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Celtic Connections 2020

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Grey's Notes by Michael Grey • *An old postcard and a wee January ephemerid*

Theoretically Speaking by Tim Cummings • *The Irregulars*

by Bill Livingstone • *The art and mystery...*

Nine Notes from **Chris Gray**

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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

Editorial

ON February 8, The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland performed their *Decade* concert at the Corn Exchange in Edinburgh. This event was the culmination of the last year of hard practice, creative thinking and team work. The concert was a huge success and was warmly appreciated by the large audience in attendance and you can read more about it on p23 to 27.



It was a very special occasion too as this concert was the band's 15th under the leadership of Director Alisdair McLaren, who, after 11 years of service in his role, has decided to retire from the position. Alisdair has done a fantastic job with the NYPBoS and the standard to which they perform is testimony to that.

Clearly there is a great deal more to this job than the performance aspect. There are the responsibilities of child protection and safeguarding, fundraising with the associated monitoring and evaluation, care and inventory of equipment, annual auditions, communication with members, parents, venues and so on. That is before you even get started with the music and rehearsals and an annual outreach programme to make the NYPBoS accessible throughout the nation to as many young pipers and drummers as possible.

In his 11 years in the role, Alisdair has managed all aspects with expertise, care and attention. Throughout his tenure, this has been run smoothly and without incident, for which we are all extremely grateful.

At the final rehearsal before the concert I was able to say a few words of appreciation to Alisdair and the members of the senior and development bands who now have more than 100 members. I took the opportunity to tell them that it was actually 20 years ago when we started to work on the mission to establish the NYPBoS.

The first part of the process was to produce a feasibility study and this was done by Dr Mike Paterson, who was also instrumental in the production of the Centre's initial magazine – *Notes* which then became *Piping Today*. The outcome of the feasibility study was able to demonstrate a very strong case for the establishment of the NYPBoS and so it took off from there with funding from the Scottish Arts Council (now Creative Scotland).

The first concert of the NYPBoS was actually held in the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) in August 2003, led by the first Director – Paul Warren. It is amazing to think that a large number of the youngsters on stage for the *Decade* concert were not even born then.

The most important point I wanted to make was about the impact of the NYPBoS project and about how proud we are of their achievements. To my mind, it has been one of the most significant factors in the rise in standard in piping and drumming amongst young people over the last two decades. Why would I say that? Well, it is clear to see at the rehearsals just how much the youngsters involved thrive from being in each other's company. When you bring together the best talent in that age category from around the country, the only way is up. I have witnessed year after year the progress of many individuals who have become members. It is very heartening to watch that.

From the NYPBoS experience, these young people have become influential members of their own pipe bands, teachers in the schools and communities and outstanding performers. Many of them entered into the BA Scottish Music – Piping, now BMus Traditional Music – Piping programmes, where they have further developed their skills and knowledge.

The mentoring programme within the NYPBoS has allowed more experienced members to continue to contribute and this has been of enormous benefit.

The standard is such that the band could arguably be considered one of the world's top performing concert pipe bands. They produce a sound which any top Grade 1 band would be proud of and this is matched by technical excellence and musicality. An amazing achievement given the limited opportunities the band have for regular practice together.

Alisdair McLaren's influence and contribution has been immense. He can leave secure in the knowledge that he has made a difference to the lives of many young people. We all thank him for his fantastic work and wish him every success in his future ventures.

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

Pipes in the spotlight at

Celtic Connections 2020

Breabach @ 15

MY first impression of Celtic Connections this year was Breabach's 15th anniversary in the Main Auditorium at Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. The show began with a multi-instrumental set from Seamus Egan Project which featured Egan on banjo, guitar and whistle with a great line-up, including bass player Trevor Hutchinson of Lúnasa.

Four big strings of lightbulbs decorated the stage and when illuminated, signalled the start of the main event. From my seat just behind the desk, the sound was exceptionally good. In such a big room, the definition could easily have been lost but engineer Keir Long really brought out a full pipe sound with excellent clarity, as though they were acoustic. I have heard Breabach play at Celtic Connections many times before but this gig seemed to have an unusually elevated energy and was altogether an excellently crafted production.

Their opening set was a stormer and it was becoming clear by the end of set number two that this gig was somehow going to keep getting better! *Gig Face* was a firm highlight – a set which really showcased the band's dynamic range and individual skill. With everyone in the band playing a good few instruments and not shy to use their singing voices, there is plenty of scope and abundant ability to build up rich rhythmic and harmonic textures which unassumingly catapult you back into the melody. I admire their decision to maintain the essence of the sets they've been performing for years with only a few additions. The pipe parts were boosted by pipe corps, Tryst, and the extra string parts bolstered by a nose-scrunching combination of Su-a Lee and James Lindsay on cello and double bass respectively.

The original line-up took to the stage for some classic tracks from their debut album which are as relevant in 2020 as they were when they were first assembled. This

is a testament to the repertoire the band have built their foundations on and like the Breabach 15yo single malt they have just released, the music is getting better with age.

The interplay between melody and rhythm sections was, as ever, incredibly impressive and Megan Henderson's rendition of *Óran Bhràigh Rùsgaich*, learned from Charlie MacFarlane in Glenfinnan, was a real education in how an old song should be treated. Carefully nestled in a meld of atmospheric sounds, the lyrics and melody were presented to the audience like a precious artefact. Megan's voice has a similar 'pure' quality to that of Julie Fowles and the recorded version certainly has that magic sheen which reminds me of *Dh'èirich Mi Moch, b' Fheàrr Nach Do Dh'èirich* the lead track from Julie's album, *Alterum*. Éamon Dooley's influence as producer on Breabach's latest release, *Frenzy of the Meeting*, shining through here without doubt.

All five have great stage presence and made the concert hall feel like a wee folk club. One particularly witty comment had the whole place howling with laughter for several minutes – so funny that it took us all a while to get back on track, not least Calum MacCrimmon, the unfortunate subject of the sharp remark! For me, the human connection factor is what makes a good gig and Breabach's global ethos comes through in everything they do, from the tunes they play to the words they speak.

This band have stayed true to themselves and the origins of their music since 2005 (incidentally, the year I was given my pipes) and this spectacle was simply a milestone in what is turning out to be a musical legacy.

James Duncan Mackenzie's most well-known composition marked the end of the gig and had everyone on their feet for a second time. After 15 years, it's quite clear that Breabach are still Smelling (just as) Fresh.

● BY AILIS SUTHERLAND



All photos: John Slavin@Designfolk Ltd



A Celebration of Women in Piping

I saw the *Celebration of Women in Piping* gig in the Strathclyde Suite on the first Sunday of the festival. This was a concert dedicated to pipers who are women in the Irish, Breton and Scottish traditions and was programmed by uilleann piper Louise Mulcahy.

The first half consisted of four uilleann pipers. For me, the highlight was the solo played on a set of pipes pitched in the key of B which belonged to Liam O'Flynn. When I was growing up, the music of Planxty, the Bothy Band, Ossian and Battlefield Band were constantly played on tapes and CDs in the car and while the dinner was being made so when I heard of the passing of Liam O'Flynn, I felt an enormous sense of loss. I had realised that the people whose music had provided the soundtrack to my childhood were not going to be around forever so it was very touching to hear Liam O'Flynn's pipes being played live for the first time.

We were speaking after the concert about these pipes and about how an instrument, especially one which is as physical as the pipes can be so personal. The human aspect of the musician is almost transferred to the pipes – you can feel where their hands have spent years gradually wearing away the wood on the chanter, where the buckles have been bedding into the leather on the belts and when you actually get to play someone else's pipes, you hear the reeds from the unique perspective of the piper.

The second half had a slightly different format – more of an individual showcase of the Scottish and Breton pipers. Enora Morice stood out in terms of her technical execution but more importantly for the expression with which she pre-

sented the music from various parts of Brittany. Enora explained the selection of dance tunes she was going to play and linked them back to the places they came from. It must also be mentioned that the tone she was producing from the instrument was remarkably good. I particularly enjoyed Enora's duet with Robyn McKay – the chanters were bang-on!

Without doubt, Alana MacInnes completely won the audience over. Having the ability to play very well is the first given at any festival but to walk out on stage and immediately strike up a brilliant rapport with the crowd is certainly what I remember most about a performer and something that clearly comes very naturally to Alana. She's famously the heart and soul of the party but it was good to see her putting in a sincere performance and I hope to see her doing more gigs and spreading the joy!

If this type of concert was to be repeated in the future, it would be great to see pipers such as Sarah Muir, Margaret Dunn, Emma Hendry, Sharon Kelly, Anna Murray, Mairead Green and Andrea Boyd playing a set or two.

Celtic Connections is representative of the cultural, musical and linguistic melting pot of its home city which was summed up in one off-the-cuff punchline after Louise Mulcahy had told the audience the incorrect name of the place where she grew up: "Five days in Glasgow and you don't know where you're from!"

● BY AILIS SUTHERLAND



Alana MacInnes, Enora Morice and Robyn McKay

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All photos: John Strain@Designfolk Ltd



Peoples Ford Boghall & Bathgate Caledonia Pipe Band

TRYST kicked off the first half of the annual lunchtime piping event in the main auditorium at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. I really enjoyed Tryst's set – it was good to see a group of pipers performing in less formal attire and to hear each of them address the audience over the mic. Perhaps this is something they all do without much thought as seasoned professional musicians, but it's something that more pipers should do when performing. The

story behind the tune often carries as much weight as the tune itself.

I really liked the Donald MacLeod set – *Donald MacLennan's Tuning Phrase* has always been a favourite and I had goosebumps from the playing on display in the final tune, *Donald Cameron's Powderhorn*. The accompaniment, provided by Angus Lyon and Fraser Stone, was minimalistic but very supportive and had a lot of depth which complimented the drones while giving enough space for the chanters to cut through.

Altogether there was a very broad range of material which included a sing-along, a bunch of Gordon Duncan tunes and a very cool Bagad-style harmony section which got the feet tapping.

Boghall and Bathgate took to the stage with a nod to Burns as they gave a lovely rendition of *Westlin Winds* – it was January 25, after all. Their second set had a nice groove and a good tempo – the drumming was impressively dynamic. I heard afterwards that the drumming had come across as being very loud for



IONS



some but from my seat, I very much appreciated it.

I liked the clever introduction of harmonies in *Leaving Ireland* which was led by the band's pipe sergeant Calum Watson. They made an unusual and well crafted entrance about halfway through the part which was pleasingly surprising.

The traditional pipe band attack can become a bit tiresome in a concert setting so it was nice that Boghall had considered this while putting the set list together. Their entrance to the stage after the fanfare was very effective – the drum corps playing the rolls followed by the drones being struck in from the wings, the pipers dropping the E and then going straight into the tune while walking back on



Pipe major Ross Harvey

from both sides. For a piper, I actually picked up on quite a few of the drumming nuances – I particularly liked the subtle crescendo into the three-pace rolls.

The band sounded good overall and the high Gs were remarkably well tuned and well-blown throughout the slow air in the medley. Pipe major Ross Harvey stepped back to the side once the band were into the jigs, leaving the musicians to play without any obvious conducting – a nice touch.

Ross Harvey was genuine and humble as he thanked the audience for coming along. I know how much work goes into putting on a concert like this – it was very enjoyable and easy listening. ● BY AILIS SUTHERLAND

Ceòlas 25th Anniversary

CEÒLAS certainly know how to put on a good show and their 25th anniversary concert was an absolute joy to witness. The line-up was a complete 'who's who' of Scottish and Cape Breton Gaelic artists including house band Dàimh, Kathleen MacInnes, Allan Henderson, Ailean Dòmhnallach, Seonaidh MacIntyre, Mairi Rankin and Frank McConnell.

Every singer, dancer and musician was given a spot in the limelight and everyone was on top form. This was an immaculately-run concert with some truly superb performances, one of the most impressive being Ailean and Seonaidh's smallpipes duet. The pipes were totally singing and it was some of the tightest playing I've heard between two musicians in a long time. It was a really beautiful thing to see this combination of master and apprentice – the transitions between tunes so slick that the people in the balcony were still confidently tapping their feet in reel time as the pair blasted into jigs!

The Ceòlas summer school in South Uist is renowned for being ridiculously good craic – anything goes and everyone there is so keen to learn, share and celebrate the music, language and culture. A couple of years ago I managed to get down for a few of the evening events after my day's teaching at the North Uist Fèis and it was unforgettable! There was always at least one set of pipes being played. People have the absolute time of their lives at Ceòlas and the tutor house in the early hours of the morning seems like the centre of the universe. When the kitchen's full, there's no need to worry – the overspill sessions are just as good – no airing cupboard too small for a tune annex!

There is a deep connection between South Uist and Cape Breton and the way the two strands interact with each other is unexplainable and magical. Everyone involved has an intrinsic understanding of the traditions which have shaped their lives and their characters and this was highlighted by the sheer number of people who were individually and collectively embodying Gaelic culture with such variety on the Fruitmarket stage.

A wonderful evening of music and only the start of what is sure to be another momentous year for Ceòlas! ● BY AILIS SUTHERLAND



Angus MacKenzie
of Dàimh



Ailean Dòmhnallach and Seonaidh MacIntyre

Michael McGoldrick: *Fused 20th and Dòchas*

JANUARY 24 saw another night in the Fruitmarket with yet more acts celebrating major milestones. First on were Dòchas who were playing together for the first time in more than a decade. Some fairly unmatched careers blossomed out of this line-up, most notably that of lead singer and whistle player Julie Fowlis. A while ago, I read an interview about the *10 Things That Changed My Life* where Julie Fowlis cites her time with Dòchas as one of the key moments in her professional development. “We spent years of setting up PAs, playing marathon dances, dismantling PAs and packing it all into tiny cars. These were some of the most fun years of my life.”

Looking at the successes she has had in the years since, this is such a humble statement to make and a reminder to any young musician to enjoy the beginning of their performing lives.

