



Mr. President, Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

### Introduction

Robert Burns has been sliced this way, that way and every imaginable way – biographically, literarily, culturally and historically. From the many available techniques, my chosen method of slicing the genius of Robert Burns tonight is the musical slice. Burns was not only Scotland's premier poet, but also an avid collector of the Scottish folksongs which he heard. I will speak tonight about the Songs of Robbie Burns, what inspired him to write them down, and how he in turn inspired others to make music which sings to us of the human condition.

The idea for this musical slice came to me from a lovely little book, called "*Songs by Robert Burns*" My Uncle Jack O'Gorman, of Dublin sent this book to me, having heard that I had been caught red-handed making speeches at Bern Burns Suppers. This tiny vellum-bound book – in size a mere 2 inches by 3 inches – was published by Siegle in London around 1900. The book was given to Jack by his Aunt, who lived in the North of Ireland. Burns songs were popular at that time for singing in a family setting, perhaps around the piano as darkness fell. I had the idea to reproduce such an evening, based upon these vellum-bound 6 square inches of Burnssong.

For a few milliseconds, I considered singing for you, but dismissed this idea because:

- firstly, my singing would subject you to a very disconcerting post-prandial musical experience, and would not assist in your digestion of the Haggis;
- secondly, I might suffer the fate of Roddie the Scottish Piper<sup>1</sup>.

It was Roddie's proud boast that he could play any tune you could name, although some of his critics would tell you that Roddie blew so lustily that all his tunes sounded alike. The big night of the year had arrived and Roddie was playing his solo at the concert. He blew and blew to some purpose and his selection was greeted with great applause. To the accompaniment of shouts of "*encore*" a voice was heard from the back of the hall: "*Can ye gie's 'Scots wha Hae'!*" **<pause>** Roddie's smile of satisfaction suddenly disappeared. "*Wha'?*" he cried in some bewilderment "*Agin? I just played it!*"



Instead, I have persuaded some kind friends to come together this evening to form a musical team for your entertainment. **Mr. Heinz Tschanz**, an accomplished classical pianist and teacher, will accompany his charming wife, **Louise**, who will sing for us. In addition, **Mr. David Weston**, a Sassenach, will play flute. Your Speaker will accompany David on guitar.



The Immortal Memorials are attending their first Burns Supper this evening, and I wish to express my warmest thanks to them for their support.

### Biographical Background

Robert Burns<sup>2</sup> was a pioneer of the Romantic Movement, an artistic and intellectual movement that originated in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe. It stressed strong emotion, such as love, trepidation even jealousy as aesthetic experiences, and freed art from classical strictures, allowing full rein to the individual imagination.

Burns was born at Alloway on January 25, 1759. His mother, Agnes Broun, infected him with a love of Scottish songs and poems, which she sang to him as an infant. She had learned these songs while working in the fields and at harvest time at the threshing. Aged 15 and working as a farm laborer, Burns met his first love, Nelly Kirkpatrick, who – like his own mother – sang sweetly. It was to the tune of her favorite reel that he wrote his first song: “*Handsome Nell*”<sup>3,4</sup>. Burns described this first song in his autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore<sup>5</sup>, as the first time he had “*committed the sin of rhyme.*”<sup>6</sup>

Nell was the first in a long line of women for whom he sinned in this rhythmic fashion during his lifetime, as he burned not only with the Muse but also with a full appreciation of the virtues of Woman. He spread his affections freely, penning poems and songs to reflect his feelings. His affairs resulted not only in children by 5 different women, but also in the warmest, most sensuous love songs that any poet has given to the world.

### Johnson: Scots Musical Museum

The growing success and reputation as an unschooled “*ploughman poet*” which he enjoyed following publication of his collection: “*Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*”, encouraged Burns to move to Edinburgh in order to seek a patron.

