

Piobaireachd Construction and Composition by Stuart Samson

Chair Robert Wallace

RW There is an interesting story about how this came about. About a year ago I had a letter from a Mrs Christine Chandler from Blairgowrie. She was looking for a tune in memory of her late husband who was a professor at Aberdeen University. She was offering £10,000 for a composer.

So I rapidly sat down, got the manuscript paper out.....

I took it to the Committee. The Committee thought that what we should do was ask four noted composers to submit a tune. We would then select the one we thought was most appropriate.

We agreed that, and I wrote back to Mrs Chandler saying that we didn't need £10,000, that £2000 would be enough, and that we would pay each of the composers a fee. They would all get the same money for their efforts.

A small sub-committee was formed consisting of Jack Taylor, Derek Fraser and me to decide which of the four would be chosen. The four composers invited all have good track records – Karen McCrindle-Warren, Bruce Gandy, Niall Mathieson and Stuart Samson.

We decided that Stuart's tune was the best. They were all pretty good I have to say. The circumstances were most appropriate. Professor Chandler was from Yorkshire but had been in Scotland for years. He considered himself an adopted Scot. He loved the whole idea of Piobaireachd, and he thought that Piobaireachd was the greatest musical culture that he had come across in Scotland. I don't even know if he was a piper. I don't know how he came across Piobaireachd. He must have listened to it on the radio or whatever.

So Stuart won the competition. It bears the Professor's name as you can see.

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The other three composers are now free to give a name to their tunes. They have done so, and they will appear on the Society website in due course. For now, Stuart is going to play us his winning tune. He is then going to discuss how he composed it, and, more generally how he goes about constructing and solving the mysteries of Piobaireachd composition.

So, without further ado, welcome to Stuart Samson.

Stuart Samson

Good afternoon. Thanks very much to the Piobaireachd Society for the invitation. After winning the competition I now have the short straw, and I have to play it.

I'll talk very briefly on the tune before I play it. The construction of the tune is 4/4. I would say it is close to tertiary construction, but it is not a tertiary tune. The green and the orange phrases make it slightly different, but you can see that there is definitely a phrase pattern there.

So I will give my pipes a wee blow just to get them settled, then I'll try my best to play the full tune for you.

Stuart Samson plays Lament for Professor Howard William Chandler.

Thanks very much for listening to that. I've been playing that tune probably every day for the last two weeks on the pipes. When I found out I had to play it you think ach there is plenty of time. Then you realise you need to put the practice in. It is like anything else, you've got to prepare. You want to play to a good standard, and hope that everything goes well.

The pipes – I could maybe have tuned them before I kicked off. They went a little bit out of tune, but in the main they were not too bad. But it hopefully gives you a good insight to the musicality of the tune.

When Robert approached me and said would you be interested in composing a tune, a commission, the first thing you think of is wow, timeline – because – talking about composition where do you start?

I'm sure that everybody that does compose have got their own method. This is a few pointers of what I think of first.

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Always you've got to come up with an idea, or a theme. A commission, or a timeline, puts pressure on you, no doubt. Because you've got to try and come up with something by a certain date. That's why I try to avoid a commission if possible. I like to compose in my own leisure.

I composed another Piobaireachd – its in one of my books – called Farewell to the Reedmaker which was dedicated to Pipe Major Bob Shepherd. But

that particular tune I had the ground composed for that tune. The ground probably took me no more than half an hour to come up with. And the tune was completed six years later.

Because I think that if you look at the classic tunes – like G S MacLennan wrote in his light music – a lot of these tunes didn't even get published until he had played them for a while. Because you realise once you get them on the pipes, maybe I should have put that type of gracenote in or whatever. It evolves a little bit. So sometimes it can be a bit hasty putting music out there.

With this tune there are a couple of areas where I've thought I could maybe tweak that a little bit. Nothing major, just a teeny little minor thing. But on the whole, how it has come out, I am really really happy.

