Putting some fire into 'Gille Chriosd'

by Jimmy McIntosh, MBE



SOMETIME BACK IN OCTOBER, I WAS questioned by a fellow judge about a tune, and the authority for what I teach and for what my teacher played. "Glengarry's March" or "Gille Chriosd," as it is better known, is the tune in question and the Thumb Variation, in particular.

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Now Bob Brown attributes many of his tunes to the Camerons (his teacher, John MacDonald was a pupil of the Camerons), and played the Cameron setting of this tune.

In the first example, I have shown the first line of the urlar as it is printed in the Society Book 2, page 57, and in Figure 2 as it was played by Bob Brown and Bob Nicol.

You will notice that the E cadence was played with a lengthened E and that an E gracenote was used instead of the G on each second B. It is printed this way in Binneas is Boreraig Volume 2, page 18, and has been recorded by both Bob Brown and Malcolm MacPherson.

The Thumb Variation has numerous changes. In Figure 3 I have shown it as in the Piobaireachd Society Book, and in Figure 4 as played by John MacDonald's pupils. Here you will notice that again the E gracenote is preferred to the G throughout; a low A with a D gracenote has been added in the second last bar; and a thumb gracenote played from High G to B in the last bar. Again it is printed as such in Binneas is Boreraig.

This is a very popular tune and was a great favorite of Bob Brown's, but it can be a very difficult tune to time and to be consistent, especially with the groups of B's in the Urlar and Thumb Variation. I would like to pass on to you what I was taught and have found invaluable when playing and teaching this tune.

Bob Brown often used words to pass on timing in tunes and his advice on grasping and remembering this part of "Gille
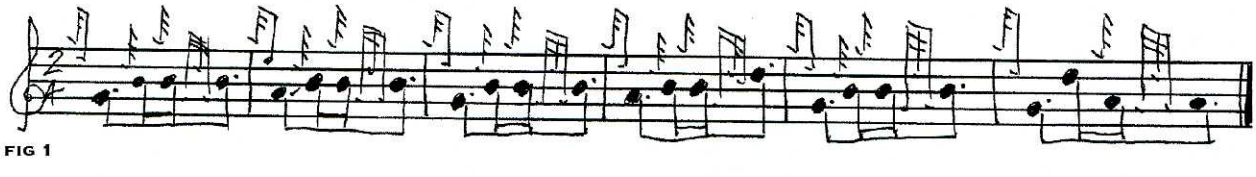


FIG 1
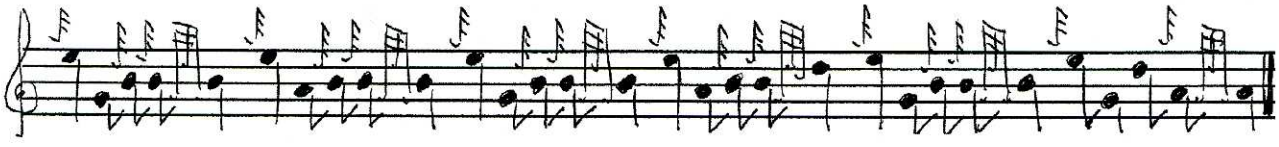


FIG 2
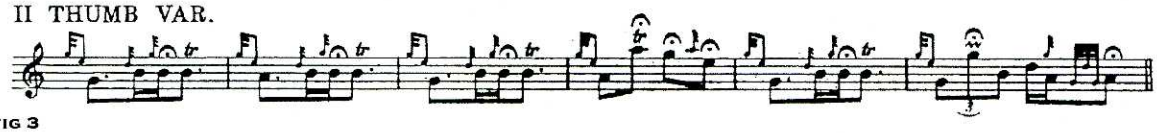


FIG 3



FIG 4
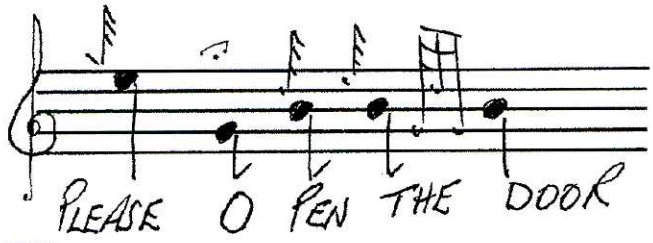


FIG 5



FIG 6

Chriosd" was to sing "PLEASE OPEN THE DOOR." The significance of this is striking if we know the story behind the tune, which I will discuss later in this article.

