OP&D
July, 2010
a Celtic tradition since 1970

Piobaireachd

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: strathspeys, marches, hornpipes and reels

Piobaireachd (pronounced *pea*-broch, with that gutteral *ch* sound) is another name for the *Ceol Mor*, the classical music of the bagpipe. The word itself is Gaelic for "what the piper does," from the root words ***piob*** (pipe) and ***piobaire*** (piper).

Like other forms of classical music in Europe, piobaireachd focuses on a single central theme. Serial variations are presented until the theme is said to have been exhausted; the piece then reverts to the original theme at the finish. Depending on the nature of the composition and the number of variations explored, a piobaireachd tune can last anywhere from eight to 25 minutes. Every tune in the piobaireachd repertoire follows a similar, regimented pattern and structure.

Tune Structure in Piobaireachd

In the specific case of piobaireachd, the theme is called the *urlar*, meaning ground or floor. This is the starting point for any piobaireachd tune, as well as the ending. This is the basic air, a slow melody ornamented by grace notes. In the next stage, known as *siubhal* (wandering), variations are introduced that are regular and rhythmic. The variations get increasingly complex and technically challenging in the next stage, the *taorluath*, which leads into the *crunluath*, or crowning movement, during which three notes are added to every bar of the music. The crunluath may be the final section of the piece, or it may be followed by a *taorluath a-mach* or *crunluath a-mach* segment before the mandatory return to the theme of the urlar. This return to the urlar brings the tune full circle, and underscores the cultural concept that the piobaireachd, as a musical form, has no end.

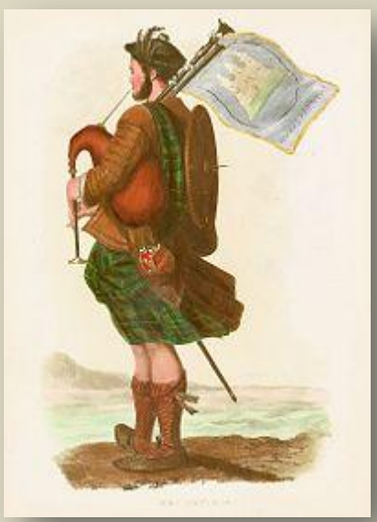
Historical Notes: The Repertoire

Some experts think that piobaireachd must be a very ancient art form. By the time the MacCrimmons touched off the gilded age of piobaireachd during the 16th century, it was even then already very highly evolved and complex as a musical form, as if it had been in existence for several centuries.

The whole piobaireachd repertoire comprises slightly more than 300 tunes, some dating back to that golden age, and some composed only within the last century. The playing limitations of bagpipes have had a fundamental impact on the repertoire itself. Because the bagpipes are not capable of dynamic emphasis of notes (playing some notes louder for emphasis), composers of music for the pipes have instead had to extend the length of certain notes to emphasize them over others.

With this built-in predisposition for drawing notes out, it's no wonder why the piobaireachd repertoire is characteristically slow and meditative. Another characteristic of the repertoire is its highly emotional quality. Included in the repertoire are laments, salutes, gathering tunes, and marches, each type designed to stir a different set of feelings. It is said that in the right hands, the bagpipes can convey the entire spectrum of human emotions, as well as mimic any sound in nature.

Historical quibbling aside, the piobaireachd truly begins with the advent of the most influential family in the history of piping—the MacCrimmons. The MacCrimmons were not only blessed with musical genius, but seemingly cursed as well, enduring tragedy after tragedy—the family survived deaths, murders, incarcerations, and epidemics, but never ceased piping and composing. This interplay between genius and despair led to the creation of many of the finest pieces in the entire piobaireachd repertoire.



A romanticized portrait of a MacCrimmon piper

The MacCrimmons

The MacCrimmons of Skye were hereditary pipers to the clan MacLeod of Dunvegan for more than 200 years. Back in the day, pipers were esteemed professionals, well-paid by the clan chief who employed them, and it was not all that unusual for their compensation to include an endowment of real estate. Early in the 16th century, the MacCrimmons received use of the MacLeod estate at Boreraig, rent-free for as long as the MacCrimmons remained pipers to clan MacLeod. The family lived and worked at Boreraig until 1770, when the last hereditary MacCrimmon piper, Iain Dubh, quit his tenure and surrendered the lands to the MacLeods.

