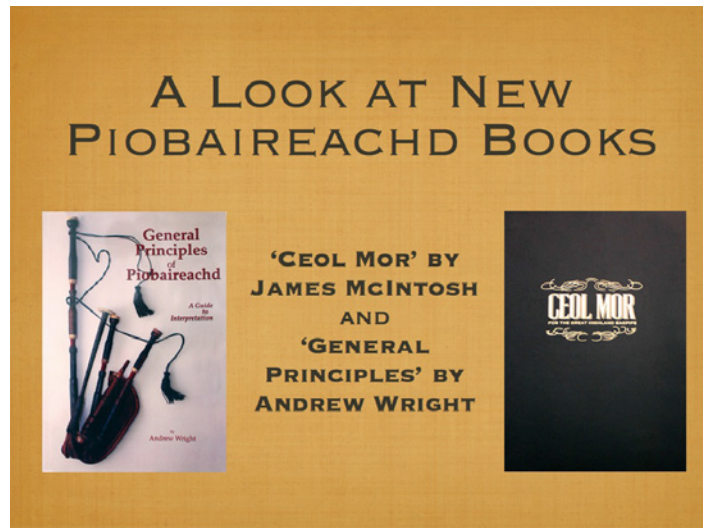


A Look at Two Books on Ceol Mor

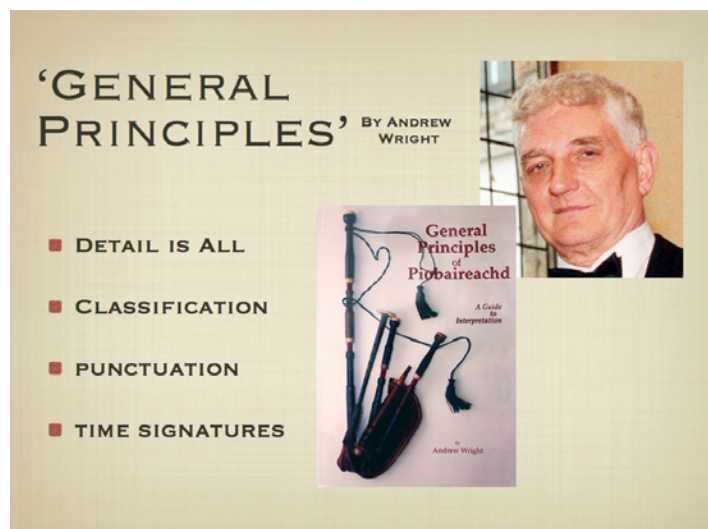
By Robert Wallace



I will talk about two books, ‘General Principles of Piobaireachd’ by Andrew Wright, and ‘Ceol Mor in the Balmoral Tradition’ by Jimmy McIntosh. I think the intention of both are neatly summed up in the quote I used in the intro to Andrew's book. It is from cellist Paul Tortellier: ‘*You think it is a small thing but the small things are great things in art.*’

Further, in the same introduction I say, ‘*this is pivotal to the endeavours of those who strive to teach the rules that govern the successful delivery of ceol mor: note length differentiation, how to establish and maintain rhythmic structure, how to time the common motifs and how small shifts of emphasis can vitalise even the most basic of melodies.*’

Both books, then, are concerned with subtleties, the difference between the prosaic and the inspired. Both are very professionally laid out in clear typefaces within attractive page designs and I will turn to Andrew's firstly



There is some difficulty in my being objective here given my close involvement with this book but I will do my best. It is 85 pages long and has 16 chapters ranging through cadences to canntaireachd to phrase structure. Some of these we will come to shortly. Andrew has a detailed look at 15 tunes and many others are touched on throughout the work.

He advises companion reference to the Piobaireachd Society books too, not because they are necessarily the best way of writing down the tunes, but because they are consistent, readily available and universally understood. Early on he dismisses the use of names as a guide to interpretation; better the melody.