I suspect that a lot of the instrumental repertoire was collected from the likes of Iain MacDonald (Glenug) who is a living tune archive. Much like the older Breabach material, the original Dòchas sets have a freshness to them. I can only guess that this is down to their timeless arrangements and the fact that nothing can get in the way of a good melody. I was familiar with a lot of the sets, particularly the Gaelic songs which I have heard many of today’s young singers performing. This indicates the influence that Dòchas have had as well as there being a likelihood that these songs have been passed on from the same sources. It was lovely to watch the band come together to play music from their past and something I very much look forward to being able to do one day.

The other celebration on this occasion was the 20th anniversary of Michael McGoldrick’s *Fused* album – one which has had an incredible influence on many of the musicians I look up to in Scotland at the moment. I spoke to a few people who remember being at the first airing of this music and who consider the album to have had a significant impact on the way they thought about traditional music during their formative years. This is evidenced by the huge catalogue of tunes which are so prevalent in sessions and

on many albums which have been released in the last two decades. I’ve never had to go and actively seek out the music on this album as it’s seemingly everywhere. I hadn’t realised how much I’d listened to it – so much that I appeared to know all the tunes and every riff, push, lift and drop in the arrangements.

I felt as though the music was carrying me forward and didn’t once during the gig feel that I had to think for myself. It was a truly immersive experience where my mind was completely occupied by the music I was hearing, feeling and its effect I was seeing in those around me. The band was feeding off the energy from the crowd and vice versa. Whole groups of people were actually jumping off the ground in excitement as the 15-piece ensemble played set after set of unbelievable key changes.

The reaction from every aspiring flute player I saw was one of humbled awe! It didn’t seem to matter what instruments the folk in the audience played either – there were box players, fiddle players, guitarists, and percussionists and they were all stunned by his ability to be at one with whichever instrument he was playing – almost as if they were an extension of himself. I don’t even think I saw Mike McGoldrick taking a breath – it was just effortless flute playing.

The Fruitmarket is a great communal venue – especially at a standing gig – and was the perfect setting for an evening celebrating longevity, joy and most importantly, great tunes!

● BY AILIS SUTHERLAND



Mairi Rankin

Miller, MacDonald and Cormier

THE link to Cape Breton has, unsurprisingly, always been a connection celebrated at Celtic Connections, and I doubt that there has been a year in the festival's 26-year history where someone from Cape Breton hasn't appeared on the bill.

For their part, the Celtic Connections audience is always highly receptive to the energetic, percussive and driving sound produced from that particular part of Nova Scotia. Given that, and the fact that they have had a couple of highly regarded CDs, it is no surprise then that there was a very healthy crowd in the Strathclyde Suite to see Miller, MacDonald and Cormier ceildh Cape Breton style.

Despite being from 'upstate' New York, piper Ben Miller has taken to both Scottish and Cape Breton music with a passion and in native Cape Bretoner, fiddler Anita MacDonald, he has found a partner to explore the shared roots of the music, add in guitar player Zakk Cormier, from Prince Edward Island, and the scene was set for some rollicking Cape Breton infused music.

The trio wasted no time getting into the groove with a quickstep and jigs and it was immediately apparent that Ben's Border pipe playing and Anita's fiddle playing were perfectly synchronised and they stay that way throughout their set. Jigs, strathspeys, reels all flew from the pair's hands as the sounds of Scotland and Cape Breton melded into one glorious soundscape.

Anita proved her versatility by singing, and getting the crowd to sing along with a Gaelic lullaby, she also threw in some step dancing while playing the fiddle to well deserved applause. The percussive plaudits though belonged to Zakk whose feet did almost as much work as his hands as they produced the distinctive Cape Breton rhythm while he sat playing his guitar. Impressive as his footwork was, the real value Zakk added was with his perfectly pitched support for the main melody. Slow and delicate or fast and raucous as required, he was on hand to provide the rhythmic backbone to the music.

This was a trio in great form and they continued the tradition of Cape Breton bringing superb musicians and music to the festival. One small point, the music was fabulous but we could have heard twice as much of it if Ben had spoken half as much. Building rapport with the audience is important but so is knowing when to just get on and play the music.

● BY CHRIS MACKENZIE



Anita MacDonald



Zakk Cormier



Ben Miller



Malin Lewis



Jarlath Henderson

SaMaLuc

THE support for Miller, MacDonald and Cormier were the much snappier titled SaMaLuc.

This was another trio of very talented musicians: Sam Mabbett on melodeon, Luc McNally on guitar and Malin Lewis on various smallpipes. Although recently formed, each of the band members has been making waves on their own, and as a trio they have gelled quickly and very impressively. Sam's melodeon playing sparkled throughout the entire set which allowed Malin to weave pipe sounds around it and to use the full range of the Lindsay System chanter when required.

Highlight of an impressive set was Malin's tune *The Old Inn*. Written for the hotel in Carbost, Skye, this had a deliciously chilled feel evocative of a lazy day in Skye.

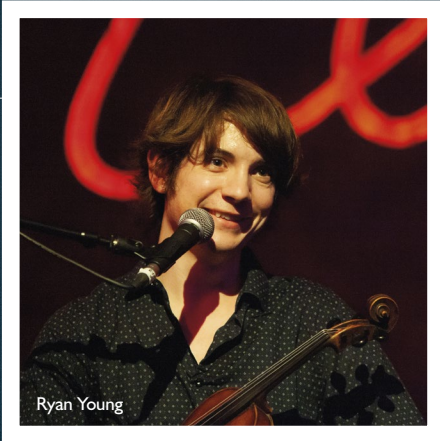
Malin is perhaps better known for the *Two Octaves* collaboration with Jarlath Henderson but this trio make some mighty fine music and here's hoping they continue to do so. ● BY CHRIS MACKENZIE

Jarlath Henderson

THE aforementioned Jarlath Henderson also got to headline in the Strathclyde Suite and he chose to gather the cast from his recent recording around him. That meant Hamish Napier, Innes Watson and Duncan Lyall joined him on stage to run through many of the tunes from the RAW album along with some old favourites.

Jarlath may have come to attention as a uilleann piper but he has branched out now to be equally at home on whistle and even guitar, if the occasion demands. As a quartet they have a distinctly jazzy feel to them, with Duncan Lyall's double bass, and indeed Innes Watson's guitar, often laying down a jazzy backdrop

All photos: John Stevin@Designfolk Ltd



Ryan Young

for Jarlath to play over on either uilleann pipes or whistle. This was best demonstrated on *Eddie Duff's Barnances* where the Strathclyde Suite became Ronnie Scott's (Jazz Club) for five minutes.

Over the last few years Jarlath has added singing to his performances and given his prodigious proficiency on the pipes it says a lot about his nascent singing ability that the highlight of the performance was his version of *The Trees They Do Grow High*, a song so sad the audience should have been issued with tissues at the start. This was a classy performance from four very talented musicians and joy from start to finish (sad songs notwithstanding).

Supporting Jarlath were the duo of Ryan Young on fiddle and Jenn Butterworth on guitar. This was a mesmerising set



Jenn Butterworth

with Ryan's fiddle playing perfectly accompanied by Jenn on guitar. Ryan's playing goes from impossibly soft and delicate to full on turbo charged with a deftness of touch that is a delight to listen to. Sets built to a crescendo with an almost hypnotic lure yet the melody stayed to the fore, and Jenn provided the rhythmic platform throughout for Ryan to build on. Jenn's playing was a delight and it was easy to see why she is one of the hardest working people of the trad circuit and pops up on stage with a wide array of players. This was special and if they are playing near you, get along to see them. You will not be disappointed. ● BY CHRIS MACKENZIE

RURA

A BAND who have become almost a permanent Celtic Connections fixture in the 10 years since they emerged are RURA. Winners of the Danny Kyle award in 2011, the band are now three albums in, the last of which, *In Praise of Home*, would be on any list of the best albums of the last decade. They have a dedicated following, many of whom packed into the Fruitmarket to see the band celebrate a decade of making music.

Part of the skill in organising this festival is matching bands to venues and putting RURA on in the Fruitmarket was inspired. It was the perfect venue to enjoy their relaxed Celtic groove and the band and audience revelled in it. With Jack Smedley on fiddle, Steven Blake on pipes, Adam Brown on guitar and David Foley on bodhran and flute, the band took the opportunity to invite along past band members Chris Waite and James Lindsay and to draft in two of the hardest working pipers at the festival, Finlay MacDonald and Ali Hutton. This then was the RURA big band and it was none the worse for that.

All the favourites were played including *Catriona's*, *In Praise of Home* and *Day One*, with the intro to each greeted by delighted cheers of recognition by the assembled faithful. The band were in cracking form with Jack's fiddle and Steven's pipes in perfect concert whether taking things down a notch or rocking the house. RURA have a very distinctive sound that manages to keep a chilled relaxed vibe going even when they are in full pipes up, eyeballs out, footstompin' mode. RURA are a fully instrumental band these days but there was a huge cheer when they were joined on stage by original vocalist Adam Holmes for a run through his song *Mary*, from the band's debut album *Break It Up*. It was undoubtedly the emotional moment of the night as the crowd sang every word along with Adam. Here's to the next 10 years of the RURA sound.

● BY CHRIS MACKENZIE

Peatbog Faeries

RURA may have a decade behind them but that pales in comparison to the three decades the Peatbog Faeries have put in. They may only have two original members, Peter Morrison on pipes and Innes Hutton on bass, but after nearly 30 years it is a surprise they have any original members left.

The Faeries sound has always been loosely described as Celtic fusion and they have never been afraid to bring in new sounds and approaches. In many ways it wouldn't be unfair to call them Prog Trad as they take the Celtic tradition into a new place. That this approach has been appreciated by their fans, of which there are many, was self evident in a sold-out Fruitmarket. That it has had a profound effect on the trad scene as a whole is less obvious but nevertheless true. Long extended versions of tunes with variations throughout and a strong rhythmic pulse may be their trademark, but it is now a commonplace feature of many performers, as evidenced by the Poozies support set. That is, at least in part, due to the success of the Faeries over the years. That said, you do get two versions of the Faeries on stage: one where the melodies are front and centre (if given a good old tweaking) and the other where the concert becomes an extended 'rave' with sets melding seamlessly into each other. This was the latter type and all there was to do was stand back and enjoy as the wall of sound wrapped itself around us. ● BY CHRIS MACKENZIE



Steven Blake of RURA



All photos: John Starin@Designfolk Ltd



The Real Life of
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SINCLAIR**



Photo: Karl Wallner

CONNOR SINCLAIR

by John Slavin

CONNOR Sinclair's image was used on The National Youth Pipe Band's *Illumination* concert poster in 2011, but Connor really could be held up as the poster boy for many aspects of what The National Piping Centre's work has established and achieved in the last 24 years.

That's to take nothing away from Connor's own musicality and absolute dedication to becoming a world class piper and musician, but he has taken full advantage of the pathway and musical structure provided by tutors at The National Piping Centre, the wonderful experience playing with other top young musicians in The National Youth Pipe Band of

Scotland and the education he received from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland from where he graduated with a BMus Traditional Music – Piping degree.

Through all those years of being influenced by The National Piping Centre's structures and projects, Connor has competed in solo and pipe band competitions and worked his way to the very top.

Starting out with his local Comrie Pipe Band in 2001, he moved to Gleneagles Strathearn for a couple of years, before falling under the influence of his solo piping tutor Margaret Dunn and joining the Cullen Pipe Band, who are led by Margaret's dad, Con Houlihan.

Connor was with the Cullen Pipe Band till 2013 when he then moved to Field Marshal Montgomery and won the World Pipe Band Championships with them in 2014 and 2016.

And as for his solo piping career, well... the picture (almost) tells a thousand words. In October 2019, he competed at the Glenfiddich Piping Championship in the Great Hall of Blair Castle. He won the MSR and came fifth in the piobaireachd playing *Lachlan MacNeill Campbell of Kintarbert's Fancy* and finished second overall.

The Glenfiddich success came hot on the heels of winning The Masters MSR at *Piping Live!* and the Gold Medal at the Northern



Photo: Paul Jennings



Meeting, both in August last year. It goes without saying that he had a glittering junior career, including the Pipe Idol title at *Piping Live!* in 2012, and when he joined the senior ranks, he quickly picked up the Silver Medal from the Northern Meeting in 2016.

If Highland pipes were not enough to keep him busy, he plays flute and whistle with traditional music band, Gness, who are a four-piece consisting of Connor and another three musicians he met at the RCS.

He first featured in *Piping Today*, issue 44 in 2010 at the age of 13 in the NYPBoS Q&A article. Back then his 'Pipe Idols' were Roddy MacLeod and Margaret Dunn, he admitted that Johnny Cash and Newton Faulker were on his CD player – alongside Chris Armstrong and Gordon Duncan, his hero was Henrik Larsson and Glasgow Celtic was his team, and he said that: "...chocolate on pizza sounds nice".

Ten years after that article, and a decade of amazing success, we caught up with Connor to chat about music and get an insight on his real life.

PT: Does having all this success at such a young age mean that you need to change your piping aims and ambitions – by shifting them forward? Can you still see yourself playing in the Glenfiddich in 20 or 30 years time?

CS: I always wanted to compete at the Glenfiddich, and I really didn't expect to have done it so early. Although I did really well last year, my dream is to one day win the Glenfiddich and I have a lot of work still to do to get there. I would love to still be competing in the biggest competitions well into the future if possible.

PT: Do you find your involvement with Gness helps or hinders you to be a competing piper?

CS: I think it's nice being able to play two types of music that are so different but complement each other in a lot of ways. Since starting with Gness and folk music in general, I have gained a broader understanding of music which has really helped my piping.

PT: Tell me more about Gness.

