

Roderick Cannon You made a very interesting statement which perhaps was factually based but which maybe needs testing. In your own work you've shown how in the field of competition March music a core of classic tunes has been established, you call it a canon, an accepted group of tunes you expect to hear in competitions. You seem to be arguing that in Piobaireachd the canon of tunes is also quite large and healthy, whereas other people would say that it is only because of the set tunes situation that this came about. I think that is something which could be tested and maybe you are the best person to do it. I would like to see an analysis of tunes that were actually played in competitions over the years from the time that the Piobaireachd Society started in 1904 because there is anecdotal evidence that the old-fashioned Piobaireachd Society view was correct because in 1903 the numbers of tunes being offered in competition was incredibly small. I've read one newspaper report where six pipers came up and five of them played one tune and one played a different tune. Also certain tunes we take for granted nowadays as part of the repertoire were completely unknown in the early days. I could hardly believe that the Big Spree and the Wee Spree were in that category. They only came to the fore when the Piobaireachd Society made a slightly daring decision to add variations.

SM Also Rory MacLeod's Lament

RC Read the notes for Lament for the Union in the Piobaireachd Society books. The Music Committee was almost scared to publish it. I think we could do with some more information about whether the Set Tunes system has achieved its objective - has the repertoire actually increased over the years?

SM That's a very good point but what I would say in response is that what's **not** happened is that it has widened the repertoire. In my view what has

happened is that the set tunes has actually brought back tunes which had fallen out of existence.

RC That's a statement of statistical fact? I would like to see a bit more evidence on that.

SM Yes. To me the idea of widening the repertoire is actually to go beyond the 240 tunes that we have and actually to have new tunes coming in.

Jack Taylor Simon you made the point early on that it was quite crucial that the tunes were set from a particular score. I would contend that that is not accurate. It was accurate for the first Piobaireachd Society when they said you must play these scores but since then they have been very very painstaking to say that you can play from any score so long as it is authoritative. Could you maybe expand on why you said that because it did not seem to marry with the facts.

SM Yes. That is actually factually true that the Piobaireachd Society music committee has gone to extraordinary lengths and done some really good work on alternative settings but actually when you look at the pragmatic reality to the competing piper they will go with the published score in general apart from a very occasional cases where there are particularly adventurous pipers – like yourself – so actually in reality what has happened there is that the tunes have been set in stone and the repertoire has stagnated into one or two very narrow sources.

John Frater Whether or not the set tunes were helpful in saving the repertoire that does not mean that they are or are not relevant now. Whatever happened in the past has happened. Part of the argument about widening the repertoire is that now it would appear to me that there are other avenues . Previously around the turn of the century it was perceived that the only way to do that was to have competitions and have competitors playing them in competitions.

Now there are lots of people playing piobaireachd and lots of enthusiasts who may not be playing in competitions who can explore the tunes in the repertoire. If these tunes are worth playing we'll play them, if they aren't worth playing why would we want to resurrect them?

SM That's exactly my argument. If they are not worth playing they are not worth resurrecting. Why insist on old material when we could maybe have better melodies to learn and play.

JF Those of us who play for the enjoyment of the tune will play tunes we enjoy.

SF Underlying that though we have to accept that the critical mass of piobaireachd performance today is by solo competitors.

JF The point I was making is that there are other aspects to it.

Andrew Wright The point I would make is that as a matter of interest five years ago I was judging at Cowal and the Cowal committee send the judges all the tunes that have been proposed for that day and there were 185 tunes submitted over all the competitions over the two days out of a total repertoire of about 300 so we could then say that half the tunes are being played. And that is the general idea – to have them played.

SM Yes, I think that is very positive but what I would like to imagine is a situation where there are many thousands of tunes.

AW We will never have a thousand Piobaireachd. I read recently that there have been more tunes composed for the bagpipe than for any other instrument.

SM Well I don't know the answer to that.

AW There are only 300 Piobaireachds. Each takes 10-15 minutes as against 2 minutes for a march or 1 minute for a strathspey. It is a specialised music that is

constructed round the bagpipe and I find it difficult to reconcile if we want to compare it to other folk music. I think we are in a different game from that.

