen. You know, they spend a third of their life getting educated. By the time I was sixteen I was capable of buying and selling sheep and cattle. I’m taken aback by the young ones nowadays; they don’t know how to harness a horse or saddle a horse! Nobody’s doing that. They know all about laptops and computers and phones, but when we all grew up, we knew all these things: working sheep dogs, training sheep dogs, saddling horses, deer ponies, out shooting deer, fresh salmon. You grew up with it. That was a way of life with you. And then, as I was saying, after a hard day’s work, it was nice to pick up the fiddle and play some tunes.

When you came back after a day’s work, would there be people around the house playing music? Is that where you first heard it?

Well, in the evening, you’d hear pipes coming across the glen, you know.

Someone would be outside playing?

Yeah. In these days, nobody would dream of playing in a pub! That was left to the traveling folk. It was beneath your dignity to play in a pub.

Really?

Oh, you wouldn’t be seen playing in a pub! That was left to the Tinkers and the traveling folk to do that. In the summertime, you’re busy gathering sheep and shearing, making hay and cutting corn, and these days you’re working with a scythe! There were no fancy carbine harvesters. It was a lot of manual work. But in the wintertime, things were pretty well tied down. That’s when there’d be a lot more music happening. And people would come to houses where there’d be music and song. That’s what that Gaelic word “ceilidh” means, you know. It’s been used now all over the place for anything, but the ceilidh really meant coming to a meeting and having not necessarily music, just talking and that sort of thing.

Just a get-together.

We played tunes and if somebody had picked up a new tune, we’d be trying to pick it up, you know. And you’d go on the way back and you’d keep whistling the tune all the way till you got home in case you’d forget it. There was no tape recorders or videos in these days, you know. And then if you wouldn’t forget the tune, and you’d be so annoyed. And then days later, something would click and you’d have it again and you kept whistling until you got home and picked up the fiddle and you had it! Once you got it on the fiddle, you had it.

Even yet, someone would say to me, “How would this tune I heard today go?” I hadn’t played that tune for thirty years, maybe, but I’d pick up the fiddle and it would come back to you. Your brain must be like a tape recorder. It comes back to you. Some of the happiest times in my life have been playing fiddle music with friends. Not only fiddle music but pipe music and Gaelic songs. “Make love, not war,” the hippies used to say. I always say, “Make music, not war.” If there was more music, then the world would be a far better place. Music is a great sweetener. If anything happened to me and I couldn’t play, I’d be devastated. My good friend, Farquhar MacRae, he died a few years ago. He was a great fiddler and he played the button key box and I played in his band for over forty-odd years. Played dances and weddings all over here. He was playing at a New Year’s dance and the last dance, he took a stroke down the left hand and never played again. He was about three years in a wheelchair and his wife used to take him to sessions and ceilidhs. I don’t think I could have done that, but he seemed to enjoy listening to his friends, you know.

People then wouldn’t be dancing at a ceilidh, just listening?

Just listening. Playing away. In these days when you’re playing dances and there was no amplification, all the dance fiddlers pulled out a good tone. I see a lot of the young fiddlers now with all their fancy pickups. Take away their pickup and they’ve got a very small tone. In the old days, you really had to pull the tone out of the fiddle. Some of the fiddlers had very good fiddles, probably picked up as loot in the wars, you know. Some good Italian fiddles, good German fiddles. This is a French fiddle. A cousin of my father’s picked it up for about two pounds before the first war. I play left-handed. My father and two of my uncles were all left-handed. I teach a lot at home here and there was a period when I had eight lasses all playing left-handed. The first fiddle I got was all set up for the left hand.
You change the insides of the fiddle? You move the bass bar to the other side?

Yes, yes. But when I was in Cape Breton two or three years ago at the Celtic Colors, I was amazed that there’s quite a few left-handed fiddlers that play a right-handed fiddle back to front! They’re playing like me but the strings are still set up for the right hand.

So they have to lean way over to reach their E string! That’s got to be tough, huh?

Yes. I asked one of them, “Why don’t you get set up [left-handed]?” “Ah”, he said, “Too much hassle.” They were quite happy and they could play. One of them tried my fiddle and they couldn’t make anything of it.