So where did the idea come from? Well, you are looking for inspiration. You are hoping that the starts are going to align. Then it just happens. It is hard to explain how it happens, but it just does. I think that comes through having belief that you have got to actually do it. If you've got belief, the chances are that you will come up with something.

All you need is a phrase. It doesn't necessarily need to be the beginning phrase. It could be an end phrase. It could be a phrase from one of the other variations. The ground maybe won't come first. It could be the dithis.

So if you can come up with a phrase, or a couple of phrases even better, then you are in a good place. I like to sing. I know we talk about this a lot in Piobaireachd. The importance of singing, and trying to get your pupils to sing. Some do, but many of them don't, because they can't sing.

Well I can't sing either, but I still do it. But that is where it comes from, it is much quicker. A phrase comes into your head, and you think oh that phrase sounds quite good. So now, because you have the mobile phones with the recorder on them, that becomes very useful. Anything that comes into my head I record it. It could be light music, it could be Piobaireachd.

Just get it down, and you can go back and listen to it later and you'll pick up on something for sure. That can happen at any time. Ask my wife Wanda. Five o'clock in the morning, you get out of bed, and you sing into the recorder. Then you listen to it maybe the next day and you go – maybe there is something there, or you go nahh that's rubbish.

So that's how I go about it.

Another one is, if you are trying too hard to do it, if you take your practice chanter out and you say right I am going to compose a piece of music. The chances are that isn't going to happen. You've got to know when to walk away. But you've got to be kind-hearted. You've got to have the belief that something will happen.

So, capturing the moment, is the most important part of where to start.

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I've got there as well, mention improvisation. I find this useful, probably more so with light music, but it can work in Piobaireachd as well. If you want to say compose a 6/8 march play a few 6/8 marches. Then when you get to the end play the first thing that comes into your head. Record it. Say to yourself I'm going to play 2 parts, whatever comes out. There might be four phrases which are rubbish, but there will be one phrase in there which is actually quite good. You've got something to work with.

So improvisation is something that I like to play around with.

The next thing about following up a tune is that I need to think about phrasing and the construction of the tune itself.

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I like to focus on phrases rather than bars. This is for both piobairachd and light music. I never think in bars, it's all phrases. Whether it is one bar phrases, two bar phrases, or even in light music it can be four bar phrases or whatever. You then build the phrases together so that they are complementary. G S MacLennan's classic question and answer phrases. The phrases could be the same rhythm, but either one note up or one note down.

So complimentary building blocks is what I am trying to do when I put a tune together. You might find, if you've got a line, the first thing you are going to go is – how many phrases? What is the metre? That is then going to bounce you into what might be a primary or a secondary tune, if you've got six bars in the first line. If it is four bars, you are into tertiary territory.

You've got to think then, if you are going down the secondary route, you have got to make sure that the second line starts with phrase C. And, as you all know, a secondary tune is made up of one bar or two bar phrases.

In this particular tune I was finding it was one bar phrases. So was limiting myself to four bars, or four phrases, in the line. I couldn't make it work as a proper tertiary tune unless I put the phrases down as a change of melody for that particular phrase. So it is a little bit different, but not far off it. I'm quite happy with how the tune turned out. It's quite easy to commit to memory.

The other thing is the key. You come up with few phrases and you identify whether that is a specific key. Do you want to stay solely in that, or do you want to broadened out and use the full scale?

The tune that I just played is in the pentatonic scale of G. There are no Cs and there are no Fs. Many of the classic tunes are in pentatonic keys rather than using the full range.

Then you need to decide I suppose about the use of embellishments and the level of technical difficulty. Who do you want to be able to play the tune? Do you want to make it a really hard very technical tune, with big piobaireachd movements, or not too strong.

Again a lot depends on the theme of what you wanted it to be. In this particular case I think I kept it relatively simple. Sometimes less is more in Piobaireachd, and in light music.

So we now need to start thinking about variations. What do we need to use. You've got so many choices going forward. Much is determined by the style of the tune, and you've got to consider the overall duration.

