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# PIPING TODAY

## Celtic Connections

*Piping's place at the premier winter festival*

## PAUL BROWN

*Living the pipe band life with the World Champions*

## The Piper's House

*The Mackays of Raasay Part Two*

## Jori Chisholm's Sound Technique

*Learn tunes efficiently*

## Prairie Piping

*Sustaining an immigrant tradition*

## Stuart Robertson's Nine Notes

*With Jim McGillivray*

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO PLAYING THE

# Highland Pipes

WITH OTHER INSTRUMENTS

## THE CLASP

*Competition League for Amateur Solo Pipers*

**GREY'S NOTES** by Michael Grey  
*Superstitious Minds*

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NYPBoS newsletter No. 47

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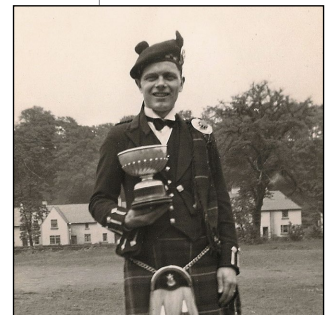
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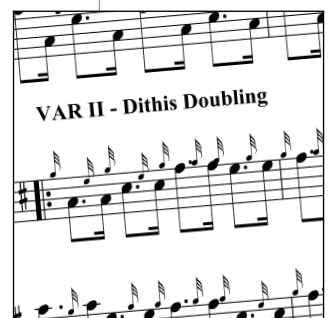
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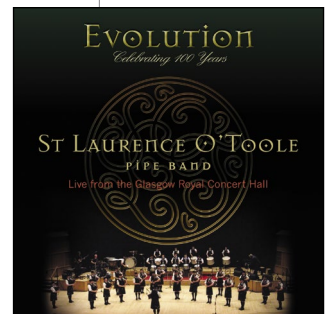
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#### FRONT COVER PICTURE:

A beginner's guide to playing Highland pipes with other instruments. (Feature on pages 10-12)

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**The National Piping Centre**  
30-34 McPhater Street  
Glasgow, Scotland. G4 0HW  
Tel: +44 (0)141 353 0220  
Fax: +44 (0)141 353 1570

#### PIPING TODAY

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Editor: **Roddy MacLeod MBE BSc**  
Features and all editorial enquiries:  
**John Slavin / Designfolk**  
email: pipingtoday@designfolk.com  
Mob: 0781 513 1116

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## Full swing into 2011

**THE winter months continue to prove to be busier in the world of piping than ever before. In January, Celtic Connections was in full swing and The National Piping Centre continued its involvement through the organisation of the Annual Piping Concert and The Gordon Duncan Memorial Piping Competition. Both events were a great success.**



The pipe band concert featured both the Fife Constabulary Pipe Band and The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland. One of the challenges of the organisation of this event is to find pipe bands that are concert-ready in January and also to find an alternative line-up to the most recent pre-worlds concerts in August. The line-up for this year certainly proved to be a good choice with both bands performing well to a large and appreciative audience at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall.

Similarly, The Gordon Duncan Memorial Piping Competition had an enthusiastic audience packing the auditorium of The National Piping Centre throughout the day. The format of this event dictates that the invited pipers must perform in three disciplines: MSR, Irish medley and Breton medley, the overall winner being the piper with the best aggregate score in all three events. This competition is a real test of skill and knowledge of style so to win an event of this type is quite an accolade: it fell yet again to Alexis Meunier. Congratulations!

On the same weekend in January, I attended Winter Storm in Kansas City along with Finlay MacDonald, Josh Dickson and a group of students from the BA (Scottish Music) degree course. My task was to judge the Silver Medal and MSR final as well as to deliver workshops while the others were there to promote our higher education study opportunities.

I was left with a number of lasting impressions. The first being what an incredible feat it was to fill two large hotels full of pipers and drummers for a weekend in the Midwest of America in January. Second, I was very impressed with the high standard of piping in the competitions and last, but by no means least, the detailed planning an organisation that obviously went into the execution of an excellent event. I am sure Winter Storm will continue to go from strength to strength.

From there, my next excursion from February 2 to 9 was to the Mastery of Scottish Arts Winter School which was held at Seabeck, about an hour's drive from Seattle in Washington state.

The school starts off with a week of bellows pipe and fiddle instruction and is followed by a week of piping and drumming instruction. In the middle weekend, a public concert is given and this year an incredible audience of almost 2000 came along to the fabulous Beranoya Hall to enjoy the show, proving that interest in Scottish music and culture is alive and well on the west coast of America.

An excellent week of instruction followed the concert with more than 70 pipers participating in the school. Again, huge credit must be given to Skye Richendrfr and all involved with The Celtic Arts Foundation for their hard work in the promotion of piping and drumming.

Dovetailing date-wise with the Mastery of Scottish Arts event in America was another winter piping and drumming school in Bruggen, Germany, which The National Piping Centre became involved in for the first time this year. The school, run by David Johnston of The Piper's Corner, was supported through the provision of National Piping Centre teachers — Glenn Brown, John Mulhearn and Callum Beaumont along with BA (Scottish Music — Piping) students Chris MacDonald, Jonathan Cheyne and Sarah Muir.

More than 50 pipers attended the school in addition to drummers and drum majors. Uniquely, a specific strand of the school was devoted to a large group of students preparing to participate in this year's Edinburgh Military Tattoo. David Johnston was highly delighted with the event and is already putting together plans for next year.

Meanwhile, at home we have commenced our Certificate in Scottish Studies with St Andrews University. This new certificate combines courses in Scottish Music, Scottish Literature and Piping for home and study abroad students. This initiative adds one further strand to our higher education partnerships which are already in place with RSAMD and Glasgow University.

Finally, this month we began our partnership with Fife Council to commence the Levenmouth Piping and Drumming Centre, to be based at Kirkland High School. This new initiative is part of a campaign to raise attainment in schools in the Levenmouth area. More than 400 local schoolchildren attended two presentations designed to kick-start the project which, at this point, has funding for three years. The project will start with two days of piping instruction and one day of drumming instruction. There is a limited number of places available and judging from the enthusiasm of the children, it will be a difficult task to restrict numbers.

So, all in all, it has been a busy start to the year and if the rest of 2011 proves to be as active then there will be very little time to rest!

by **RODDY MacLEOD** MBE, BSc  
Principal, The National Piping Centre

# £300,000 funding blow for music school

**C**AMPAIGNERS fighting to save The National Centre for Excellence in Traditional Music, based at Plockton High School, were dealt a major blow in early February when Highland Council withdrew a £300,000 funding package.

The budget cut led to the plight of the centre, which is headed by piper and multi-instrumentalist Dougie Pincock and whose work featured in issue 44 of *Piping Today*, being raised in the Scottish Parliament.

Lib Dem leader Tavish Scott told Holyrood that the centre should be given the same priority as other national institutions such as the new Robert Burns Museum, in recognition of the Scottish Government's commitment to promote traditional music.

He said: "The centre provides many talented children with the opportunity to pursue a national, and indeed, international career in music.

"The centre opened in 2000 with direct government funding, which was initially continued in 2007. A year later, Highland Council had to assume complete financial responsibility. Now, they face agonising budget decisions."

He suggested it should instead be funded by the Scottish Government, Creative Scotland and the local authorities who place children at Plockton.



Students from The National Centre for Excellence in Traditional Music on stage at Celtic Connections in 2010

While First Minister Alex Salmond rejected the argument for national funding, he said politicians were working with Highland Council to safeguard the future of the centre.

He added: "I would be very surprised if some progress hadn't been made to ensure the continuation of the centre offering their vital educational experience."

An online petition to save the centre has attracted almost 10,000 signatures with leading musicians such as Phil Cunningham signing up. The petition can be found at [www.gopetition.com/petition/42495.html](http://www.gopetition.com/petition/42495.html)

A spokesman for Highland Council said it would continue to work to try to ensure the Plockton centre's long-term future.

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## Lomond and Clyde Invitational aims to be a big draw

**T**HE draw has been made for the grade 1 indoor invitational competition being run by Lomond and Clyde Pipe Band in March.

The running order for the first heat is Scottish Power, Torphichen and Bathgate, Boghall and Bathgate Caledonia, Dysart and Dundonald and Inveraray and District.

In the second heat will be Cullybackey, Fife Constabulary, Robert Wiseman Dairies Vale of Atholl, Strathclyde Police and House of Edgar Shotts and Dykehead.

The bands will be battling it out for a £2500 top prize. Each will play their medley in the heats, which start at 12 noon. The four outfits who make the final will perform both an MSR and medley.

One of the organisers, Fraser Sergeant, said: "The feedback from last year's event was very encouraging and one of the main reasons we are running the competition again is because so many pipe majors said to us last year that they wanted to be part of any future competitions.

"We have had an increase in the number of bands who wanted to enter this year, and the response has been fairly overwhelming.

"It is an expensive event to host, and it will only become an annual fixture in the pipe band calendar once it starts to break even financially, but we are constantly learning and it will get easier to organise with every year.

"We are hoping to attract an audience of 600 to 700, with an added potential of 250 band members. If we get those numbers, it will be an audience increase of about a quarter on last year."

In a bid to tempt more pipers to come along, organisers are offering a group deal which gives 12 tickets for the price of 10.

Fraser added: "We want pipe bands to use the competition as a day out for their own band. It is not often that you get a chance to sit in a hotel with a refreshment in hand, listening to and watching some of the best pipe bands in the world in action."

The competition is on Saturday, March 19 at the Radisson Hotel in Glasgow. Doors open at 11.30am.

Tickets are £18 (plus booking fee) for the whole day — £2 less than the 2010 prices — and are available from [www.tickets-scotland.com](http://www.tickets-scotland.com). The group ticket is £180 (plus booking fee) for 12 people. For more information see [www.lomondandclyde.co.uk](http://www.lomondandclyde.co.uk)



## New firm shows bags of potential

**F**ORMER Torphichen and Bathgate Pipe Band pipe major Gordon Stafford is heading a new company producing piping accessories.

He has become the chief executive officer of Pipetech which has just launched a new backpack for carrying pipes and the firm is also in the process of developing a drone tuner.

The rucksack, known as the Coolbackpack, has room for pipes, accessories, sheet music, a laptop, mp3 player and even a change of clothes. If you work up a thirst when you're playing it also has a special cool pocket for drinks or food, hence the name.

Soon, they will be launching their Precision-Plus drone tuner, which comes with a flexible external clip microphone.

The business venture came about as the result of playing the pipes for a high-flying business executive from the Far East, a gig which was organised by Gordon's friend, former Torphichen and Bathgate lead drummer Billy Stirling.

Billy is co-founder and director of a highly successful video game accessory firm, Accessories 4 Technology (A4T).

Gordon explained: "Billy invited me along to a dinner he was holding just before Christmas 2009 and asked me to bring along my pipes and wear my kilt. I asked why and he just said that it might be worth my while. So I obliged.

"Present at the dinner were a few of our mutual friends and also there was Mr Lui, A4T's CEO of Far East Operations and factory owner. He and his wife were absolutely knocked over by the uniform and the pipes. Afterwards, we got talking over a few drams and it turned out Billy had told them about the piping accessory market but he didn't feel it was anywhere large enough to normally excite someone like the CEO of A4T's Far East Operations. However, because of Mr Lui's instant liking of all things Scottish, coupled with the fact that we had a great night together, a new relationship was formed."

Gordon kept in touch and sent CDs, DVDs and information on pipe bands and in August last year he was invited to China to play at the opening of the firm's new design and production facilities in Shenzhen.



Gordon Stafford

He said: "We had another extremely long night, this time entertaining the Chinese way. Believe me, that was something else — feasting on chicken feet washed down with some unknown potent Far Eastern cocktail."

The next day he met with Mr Lui, who asked if Gordon would be interested in fronting a company which would allow him to be part of the piping fraternity. As a result, Pipetech was born.

Gordon explained: "I was taken aback to say the least. This is a company which not

only produces all of A4T's video game products but also works with top global brands in the electronics industry to design and manufacture products such as MP3 players.

"So I have found myself in business with a global giant who just loves the Great Highland Bagpipe. For Pipetech, this means the world. No massive minimum orders from a factory that can produce over 20,000 quality finished products per day. Also very important is my direct line to the top man which ensures that I have direct communication with everyone who matters within the organisation.

"We firmly believe that it is this unique combination of market knowledge, product development skills and state-of-the-art production facilities which will assist us in revolutionising the piping accessory market, moving forward from our inaugural launch of our new Pipetech branded range.

"Our main objective is developing unique and innovative high quality products to enhance your piping experience at affordable prices.

"Now, as the first products are starting to hit the market, I sometimes have to pinch myself that I am heading up Pipetech."

More products will be released in the coming months and Gordon added: "Don't be surprised to see an introduction into the drumming accessory arena in the not too distant future, instigated by my good friend Billy Stirling."

The products will be sold through their website [www.pipetech.uk.com](http://www.pipetech.uk.com) as well as through the usual piping suppliers in the UK and Great Lakes Scottish Supply in North America.

## Vegas gets a tattoo

**LAS VEGAS is playing host to a weekend packed with piping from April 15 to 17.**

The busy programme's centrepiece is the inaugural Las Vegas International Tattoo: a spectacle produced by Major Bruce Hitchings MBE BEM, former Senior Pipe Major of the British Army and Chief Instructor for the Army School of Piping.

The performances on the Friday and Saturday nights will feature more than 500 performers — showcasing military and police units from Scotland, Canada and the US, including 1st Battalion, The Scots Guards, below.

Simon Fraser University and the Los Angeles Scots Pipe Bands are among the bands competing at the Las Vegas Celtic Gathering and Highland Games on April 16 and 17. More information is available at [www.lasvegascelticsociety.org](http://www.lasvegascelticsociety.org)

Pipefest Las Vegas plans to fill the streets with pipers and drummers on Friday, April 15.

Players can register at [www.lasvegasinternationaltattoo.com](http://www.lasvegasinternationaltattoo.com) — where Tattoo bookings can also be made.



## News in brief...

● **THE knock-out competitions at the Scots Guards Club in Edinburgh are up and running again for 2011.**

The draw is as follows: March 13 — Andrea Boyd and John Mulhearn; March 27 — Alastair Henderson and Cameron Drummond; April 3 — Craig Muirhead and Kevin McNulty; April 17 — Jenny Hazzard and Finlay MacDonald.

All start at 4pm in the Scots Guards

Club, Edinburgh. Tickets are available on the door, priced at £10.

● **THERE'S still time to book up for The National Piping Centre's piping and drumming schools in Glasgow, USA, Germany and Switzerland.**

The Scottish schools run from April 11 to April 15, June 27 to July 1, July 4 to July 8, July 25 to July 29 and October 17 to 21.

The Swiss school takes place from May 1 to May 6.

The Georgia school runs from June

12 to June 17 and the Virginia school is from June 19 to June 24.

Finally, there is a school in Munich from October 11 to 15.

For more details or to book, visit [www.thepipingcentre.co.uk/schools/](http://www.thepipingcentre.co.uk/schools/)

● **PIPERS are being warned to have regular eye tests after a study found players had a higher risk of glaucoma.**

Research by Glasgow Caledonian University found that playing the pipes can put the eyeballs under significant stress. The scientists said playing regu-

larly and for prolonged periods could lead to damage to the optic nerve.

Dr Gunnar Schmidtman, who led the study, said: "It doesn't matter if you are a hobby musician or a professional player, you should go to your optometrist frequently."

● **THE Italian Spring Piping School runs from April 5 – 12 in Isernia, Italy.**

The tutors include Stuart Liddell, Finlay MacDonald, Jamie Troy and Alberto Massi. More information from [www.italianspringschool.it](http://www.italianspringschool.it)

## Pipe-maker turning a new leaf in Dunkeld

**P**IPER Derek Marr is going from strength to strength after launching his own pipe-making firm, inspired by a Center set from a century ago.

Derek started The Highland Bagpipe Company in Dunkeld in June of last year, producing his own handmade Marr bagpipes.

He learned his trade as a pipe-maker, starting his apprenticeship with Pettigrew Bagpipes in Glasgow more than 10 years ago.

He also spent some time working for Wallace Bagpipes, before moving to Bannatyne Ltd for three years where he first got a chance to work on his own designs.

The former pipe major of Lanark and District Pipe Band, who previously played with Polkemmet for eight years, decided to set up his own business to help fit in with family life.

He is married to Sarah, who plays

bass drum with Pitlochry and Blair Atholl Pipe Band, and has three kids.

He based the bore sizes for his own design on an old set of pipes he received as a youngster.

Derek explained: "I have changed all my bore sizes since leaving Bannatyne Ltd to allow me to differentiate between the pipes I made for them and my own Marr bagpipes.

"The sizes I now use were taken from an old set of pipes which I have been told were Center bagpipes, probably made around the start of the 20th century.

"They were the first set of pipes I ever had and I was given them by Fraser Mitchell, who used to play in Polkemmet Pipe Band with my dad John.

"They are one of the best sounding set of pipes I have ever heard and that is why I have used those sizes for my new pipes."

The company now offers a wide variety of bagpipe models and is starting to build up a stock of pipes.