Let’s talk a little about the style of music here in the Highlands.

Well, there’s quite a few different styles in Scotland. There’s not just one style, you know. This is the Gaelic part. You see all the signs are written in Gaelic now. Our music is sort of toward the pipes and the Gaelic pipe music and song. It’s quite different from the south country and east coast. And then in Shetland and Orkney, they have a style of their own, too.

Do you feel like the fiddling sounds like the language of each area?

Oh, yes, yes, yes. When we’re teaching at Stirling, within two or three days, in Tom Anderson’s classroom you’ll hear all this Shetland sound coming out; Alastair Hardie was teaching northeast stuff and you’d hear that style and I was teaching West Highland and you’d hear the style. And on a Saturday night, there’s Scottish dance music on the radio. And you hear south country bands playing Gaelic tunes. But it doesn’t sound Gaelic. And yet you hear some of the Highland boys playing it, you know it’s a Highlander that’s playing it, you know? Oh yeah. You can’t put your finger on it but it’s there. I’ve been in Ireland, too, and you see the Irish boys playing. We play Irish tunes the same and it doesn’t sound just quite the way they played it.

Maybe you could play a tune and describe what it is that gives it the Highland sound?

[Aonghas plays a medley.] That’s a Gaelic song — a reel. There’s Gaelic words to it. It’s what they call a puirt a beul, that they use for dances when they haven’t got a fiddle or pipes. The singers would sing these fast songs and you’d dance to them.

Let’s talk about some of the components of the way you play. You’ve got some ornamentation…

Oh, yeah. Compared to the east coast fiddlers, we put a lot of ornamentation in. Because we’re used to putting ornamentation in on the pipes. There’s a tremendous amount of gracing in the pipe music and you transpose some of it onto the fiddle.

[plays an example with a lot of ornamentation] A lot of what you’re doing is your third finger and your fourth finger [mordants]. And then you play an octave [open drone strings]. So you’re droning away like the pipes.

Do you play a full roll? Do you lift up your first finger?

Yes, I do. But not as much as the Irish do. We do a lot of birls with the bow and with the fingers [a quick shake of the arm creating a triplet ornamentation].

Do you do it on both upbows and downbows?

Yes. The Shetlanders call it a “shiver,” which is very apt because you’re just doing a slight shiver. Some fiddlers never get it at all and other ones just do it naturally. It comes to you, you know. We just call it a birl. And that’s what they call it on the pipes — a birl. If you do it slow, it disappears. You have to do it full speed.
How about your noting hand? How do you teach what you are doing? Do you tell people to just watch?

Nowadays I can read music, slowly.

But it the old days, people didn’t read music?

No, and yet they could play in flat keys. They had good ears. The only thing in these days, even myself now, none of us had the slightest idea what a concert A was. You would tune in fifths but slightly down. A lot of the old fiddlers — and I quite agree with them — felt the fiddle sounded sweeter when it wasn’t tuned so high up. And a lot of them had the idea that the fiddle sounded louder when it was tuned low and I quite believe that, too. Because there’s not so much pressure on the bridge and it would vibrate better. I don’t like playing with steel strings because it puts too much pressure on the bridge, you know. This is more like gut.

What strings do you use?

Corelli.

How tight do you tighten the bow?

I never play with a tight bow. And I notice a lot of good players, the young Shetland players play with a very slack bow. I remember many years ago, the great Irish fiddler Tommy Peoples — his bow was almost an inch and a half. The bend was almost coming out of it! I think you get more subtle notes with a slacker bow. I like playing with a heavier bow for dances, because you’re putting a lot more pressure on, you know. A good bow is a wonderful thing. It’s an extension of your arm. You don’t hardly notice you’ve got it in your hand.

You know a lot about the background of your tunes. For almost every tune, you have a story. Is that passed down from whomever you learned it from?

Yes, my father and uncle were great, if you’d play a tune, they’d tell about the story. It makes such a difference if you know what the tune is about and who composed it. The thing that annoys me these days is that a lot of good young players, they come on stage and say, “I’ll play a couple of tunes I picked up — I don’t know what their name is.” Why? The main way to remember a tune is by its name! It really annoys me. Surely, if they’ve got the ability to play a tune, they should have the ability to find out what the name is….