Going back to the tune that I wrote, Farewell to the Reedmaker. At one point the tune would have lasted over half an hour because I had that many variation. It was just too long. A difficult decision was narrowing it down, saying, well, a 16-18 minute tune is long enough really. It is a fairly technical tune.

I had to ask various pieces of advice. I asked some people which variations do you really think – to get a bit of feedback on that particular aspect.

This tune is pretty straight. I just wrote a dithis variation, a taorluath singling, doubling, crunluath singling, doubling. I tried to incorporate into

that the accents, the pulses. It is one bar phrases. If you are playing one bar phrases you have to do something with the tune. So it is strong weak weak strong.

You will have heard in the dithis that I actually timed it that way. I am not saying if it is right or wrong -everybody to their own style. I have always been taught to try and express a dithis variation, especially in the singling. It is just the little pauses, so you phrase it, rather than playing it too straight. You will hear it played straight and I'm not saying that's wrong. It's fine, it's great. I actually mention that in the background notes of the tune.

You want to pick variations which enhance the themal notes. Now, when you've got the ground, you're looking at the themal notes in the ground, you are saying they will just match all the way down. But sometimes it doesn't work out like that. You just can't make it work. Or you can, but it just doesn't sound musical. So you've got to use a little bit of artistic licence and say well.. –

In the tune I just wrote I like to end the phrases with two notes just the same, because it really punctuates the end of phrases. So that was the line I decided to go down. I thought that it kept the variations quite musical without losing the theme of the tune. I felt that the theme was all the way through, but I wasn't sticking religiously to the themal notes all the way down.

I mentioned the pulses within the phrasing, which for me is a very important part of the way I play.

So, you've come up with the tune, you have got it in your head, and now you need to write it down. This is the hardest part, because you've got to try and shoehorn it into a time signature. I know that what I have written is accurate 4/4, but it doesn't sound anything if you play the note durations as to the way I played it. That's just how it is. You've got to accept that, if you are going to write in bars, with a time signature, you've got all the notes in there, but the note values are no resemblance.

It helps if you use pause marks to give a little bit of guidance. The alternative is that you could consider writing without any bar lines and no time signature, just using phrases and note values. I've seen that written. I think that it is in some ways very good, especially if you don't have a teacher or a recording.

I would say that, with modern technology it is easy enough to get a recording of most tunes. That is really your guide. Taking on a tune as a novice, looking at the tune on the page can be quite daunting.

I remember playing at the Piobaireachd Society conference many years ago, when it was in Bridge of Allan. I played some of the set tunes. I played the ground and two first variations of Earl of Seaforth's Salute. Malcolm Macrae introduced me, and at the end he said "That was a wonderful rendition of The Earl of Seaforth's Salute and nothing like it is written in the book. He was actually right. It was the way it was handed down to me, and I listened to recordings. So the staff notation is only a guide.

But if you want to get it out there, you have to write it down. It was quite difficult trying to fit everything in. Some tunes are easier than others. Once you get to the doublings, they are usually quite easy, but it is the singlings and the ground itself that are hard to write down, because you can't show the expression.

Finally you have to consider the layout of the tune. I have two books of music. In the second book there are two Piobaireachd. I've decided to go landscape, and the tune is over four pages. I wanted to make it big, it is easier to read, easier on the eye. It is quite difficult to get everything onto one page.

I think that when I submitted the tune it was over two or three pages. Robert then said could you put it on one page. It was quite a challenge getting the typesetting right to get it onto one page. You need good music writing software. I use Electric Pipes. It is a gentleman from New Zealand who put that together, but there are many good ones out there. I think getting the right software where you can get the right spacing is quite hard.

So in the old days when I did my Pipe Major's course you had to write out all the music by hand. So you had no problems with spacing. You just put the note where you wanted it to go. But that's an art we don't do any more.

But where does the composing come from? I write a lot of music for massed bands, for events. I'm always sending music out, with arrangements. So with inputting so much data I am subconsciously becoming aware of note patterns. So when I come to compose, I am automatically getting pulled into certain note patterns. So I can decide if I

need to go this way, or that way, or that way. It seems to be easier now with experience and the amount of music writing that I have done.