CS: Gness are four-piece folk band made up of Graham Rorie (fiddle and mandolin), Aidan Moodie (guitar and vocals), Craig Baxter (bodhran) and myself (flute and whistles). We met while studying Traditional Music at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. We started off this year at Celtic Connections and we have been performing a string of gigs in Scotland and England throughout February. Our latest record was released in spring 2019, titled *Drawn From Deep Water*, and was nominated for Trad Album of the Year at the MG Trad awards.

PT: Over the last 20 years the RSAMD and Royal Conservatoire of Scotland have been very influential in producing highly talented, young Scottish traditional musicians. How important has the RCS been in getting you to this musical stage of your life?

CS: It has been a massive part of my musical development. Coming from a competing background, I never really had the chance to play music for fun and I really lacked a creative side because of this. But having the platform where you can throw ideas about and bounce off of other people was really refreshing and



exciting. The RCS brings musicians together from all over Scotland. It's a great way to learn and share ideas with some of the best young musicians from around Scotland and the world.

PT: Over the last 50 years the UK folk club circuit was where young musicians and bands honed their stage craft and established themselves as performers. But the folk club scene is not as strong as it was. Are you aware of the current UK folk club scene and is it somewhere Gness would look to get gigs?

CS: Yes. On tour we like to make sure that we support community venues – these are often folk clubs. I think they're very important to keep folk music accessible and they give a great platform to up and coming bands and artists.

Over the past few years it feels like folk and trad music is becoming more and more popular, and I've already seen folk clubs around Scotland attracting bigger bands to perform and therefore more people are attending. I'm sure this will start inspiring the next generation to pick up an instrument and start playing traditional music.

PT: I read some information for concert organisers on the Gness website which tells them that you have a peanut allergy. So is that something that is constantly in your mind when at a piping event or a Gness gig – that someone in the audience may have been eating peanuts? How does it affect your life and are you allergic to other nuts as well?



Connor with the other prize winners at the Northern Meeting 2019

Photo: Alister Sinclair

CS: Yeah, it's always something I have to think about in my day-to-day life. Gnos were in Denmark a couple of years ago and we had arrived at our venue. When we went into the concert room, there was a bowl of peanuts on every table in the audience. For obvious reasons I asked the guy who was running the gig if they could be removed and his answer was: "Well, they aren't for you." So I told him I would be at risk of dying if I came into contact with them, and that seemed to do the trick. So yeah, I have to be careful. Luckily for me it's only peanuts I'm allergic to.

PT: OK, let's lighten the subject. What is your favourite knock-knock joke?

CS: I've never heard a funny knock-knock joke in my life.

PT: Aw, that's a shame, let's remedy that. Knock! Knock!

CS: Sigh... who's there?

PT: Dejav

CS: Dejav who?

PT: Knock! knock!

CS: I rest my case...

PT: *Sorry!* Talking about déjà vu, have you ever had a supernatural experience — or even a dream that you remember as it was so strong?

CS: I've not had any supernatural experiences and I'm not usually a big dreamer. But I had a dream last week that I was getting chased down Sauchiehall Street by Godzilla.

PT: Wow, scary scenes in the middle of Glasgow... sounds like a typical Saturday night when the pubs empty. Let's not interpret that any further...

PT: If you could spend a day with a celebrity, who would it be?

CS: Lionel Messi. I know he doesn't speak a word of English and I don't speak any Spanish but football is a universal language so I would love to have a kickabout with him.

PT: Is there something you constantly lose?

CS: I'm always losing hemp and tape. I've bought so many of both and it seems I use them once and they run away. That's my excuse for my pipes always being in a bad state.

PT: What are you doing most days at 11am and is it different at the weekends?

CS: Between teaching, gigging and competitions, nearly every day is different for me at the moment. It's quite difficult to make my work fit a routine. I'm sure most self-employed musicians will be the same.

PT: If you could only have one meal for the rest of your life, what would it be?

CS: The main course would be pizza and dessert would be warm chocolate brownie with ice cream.

PT: So your palate has not changed much in the last 10 years... I wonder what that answer will be in 20 years.

PT: What wastes the most time in your daily life?

CS: Playing the Playstation and looking for tape and hemp.

PT: Do you do any kind of exercise?

CS: I enjoy playing football but don't get the chance to play much any more. I've been going out for short runs now and again to try to get a bit fitter after Christmas and Celtic Connections.

PT: When you think about "the future", what springs to mind?

CS: I don't usually think too much about my future. I try to only think about the year ahead. I find this lets me focus on specific goals and that way I don't get ahead of myself. I have a lot of new opportunities coming up this year and I try to keep my mind as close to the present as possible.

PT: That approach certainly worked for you in 2019 and I wish you all the best for 2020! Thanks for your time, Connor. ●



by Bill Livingstone

The art and mystery of composition for the bagpipe: *part 1*

This article is excerpted from the writer's memoir *Preposterous: Tales to Follow* and has been edited for length

THE ability to compose music, any music, for the bagpipe or otherwise is a peculiar talent and very difficult to describe or define. We know what the results of the effort are, but not much is known about the process itself. Everyone has heard a tune composed by someone trying their hand but without much natural ability for it. It's not attractive, perhaps not ghastly, but sure to be confined to the bin the moment the neophyte's back is turned.

But think about that and contrast that stuff with the gems – the timeless treasures. Think of *The Little Cascade*, the work of a compositional genius, *Lochanside* with its exquisite melody, *The Knightswood Ceilidh* a grand competition march and the iconic *Mist Covered Mountains*. Each of these is a lovely example of pure inspiration at work, and they each illustrate a fascinating and liberating aspect of composition for the bagpipe.

The Little Cascade, composed in the era of Kurt Weill and Bertold Brecht seems to capture some of the mysterious zeigeist of those times. Without going too far down the rabbit hole, let's ignore the way the bagpipe has rocketed up in pitch, and accept that in earlier times it was pitched roughly at B flat. With the advent of digital technology, we can convert the pitch of the modern pipe chanter, which helps us to understand the keys available to us, and the chord patterns of those keys which can and do support pipe music. We simply take a tunable electronic keyboard and tune or adjust the keyboard's B flat to the bagpipe low A. Voila... we are "sort of" playing in B flat, even though the pitch of the modern chanter will actually be higher than that. Note that we must be allowed a little flexibility of mind here. The pipe scale operates in a mixolydian mode, with both high G and low G flattened by a half tone, and the pipe note C is slightly flatter than the analogous note on the keyboard.

To explore the tonality of *The Little Cascade*, noodle around on the re-tuned keyboard while having someone play the Cascade on the pipe and it becomes obvious that the tune was written by GS McLennan in the key of F minor. At the time this was a rare and exciting breakthrough, as to my knowledge, it's the first of its kind and it is still relatively unusual to see compositions in this key and mode. Dr Angus MacDonald's *Chloe's Passion* and Bruce Gandy's *Coppermill Studio* are two examples of the rare, but in these two cases, successful recent attempts to compose in F minor. I suppose that most pipers realised that GS mined the territory so thoroughly and beautifully with *The Little Cascade* that they avoid it.

The Knightswood Ceilidh employs what I call a faux B flat minor mode, or if you prefer, an implied key of B flat minor. Tunes of this type are usually rooted in low A, although the march, *The Royal Scottish Pipers' Society* has its focus on E. They achieve the effect of a minor key simply omitting the third note of the major mode, C, on the pipe chanter. There are myriad examples of this type of composition – my own, *The Busy Buddy* is one.

The Knightswood Ceilidh is quite a typical march in this faux B flat minor mode, but as ever, Donald MacLeod pokes expectations in the eye by dropping what at first sounds like an out of place C in the sixth bar of the third part. This buckshee C draws the ear to this attractive melodic quirk.

This faux B flat minor mode is employed generously throughout blues music, where it's applied to various keys, not just B flat. Blues also features a repeated focus on the fifth interval which too, seems to be a feature of much Celtic/Gaelic music.

Little needs to be said about *Lochanside*, composed by the great John MacLellan, Dunoon. It's a pure and beautiful melody which is produced on the bagpipe in the key analogous

to E flat major. It's so accessible that the Scottish singer Andy Stewart made it into a lovely song, sung by him by the way, very beautifully. Ignore his horrid *Donald Where's Your Trousers* and seek this one out instead.

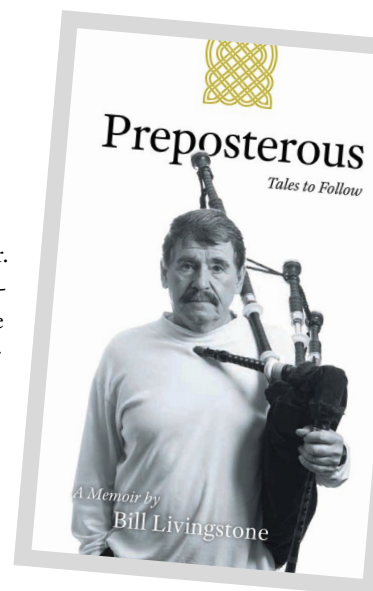
But there's more... think of tunes like *The Hen's March* or *The Geese in the Bog*... here the composition is in the bagpipe's low G mode, which is analogous to A flat major on the re-tuned keyboard, with the triad being Low G, B and D. It's a major key, but feels dark and grumbly like much minor key music. That's because it's in the basement of the chanter's tonal structure, but with the drones stubbornly refusing to go along.

And finally *The Mist Covered Mountains*, while so familiar as to seem hackneyed, is a wonderful poignant air, composed in the key of C minor on the re-tuned keyboard, the triad of which on the pipe chanter is our B, D and F.

So, while remembering that we have re-tuned the keyboard to take the B flat to the pipe chanter's Low A, we have the following keys available for bagpipe composition:

- B flat major
- B flat minor (faux or implied)
- F minor
- E flat major
- A flat major
- C minor

Pretty wonderful stuff... six distinct keys all on a scale of eight tones... no half-tones to help us. ●





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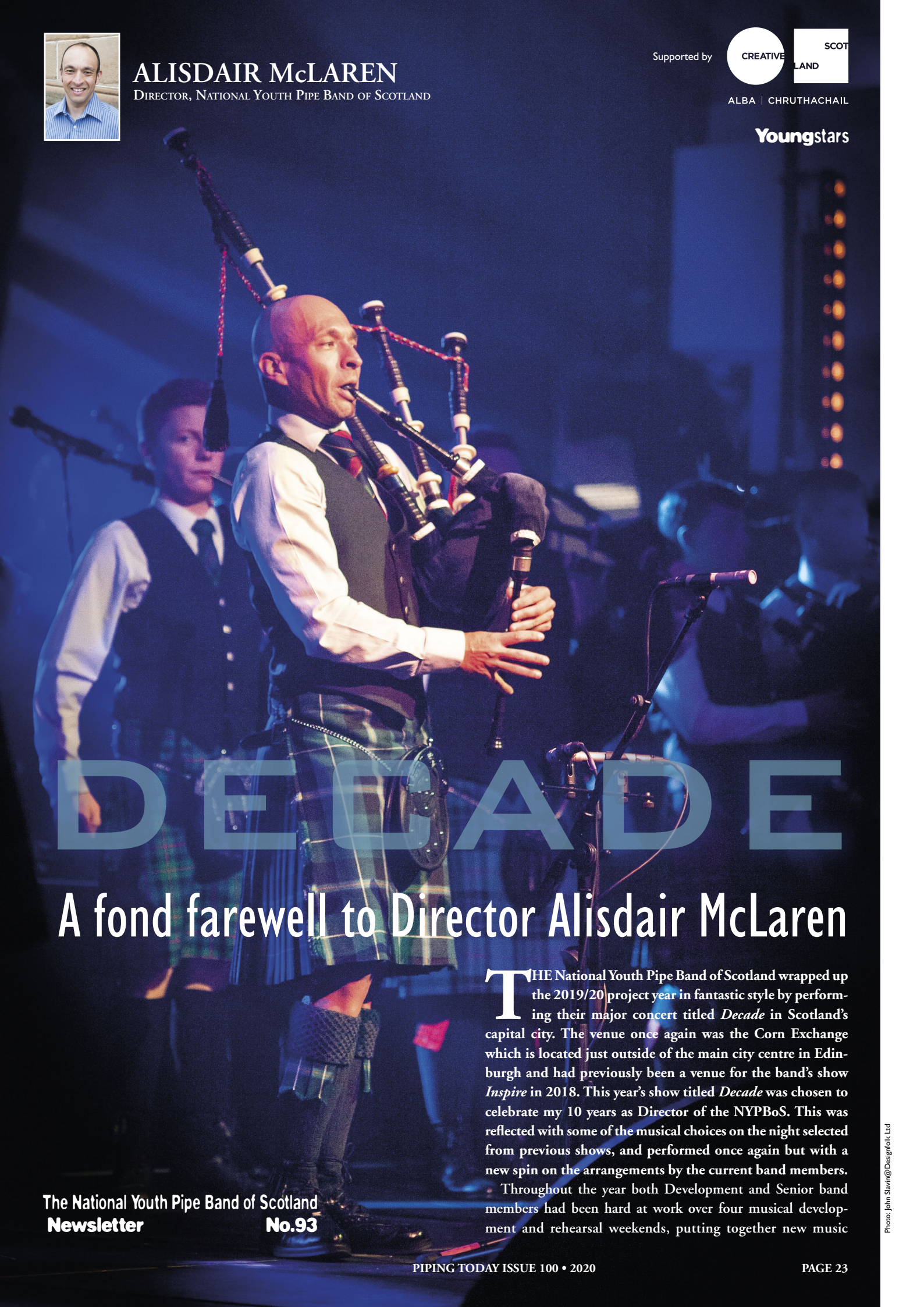
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DECADE

A fond farewell to Director Alisdair McLaren

THE National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland wrapped up the 2019/20 project year in fantastic style by performing their major concert titled *Decade* in Scotland's capital city. The venue once again was the Corn Exchange which is located just outside of the main city centre in Edinburgh and had previously been a venue for the band's show *Inspire* in 2018. This year's show titled *Decade* was chosen to celebrate my 10 years as Director of the NYPBoS. This was reflected with some of the musical choices on the night selected from previous shows, and performed once again but with a new spin on the arrangements by the current band members.