Burns met James Johnson, a struggling music engraver. Both shared a love of old Scots songs. Burns became a contributor to the “*The Scots Musical Museum*”, and travelled through the Scottish Highlands on what he described as a “*pilgrimage to the classic scenes of this country*”<sup>7</sup>. He was finally responsible for 1/3 of the 600 songs in the 3 volumes of the *Musical Museum*.



From the “*Musical Museum*”, we have chosen the lyrical love song called “*John Anderson, my Jo*” to perform for you. Burns took an old, bawdy song and rewrote it as one of his most well-loved and beautiful love songs – creating an enchanting expression of time-tried tenderness<sup>8</sup>. John Anderson’s wife speaks to him about the love they bear for each other, which has been unchanged by the progression of time, of how they climbed the hill of life together, and spent many a “*canty day*” with



each other. Now, in old age, they will “*totter down*”, and “*sleep together*” at the foot. “*Jo*” is a word which means “*sweetheart*” or “*schatzell*”.

These were the words which Burns perhaps imagined to hear whispered into his ear by his wife, Jean, in old age; they were a projection into a future which did not come to pass for him. He died on July 21, 1796, at the young age of 37 from rheumatic fever. He was buried in the churchyard of St. Michael's in Dumfries, even as his young wife Jean, aged only 31, gave birth to their ninth child.



Louise Tschanz will now sing “*John Anderson, My Jo*” for us. Heinz Tschanz, her *Jo*, will tenderly accompany her on the piano.

Heinz and Louise: John Anderson, My Jo

Burns did not actually compose the tunes for his songs; he selected them from the rich musical soup of Scots and Gaelic cultures that surrounded him. His unflinching ear captured many beautiful old Scottish melodies, and his verses pinned them forever to paper.

Burns describes how he mastered the tune, before composing the words, I quote: “*My way is: I ... chuse my theme; begin one Stanza; when that is composed, which is generally the most difficult part of the business, I walk out, sit down now and then, look out for objects in Nature around me that are in unison or harmony with the cogitations of my fancy and workings of my bosom; humming every now and then the air with the verses I have framed*”

The song *Afton Water*, also from the *Scots Musical Museum*<sup>9</sup>, is based upon a poem presented by Robert Burns to Mrs. General Stewart of Slair. It appeared in the *Scots Musical Museum* in 1792, set to music by Alexander Hume.

The song was inspired by Mrs Stewart’s home Afton Lodge in Ayrshire on the banks of the Afton River. The *Mary* probably refers to Mary Campbell, whom Burns courted, and who died tragically of a *malignant fever*<sup>10</sup>, probably typhus.

The **River Afton**<sup>11</sup> is a small river, which flows North from Alwhat Hill, through the Afton Reservoir, and then for eight miles down Glen Afton to join the River Nith at New Cumnock. The word picture of idyllic scenery painted by Burns in the song:



*How pleasant thy banks and green valleys below,  
 Where, wild in the woodlands, the primroses blow;  
 There oft, as mild Ev'ning weeps over the lea,  
 The sweet-scented birk shades my Mary and me*

leads me to my second Burns Supper joke: At the beginning of time God, in his infinite wisdom, turned to the Archangel Gabriel and said "Today I am going to create Scotland. I will make it a country of dark beautiful mountains, purple glens and rich green forests. I will give it clear swift flowing rivers, which I will with salmon. The land shall be lush and fertile, on which the people shall grow barley to brew into an amber nectar that will be much sought after the world over. Underneath the land I shall lay rich seams of coal. In the waters around the shores there will be an abundance of fish and beneath the sea bed there will be vast deposits of oil and gas."

"Excuse me Sire" interrupted the Archangel Gabriel. "Don't you think you are being a little overgenerous to these Scots?"

"Not really" replied the Lord. "Wait until you see the neighbours I am giving them."

*"Flow gently, Sweet Afton, among thy green braes.  
 Flow gently. I'll sing thee a song in thy praise"*



Louise and Heinz will now perform Afton Water.