You will see here how this reccurs throughout. As you know, it is not possible to show every nuance in music on paper, but Bob Brown showed a very slight pulse on the low G throughout. I consider this one of the gems of his teaching.

In the Singling of the Siubhal Variation, the emphasis is on cutting down to the dotted eighth notes and in this variation in Binneas and some older collections, there is no E cadence, but merely a G gracenote on the B's and A's. I understand this was the way John MacDonald and the MacPherson's played it.

There have been differing opinions on the timing of this tune, and it has concerned the duration of the starting E and the low G or low A, as some teachers played and taught a reversal of timing, i.e. cutting the E down to a long low G or low A. This has been a contentious point that has tended to label players to their respective schools and teachers by the way they time the tune.

I recall in 1977, the Clan Donald organized a Cruise around Scotland for the Gathering of the Clans, and the cruise ship S.S. Calypso was anchored off Armadale in Skye. An invitational piping competition was held on the ship, and I think ten of us competed. The Judge's bench was formidable—I think there were five or six judges, including Capt. D.R. MacLennan, General Richardson, and P/M Donald MacLeod. One competitor, John Wilson, played "Gille Chriosd." John was being tutored by P/M MacLeod and placed second, but it appears a strong discussion ensued amongst the judges that the way the tune was played, and had been taught by Donald, was not as John MacDonald taught it. So you can see there have been some strong feelings about "Gille Chriosd."

The Gaelic name, "Gille Chriosd" refers to a church which is situated in the parish of Urray in Ross-shire. The church was reputed to have been the scene of a tragedy which occurred because of a feud between the MacDonnells of Glengarry and the MacKenzies of Kintail. It is said that the MacDonnells found the MacKenzies at worship in the church, and set fire to it, burning everyone inside and killing those who attempted to escape. The piper is said to have played around the burning building playing this tune. Vengeance was swift and the MacDonnells were overtaken by the MacKenzies inside an Inn, and 37 of them were burned alive. Later when Glengarry's son was killed in a fight near Eilean Donan, he was buried in the doorway of the Church of Kintail so that the MacKenzies might trample over his body every Sunday when they came to worship.

So if you venture to play this tune, remember to:

PLEASE O-PEN THE DOOR!

As I have said before, it is easy to become confused with all the differences in settings, but if there is written authority for them, then they are acceptable. The Piobaireachd Society states in the notes to this tune that the setting is stated to have been played by Donald Cameron, yet the notes also illustrate changes to this setting and attribute the changes to Colin Cameron, so we are left wondering!

It it very important that piobaireachd judges are fully conversant with these different settings, as many times prizes can be denied to a good performance of a different setting.

I have also been asked about one of the set tunes, Hector MacLean's Warning, page 51, Book 2. In the Urlar, bar 2 and the corresponding bar throughout, this is a Donald Mor rundown and should be played as such. In Bar 6, and again throughout, do not pause on the cadential E, but play down to the low G.

Variation I, Dithis, Doubling, Taorluath, and Crunluath should be portrayed in 4/4 timing.

In the Taorluath and Crunluath Singlings, the theme notes before the rundown and cadences should be held a little as in Figure 6.

The history behind this tune is as follows: This Hector, the son of a noted marauder, followed in the troublous footsteps of his father. He usurped the guardianship of the young Laird, and being suspected of having a design on his life, he was long imprisoned in Duart castle. However evil his designs might be, they could hardly justify his chief in beheading him without trial in 1579. ■

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