You said it was easy for you to learn the fiddle. Was that because you could sing all the tunes beforehand?

Yes. It’s quite interesting that you say that, because wee people come in and I get them to hum the tune. If you can sing the tune, hum through it, then you’ve got it in here [in your head]. Some years ago on television, the great Yehudi Menuhin, he was at some orchestra and they were finding it a bit difficult and he said to them, “Hum this part. Hum this bit.” And they got it. In the old days, in the piping, there was no written music at all for the pipes until about the 1800s. I reckon Angus Mackay, piper to Queen Victoria, was one of the first to write down any notation. It was a vocal called canntaireachd and they still use it, a lot of the Highland pipers. It was just a vocable:

[Aonghas demonstrates by chanting syllables as his fingers act out figures on the pipes] Hambara hara hay, bahara hambaharra hambaray… and you knew exactly what they were playing.

That was a vocal way of describing what the pipes were playing.

Yes, all vocables. And a lot of the old pipers say once it was written down in music, there was something lost, that wasn’t quite the same.

They would teach by vocables?

Yes, and demonstrate the fingers at the same time. Even today some of them do still. There’s different styles of vocables. It wasn’t all the same all over the country. One piper maybe would have his own ideas of how to do it, you know. You’d sing the bit that you were doing on your fingers.

Was there an equivalent of vocables for the fiddle?

No, I never heard anybody doing that for the fiddle at all. Because it works with what you’re doing with your fingers [on the pipes] and on the fiddle you are only working with one set of fingers, not two.

So you didn’t use the vocables to help you learn tunes on the fiddle.
No, but I used to hum through tunes. To be a good fiddler, you have to have a good ear, and a great imagination, too. [The great fiddlers] would get a well-known tune and put their own stamp on it. They would play a common, ordinary tune and they would put an ornament here or a different type of bowing, different phrasing, different tempo and put their own individual style of playing into that tune. Which would make it stand out quite different. So all the good fiddlers are renowned for playing various tunes, favorite tunes.

Is there any good folklore about the fiddle? I’ve been reading some folklore about the Hebrides and they often talk about the “little people.”

Oh, there’s lots of it, right up to Shetland, about the fairy fiddlers and tunes from the fairies and the shian, the fairy knowes [knolls]. There’s a story about a fiddler coming back from all night playing at a wedding and was tired and lay down on this knoll and fell asleep and he heard all this music and he got this tune. It was the fairies in the knoll below playing and he picked up the tune. He was probably mistaken — he was in the throws of a hangover and wasn’t sure where he was, coming back from a wedding! Yes, there’s a lot. Whether there’s anything in it or not, a lot of people I knew, even myself, I would never ridicule the fairies when people are not too sure if there are such a thing or not. People have heard music and pipes coming from nowhere. Where is it coming from, you know?

So the fairies were known to play the fiddle…

And the pipes. There’s lots of stories if you did a good turn for a fairy, they would do a good turn for you. There’s a tune that I got from my uncle that’s called “The Fairy Bridge.” There was a big storm a few hundred years ago and this guy was coming up the road. He couldn’t get across it, it was so rough and wild. And he heard this voice say in Gaelic, “Help me! Help me!” And he looked down and there was a little fairy man trapped under a tree. And he lifted the tree off of him and the fairy man said, “You’ve helped me, can I do something to help you?”

He looked at the river and he said, “Well, we could do with a bridge. We can’t get across the river for days, it’s so wild.” He [the fairy man] said, “There’ll be a bridge in the morning.” Anyway, he went back home and told the people the fairy told him there’d be a bridge in the morning. They came out and couldn’t see any bridge and they walked up and suddenly where there was a waterfall, there was a hole appeared and all the water was going through a hole and you could walk across a natural bridge! It was supposed to be there into the 1800s, that bridge. And it’s called the Fairy Bridge.

A test tune!