*Heinz and Louise: Afton Water*

Thomson: Select Collection of Scottish Airs



In addition to Johnson's *Musical Museum*, Burns contributed more than 100 songs to George Thomson's five-volume "*A Select Collection Of Scottish Airs for the Voice*". Thompson was a civil servant, but had a passion for traditional music. Sharing this passion, Burns spent the last years of his life preparing songs for it.

*A Red, Red Rose*<sup>12</sup> is a 1794 song written down by Robert Burns and based on traditional sources. In this case, Burns preserved the old text of the song, and not the tune:

*O my Luve's like a red, red rose,  
 That's newly sprung in June:  
 O my Luve's like the melodie,  
 That's sweetly play'd in tune.*



Burns passed the text to the Scottish singer Pietro Urbani, who set it to a tune of his own composition. Urbani wrote that Burns “was so struck by [the words of the song] when sung by a country girl that he wrote them down and, not being pleased with the air, begged the author to set them to music in the style of a Scots tune” The song describes a love that is both fresh and long lasting. It has been performed by artists in modern times such as Jean Redpath and Eddie Reader<sup>13</sup>. Here, in a world premiere, David Weston will play it on flute, with your Speaker on guitar.

David and Ian: A Red Red Rose



Burns’s Influence on Other Composers

Many composers have been fascinated by Burns’s work. George Thomson's collections introduced the songs to European composers. The German poet Wilhelm Gerhard published a translation of Burns’s poetry in 1840, as well as his awkwardly-named *Minstrelklänge aus Schottland, rhythmisch verdeutscht*, inspiring the Romantic composers such as Mendelssohn, Brahms and Schumann. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shostakovich, Tippett and Britten have been drawn to the lyrics.

Robert Schumann was born 14 years after Burns’s death. He wrote the *Myrten Lieder Zyklus*<sup>14</sup> in 1840, which included 8 songs set to Burns lyrics, as translated by Gerhard. The defining struggle of Schumann’s life at that time was to win his bride, Clara. On tenterhooks waiting for Clara to turn 21, when the law would allow them to marry, Schumann expressed his love for her in the *Myrten* cycle. He had the songs printed in two colors, in order to allow a design of green myrtles (the German symbol of marriage) to adorn the lettering on the cover. He presented this volume to Clara on the eve of their marriage. The Burns songs were chosen to portray the steadfastness of heart which beats in the sometimes wild breasts of Highlanders.

We have chosen two songs from *Myrten* to perform for you. In *Hauptmann’s Weib*, Schumann is saying that he is proud of his Clara, who is a redoubtable fighter. Indeed, Clara became a composer in her own right and a virtuoso piano performer. In the original Burns poem, the *Captain’s Lady* views the battle from safety:



*When the drums do beat  
And the cannons rattle  
Thou shalt sit in state  
And see thy love in battle*

Gerhard misinterpreted the words “in state” in his translation to mean “armour”. His redoubtable Lady is mounted in full armor, ready to join the fray, and to join her lover after the battle.



David and Heinz will now perform *Hauptmann's Weib* (in English *The Captain's Lady*) on flute and piano:

David and Heinz: Hauptmanns Weib



The second song from *Myrten*, which we will perform for you, is called *Weit Weit*. It is one of the simplest songs in the cycle, and refers to an episode in 1788 in which Burns returned to Ayrshire to find that his beloved Jean Armour has been driven from her home by her parents:

*O how can I be blithe and glad  
Or how can I gang brisk and braw,  
When the bonie lad that I lo'e the best  
Is o'er the hills and far away*

Gerhard renders these Burns lyrics in German thus:

*Wie kann ich froh und munter sein  
Und flink mich drehn bei meinem Leid?  
Der schmucke Junge, der mich liebt,  
Ist über die Berge weit, weit.*

David and Heinz will now perform *Weit Weit*.