The firm is able to offer fully customised sets to suit the customer's tastes, whether it be a different shape of drones, specialised engravings or types of wood.

Trading has been good for the company's first six months, with excellent support from retailers, and Derek has also built up a customer base selling other bagpipe supplies through word of mouth and from their website at [www.highlandbagpipecompany.com](http://www.highlandbagpipecompany.com)

He added: "So far we have had a very pleasing review from Xavier Boderiou, who is a solo competitor and also plays with Simon Fraser University. We have had plenty encouraging feedback on our pipes by word of mouth, and we have more pipes in preparation at the moment to be sent out to reviewers."

## The CLASP results

**THE main results from the Scots Guards Club CLASP competition in Edinburgh in January.**

**Overall Winners: Grade 1** — John Frater; **Grade 2** — Andrew Park; **Grade 3** — William Fallon.

**Grade 1 — MSR:** 1. John Frater; 2. Alan Bradford. **Piobaireachd:** 1. John Frater; 2. Alan Bradford.

**Grade 2 — March:** 1. Joe Campbell; 2. Andrew Park; 3. Jack Lockhart. **Strathspey & Reel:** 1. Jack Lockhart; 2. Joe Campbell; 3. Andrew Park. **Piobaireachd:** 1. Andrew Park; 2. Jack Lockhart; 3. Daniel Rab.

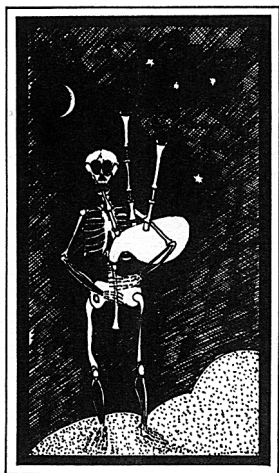
**Grade 3 — March:** 1. Daniel Rab; 2. John Duncan; 3. William Fallon. **Strathspey & Reel:** 1. John Duncan; 2. William Fallon; 3. Daniel Rab.

**Piobaireachd:** 1. David Gatum; 2. Clive Troubman; 3. Michael McGowan. **Piobaireachd Ground:** 1. William Fallon; 2. John Duncan; 3. John Campbell.

**OVERALL winners from the Scottish Piping Society of London CLASP in November. Grade 1** — Len Durham; **Grade 2** — Alan Dunsmore; **Grade 3** — Francesco Toiati.

For more information on The CLASP, see the feature on Page 29 and visit the website at [www.theclasp.co.uk](http://www.theclasp.co.uk)

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# Playing the Highland pipes with other instruments

A Beginner's Guide

*This feature was only made possible thanks to Calum MacCrimmon, Finlay MacDonald, Dougie Pincock, Mike Katz and Angus MacKenzie, by the generous sharing of their extensive musical knowledge and experience of piping in folk bands.*

**T**HE GREAT Highland Bagpipe is a versatile instrument capable of producing breathtaking music in the hands of the finest solo performers and grade one bands, or of stirring the emotions of the listener when a pipe band parades down the street with a bit of pomp and swagger.

Those are the situations we most associate with Highland pipes, but over the last 30 to 40 years there has been a growing interest in playing the Highland pipes alongside other traditional instruments, and for the past 14 years, the RSAMD BA (Scottish Music — Piping) degree course has been producing Highland pipers who are quite comfortable in the folk band idiom.

The early folk scene piping pioneers in the 1970s were Jimmy Anderson and then Tom Johnstone in Glasgow band, The Clutha; Duncan MacGillivray in Battlefield Band; Iain MacDonald and then Dougie Pincock in Kentigern; and Alan MacLeod in Alba and then the Tannahill Weavers. It may sound like a long time ago, but it seems that the tradition moves at a slower pace and the skills and techniques of piping alongside other traditional instruments have not been widely passed on and are not common knowledge to the majority of pipers.

The whole subject of playing pipes with other musicians is a massive topic and could delve so deep into the related music theory that only a book could do it justice. This feature is taking it very slowly, giving you simple instruction on how to pitch your pipe chanter, a little of the music theory involved and some knowledge of what other musicians need to do to play along with you.

You don't need to have a strong grasp of musical theory to follow steps one to three, but it does assume you are a piper who can read pipe music; you know the names of the notes on the chanter; you understand how to set the pitch of your pipe chanter by sinking or raising the reed and how to check the pitch using a tuner.

If you are able to do those things, the steps below should allow you to set your pipe chanter, and knowing you are at concert pitch, give you the confidence to find a willing musician to share a tune; even if only to encourage you to share a few tunes with a friend who plays guitar... and everyone has a friend who plays guitar!

## GETTING YOUR PIPE CHANTER IN TUNE

1. You must have a B-flat concert pitch pipe chanter, and these are now available from a few bagpipe makers.
2. Your low A needs to tune to 440 Hertz (Hz) — that is not strictly true (it actually tunes to 466Hz) and we will find out why in the next issue. However to keep things simple for the moment, get a calibratable chromatic tuner, such as a Korg C-30, and set it to 440Hz.



**Example 1. Chromatic tuner set to 440 Hertz showing the B-flat note 'in tune' when a low A is played into it.**

3. If the chromatic tuner shows B-flat 'in tune', see example one, when you play your low A into it when set to 440Hz, then your chanter is where you want it to be.

So if you have followed the points above, your pipe chanter should now be at concert pitch. The following points, from four to 10, start to

explore the music theory, but don't give you all the answers. The various topics and theory will be explored in future issues of *Piping Today*.

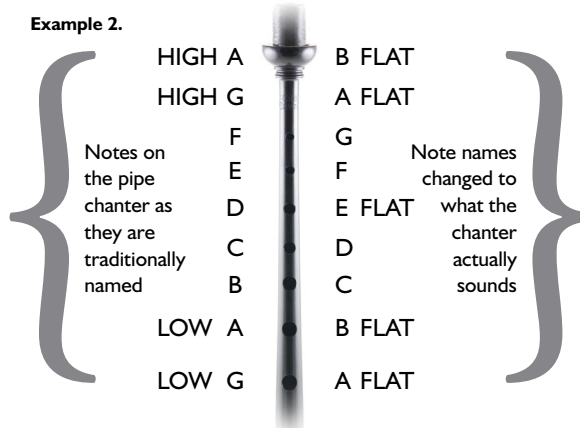
# The importance of concert pitch B-flat with Calum MacCrimmon

## MUSIC THEORY BASICS

4. Your low A note actually sounds a B-flat and that is why the tuner shows a B-flat when you play a low A into it. All the other notes on the chanter sound one semitone higher than what they are traditionally named: see example two.

So in theory, if you were trying to check that you and another musician were in tune with each other, you would ask them to play a B-flat and you would play a low A.

### Example 2.



5. There are seven keys available on the pipe chanter: A-flat major; B-flat major & B-flat minor; C minor; E-flat major & E-flat minor; and F minor. Many pipe tunes are not in conventional major or minor keys, but rather in modal keys, eg. mixolydian, and these will be explained in future issues. In the usual piping scenarios, pipers don't need to know the key of a tune and most will only have experienced keys by the feel of different tunes. Once you start to play with other musicians, you will inevitably be asked the question, "What key are you in?"

6. The most commonly used keys for pipe tunes are B-flat major, E-flat major and C minor.

7. In the majority of traditional/pipe music, you can find the key of a tune by looking at the last note of the tune.

8. Other musicians who change the tuning of, or transpose, their instruments (fiddle, guitar, whistles, and most other stringed instruments) to be the same pitch as the pipes do not think in the actual keys the pipes are playing, but rather in the keys which are more familiar to them: G major; A major & A minor; B minor; D major & D minor; E minor: see example three.

**Example 3. The top line shows the keys which the Highland pipes actually sound. The bottom line shows the names of the top line of keys changed to suit other musicians who tune up or transpose their instrument.**

A-flat MAJOR	B-flat MAJOR	B-flat MINOR	C MINOR	E-flat MAJOR	E-flat MINOR	F MINOR
↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓
G MAJOR	A MAJOR	A MINOR	B MINOR	D MAJOR	D MINOR	E MINOR
↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓	↓ BECOMES ↓

9. If you are looking to find which key a tune is in and you use the method at number 7, and find that the last note is a low A, you can tell the fiddler/guitarist you are in the key of A major, (or A minor if you have been crossfingering the C note). See example four over the page.

10. Pipers who want to play with other musicians should learn to think and speak in the keys that other musicians use, as well as being familiar with the names of the keys that the pipes actually sound.

These are the very basics of the theory which will be explored further in future issues. **continued over →**

*As part of the interviews conducted for this feature I focused on certain topics which are crucial, or closely related, to the whole subject. These discussions are not all about the theory but more about sharing the experience of the guys who do it for a living.*

*Here, piper and multi-instrumentalist, Calum MacCrimmon of Scottish folk band Breabach, who were nominated for a BBC Radio 2 'Best Band' Folk award of 2011, talks about the importance of having a concert pitch B-flat chanter.*



**C**ALUM attended Celtic Connections in 2004 as part of The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland 'support team' as he was involved with setting up the band and helping to arrange the backing music. The NYPBoS had been offered an opportunity to play a concert with Carlos Núñez, and Calum explains how they prepared.

"The band had learnt all the music and we were at rehearsals setting up the pipes and they were sounding good, but I was a little bit concerned that the band wasn't going to be in concert pitch B-flat. The chanters were closer to pipe band pitch, so I worked alongside Chris Gibb to flatten them off, and though it still wasn't down to concert pitch B-flat it was closer — an improvement at least.

"Carlos Núñez came to rehearsals to see how things were going and I took the chance to speak to him. I said, 'I understand you have played with pipe bands before, but just so you know, we are not in concert pitch B-flat.' At which point his face changed colour and he asked what I meant. So I quickly back-pedalled, and said, 'Oh no, no, we are close to B-flat, it will be fine, we will get there.'

"So we had these normal pipe band chanters and reeds — and just had to go to town on it. We taped up everything, in particular the lower holes of the chanter and lifted the reeds, and eventually got everybody in tune, but the tone from the chanters was horrific because it was all tape. So the band went on to play with Carlos that night and his comment after the show was, 'This is the best pipe band I have ever played with.' It was all because they were actually in tune with Carlos and his band — I can only assume that Carlos's previous pipe band encounters were of poor concert tuning and accepted that this is what pipe bands sound like. He was blown away that these youngsters played and sounded so good... and that was with all that tape.

"It was at that point I realised that we had to get instruments that could cope with concert pitch B-flat and I went to speak to Stuart McCallum at McCallum Bagpipes. I had tried the B-flat chanter they already had but it was based on an Anderson reed which doesn't naturally sit at a very low pitch.

"So I did a bit of research on reed types and I found that Troy Reeds were the most suited to sitting naturally at a low pitch. I based my research on 50 Troy reeds and set out to find out the common problems of the B-flat chanter McCallum Bagpipes already had. The chanter had to feel like a modern pipe chanter so to do that, and achieve the correct tuning, we changed the position of the low G, the A and B holes and from there it was a case of changing the size of the holes to get the tuning just right.

"I visited Stuart quite a few times and it took a while and a lot of trial and error on my own part, but now I have a chanter which I can stick a Troy reed in and straight away I'm within the realms of concert pitch B-flat.

"I then set up The National Youth Pipe Band with the new re-developed McCallum concert pitch B-flat chanters, as I felt it was important that they were making the commitment to be the first ones to get a great pipe band sound in B-flat. It enabled them to play with any other band or orchestra in the world, because when they walked on stage they were at correct pitch.

"The National Youth Pipe Band were one of the first bands to make the effort to be at concert pitch and it was a very original sound. I know that they still use the normal pipe band chanters when it is their own concert, but it is great that they have the resources and understanding to set the band up and be in tune with other musicians when the chance arises.

"It really lifts the musical world's perception and appreciation of what pipers are in the modern age. We are not just the out-of-tune pipe band sound coming around the corner — we can be bang in tune. The pipes may not be an easy instrument to tune, every piper knows that, but that is not a good excuse.

"There are lots of great players with great pipe bands out there and they could do it. Certainly, any concert band should have the capability to achieve concert pitch B-flat." ●

Sincere thanks to Jim McGillivray of pipetunes.ca for his permission to use the tune below, and to Janette Montague for her advice and work in typesetting the tune samples.

# Arranging Tunes with Finlay MacDonald

Finlay MacDonald is Head of Piping Studies BA (Scottish Music — Piping) degree course at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. He has been in demand as a performer and has toured with top Scottish bands such as Deaf Shepherd, Battlefield Band and Old Blind Dogs, and, as well as having recorded on more than 20 albums as a session musician, he has released two albums with his own, Finlay MacDonald Band.



**W**HEN I asked the musicians how they went about choosing tunes to play in a folk band situation, the standard answer was that the piper would pick a bunch of tunes and play them to the band for their feedback. The tunes which were eventually selected would be the choice of the whole band and generally tunes were picked that gave scope for the other musicians to do something creative with.

Finlay explained how he chooses and arranges tunes: “There are a few approaches you can take and it really depends on how you want to portray your music. There is nothing wrong with playing a big set of tunes which sit really nicely on the pipes and are comfortable to play. Though at other times it is good to stretch yourself with tunes that are difficult and awkward to play, maybe in a situation where the tunes have been composed by musicians who are not pipers and which don’t quite sit as well on the pipes. It is good to challenge yourself and push that out, though it is equally as satisfying to rattle into a set of reels which naturally feel good.

“When it comes to arranging I like to pick tunes which sit comfortably on the lead instruments in the band. So if it is pipes and fiddle which are leading, then I will naturally tend towards pipe tunes to give a big, strong feel to the sound, or just write tunes to give the feel I’m looking for. When I’m arranging I sometimes need a tune in a specific key and with a certain vibe and if I don’t know one I will just write one.

“I now often find that it is possible to do more with an arrangement when it is a simpler tune; and in the past I have probably been through the mill trying to play and arrange the most complex of tunes. Those complicated tunes do have their place and it is all to do with how you want your music to come across but I now feel that you can’t beat a lovely 3/4 march with nice chords, harmony and a bit of percussion behind it. That is where I am at the moment; enjoying these big strong tunes.

“Tune players generally have an inbuilt ability to put sets of tunes together, without really analysing what they are doing. I could be playing a tune and think, ‘that would be good for starting a set’, and then I will just naturally feel what the next tune should be. It is important when you put a set together to think about it as a piece of music, rather than individual tunes, so that it has a start, a middle and an end. There are so many ways to go and you don’t need to follow the same formula — start with a big tune, then go small and have a big finish; or start small then get bigger before coming back down — there are so many options and it is great to explore them.

“It is quite different arranging for a folk band compared to a pipe band where everyone has to be playing all the time and it is impossible to use dynamics. It can feel limiting when arranging for a pipe band but it becomes a challenge in different ways. When arranging a tune for various instruments I always like to think of a spectrum of sound with the pipes always fixed at one level, and then consider what the other instruments can do to fill in the spectrum above and below the pipes. So you will have the bass guitar or drum filling in the lower end of the spectrum, the snare away up high above the pipes and the fiddle, whistles or flute weaving in and out above and below the level of the pipes.”

**Example 4.** A pipe tune with the C# and F# marked in the key signature and guitar chords added above the bars. This music can be used by any musician who tunes up, or transposes, their instrument, e.g. a fiddler who is tuned up one semitone or a guitarist who is tuned up or using a capo on the first fret. The final note of the tune is a low A, and as is the case with many traditional/pipe tunes, indicates the key of the tune — which is also A.

**The Gardens of Skye** A. Harper

4/4 March

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**Example 5.** The music below is the first four bars of *The Gardens of Skye*, transposed to show what would be needed for a musician playing piano or accordion to be able to read the music. The B-flat and E-flat have been marked in the key signature, and if you compare it to example four above, you will see all the notes have been moved up one place on the staff.

**The Gardens of Skye** A. Harper

The following points below give you the basics of what a few other instruments need to do to be in tune with Highland pipes. So if you have a guitarist friend who has never accompanied Highland pipes, just give him the instruction below and tell him to use his usual chords for whatever key the tune is in.

**OTHER INSTRUMENTS**

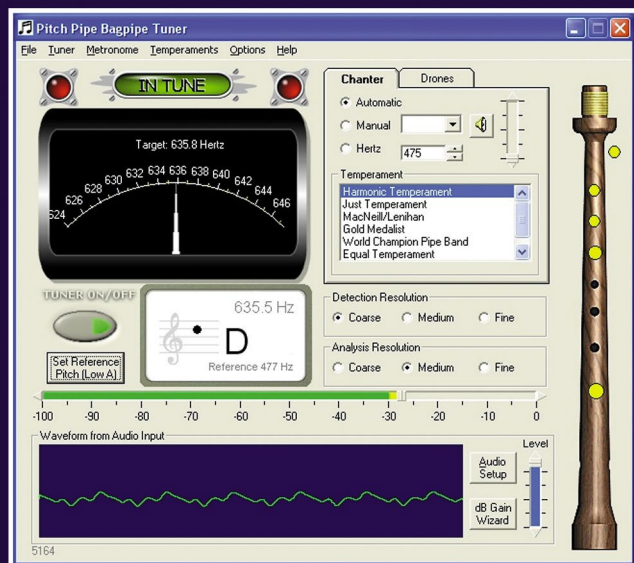
- 11. Many instruments will adjust their tuning, or transpose, to allow them to play more easily with Highland pipes. The techniques for tuning/transposing the most common instruments are as follows:
- 12. The fiddle will tune up by one semitone.
- 13. A whistle or flute in the key of E-flat should be used.
- 14. A guitarist can put a capo on the first fret, or the guitar can be tuned up by one semitone. This also applies to a bouzouki or mandolin.
- 15. Most keyboards can transpose electronically to suit any key.
- 16. A piano or an accordion can not transpose or tune up, so the musician needs to play in the same keys that the pipes actually sound: see example three.

