

From ceòl mór to pibroch

IN the following article I would like to outline some of the changes that *pibroch* (Anglicism of *piobaireachd*; Scottish Gaelic = piping) has undergone over the last 250 years. My intention, at its core, is a call for variety. To ground you in my perceptions of pibroch, I have added some personal accounts to this piece, which I initially wrote for my current studies at Sheffield University.

My first encounter with pibroch was through a CD: *Piobaireachd – The Classical Music of the Great Highland Bagpipe*, published by Lismor in 1989. I had already played the Highland pipes for a number of years and was very keen on drone-based music, particularly on bagpipe as well as medieval music. So, my expectations about this apparently ancient genre of Scottish music, which was actually mentioned to me by a blues guitarist I had met while busking, were quite high.

After listening to the CD, I was confused. The performers were renowned, and from a technical point of view the pieces were certainly executed at the highest level. But I could not really make head nor tail of the melodic progression of the pieces. So I was left puzzled, however, still intrigued. I decided to learn more about pibroch. After gathering bits of information, I felt that I should start by learning *canntaireachd*. In 2001, I went to The National Piping Centre for an intense two-month course to improve my piping in general (three hours of tuition a day). Over this time, I got to know a lot of great, friendly and open-minded pipers, who I am still very grateful towards. One of my main tutors back then was Willie Morrison. He was kind enough to deal with my eagerness and to introduce me to *canntaireachd* — mostly his version of it, which I thoroughly recorded and notated in a little reference book. His style still forms a substantial part of the *canntaireachd* I use nowadays for teaching myself. Willie also introduced me to my first pibroch, *The Little Spree*.

While walking past one of the teaching rooms I heard somebody teaching a piece of music, which really appealed to me. I sat down to hear more. When the tutor left the teaching room I asked him what he had just been teach-

ing (*King of Laois*) — and got to know Allan MacDonald.

Towards the end of my stay I undertook a little shopping tour at The National Piping Centre shop. Among my purchases was a CD called *Ceòl Na Pìoba*, a recording of a concert of pibroch music held at the Edinburgh Festival in 1999. Back home in Germany, a week later or so, I was listening to this CD. Once track four came on, I was electrified. It sounded so different from the other pibroch pieces I had heard so far and much more like what I had previously imagined it to be. I looked at the back of the CD to figure out what I was hearing. It was Allan MacDonald playing *Glen-garry's March*. I remembered meeting him and decided to share my excitement with a direct phone call to Scotland — Allan had given me his phone number. I told him how much I loved his interpretation and how different it sounded, that it made much more sense to my ears and that I would love to learn more about this style. My curiosity and desire to learn finally let me aboard the Bachelor in Scottish Music — Piping Degree course in 2002, where I was able to study the great Highland bagpipe in depth — and to focus on Allan's approach to pibroch.

From ceòl mór to pibroch

PLEASE allow me to start with a quote from Louis Armstrong. He once said: "What we play is life." And even though this quote may be read in many different ways, for this essay I would like to suggest the following interpretation: music is being shaped by its surroundings, by the soil it grows upon.

Over the past 300 years, life in the Highlands of Scotland has changed substantially. In the decades to follow the battle of Culloden in 1746, social structures ceased to exist in their former shape. The Highland Clearances that led to emigration and the constant pressure exercised onto those who stayed in their native area initialised a process that fragmented a cultural nation. Consequently, the functional art form of *ceòl mór* (Scottish Gaelic = big music), nowadays mostly referred to as pibroch, was affected too and ultimately became uprooted.

This essay will highlight the effect the changes in the soil had on the music. To do so, it will look at two of its core motifs: the cadence and the echo beat. The analysis will show how their changing interpretation affected the overall impression of the music and how it developed from the culturally interwoven art form called *ceòl mór* to an isolated stage performance referred to as pibroch.

What is ceòl mór/pibroch?

PIBROCH compositions can be traced back several centuries and about 300 pieces have been identified. A pibroch can be subdivided into multiple sections. It starts with the so-called *ùrlar*, which can be translated as ground. This musical theme consists of several phrases, which usually contain four stresses each. It is important to note that the *ùrlar* is played in a non-metrical manner and that the phrases and their internal rhythms give shape to the overall impression of the piece. Two of its core motifs are the cadence and the echo beat and almost any pibroch will include either one of them or both. Several variations utilising sophisticated embellishment techniques follow the *ùrlar*. Including the main melody notes, they maintain the musical skeleton of the piece as it progresses into further complexity before returning to and finishing on the ground.