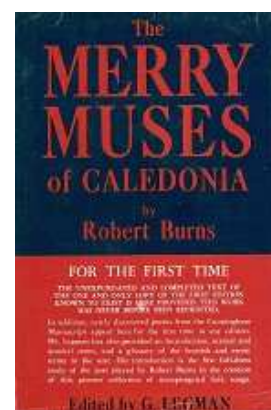
David and Heinz: Hauptmanns Weib Weit, Weit



Erotic and Bawdy Songs

Burns was fond of collecting erotic verse and bawdy songs, suitable for singing in taverns, and enjoyed sending them to Robert Cleghorn, a fellow-member of a convivial club of young men known as the *Crochallan Fencibles*. He wrote as follows in October of 1793: "*There is, there must be, some truth in original sin. My violent propensity to bawdry convinces me of it. ... I am the most offending soul alive.*"

Some of the songs were of such an indecorous nature, that they were kept locked in his desk drawer, and intended to be shared only with his drinking buddies. They were published after Burns's death as *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*<sup>15, 16</sup>.



Titles such as *Beware of the Ripples*, *Andrew an' his Cuttie Gun* will give you a hint of the boisterous nature of the texts.

We will perform two bawdy songs for you. The first is called *Nine Inch will Please a Lady*. It refers to a popular Highlands leisure-time pursuit of that time, still widely



popular to this day. Even though the song is securely encrypted in Scots English, as part of a polite Burns Supper speech it is possible only to quote the following filtered extract from the song, using bleeps instead of the rude bits, as they do on television:

*But for a bleepie bleep like mine  
In sooth, we're not sae gentle  
We'll tak tway thumb-breads to the nine  
And that is a sonsy bleepie*

To put the title of the song into perspective, I can tell you that *Nine Inches* is about 23 centimeters, or the maximum permitted length of a haggis permitted by the rules of Haggis Hurling<sup>17</sup>, a sport performed at Highland Games. It involves the hurling of a haggis as far as possible for distance and accuracy from atop a platform, usually a whisky barrel. The Haggis must be edible.

The second bawdy Burns song is called *Dainty Davie*. It relates the tale of the Reverend David Williamson who, being pursued by dragoons, took refuge in the house of Lady Cherrytree. She hid him by putting him into bed beside her daughter. The Reverend showed great daintiness of manners and took advantage of the situation by getting her daughter with child, to the great scandal of the Puritans of that period.

David will now daintily play *Nine Inches* and *Dainty Davie* for us upon his 26 inch Flute.

*David and Ian: Nine Inch will Please a Lady Dainty Davy*

### Auld Lang Syne

To complete our tour of Burnssong, some words about "*Auld Lang Syne*"<sup>18</sup>:

Robert Burns picked up the tune and some of the words from an old man singing in the dialect of southwest Scotland. He sent the first draft of the song to Mrs. Dunlop in 1788 with the following comments:<sup>19</sup>

*"is not the Scots phrase, 'Auld lang syne,' exceedingly expressive?.... There is [the] fire of native genius in it"*

Burns published the song in the 1796 edition of the *Musical Museum*, signing it with a "Z," denoting a traditional song by an anonymous writer.

"*Auld Lang Syne*" has become the international song of departure, and is sung by more people than perhaps any other. The song centers upon two young men, who drifted apart after their early schooling. After being reunited, they reminisce about earlier times, their happy experiences together and the kindly folk they have met.



The wonder of this song is that Burns wrote it down in a language few understand – how many people singing *Auld Lang Syne* know that we "*pou'd the gowans fine*" mean we have "*picked the beautiful daisies*"? Taking "*a right gude willie waught*" means merely that we will take a "*kräftiger Schlück*" from our glasses. "*Auld Lang Syne*" itself means "*Former days and friends*".

There are many theories of how this song came to be upon the lips of people across the globe. My favorite amongst them is the theory that it was spread by freemasons<sup>20</sup>. Freemasonry was very popular in Protestant Europe during Burns's time, especially in the British Isles, where the first Grand Lodge was formed in London in 1717.