Yes, some fancy tune… You wonder where tunes come from, you know. Any tunes that I’ve made have suddenly come to me. I have a problem just now. There’s a woman who’s retiring from the Strathspey and Reel Society and they’ve asked me to compose a tune for her. I can’t think of a thing! And I’m just hoping that by some miracle something can happen before then and I’ll get it. Because all the tunes [I have composed], I’d just pick up a fiddle and got the feel of a tune. But to think and sit down and start working on a tune, it’s something like poetry, I suppose.

So who would you say was your biggest influence? Was it your uncle?

My uncle Archie, he was a great influence. And then another friend as I got older in my teens, Jock Kirkpatrick. He was the sheep manager on the next estate with us and he’d play the fiddle and took a great interest in me. In the wintertime, every Saturday night, if there wasn’t deep snow — because he stayed a way up in the hills — I’d go up there and play a fiddle. I learned lots of tunes from him. After he died, his wife gave me his fiddle and I composed a tune called “Jock’s Fiddle.” [Aonghas plays the tune, a lively jig.]

There’s only two forms of ethnic music associated with Scottish music. The piobroch on the pipes, the classical music of the pipes, and the strathspey on the fiddle. Jigs and reels and hornpipes, you get them all over Europe in various forms. But when you think of strathspey, that’s supposed to have started up in the valley of Strathspey, up in Badenoch. Angus Cumming was one of the ones that started up strathspeys. [Angus Cumings of Strathspey published the Collection of Strathspeys or Old Highland Reels in 1780.] It’s quite a different style.

So the strathspey invented at some known time or does it go way back?

I think it was invented in the 1600s. I think probably some of the Gaelic puirt a beul music was sung to strathspey tunes and that came first and was transposed onto the fiddle and the pipes. The east coast, they have more of a biting style of playing, and unisons, kind of slower. I think in the west we play kind of a
smoother style of playing and probably faster, more like the pipes. It just evolved, I think. It’s called the “strathspey” I reckon because it started up in the valley of Strathspey. And then, of course, way back in the 1700s, Niel Gow down in Dunkeld had a great style of playing strathspeys with a very strong up bow. And my friend Pete Clark in Dunkeld there is a great fiddler and he started about eight years ago a Niel Gow festival every year just about the time of Gow’s birthday. Gow died in 1808. And as an example of good tunes, those tunes are still played daily. Every Scottish fiddler has got a repertoire of Niel Gow’s tunes. They weren’t complicated tunes. They were nice playable tunes that would appeal to people. Where there’s better composers — probably William Marshall and Robert Mackintosh in Tullymet — they composed quite complicated tunes. Whereas Gow’s tunes were uncomplicated… There was nothing very technical or difficult with them. A good fiddler could do things with them. I’m very fond of Gow’s music. While I’m not that stuck on Scott Skinner’s music on the east coast. He had classical violin technique and used a lot of it and a lot of it is quite technically difficult to play.

I notice that you use vibrato. Is that typical? Would your uncle have played with vibrato?

No, I don’t think he did. That’s a thing that evolved, just came to me.

Did the old-timers play with vibrato for the airs, the slow tunes?

No, most of them didn’t. Most of them never played with vibrato at all. And most of them never played on the shift. They just played in first position. And you notice lots of fiddlers now jump up and down the fingerboard. All the fiddlers now are getting a lot more violin technique.

While the main technique in the old times was the birl…

And the phrasing, the way they played tunes. They were very individual. All the good fiddlers, they all stood out as individual players in the style of playing a tune. Which made it so interesting. Whereas now a lot of written tunes, they all seem to be played the same. And they are played at sixty miles an hour, because most of them are not playing for dances. We all had good timing because we played for dances. My uncle used to say to me, “Watch the best couple on the floor. Play to them. Don’t look at the rest. Pick out who’re the best dancers and play to them.” And that will keep you right, you know. It’s a good idea. Way back then when I was young and playing dancing, there were very good dancers and right in time. A lot of the youngsters today just charge about and are not so keen on doing things right….

Could you have a dance with one fiddle?