SM I can imagine a world in which Piobaireachd is a living compositional practice – that people are actually writing tunes today in 2013 that have a chance of being played and that actually we could go from 240-300 tunes to a repertoire of thousands of tunes and to me that is a world that I'd rather live in. There is more choice and it is an evolving tradition.

Peter McCalister If I could just echo what John Frater said. When Jack was talking (to the CPA) about setting tunes he said, I'm not sure if he was comparing Hadyn symphonies, the majority of Hadyn's music is not played because he wrote lots and lots and lots and lots of music and only a small part of it is actually really good and that's the bit that we hear. That's the same for Mozart and many other classical musicians. And so he was saying, so maybe some Piobaireachds aren't that good and if we don't play them over several hundred years there may be a reason behind that and maybe they just need to sink away into the distance and new stuff come through.

SM I would wholeheartedly agree with that.

JT I've got a worry, I'm sure shared by many, which is that if we stop setting tunes then the number of tunes being played will just shrink down because we all know that players put in their favourite tunes time and time again and year after year after year. Also pipers are lazy, sometimes, so won't necessarily take the trouble to learn new repertoire and I think that is probably quite a concern. But counterbalancing that I think that it is important that the tradition becomes a living tradition rather than re-enactment. I do have a worry that our musical ear is trained very differently to the musical ear of those who actually listened to Piobaireachd when it was actually being composed and wonder if it would actually be reinvented because of that.

SM What I think, and this is by its own nature a very personal view, I would love..... Bill Sweeney who is Professor of Music at Glasgow University has composed a suite of Piobaireachd variations for clarinet which are very fascinating to listen to. And of course Piobaireachd has been taken on by other musicians as well. There are many fiddle Piobaireachds and some work has also been done on other instrumental traditions.

I think that what we are talking about here is actually allowing the idea of what Piobairachd is to evolve. It is saying that Piobaireachd is not just this type of tune. It could evolve significantly. And in the end if that means that lots of people are playing things that we don't like as Piobaireachds, that shouldn't really be a problem for us as competitive pipers or judges if we can play what we want to. I think that the idea of what Piobaireachd is has stopped and we need to kick start the idea of what Piobaireachd could be again.

Dugald MacNeill Could I ask about the 2/4 march? You said how many were in reasonable use?

SM I think there are 50-70.

DM Then why isn't it 500 or 700, because no-one is setting 2/4 marches for a competition.

SM No the answer to that in my view anyway is that pipers play them in solo competition and the primary motivating choice aesthetically for new tunes is the age of the tune and also some of the characteristics of the tune.

DM Surely it is to do with the lack of good new composition for 2/4 marches.

SM No that is definitely something I don't agree with.

DM Then where are they?

SM There are a lot of good new 2/4 marches that have been written I think over the last 30 years or so but I think that the age of the tune also is a factor.

DM Why aren't they played if they are so good?

SM I think a lot of the competitors would be scared of the notion that the judges might not know the tune or that they might be discriminated against because it is a new tune.

DM Surely it is because the competitors don't know these new tunes. They learn a few and stick to them. I can quote many professional pipers who only play about seven or eight 2/4 marches and never learnt any more.

SM I wouldn't count myself amongst them.

DM Thank you. But seriously that is a fair point because the 2/4 march is quite different

AW Simon just as an aside if you take the World Pipe Band championship that is going to take place in August and you take the MSR competition, how many different marches are we going to hear out of 20 bands? We will probably hear no more than six. And that has been going on for many years. Why? Because a lot of the guys are not able to handle a wide range of tunes. I would take that into consideration, and I wonder if that is why they don't like the set tunes, because the average piper learns 6 7 or 8 tunes and that keeps them happy for the rest of their life.

SM I don't share the view that performers are instinctively extremely conservative and lazy. I instinctively hold the view that performers of pipe music are interested in new composition and new tunes. I think what we are talking about actually is the context of competition and it is competition itself that altered the type of submission. Even if we do take marches in the Pipe Band world there have been new tunes introduced into that arena over the last

50 years. There have been new tunes added to that arena than there have in the piobaireachd arena.

AW Not in Strathspey and Reel. Maybe in open selection there is a lot of new music but in the MSR there are no more than six.

SM Maybe we should be relaxing the MSR rules for the World Championships?

BW I think we should carry on the discussion over a cup of tea now. Again I would like to thank Simon for his very thought-provoking talk.