Throughout the year both Development and Senior band members had been hard at work over four musical development and rehearsal weekends, putting together new music



ALISDAIR McLAREN

DIRECTOR, NATIONAL YOUTH PIPE BAND OF SCOTLAND

Youngstars



and arrangements. They also worked on improving technique, sound and performance to produce this concert to showcase the many talents within the band. This show proved that the band is at the forefront of the pipe band concert format and it didn't disappoint.

Decade was a fantastic evening for everyone involved. Both bands performed to an extremely high standard, entertaining



Harris MacLennan

an enthusiastic and vocal audience of more than 500. It was an hour and a half of innovative music incorporating dazzling solos, duets, quartets and fully backed musical suites with a lighting display as good as any rock band concert.

The final encore saw for the very first time nearly 100 members take to the stage to perform the suite *Our Musical Journey*. This piece of music was composed by



*NYPBoS Development Band



members of the band in 2016 to reflect their time in the NYPBoS. It has now become tradition for the band to perform this at the end of each show to say farewell to, and also celebrate, members that are performing for the last time with the band in concert.

I would like to say a massive thank you to the retiring pipe major of the senior band, Harris MacLennan, who is leaving the NYPBoS after 10 years of service. He joins a special group of alumni who have contributed so much to this great project and have made a huge impact on the





ALISDAIR McLAREN

DIRECTOR, NATIONAL YOUTH PIPE BAND OF SCOTLAND

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band. We also said a sad farewell to senior band drum sergeant Callum Edwards, drum corporal Eilidh Wynd, senior band bass drummer Fergus Bryce and senior piper Sean McHugh, who all have been fantastic ambassadors for the project over many years. Thank you so much for your dedication, drive and commitment to inspiring the next generation of pipers and drummers in Scotland.

Decade also sadly signalled my 15th and final show as Director of the NYPBoS as I have made the very hard decision to return to my hometown of Perth, Western Australia, to be closer to my family. I've had an absolute blast over the past 11 years with the project and as a part of The National Piping Centre team.

It has been an honour and privilege to have been the Director of such an amaz-

ing group of young people and to see the band develop into such a fantastic entity within the piping community, not only locally, but also internationally.

I hope that I leave behind a project that will continue to provide a platform for aspiring young pipers and drummers from around Scotland, of any background, to develop their musical skills, build new friendships and help bring the wider



NYPBoS Senior Band perform their final set of tunes under Director Alisdair McLaren

piping community closer together. It's such an important project.

Thank you to the Principal of Piping, Roddy MacLeod MBE, Director of Administration, Alberto Laidlaw and The National Piping Centre Board of Directors for giving me the opportunity to build the project and follow my vision. Thank you also to all the staff for their friendship and support over the years and to also my

drumming instructors David Henderson and David Ross from D2 Percussion for developing a brilliant drum corps. I would also like to make a special thank you to Lynsey McLaren, who was a full-time volunteer for the project for over 10 years, for her support and massive contribution.

Last but not least, I would like to extend once again a special thank you to all the members and families of The National

Youth Pipe Band of Scotland over the past 11 years for their dedication and enthusiasm. Without the tremendous efforts you guys put in, the success of this fantastic project would not be possible.

I look forward to watching from Australia with great interest the continued development of the project and wish the band every success in the future.

Happy piping! ● BY ALISDAIR MCLAREN



COMPETITION LEAGUE FOR AMATEUR SOLO PIPERS

11 questions with Major Duncan Lamont R SIGNALS

Q. Where are you from and how did you get into piping?

I was born in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire but moved to Perth, Scotland, with my parents at a very early age. My father was a piper with Perth & District Pipe Band so my elder brother and I would be taken for weekly practice and many of their engagements.

Q. Tell us about your military involvement?

I joined the Royal Corps of Signals at the age of 17 in 1991 and have risen through the ranks to Major (29 years' service so far). My service has seen me travel the world and be stationed in various countries along with deploying on many operational tours. My particular cap badge like many others, offers great opportunities, development and fulfilment to suit nearly everyone's needs and the regiment have certainly been supportive in all my piping engagement. Sounds a little like a sales pitch, but I would certainly recommend the military to any young person looking for an exciting and varied career.

Q. Who is your current teacher and what are lessons like with them?

My current teacher is Willie Morrison at The National Piping Centre, Otago Street (previously College of Piping). I have been going to Willie for four years and he has been instrumental in my progression and confidence to enter a solo competition. Having never touched piobaireachd before, he has taught me from scratch, as well as unpicking many of the band habits that creep in over time whilst also mentoring me through my SCQF certification. As you can imagine, we have become friends, but lessons are firm with no errors ever overlooked (even a wrong grace note will be heard from the end of the room with my back turned on a counter march). All lessons are extremely enjoyable and with the vast knowledge that Willie has, it is certainly a pleasure to be in his company.

Q. How were your early years as a learner piper?

I would say varied. Hours of practice, often playing a reed too difficult, in a darkened corridor away from the main band or sat around the kitchen table with my dad and brother going through endless embellishments. However, my determined nature and enjoyability of playing the pipes or practice chanter has always kept me going and the small successes along the way are all worth the effort.

I think learning is a continuous cycle though, as there is always something to develop or improve.

Q. Your CLASP journey began in Grade 3 in 2017, tell us about your journey to date.

I think my first competition was at Rosneath, the weather in the morning was brutal with torrential rain and strong winds. Donald MacPhee was the judge and is always great at relaxing you as you step on to the boards. I can remember the wind and rain making it near impossible to concentrate whilst trying to systematically go through what Willie had told me. As I turned, I could see Donald holding on to the table and crit sheets to prevent them blowing away whilst the gazebo was about to take flight. I was hooked, a great experience and fantastically friendly people but, I had learnt my very first lesson – competition day is unpredictable. I was promoted to Grade 2 in 2018 and have performed relatively well with ups and downs along the way but hope to reach Grade 1 soon. Like the *People make Glasgow* slogan, the people certainly make the CLASP and it's a great family to be part of.

Q. You are currently very much involved in solo competition. Have you ever played in a pipe band?

During a posting in 2008, I met William (Billy) Wardrope, also a CLASP member who rekindled my passion with the Great Highland Bagpipe. Fairly rapidly, I progressed into the Pipes and Drums of the Royal Corps of Signals where I spent 12 years being involved as a Piper, Secretary and deputy President. Over this time, I was fortunate to play at a number of high-profile occasions and military tattoos worldwide. Due to being of a higher rank when I took up the pipes again and balancing a busy career path, I was unable to utilise the more conventional route that military pipers take through the Army School of Bagpipe Music in Edinburgh. However, I am indebted to Billy Wardrope who took me under his wing in my early years and then Pipe Major Steven Bell, ex KOSB & I SCOTS Pipe Major who have both remained close friends throughout my piping journey. I also spent a small amount of time with York City Pipes & Drums when I was posted to York from 2010-13, again I met some fantastic people some of whom have remained good friends.



FOR as long as there has been organised warfare, the ability to send messages between allied forces has been a battle-winning capability.

Communicating with friendly forces, gaining information on your adversaries and protecting yourself against enemy threats; for the past 100 years, the Royal Signals have provided this vital service to the British Army on every major operation and exercise worldwide.

In the early days, the Royal Signals ran wire across battlefields, sent dispatch riders on motorbikes and manned telegraph stations. As technology advanced, so did the Corps, and today they operate at the heart of the information battle as cyber warfare specialists.

It takes a very special person to be a Royal Signals soldier: often working in remote areas, they require teamwork, ingenuity and determination. They are trained in a huge variety of technical trades, from digital communications to the cutting-edge electronic and cyber warfare. Their soldiers are some of the most diverse in the British Army, with all trades open to women, and they offer a vast range of apprenticeships, professional trade qualifications and higher education courses.

Above all, they have a 'technical first, soldier always' ethos, meaning that they're as proud of their tactical ability as their specialist trades. You'll find Royal Signals soldiers everywhere the British Army operates, from peacekeeping and ceremonial duties to Special Forces operations.

This year, to mark their centenary, they are running a series of adventure training challenges, sports tours, services of remembrance and celebrations. They are also looking forward to the next 100 years and relishing the challenge that the future brings. Whatever happens, the Royal Signals will continue to get the message through, remaining the British Army's vital link.

Q. Is balancing work/family/piping challenging?

Overall, it can be, especially if I have to spend periods away on exercise or operations. But, in a normal week I am very fortunate. I have a conference room that I utilise every lunchtime as my personal practice room and if I need more practice in the house, my family are my biggest fans! OK, slight exaggeration, but they are very supportive of my passion and will often accompany me to some of the Highland Games competitions throughout the summer.

Q. What CDs are you currently listening to?

I mainly listen to soloists and have four firm favourites. Willie Morrison (of course), Roddy MacLeod, John Wilson and Pipe Major Gavin Stoddart. Although at times in the gym, I may sneak a little Iron Maiden into the mix.

Q. What are your piping goals for the future?

Certainly, my near-future goal is to continue with the CLASP and hopefully move to Grade I. I will also continue with the SCQF certification. Beyond this I am unsure, but I hope on retirement from the military to become more involved in piping in a professional way, and to give something back to what has offered me a fantastic experience.

Q. If someone was considering joining the CLASP, what advice would you give them?

Having already encouraged four to join, it's a fantastic opportunity to develop your solo piping in a relaxed environment with a slight competitive edge. Constructive critique is paramount in developing, so I would always recommend finding yourself a tutor and above all, go for it and enjoy it.

Q. Is there anything of interest that your fellow CLASP members do not know about you?

I suppose a proud moment was being recognised on the Queens New Year's Honours list in 2013 for Meritorious Service. I also have another passion in mountaineering, I have climbed nearly 100 Munros throughout Scotland in both summer and winter conditions and enjoy the odd day on the river fly fishing. ●



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Large entry at first CLASP of 2020



The National Piping Centre Otago Street 2020 results

Judges: *Ronnie McShannon (Piobaireachd)*
and *Peter Hunt (Light Music)*

GRADE 1

Overall Winner
Stuart Robinson

Piobaireachd

1. Stuart Robinson
2. David MacKenzie
3. John Frater

2/4 March

1. Neil Henderson
2. James Waugh
3. David MacKenzie

Strathspey & Reel

1. Neil Henderson
2. Stuart Robinson
3. James Thomas Murray

Jig

1. Neil Henderson
2. David MacKenzie
3. Stuart Robinson

GRADE 2

Overall Winner
Dugald MacLeod

Piobaireachd

1. Dugald MacLeod
2. Dagmar Pesta
3. Lachlan MacDonald

2/4 March

1. Stuart Letford
2. Dugald MacLeod
3. David Livingstone

Strathspey & Reel

1. Stuart Letford
2. David Livingstone
3. Dugald MacLeod

Jig

1. David Livingstone
2. Dugald MacLeod
3. Stuart Letford



Overall winners Dugald MacLeod, Stuart Robinson and John Hunt

GRADE 3

Overall Winner
John Hunt

Piobaireachd (Ground)

1. Hector Thomson
2. Bjorn Frauendienst
3. John Hunt

Full Piobaireachd

1. John Hunt
2. James McKenna
3. Joe Moore

2/4 March

1. Cameron O'Neill
2. Bjorn Frauendienst
3. Hector Thomson

Strathspey & Reel

1. Cameron O'Neill
2. John Hunt
3. Hector Thomson

Jig

1. Cameron O'Neill
2. Leslie Barrett
3. Bjorn Frauendienst

The next CLASP competition is on **March 28** at The National Piping Centre, MacPhater Street. For more information and dates visit: theclasp.co.uk

by Donald WG Lindsay

Ascension Method *Modh Dìreadh*

LINDSAY SYSTEM CHANTER /
PÌOB AN T-SIONNAICH: PART TWO

*The Border Voice, some Keys,
and an introduction to Tastes*

DURING the months of December, January and February, at the height of the Southern hemisphere's summer, Ascension experiences what people here call "Christmas weather". The mercury regularly rises above 35 degrees, and the heat of the midday sun tends to encourage island residents to seek out shady spots or remain indoors.

For the island's wildlife, however, this summer heat marks the beginning of a very productive period. Green turtles begin to arrive in increasing numbers on the beaches, and the endemic land crabs begin their migrations from the slopes of Green Mountain to the shore at North East Bay. The summer also more or less coincides (at least this year) with the less predictable nesting period of the island's Wideawake (Sooty Tern) population. These birds follow a lunar calendar, returning to Ascension in their hundreds of thousands for about nine months each year, nesting and raising their young on the barren clinker fields of the island's southern coast.

At time of writing, many of the Wideawake chicks have hatched, and by the time we leave the island in July most nests will lie empty. On our return to Ascension in September, our own nest will be a little emptier too, as our eldest Ryall will be remaining in Glasgow to begin his studies in music. For now, though, Ryall and I are spending our days on Ascension exploring the island, encountering the wildlife (including on the end of a fishing line), composing new music, and preparing to record an album together, titled *Mars Bay*.

The album is named for a bay on the south side of the island, which is surrounded by the "Wideawake Fairs" where the main concentrations of nesting Sooty Terns are to be found. Any visitor to Mars Bay, unaware of its history, could be forgiven for thinking that the bay was named for the martian-like landscape that surrounds it. A photo taken from Mars Bay road, the rough dirt track that winds through rust-red dust round the foot of a red volcanic ash cone, could easily be mistaken for one transmitted home to earth by the Curiosity or Opportunity rovers.

The resemblance is a coincidence, however, and in actual fact Mars Bay is named for the work of Scottish astronomers David and Isobel Gill, who spent six months on the island in 1877, long before anybody on earth had seen a rover's-eye view of the red planet. The purpose of the Gills' expedition was to accurately measure the distance between the earth and Mars, using the recently invented Heliometer which allowed all measurements to be taken from a single point of view on the earth's surface. The site of the Gill's camp can still be easily identified, as can the site of the 1957 British Ornithologists Union expedition which 80 years later camped nearby to carry out the first in-depth study of the Wideawake colonies.