Ceòl mór in Scottish Gaelic culture — interwoven with its soil

WHILE we nowadays attribute pibroch mostly to the great Highland bagpipe, historic sources hint towards *ceòl mór* being played on other instruments including the *clàrsach* (harp) and the fiddle, too (Purser 2007:163). Regardless of the instrument it was played upon, most important in shaping this high art form was the natural presence of the spoken language: Scottish Gaelic.

In a society such as Gaelic Scotland instrumental music was probably quite isolated from European musical influences. In this respect, one would expect that the rhythms of instrumental music would be closely associated with the language. (MacDonald, A. 1995:10)

One of the earliest sources describing (a different style of) pibroch was written by Joseph MacDonald in c. 1760: the *Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe*. Joseph MacDonald was brought up in the remote area of Durness in the far north of Scotland where Gaelic was still spoken throughout the 18th century. His musical education included leading the psalmody in the Kirk at the age of eight, playing the bagpipe, flute and oboe (Donaldson, 2000:20-21). For the violin he received classical tuition in Edinburgh, which also provided him with knowledge in notating music. The *Compleat Theory* includes various explanatory fingering charts, exercises for embellishments, music fragments as well as complete pieces. MacDonald also refers to the two core motifs this essay focuses on. However, he uses a different terminology for them. Cadences he calls *introductions* and to echo beats he refers to as *na crahinin* (MacDonald, J. 1994:27).

Introductions (cadences)

Figure 1: *Introductions* (cadences) in the "Compleat Theory"



FIGURE 1 shows the most common introductions MacDonald used in his manuscript (Cannon on MacDonald, J. 1994:14). To Cannon's findings I have added an introduction which is unique to MacDonald's manuscript, consisting of five gracenotes (MacDonald, J. 1994:60). Even though they are all written with two tails here, the introductions also appear with three or even four tails in the manuscript. However, it is very important to note that the gracenotes within one introduction always share the same time value. Consequently, their notation hints towards an even flow towards the following melody note. This will change as we proceed through time.

Na crahinin (echo beats)

Figure 2: *Na Crahinin* (echo beats) in the "Compleat Theory"



FIGURE 2 shows MacDonald's version of the echo beats. He describes the gracenotes that separate the melody notes as *So Quick & Slight that they Cannot be Said to be Sounded* (MacDonald, J. 1994:28).

At a time when pibroch was taught orally through the means of *canntaireachd* (see following section), MacDonald's manuscript represents a rare witness to the playing style of his time. On the title of his manuscript he states that it includes "all the Terms of Art in which this Instrument was originally taught by its Masters & Composers in the Islands of Sky & Mull ... in the genuine & native Style of this Instrument" (MacDonald, J. 1994:25).¹ With MacDonald being literate in music, fluent in Gaelic and familiar with many aspects of his own music tradition², we can assume that his descriptions accurately portray a playing style that is interwoven with its soil. *Canntaireachd* was a part of that soil, being a common teaching tool within the oral tradition of piping, varying to some degree from piper to piper. It has been compared to the modern *tonic*

sol-fa system (Cannon 2002:67). *Canntaireachd* uses (meaningless) groupings of vocables that accurately resemble the sound of bagpipe music. It allows highlighting important sections through the dynamic possibilities of the human voice. Furthermore, it fulfils a mnemonic function.

Colin Campbell of Argyll turned the oral version of *canntaireachd* he knew into a clearly

structured scribal system (see figure 3), which he utilised for his Campbell *Canntaireachd* manuscripts. Its accurateness allows retrieving complete pieces from his texts. He compiled at least two volumes (a third might have been lost; Cannon 2009:255) using this system between approximately 1797-1819, including a total of 168 pibrochs.