- 17. Sheet music for Highland pipe tunes can be read by any musician who tunes up or transposes their instrument, but mark in the C sharp and F sharp in the key signature, and tell them that the G note is a natural — and to ignore the grace notes: see example four.
- 18. If providing music for a piano or any other instrument which does not tune up or transpose, then the music needs to be rewritten, moving every note up one place on the staff and indicating B-flat and E-flat on the key signature: see example five.

So that is it in a nutshell and I hope I have interested you enough to try it for yourself. The next issue will explore the above points in more detail — and also give you tips and tricks from musicians who have made a living playing Highland pipes in folk bands. ●

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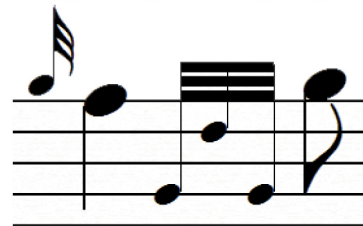
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# The Piper's House

Taigh a' Phìobaire

*The music of the Mackays of Raasay lies at the heart of Scotland's piping tradition although our conventional wisdom tends not to engage further with issues such as the origins of the Mackays or the Hebridean context, cultural and social, in which they lived. In this, the second of three parts, piping scholars Professor Hugh Cheape and Dr Decker Forrest, both programme leaders at Scotland's Gaelic College, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in Skye, explore the musical heritage of the Mackays of Raasay.*

**T**HE Piper's House and Raasay tradition was the starting point for our exploration of the piping heritage of the Mackays of Raasay. It is immediately evident that the picture can be richly filled out by what you can see and hear both in the island and in the music.

The house itself was the cradle in which John Mackay raised a large family although there is a dearth of written records to substantiate the connection. Island tradition is certain and unanimous however that this is *Taigh a' Phìobaire* and furthermore fills out the record of John Mackay's family, for example, that he had a brother, Donald, *Dòmhnall Ruairidh* or *Dòmhnall mac a' Phìobaire*, and three or four sisters, one of whom was Catriona. In Raasay tradition, John Mackay is *Iain Ruairidh*, 'John son of Roderick', aligning him with a similar Mackay naming pattern of the Blind Piper, *Iain Dall Mackay* (i.e. *Am Pìobaire Dall*, c.1656-c.1754), whose son, also Angus, or grandson, John Roy, taught piping (according to Raasay tradition) to the young John Mackay. The

Raasay Mackays were said to be related to the Gairloch Mackays, John's father Roderick, also a piper, having come from Sutherland, as did Iain Dall's father.

We do not seem to have any direct written evidence of John Mackay's tenure of house and land in Oighre at the southern end of Raasay. It appears that many Raasay manuscripts have been wantonly destroyed and lost, possibly to cover up evidence of the later Clearances. One set of papers, the Militia Records, which survived in the public domain, offers some identification for the evidence on the ground. This was the system something like the American 'draft' whereby persons between the ages of 16 and 45 had to be registered in Scotland for service in a militia raised from regions and districts for home defence. From 1794 onwards, home defence was a response to the Napoleonic Wars which had included serious invasion threats from the Continent.

Raasay tradition records John Mackay as serving in the armed forces for home defence from 1798 until 1802. He was recruited into

the Fencible Regiment raised by MacLeod of Raasay and commanded by John MacLeod of Colbeck, the same family (closely related to the Laird of Raasay) commemorated of course in John Mackay's *Lament for MacLeod of Colbeck*. This force was stood down after the Peace of Amiens in 1802 when the home defence imperative collapsed. But the war with France broke out again the following year and John Mackay joined a new military formation, the Isle of Skye Regiment of Volunteers, in 1803 and sailed away on war service.

In the Militia Records for the years about 1811 and 1812, four farming tenants are listed for Oighre, including 'John Mackay, tenant, above 30 [years of age], 6 children under 14, in Local Militia'. Since Angus Mackay was born in 1812, and John Mackay's first child, Catriona, died in infancy, this must describe the family in the Piper's House in the year or so before Angus's birth and further strengthen Raasay tradition of his military service. The late Calum Mackay of Raasay, another descendant of the family, recounted how John Mackay's sister,



Catriona, was working close to the shore in Oighre when she heard the sound of the pipes coming from a boat far out in the Sound. 'Had she not known,' she said, 'that her brother John was away fighting Napoleon, she would have said that he was the piper!' But she was right, since this was John Mackay on his way back to Raasay from his military service.

### Ceòl Mòr

In the annals of piping, John Mackay's most celebrated pupil must be his son Angus. Angus Mackay (1812-1859) is known by pipers today mainly for his contribution to *ceòl mòr*. His settings, both in manuscript and those he published in 1838 in *A Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd* influenced later *ceòl mòr* publications and many became the basis for standardised settings in the 20th century. There is little doubt that Angus's success has been down to the perpetuation of his written works which we may assume had resonance with the playing of a succession of 19th-century master pipers beginning with Angus's father, John, and his pupils who included Angus and his brothers, John Bàn Mackenzie and Angus Macpherson, and their pupils in turn who included Malcolm Macpherson (*Calum Pìobaire*) and Donald Cameron.

The subject of Angus's style of *ceòl mòr* has been discussed and illustrated at length elsewhere but, to summarise, his settings, as well as those of his brother John, are less decorated and employ a smaller, more standardised corpus of ornaments than, for example, the settings of Donald MacDonald and Angus MacArthur. The timing of some of these ornaments has long intrigued students of piping due to the notoriously prescriptive nature of *ceòl mòr* notation. It is therefore instructive to look at the manuscript of Eliza Ross when considering the interpretation of such movements as notated by Angus. The 'Lady D'Oyly Manuscript' in Edinburgh University's School of Scottish Studies Archives takes its name from Eliza Ross's married name and carries the legend on the front cover: 'Orig-

inal Highland Airs Collected Rasay in 1812 by Elizabeth Jane Ross'. The personal and musical circumstances of Eliza Ross (1789-1875) are explained in Angus Mackay's 'Historical and Traditional Notes' in his *Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd*:

Her father and mother having died when she was in infancy... she was left under the guardianship of her uncle (James MacLeod of Raasay) who brought her up in his own family at Raasay. She became a great favourite with all who knew her, being imbued with the finest feelings of the Highlander. Her musical taste was remarkably good, and she was so fond of Piobaireachd that she acquired many of the longest pieces from the performance of the family piper, and was accustomed to play them on the piano with much effect.

We see that Eliza Ross used Angus's father, John Mackay, as source for the *ceòl mòr*

examples in her manuscript of Highland music arranged for fortepiano or piano. Eliza Ross's settings represent a non-piper's impression of the melodies of several *ceòl mòr* airs and give an unusual and extremely valuable overall melodic impression of the music deriving from an ear-learnt player in a 'pre-literate age' of piping. It is therefore of particular interest that Eliza Ross incorporated certain ornamental motifs, especially 'echoing beats', directly into the melodies of her arrangements. Had these been played differently by John Mackay – more quickly for example – then we might assume that Eliza would have notated them differently, replaced them with a more typical keyboard embellishment or even omitted them entirely.

The following examples of 'MacLeod's Salute' from Eliza Ross (transcribed here one tone lower) and Angus Mackay allow for some interesting comparisons:

#### Example 1. Unnamed (The MacLeod's Salute) from Eliza Ross (No. 145)

#### Example 2. Fàilte Na 'n Leòdach – 'The MacLeod's Salute' from Angus Mackay (1838)

The Piper's House in its Raasay setting, looking from Oighre to Skye.

Eliza Ross's interpretation of what we may assume was an echoing beat on low A (i.e. *biharin*) at the start of bars 1 and 5 is slightly puzzling in that the first emphasised note of the motif is D followed by passing notes B and low G before resolving to low A. As a piper, one would have expected Eliza to use notes E and D in place of D and B to more closely represent the motif as notated by Angus:

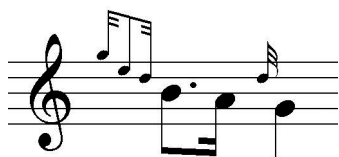
### Example 3.



However, the overall effect is still the same; the introductory note of this movement is still held at considerable length before resolving to A and this is how the movement is timed by pipers today. As well, Eliza Ross's treatment of the echoing beats on E and D (i.e. *chere* and *bihara*, respectively) in bars 6, 8 and 10 are timed very similarly to how pipers play them today.

The 'run-down' gracenote sequence from E to low G in the odd numbered bars of both examples also makes for an interesting comparison. This particular note sequence features in many Donald Mòr MacCrimmon compositions and is generally played in one of two ways:

### Example 4.



### Example 5.



The second approach is sometimes referred to as a 'Donald Mòr run-down' by some pipers. Angus Mackay's notation seems to suggest an interpretation similar to Example 5 while Eliza Ross's notation, although not always consistent, seems to align with Example 4. Perhaps John and his son Angus played the movement differently from one another — disparities such as these did exist in other piping families after all.

## Cèòl Beag

Angus Mackay was also an important figure in the development of *cèòl beag* by the mid-19th century although this is often overshadowed by his contribution to *cèòl mòr*. Following the publication of *A Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd* in 1838, he became involved in the extensive reworking of a collection of *cèòl beag* by William Mackay (1840), which was in due course published around 1843. Shortly thereafter, Angus reworked the collection further and expanded it to create his own collection entitled *The Piper's Assistant: A Collection of Marches, Quicksteps, Strathspeys, Reels and Jigs*. With his work for these two publications, Angus also continued

tions became established in the early-to-mid 20th century.

In keeping with the trend for subsuming earlier works into new collections, Angus's revised edition of William Mackay's collection accounts for over half the tunes in the *Piper's Assistant*. Other tunes used by Angus appear to have been lifted from collections including those of Donald MacDonald (1828), Thomas MacBean Glen (1840-1843) and one or two publications of fiddle music. Table 1 (below) gives an approximate breakdown of the sources for the 155 tunes in Angus Mackay's collection and implies that less than 20% were original:

Table 1

William Mackay, 1840 (later revised by Angus Mackay)	87	56%
Donald MacDonald, 1828	29	19%
Various fiddle sources	7	4%
Thomas M. Glen, 1840-1843	3	2%
Total borrowed	123	81%

to collect music which he notated in manuscript and which has survived in a vast collection of around 500 tunes, now in the National Library of Scotland. This manuscript collection of *cèòl beag* comprised many tunes lifted from already published sources such as Donald MacDonald's *Collection* of 1828 and William Gunn's *Caledonian Repository* of 1848. His most notable compositions appeared after his death in the publications of Alexander Glen (1860), William Ross (1869) and Donald MacPhee (1878), and most are still played by pipers today.

Throughout most of the 19th century, emphasis was placed on creating standard collections of bagpipe music that outmoded earlier works by incorporating 'new and improved' settings of pre-published tunes rather than the production of original compositions. In the earliest collections of *cèòl beag* (i.e. between Donald MacDonald's *Collection* of 1828 and about 1860), we can see the influence of earlier fiddle music collections such as the successful *Caledonian Repository* collections by Niel Gow and his sons and then increasingly of existing bagpipe music publications. That this was so, indicates the pace at which bagpipe music was developing until the Piobaireachd Society books and Pipe Major William Ross's collec-

We might speculate that of the 27 or so original airs in *The Piper's Assistant*, some were tunes known to Angus from early in his piping career and may perhaps have a connection with Raasay and the Piper's House. One of these, *Cailleach Liath Rarsair* 'The old grey woman of Raasay' is said to have been composed by *Iain Dall* Mackay and reminds us of the claim, mentioned previously, that the Raasay and Gairloch Mackays were related. This tune along with several others in *The Piper's Assistant* are also found in Eliza Ross's manuscript and suggest that vestiges of a Raasay musical tradition can indeed be found in Angus's collection.

Other tunes in *The Piper's Assistant* that are potentially connected to Raasay include those with titles derived from the first lines of Gaelic vocal melodies (as opposed to simply Gaelic translations of English or Scots titles which are in fact common throughout the text). Of note are a couple of bawdy titles, unknown to other sources, that remind us of the rich diversity of Gaelic song that ranged from the polite to the obscene — or humorous. These are *Cò tha sin air do chòchan geala*; *The fair bosom* (page 67). More accurately, Angus's Gaelic title might be translated as: 'Who is that on your white breasts?'; and *B\_Dhòmhnaill 'ic Cugain*;

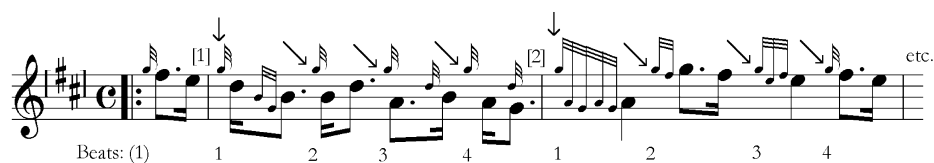
*Donald's Rant* (page 75). The clear and strong implication of the 'B\_' is 'Bod', which would render the Gaelic title as 'The Penis of Donald son of Cugain'!

Reflecting on Angus Mackay's *ceòl beag* sheds light onto his distinctive approach to arrangement and gives us a glimpse into some of the trends and development of *ceòl beag* during the middle years of the 19th century. One feature of Angus's *ceòl beag* ornamentation is that (unlike his ornamentation in *ceòl mòr*) he used a fairly

wide range of ornaments as was typical of most early compilers. Angus did however have one or two interesting distinctive characteristics in his ornamentation.

From the mid-19th century, high G grace notes were increasingly used to begin a sequence of single grace notes on melody notes, or as the first grace note of a doubling. They are used especially on melody notes that align with the down-beats in a tune. The following example illustrates this:

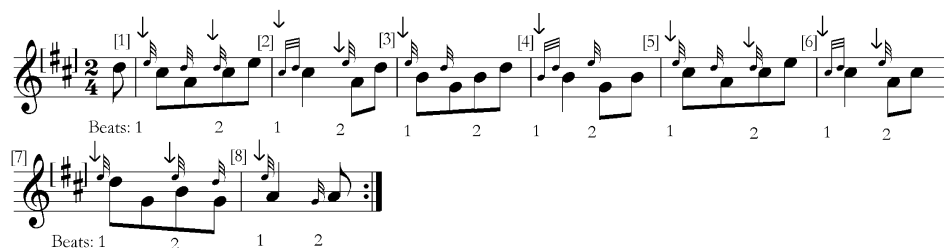
**Example 6.** 'The Miller of Dron' (Strathspey)



Seaforth Highlanders (1936), page 26.

In contrast to this and other possible approaches, Angus often left melody notes un-graced or used E or D grace notes instead of G grace notes:

**Example 7.** 'Tha Biodag air Mac Thòmais; Arndilly's Reel' (Reel)



William Mackay (1843), page 24.

In another tune, we can see Angus's preference for E grace notes prefixed to C and B doublings where later pipers would automatically use high G grace notes:

**Example 8.** 'A Shean Bhean Bhoichd; Glengarry's March'



Angus Mackay (1843), page 7.





Mackay's setting may seem slightly awkward to the modern piper. The question, however, of one approach being more or less difficult than another is not down so much to the mechanical implications of either, but to an individual piper's habits and training. Overall, Angus's use of E or D grace notes gives his settings a subtler, slightly 'looser', feel than more modern settings which feature high G grace notes throughout.

The tune in Example 8 is an interesting example of an early quickstep probably adapted

from a vocal air and is typical in this respect of a number of tunes found throughout *The Piper's Assistant*. It previously appeared in William Mackay's collection as *The Sutherland Fencible's Quickstep or Glengarry's March* and in Thomas MacBean Glen's collection as *Glengarry's March*. When Angus revised William Mackay's collection, he expanded the title, as we have seen, to: *A Sheana Bhean Bhochd or Glengarry's March*. A likely source for this tune is an old lullaby where Mackay's Gaelic title can be identified in the first line:

————— **Example 9.** 'A Sheana Bhean Bhochd' as sung by Kenna Campbell (August 2003)

A sheana bhean bhochd,  
Chan fhalbh thu nochd; (x3)  
Nach tig thu steach san oidhch' ann?