Boreraig became the center of piping in Scotland, for it was there that the MacCrimmons established a world-renowned academy to which chiefs or lords would send their pipers for instruction. The MacCrimmon course of study took at least seven years to complete; to become MacCrimmon-certified as a master of composition and theory of pipe music, a piper had to learn a minimum of 196 tunes, but even learning this portion of the repertoire was a daunting task that took some students over a decade to accomplish.

The MacCrimmons were famed not only as the most sought-after teachers of piobaireachd (they worked out an oral system for teaching the repertoire, called ***canntaireachd***—see below), but also as its finest composers and pipers. If the legends surrounding MacCrimmon family history are to be believed, then some of the piobaireachd tunes composed by the MacCrimmons must have been created under some pretty amazing circumstances. Here are two notable examples of tunes with astounding origin tales behind them.

> ***A Flame of Wrath for Squinting Patrick***
> Donald Mor MacCrimmon, then-occupant of the position of hereditary piper to the MacLeods, had a brother, Padruig Caogaich. This brother's facial tics earned him the derogatory nickname Squinting Patrick. Patrick was slain by his foster brother following a dispute, and Donald Mor MacCrimmon was hell-bent on revenge. His patron MacLeod interceded, and guaranteed Donald Mor that justice would be delivered within a year's time. When 12 months came and went without satisfaction, Donald Mor resolved to take matters into his own hands. He traveled with friends to Kintail, the village of Squinting Patrick's murderer, and knocked on many doors demanding his surrender. At each house, he was told that the murderer had gone out. This was the last straw for Donald Mor and his friends; they nailed the doors shut and set fire to 18 houses, at a cost of several lives. Donald Mor's song inspired by these events, *A Flame of Wrath for Squinting Patrick*, is said to demonstrate the power of bagpipes to invoke any of the human emotions, even rage and anger.

> ***Cumhadh na Cloinne*** **("Lament for the Children")**
> This heartbreakingly beautiful lament is one of the most famous tunes in the entire piobaireachd repertoire, composed by the son of Donald Mor MacCrimmon, Patrick Mor. Patrick Mor had eight sons, all grown up. Father and sons were extremely close, the sons frequently accompanying their father on errands around town. One day, a ship from abroad arrived in Dunvegan port whose crew and passengers had contracted a deadly fever. The epidemic claimed all of Patrick Mor's sons save one, and the resulting lament expresses every shred of Patrick Mor's overwhelming sense of grief and loss.

Among piobaireachd instructors, lineage and tradition can be of critical importance in establishing a reputation and successful career. Some of the best piobaireachd instructors working today can trace their educational pedigree back hundreds of years, to a teacher who studied directly under one of the MacCrimmons.

The Fairy Chanter of the MacCrimmons: Soumsair Airgiod na Mna Sithe

The line of MacCrimmons linked to the MacLeod family began with Iain Odhar, the first hereditary piper to the MacLeods. Iain Odhar was born circa 1500, but little else (of a factual nature, anyway) is known about him. The legends, however, abound -- including the tale of the fairy chanter. The unprecedented playing abilities of the MacCrimmons were said to derive from their ownership of the ***Soumsair Airgiod na Mna Sithe*** -- the silver chanter of the fairy woman –- given to Iain Odhar in a place called ***Uamh nan Piobairean*** (the Pipers' Cave).