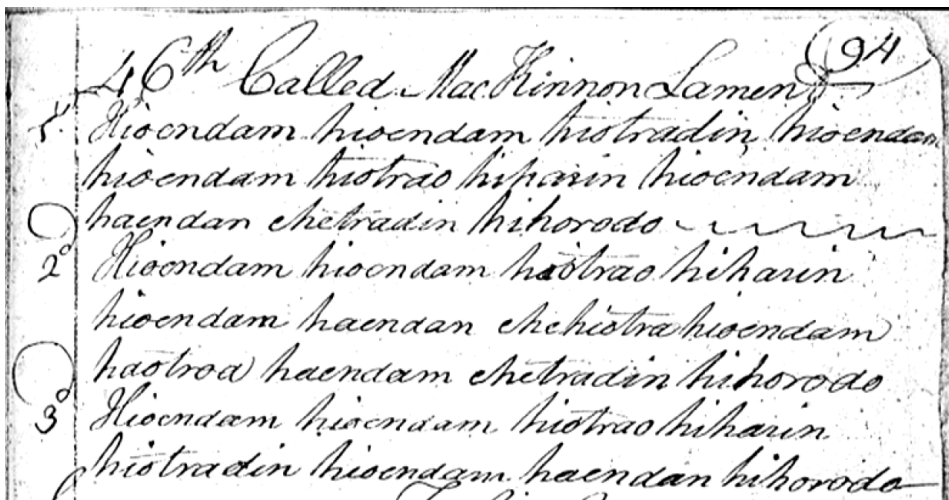


Figure 3: Excerpt from the Campbell *Canntaireachd*. Ùrlar Cumha Mhic Fhionguin (MacKinnon's Lament)

1. Joseph probably refers to important piping dynasties such as the MacArthurs, MacCrimmons and Rankins.

2. See also the letter that he wrote to his father cited in the Patrick MacDonald Collection (2000:4).

Figure 4: Cadences in the "Campbell Canntaireachd"



All represented by the prefix "hi" in the Campbell Canntaireachd MS

Cadences and echo beats in the Campbell Canntaireachd MS

CAMPBELL decided to use only one syllable to represent a cadence: *hi* (see figure 4). So, theoretically speaking, Campbell's *hi* could well represent any of the cadences outlined by Joseph MacDonald, again shown above. I am playing devil's advocate here, as Campbell does not specify which gracenotes or how many of them should be used. I would like to suggest that Campbell entrusted the choice of an "appropriate" cadence to the performer. A remark supporting this thought can be found in Joseph MacDonald's manuscript, when he writes that introductions should be studied "untill he can introduce them properly of his own accord, if he has any Taste or Genius, without which no kind of Musick can be well taught him" (MacDonald, J. 1994:36). This freedom of choice was evaporated by the written collections to follow. Figure 5 shows the echo beats with the combinations of vocables they are represented by in the Campbell Canntaireachd.³

Campbell chose three vocables to represent the three melody notes of each echo beat. The echo beats on B and D are additionally preceded by the vocable *hi*, indicating that a cadence should be played to introduce them.⁴

Figure 5: Echo beats in the "Campbell Canntaireachd"



The interpretation of the Campbell Canntaireachd requires some knowledge of pibroch as well as experience within the system. To illustrate this point we will take a look at *hiriri* (see figure 5). The echo beat on high g consists of three vocables: *hi*, *ri* and a second *ri*. If looked upon as individual vocables the first one, *hi*, could be interpreted as a cadence on whatever follows next – in this case: *riri*. However, *riri* does not exist on its own in Campbell's manuscripts and neither does any other possible separation of this cluster. It only makes sense as a whole (*hiriri*), representing the echo beat on high G. This should be kept in mind for the section "From piobaireachd to pibroch — changing the melodic flow".

Colin Campbell succeeded in merging the traditional way of teaching pibroch with the zeitgeist of his time to produce music collections, to preserve music. He avoided staff notation and refined the teaching system he and other pipers already knew. His motivation in compiling this extensive collection might be connected with a new type of patronage

that emerged towards the end of the 18th century⁵: The Highland Societies of London and Scotland.

From ceòl mór to piobaireachd — the changing of the soil

WITH the decline of the social structures after the battle of Culloden, ceòl mór lost its original purpose as well as its patronage at the same time. The latter re-emerged several decades later in the format of the "Highland Society of London" (1778) and the "Highland Society of Scotland" (1784). In essence, these associations represented the landed class and they had many different tasks on their agenda.⁶ One of them was to preserve bagpipe music and they took initiative to do so in several ways. Their subsequent activities changed the soil on which piping continued its development.

The Highland Societies sought from the outset to undermine the oral basis of piobaireachd by reducing it to a fixed written form. They

had a number of motives for doing this. One was an antiquarian desire to collect the fragments before they perished, the response of a literate élite who had little personal knowledge of the culture for which they sought to legislate, and whose education encouraged them to regard traditional culture as by definition incapable of sustaining itself without external intervention. (...) The mechanism of competition inevitably tended to favour standardisation. If pipers could be induced to play from a fixed written text instead of their own versions of a given tune, they could be more easily compared, and the task of judging made more straightforward. It seemed likely, too, that music thus 'simplified' and 'fixed' would lend itself to teaching in a shorter time, accelerating - and therefore cheapening - the training of pipers for the army. (Donaldson, 2000:97)

Their effort manifested itself in several publications throughout the 19th century. Two of the most important names in this respect are Donald MacDonald and Angus MacKay.