*Poor old woman,  
You will not leave tonight;  
Won't you come in from the night?*

As pipers, we tend not to appreciate the influence that pipe music can have on other traditions and, with this in mind, it is interesting to note that the quickstep setting of *A Sheana Bhean Bhochd* appears to have been reabsorbed into the Gaelic vocal tradition and arranged with a more rhythmic set of lyrics for the first part along with a newly composed set of lyrics set to the second part. The following words, as sung by the Skye-born Gaelic singer, Kenna Campbell, fit comfortably with the bagpipe setting above and no doubt offer insights into an earlier tradition:

A sheana bhean bhochd,  
Bidh tu anmoch a-nochd; (x3)  
San t-uisge san t-anmoch san ceò ann.

*Poor old woman,  
You will be late tonight;  
It's raining, it's late, it's misty.*

A sheana bhean bhochd,  
Nach fuirich thusa nochd; (x3)  
San t-uisge san t-anmoch san ceò ann.

*Poor old woman,  
Will you not stay tonight;  
It's raining, it's late, it's misty.*

During Angus's piping career, quickstep marches quickly evolved from sparsely ornamented two-parted tunes like *A Sheana Bhean Bhochd* to longer, more elaborate arrangements and compositions, recognised later as 'competition marches'. Angus was one of the first to compose tunes of this genre and *The Glengarry Gathering*, *Balmoral Royal Highlander's March* and *The Duke of Roxburgh's Farewell to the Black Mount Forest* (said to be an adaptation of the quickstep, *Miss Forbes' Farewell to Banff*)

are still played by pipers today. All three tunes first appeared in Alexander Glen's collection from 1860. This was the first bagpipe music collection to feature many new compositions and modern arrangements by leading pipers like Angus Mackay, Duncan Campbell, Hugh Mackay and Alexander, John and Donald Cameron. Angus was less successful with other genres of *ceòl beag* and apart from the excellent strathspey, *Balmoral Castle*, attempts such as the two-part strathspey, *His Royal Highness Prince*

*Albert's Birthday* appear derivative or otherwise uninspired. One notable exception is to be found in Angus's manuscript of *ceòl beag*. This is a three-part jig which was inspired by the pibroch, *An Ceapadh Eucorach – The Unjust Incarceration*. It, along with a number of other tunes in the manuscript, was published in William Ross's collection of 1869. It is a striking piece of music which demonstrates Angus's creative and progressive abilities as a composer/arranger:

**Example 10.** An Ceapadh Eucorach; The Unjust Incarceration (Jig)

William Ross (1869) page 251.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are extremely grateful to Dr Peter Cooke who has generously provided us with a pre-publication copy of *The Elizabeth Ross Manuscript – Original Highland Airs Collected in Rasaay in 1812 by Elizabeth Jane Ross* (edited by Peter Cooke, Mòrag MacLeod and Colm Ó Baoill). This highly valuable work will soon be available through the University of Edinburgh School of Scottish Studies on-line publications at [www.celtscot.ed.ac.uk](http://www.celtscot.ed.ac.uk). We are also indebted to Kenna Campbell who has shared her extensive knowledge of Gaelic song with Decker Forrest whilst he was studying for his PhD.

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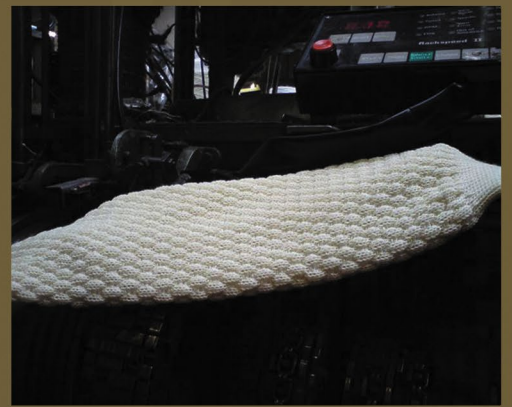
**To be continued in the next issue of *Piping Today***



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# The Best of Both Worlds



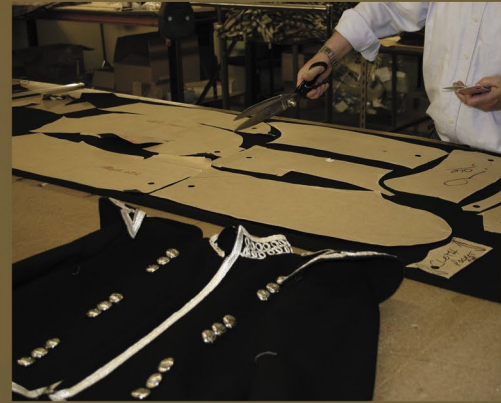
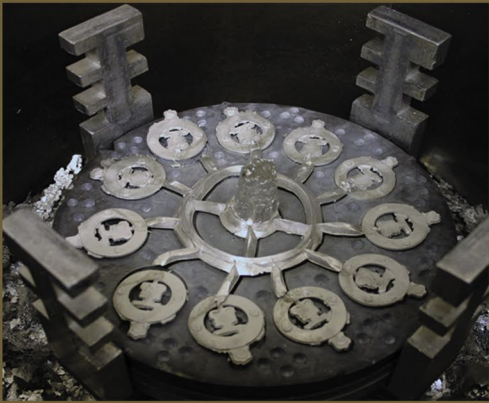
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by Chris MacKenzie

# Piping's place at the premier winter festival

Celtic Connections 2011



James Mackenzie



All photos: John Shavin@designfolk.com

Alasdair Henderson

**WHAT** do Welsh superstar Tom Jones, American soul legend Mavis Staples, Indian tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain, a reformation of Scots band Love and Money, and of course, two guys playing bronze age horns all have in common?

Well, if you were in Glasgow in January you'll know the answer is that gathering of all things Celtic: Celtic Connections.

The *celtic* connection for some of the headline acts on offer may make some politician's justification of their expenses look realistic, but to grumble about that is missing the point entirely. This is a festival that celebrates music and any festival that brings Mavis Staples to the stage is definitely doing something right. In any case, the "traditional" end of the spectrum is still extremely well catered for. For the piping enthusiast it was possible to go out every night and take in a gig that had pipes in one form or another in it.

The big setpiece piping concert is now in with the bricks and this year it was the turn of the Fife Constabulary Pipe Band and The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland to entertain. Fife, under pipe major James Murray, got the proceedings under way and



Barnaby Brown

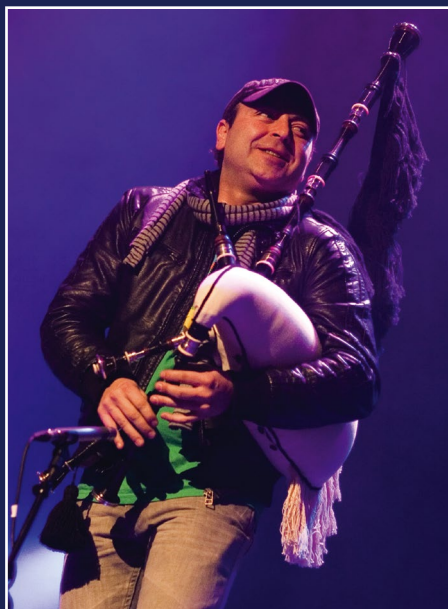
their grade 1 sound and technique shone through. Their concert repertoire was conservative with the band only playing around half a dozen sets including two MSR's and a couple of medleys. The bulk of the band got a break as Stevie Dewer's ceilidh band took the middle section of the concert and entertained with some energetic selections finishing with a set of Irish jigs. Dougie Murray, brother of the PM, got to do the solo spot and impressed with a set including that perennial favourite *Crossing the Minch*. Overall, the Fife Constabulary's performance was traditional pipe band material well played.

After the break it was the turn of The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland, under pipe major Emma Buchan, to take centre stage. This they did with impressive technique, verve and energy. With 35 pipers and more than 50 musicians in all, this is not so much a band as a musical tour de force. From the minute they started with the *Dragon's Lair* set to *The Annihilator* finale, the band met every musical challenge head on and they do not shy away from tricky material – tunes by Chris Armstrong, Mark Saul and Bruce Gandy pepper their set. They soon had the audience completely captivated. Using their accompanying musicians to great effect the band moved effortlessly from the atmospheric and moody to full-out rock and roll as the whole ensemble created a sound that radiated more energy than the sun's solar flares.

The band created a visual as well as an aural landscape and they happily moved around and brought on dancers to create more interest and had a bit of fun on the stage. The face-off between the tenor drummers and the snares during the drum salute was terrific fun and had the audience laughing loudly. Special mention goes to the tag team soloists, all of whom are only 14 years old, and played brilliantly: Christopher Gray, Andrew Clark and Connor Sinclair, take a bow; you have nerves of steel.



Angus MacKenzie



Anxo Lorenzo

Do not get the impression that the NYPBoS are in any way shape or form a triumph of style over substance as this band can play — boy can they play.

There are few bands in the world — Simon Fraser University, 78th Fraser Highlanders; St Laurence O'Toole, Field Marshal Montgomery and Toronto Police — that can consider themselves in the same league as the NYPBoS when it comes to giving concerts and without a shadow of a doubt they are the best concert band in Scotland. If they are playing anywhere near you, make the effort to get out and see them — you will not be disappointed.

For the sound of pipes unfettered by drums, keyboards and fiddles, the fifth annual Gordon Duncan Memorial Competition at The National Piping Centre was the place to be. The contenders — Chris Armstrong, Cameron Drummond and Alistair Henderson from Scotland, Andrea Boyd, Ryan Canning



Ewen Henderson



Dougie Murray

and Robert Watt from Ireland and the Breton contingent of Alexis Meunier, Sylvain Hamon and Xavier Boderiou — served up a feast of piping that was of the highest quality throughout. It seems that the Scots and Irish contingent are now getting a better grip on the Breton tunes giving that section a more even feel. The overall winner on the day was Alexis with Robert second and Sylvain in third. This was an excellent day's piping but as it does take up most of the day it might make more sense — and in the spirit of Gordon Duncan, who never took more than 30 seconds to tune when on stage — to have the competitors play each set one after the other. After all, that wouldn't have been an issue for Gordon.

Lorne MacDougall



All photos: John Slavin@designfolk.com

One of the great things about Celtic Connections is that over the years you get to see artists and bands grow and develop into fully fledged entertainers. One such band is Skerryvore. Originally a beefed-up ceilidh band they have matured into full-on folk rock outfit. There has been a gap in the market for a young band to fill the void left by Runrig and Wolfstone, as they have grown older with their audience, and Skerryvore are striding right in there with size 12 Doc Martens.

The pipes, fiddle and accordion may take the melodic duties but there is heavyweight backing behind it with drums and guitars and when they want to, which is often, they produce a sound that is loud and proud and as tight as an Aberdonian farmer.

The band are the very definition of Scottish folk rock and when three pipers from the Strathclyde Police Pipe Band were added there was a danger the hall might explode with the energy in the room. Alec Dalglish's voice has matured nicely and he was completely at home with the songs, including the band anthem *Home to Donegal*. Indeed his rendition of *Folsom Prison Blues* was one of the surprise highlights of the festival. This was a terrific night's entertainment and special mention must also be made of support acts Manran and Uist fiddler/accordionist Calum Iain MacCorquodale, who was accompanied by Runrig legend Malcolm Jones.

It might seem at first glance that Skerryvore and the Red Hot Chilli Pipers inhabit the same space but that's not necessarily so. The Chilli pipers, and their self-styled Bagrock with its unique twist on pop and rock intermingled with some traditional material, has reached a broad audience. While there is undoubtedly some crossover, the Chillis are clearly taking the pipes to places they don't normally reach.

There was certainly a section of the audience at their Celtic Connections gig that I doubt



The Red Hot Chilli Pipers. From the left, Kevin Macdonald; Kyle Warren and Stuart Cassells.



Allan MacDonald

would have been at any other festival concert.

Like Skerryvore, the Chillis have matured into skilled and committed entertainers, and are the Scottish equivalent of The Shadows with carefully crafted routines allied to classy playing. With at least three pipers to the front and centre but on some sets as many as six pipers leading the line, including Willie Armstrong (making a brief return to the fold for the night) and Lorne MacDougall, this was a sight and a sound that was as majestic as it was loud. No one can accuse the Chilli Pipers of doing anything by half and, true to form, they brought on the Gospel Truth Choir to help out with a soulful version of *Amazing Grace*. Of course, the Chilli Dancers were much to the fore and added even more energy to the occasion. At two hours start to finish without a break, this was an adrenaline-fuelled blast of a set that rocked for every second and, as the strains of *Rocking All Over World* emanated from the pipes, it was easy to see why the Chilli Pipers are winning fans, and indeed — rocking all over the world.

Piping of an altogether different form was the order of the day at the Ceol's Craic concert. Here, Barnaby Brown on Border pipes was joined by Indian singer Prakriti Dutta for a set featuring the piobaireachd *Struan Robertson's*

*Salute* sung in three different styles and Barnaby playing Sardinian Triple pipes. This was an interesting set and one that illustrated that there are as many connections as there are differences across the musical genres. The link between Scotland and India was further explored by that fusion of the genres that is India Alba. Ross Ainslie on Border pipes and whistle provided the drive behind the band sound as the sounds of east and west intermingled. Special mention must be made of young Irish band Macher who kicked off the evening's entertainment with a well put together set that had everything from *Fear a Bhata* to rousing sets of reels, all played with skill and passion. Cellist and singer Alana Henderson, sister of Jarleth, is a star in the making and we will undoubtedly hear more of her beautiful voice.

Macher started their show with some canntaireachd and there was more piobaireachd on show when acclaimed fiddler, Bonnie Rideout, played at St Andrew's in the Square. With a supporting cast that included Allan MacDonald on pipes big and small, and John Purser and Simon O'Dwyer on the aforementioned Bronze Age horns, Bonnie explored playing piobaireachd on the fiddle — not something you hear often but with Bonnie's consummate skill she managed to bring a fresh perspective to the ancient music.

The final night of the festival had all 10 of the Angus Nicolson Trio in concert. With Angus in cracking form on the Highland and Border pipes and supported by the assembled throng (that included Iain MacDonald) he blitzed through tracks from his sparkling debut album, *The Lasses that Baffle Us*. This was west coast music in body and spirit and whether 2/4 marches, slow airs or hornpipes and jigs, the music reeked with the smell of the Highlands and Islands. The album is a cracker and in concert the band were a blast, if a little raw in places, and a superb night's entertainment.

The above is but a taste of the piping on offer through the festival and, as stated at the beginning, there was plenty of piping alongside the big name headline gigs. You pay your money and you take your choice! ●

PIPER

Youngstars

# Caitlin Macdonald

**Q. Where are you from and how old are you?**

I'm 17 and I come from Newton Mearns, Glasgow.

**Q. How did you get into piping and when?**

I started learning about eight years ago on holiday up north, when my papa's friend, who played the pipes, visited us. From that moment on I loved the pipes and knew I wanted to learn how to play them. We didn't have a chanter so I started learning on a wooden spoon with holes marked on it for the fingers.

**Q. Who is your tutor and what pipe band do you play with?**

I've had a few teachers, starting off on chanter with Margaret Dunn and then pipes with Finlay MacDonald and now I'm being taught by Chris Armstrong. I played with Johnstone Pipe Band for three seasons and am now currently with Cullen Pipe Band.

**Q. How many hours a week do you spend on piping and how much practice is on your own, with a band or on the pipes/chanter?**

I usually practise about an hour or so every day but in the lead-up to competitions I practise more.

**Q. What are your piping strong points and what do you most need to improve on?**

I think my piobaireachd is stronger than my light music but you can always improve on everything.

**Q. What do you want to achieve in piping?**

I would love to win the Gold Medal one day as it's every solo piper's ultimate ambition.

**Q. What is your favourite tune and why?**

I don't really have a favourite tune because it changes constantly as I increase my repertoire.

→ continued on page 28



Caitlin pictured playing with the NYPBoS at Celtic Connections 2011.

Photo: John Slavin @ designfolk.com

Youngstars



# NYPBoS star at Celtic

**T**HE start of the New Year for The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland has been a very busy time as the senior band has been performing at various events, both at home and abroad.

The first weekend in January saw the band travel to Gartmore House in Stirlingshire for a music camp where the band used the extra rehearsal time to fine tune their playing and prepare for the annual pipe band concert at Celtic Connections.

It was the first time the band had rehearsed in this type of environment.

A lot of the members made new friends and it was a great team-building exercise. Overall, the weekend was a big success and a fantastic experience for everyone involved and we look forward to travelling up to Gartmore House again in March.

The following Saturday, January 15, was a very big day for the NYPBoS as the senior band, along with Fife Constabulary Pipe Band, took to the stage at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall for the Celtic Connections pipe band concert. This event is now considered by many as one of the major pipe band concerts of the year.



Pipe major  
Emma Buchan

In front of a very enthusiastic crowd, the young musicians put on a superb performance, showcasing the fantastic talents of every individual within the project. Not only did the band perform to a very high standard, they did so in style, flooding the stage with more than 50 musicians including 35 pipers and 10 snare drummers.

The audience's enjoyment and appreciation was clear to be seen with a deserved standing ovation as the band concluded their final number *The Annihilator*. It was a concert that I'm sure most of the members of the NYPBoS will remember for many

years to come.