At time of its discovery in 1501, Ascension as a whole was more or less one giant seabird colony. Human beings are a relatively recent introduction to Ascension, with the first inhabitants (other than occasional castaways) a shore party from the brig-sloop HMS *Peruvian*, sent here in 1815 to deter any rescue attempt on Napoleon (then imprisoned on St Helena). Earlier visitors tell of their ships being more or less surrounded by birds as they approached the island. The birds would perch themselves in the rigging, rails, even on the sailors shoulders, and were so tame that when the hungry sailors inevitably wrung one or two of their necks for a meal, the others didn't appear to realise



Looking inland from Mars Bay towards South Gannet Hill and Green Mountain (with its head in the clouds)



Gannet Hill with the Wideawakes soaring past Donald on the prevailing Trade Winds

Photo: Ryall Lindsay

there was any need to take fright or fly away. Following the wreck of the Roebuck in Clarence Bay in 1701, black rats arrived on the island, and the seabirds were soon in retreat. The introduction of cats by the Royal Marines, who became the island's first permanent human residents in 1815, brought about the final collapse of most of the bird colonies. The Wideawakes survived, due to their habit of spending three to four months a year off-island, while the Noddies, Frigate birds and Boobies held on only on the few offshore stacks, some cliffs, and the tiny Boatswainbird Island off Ascension's east coast.

Both the sea birds, and the stories, are providing inspiration for the music we're composing for *Mars Bay*, and we're aware of a sense in which we're in a musically relatively unexplored or un-sung environment. At the same time, we're taking the opportunity to explore in more depth the possibilities of the Lindsay System chanter, itself still also a relatively unexplored musical space.

Building on the concepts of Registers, Voices and Hands (as described in issue 99), I'm developing a concept of "Tastes", which can form the basis of compositions or improvisations of different kinds. The use of the word Taste here is influenced by Joseph MacDonald's use of the same word in his *Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe*, where he settles on it as a technical term for what he also initially calls a "Key". Although inspired by Joseph's usage, I'm using the term in a slightly different way. A Taste in Ascension Method describes a kind of musical "seed" which can be used to produce music with a particular and distinctive flavour. To date, this development has progressed in more of an intuitive, than a formulaic, direction. Three of the example Tastes given here form the basis of three improvisations on my forthcoming album *The History of Sleep* with Richard Youngs. The concept of Taste will be explored more fully in the book, where both intuitive and formulaic approaches to their development will be explained, alongside more mainstream concepts such as "key" and "mode" that will be more familiar to many pipers. The chanter is able to play a wide range of music in a wide range of keys, and to hold its own alongside many other instruments. The skills necessary to play music in this way from the wider traditional repertoire, and beyond, are best developed with reference to mainstream musical concepts.

Readers will have guessed by now, however, that there's something else afoot here.

Ascension Method is not only intended to provide a route to proficiency on the chanter, nor to simply teach pipers to exploit its innate versatility. The ultimate goal is to learn to understand and play the instrument "for its own sake", and to define an approach to creating new music in a style perfectly adapted to it. This approach will be improvisational at its roots, and will be threaded throughout the course of the book. Along the way, the piper will have the opportunity to build technical skills, and to gain an understanding of mainstream music theory as it relates to the chanter. Attention will be given to developing techniques appropriate particularly to the playing of traditional music on the chanter, and also to the skills necessary for the piper to be as musically versatile in other styles of music as the chanter will allow them to be. The ultimate goal of the book however, will be to persuade pipers to become improvisers (if they aren't already), and to develop through this an instinctive understanding of the chanter and its many voices.

For now, here is an introduction to one more Voice that can be found within the chanter, composed of two new Hands, followed by a brief discussion of some of the Keys the chanter is able to converse in, and finishing with an introduction to the concept of Tastes.

The Border Voice / Guth nan Crìochan:

Hidden "within" or "behind" the Master Voice, the Mormoka and Border Hands provide five further notes, all within the range of the Master Voice. These are Bb3, C4, D#4 for the Mormoka Hand and F4 and G#4 for the Border Hand. The division into two Hands, reflects the two distinct techniques that are used to produce these "semitones", which effects a considerable difference in response and performance between these two groups. Those in the Mormoka Hand are produced using the "Flea Hole" of the chanter, while those found within the Border Hand are produced using "cross fingerings" or "fork fingerings", similar to the method used on the Border pipe chanter. Taken together, the In Between Hands are also described here as the Border Voice, as it provides the same five semitones found on many Border pipe chanters. The implication is also that these notes exist on the "Border" between two notes of the familiar pipe scale, reflecting their more contentious relationship with the drones. The notes of the Border Voice are likely to be used most often as "semitones" than as one continuous range, being substituted for other notes to produce different scales and to allow playing in different keys.

1. Mormoka / Tol Cnuimh

The notes in this Hand are Bb3, C4 and D#4. They are produced using a Flea Hole, an innovation directly inspired by the Hungarian Duda. The Duda from which this idea was learned was constructed by Horvath Zoltan in Kecskemet, Hungary. Initially a gift in 1995 from Peter Jaeger, Hungarian professor and friend of my father, it later formed part of an exchange in 2019 between the Leskowsky Museum of Musical Instruments in Kecskemet and The National Piping Centre's Museum of Piping. This Duda can now be seen in the display of the Museum of Piping, while its voice can be heard on *Cyclone's Vernal Retreat*, track 8 of *The Night is Advancing* by Alasdair Roberts' Appendix Out (Drag City 2001). On a Duda, the narrow (~1.5mm) Flea Hole replaces "High G" sitting some way further up the chanter than G otherwise would. For the method to work on a Scottish smallpipe chanter, this single Flea Hole has to be replaced with a double Flea Hole, which is scalloped and for the most part is played as if a single High G hole. The notes in the Mormoka Hand are produced by opening the upper of the two Flea Holes while fingering "A", "B" or "D" on the Bottom Hand, raising the pitch of the note by one semitone. The resulting notes are highly pressure sensitive, requiring very steady blowing on the part of the player. At the same time this sensitivity allows the notes to be pitched dynamically to the drone, without otherwise disturbing the tuning of the pipes. This makes some form of tuning available for these semitones, hopefully going some way towards solving a known issue with bagpipe semitones generally.

2. Covered / Ìsleachadh

The notes in this Hand are F4 and G#4, and both are played using "Fork Fingerings", the same technique as is used to play semitones on the Border and Highland pipe chanters. The fingering for G# is the same as used on most Border and Highland pipe chanters, while that for F natural is different. Several variant fingerings exist particularly for F natural, and depending on the reed or the intonation desired, the player can choose between these options as appropriate. These notes don't have the same pressure sensitivity as the notes in the Mormoka Hand, being more similar in response to Border pipe semitones.

KEYS & MODES

Talking to other musicians about tunes can be difficult for a piper with no grounding in the basics of mainstream music theory. Even with an understanding of the basics, ideas like key and mode are rendered slightly more complicated when applied to pipes with their drones. Chanters are typically tuned to harmonise with the drones, and the resulting deviations in tuning from the Equal Temperament used by most other instruments are frequently misunderstood or overlooked, with even many pipers not being aware of the issues. Nonetheless, ideas about key, mode, chords and harmonies can provide a helpful starting point for collaborations with non-pipers, and attractive music is made all the time without the players necessarily having a deep understanding of the underlying realities, so with all the necessary caveats here are some examples of Keys and Modes that are available to players of the chanter, giving the range that can be found for each:



Photo: Ryall Lindsay

D Major / B Minor:

Range used "Two Octaves / Da Octa Iosal"

(see PT issue 99)

D Major is probably one of the most "useful" keys available to players of the chanter. D can be played over A drones without any serious issues, and an instrument tuned to a drone on A can also be used effectively over a D drone. The same range can be used to play in B Minor, and in other modes (A Mixolydian, E Dorian) using two sharps, but for a chanter tuned to an A drone, the use of drones on other tonics (ie. B for Minor or E for Dorian) can present tuning issues.

A Major / F# Minor:

Range used "Two Octaves in A / Da Octa Ard"

(see PT issue 99)

Despite more or less excluding the Back Bore Hand, A Major and F# minor are keys for which the chanter is very well adapted. As the notation in the first Ascension Method article shows (PT issue 99), the range in A Major offers a full two octaves, beginning from Low A (A3). In addition to this ample range, it's possible to skip the natural Low G, and make use of the Back Bore's Low F#, Low E and Low D as bass notes.

G Major / E Minor:

An essential key, particularly for Irish traditional music, G Major takes the chanter (and the piper, probably) slightly outside of their comfort zone. It's not too hard to adapt to playing tunes in G Major, and for the regular pub session player, gaining facility in this key should be an early priority. Drones in "A" can sound interesting when playing solo in G, but for mixed ensembles or sessions drones in D should be used for this key, where drones are used at all. Drones in G can also be used, but this can limit flexibility for moving into the key of D, so it's probably best avoided or saved for solo playing. Some minor intonation issues may be encountered in G, depending on the drone used, and on the types of instrument you choose to accompany you.

A Minor:

A Minor is well adapted to the chanter, with A drones being the most suitable for this key. There should be no intonation issues in this key, and while the range is restricted to 10 notes, it includes High B, providing scope particularly for song accompaniment or the playing of the many vocal melodies that use this range.

E Major:

E Major, B Mixolydian, and other modes using the range given here, are quite widely used in traditional music. This scale is not easy to master by any means, and has a similarly restricted compass to A Minor. Drones in E or E/B can be used, although equally drones can just be avoided in this key.

TASTES

Taste is a more subtle and flexible concept than Key or Mode. As used here, it's based on the sense or feeling that two tunes are "alike", and as such it's possible to imagine that the range of possible Tastes could be almost as great as the range of tunes themselves. The ambiguity of this idea is one of its main attractions, particularly in trying to define a new musical form that's intended to be primarily improvisational in nature.

The few Tastes given here are a starting point. Try playing through them a few times slowly and contemplatively, freely lingering on notes as you please, and then begin to develop them by introducing other notes and gracing, in ways that are sympathetic to the "feel" of the Taste. This free improvisational approach will be developed in more detail in the book, alongside other more methodical and formulaic approaches to developing Tastes.

I've not provided any further notes on the Tastes, but all but one of those included here have a title, and the last three express the foundations of the first three improvisations on mine and Richard Youngs' album *The History of Sleep*, which is due out on March 31 from <https://goodenergy.bandcamp.com> ●

LINDSAY SYSTEM CHANTER / PÌOB AN T-SIONNAICH

The Border Voice, some Keys, and an introduction to Tastes

The Border Voice / Guth nan Crìochan:



Range in G Major / E Minor



Range in A Minor



Range in E Major



TASTES

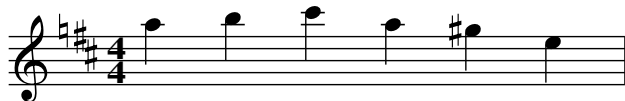
Barnbreth



Balloch



Untitled



Wideawake



History of Sleep



June



International Bagpipe Day





Nine Notes from CHRIS

CHRIS Gray is from Lockerbie and was introduced to the pipes at age seven when watching his dad and elder brother Steven play. He was first taught by the late Anthony MacDonald and played with his local Lochmaben Royal Burgh Pipe Band. Tony gave Chris the grounding in his piping and also introduced him to solo piping competitions from the age of eight which kept him particularly busy during his younger years. He also received tuition at The National Piping Centre and spent one year playing with the Dumfries & Galloway Constabulary Pipe Band in Grade 2 before joining Inveraray & District prior to the 2012 season and won the Worlds with them in 2017.

He got hooked on the piano after being inspired by an inspirational workshop led by jazz pianist Richard Michael, and started formal lessons when 14. He studied the pipes and piano at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and graduated with a Masters in 2019.

Piping Today caught up with him after his January CD launch concert at Celtic Connections and fired our nine questions at him...

Q. I'm interested to know why you chose piano as your main study at the RCS. What led you to make that decision?

I chose to study both piano and pipes at the Conservatoire, with piano my main study on the Masters' programme. This allowed me to explore various genres including classical and jazz alongside traditional music and other aspects such as composition.

Q. Do you find that you are more in demand as a pianist or a piper? Is there a niche for pianists within the Scottish traditional music scene, or do your skills as a pianist take you into different musical genres?

I think about the same, although I can go through spells of mainly one or the other. I equally love playing solo as well as working on collaborations on all the instruments I play in various settings. There are so many opportunities within the Scottish traditional music scene for genre crossovers.

Q. What age were you when you thought you could be a musician for a living?

Music has been my passion for as long as I can



remember and as I progressed through secondary school, every spare moment I had would be spent either playing, writing or listening to music. I realised in the latter years of school that attending the Conservatoire was what I wanted to do.

Q. Which influences do you think shaped you the most into the musician you are now?

The tuition and friendship I received at the very beginning from my first piping and piano teachers have been hugely influential. I owe a lot to them and to my parents who would bring me to Glasgow and further afield in Scotland regularly to enjoy the amazing music going on.

Q. Did your career path become clear to you as you were going through the RCS?

I knew that performing was my main goal after graduating from the Conservatoire. During my six years there I performed at various gigs and took part in different projects including recording and teaching on pipes, piano and whistle. I had some really exciting opportunities whilst studying at RCS and this has given me invaluable experience and continued my desire to perform and record as much as possible beyond graduation.

Q. What is the most prestigious gig you have ever played?

A few highlights would be playing at the Ortigueira Festival in Spain, playing solo at the 2019 Basel International Tattoo and dipping on keys with Skipinnish. I have had the pleasure of playing in many different types of venues – a few recent gigs were playing piano at the Parliament of New South Wales and Border pipes/whistles at a folk club in Sydney.