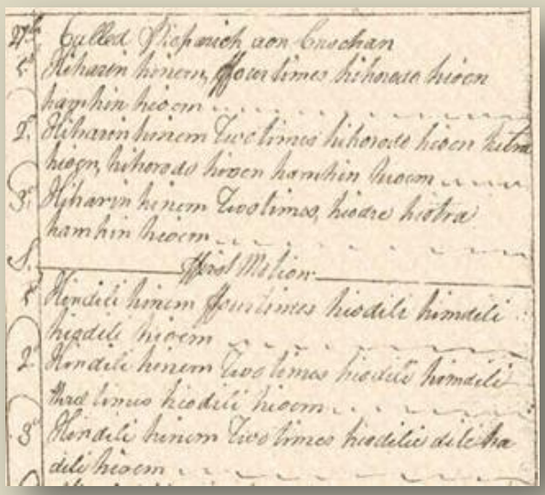
Legend also has it that Iain Odhar received the tune for his first piobaireachd piece while fasting and meditating in the Pipers' Cave. The spirit of an ancestor appeared to Iain Odhar, and played a tune on the pipes for him. To his dismay, the tune was too long and complex for Iain Odhar to learn in one sitting. He continued his meditation and fast for two more nights; both nights, the spirit piper appeared and played the tune. By the end of the third night, Iain Odhar had learned the tune perfectly. (The tune in question, by the way, is known as *MacCrimmon's Sweetheart*.) For hundreds of years afterward, the MacCrimmons went on retreat to the Pipers' Cave whenever a new composition was required for a special occasion, steadfastly refusing to break their fast until the tune was completed.

Canntaireachd

The first book containing written music for the piobaireachd repertoire, compiled by Joseph MacDonald, was published in 1803. Prior to the onset of written notation, however, how was the music of the early composers of piobaireachd handed down?

The MacCrimmons are credited with developing the strong oral tradition known as ***canntaireachd*** (pronounced *can*-troch, with the gutteral *ch* sound), which has been used to teach pipers the piobaireachd repertoire for almost five centuries now. In canntaireachd, the teacher sings the tune using a system of vocables, consisting of combinations of vowels that represent the melody notes, and consonant combinations representing the grace notes and embellishments.

Other than the bagpipes, the human voice is the only other musical medium that is capable of accurately conveying the nuances of a piobaireachd tune—its emotion and shading—with the requisite power and subtlety. For this reason, the canntaireachd tradition continues to be handed down from teacher to piper, to this very day. Around the middle of the 18th century, canntaireachd lost its rigid standardization; nowadays, each individual teacher or school is likely to employ their own method, system, and collection of vocables.



The Legacy of Piobaireachd

The Great Highland Bagpipes have maintained their standing as the central instrument in Scottish music, and efforts continue to research and revive ancient piping traditions, from centuries-old instruments to playing styles. At the same time, the appreciation and playing of the Great Pipes has extended to every continent on the globe. The Great Highland Bagpipes are more popular today than they have been for the last several centuries, and many feel that the key factor behind the bagpipes' longevity and continued popularity is the timeless, enduring quality of the piobaireachd repertoire itself

Modern Appoint of Hereditary Piper of MacLeod

The MacCrimmon piping dynasty is honored in the form of cairn built in 1933, at Borreraig. This cairn, which overlooks Loch Dunvegan across to Dunvegan Castle, was paid for by clan societies and donations from around the world. The Gaelic inscription on the cairn reads in translation as: "The Memorial Cairn of the MacCrimmons of whom ten generations were the hereditary pipers of MacLeod and who were renowned as Composers, Performers and Instructors of the classical music of the bagpipe; *Near to this post stood the MacCrimmons' School of Music, 1500 – 1800".*

In the last century, with a revival in clan interest, the modern chiefs of Clan MacLeod have instated two MacCrimmons as hereditary pipers to the chief. Malcolm Roderick MacCrimmon, a Canadian born in 1918, started piping at the age of eight. With the start of the Second World War he joined the Calgary Highlanders and subsequently joined the pipe band. At some point in time he wrote to Dame Flora MacLeod, chief of Clan MacLeod, asking for approval and support of his decorating his bagpipes in the MacLeod tartan. The chief then wrote to the regiment's Commanding Officer and permission was granted. In 1942, MacCrimmon is said to have made a verbal agreement with the clan chief and became the ninth "hereditary piper" to the Chief of Clan MacLeod. MacCrimmon claimed there was proof of his descent from the MacCrimmons of Borreraig, and as such, that he was a descendant of the hereditary pipers to the Chief. In 1978, John MacLeod of MacLeod, 29th chief of Clan MacLeod, while visiting Calgary, Alberta, Canada, formally made Malcolm's son, Iain Norman MacCrimmon, the tenth hereditary piper to the Chief of Clan MacLeod.

Until next month…

Sláinte