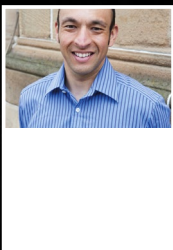
I'd like to make a special mention of Christopher Gray, Andrew Clark and Connor Sinclair for their excellent performance in the tag team solos. Each displayed the experience and composure normally seen in pipers more than twice their age, so well done!

They were also joined on stage by six Highland dancers from the Dawn Walker School of Highland Dancing who showcased contemporary and traditional dances and were the perfect complement to some

Photos: John Shawra@designfall.com



The NYPBoS play in the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall main auditorium as part of the Celtic Connections 2011 piping weekend



by **ALISDAIR McLAREN**  
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL YOUTH PIPE BAND OF SCOTLAND

Youngstars

# Connections and in Switzerland



The NYPBoS play at the Hallenstadion in Zurich, performing the *Dragon's Lair* which was composed by South African piper Chris Macaulay.

Photos: Helen Willmson

of our numbers. Thanks to Dawn and her team for making the concert a very pleasing visual spectacle.

From January 26 to 31, a group of 42 eager members of the NYPBoS embarked on a trip to Zurich, Switzerland, where we had been invited to perform at the 22nd CSI Mercedes in the city.

This event is seen as one of the most prestigious showjumping competitions in the world and this year played host to the Rolex FEI World Cup which showcased the world's top 25 riders during the three-day tournament. Our main purpose for the trip was to take part in a performance entitled The Great Britain

Show, which also featured Her Majesty the Queen's Household Cavalry and The Royal Cavalry. The band performed twice during each show, performing a marching display and our concert version of the *Dragon's Lair* which was the main theme that filled the arena during the finale.

It was the first time the band had performed in such a large stadium and in front of an audience of approximately 15,000 spectators. The experience left each member with goose bumps after the performances. Although the band had a very busy schedule, we did manage a day of sightseeing as we all ventured into the city for a day of shopping and relaxing between shows.

The heavy schedule continues in the next few months with the focus turning to the band's Outreach Programme. Members of the senior band will be travelling to Melrose in the Scottish Borders, Musselburgh in East Lothian and Dingwall in Ross and Cromarty to conduct a day workshop and evening concert to help boost the profile of piping and drumming in the region.

If you are in these areas and are interested in attending please drop me a line at [amclaren@thepipingcentre.co.uk](mailto:amclaren@thepipingcentre.co.uk) for more information.

Finally, I would just like to say a big thank you to all the members of The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland for their outstanding commitment throughout January. I hope that they have enjoyed the experience as much as I have and I look forward to many more in the future. ●



**Youngstars**

→ continued from page 25

**Q. Have you written any tunes?**

I've composed a few tunes, my first one being a 3/4 march dedicated to my dad's friend who was tragically killed in a motorbike accident. The tune is called *Iain MacDonald 1<sup>st</sup> Engineer of the N.R.V. Alliance*.

**Q. What make of pipes do you play, and are they set up with sheepskin and cane or synthetic?**

I play a set of McCallums with a sheepskin bag, Ezeedrone tenor drone reeds and a white Henderson bass.

**Q. What is the best trip or playing experience you have had with the NYPBoS?**

My best playing experience with the NYPBoS was playing at the Alexander McQueen memorial service at St Paul's Cathedral, London. We got to wear tailor-made uniforms with a feather bonnet, designed by Philip Treacy, which looked fantastic and we also got to rehearse at the Air Studios where Take That, Coldplay and more artists have recorded albums.

**Q. What is your favourite part of being in the NYPBoS?**

Playing alongside really nice people who are great pipers and musicians.

**Q. What are the other band members likely to say about you, or what are you most known for in the band?**

Not sure, I hope it's all good.

**Q. What is the secret of your success?**

To be successful at anything requires hard work and dedication which I would like to think I have.

**Q. What would be your ideal uniform if you were allowed to choose it for your band?**

It would have to be a Macdonald tartan (not a Campbell one).

**Q. What would you do or say to encourage other youngsters to learn the pipes?**

Enjoy, keep going and if you don't succeed, try again.

**Q. Do you have any superstitions or any pre-performance rituals?**

I don't really have any apart from putting my left shoe on before my right.

**Q. Who is your pipe idol?**

I have a few pipe idols but my main one right now would have to be Chris Armstrong as he is my teacher and has been very successful in his piping career.

**Q. What are your interests outside of piping?**

I play the low D whistle, drum kit and I am learning the piano — anything musical!

**Q. What do you want to do for a career?**

I want to have a career in music.



**Q. What other music do you like? What's on your MP3 player?**

I like all kinds of music but a vast majority of my iPod is taken up with piping music.

**Q. Who are your heroes?**

My heroes would have to be my mum and dad as they have supported me all the way, even though it takes up most of their time too. If it wasn't for them and their encouragement, I wouldn't have come this far with my piping.

**Q. Are you sporty, and do you follow any teams?**

I play hockey for school and have done so since primary five. I also used to do a lot of snowboarding but I had to stop doing the jumps because I was breaking too many bones.

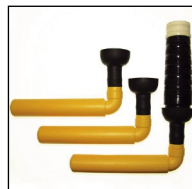
I do like football and support Celtic FC as my grandpa was a huge fan. I still have the football shirt he gave to me when I was five years old.

**Q. Do you prefer sweet or savoury?**

I like a bit of both.

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# Competition League for Amateur Solo Pipers

## THE CLASP

**I**T may seem like there's a million miles between the revered Gold medallists and the pipers who play with mid-grade bands or those who have been learning for a few years and just love a good tune.

The CLASP, the Competition League for Amateur Solo Pipers, has been set up to bridge the gap and encourage amateur pipers to pit their skills against each other and — in a number of cases — work through the amateur grades and into the professional ranks.

The CLASP is open to over-18s and gives solo pipers the chance to compete in a series of graded competitions throughout the year, playing piobaireachd and light music.

The co-ordinators of the competition are Silver medallists Margaret Dunn and Callum Beaumont. The CLASP was formed in 2006 after The National Piping Centre principal Roddy MacLeod identified a need for such a scheme.

Margaret explained: "He felt there wasn't really any regular platform for amateur solo piping. The professionals have the option to compete at the games so Roddy thought we could put together a series of graded amateur competitions and have a league table, so that every time you compete, if you get a prize, you get points. It's similar to the system which has been in place in North America for years."

The CLASP was well received from its inception and has continued to grow in popularity. The competitions now attract entrants from around the world.

Margaret said: "We found that amateur pipers did want to compete and welcomed it. Pipers who had never competed before, who didn't think they were good enough to play in the professional ranks, found they could work their way up through the CLASP grades.

"Some pipers in bands have been attracted to play solo for the first time as it's an achievable goal. There is also a great level of camaraderie as we try to make it a little bit social. We are keen to encourage people.

"It has grown in popularity and it has grown

a bit of momentum overseas as well. We run the amateur competition here at *Piping Live!* and the winner gets an all-expenses-paid trip to New York courtesy of Eric and Maureen Stein to play at the Metro Cup — so that attracts amateur grade 1 pipers from around the world."

In the CLASP set-up, there are three levels from grade 3 up to grade 1, with the level of ability roughly corresponding to pipe band gradings.

Margaret explained: "The repertoire you'd need for a grade 3 band — a march, strathspey and reel — would be similar to grade 3 amateur. In grade 2, you play two of everything so again it would be similar to grade 2 pipe bands. Grade 1 would be of a good standard, just before you'd go into the professional ranks. Some are even good enough to be professional players but just choose not to go down that road.

"Players interested in competing can find out what level they are at by sending us in a recording. We'll have a listen and, for example, we might say you're grade 2 for light music but grade 1 for piobaireachd. A player could have two different gradings.

"If someone doesn't play piobaireachd then they'd just compete in the light music events. It would affect them for overall prizes as they wouldn't have the points from the piobaireachd. They could win but have less of a chance.

"We find a lot of people end up having a go at piobaireachd, which isn't a bad thing."

Grade 3 is the starter grade, and like the C grade in the professional competitions, it has a wide mix of talent.

Margaret added: "Because some people in grade 3 have never played piobaireachd before, we have introduced just the ground of a piobaireachd event, as well as the option of a full piobaireachd in grade 3.

"Throughout the grades there will always be the piobaireachd section and there will always be the MSR section. We might mix the other sections up a little bit with a hornpipe and jig

for the grade 1s, or a 6/8 march and just a jig, so it can vary slightly.

Although some of the entrants are playing competitively in a pipe band, it's an altogether different experience playing solo and Margaret says there's a different mindset involved when switching to going it alone in front of judges.

She explained: "Even subtle things like how you would move from a strathspey into a reel wouldn't be the same as a pipe band. How you set up your pipes would be different. All of the competitions we run are indoors so they wouldn't have to have the volume a pipe major may be looking for. You are just looking for more of a mellow solo sound."

Already in just five years, there have been a number of success stories from the CLASP.

Four pipers who started in grade 3 of the amateur competitions are now battling it out in grade 1 of the CLASP, with the potential to go on to bigger and better things. These dedicated players are Andrew Park, Alastair Thom, Peter Weidig and Julie Donn.

Peter McCallister and Douglas Gardiner have already made the leap from the CLASP into the B grade of the professional ranks.

Peter explained: "The years we spent in the CLASP were vital for preparing for this. The events are very similar, you have to have your pipe ready and in tune at the right time, be prepared for some nerves, and as time goes by, the nerves perhaps become less of a problem. That hasn't happened to me yet.

"The big difference between CLASP and CPA contests is playing outside in a noisy and windy or rainy environment but you can train yourself to do that.

"Doug and I have had very similar careers since we left the CLASP. We spent a year in the C grade piobaireachd and came out joint first at the league table for that. Since then, we have had some success in the very competitive B grade and now have graduated from B- to B for piobaireachd, which means we are eligible to apply for the Silver medal.

“As for light music, after two years in the C grade getting fairly consistent prizes at MSR, we have just been upgraded to B- for this discipline.

“Around the Games both Doug and I have had wins and many other prizes, and it has been great fun. The camaraderie is very similar to the CLASP. Everyone wants a prize, but everyone also supports each other and are genuinely pleased for the prizewinners.”

Douglas agreed that his time in the CLASP provided invaluable competition experience.

He added: “Both Peter and I enjoyed a degree of success in our first year in the CPA, which I am sure was hugely assisted by what we learnt with the CLASP.

“Prior to the CLASP there was a huge void between junior contests and adult professional competitions. The CLASP now provides a very clear stepping stone which is fully complementary with the CPA grading system.

“The CLASP competitions are also organised and stewarded as well as, and in some cases

better, than some of the open level contests I have played in.”

Some aspects of playing the professional circuit you have to just try to take in your stride, regardless of your competition experience.

Peter added: “Nothing can prepare a piper for playing a 12-minute piobaireachd next to a bouncy castle generator and a man firing a starter’s pistol at some cyclists every five minutes or so while you were tuning up.”

The overall experience gained by Peter and Douglas is echoed by many who take part in the CLASP, even if they haven’t shared in the same level of success.

Margaret agrees joining the amateur competition does have real benefits for pipe band players and fledgling soloists alike.

She said: “Solo piping definitely does improve a person’s playing, because when you have a competition coming up you will practise more.

“Of course, people are nervous at the start but once they gain experience they get more

particular about how their pipes sound and improving their technique. I notice that a lot of the competitors are taking lessons and trying to better themselves.

“Getting in there, standing up and doing it is tough for people. The best piece of advice is just do it: go in and see where you are. It’ll be easier the next time.” ●

**UPCOMING CLASP MEETINGS**

Glasgow CLASP (The National Piping Centre) • 16th April 2011

Army School of Piping, Edinburgh • 11th June 2011

Piping Live! World Championship CLASP Grade 3 • 10th August, 2011

Piping Live! World Championship CLASP Grade 2 • 11th August, 2011

Piping Live! World Championship CLASP Grade 1 • 12th August, 2011

Northern Meetings, Inverness • 1st September, 2011

Scottish Piping Society of London • 5th November, 2011

Scots Guards Club, Edinburgh • Jan/Feb 2012

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Or contact Margaret Dunn or Callum Beaumont

Email: [mdunn@thepipingcentre.co.uk](mailto:mdunn@thepipingcentre.co.uk)

or [cbeaumont@thepipingcentre.co.uk](mailto:cbeaumont@thepipingcentre.co.uk)

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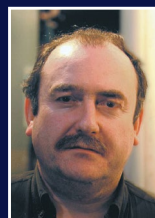


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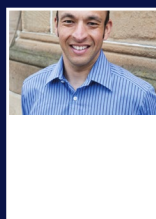
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**Alisdair McLaren**  
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Silver Medallist



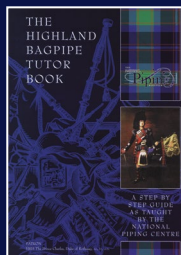
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## Sound Technique

by Jori Chisholm

BagpipeLessons.com

# Learn tunes efficiently by avoiding common mistakes — PART ONE

**A COMPLETE understanding of any tune always begins first with general principles, followed by specifics. It helps to understand not only what we want to achieve, but also mistakes we should avoid.**

First, the tune's time signature tells us the number of beats per bar and which kind of note gets a beat. In 2/4s, each bar has two beats and a quarter note gets one beat. In 6/8s, each bar has six eighth notes, and a group of three eighth notes gets one beat.

Next, we need to understand the particular style of expression for the tune. For example, 2/4 marches are played with a strong dot/cut feel with extra emphasis on each beat. Strathspeys are played with a strong dot/cut feel with extra emphasis on the first and third beats of each bar. These days, jigs are played with the eighth note triplets more or less even or with a very slight emphasis on the first note of each triplet.

These general concepts are important as they lay a foundation for how to approach your tunes. But each tune is a unique combination of medley notes, rhythms and technical embellishments. Every tune has easier parts and harder parts. Your job as the student and future performer is to work through your tunes and identify the trickier parts and work on them so they sound just as smooth, consistent and polished as the rest of the tune.

You will be able to learn tunes faster and easier if you are aware of common mistakes and how to avoid them.

### Keep the short notes short, especially right before an embellishment

One of the most common errors of expression made by beginning pipers is the inadvertent lengthening of the short note prior to a doubling, grip or embellishment. It's important to have clean, clear doublings, but be careful that you don't pause on a short note to set up for what comes next. The short B prior to the grip in bar one of *The Green Hills of Tyrol* is a classic example. Your goal is a very short B and

a nice, crisp grip. Focus on holding the first note of the bar (low A). The short B should almost sound like part of the grip. It might take some practice, but good pipers can achieve fully expressed rhythms and clean technique. In other words, don't sacrifice the timing of big notes in order to get in the little notes (i.e., gracenotes and embellishments).

#### *The Green Hills of Tyrol*



### Wait for your strikes

We pipers are much more likely to play a strike early rather than late. So make sure to give the preceding note its full value and place the strike rhythmically right where it belongs. In the second part of the famous jig

*Glasgow City Police Pipers*, it's quite easy to rush the thumb strikes on high A. If the first high A gets too short, you lose the triplet rhythm and it sounds more like a high A doubling.

#### *Glasgow City Police Pipers*



### Control your tempo through a sequence of several even eighth notes

Some parts of tunes naturally seem to slow down; other phrases naturally seem to speed up. Some marches, however, have phrases with several even eighth notes in a row, so take it easy and hold back on your tempo. In bar

three of the first part of the 4/4 march *Meeting of the Waters* we have eight eighth notes. Without quarter notes and dotted eighth notes to help you control your tempo, be careful that you don't speed up.

#### *Meeting of the Waters*



### Don't forget the note after the taorluath

From day one, we are taught to hold the notes just before taorluaths. This note is usually a long note and often it's the first note of a bar, phrase, or part. However, in many cases the note after the taorluath is also a long note. In the very first bar of *Scotland the Brave*, the low

#### *Scotland the Brave*



A after the taorluath is a dotted eighth note. If played correctly, low A after the taorluath

should be nearly as long as the low A before it, so be sure to hold it for its full value.

### Don't get tricked by syncopation

Syncopation is a clever musical device that can trick the listener to thinking the beat and time signature have changed. In pipe music, syncopation often occurs when the rhythm or gracenoting changes from the regular pattern. For example, a bar of a 6/8 jig usually consists of two groups of three eighth notes. However, some modern composers create jig phrases that sound more like three groups of two eighth notes. It's tempting to change the tap of your foot to match the syncopated notes, but don't fall for the trick. Let your audience enjoy the unexpected rhythmic change, but keep your

#### *Swagger*



tempo and foot nice and steady. Notice how the regular jig pattern in the fourth part of Shane Smith's six-parted jig *Swagger* changes to syncopation in the fourth bar.

#### **Doublings on short notes: keep it going**

Typically, doublings and other embellishments are used to emphasize long notes, but

occasionally you'll encounter a doubling on a quick note. In *Swagger* you'll notice doublings on the first beat of several bars. You'll want to keep the rhythm flowing through these eighth notes. These notes are quick – especially once you get up to speed – so resist the urge to pause on the note after the doubling. No time to hang around. Keep it going.