The live launch of my album at Celtic Connections this year at the Oran Mor has to be the most memorable to date – to play an entire



GRAY

Chris begins his second set at his album launch concert in the Oran Mor, Celtic Connections 2020

show of my own music, each piece with its own stories and meanings, with an incredible team of musicians is really special to me.

Q. What do you do when you are not playing music?

Music is on my mind for the most part – I love to listen to and discover new music and get out to watch gigs when I can. I also enjoy the outdoors – going for walks, hikes and exploring new places. I have taken up running, and when I was in Sydney last year I completed my first marathon.

Q. How enjoyable was the recording process for your new CD, and what is the next step now it has been released?

The preparation and recording process for the album has been a really rewarding journey. I have been composing the music for the album for a while now before recording in May and June 2019. The whole process has been captured in a video documentary which can be found on my website. We completed the recording for the album before I headed out to Australia for five months to teach pipes at the Scots College in Sydney. The album cover photos were taken in

Australia. Whilst out there I liaised with the production team back home with the aim to launch soon after I got back and I'm delighted this happened as part of the amazing Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow.

The music featured is all of my own compositions and is influenced by my exposure to folk music from a young age. I have also drawn from my love of various other kinds of music including jazz and classical. I recorded Highland pipes, whistles and piano on the album and a series of musicians came in to play on the tracks. It was really fun to work with such an exciting team of musicians on the album – Graham Mackenzie (fiddle), Innes White (guitar), James Lindsay (bass), Mark Scobbie (drums), Alice Allen (cello), Laura-Beth Salter (mandolin) and Mohsen Amini (concertina). Each of these musicians added their own character to the tracks and this was really special to hear. With Barry Reid recording and mixing the album and Calum MacCrimmon as co-producer, I was thrilled to hear my creative ideas come to fruition. Releasing the music for everyone to hear after the music has lived with me for a while is a great feeling.

Now the album has been released, I am looking forward to bringing the music to a live setting! I have other music that I would like to record, but right now I aim to be out performing when I can.

Q. Tell us something significant about yourself, or your music, that you would like to share with the readers.

As a musician I get to travel to different places and countries and it always amazes me how a shared love of music and performing can overcome both language and cultural differences. Undoubtedly listening to and experiencing music from around the world plays a part in the music I create. One of the most significant experiences I have had was spending a semester in Sweden on Erasmus exchange in 2018. Although I went there not knowing the language, I quickly felt at home with both the people and their music. The warmth and spirit of the people I worked with in Sweden is something I cherish and this is reflected in the music I create. I think my album is a true reflection of my experiences with each piece telling its own story. The album is available from www.chrisgraymusic.com ●

by Timothy Cummings



THEORETICALLY SPEAKING:

The Irregulars



IN this fifth consecutive *Piping Today* article about rhythm and metre, I'd like you to join me in exploring some rhythmic realms that may be outside your comfort zone – metres that are also rarely encountered in the common repertoire of Scottish-style piping, but that nonetheless have value and interest. We've already explored a few lesser-known metres in the previous four issues, as in addition to examining common domesticated metres such as 2/2, 2/4, 3/4, 4/4 and 6/8, we've also held the magnifying glass up to slightly more feral creatures such as 3/2, 6/4, 9/8, 12/8 and even 9/4.

Depending on how you feel about metres on the outer fringes of our piping canon, you might be intrigued to know there are such wild, 'irregular' beasts as 5/4, 5/8, 7/8 and 8/8. And there are characters

like the aforementioned 12/8, which, depending on how you accent certain notes, can either be conventional or irregular in their effect. And if that weren't enough, there are also suspicious tunes that just have to be nonconformist, cheekily refusing to settle with just a single metre throughout – a topic we'll discuss in the next issue of *Piping Today*. So if you'll allow, I'd like to guide you through the veritable zoo of irregular metres (sometimes called 'complex' metres).

FIRST, let's wander over to the 5/4 enclosure. Tunes of this species are generally pretty friendly, and it's generally OK to approach their cage. But please do not feed the 5/4s. They sometimes inhabit orchestras, and one of their most well-known eco-orchestral realms is the remarkably powerful *Mars: Bringer of War* from Gustav Holst's *The Planets* suite, composed during World War I:

Mars excerpt from Holst's *The Planets* suite

1. Unequal or asymmetric subdivisions are sometimes referred to by music theorists as being 'additive' or 'imperfect', in contrast to equal subdivisions of metres like 4/4 and 6/8, which may also be called 'divisive' or 'perfect'.

I've obviously not included every sounding orchestral part in the above example, but rather hand-picked one melody part and a more rhythmic one accompanying it. The simplified score may help you see that each bar of 5/4 is broken into two unequal parts¹: a three-beat division followed by a two-beat division. To get a sense of this particular groove, try saying the following, adding due emphasis for the numbers in capital and bold, and with a completely even rhythm for each word: "ONE two three **Four** five | ONE two three **Four** five" (tapping your foot on ONE and Four). If you're producing this 5/4 rhythm successfully, it will feel like it has a limp. In the case of *Mars*, it's a particularly intense, angry, driving, dogged limp, seemingly conveying both the extreme mental distortions that so often lead to war, and the extreme injuries that result from it.

Other famous examples of 5/4 outside of the piping realm that may help you grasp the five-beat pulse include the theme from *Mission Impossible* and the cool, aptly-named *Take Five* by Dave Brubek, the latter being considerably mellower than the *Mars* and *Mission Impossible* themes.

Now let's take a look at an actual pipe tune in 5/4, something I penned after accidentally pairing a few glasses of leftover pinot noir with the *The Old Woman's Lullaby* piobaireachd:

Port William

A-Major [pentatonic]

1st part orig. 'The Old Woman's Lullaby', arranged,
and 2nd part composed by Timothy Cummings

5/4 Waltz, ♩ = 176

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www.birchenmusic.com

If you find it difficult to feel its groove simply by looking at the dots on the page, try uttering a much softer, gentler – but no slower – version of the “**ONE** two three **Four** five” pattern. Better yet, try to find some way to hear it, either by playing it, or having an experienced musician play it to you, or finding the recording Jeremiah McLane and I did of it online (search for “Port William 5/4 waltz”). Hopefully you’ll again sense that each measure is split into two unequal triplet and duplet parts, like the Holst example on the facing page, only with a lot less aggression.

In this particular case, for better or worse, you are now witnessing a French-style 5/4 waltz derived from the *urlar* of *The Old Woman's Lullaby*, a melody tweaked to the extent that it seemed to want its own title, hence *Port William* (the fictional town in author/poet Wendell Berry's writings²).

At this point I will beg the pardon of those who regard piobaireachd as a near-sacred art not to be messed with. And for those of you wondering, “5/4 waltz?” Indeed, it's not only an existing tune genre, but it's also possible to dance a 5/4 waltz, as often witnessed at “Balfolk” dances. In contrast to *Mars*, the dance, and thus the accompanying tunes, have an endearing, *graceful* limp.

Some of you may be triumphantly declaring, “I know a tune in 5/4 – *Cullen Bay!*” And you may be right. But keep in mind that some consider this tune to be more of a domesticated 4/4, with a *fermata* (or ‘bird's eye’) on the fourth beat of each bar, played in such a way as to consistently double the length of that beat. From this perspective, the tune could be written like this:

Cullen Bay excerpt, notated in 4/4

It certainly works to write this in a 5/4 metre as well, since the fourth beat has the precise, consistent duration of two beats:

Cullen Bay excerpt as found in the *Scots Guards* collection (vol. II)

But the melody otherwise lacks any of the grooves more commonly associated with the 5/4 metre: either the 3+2 or the 2+3 ‘irregular’ patterns. I suppose one could try to argue in favour of a 4+1 pattern for *Cullen Bay*, though that pattern is not something I've ever encountered anywhere else. Notably, if you were to shorten the last minim of each bar to a regular ol' crotchet, the tune still succeeds – possibly even more so than the 5/4

2. Not to be confused with the actual village of Port William, which is a fishing village in the parish of Mochrum in Dumfries and Galloway in south west Scotland.

version – which may be another argument for the tune ultimately being more 4/4 in nature. (If you don't believe me, try playing the above version in 4/4, removing the pauses.) Either way, an important question remains: where do you feel the second strongest pulse in the bar – beat 3 or beat 4? Answering this may help you determine your preferred metre for the tune.

NOW, in the adjacent exhibit (*below*), we have similar fauna also sporting five pulses – the more nimble 5/8. These guys can also be either of the 3+2 or 2+3 variety, so the only discernible difference is that the eighth-note (or quaver) designation implies – but does not legally require – a faster pace. Many of you have already had some exposure to 5/8, possibly without knowing it, courtesy of Gordon Duncan:

An excerpt from the second part of G.Duncan's *The Bellydancer*

LET'S move over to the 7/8 habitat. Tunes in 7/8 can be harder to catch, but not impossibly so. Like the 5/4, the time signature of 7/8 is considered irregular (or complex) because its beat groupings are unequal. Any of the following are common examples of 7/8 subdivisions: 3+2+2 or 2+2+3 or 2+3+2.

There surely aren't many 7/8 tunes in the Scottish piping canon at present, but they do exist. Take, for example, Michael Grey's *A Legend Is Born*, the opening tune in his larger *Megantic Outlaw* suite, recorded by the 78th Frasers in 1992 and published in his *Old and New Tunes* collection (1995):

An excerpt from the beginning of *A Legend Is Born* from M.Grey's *Megantic Outlaw* suite

(7/8 is also a metre frequently encountered in the traditional music of Bulgaria, a genre that also includes bagpipes and dancing, and bagpipes being played for dancing. Outside of Bulgaria there even exists such a thing as the 7/8 waltz, which, like the 5/4 waltz, can be found at some Balfolk dances.)

CONTINUING along on our zoological tour, we have below the elusive 8/8, which may try to blend in with its surroundings. It particularly likes to trick you into thinking it's no different than a 4/4 or 2/2, since the fractions all work out the same in the end. It's metrical mimicry, perhaps, but don't be fooled! 8/8 is considered irregular, too, and it will help to see it this way if you subdivide it as such: 3+3+2 or 2+3+3 or 3+2+3.

You may think this is all getting too esoteric and impractical, but before you leap to that too-convenient conclusion, let me turn your attention to some fairly well-known pieces of music outside the piping canon. First, for those of you under the age of 45, please bring to mind the memorable song *Clocks* from Coldplay's Grammy Award-winning album *A Rush of Blood to the Head* (2003), also featured on the Red Hot Chilli Pipers' *Bagrock to the Masses* (2010):

Clocks excerpt from Coldplay's *A Rush of Blood to the Head* album (transposed to D from the original A^b)

To be fair, the song *melody* is squarely in 4/4. The piano part, however, is irregular in its pulsing – consistently so – and is much more easily read if written in 8/8. (And yes, it's perfectly legal in music theory circles to have different time signatures happening at the same time. Even J. S. Bach did it.)

And second, for those of you over the age of 45, try on the memorable *Buffalo Hunt* theme from John Barry's Academy Award-winning score to the film *Dances with Wolves* (1990):

Both the melody and especially its accompaniment strongly evoke the same 8/8 pattern as in *Clocks*. Note that some musical

theorists downplay the existence of 8/8, preferring to call it 4/4 with particular syncopated accents. But 8/8 is for real, and there is widespread use of it in traditional Bulgarian dances, dances which almost certainly inspired such notable composers as Béla Bartók to also employ 8/8 in their own music.

Buffalo Hunt excerpt from the soundtrack to *Dances with Wolves* (transposed to D from the original E^b)

EARLIER I mentioned that 12/8 has another side to it. Not unlike the *felis catus*, your average cat – an animal most of us encounter in domestic arenas, but that also exists in the wild – the 12/8 metre can function as a relatively tame compound metre in

the form of an Irish slide (as discussed in *Piping Today* issue #99), and can also be irregular. If you haven't already encountered an irregular 12/8 in the wild, please uncap your binoculars and aim them towards Richard Kean's infectious wildcat, *Pixel*:

An excerpt from the second part of R.Kean's *Pixel*

As you can see, the beat subdivisions are unequal: 3+3+2+2+2. Richard was influenced and inspired by traditional Bulgarian dance music – a genre which, as previously referenced, also makes excellent use of the 7/8 metre, among many other irregular possibilities. (NB: If you haven't yet heard it, Richard and EJ Jones made a very fine recording of *Pixel* on their 2008 album *Teribus*.)

YOU may now be wondering, what about 9/8? Can its beats be arranged such that they are irregular? Of course. You would just need to designate what the specific divisions are, such as 3+2+2+2, as per the last bar of both the 2nd and 4th parts of Duncan's *The Bellydancer*³. And what about other possibilities like 7/4, 10/4, 11/8, 15/16, or 21/32? Why not? In fact, music written in these metres already exists, courtesy of Pink Floyd, Radiohead, the Grateful Dead, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Elliot Carter, respectively.

This is probably something I oughtn't admit publicly, but I was once the principal bass clarinetist – which is to say the [cough] *only* bass clarinetist – in a university orchestra, and

on one occasion found myself leaning forward and squinting mightily at a particularly curious metre crawling around on my music stand. The wee beastie emerged from *Sensemaya*, a piece by Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas, and was a specimen of the 5^{1/2}/8 species. Yup, that's five-and-a-half quaver beats per bar, something most orchestral musicians may encounter only once in a lifetime, if they're lucky. Or perhaps unlucky. (The piece is actually a wonderfully evocative 'tone poem' inspired by an Afro-Cuban ritual involving the sacrificial killing of a snake.)

The insanity doesn't stop there – I'll let you decide if it's worth going down the rabbit hole with such 'irrational' metres as 2/3 or 1/12...