‘General Principles’ has an extensive study of phrase structure and classification of piobaireachd; in this the author builds on the work of Seumas MacNeill in his BBC book. Both are clear and informative on this sometimes complex subject. Andrew goes further in his explanation however, using the spoken word to help illustrate the importance of such musical demarkation. He shows how if we misplace a word we lose sense - so it is with music. If we miss the phrase, distortion of the melody can occur. Here is an example of what he means and how he explains it:

CLASSIFICATION

**SECONDARY PIOBAIREACHD CAN BE
DIFFICULT TO MEMORISE**

LINE ONE IN WORDS:

**THE PIPER PLAYED WELL - THE INSTRUMENT WAS
PERFECT - THANKS TO GOOD TUNING WITH VERY
STEADY BLOWING - THE WELL THOUGHT OUT
EXPRESSION WAS BACKED BY HARMONICS**

LINE ONE WHEN THE PHRASING IS WRONG:

**THE PIPER PLAYED - WELL THE INSTRUMENT WAS
- PERFECT DUE TO GOOD TUNING WITH VERY
STEADY - BLOWING THE WELL THOUGHT OUT
EXPRESSION WAS BACKED BY - HARMONICS**

Punctuation is another major lesson we learn, or as Andrew puts it, ‘carrying the accent through the tune’. To quote: *‘Playing piobaireachd can be likened to a journey; we can either wander our way haphazardly to our destination (the end of the tune), or we can plan our trip, take the most logical and rewarding route and point out places of interest on the way - the latter should always be the choice of the true musician.’*

To do this we must use our *tempo rubato* to bring rhythm and phrasing to our tunes. Here's how Andrew points up Catherine's Lament:

PUNCTUATION

fig. 11 *Catherine's Lament*

Andrew again: *'Try to imagine what we would do if the human voice could not punctuate speech and we could only speak in a continuous monotone and at a constant volume. The only way we could aid understanding would be to punctuate what we are saying by extending the length of words and syllables. This is exactly the situation we are in with the bagpipe - this has to be done to a pattern to create rhythm - no easy task.'*

The final point I want to make on Andrew's book is that he is not afraid to step outside convention when suggesting better ways of writing tunes on the staff. Here he is on 'My King Has Landed in Moidart' advocating a 5/4 structure, the better to represent what we actually play; and if we run this through a computer music-writing software player we find that he is absolutely correct. I would hope the Society's Music Committee is listening.

TIME SIGNATURES

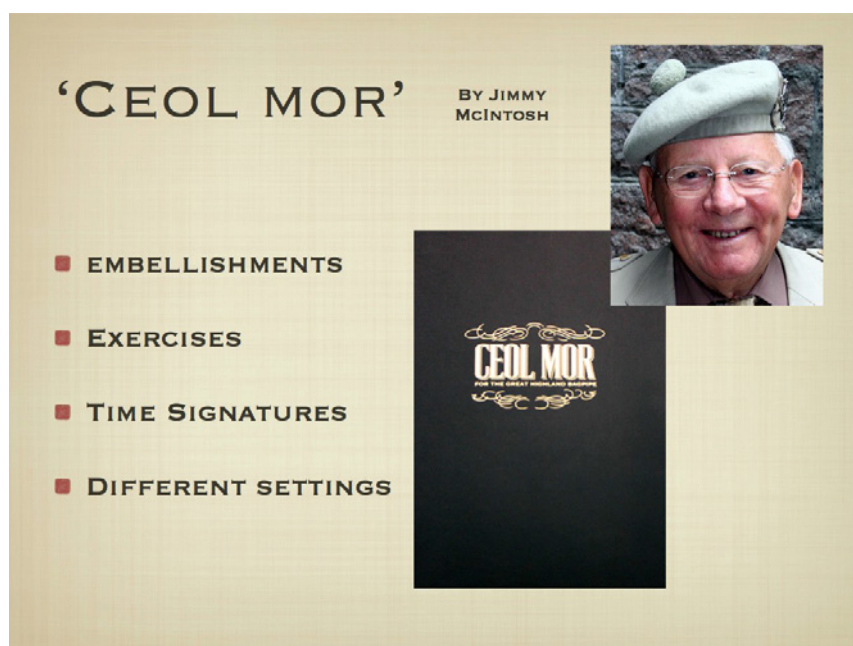
Often it is the short note that takes the beat or where the beat begins. The following examples, from the opening bars of *I Got a Kiss of the King's Hand*, might help to illustrate this concept:

fig. 29

In the first line, the short B connecting notes are beamed with the low A that is being departed from. Followed slavishly, this can, and often does, lead to lifeless music. Much more helpful would be a representation as per the second line of fig. 29, where the slur sign encourages the use of the B to start the next beat. Below is how the start of the tune might be even more accurately represented, with the first bar in 5/4, and the 'introductory' Es added to the bar value:

fig. 30

Now to our next book 'Ceol Mor in the Balmoral Tradition' by Jimmy McIntosh



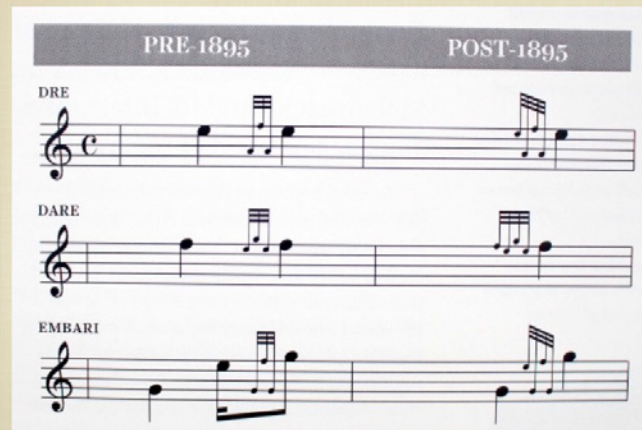
This is a much larger book as you can see and runs to 140 pages. It has detailed instruction on 70 tunes - and a number of errors which will be corrected, I am sure, in the second edition. I might say that Andrew's book is practically error free - what happens when a good editor is at the helm. This book has much more on the author himself and it provides interesting reading amid a collection of historic photographs. There are comments from such notables as John MacDougall, Norman Matheson and Jimmy's long-time friend, Jakez Pincet.

Piobaireachd Embellishments are considered in detail, the author propounding the theory that we write them incorrectly today. He blames many of the weak and declining crunluaths that we hear - even among the top players - on the fact that they have been taught incorrectly from the outset. The first E of *dre* and the F of *dare* should be written as short melody notes, and not as we have them in most modern collections today

Maybe he has a point, and also the short Ds we hear in the B echo and *biharin* need rethought as regards how we write them. Jimmy is on shakier ground, I fear, when he insists that the semiquaver low G in the D throw alters its rhythm.

[The speaker demonstrates various movements on the practice chanter]

EMBELLISHMENTS



John MacDonald's embellishment exercises feature strongly in the book. These lessons were passed from General Frank Richardson to the author in Verdun, France, in 1946 - the book has it as in Germany but we are not here to worry about geography.

They make good sense and are what most people teach today. I don't believe there is anything unique in them but it is nevertheless good to have some written evidence to reinforce your view, especially when you have a questioning student who's been at the books.

The Crunluath reads *'This is the simplest exercise and it is guaranteed to produce a perfect rhythmic movement. With extensive practice, it will also correct a weak movement. Always play the crunluath from low G; lift the D finger high, replace; lift the E and low A fingers together (the book has low G); put the E finger down sounding low A and finally lift the E finger to complete the movement. The important point is to have the fingers high so they create equal duration between the rising fingers. This makes sure that when done up to speed all the gracenotes are of equal duration and speed.'*

Time signatures are absent from the book. This works well in Binneas though I am not a fan. I believe time signatures are great help to interpretation and the fact that they are often wrongly applied is no the reason for abandoning them. The author does not share this view and there are none throughout this book; this is something I see as a weakness. Others will think differently of course.