### Grips in jigs: let them flow

In conventional bagpipe music notation, the time taken to play grace notes and doublings is not written into the tune. Doublings and gracenotes are quick and they simply fit in between the melody notes. They generally take their time from the note that follows them. Grips in jigs are an interesting case where the rhythm is written differently from how it is played. Check out example six from the third part of *Old Wife of the Mill Dust*.

#### *Old Wife of the Mill Dust*



In bar two, the note prior to the grip is written as a quarter note. But if you listen to a top piper performing this tune up to speed, the length of this C is shorter – probably closer to the length of an eighth note. It would be more accurately written as an eighth note, with the grip taking up the time of the second eighth note of the triplet and the E in the third position. Grips and other embellishments don't get any time in traditional bagpipe notation, so the C is written out as a quarter note to give that beat its full value.

#### **Don't over-hold your quarter notes in jigs and 6/8 marches**

The quarter note – eighth note combination is found in most jigs and compound time marches. Give the quarter note its full value but no more. In *Old Wife*, over-holding the first note of the part (C) would result in shortening the following note (A). This interrupts the flow and smoothness you are trying to achieve with your jigs.

#### **Keep your GDEs in jigs open and clear**

GDE gracenote combinations are a common staple of pipers' practice. They are the backbone of many great jigs. As you build speed in your jigs in preparation for competition or performance, check that your GDEs don't get compressed. Keep them open and clear to improve the control and clarity of your jigs.

#### Tunes used as examples:

- **The Green Hills of Tyrol** (3/4 march)
- **Glasgow City Police Pipers** (jig)
- **Meeting of the Waters** (4/4 march)
- **Scotland the Brave** (4/4 march)
- **Swagger** (jig)
- **Old Wife of the Mill Dust** (jig)
- **Bonnie Dundee** (6/8 march)
- **Dornie Ferry** (strathspey)
- **Muir of Ord** (2/4 march)

**Wait for a doubling on the same note**

It is very easy to jump the beat when the note before and the note after a gracenote or embellishment are the same note. Be aware of this common pitfall and wait for the beat.

*Bonnie Dundee*



In the first bar of *Bonnie Dundee*, be aware of the tendency to rush the E doubling coming from E and wait for it.

**Get set up properly for your strathspey triplets**

Strathspeys are some the most exciting and technically challenging tunes in the pipers repertoire. Most strathspeys are made up of only four different rhythms: the quarter note, the dot/cut (long/short), the cut/dot (short/long) and the triplet (short/short/long). Often the triplet follows a dot/cut rhythm, so the entire five-note sequence would be long/short/short/short/long. In this two beat pattern, don't pause

on the short note just prior to the triplet. In the first part of the classic competition-style strathspey *Dornie Ferry*, sometimes pipers pause on the D, making it longer than the two short notes in the triplet. Hold the first long note (E) for its full value so the next three short notes can flow quickly to the last note of the sequence (high G). The important lesson is that all three short notes should be equal in value.

*Dornie Ferry*



**Keep your fingers low to help make the short notes short**

Many pipe tunes have a strong dot/cut feel. Particularly in strathspeys, we strive to hold the dotted notes in order to make the short notes short. Lifting your fingers too high off the chanter can make it harder to play these short notes as short as they need to be. Try the last bar of the first line of *Dornie Ferry* and try to make the short D (beat 2) as short as possible.

Now try it again and shift your focus to keeping the fingers of the bottom hand closer to the chanter. You might find it makes it easier to make the D short when your fingers travel a shorter distance up and back down to the chanter. You can lift your fingers higher on the long notes (if you want), but try keeping them close on the short notes.

**The most misunderstood and misplayed rhythm in all of piping is (probably): the long note followed by the short/long**

Look at the second beat of third bar of the first part of G.S. MacLennan's 2/4 march masterpiece, *Muir of Ord*. This rhythm is found in many 2/4s and also in reels. It's so commonly misinterpreted or incorrectly executed, many pipers don't even realise they are playing it wrong. In this example, look at the three notes, B-A-G. The B is the longest note of the three.

But you might be surprised at how many players rush the tachum and make the low G the longest note of the beat. Tachums and other places where the short note falls on the beat or offbeat are some of the most common places that pipers jump ahead of the beat. Be aware of this rhythm and hold the long note before the short/long rhythm.

*Muir of Ord*



Jori Chisholm is a successful solo competitor, a member of Simon Fraser University Pipe Band, and one of the world's leading bagpipe instructors.

If you have specific questions about learning tunes, or any other bagpipe-related topics, contact Jori through his website [BagpipeLessons.com](http://BagpipeLessons.com).

To hear recordings and download sheet music for these tunes, visit [BagpipeLessons.com/magazine](http://BagpipeLessons.com/magazine).

**STEPS TO LEARNING TUNES**

- Start learning tunes with a good understanding of the fundamentals of the rhythm and time signature.
- Appreciate the traditional ways of expressing different styles of pipe tunes.
- Be aware of common mistakes and how to fix them and you'll be able to learn tunes faster and more efficiently.

Good luck! ●

# From the Kingdom of Fife to the king of the world

Paul Brown

**I**T'S a Thursday night, practice night, and Paul Brown is at Edinburgh Airport. His hand luggage contains the most important items he needs for his journey — drumsticks, drumpad and a video camera. His flight departs at 6.30pm, destination Dublin. Paul's commute to band practice can certainly be considered a little different from many of us who travel in pursuit of our hobby.

Although he lives in the village of Crosshill in Fife, for the last three years Paul has travelled to play in the drum corps of one of the most highly regarded pipe bands, current World Champions, St Laurence O'Toole.

"I remember the St Laurence O'Toole band from way back, going around the competitions, and being fascinated by this distinctive green kilt. I'd always admired the band but it was after hearing their first CD from their 2005 concert that I really thought, wow!" said Paul.

"I became good friends with Chris Johnston, who played with St Laurence at that time, and it was he who put the idea about joining into my mind. I was introduced to leading drummer Stephen Creighton at Cowal in 2006, who asked if I would be interested in having some time in Dublin. At first, I wasn't sure if he was serious. After listening to all of grade 1 in Ballymena in 2007, I decided — that's it. I spoke to Stephen at the end of the season and we arranged that I could travel over to practices. I was there for the first practice back just two weeks after Cowal."

Preparing to embark on what will be his 30th year in pipe bands, Paul reflected on the early days and revealed it could all have been very different. He said: "My dad Tom had been involved in teaching at the Ballingry School, which always had successful novice and juvenile bands and set up a feeder system for Dysart and Dundonald under pipe major Bob Shepherd MBE. So, as a youngster, I was always packed up and trolleyed off to contests



The three international members of St Laurence O'Toole Pipe Band: Gareth Rudolph (left), Andrea Boyd, and Paul Brown, pictured with Armagh City Councillor William Irwin and the European, World Championship and All Ireland trophies.

on the Saturday whether I liked it or not. It just *gets* into you."

"I remember my dad teaching me the pipes but I gave it up, knowing the pipes were not for me. I would sit at the practice, behind the drum corps, listening to the band playing. I was always interested in the drums but I guess because my family already had three pipers, that was a natural course for me. However, I still occasionally pick up a chanter and try to string a few notes together... not very successfully.

"At a contest one day, I picked up a pair of drumsticks that had been left on the band bus. Willie Bell, who became Dysart's leading

drummer after Jim King, noticed and asked my dad, 'When's he starting?' 'He'll never be a drummer,' my dad said. But the following Monday, there I was — learning the drums."

As piping and drumming in Fife boomed, Willie Bell became a mentor to Paul and other notable figures such as Lee Innes, the current leading drummer at Dysart and Dundonald, and Gordon Lee, now a two-time world champion with Simon Fraser University. As well as Willie Bell, Paul was also taught drumming at Ballingry School by Paul McGuire. After a successful competitive run in the juvenile arena, Paul was promoted at the age of just 13 to the Dysart grade 1 band, which had his dad



Photo: Jim Butler

Paul Brown

Tom Brown as pipe major at the time. “We’re young, we’re Dysart” was the mentality shared in the band where Paul spent many memorable years.

In 2000, work commitments forced Paul into a three-year playing hiatus, although he remained a regular visitor around the games. He started teaching youngsters at Lochgelly and was coaxed back into the competitive circuit when it was decided that Lochgelly High School would form a former pupils’ band. With dad Tom as pipe major, Paul was also reunited with Lee Innes, who became lead drummer. Starting off in grade 3A with the nucleus of the juvenile band, the band was elevated to grade 2

the following season, where Paul remained until his move to St Laurence O’Toole.

“I had a discussion with my father about the move to St Laurence O’Toole,” said Paul. “He was very supportive and gave me good advice and the encouragement that I needed to make the move. Having been involved in what was effectively one piping organisation for my whole pipe band career, it was difficult to take a step away from what you know so well into something that is completely new.”

When he arrives at Dublin Airport off the flight from Edinburgh, Paul is normally picked up by another band member in time to get to practice at 8pm in Tallaght. Afterwards,

Paul may stay over in Dublin or head back up north with other members of the band. On occasion he will catch a Friday morning flight into Dublin for one-on-one practice at leading drummer Stephen Creighton’s home in Newbridge, County Kildare, spending most of the day making recordings and practising both new and current material. Paul is grateful to Stephen and his wife Amanda, and to Terry and Eileen Tully, who often accommodate him over weekend stays for Saturday practices or engagements during the summer months.

“Without the support from the leadership of the band and to the guys and girls from the north, who go out of their way to pick me up at the airport, getting to band would be a lot more difficult, so to all of those people I am very grateful,” he added.

Paul’s debut competition at Dumbarton in 2008 was also an historic day for St Laurence O’Toole as they captured their first ever major championship win.

He recalled: “It was unreal, after that long pause, to hear Ian Embleton say those words. To be crowned Scottish Champions in my first contest was just unbelievable.”

The band immediately followed this achievement by notching up another championship victory in an eventful contest at Birmingham. Ending the year at Cowal, they secured the coveted Champion of Champions title, becoming the first non-UK band to do so, and capping a truly remarkable year for both Paul and the band. “I could never have imagined my first year would have been quite as amazing as it was,” he added.

However, 2010 is the year that shall be forever remembered in St Laurence O’Toole folklore. The year marked the centenary of the band’s formation in 1910 and band members past and present, friends, family and loyal supporters were all invited to celebrate the landmark at a mammoth dinner in March. The after-party is reputed to have raged on for three days.

After what Paul admitted was a ‘shaky’ start to the competition season — a sign perhaps of how far this band has come when placing third or fourth at majors is considered a disappointment — St Laurence O’Toole found their form.

They clinched the All Ireland Championships in Ballina, then the European Championships in Belfast at the end of the July. It was to be the start of a special few weeks.



Photo: Donagh McKeown

St Laurence O'Toole Pipe Band at the William Kennedy Piping Festival in Armagh with an impressive haul of trophies from the 2010 season, including the All Ireland, European, and World Championship trophies.

St Laurence O'Toole had again been given the honour of performing the pre-Worlds gig at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, after their memorable debut in 2005. The Dawning of the Day concert they performed on that occasion was such a hit that the band was invited over to Pittsburgh to reprise the show in 2007. Having carved a reputation as a musically enterprising and highly entertaining outfit, the band seemed keen to meet the great expectations they had set with their previous concert ventures and duly sold out the venue.

Paul said: "Practices for the concert were in full swing by the early summer. Usually from midday on a Saturday for several hours we would run the full show. The backing musicians were all there from the start and were well prepared. Except for the Breton guys — we only had a brief rehearsal with them on the day."

The show, titled *Evolution*, paid homage to the band's own evolution from its humble inception and rise through the grades to the very peak of grade 1. With a typically robust repertoire of Irish, Scottish, Breton and other compositions, their concert came to a stunning finale when the band left the stage and emerged to play among the audience in an unprecedented encore. Many mesmerised members of the crowd correctly predicted the outcome of the World Championships four days later,

based on what they had seen and heard that Wednesday night.

"There's a thing about St Laurence O'Toole that's quite hard to describe," said Paul. "Things just seem to happen very quickly. On the turn of a coin, it can go from just normal, run-of-the-mill winter material to being absolutely sensational — like that." Paul clicks his fingers as he revels in the band's special quality to produce their own unique brand of music.

"I can only put it down to the fact everyone is so dedicated. There's a lot of talented people there and when you have so many talented guys around about you, you know you've got to practise hard so you don't slip. The leadership of the band and its support team is just absolutely phenomenal. You don't have to do anything. As long as you turn up fully committed and put in your best effort at practices and on the day, the ship's going to keep floating. It's a relaxed but still professional atmosphere across the whole band, and that's why I think it works."

"Everyone socialises together," added Paul. "I'm sure everyone has heard about the famous barbecues and the legendary parties at Terry Tully's house."

Paul and the rest of the 'international team' — Scottish-based pipers Gareth Rudolph from Johannesburg and Andrea Boyd, originally from Nova Scotia — are made to feel very

much a part of what he describes as a huge Irish family.

For all his ambition, Paul remains committed to the teaching and development of youngsters. "Teaching helps keep your feet on the ground," he explained. The St Laurence O'Toole organisation recently announced the launch of their own development band, which is expected to follow a similar mould to the long-running programmes that have served Boghall and Bathgate, and Simon Fraser University with their Robert Malcolm Memorial teaching set-up.

Paul added: "I have so much respect for people who devote their time to teaching, people who take the time to help the development of children and teach them the joys of piping and drumming. I admire my father, who has devoted most of his life to teaching and developing the art of bagpiping and also pipe major Iain Simpson and Fife Constabulary leading drummer Mick O'Neill for what they have achieved with George Watson's College. It's vital for the future of the top bands to sustain their membership and keep the high standards of the tradition alive."

Paul's love of teaching has seen him maintain his roots in the local piping and drumming community. He continues to teach twice a week at Lochgelly High School, where his father

serves as a piping instructor for Fife Education and as pipe major of the Lochgelly High School Band. He added: "It's amazing just how much the kids respect the World Champion tag I have. It's given them a bit of a drive and encouragement to think they are being taught by the best."

Paul was at Glasgow Green at 7.45am to assist the Lochgelly novice band on the day of the

and I couldn't find our drums. With the surge of the crowd we ended up being about 50 feet from where we started. When we got them, it was a scramble to catch up with the band and we played all the way back to the area where we had our tent pitched. A huge crowd followed us all the way. People were constantly coming over to offer congratulations and the guys from SFU came across and were very sporting."

*I became aware of people running towards us with this big sign. You're shaking your head thinking, 'No', but at the same time thinking, 'Yes, come over here'. Then there were people coming from everywhere. So many people were overcome with emotion*

Worlds last year, while his St Laurence O'Toole band-mates may have enjoyed a slightly longer lie. "It can be tiring being on your feet all day but it's more a mental strain," he explained. "You have to change your mindset and re-focus from helping the kids in the morning to concentrating on your own performance come the afternoon."

When asked about his recollections of the 2010 Worlds performances and that winning moment that he hopes all the kids he teaches can one day savour, Paul pauses, as if he still can't quite believe it.

He said: "I do remember the MSR and the crowd's huge reaction. That took some of the nervousness off us for the medley. I had a little nervous feeling in my stomach — I think you always need that. The medley is the showpiece event after all and, yeah, it felt good."

What about the announcement itself?

"It happened really quickly. There was a huge banner being brought forward — the Champions sign that is placed in front of the winning band for photographers — and I became aware of people running towards us with this big sign. You're shaking your head thinking, 'No', but at the same time thinking, 'Yes, come over here'. Then there were people coming from everywhere. So many people were overcome with emotion.

"For the band march-off, Julian Mordaunt

A bottle of Balvenie malt whisky appeared and within a couple of minutes of being handed to Kevin Rogers — whose nickname The Big Yin is the title of SLOT's medley opener — it was emptied and thrust into the Clyde. These are moments that make it all worthwhile, according to Paul, and which far outweigh pressures of taking time off work and travelling to Dublin for practices.

Of the group of players who came through the Ballingry and Lochgelly set-up, many have enjoyed success in their adult lives in pipe bands. Paul remembered how, in the early years, he and Gordon Lee used to dream of one day wearing the sash for best drum corps at the Worlds.

He added: "Gordon got there first with SFU in 2008, so it was very fulfilling and satisfying to win and wear it myself last year."

Paul has taken his passion even further by setting up his own indoor competition, the *Kingdom Thistle* solos, which was first held at Lochgelly High School in 2009. With competitors travelling from all over Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic, and the likes of accomplished piping soloists Jimmy and Douglas Murray and 2006 World Solo Drumming Champion Steven McWhirter in attendance, the contest has been hailed a success. With a full array of juvenile categories, the event has the rare attraction, in Scotland at least, of offering

adult competitors the opportunity to play both the traditional March, Strathspey and Reel and a Hornpipe and Jig set.

Paul now plans to organise an outdoor contest for bands — possibly an invitational contest — with a top concert performance, perhaps from his own band, on the Friday night before. "The idea really came just from looking at the size of the fields outside the school. There would be no need for janitors like we have for the solos, so we can run the event as late in the day as we like."

Paul is enthusiastic, full of ideas and has the drive and determination to pull them off. With his pedigree in organising the *Kingdom Thistle* solos, this new contest is surely one to look out for.

