

## PIOBAIREACHD – SCOTLAND’S GREAT ART.

Brett Tidswell, National Principal of Piping

“To the make of a piper go seven years of his own learning and seven generations before. At the end of his seven years, one born to it will stand at the start of knowledge, and lending a fond ear to the drone, he may have parley with old folks of old affairs.” (Neil Munro-“The lost Piobaireachd”).

*Piobaireachd* (pee-brock) is not the music of the pipe band, (a nineteenth century invention) nor is it the strathspeys and reels that folk dance to. These are known to pipers as *Ceol Beag* or little music. *Piobaireachd* (a Gaelic word literally meaning the playing of pipes) is called *Ceol Mor*, “the great music” of the pipe that serious pipers revere as the height of their art.



WILLIAM ROSS  
HER MAJESTY'S PIPER



JOHN CAMPBELL  
ADERFELBY

So what is it that goes into the making of this so called “great music”? Like the strathspey, this music is unique to the Highlands of Scotland. Generally tunes consist of a poetic *urlar* (a ground or theme), upon which several variations of varying tempi are constructed. These are embellished with a series of musical ornaments that become more complex as the tune progresses, culminating with the return to the *urlar* to complete the tune. The effect of these variations with an instrument that is harmonically balanced against its drones will provide an almost mesmerising effect. The piper uses subtle variations of note length to build poetic phrasing, expression

and character into a piece to convey the story the original composer was trying to portray to the listener.

These *piobaireachd* are repetitious gathering tunes that call the Clan, stately salutes about the heroes of battle, or notable gents and ladies, or a lament mourning those who deserve our respect or sometimes contempt. These tunes often date back hundreds of years to a time when the bard or piper held great esteem in the Gaelic community.

Legend says that the MacCrimmons were the greatest of the hereditary pipers, who had a college at Boreraig in Skye where pipers from all over Scotland were refined over a number of years and returned to their patrons. The origin of the music and the history of the MacCrimmons were lost in the mists of time. Our earliest knowledge stretches back to Findlay and Ian Odhar, sometime around the sixteenth century.

After Colloden in 1745 and the subsequent bans on many aspects of Gaelic life, which included the bagpipe, regarded by the English as an instrument of war on the assumption that no Scottish Clan had ever marched into battle without a piper, many of the old tunes were lost, or in fear of being lost. Piping which was then to survive within the Scottish Regiments, now serving the British crown, began to change its character and *piobaireachd* was more commonly heard on the competition boards at many gatherings, being judged by the local laird or vicar. Those days have gone, and the judges are now piping experts, with the audience made up of piping purists and the general public usually regarding *piobaireachd* as an acquired taste, preferring to watch the caber tossing or tug-o-war.



JOHN STEWART  
SHEPHERD

In the nineteenth century, tunes were for the first time, being written to manuscript. This has certainly preserved many that would otherwise have been lost to us, but the criticism being that such music cannot be written. *Piobaireachd* is based on a rhythmic meter much like poetry, where the piper cuts or extends notes to mark phrases, the ends of lines, or even various notes of identical value throughout a line to create interest and the mood of a tune. This is not done at random, and there must be some historical source upon which the pipers base their particular setting. There are various schools of playing and they all have their own individual styles and settings. Some of the pipers own feelings and interpretation are no doubt always expressed in a tune, but variation from the existing settings is frowned upon.

Being an oral tradition *piobaireachd* was taught using a *canntaireachd* (can-trock). This was a method of verbalising the notes and embellishments in a tune and teaching it as a song. This method is still used today, with the manuscript used as a teaching aid. Rare is it to find a piper that has learnt *piobaireachd* with any success that has not had a proper teacher to refine his art using *canntaireachd*, even in this age of modern communication.

So what is it that these pipers are attempting to express? Let us analyse one tune as an example, a favourite among pipers known as “The Unjust Incarceration.” This was composed by the famous blind piper of Gairloch, Iain Dall MacKay, who we know lived from 1656 to 1754. The tune tells the story of Neil, the eldest son of the seventh chief of the MacKays of Strathnaver who was incarcerated on Bass Rock a tiny island off East Lothian for nine years from 1427, by King James I. In his efforts to control the Highland Clans, James had called a parliament in Inverness and when they arrived James had many of the Clan Chiefs executed or placed in “safe keeping” in various jails or strongholds throughout Scotland. Neil escaped after James was executed in 1436.