Burns joined the Lodge St. David in Tarbolton as an Entered Apprentice at the age of 23. The Lodge book<sup>21</sup> for that evening records that: "*Robert Burns in Lochly was passed and raised, Henry Cowan being Master ... and others of the brethren being present.*"

Burns saw Freemasonry as the cutting edge of democracy, equality and brotherhood of all men and races. "*Auld Lang Syne*", was sung at the end of convivial Lodge Dinners, in which all form a circle where everyone is equidistant from the centre, symbolizing their equality. To begin, all stand with hands by their sides, symbolizing being relative strangers. The early verses are sung very softly, accompanied by reflection upon cherished memories of earlier times together and thoughts of those who have passed away.



At the last verse, "*And there's a hand, my trusty friend*", each extends the right hand of fellowship to the person on his left, and the left hand to the person on his right. This has two symbolic elements: the crossing of hearts, and the forming of a smaller and more intimate circle of friendship. Now there exists an unbroken chain of close friends.

Had Robert Burns lived today, the royalties which he would earn from this one song alone would have made him a very rich man. Compare it with the popular song Happy Birthday<sup>22,23</sup>, written by the Hill sisters in 1895, when they were school teachers in Kentucky. The lyrics were copyrighted in 1935, and have changed hands since then in multi-billion-dollar deals. The current owner is Time Warner, and the copyright is due to expire in 2030. By contrast, *Auld Lang Syne* is free of copyright, and I am happy to inform you that we are legally entitled to sing it later this evening, without having to pay a single Rappen in license fees to enjoy the immortal musical genius of Robert Burns.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please be upstanding, raise your glasses and join me in drinking a Toast to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns, Bard and Songwriter!





- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.scotsindependent.org/features/scotwit/index.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Burns](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Burns)
- <sup>3</sup> [http://www.worldburnsclub.com/poems/o\\_once\\_l\\_lovd.htm](http://www.worldburnsclub.com/poems/o_once_l_lovd.htm)
- <sup>4</sup> Dirt & Deity, A Life of Robert Burns, Ian McIntyre, Flamingo, ISBN 0 00 638759 4 – page 21
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/MooreDrJohn.647.shtml>
- <sup>6</sup> Project Gutenberg: letters of Robert Burns: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/9863>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.nls.uk/burns/mainsite/trav/trav.htm>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.springthyme.co.uk/songtexts/JohnAndersonMyJo.html>
- <sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Scots\\_Musical\\_Museum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scots_Musical_Museum)
- <sup>10</sup> Dirt & Deity, McIntyre, (see above) p75
- <sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afton\\_Water](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afton_Water)
- <sup>12</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Red%2C\\_Red\\_Rose](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Red%2C_Red_Rose)
- <sup>13</sup> <http://www.eddireader.co.uk/>
- <sup>14</sup> The Songs of Robert Schumann, Hyperion Records Ltd, London, Dorothea Böschmann, Ian Bostridge, Graham Johnson (piano). CDJ33107, LC 7533
- <sup>15</sup> <http://www.robertburns.org.uk/merrymuses.htm>
- <sup>16</sup> <http://www.immortalia.com/html/books-OCRed/merry-muses/index.htm>
- <sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haggis\\_hurling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haggis_hurling)
- <sup>18</sup> <http://www.masonmusic.org/burns.html>
- <sup>19</sup> [http://www.worldburnsclub.com/expert/burns\\_songs\\_an\\_american\\_connection.htm](http://www.worldburnsclub.com/expert/burns_songs_an_american_connection.htm)
- <sup>20</sup> <http://scottishritemasons-can.org/hampnew.htm>
- <sup>21</sup> [http://www.worldburnsclub.com/expert/burns\\_freemason.htm](http://www.worldburnsclub.com/expert/burns_freemason.htm)
- <sup>22</sup> <http://happy-birthday.biography.ms/>
- <sup>23</sup> <http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2003/7/5/112441/6280>