"Pipe bands are just what I do," laughed Paul, whose own hard work, extensive travelling and commitment is, in itself, a microcosm of the entire St Laurence O'Toole organisation.

"The objective now is simply to win the Worlds again," he said. "To continue with the hard practice and stay among the likes of the Field Marshal Montgomery and Simon Fraser University, bands who have set the benchmark and won six world titles each. To sustain that high level of performance is going to be a great challenge for us but we are confident we can maintain and even improve."

It can sometimes be hard for those outside of the piping world to grasp just how passionate some players are in their desire to chase their piping and drumming ambitions. Paul is a fine example of someone who has actively pursued his interest and reaped great rewards.

Paul has his own perspective on the whole appeal of pipe bands.

He said: "I remember I used to go out in the street or go down the park and play football with my friends.

"As we got a bit older I'd still go back, and then, as the years passed, I would go back having been away doing a gig in France or come back with a championship winner's medal. They would all still be kicking a ball about the park or just hanging out. Piping and drumming gives you all these great, endless opportunities. And that's it for me." ●

Entry forms for this year's *Kingdom Thistle* competition at Lochgelly High School on April 16 can be obtained online at [www.kingdomthistle.com](http://www.kingdomthistle.com)

# Sustaining an immigrant tradition

## PRAIRIE PIPING

RHYMES OF THE WANDERING PIPER

19

### THOSE DEAR OLD PIPES OF MINE 1926

I've played my pipes 'mong Scotland's hills,  
Where blooming heather grows,  
By lochs and lakes and foaming rills  
Where stream and river flows,  
I tune my pipes in peace or war  
To fit the place and time  
They journey with me near and far  
Those dear old pipes of mine.

In France and Flander's bloody fields,  
I've played in many a strain,  
For men who fought and would not yield  
For men who fought in vain.  
In hall, in church, and market-place  
In every land and clime  
I've played with honor, zeal, and grace,  
Those dear old pipes of mine.

Far out on Egypt's burning sands  
Beneath the bright sun's ray,  
Likewise on Africa's coral strands  
On the road to Mandalay.  
I've played the soldier's martial airs  
Along the march of time,  
At city, towns and country fairs  
Those dear old pipes of mine.

I've played reveille, at early morn  
At evening, played retreat  
A lively tune, when victory born  
A mournful in defeat.  
O'ft times the last lament I've played  
For heroes of the line  
As on my shoulders, sadly swayed  
Those dear old pipes of mine.

In Queensland's sunny clime I've played  
And in far-off New Zealand's  
The land in which I almost stayed  
It looked so like the Hie'lands.  
In South Sea Isles, where maidens smiles  
Are really most sublime,  
I've marched and played ten-thousand miles  
Those dear old pipes of mine.

In Canada's great and glorious west  
'Mid golden fields of grain,  
I like to play my pipes the best  
And play and play again.  
By North Saskatchewan's mighty stream,  
'Mong poplar, spruce and pine,  
I realize my fondest dream  
With those dear old pipes of mine.

At times I may go on a spree  
Which is no piper's crime,  
It happened once in gay Paree  
Where I was brought to time.  
Since then I moderate my ways,  
But when I do incline,  
I take enough to make me play  
Those dear old pipes of mine.

**B**ACK in the earlier part of the last century, there was a piper called James Forrest who farmed a few miles away from the community of Prince Albert in central Saskatchewan, Canada, a place that now calls itself the “Gateway to the North”.

A First World War veteran who grew up in Scotland, James wandered the Pacific before putting down roots in the prairie soil, in an area first farmed in the 1860s.

He was sufficiently respected as a piper to lead the local band and to teach.

James was committed enough to regularly hitch up a dog sled in winter — when temperatures fall to -20C and below — and mush his way over the snow and ice to band nights.

He'd tie up his panting team beside a friend's house on the edge of town and the band would send a taxi to get him. He would run the band practice and give a few lessons. Then the band would get him back to his dogs and he'd sled off into the night, back to his home.

It's not that long ago that the vast grassy expanse of the Canadian prairies, stretching across three present-day Canadian provinces, was the pristine bison-hunting ground of mobile mounted bowmen... the Plains Cree and Assiniboine, the Shoshone, Atsina, Plains Ojibwa and the tribes of the Blackfoot confederacy.

European settlement began in earnest only with the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway and suppression of the Metis' rising in 1885: a sudden influx of land-hungry Americans from the south and new immigrants from Europe.

Saskatchewan — an area of more than half a million square kilometres, with Manitoba to its east, Alberta to its west and Canada's Northwest Territories to the north — became a Canadian province in 1905.

The history of bagpiping here is being actively researched by Iain MacDonald, past president of the Saskatchewan Pipe Band Association; and the online archive that's a feature of the association's website is an appreciating

asset that any piping organisation would do well to emulate.

The story of James Forrest only recently came to Iain's attention.

He said: “People send me things and, in a Saskatchewan folklore magazine, my nephew found an article about a woman piper from Prince Albert.

“The magazine story was about her serving with Canadian Women's Army Corps Pipe Band during the Second World War (see: ‘Athene's Pipers made history’ by Janet Cape, *Piping Today* No. 38, p 30-34). “She had learned to pipe with the Prince Albert Girls Pipe Band and was recruited when the band came through Saskatchewan.



Pipe Major James Forrest

“I started looking for more information about her and found an obituary. But I was able to track down her husband and wrote him a letter. He's nearly 90 years old and absolutely delighted that someone would care.

“His wife, Nellie, was the daughter of James Forrest. So, as well as finding out about Nellie, I learned about James. He wrote a book — *Hamish McIver the Gregarious Immigrant* — that's in fact an autobiography. He also produced a little book of poetry called *Rhymes of the Wandering Piper* about his travels and wartime experience.”

IAIN, whose family heritage goes back to Scotland by way of more than a century of settlement in Prince Edward Island, might easily have bypassed an interest in piping but his mother insisted he learn.

“She'd desperately wanted to learn when she was a kid here in Regina, but they wouldn't accept her. Then, when I was eight years old, in 1965, a junior band was re-formed.

“It took my mother three months to get me to go along but, once I got there, I loved it,” he said

Iain's first lessons with the Regina Boys Pipe Band — now the Fraser Pipe Band — were with a Scottish expatriate called Tom Ireland. “He wasn't a competitive piper but he loved teaching and did a very good job of teaching basics.

“From him, learners were passed on to Andy McAnsh and Angus Spence: two buddies who'd played together with the same band in Scotland.

“After serving with the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, they emigrated to Regina and their two families shared a house until they got settled. They were huge contributors to the community here... fantastic guys and good pipers.”

The focus of the band was community performance. “Once it got more developed, we started going to an indoor event — solos, quartets and minibands — in Dauphin, Manitoba,” said Iain. “There was one in Moose Jaw in the spring. There was an outdoor event at Moose Jaw called the Kinsmen International Band Festival and, in the summer, we often went to Selkirk and Winnipeg in Manitoba for their Highland games. Over the years, games have been held in Regina and Saskatoon as well.”

Iain's first big trip away with the band was in 1975, to Ontario, by which time he was its pipe major. “Jack Coghill organised the Canadian Inter-provincial Pipe Band Championships that ran for three or four years in Ottawa,” he said. Jack Coghill was originally from the prairies, from Manitoba. After his employer, the Canadian Pacific Railway, moved him east, he

became a stalwart of the Ottawa branch of the Ontario Pipers and Pipe Band Association and instrumental in founding the City of Ottawa Highland Games and Canada's first Inter-provincial Championships.

“As the grade 3 provincial representative band in 1975 we raised the cash and flew east for the big games,” Iain recalled.

“We were warming up, trying attacks... and one of the older guys standing around came over and said, ‘I really like the sound of your band. I was going to say, though, when you bring your chanter up into E, nobody has their bottom hand on it. It'd make a huge difference.’

“Up to that point, everyone would blow up, the E would sound with our top hands on the chanter, then our bottom hands would find their way on.

“It was like a door opening. So I said to the band, ‘It makes total sense, so let's try it.’ Of course, it made a marked difference and 20 minutes later we did it in the arena. To this day, I don't know who that guy was. That's the kind of advantage you get from going to big events like that.” Iain's youthful band took third place in grade 3 that day.

“It was all a huge eye-opener,” he said. “The Guelph band was there with Ed Neigh, Clan MacFarlane with Ken Eller, General Motors, the City of Victoria and Triumph Street from the West Coast and professional and amateur soloists across all the different categories.”

Inspired, Iain went on to spend 1978 and

1981 in Scotland, developing his piping, taking weekly lessons with Pipe Major Donald MacLeod and playing with the famous Babcock-Renfrew Pipe Band under Iain McLeod.

In Canada, he turned out as pipe major with the Clan Scotia Pipe Band and the Strathfleet Pipes and Drums of Saskatoon then, in 1985, joined the pipe corps of the grade 1 Simon Fraser University Pipe Band. In 1992, after seven years with Simon Fraser University, he launched the grade 2 City of Regina Pipe Band, and continues as its pipe major.

Under his leadership, it has won the grade 2 Saskatchewan championship each year, taken the Alberta grade 2 title four times and has been a frequent prize winner at the Canadian Championships in Maxville, Ontario.

Iain was initiated into solo competition as a boy at the local “Sons of Scotland” annual picnic in Regina. He explained: “They used to organize little solo contests and I can remember when I was 10 or 11 playing a march in the summer time for a judge at a picnic.

“There were other contests we'd go to, indoor ones with the regular solo events all graded by age. I started playing open contests when I was 18 or 19.”

He went on to take prizes at the British Columbia Pipers' Annual Gathering, at the Portland and Seattle Games in the US, at the big Canadian games in Maxville and Montreal and on the Highland games circuit in Scotland. For a few years, he was a student of James McMullan, in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Pipe major Iain MacDonald, far right, leads the City of Regina Pipe Band in a performance in George Square, Glasgow, as part of *Piping Live!* 2010.



In 2008, Iain published a collection of bagpipe music called *Along the Road* which, as well as some of his own compositions, includes previously unpublished tunes and arrangements by Donald MacLeod.

He has also taught, working with bands and individuals, many of whom have gone on to strengthen grade 1 corps across the continent. He gained the Institute of Piping's Senior Teacher's Certificate in 2005 and is now a member of the Board of Examiners for the Piping and Drumming Qualifications Board.

Iain has also devoted a lot of his effort to the Saskatchewan Pipe Band Association, formed in 1969. "There were a number of players here who'd come from Scotland and found a fledgling competition circuit but the rules could be different from one place to the next," he said. "So the Prairie Pipe Band Association was formed to standardise the rules a bit and look at things like band gradings."

Soon the bands found they needed provincial, rather than regional organisations to qualify for provincial support, so, in the early 1990s, the organisation was re-formed as three province-based associations.

"We (the Saskatchewan Pipe Band Association) hold an annual summer school in Regina that's pretty well attended. People from all across Western Canada go to Piping Hot Summer Drummer, run by the Simon Fraser University Pipe Band organisation.

"Something that's had a very positive impact here, at least in certain pockets, is teaching through Skype: Jack Lee, Bob Worrall and Bruce Gandy all have students in the region, and we use the technology at the Conservatory where I teach.

"But interest here generally, like elsewhere, is concentrated among the adult learner population. It's hard to get kids into it and have them stick at it.

"You tell them, 'You need to practise more'. Then you look at their schedules and have to admit that maybe they really don't have more time for practice. Kids get scheduled into activities these days, rather than sustained interests so it's hard to sustain a skill-based pursuit. In a few high-demand, big-intake activities like ice hockey, coaches can say, 'If you don't come to practice, you don't play'. If I did that, we wouldn't have a band."

IT was Saskatchewan's 100th birthday celebrations in 2005 that prompted Iain to undertake



At left is Andrew McAnsh who arrived in Regina after WW2 with his lifelong buddy, Angus Spence [above]. Andy and Angus played in the Camelon Pipe Band from Falkirk, and Angus is pictured with the trophy from the European Pipe Band Championships, 1947.



Weyburn Legion Pipe Band, 1951 with Pipe Major Jock Chalmers at left. Jock taught many pipers and bands in southern Saskatchewan.

some historical research on behalf of piping and drumming.

"It occurred to me that it needed to be done," he said. "We'd reached a time when lots of material would be lost if it wasn't done soon, so I got into it.

"I've found a lot of inspiration in it. I'm finding stories that tell me piping here has always been hard. When you run a band and teach piping in a place like this, it can be frustrating – you never have the resources, the numbers or the influence to get you where you want to be;



Rear L to R Wm. McGeachen, J. Logan, J. Nelson, J. McQueen, G. Wilson, A. Savage, D. Carnegie  
 Middle : G. McIntosh, C. McLaughlin, J. Smith, J. Hogg, W. Findlayson, J. Frazer, G. Allan  
 Front L to R: Major J.S. Rankin 2 I/C, Lt. Col. H. J. Dawson CO, Maj. J.A. Hope, Adj.  
 Picture taken 1917 at Hersin-Copigny; France (near Vimy Ridge)

Photo: courtesy Saskatchewan Dragoons

Thanks to Lt. Col Carline and the Saskatchewan Dragoons Regimental Museum

46th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force 1917. Photo probably taken sometime between July 4-24 1917 at Hersin-Copigny, France which is located about 2kms NW of Vimy Ridge. As part of the 10th Infantry Brigade of the 4th Canadian Division, the 46th Battalion had played a pivotal role in the capture of a feature on Vimy Ridge known as the Pimple. The Pimple is the highest point on the Ridge and was the last part wrested from the Germans on April 12/13, 1917.

The Band played for HM King Edward on July 11/1917 when he visited the Canadian Corps and Vimy Ridge.

Thanks to the Saskatchewan Pipe Band Association for use of the archive photos to accompany this article. More photos and stories can be found in the archive at [www.saskpipebands.org/archives/archives-home](http://www.saskpipebands.org/archives/archives-home)

you're never going to develop a Simon Fraser University Pipe Band in Regina. However, when you look back over the years, you see it's always been like that.

"There were several First World War military bands. The South Saskatchewan Regiment pipe band included a number of Scots who'd come here to make their fortunes. My understanding is that many of them were wounded in one single incident and the rest were merged into other bands.

"The 96th Highlanders, raised out of Saskatoon, also ended up being absorbed elsewhere. The 16/22 Horse Regiment (WW2) included men from the Western Isles who'd been working on farms here. I remember one of them, a piper called Jock Chalmers, being around as an adjudicator when I was young. He lived and taught in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, for many, many years," said Iain.

"There was also a ladies' pipe band here in the 1920s: the Nellie Small Kiltie Band. I found a postcard of them in an antique store. When I researched it, I found people who remembered it. Then I heard from a lady in Texas who'd

been in the band and went with it to Texas. She met a man there who followed her back to Saskatchewan and married her. They moved to Houston and she's been there ever since."

"In the earlier times," he said, "piping was about individuals. There aren't any records of piping in Saskatchewan in the 19th century, not that I've found, but there were Scottish settlers here.

"The earliest piper we know of in this region would have been Colin Fraser from Sutherlandshire. He was hired as the personal piper to Sir George Simpson (1787-1860), overseas Governor-In-Chief of the Hudson's Bay Company, and accompanied him on his travels across Canada (see: picture and news item, *Piping Today No. 32*, cover and p. 3).

"He'd have passed through Saskatchewan, because Simpson was very instrumental in the development of the Carlton Trail transportation route."

That was quite a few years before Saskatchewan was settled and became a province. "I've looked through the photographic collection at the Saskatchewan Archives," said Iain. "Most

of the photographs I found were of individual pipers playing in little, muddy-town street parades, or two pipers playing at a picnic... that kind of thing.

"There was a piper who came here in 1926 by the name of John Hosie. He brought his pipes with him. They're stamped 'James Center, Edinburgh' and we know James Center left Edinburgh in 1908. So the pipes are pre-1908. They're complete, including the chanter, and there are a couple of Centre practice chanters in the case as well.

"It's a beautiful set of pipes but what's really interesting to me is how worn they all are: the pipe chanter and the practice chanters.

"John Hosie farmed, and there are stories about him piping at this or that fair and at the 'Scotch Picnic' as they called it, and stories of him getting his horses hooked up to the cutter on New Year's Eve and going from farm to farm with his pipes, first-footing houses around the district."

Iain added: "He wasn't a competitive piper at all. But he must have loved his piping and he wasn't unique." ●



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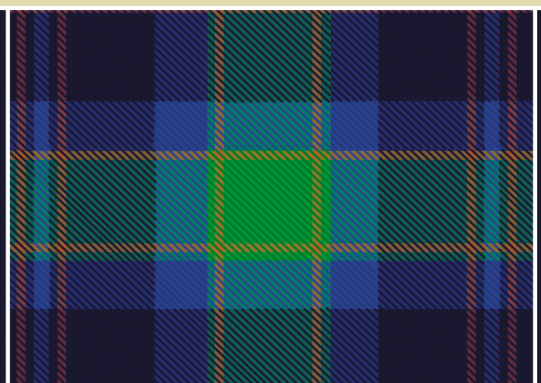
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Scotland, UK.  
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email: [C.McGowan@admin.gla.ac.uk](mailto:C.McGowan@admin.gla.ac.uk)



# Neil Munro tune competition success for Karen



Karen McCrindle

**P**IPER Karen McCrindle is celebrating a double success after winning both sections of a prestigious tune composition contest.