If you think back to the early days. Willie Ross, G S MacLennan, Donald MacLeod. They are all writing music. It was all hand-written. Every tune they got, they had to write it out. So subconsciously they are getting used to all the note patterns by doing that. So that is maybe why we had so many great composers back in those days. Because they were writing music all the time. It is just a thought that came to me. So I think that there is a lot in that.

So once I wrote the tune, I recorded the tune, and it's there. The recording accompanies the music, and that is the tune complete. I am sure that many composers will have their own take on how you write a tune. And everybody is right how they do it. If it works.

I am enjoying it at the moment. I have composed a lot of tunes. I have been lucky. It's happening. I need to enjoy it while I can. It might dry up, you never know. I think I'm on, what is it, about 180 tunes, and four Piobaireachd. I'd like to do a bit more piobaireachd writing. It is a real sort of achievement when you have written Piobaireachd.

So that's my presentation. If anybody has any questions you'd like to point my way.

Robert Wallace

There is quite a sad postscript to this piece. When the four composers had submitted the tunes the original idea was that Mrs Chandler would listen to them all. All the composers had to submit a recording and the staff notation. I sent them off to her. She was going to have a listen and if she needed any help she would come to the Society and I would give her any help with it.

I sent them off to her. A month went by and I heard nothing from her. I started to get a bit worried. Clearly she wasn't a young woman. I did a bit of searching around, and I came up with a death notice for Mrs Christine Chandler. My CD and letter was clearly lying in a bunch of mail that the Post Office had put through her letter box.

So anyway there was a funeral director's name on the death notice. I phoned them up and asked them if I could get contact with the family. She

had given all this money, and I was a bit unsure about the way he wanted to proceed. They said they would contact the family and ask them to get in touch with me.

The son duly emailed me and said they were perfectly happy with the money remaining with the composers and all the arrangements the mother had made. They were very grateful. I invited them today to come, but they couldn't manage. I did say that I would send a good print-out of Stuart's manuscript to them so they could possibly get it framed as a memorial.

So that is the sad postscript to the story. But the good news is we have got a great tune. So do we have any questions for Stuart from the body of the kirk. Any budding composers out there who are looking for some tips?

Bill Wotherspoon Stuart, thanks for your presentation. Do you feel it becomes easier, or better, with time? Do you feel time changes things?

SS Probably. It gets easier because I feel you get more experienced. For example I was asked to write a tune for Doddie Wier, for the Foundation. It was a comission, but I was presenting the tune to the foundation. I was really worried about it, and I'll compose five tunes and you can pick one that you like. In four days I composed a slow air, three jigs, and a 9/8 march.

I recorded them and I sent them down. They picked the slow air and they called it Doddie the Gallant Hero of our time. One of the 9/8 marches I wrote they said why don't we auction that at a charity dinner. They auctioned the tune and made £5000. Somebody bought the tune and put their own title to it. All the money went to the Doddie Weir Foundation.

Ten years ago I would never have been able to compose so many tunes in such a short time. All the tunes I wrote are online now, and they are on the Facebook page. The only one which is not out there is the 9/8 march because I am still waiting on a name for the tune.

So, yes, it gets easier. I know that I could probably sit down and write a tune every day if I put my mind to it. But I don't want to do that, because that's too rigid. I prefer to just let it happen when it happens.

John Forbes You mentioned that you sometimes change it after you have played it on the pipes. Can you expand on that?

SS This is probably more to do with light music I would say. You compose a tune. You are in front of the screen. You can play back with the computer software. You think that sounds pretty good, I quite like that, I'm pleased with that. Then you play it on the practice chanter and you say that's fine.

Later on you start playing it on the pipes. The pipes is the final instrument that it is going to be played on. Then you think – I'm not sure about that embellishment, it's too heavy, it's too awkward. You end up maybe having to change a few things.

