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## **Book review: *Hamish MacCunn (1868-1916): a musical life*, by Jennifer L. Oates**

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*Hamish MacCunn (1868-1916): a musical life* (Music in 19th-Century Britain) by Jennifer L. Oates. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013; ISBN 9780754661832 (£60.00)

The closing years of the nineteenth century were witness to great changes in British and indeed Scottish musical life. A maturing of editorial approaches to fieldwork and folksong collecting led to greater care in preserving the voices and intentions of those from whom collectors drew their material, and orchestral and symphonic evocations of place and identity occasioned the emergence of a romanticised musical nationalism. However, in time this romanticism began to wane in deference to audiences with increasingly sophisticated tastes and expectations. Jennifer Oates's new work, published by Ashgate as part of its *Music in 19th-Century Britain* series, personifies this period in the career of young, tempestuous composer Hamish MacCunn.

It was an extremely creative time in Scotland's musical life as art music composers sought to establish and rationalise their place in a London-centred hegemony. Greenock-born Hamish MacCunn did so by grounding himself firstly, firmly and publicly in the elicitation of Scottish homeland and heritage through his early works, such as *The Land of the Mountain and the Flood* and *The Dowie Dens o' Yarrow*. Both were inspired textually by the works of Sir Walter Scott, but they fall heir artistically to the works of Mendelssohn, Grieg, Dvořák and Wagner in the evocation of native traditions,

mythologies and folk imagery. In so doing, MacCunn had tapped into the 'Caledonian twilight' of the Victorian era, resulting in wide popular acclaim. This was a savvy move for a young composer finding his niche, but, as Oates demonstrates, it spelt MacCunn's eventual professional decline owing to the fact that he was never able to escape the initial public persona he had so carefully crafted. Although MacCunn's work can be said to have foreshadowed the idioms of Bartók and Vaughan Williams, he was soon outdone by them.

Oates offers a vivid portrait of MacCunn's life, education and career in the context of his time and demonstrates his contribution to the making of British musical modernity. Organised chronologically, she begins with a detailed account of MacCunn's upbringing and precocious compositional output in Greenock prior to his years at the Royal College of Music in the 1880s. This is followed by an analysis of MacCunn's efforts thereafter to find his niche as a composer in the London social scene, including the success of his overtures and choral-orchestral works at the Crystal Palace and the mixed reactions of a fickle audience. Then follows a description of his efforts to extend these early successes, including a busy period of conducting, teaching and publishing (for example, his 1891 *Songs and Ballads of Scotland*), which in the end may be said to have merely consolidated his reputation as a 'Caledonian' composer. Oates goes on to present an exhaustive dissection of MacCunn's operatic output in the 1890s, supported by contemporary evidence of his maturing compositional style and his increasingly broad yet subtle use of idiom, including traditional Scottish dance rhythms, in the face of entrenched public expectations. Oates concludes with an account of MacCunn's later works, including musical comedy and novelty pieces, and his last attempts at conducting and teaching prior to his untimely death due to throat cancer. Throughout, Oates underpins detailed musical and historical analysis with a recognition of the personal failings

and inconsistencies which beset MacCunn's life and, ultimately, doomed his career.

This is an insightful and detailed exploration of musical nationalism and the birth of 'British' music in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Oates presents this exploration methodically and with due regard to a wide range of contemporary records and seldom-seen manuscript and correspondence evidence. This is complemented by evocative contemporary photographic illustrations and frequent musical examples depicting the thematic, motivic and other details of MacCunn's works. This is particularly useful when, for instance, Oates compares Mendelssohn's *Hebrides* and MacCunn's *Land of the Mountain and the Flood* in terms of exposition, development and recapitulation. By demonstrating how the latter was influenced by the former, we see the formation of a sense of place and identity in Scottish art music in progress.

*Hamish MacCunn (1868-1916): A Musical Life* will be of value to historical musicologists, cultural historians of British and Scottish art music and to today's composers seeking insights into the evocation of landscape and other hallmarks of identity and heritage in the modern world. Composers may also find it to be a highly instructive examination of the complex relationship between artistic integrity and public perception.

### **About the review author**

JOSHUA DICKSON MA, PhD is Head of Scottish Music at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. He is the author of *When Piping was Strong: Tradition, Change and the Bagpipe in South Uist* (John Donald, 2006) and editor of *The Highland Bagpipe: Music, History, Tradition* (Ashgate, 2009).