The first line of the tune laments Neil’s incarceration and expresses his sorrow. *Hiharin hioen, hihoroohin, hiemdan hoen*, goes the *canntaireachd*. The second line of the *urlar* changes mood and moves on to Neil’s indignation with being interred. The piece takes on a questioning appeal, *hihidrotra, cheredehoen, hiadreahoen*, begins the second line of music. Onto the third line, the piper playing more forcefully changes the mood of the tune to tell the story of Neil’s rage as his period of internment progresses. *Hiharache, hivedarive, cheho, hiaembarive*, that line begins.

All of our tunes have these wonderful stories expressing our history, in an emotive musical form. “The Lament for the Children” accredited to Patrick Mor MacCrimmon who is said to have lost seven of his eight sons in one year to a smallpox outbreak on Skye, brought there by a visiting ship during the mid seventeenth century. This tune is said to be one of our most beautiful laments.

“The Piper’s Warning to his Master”, tells the story of a captured castle and the piper’s attempts to warn his returning master by playing variations in a well known tune as a signal that all was not well. When the captors discovered the deception the piper’s fingers were all cut from his hands, which is said to give rise to the name, “Hill of the Bloody Hand” in Islay.

Patrick Caogach (squinting Peter) was brother of Donald Mor MacCrimmon. Patrick was killed by his half brother, a native of Kintail, and Donald Mor prepared to avenge his death. The chief of Clan MacLeod in an effort to let Donald simmer instructed him to stay at home and before the end of the year justice would be done. During this time Donald's anger grew and at the end of the year he set out for Glenelg and pursued his brother's murderer to Kintail. When the locals failed to tell Donald where the culprit was hiding, he was so enraged, he is said to have killed several of the villagers and burnt down 18 houses. The tune "Flame of Wrath for Patrick Caogach," is a short but powerful tune using to great effect the constantly repeated bottom note of the pipe chanter.



JAMES MORQAN  
SERVANT TO THEIR ROYAL HIGHNESSES  
THE PRINCE AND PRINCESS CHRISTIAN  
OF SCHLESWIG HOLSTEIN



ARCHIBALD F MACDONALDB  
JAGERTO  
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS  
THE PRINCE OF WALES

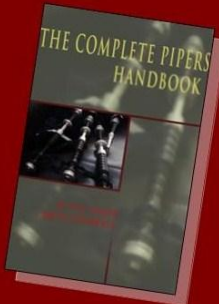
The tune "MacCrimmon Will Never Return" was written by Donald Ban MacCrimmon, who was dispatched with a number of his clansmen to fight against the army of Bonnie Prince Charlie. It is believed he was a reluctant participant, being a supporter of the Stuart cause, and had a premonition of his forthcoming death, composing a tune to mark the occasion. He is shown as the only casualty at the engagement known as the Rout of Moy.

One of modern time's greatest exponents of *piobaireachd* was Pipe Major John MacDonald - Inverness. He wrote in 1949 that, "A Piper should be a man of as wide a culture as possible, not only concerned about execution, but with strong and sympathetic understanding of natures varied moods, translated by him into music." "When a piper is at his best, and is being carried away by his tune, he sees a picture in his mind – at least that is how it is with me. When I am playing "The Kiss of the

King's Hand," I visualise Skye and Boreraig and the MacCrimmons. The tune "Donald Doughall MacKay" brings to mind a picture of the old pipers, and how they played this tune. A piper in order to play his best must be oblivious to his surroundings – he must be carried away by the beauty and harmony of the tune he is playing."

*Piobaireachd* with its length, intricacies, emotions and the need to have a well set pipe is not the domain of the novice. To say one stands at the start of knowledge after seven years of learning is no exaggeration as this art encompasses a life times study. The knowledge passed orally from our teachers cannot be under estimated and indeed I would say that any master's skill could not be honed in this art without adding the input of previous generations of pipers to his learning. I have heard *piobaireachd* referred to as self indulgent music, as it may sometimes seem to the uninitiated. It is played only on a solo pipe, and the competent performer often seems to be drifting off to some far away place, but be assured he is "lending a fond ear to the drone" and expressing the thoughts of "old folks and old affairs".

This article was written for a worldwide Scottish Magazine of a non-piping nature in 2004. More articles and piping information can be seen at the school of piping website. <http://www.schoolofpiping.com/index.html>



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