Jimmy says: *'I have decided as all my teaching derived and focussed on ORAL interpretation of piobaireachd, to write out the music, not with time signatures or bar lines, but to show it in melodic phrases, as accurately as possible to the teaching of my teachers Bob Brown and Bob Nicol.'*

There is the contradiction - you cannot talk in terms of applying the correct rhythm for 4/4, 3/4 tunes etc., and at the same time abandon time signatures.

NO TIME SIGNATURES

Black Donald's March

Uirlar



Thumb Variation



The image shows a musical score for 'Black Donald's March'. It is divided into two sections: 'Uirlar' and 'Thumb Variation'. Each section contains three staves of music written in a single system. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The 'Uirlar' section is the first, and the 'Thumb Variation' is the second. The music is written in a style that is easy to follow, with clear note heads and stems.

The tunes are all very clearly laid out and easy to follow with detailed notes on interpretation. There are some good, and less often heard, settings too. Here for example is part of 'Too Long in This Condition', 'as played by John MacDonald with this comment regarding the first variation: 'John MacDonald informed Bob Brown that he (J McD) played a different setting and that setting has a completely different Variation 1 that was cut

DIFFERENT SETTINGS

Too Long in This Condition

AS PLAYED BY JOHN MACDONALD

Uirlar



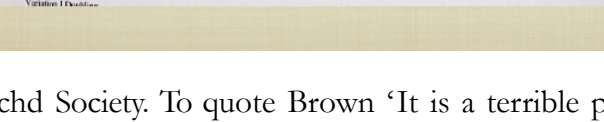
Uirlar Doubling



Variation I



Variation I Double



The image shows a musical score for 'Too Long in This Condition'. It is divided into four sections: 'Uirlar', 'Uirlar Doubling', 'Variation I', and 'Variation I Double'. Each section contains three staves of music written in a single system. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The 'Uirlar' section is the first, followed by 'Uirlar Doubling', then 'Variation I', and finally 'Variation I Double'. The music is written in a style that is easy to follow, with clear note heads and stems.

out by the Piobaireachd Society. To quote Brown 'It is a terrible pity and a mistake. It's a lovely variation and should have been left in.'

On General Thomason's 'Hail to My Country' there is the sensible note not to play Variation 1 too fast or it becomes a slow air. Nice to see too that Jimmy has MacKay's Banner crunluath singling and doubling as per Angus MacKay with the stressed first note, and not as we have it in the PS collection - a blot on our musical landscape if ever there was one.

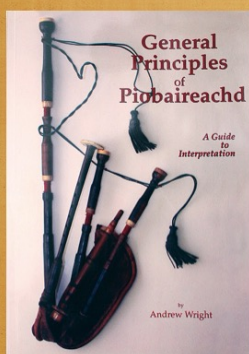
We are fortunate to have these important educational works to add to the canon of piobaireachd literature. Both authors are to be congratulated for getting the job done. I would urge all with a story to tell about the great music to get it down on paper or screen. What may seem to you to be inconsequential may grow in importance as the years roll on.

Both these books concern, largely, the legacy of the teaching of John MacDonald, Inverness. There will be other piobaireachd traditions to write of, maybe that of the Camerons, MacDougall Gillies and Robert Reid for, as John MacDonald showed with his search for knowledge from the those self same Camerons and the MacDonalds of Morar, we should not confine ourselves to only one mantra when it comes to interpreting our music.

Finally I close with a mention of the Masters of Piobaireachd recordings made by RU Brown and RB Nicol. Here we have recorded for posterity MacDonald's teaching in aural form and that is a form which will always enhance the written instruction no matter how well it is set out and explained in books such as those under discussion.

Ceol Mor by James McIntosh is priced is £44 - I have a couple of copies for sale - and General Principles by Andrew Wright was £20 from the College of Piping when last I looked some time ago.

'CEOL MOR' AND 'GENERAL PRINCIPLES'



**TWO
EXCELLENT
EDITIONS
WHICH WILL BE
VALUED BY THE
PIOBAIREACHD
LOVER**