COMPOSERS among you, I'd like to offer you a challenge: how 'bout chipping in a few more irregular-metre tunes into our piping repertoire? Whether or not any of your offerings become timeless favourites or competition zingers – which is never the point – I think you'll enjoy, be enlivened by, and ultimately benefit from the experiment. So, too, will those who have the privilege of playing or receiving your new tunes. If you're not sure where to begin, try picking one of the above music examples and see if you can filter out any melodies and retain just the distilled irregular rhythmic pulse(s); and then inhabit that rhythm for a few moments. Once you feel more acquainted with the new groove, feed in some fresh notes from your chanter to create what will likely be a tune that's more original and stimulating than most. ●

3. Ideally, you would clarify the irregular pulsing both in the way the quavers are grouped and beamed together, as well as with the desired beat pattern marked above the time signature: (3+2+2+2).

by John Slavin



Lovely weather for ducks

I remember as a wee boy in the 70s my mum would occasionally remark: “Ah, the world’s changing”, and I would look at her bemused, as if she had just turned into an all-knowing wise woman who could detect the ebb and flow of hidden forces.

She wasn’t wrong, the world has changed in many ways over the last 40 years – not least the weather. At all five major pipe band championships in 2019, it rained. It could be very easy to blame global warming, but it has always rained in Scottish summertime, so hopefully 2019 was just a freak of nature. As the saying goes, it was ‘Lovely weather for ducks’, and also for the new owners of Mister Antony – makers of rain capes since 1982.

The founder of the company, Antony Mistofsky, who designed and produced the ubiquitous Bandspec cape in 2005, retired in 2019 and sold the company in February the same year after running the business for 37 years from his Glasgow premises.

The new owner is Nigel Pearson, who is based in Houston, Renfrewshire.

Nigel decided to have a radical change in his life and made the move from commercial landscaping to tailoring.

He said: “So on February 1, 2019, I took over the running of the business, Antony worked with me for six months to ensure a smooth hand-over and show me how he ran the business.”



Antony Mistofsky and Nigel Pearson

Nigel now has a small team of staff, including tailors and pattern cutters, who make the capes and other items from his Houston premises. They have since made their own small improvements to the cape and have also added other colours and a camouflage cape to the range, which is mainly aimed at ‘other’ outdoor

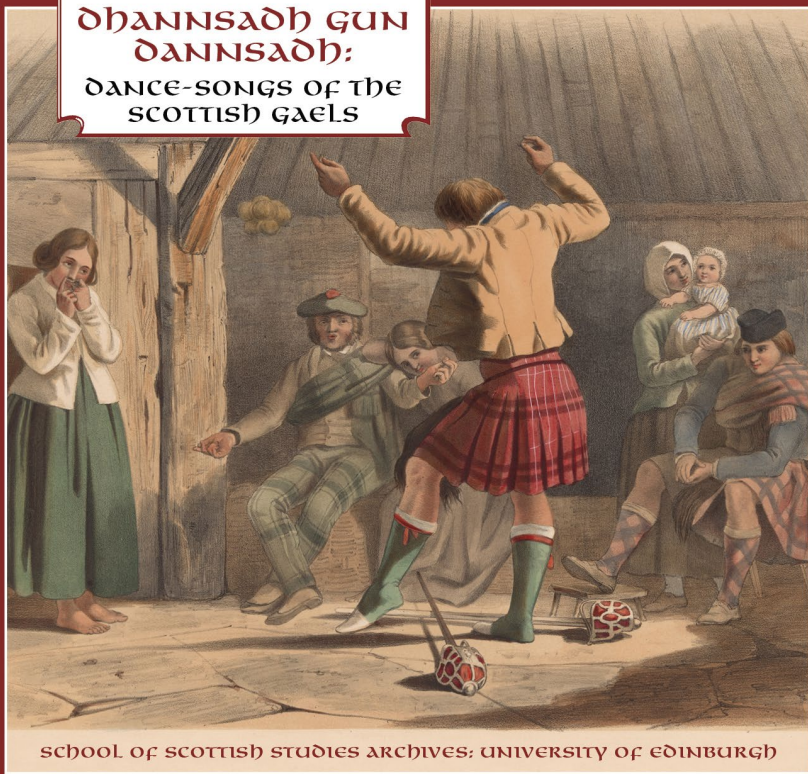
pursuits. As well as the Bandspec cape, they still produce the Original Inverness rain cape in various colours, an Ultimate Doublet Rain Cape made from cotton, and if you are looking for a touch of style and panache, a luxurious Black Barathea Wool or Harris Tweed cape.

Mister Antony Ltd is also developing a range of other products under the Bandspec brand. Nigel explained: “While we were doing some research into the company, we realised that young pipers and drummers recognised the Bandspec name more than the Mister Antony brand, so we have added our own new products to the Bandspec range including a hygiene spray for cleaning your bagpipe mouthpiece and the inside of your pipe bag, a pipe chanter reed box, a specially designed chanter tape that does not leave any sticky residue on your chanter, and deluxe rain covers for snare and any size of tenor drums.

“There are more products in the pipeline, including a range of custom fitting pipe bag covers to fit existing bag sizes like Bannatyne, Canmore, Gannaway and Ross. The bagpipe covers are tailored to fit each bag perfectly – with no slack!”

Hopefully, 2020 will see improved weather for the bands playing throughout our lovely Scottish summer, or wherever in the world you might be playing – but you had better take your cape just in case. ●

SCOTTISH TRADITION 28
**DHANNSADH GUN
 DANNSADH:**
 DANCE-SONGS OF THE
 SCOTTISH GAELS



SCHOOL OF SCOTTISH STUDIES ARCHIVES: UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

DHANNSADH GUN DANNSADH
Dance-songs of the Scottish Gaels
 Scottish Tradition 28
 GREENTRAX CDTRAX9028

THIS is a newly released collection of *puirt-a-beul* (mouth-music), dance songs from the archives of the School of Scottish Studies dating back to the early 1950s. These are songs that have been handed down orally by singers and musicians over the centuries and provide a rich tapestry of rhythms that I am sure most pipers will appreciate.

It is from this rich seam that we get the Strathspey idiom in its most unadulterated form where its internal rhythms are inseparable from the dynamics of words in song – often inextricably linked to that of dance itself, most commonly as a Strathspey or a reel. The term ‘Strathspey’ appears to have been a term that was late to appear in Gaelic speaking areas on the west and north west coasts until the second half of the 19th century. They were simply recognised as a ‘port-a-beul’ ie ‘tune from mouth’ that would refer to a wide range of genres from marches to jigs and to what became known as the ‘Strathspey’, as well as the reels. In 1780, Angus Cumming from Grantown, in Strathspey, published his collection of tunes calling them ‘Strathspeys or Old Highland Reels’. We have to remember that the Strathspeys at this time were played much faster to suit the rhythms of step dance that were extant then, before the clearances and its diaspora led to the demise of the step tradition, and the introduction of the slower competitive Strathspey, possibly derived from a reel step and choreographed to suit the competitive dancing that emerged at the burgeoning Highland Games and Gatherings following George IV’s visit to Leith in a kilt and pink tights in 1822.

The texts to these *puirt-a-beul* (pl) are, of course, highly rhythmic and often humorous and esoteric, often with subtle/unsobtle sexual connotations.

On this CD we have a compilation of 45 songs with accompanying texts and information on all the 23 singers whose recordings were chosen by Dr. William Lamb, editor of this recording project. For any piper, these recordings provide a different way of re-interpreting melodies that have often only ever been heard within the strict constraints of what has been laid down by the successive publications of standardised settings that have become sacrosanct, even in their styles of embellishment. When these tunes are heard sung, each verse can be different on account of the tensions that exist between language and music – so that one verse is often taken as the ‘standard’ for notation.

Annie Arnott of Skye, with her inimitable rich voice, sings *Tha Biodag aig MacThòmais* or *Thomson’s Dirk* that appears as a Strathspey in David Glen’s tutor [p. 17] demonstrating the difficulty the listener/notator had in deciding whether or not it should be written as a Strathspey or as a reel. As we know, it became commonly accepted as a reel in the pipers’ repertoire of the late 19th and 20th century. We have the reel *Pease Strae* or as Dr. Lamb has it *Clean Pease Strae* with the song text *Nam biodh agam ghalbh bodaich* (*If I had a ragged old man*) again reinforcing the fact that many of these *puirt* had different texts to them from area to area, ranging from the difference of several words to wholly different texts. The popular melodies often acted as vehicles for many different texts that bear witness to a rich oral tradition where many versions of songs and tunes existed. In this particular case, the commonly sung first line is *Nam biodh agam trusdar bodaich* (*If I had a lecherous old man/carle*) with another title *Ducking the Carle* coming from the following line *Bhogainn anns an allt e* (*I would duck him in the burn.*) For pipers, on this CD, you will hear Gaelic vocal ver-

REVIEWS

sions of Mrs. MacLeod of Raasay, Lady Madelina Sinclair; *The Mason’s Apron*; *Munloch Bridge* (with two different texts to the same melody) *The Devil in the Kitchen* and many more besides. However, if you award yourself with Dr. William Lamb’s wonderful republication of Dr. K.N. MacDonald’s 1901 publication of *Puirt-a-Beul, Vocal Dance Music of the Scottish Gaels* (repub. 2012 Taigh na Teud) as well as another inspiring addition to piping repertoire, Vol. 2 especially, of Barry Shears’ *Collection of Bagpipe Culture and Dance Music from Nova Scotia* (2018 Bradan Press) along with this CD, you will have enriched yourself immeasurably! ●

BY ALLAN MACDONALD

The Tales Behind the Tunes of Glory

by Stuart Gordon Archer

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FOR centuries pipers have been synonymous with the Scottish army, and as a consequence, pipers have been at many of the glorious, and not so glorious, moments of the Scottish regiments. There is a very long tradition of those pipers commemorating those events with tunes.

Stuart Gordon Archer doesn’t offer a definition of what constitutes a tune of glory but a simplistic view would be a tune written to commemorate a significant

THE TALES BEHIND THE TUNES OF GLORY



THE INSPIRATION FOR OUR
 BEST-KNOWN PIPE MUSIC

RETOLD AND ILLUSTRATED BY
 STUART GORDON ARCHER

military event. Every piper has some of these in their repertoire, the obvious ones being *The Battle’s O’er*, *The Battle of the Somme*, *The 10th HLI Crossing The Rhine* and *Lochanside*. Although perhaps the most famous tune of glory, *Scotland the Brave*, doesn’t fit that definition, so Archer is right to include pieces in his book that fit with the subtitle of the book ‘the inspiration for our best known music’ to also include tunes such as *Amazing Grace*, *Flower of Scotland*, *McPherson’s Rant* and *Highland Cathedral*.

Inevitably the provenance of some of the earlier tunes is opaque and Archer acknowledges this and gives the best account he can of the related event and the likely origin of the tune. *Caber Feidh* is a good example of this as the ‘oldest’ tune in the book, it may have begun life as a fiddle tune and first appeared in

REVIEWS

a music manuscript in 1734 but took another 100 years to be published as a pipe tune. That said many of the tunes have very strong provenance such as Willie Lawrie's magnificent *The Battle of the Somme*. Lawrie fought in the battle and composed the tune as a result. He died, at 35, as a result of illness picked up in the trenches. His tune lives on as a fitting tribute to all those that took part in that most horrendous of battles.

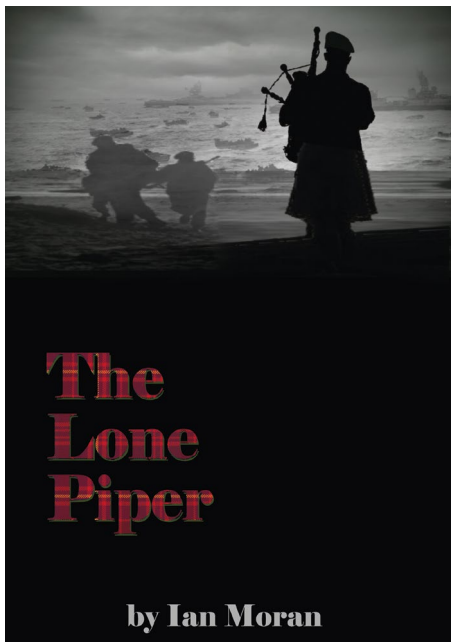
Archer brings the tunes of glory right up to date with the inclusion of Pipe Major James Riddell's tribute to the British army's capture of Tumbledown Mountain during the Falklands War. *The Crags of Tumbledown Mountain* has become very popular with pipe bands both civilian and military.

The book contains 30 tunes including *Hielan' Laddie*, *The Barren Rocks of Aden*, *Bonnie Galloway*, *Lord Lovat's Lament*, *Scots Wha Hae* and *The Bloody Fields of Flanders*, which Hamish Henderson famously used as the base for his *Freedom Come All Ye*.

If you have a desire to know a little more about the stories behind the tunes, then this is a very good place to start. ● BY CHRIS MACKENZIE

The Lone Piper

BY IAN MORAN



TO those pipers of a certain, sadly rapidly declining, vintage, the name Bill Millin is as well kent as those of Donald Macleod, GS McLennan and Willie Ross, yet for those well short of their three score and ten the name Bill Millin will not resonate at all. Bill Millin was not a Gold Medalist, nor did he lead a band to glory at a World Championship and he was not a composer of note. Yet while the Great Highland Bagpipe is played (hopefully for as many centuries to come as past), he should be remembered and his outstanding act of bravery revered.

The power of the Great Highland Bagpipe to rouse soldiers to acts of glory is well known and has been harnessed by the army for centuries, however by World War II pipers were kept away from the front

THE ROKE
ROSS MILLER



line to avoid the slaughter that occurred in World War I, where 1000 pipers met their deaths going over the top.

