

Four Scottish Dances, Op. 59 (1957)
Sir Malcolm Arnold (1921 – 2006)

Sir Malcolm studied composition with Gordon Jacob and trumpet with Ernest Hall at the Royal College of Music. During the second World War he played in the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and after two years military service he joined the BBC Symphony Orchestra for two years. After a year's study in Italy, he returned to England and devoted himself to conducting and composing. He wrote nine symphonies, seventeen concerti (including works for clarinet, guitar, flute, piano, violin, harmonica, French horn, and viola), a large volume of orchestral, chamber, instrumental, vocal, and ballet music, two operas, and music for more than 80 films, including "The Bridge over the River Kwai" and "The Inn of the Sixth Happiness."

Arnold's music is basically diatonic and key-oriented. He frequently makes use of catchy tunes, and his orchestration is always masterful. In larger works, Arnold prefers melody to developing themes, and his works frequently progress with new variants of his themes, rather than fragmentation of them for development. Although his early works contain passages reminiscent of the music of Bartók and Sibelius, Arnold claimed that it was Berlioz who influenced him most. Certainly, he developed the Berlioz techniques of expressive orchestration, sweeping melodies, and the shock tactics of sudden changes in harmony, mood, and texture. He used a wide variety of compositional styles and moved freely from one to the other, which thwarts any attempt to categorize him.

The Four Scottish Dances were dedicated to the BBC Light Music Festival. Apart from one melody by Robert Burns all the themes are original. The first dance is in the style of a strathspey, a slow Scottish dance in 4/4 time with many dotted notes, often in the arrangement of a Scottish snap. The name comes from the Strath (or valley) of the river Spey and was originally synonymous with the reel. Later, the name reel was given to a different type of dance. The second movement is a lively reel which starts out in the key of E flat and rises a semitone with each repetition until the bassoon plays a very slow variation in G major. The dance concludes with a restatement of the theme at its original speed in its original, E-flat key. A Hebridean Song forms the basis for the third movement, which depicts the sea and the mountains on a breezeless summer day. Much use is made of open violin strings in the last movement, which is a vigorous Highland fling that brings the work to an exciting conclusion.

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