Her piobaireachd and 6/8 march were chosen by judges as the top entries in the Neil Munro Society competition.

As we reported in issue 48 of *Piping Today*, The National Piping Centre was approached by the society to organise a composition competition to honour the memory of Neil Munro — the leading Scottish author, best known for Para Handy.

Karen is a graduate of the BA Scottish Music course at the RSAMD and a former member of The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland. She now lives and works in Oman, where she teaches the Royal Air Force of Oman Pipe Band, and writes music for them to perform for the Sultan.

On hearing news of her success, she said: “Wow, that’s fantastic.”

Ronnie Renton, Chairman of the Neil Munro Society, explained the rationale behind the competition.

He said: “The Society’s Committee thought that it would be appropriate to sponsor the creation of two pieces of music to be played on Scotland’s most iconic instrument to honour

## Neil Munro

March

Karen McCrindle

one of Scotland’s leading authors.

“We were particularly keen that one of the pieces would be a piobaireachd, and also that there would be a piece of light music, which might be suitable for a pipe band to play.

“We are very pleased that the competition has resulted in such a worthy winner.”

The competition was judged by Roddy MacLeod, Principal of The National Piping Centre, and well-known piping adjudicator John Wilson.

Commenting on the competition, Roddy said: “The standard of entries was very high and

both John and I had a pleasurable task of sifting through the tunes to arrive at our decision. We are satisfied that both the winning piobaireachd and 6/8 march will provide welcome additions to the repertoire of the pipes.

“Congratulations to Karen McCrindle on a great feat in winning best composition in both categories.”

It is intended that the piobaireachd be a set tune for the A grade piobaireachd periodically at Inveraray Highland Games, and the scores for both tunes are also available from the Neil Munro website at [www.neilmunro.co.uk](http://www.neilmunro.co.uk) ●

# Salute to Neil Munro

Piobaireachd

Karen McCrindle

## Ground

The Ground section consists of three staves of music in treble clef, key of D major (one sharp), and common time. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and contains the first two measures. The second and third staves continue the melody, with the third staff ending with a repeat sign. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets and slurs.

## VAR I - Dithis Singling

The VAR I section consists of three staves of music in treble clef, key of D major, and common time. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and contains the first two measures. The second and third staves continue the melody, with the third staff ending with a repeat sign. This variation is characterized by a more rhythmic and repetitive pattern of eighth notes.

## VAR II - Dithis Doubling

The VAR II section consists of three staves of music in treble clef, key of D major, and common time. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and contains the first two measures. The second and third staves continue the melody, with the third staff ending with a repeat sign. This variation features a complex, fast-paced pattern of eighth notes, often used for doubling the original melody.

### VAR III - Taorluath Singling

VAR III - Taorluath Singling

Three staves of musical notation in treble clef, key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The music features a melodic line with taorluath (T) markings below the notes, indicating a specific playing technique. The first staff begins with a repeat sign. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed pairs.

### VAR IV - Taorluath Doubling

VAR IV - Taorluath Doubling

Three staves of musical notation in treble clef, key signature of two sharps. The music features a melodic line with taorluath (T) markings below the notes. The melody is simpler than VAR III, consisting of quarter and eighth notes.

### VAR V - Crunluath Singling

VAR V - Crunluath Singling

Three staves of musical notation in treble clef, key signature of two sharps. The music features a melodic line with crunluath (C) markings below the notes, indicating a different playing technique. The melody is similar to VAR III, with eighth and sixteenth notes.

### VAR VI/VII - Crunluath Doubling and Crunluath A Mach

VAR VI/VII - Crunluath Doubling and Crunluath A Mach

Three staves of musical notation in treble clef, key signature of two sharps. The music features a melodic line with crunluath (C) markings below the notes. The melody is simpler than VAR V, consisting of quarter and eighth notes.





# Jim McGillivray

**M**ORE than 20 years of international prizes in all branches of pipe music between 1971 and 1991 lend credence to Piper & Drummer magazine's claim that Jim McGillivray is "one of the best all-round pipers – ever".

Jim began piping in Kitchener, Ontario, in 1966. By 1972, he had risen to the top of the amateur competition ranks and began competing as a professional. Over the next two decades he won the major piping prizes on both sides of the Atlantic, including the coveted Gold Medals at Oban and Inverness, the Clasp at Inverness, the march, strathspey and reel at the Glenfiddich Championship and the North American Championship.

The pipe band world also felt his influence. For 10 years in the 1970s he played a prominent role in Guelph Pipe Band's rise to the top ranks, leading the band in 1981 to its second North American Championship. From 1988-92, he was a member of the groundbreaking 78th Fraser Highlanders, winning three more North American titles with this illustrious band.

In recent years, Jim's attention has turned to teaching, publishing and performing. In 1992, he made a solo CD — Volume 10 in Lismor Recordings' *World's Greatest Pipers* collection. His tutor and companion CD, *Rhythmic Fingerwork*, published in 1998, became an immediate bestseller and set a new standard for piping tutors. It is now in its seventh printing. His two instructional videos, *Pipes Ready* and *Pipes Up* were released in 2000 and 2001 respectively and have attracted attention from pipers worldwide. Jim has also become an accomplished performer on the Scottish smallpipes, Border pipes and Northumbrian smallpipes.

Since 1998, Jim has been the Piping and Drumming Program Director at St Andrew's College, an independent boys' school near his home in Aurora, Ontario. He was also the co-founder and Director of the Ontario School of Piping and Drumming at St Andrew's College, one of the continent's leading summer piping and drumming schools from 1998 to 2004. He still teaches there.

He is an active international piping judge, having adjudicated across North America. He has also judged such prestigious events as the Clasp at Inverness, the Gold Medal and Senior Piobaireachd at The Argyllshire Gathering at Oban, The Bratach Gorm at The Scottish Piping Society of London contest and the March, Strathspey and Reel at the Glenfiddich Piping Championship.

His current labour of love is [www.pipetunes.ca](http://www.pipetunes.ca), a website where pipers can download individual pieces of sheet music. He is also a member of the Spirit of Scotland Pipe Band.



Jim McGillivray, left with Michael MacDonald who was the subject of Jim's *Michael MacDonald's Jig*.

Alasdair Gillies once told Jim that he won five straight jig contests playing *Michael MacDonald's Jig* on the Scottish games circuit some years ago. The judges picked it each time, and each time he won.

## When did you start composing?

Actually, virtually all of my composing was done in a brief period between around 1990 and 1992 when I was playing with the 78th Fraser Highlanders. It was a very vibrant and creative environment and a little competitive, I suppose. Bill Livingstone, Bruce Gandy and Michael Grey were all writing tunes. You had great incentive to write there, because if the tune was good you had a prize-winning grade 1 band playing your stuff right away, and most likely recording it. Of course, having feedback from the other composers right at hand was very valuable. I have to say it was a little scary to come to the chanter table and play a new tune for 15 guys sitting there. We weren't very sensitive about telling someone when they just played us a dud.

## What inspires you to write?

The environment I described above was my greatest inspiration. Hearing very original and stirring new tunes is inspirational as well. I remember there was something about Bruce Gandy's jig *Annette's Chatter* that I really liked, and that got me thinking about the more unusual note combinations I used in *Michael MacDonald's Jig*. Of course, if you produce a good tune and people like it, you're inclined to try again. Positive feedback certainly inspires! Once I get started though, there's a drive that has to come from inside, not outside.

## Modern day composers...who do you rate?

I don't really keep up with who is making new tunes for bands. There is too much and a great deal of it is not very inspiring. Having put a lot of Bruce Gandy's tunes up on my [pipetunes.ca](http://pipetunes.ca) sheet music site, I have to say I have great respect for Bruce's work. Roddy MacDonald and Gordon Duncan, of course, have made many very original tunes. Allan MacDonald and a number of Michael Grey's tunes are superb.

## How do you mould a tune from conception to completion?

My tunes have happened mostly at the editing stage and I'm afraid it hasn't been a very enjoyable process, which is why I don't really do it any more. I didn't like it. I don't start until I have something that I feel is original. For *Duncan McGillivray, Chief Steward*, I started with the F grip to high G in the ending because I hadn't heard that done. For *Michael MacDonald's Jig*, I came up with the E-low-A-low-G and D-C-low-G note combinations that I hadn't heard used much either. Then I started building phrases around those. I tend to 'try out' lots of phrases and parts. Once I come up with two or four parts, I try to set it aside, then come back and change or eliminate phrases that I don't think are very original, or which don't move the tune forward tonally or emotionally. I may write 15 parts to end up

## Skye Rovers

Jig

Jim McGillivray

The musical score for 'Skye Rovers' is presented in two systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music is in 6/8 time and features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. There are several repeat signs (double bar lines with dots) throughout the piece, indicating where the melody returns. The notation includes various rhythmic values and rests, typical of a traditional Scottish jig.

Published by pipetunes.ca and McGillivray Piping © 2006, Copying Prohibited

with my final four. I may change a phrase 10 times. The final version of a tune I come up with is often quite different from the first draft. For me, making a good tune means being ruthless with non-original or non-inspiring bits. I'm afraid I really obsess over a tune at this stage. I can't get it out of my head. It's quite unpleasant but it has worked for me. I've thrown out four times as much as I've written. Having someone you can trust to give good feedback is important for me too. When we went to play *Duncan McGillivray* in the band, Bruce suggested that I simplify a few phrases to make it easier to memorise. They were great suggestions as the tune had become a bit convoluted.

So that was how I published it, although you can hear the original version on Iain MacInnes's *Tryst* CD.

### The tune you have given us, how did you come about writing it and what was the inspiration?

It's a long time ago but this one was written to order. The Frasers needed a little jig and I came up with the first five notes and just built off that. It was a two-parter for the longest time but I thought it could stand a couple more. When Michael Grey wanted to publish it, I worked up the last two parts. The fourth part took forever. Michael offered to write the last part, but I ended up finishing it. I'm terrible with titles,

and Michael suggested this one. We both travelled with Bill and Lillian Livingstone from Glasgow to the Silver Chanter at Dunvegan in a rented Land Rover. I drove back to the hotel that night because I was the only one sober. We got quite lost. I had a lot of trouble driving a standard transmission car with my wrong hand in the dark, so we drove aimlessly around Skye while the guys in the back seat, who were supposed to be navigating, did nothing but giggle at nonsense for an hour. I thought we were getting to be in dire straights when suddenly and magically the hotel just appeared in front of us and we were saved. In retrospect, I think the tune still works better as a two-parter. ●

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Email; [info@shepherd-bagpipes.com](mailto:info@shepherd-bagpipes.com)  
[www.shepherd-bagpipes.com](http://www.shepherd-bagpipes.com)

## CD reviews

**St Laurence O'Toole Pipe Band***Evolution*

MONARCH CDMON 882

**THE premier Dublin pipe band, led by the innovative Tully family for many years, paddled its own canoe in the wilderness for far too long, just missing competition honours on several occasions.**

Now, when pipe major Terry Tully has finally raised the World Champions trophy in his band's centenary year, a full CD from these maverick moss-kilted musicians has come my way — and it's a goodie.

Not perhaps in quite the same ground-breaking league as Field Marshal Montgomery's 1991 *Debut* or Shotts and Dykehead's 1994 *By the Waters' Edge*: but *Evolution* is a splendid 75-minute mix of hardcore traditional piping and multi-cultural eclecticism. Recorded live in Glasgow, this is their second CD, and it's available on DVD too.

There's a strong Irish accent on *Evolution*, of course. The opening track chains three classic Irish jigs, ending with that famous canoe-paddling slide. Terry Tully has done an uncanny job of arranging *The March of the King of Laois* for a nine-note chanter,



and this big old melody is a clear high point. A racy version of *Lochanside* is followed by *Condon's Frolics* and *Drops of Brandy*. The *Air and Jigs* set starts with Shaun Davey's *Irish Sea* and ends with another well-known slide. SLOT also sneak several emerald gems into their medleys: *The Yellow Tinker*, *Jim Ward's Jig* and a couple of the band's own tunes.

The pair of hornpipes here is more home-grown

Irish produce, fine compositions by Alen Tully and Richard Magowan.

The men in green can sound as Scottish as anyone, as their long-awaited Worlds title testifies. There's a sublime rendition of *Mrs MacPherson* in their winning MSR, a big set of Scottish jigs centred on MacLennan's *Jig of Slurs* with subtle harmonies, and plenty of great tunes by MacLeods, MacDonalds and MacLeans.

Music from further afield is represented by a trio of Breton tunes popular in Irish bands for a long time now, a catchy Galician number, and the old-time waltz *Midnight on the Water* which transfers brilliantly to the pipes, complete with full-band glissando. There's a quartet selection, a spot by contemporary group Pipedown and a drum salute for good measure.

The whole show is as slick as you'd expect, including entrance and exit. Another aspect of this recording which I particularly like is the balance between chanters, drones and drums, which is a little heavier on the chanters than usual.

The sleeve notes are traditionally sparse and unreliable but that's about the only weak point of this CD. If you need a reason to go green in your piping tastes, *Evolution* should fit the bill. **ALEX MONAGHAN**

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# Grey's Notes

by Michael Grey



Photo: Ryan MacDonald Photography

## Superstitious Minds

**I'm not a hugely superstitious person. But then again, I'm not not a superstitious person. You won't see me walk under a ladder. That's just crazy. What harm's a little salt over the shoulder when I'm in a spilling way, and, yes, it's true you won't ever see me put new shoes on a table — touch wood. Okay. Maybe I am superstitious.**

I'm in good company, though. Like sports pros and actors, pipers are among those who tend to have an irrational belief in things to come. Consider Laurent Blanc, current head coach of the French football team. While he was a player, he was famous for his superstitious need, before every game, to plant a kiss on the head of his goalkeeper, Fabien Barthez. To Laurent Blanc, at least, the team's 1998 World Cup win is a testament to the power of pre-game head-snogging.

Then there's the famed virtuoso, pianist Glenn Gould, who could only perform concerts while sitting 14 inches above the floor, perched on an old chair his father had made. He continued to do this even after the chair was worn beyond good repair.

It's thought that superstition is one of those things that come to be after the fact. For musicians — like pipers — a day's great performance is almost always analysed in hindsight. The search for clues for the causes of the winning effect almost always ends up as the root of a person's superstition. We're all pretty good at connecting the dots and creating meaning from our actions — and what happens as a result of them.

I once had a cat named Jack (now there's surely a line from a hardcore country song). Now Jack had some magic. At least he did as a kitten; for a time I was sure of it. Early one hot July morning I got out of bed to ready for the games. Kilt, jacket, sporran, hose, I gathered all the necessary accoutrements. Brogues? Of course, only this morning one of them had been filled with cat doings. Undaunted, and after some cursing and a quick clean-up, I was off to the games — a big contest: one of the biggest in my part of the world.

Anyway, I had a great day; one of my best ever. And naturally I credited Jack's early morning 'gift'.

Forget hard graft and preparation — I credited the cat. At the contests that followed that summer, in a vain attempt to recreate that fragrant day, I tried my damndest to get Jack to help me make my mark — by making his in my brogues. Each Friday night I'd place my size 11s conveniently and encouragingly beside the cat box. But he never again obliged. Happily, Jack helped prove the importance of hard practice and preparation.

The philosopher Francis Bacon said that “the root of all superstition is that men observe when a thing hits, but not when it misses”. That feels true to me. We aim to recreate the conditions that create purple patches but it's less common for us to bother assigning superstitious roots to ruts. Who's ever heard of the “lager korma” superstition? That's the one that relates to pipers breaking down in solo piping events on a Saturday after a Friday night of nine pints and a late night Indian. I've never heard of it either. But if a pre-contest night like that assured wins and not chokes, well, I suggest it might well be a superstition.

It appears that when it comes to superstition and high performance, there's more logic in the whole equation than anything obsessive compulsive — or crazy.

A study by scientists at the University of Cologne, recently published by the Journal of Psychological Science, found that superstition can boost a person's confidence — and by extension, their performance.

One of their experiments looked at the idea of “lucky ritual” in a sporting context.

Their test saw 28 volunteers try to sink 10 golf putts. Half the group were told they had a “lucky” golf ball.

The end result saw the “lucky” ball group sink 6.4 putts on average. The control group hit just 4.8 of the 10 putts.

So there you have it. The world needs more lucky balls.

The lesson in all of this is clear. The next time you're at the line with the band and find yourself furtively reaching down in your sporran for the reassuring (tattered and slightly discoloured) support of your treasured and über-lucky 11-year-old Hello Kitty key-chain, feel no shame.

Be happy. Be confident.

And whatever you do: break a leg. ●



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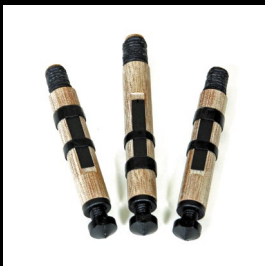
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