Despite this order, Private Millin, on the command of Brigadier Lovat, jumped into the sea from his landing craft and, with his father's World War I kilt wrapped round him, waded through the surf, red with blood and thick with bodies, and struck up *Hielan' Laddie* to pipe his Commando troop ashore on Sword beach. Once ashore, Millin stopped playing and took cover from the heavy German fire. On seeing Brigadier Lovat, he strode over to the charismatic Brigadier who then said, 'Would you mind giving us a tune?', Millin's question of 'What tune would you like, Sir?' was met with the answer, 'How about *The Road to the Isles*'. With that, the lone piper put his pipes on his shoulder, struck up and marched along the beach with the fine old tune ringing out among the cacophony of the gunfire and shelling. Millin played along the entire length of Sword Beach three times before finally putting his pipes down and heading inland to catch up with his unit.

Ian Moran's book, *The Lone Piper*, details how Bill Millin came to be on that beach on that day with the Commando unit and how his fate was intertwined with that of the indefatigable Lord Lovat. Inevitably, this book is really a detailed insight into the formation and role of the Commando units and how they, and indeed the allies, fared on that fateful day of June 6, 1944. Moran's account is unflinching in its detail, with many first-hand accounts woven into the text, which can be very hard to bear. War is hell, a hell even Dante couldn't envisage. Allied failures are not glossed over, and the loss of allied troops on training exercises, or due to inadequate equipment or plain bad luck is especially harrowing.

Millin's heroics were to the fore in the film *The Longest Day* and Moran includes a chapter on the film in the book. Millin survived the war and lived until 2010. Unfortunately he didn't survive long enough to see the statue that was erected to him in Colleville-Montgomery, near Sword Beach.

The Lone Piper is an engrossing read that is difficult to put down, it is both a story of personal valour, (Millin and Lovat) and a story of the bravery of the thousands of men who landed on the Normandy beaches, and that is entirely as it should be.

● BY CHRIS MACKENZIE

ROSS MILLER

The Roke

ROSS Miller is a great example of what it means to be a modern piper. As Ross explains in the sleeve notes to his debut solo album, *The Roke*, his early musical background was purely in pipe bands (formerly Peoples Ford – Boghall & Bathgate Caledonia and now reigning World Champions Inveraray & District) and solo competition. His studies at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland opened his eyes and ears to new styles, and this release reflects the many varied influences from his musical education.

As has become typical, *The Roke* is not strictly a solo piping album. He has enlisted the help of five equally talented guest musicians who have been important companions on his musical journey: ex-Manran guitarist Craig Irving, 2017 BBC Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician of the Year Charlie Stewart on fiddle and double bass, Rory Matheson on piano, and fellow National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland stalwarts Callum Edwards and Craig Baxter on percussion. All six members of the line-up make great contributions to an album filled with energy and positivity.

It begins in upbeat fashion with three reels given a very pleasant treatment by the backing ensemble – *D Major MacKenzie* and *Rona's Reel* by Ross and *Mornington* by Craig Irving. It is a lively start to the album, and the energy is continued in the second set, comprising waltzes (*Richard's Gone Bananas* by Terry Tully and *That Little Bit Extra* by Ross) and polkas (*Ton Doubl*, adapted from a Breton dance, and the most enjoyable *Laurie the Blaster* by Zakk Cormier and Ben Miller).

Recordings with a keen sense of place are always enjoyable, and the album art of *The Roke* is firmly rooted in Ross' native Linlithgow in West Lothian – the excellent photographs show off the magnificence of Linlithgow Palace and Ross's excellent beard. That sense of place is combined with another common theme (tributes to Ross' family) in the third track. It begins with a delightful air for Ross' Grannie Betty, and continues with the retreat march *Far O'er Struy*, the hill of Struy being one of the landmarks visible from Grannie Betty's garden in Sutherland. Both tunes are greatly enhanced by Rory Matheson's exquisite piano accompaniment. Much of the album continues in

Continued from page 46

We come. We go. How many today know of Donald Ross MacLennan, or, that he was always known as “DR”? With each passing year the number dwindles. John MacDonald (Inverness)? To a few hundred piobaireachd aficionados his name – one of the greatest in the pantheon of pipers – will be known. And then there’s Mary Aitken, she’s more than the title of a clever jig in John Wilson’s first book of music (1937). Mary was the superstar Highland dancer of her day.

It was in reading Bill Bryson’s latest book, *The Body: A Guide for Occupants* (2019), that underscored my understanding of ephemera and that life is high on the list of things ephemeral. Bryson explores the workings of the human body – including death and dying – in his usual brilliant way, with facts and anecdotes galore. Consider the gravestone. Everyone’s favourite subject. We generally seek to honour our dead and, in some cases, I guess, ourselves with stone-marked “resting places”. Bryson found that the average grave is visited for only 15 years. People, like memory, fade.

In reflecting on things ephemeral, the performance of music must be even higher on the list of things



DR MacLennan

short-lived. An unrecorded musical performance is a temporary sound track of a moment – and place – in time. When the last note has been played, the “thing” is gone. Over. Released to the heavens. What could be more ephemeral? The performances of the first and second prize-winners at the 1924 Strathpeffer games may still swirl somewhere in the ether. But for us, they are long forgotten.

On a cheerier note, playwright Eugene Ionesco said that only the ephemeral is of lasting value. It’s so often the way that paradoxical statements – like Ionesco’s – make you stop – and think. The ephemeral, as in performance, is of the moment and as such an expression of an artist’s intention; while not lasting itself, it impresses on listeners and, so, lingers. Think of an occasion where you took in live music, one where you felt something. Where you were moved emotionally. In this, maybe, we have one example of the lasting value of the ephemeral.

The lesson offered by an old postcard and a wee January ephemerid is clear (well, to me and Aunt Hughina, at least). Live to be your best. Each moment is precious and life is fleeting. Oh, and record your performances. They’ll last longer. ●

a similar vein – great musicians playing good tunes tastefully and well – though some of the original compositions near the end of the album are not as strong as the early offerings. Listeners who have followed Ross’ playing career closely will recognise the *Aye Right* set from his trio performances – Bill Livingstone’s retreat march *Leaving Arisaig* mixed in with a Gaelic *puirt a beul* and the cracking reel *Aye Right* by Angus Grant

Junior. Still more striking is the unusual *Quartet* track, where Ross plays multiple bagpipe parts to create a Breton feel to this experimental set.

Indeed, it is very hard to define where Ross’ musical talents end. He remains an active and successful solo competitor, is a Grade I World Champion bandsman, and is the Town Piper of Linlithgow (the album title comes from the 6/8 march *The Roke, the Row and*

the Wee Pickled Tow he and the town drummer are required to play at dawn on the day of the Linlithgow Marches). He has also crossed the channel to compete at the highest level of the bagad championships in Brittany. This album proves he is equally at home in the folk scene. Pipers of his generation are becoming the new normal and putting we greybeards to shame – is there nothing they can’t do? ● BY STUART MILNE



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Grey's Notes

by Michael Grey



An old postcard and a wee January ephemerid

BEYOND nostalgia, I imagine one reason for the popularity of old posters, crate labels, postcards and, yes, magazines is due to the ease in which these items can be shipped. Online sites everywhere are bursting with stock for sale; from old newspapers to matchbook covers and everything in between.

You may know these things are known as ephemera to those most interested, namely, collectors. And this stuff is collected. Ephemera. While it's a Greek word meaning "lasting only one day", it has the ring of the name of old Uist aunties: Hughina, Fenella – and Ephemera. I imagine Auntie E, yet, with yellow nicotine fingers and a purse full of linty mints – and absolutely no time for collecting old bits of paper.

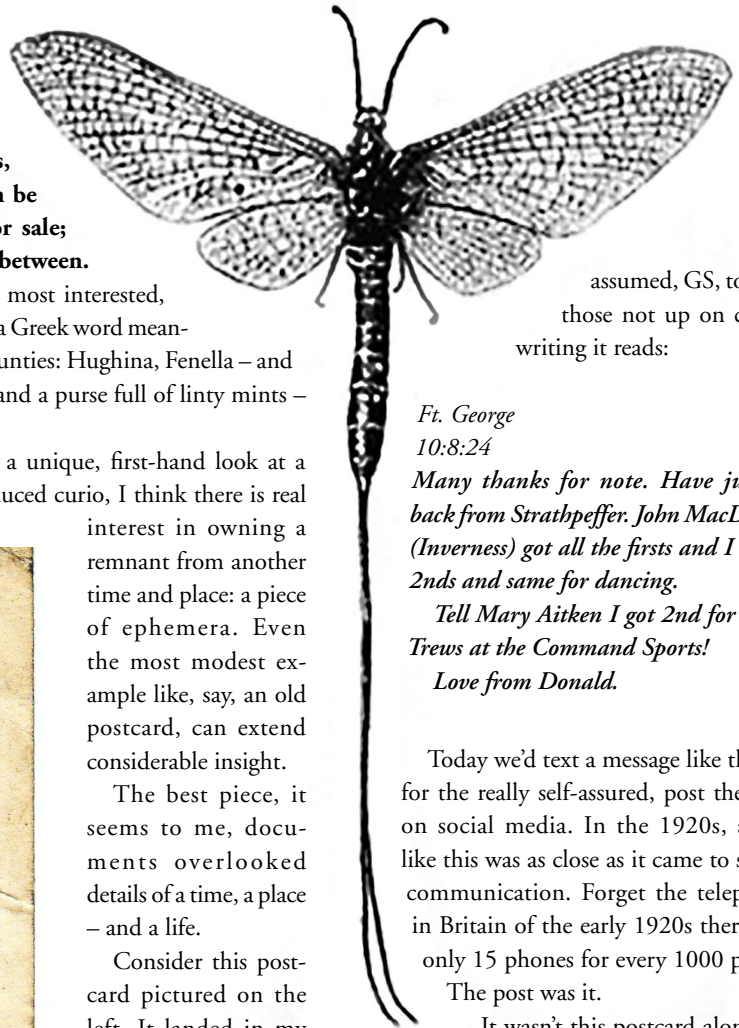
Still, in collecting old bits of paper a person can experience a unique, first-hand look at a reflection of the past. Rather than own an impersonal mass-produced curio, I think there is real

interest in owning a remnant from another time and place: a piece of ephemera. Even the most modest example like, say, an old postcard, can extend considerable insight.

The best piece, it seems to me, documents overlooked details of a time, a place – and a life.

Consider this postcard pictured on the left. It landed in my hands courtesy of GS McLennan's grandson, Hamish McLennan. As you can see, it's postmarked Fort George, 11 August, 1924. The sender was GS McLennan's brother, 23-year-old Donald Ross MacLennan¹, the recipient: his sister-in-law, Nona, and, it can be

1. Hamish McLennan advises GS McLennan's brother, DR, spelled his last name MACLennan, while the rest of the family were MCLennan.



assumed, GS, too. For those not up on cursive writing it reads:

Ft. George

10:8:24

Many thanks for note. Have just got back from Strathpeffer. John MacDonald (Inverness) got all the firsts and I all the 2nds and same for dancing.

Tell Mary Aitken I got 2nd for Shean Trews at the Command Sports!

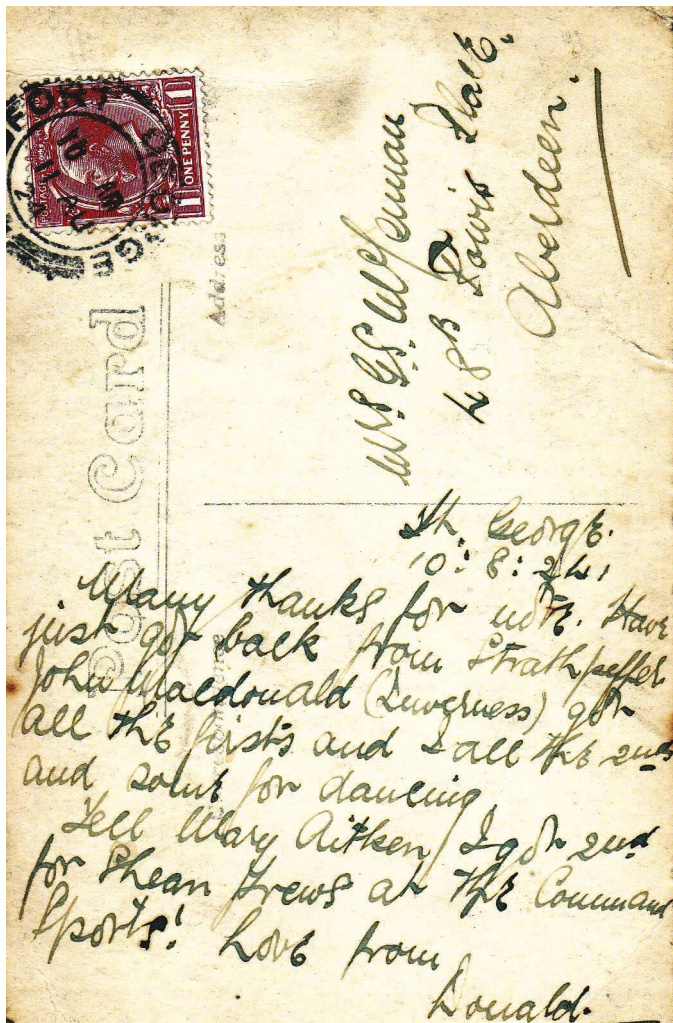
Love from Donald.

Today we'd text a message like this, or, for the really self-assured, post the news on social media. In the 1920s, a card like this was as close as it came to speedy communication. Forget the telephone: in Britain of the early 1920s there were only 15 phones for every 1000 people.

The post was it.

It wasn't this postcard alone that got me thinking about ephemera. It was a mild day last month. A "January thaw", as said in my part of the world. On these brief days, when the temperature rises a glorious 5 or 8 degrees above freezing, miraculous little mayfly-like insects appear. They emerge from the brief thaw and live their chilly momentary lives. Every one of their minutes of life equal, maybe, to a year of ours. Scientists acknowledge this. Creatures such as these are known as ephemerids. Their evanescence is fascinating.

But pity not the ephemerid. We might look in the mirror. The most-said aphorism is surely, "life is short". And so it is. ■



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