Oh, yes. In a small schoolhouse or that, yeah. You’d always stand on a chair in the corner, so you’re a bit above, you know. And it was a good idea because the corner threw out the sound, you know. You had the wall on each side throwing out the sound, you know, from the chair. But the last time I did that was over in the Isle of Muck. They had a new schoolhouse and I was over playing a birthday party and they had a dance. And I got a chair and I stood in the corner like the old-timers and it was quite good. It kept me out of the way of the dancers in case they knocked me down. And then some of my friends in Cape Breton were telling me the way they played, like this [holding the fiddle] tight in, in case you got the fiddle knocked out of your hand.

Because the dancers would be so close to you.

Yes, they wouldn’t have a stage, you know. It’s always far better playing up, even a couple of feet. You’re above the noise and it goes out better. Of course, nowadays with all the fancy pickups, you could be almost playing in the next room.

Did people play with the fiddle under their neck or on their chest?

In fact, the woman who owned this fiddle, she just played in the crook of her arm. [Plays a tune with the fiddle resting on his arm.] Some of them played just about at the balance point [of the bow] up here.

But you chose to play under your chin.

Yes, though I made this chin rest, I play with it right over here [his chin placed on the side of the fiddle without the chin rest] unless I’m going to play up the shift. [Aonghas plays a slow air, with a shift and harmonic.] That’s Niel Gow’s famous tune, “Lament for his Second Wife.”

So people who played on their chest probably couldn’t play that tune at all?

Well, they would just play it without moving up and down at all.
At this point, a glance at our watches indicated we had better get moving on to make it to the weekly Glenfinnan Thursday evening session in time and we drove a half hour west, passing the loch-side monument where “Bonnie Prince Charlie” had landed on the mainland in 1745 for the start of his ill-fated rebellion. When we arrived at the Glenfinnan House Hotel, the session was in full swing. Local favorite Iain MacFarlane, of the Glenfinnan Ceilidh Band, was leading a tune, with accordion, tenor banjo, guitar, piano, and fiddles all chiming in. In no time, Aonghas had a seat at the table and had his fiddle out of its case. When it came time for him to lead a tune, he chose a set of pipe marches. One of his fiddle students, visiting from Glasgow, sang a beautiful Gaelic tune and a tenor banjo player from Ireland plucked out a set of Irish reels. But the highlight of the evening may well have been a recitation by Iain’s father, Charlie MacFarlane. The kilted seventy-nine year-old piper and fiddler had come tonight without his instruments but he kept the audience in stitches with his recital of Compton Mackenzie’s humorous poem, “The SS Politician,” about a whiskey-laden boat that sank off the coast of Barra during World War II.

Charlie later told me an anecdote about James Scott Skinner’s penchant for composing tunes and dedicating them to people. Skinner, originally from Aberdeen, was then living in Dundee: “He had a neighbor who was from Aberdeen and they both had a mutual friend living in Aberdeen. And this lady in Aberdeen was expecting. Every now and again, Scott Skinner went to visit this lady in Aberdeen and when he would come back, his neighbor would say, ‘Any news? Any news?’ Getting near her time. ‘No news,’ he had to say, ‘no news.’ And eventually he comes back and he says this time, ‘Any news?’ ‘Yes, two strathspeys!’ It was twins, she had.”

The next morning, as Connie and I headed out to our car to continue our journey to the Isle of Skye, Aonghas suggested we stop for a famous vista of Glengarry valley. The beautiful scene of lakes and mountains was near where Aonghas had grown up and a photo of the view appears on the cover of his Glengarry Collection. 

[Aonghas Grant’s most recent CD, The Hills of Glengarry (available from www.allcelticmusic.com/labels/Shoogle_Records.html) provides a wonderful introduction to the fiddle music of the West Highlands, from haunting airs to lilting reels ornamented to sound like the pipes. Most tunes are either traditional or composed by Aonghas, family, and friends. For those interested in playing this style, the Glengarry Collection tune book and accompanying DVD [from Mel Bay Pubs.] is an essential resource. Co-authors Barbara McOwen, Laura Risk, and Peggy Duesenberry have taken great pains to capture in the transcriptions the bowings and ornaments that give the tunes their engaging regional character. On the informally-produced DVD, Aonghas plays through a number of the tunes unaccompanied, allowing the student to observe nuances of bowing and ornamentation. Photos of Scotland and Aonghas’ commentaries on the tunes provide a visual and historical context for the collection.]

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