

# Bagpipe Music - a Primer

The bagpipe carries a long and honorable history stretching back to the beginnings of civilization as one of the oldest instruments created and played by early humans.

Most likely, the music had its beginnings in ancient Egypt where a simple chanter and drone were played together. These were later attached to a bag made of skin and fitted with a blowpipe making a primitive form of the instrument we have today. This kind of Bagpipe was played by the Greeks and the Romans, and eventually spread throughout Europe, carried first by the Celts and then by the Romans on their invasions. (see *the May 2010 Issue of OPD for an abbreviated history of the bagpipes*)

In Britain, its history and fate, except in the Highlands of Scotland, followed the same pattern as on the continent. It came with the Celts and the Romans and flourished for centuries as the instrument of the common people. It was played at fairs, weddings, open air dancing, pageants and all sorts of processions and merry makings.

It fitted into the clan system then operated in the Highlands, the chiefs of the clan having their own – in many cases a hereditary office – and colleges, of which there were several, were set up for the teaching of bagpipe playing. In these colleges was developed the "Ceol Mor", or "Piobaireachd" (see *the July 2010 issue of OPD for an explanation of Piobaireachd*).

Piobaireachd was originally passed from one generation to the next using an oral system for teaching the repertoire, called **canntaireachd**. This was eventually replaced by the classical European system of music notation.

Without getting into a lot of music theory, music notation uses a five-line staff. Pitch is shown by placement of notes on the staff and duration is shown with different note values and additional symbols such as dots and ties. The lines are (from bottom to top) **E G B D F** and the spaces are **F A C E**. Notation is read from left to right.



A staff (or stave, in British English) of written music generally begins with a clef, which indicates the position of one particular note on the staff.



Following the clef, the key signature on a staff indicates the key of the piece by specifying that certain notes are flat (*b*) – lower in tone by one half-ton, or sharp (#) – higher in tone by one half-tone throughout the piece. The question is frequently asked, “*What key are the bagpipes?*” The appropriate answer is, bagpipe music is written in the *key of B minor or D major* (two sharps #).



Following the key signature is the time signature. Measures (bars) divide the piece into groups of beats, and the time signatures specify those groupings of notes.

The bagpipe scale consists of nine (9) notes...that's it. The limit of nine notes (along with the key) is why some tunes cannot (and/or should not) be played on the bagpipes.

Unique to bagpipes are the embellishments that separate the notes in a tune. There are single grace notes, doublings and half-doublings, and combinations of grace notes including throws, shakes, birls, lemluaths, taorluaths, crunluaths, and edres.

A bagpipe music manuscript for the familiar tune, *Scotland the Brave*, is shown on the following page.

Music written for the Great Highland Bagpipes falls into one of three categories:

- **Ceol Mor**—the Great Music: a repertoire consisting of salutes, gathering tunes, marches, *cumha* (laments), and *brosnachadh* (incitements to battle)
- **Ceol Meadhonach**—the Middle Music: slow airs and jigs
- **Ceol Beag** (or **Ceol Aotrom**)—the Little Music: marches, strathspeys, reels and hornpipes

## Ceòl Meadhonach

Ceòl Meadhonach includes tunes as are neither constructed to the measure of Piobaireachd, nor adapted to the quick march or dance. Included are the slow air and jig.

Generally, **airs** are graceful, elegant, polished, often strophic songs (i.e., songs having the same music for each stanza), typically dealing with amorous subjects. But many are lively and animated, full of rhythmic subtleties, while others are deeply emotional works that gain much of their effect from bold, expressive harmonies and striking melodic lines.

The **jig** is a popular tune-type within the traditions of Irish dance music; second only to the reel, and popular but somewhat less common in Scottish country dance music.

## Ceòl Beag

As mentioned, **Ceòl Beag** is the Gaelic-language term for "little music," which in bagpiping includes such forms as marches, strathspeys, reels, and hornpipes.

A **march**, as a musical genre, is a piece of music with a strong regular rhythm which in origin was expressly written for marching to. Marches can range in tempo from slow to quick. A **Retreat March** is a form of departing music. It is believed that the term comes from the French *Retraite* meaning retire or return to bed in the evening.

**Strathspey** refers both to the type of tune, and to the type of dance usually done to it. It is named after the Strathspey region of Scotland, in Moray and Badenoch and Strathspey. It is similar to a hornpipe but slower and more stately, and containing many snaps. These days there are at least four, some would say seven, varieties: the bouncy schottische, the strong strathspey, the song or air strathspey, all three of which can be enjoyed for dancing, and the Competition strathspey for the bagpipe, primarily intended as a display of virtuosity.

The **reel** is a folk dance type as well as the accompanying dance tune type. It is one of the four dances which comprise Scottish country dancing, the others being the jig, the strathspey and the waltz. It is very rhythmic and very quick tempo. It is believed that the reel was originated from an old Irish dance called the *Hey* in the mid 1500's. Today many Irish reels are supplemented with new compositions and by tunes from other traditions which are easily adapted as reels. It is the most popular tune-type within the Irish dance music tradition.

The term **hornpipe** refers to one of several dance forms played and danced in Britain and elsewhere from the late 17th century until the present day. This type of hornpipe is generally thought of as a sailors' dance.

All bagpipe music is performed from memory; adding to the complexity and art of the instrument. Building a repertoire of tunes in each of the genre is a lifelong endeavor.

When competing, bands are placed into one of five grades with 1 being the uppermost. The Omaha Pipes and Drums compete in Grade 4. Each grade has an associated minimum number of performers (pipers and drummers) and music requirements. For pipe band competitions, the music requirements fall into one of three categories; **MSR** (March/Strathspey/Reel), **QMM** (Quick March Medley – any number of quick marches played in succession), or **Medley** (minimum of four different tune categories). The grade of the band determines the tune requirement and time limit. The selection of tunes to meet the requirements is up to the individual band.

Solo players are graded as professional, amateur, or novice. The Amateur Grade is further divided into Grades 1 - 4. The Novice Grade is divided by age; Senior Novice (30 years and older) and Junior Novice (29 and under). The music requirements are determined by grade and fall into four categories; **March**, **S/R** (Strathspey/Reel), **H/J** (Hornpipe/Jig), and **6/8 Mar** (6/8 March). Similarly, **Piobaireachd** is graded as professional or amateur with the amateurs being divided from into four grades.