In c. 1820 Donald MacDonald (1776-1840) published his first volume of *Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia, called Piobaireachd*. His consistent style of notating pipe music, with the stems of the gracenotes going up and those of the melody notes going down — regardless of their position on the staff — is still in use for bagpipe notation today. While his variety of cadences as well as the rhythmic notation of the echo beats still resembles that of Joseph MacDonald⁷, the impression of MacKay's settings is a different one altogether.

Angus MacKay (1812-1859) was born into the famous piping family of the MacKays of Raasay. Still in his twenties, he compiled *A Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd, Dedicated to the Highland Society of London*, containing 61 pieces. The prospectus advertising this publication stated that it would furnish "a fixed standard for future performers" (Donaldson, 2000:145). The collection indeed became the single most important written source of pibroch of the 19th century.

One of the main differences of MacKay's settings compared to those of Joseph and Donald MacDonald is the cadence, see figure 6.

3. The Campbell Canntaireachd MSS do not include the echo beats on low G and C.

4. The cadences in figure 5 on the echo beats on B and D I chose myself and should be considered as one of several possibilities.

5. Whether this was Campbell's true motivation or not remains unknown. However, records show that his son John brought it along to a competition in Edinburgh in 1818, presenting it to the bench of judges (Donaldson, 2000:88).

6. Both Highland Societies have been studied in great detail by Iain MacInnes in his thesis (1988).

7. The same is equally true of the MacArthur-MacGregor manuscript (1820).

Figure 6: Cadences in Angus MacKay's manuscript



MacKay reduced the variety of cadences and replaced it with simplicity (compare to figure 1). The cadence on E was reduced to a single high G-gracenote. D, low A and low G share the same cadence, which consists of two (grace)notes, high G and E. With regards to C, B, low A and low G, MacKay used several ways of writing the cadence: as a mixture of melody — and gracenotes or as a series of gracenotes only. A common feature of all of his cadences is the long E, which he attributed the value of a melodic note. He thus altered the interpretation of the cadences from an even melodic flow to a rather static movement. Consequently, MacKay's cadences represent a motif of melodic value themselves, which differentiates them substantially from Joseph MacDonald's version.

Figure 7: Echo beats in Angus MacKay's manuscript



MacKay's liking of the E is also present in the notation of his echo beats. For those onto low A, B and D he again introduced an E of melodic value. This development might have been spurred by his personal taste, as the E represents the fifth against the drone — a strong, appealing interval.⁸ Furthermore, with the first note of his echo beats being notated short, his timing is inverted from the sources discussed above.⁹ Another difference lies in the two tails

he used for the gracenote between the melody notes two and three. His notation indicates that this gracenote should be held longer. This represents another step away from the style Joseph MacDonald suggested. On the echo beat on D, MacKay introduced an even heavier embellishment, replacing the strike with a throw on D.

With piping being strong in his family, his achievements from an early age as both a piper and compiler and his appointment to Queen Victoria as the first piper ever to the Sovereign (1843-1854), MacKay can be described as a living legend of his time. The extensive foreword of his collection, consisting of almost

30.000 words, ghost-written by a secretary of the Highland Society of London¹⁰, made it also a valuable resource. Both factors combined turned the collection into the most successful and influential of its time and beyond: it served as the basis for the early *Piobaireachd Society* books, whose settings dominate the performance of pibroch today.

8. This is, as far as I am aware of, a new line of thought and is currently based on speculation.

9. This includes Joseph's as well as Donald MacDonald's notation of the echo beat.

10. The author of the foreword has been identified as James Logan (Donaldson, 2000:150).

From piobaireachd to pibroch — changing the melodic flow

FOURTEEN people, who mainly had a “landed and military background”, founded the Piobaireachd Society in 1903 (Donaldson 2000:283). Over the decades to come, the Piobaireachd Society published their own settings¹¹ that competitors had to play¹², basing their scores on Angus MacKay's notation. The uniformity in performance that these arrangements meant to produce allowed those in charge to evaluate a performance more easily.

When the Piobaireachd Society reproduced pibrochs from other sources, they imposed MacKay's style onto them, further nurturing uniformity in style. McLennan, “a prolific correspondent of the *Oban Times* during the first two decades of the 20th century” (Donaldson, 2000:303) criticised:

a number of contemporary stylistic vices including unnecessary prolongation of introductory Es, ... which he traced, ..., to the influence of the printed scores. ... They were, he claimed, the result of 'unqualified men writing music they knew little or nothing about, thereby making bagpipe playing a variety of wild and meaningless notes, as if Momus, the god of mockery, was trying his best to show the piper as a full-grown clown'. (Donaldson, 2000:303)

Figure 8: Cadences in the Piobaireachd Society books



A similar thing happened in the interpretation of the echo beats. In the case of *hiharin* (the echo beat on low A) the E is even given the melodic value of a crotchet (see figure 9).

Figure 9: Echo beats in the Piobaireachd Society books



11. Fifteen books have been published by the Piobaireachd Society to this day.

12. See advertisement note (Donaldson 2000:290)

Considering the frequency in which these two motifs occur in the ground of a pibroch, one can imagine the effect that these extra Es have on the flow of the music: they subdivide it to an extent that detracts from its melodic progression. To illustrate this point we will look at the opening phrase of *Lament for Donald of Laggan*. The piece appears in Joseph MacDonald's manuscript (in parts) as well as in the Piobaireachd Society books¹³. The first line of figure 10 shows Joseph MacDonald's notation of the piece. The second line represents a copy of what the Piobaireachd Society puts forward and what represents the modern interpretation of the piece. The Campbell Canntaireachd of the phrase is included in between.¹⁴

Figure 10: *Lament for Donald of Laggan*

First of all it is important to note that MacDonald simply notated the melody line without gracenotes. We can therefore assume that his version represents the melodic skeleton of the phrase. Note how the E of the Piobaireachd Society's echo beat on low A at the beginning of the line is not part of MacDonald's melody (marked "1"). The presence of the long E has squeezed the gracenotes together into a very fast cluster, representing the modern echo beat on low A (see figure 9). Thus, the gracenotes cannot produce the rhythm notated by Joseph MacDonald. It is furthermore important to note, that the setting of the Piobaireachd Society includes a second E that is not part of the melody that MacDonald outlined (marked "2"). It probably stems from the Piobaireachd Society's interpretation of the Campbell Canntaireachd. Campbell gives the first phrase as: *hiharin hiodindao cherede chea hiodin*. The Piobaireachd Society interpreted the "bold and underlined" *hi* as a cadence (see figure 4), applying MacKay's style (see figure 6). However, if one adds the "o" following the "hi" in question, according to Campbell the term *hio* can also be seen as a B, introduced by a *single* High-G gracenote. Marked "3" is the inverted rhythm of the echo beat.

He who pays the piper calls the tune — from variety to uniformity

INDIVIDUALITY has been perceived as undesirable when patronage shifted from supporting a productive art form to preserving the status quo. With the standardisation of the cadences and the echo beats, enhanced through the competitive system as well as the introduction of the written sources, the variety in and the rhythmic motifs of pibroch have slowly but constantly been decreased. The freedom the performer once enjoyed in choosing embellishments and phrasing a pibroch according to the predominant style¹⁵ has ceased to exist within the competitive circuit.

The modern interpretation of the cadence constantly adds Es of melodic value to the ground, interrupting the natural flow of the music. It developed from a quick succession of notes to a static melodic motif. A similar effect can be described with regards to the echo beats. Their former resonance with the rhythms of Gaelic song, where "the melody is the passenger of the language rhythms, rather than the carrier" (MacDonald and Stewart 1998:sleeve notes on track 11), has been eradicated.

With the strong presence of both the cadence and the echo beats within the pibroch grounds, we can assume that their modern interpretation has affected the overall performance by slowing it down. This assumption is supported by Joseph MacDonald's comments on the introductions, too.¹⁶

A call for variety

CONCLUDING, I would like to channel the points outlined above into a call for a variety, for a reintroduction of diversity that is supported by historic evidence. Revive the beauty of historic and culturally informed performances of pibroch — also *within* the competitive circles of pibroch. May the difference between a gathering, a lament and a salute be heard again. It would spark new life in a wonderful genre of music that in modern times almost exclusively consumes itself, even though musicians of the highest degree perform it on a regular basis. ●

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13. Piobaireachd Society Book 8.

14. Campbell Canntaireachd, Vol. 1 page 25th piece, "Called one of the Cragich"

15. (MacDonald J., 1994:78)

16. (MacDonald J., 1994:61-64)