I also found as well, in my first book, a lot of the tunes I wrote, I look at them now and I think maybe I could have done this, maybe I could have done that. That's just the nature of the beast.

In my second book, I spent a lot of time where I finished a tune, then just put it to the side. I said I am going to go back in a week's time and go over it again. In just about every single tune I made little changes to it, and I felt really much better about it. I felt that everything had a much better flow because I had done that.

Jim ? Do you find there is a danger that you've written a tune, and somebody says, oh that's an existing tune. Somewhere in your subconscious you have heard it or seen it – maybe in the Scots Guards or something.

SS Absolutely. You've only got nine notes for a start. And as I talked about rhythms and note patterns, once you play one note, there are only certain notes you can go to there afterwards. So it narrows it down a little bit. You've just got to be confident. I've never worried too much about it, because I've said to myself, any tune that has come out of my head it has come out of my head. It is not like I have been looking to try and get inspiration from another tune or anything like that.

So hand on heart you just put it out there. It has come straight out of my head. That's not saying its not going to sound like something else. Little bits might. How many 2/4 marches are out there that have got very similar phrases.

When I was learning, I would be asked to play Clan McColl. I would be play Clan McColl but I would probably manage to fit about four other 2/4 marches into that as well. The teacher is going no no, you're coming off the

tune. There are so many similarities. You've got six marches you have been learning. You end up getting them all mixed up because there so many repetitive phrases.

This Piobaireachd here, I had a little wobble I'll admit. Once I had learnt that it had won the competition I actually looked through every tune in the Piobaireachd Society collection to see if there was anything that was similar. I didn't find one that was similar but there are piobaireachd's out there similar to each other.

There was one technique that I was taught on the Pipe Major's course. Because all Pipe Majors need to be able to compose because the Commanding Officer is leaving, or there are events. Some people are more natural at doing it than others.

A little wee trick that I was given, although I have never actually used it, for example if you took a 2/4 March like Highland Laddie and write down all the beat notes only on the stave. Then write 6/8 at the beginning, and just fill in the gaps with notes.

Howard Tindall You mentioned that the note on the page can differ quite a bit from the note which is played. So how do you decide what note to stick on the page?

SS Picking the notes is all right. It is just picking the duration of the note. You've got to then just say, well, if it is 4/4, you are looking at four groups within the bar, and you are saying that's roughly going to be the first pulse, that's roughly going to be the second pulse. It is very difficult to do.

HT So is it mainly arithmetic then?

SS It's arithmetic, yes. So sometimes a gracenote as a note is helpful. Sings E low A. That buys you a little bit to say that's helpful. So it really is quite difficult in that sense.

Derek Fraser I was fascinated by the singling of the Dithis. You were clearly emphasising the end of the phrase. Normally we would play straight through that. You've got the pause mark there. You covered it in your presentation, but could you say a little more. Were you thinking Strong Medium Medium Strong? What were you trying to do there?

SS I was taught initially by Norman MacLeod in Montrose, then I went to Jimmy MacGregor. When I won the Silver Medal I was going to Jimmy for

lessons. So he comes off the two Bobs. I've always played my dithis variations with a little SMMS. Jimmy MacIntosh is the same. You will see with a lot of his music he's got it in his tunes.

Maybe when I was competing I wouldn't have done it so much as I did it here. I really went for it, but I think that it is effective. I think that is a lot to do with listening to other instruments. Another tune I wrote Lands of Bens and Glens and Heroes, it was then picked up by Chris Stout and Finlay MacDonald because they played it on the fiddle.

When you hear them playing it, much they hold the end of the phrases is way more than we do. They hold the note, and a bit more, and a bit more, and a bit more. But it is so effective. They want to get every ounce of music out of it. We tend to not be as bold as that playing on the pipes. So I was maybe a little bit bold there, but I just felt that there was something about it playing it that way. I'm not competing any more so I can do what I want.

Alan Forbes You mentioned that traditional piobaireachd don't necessarily fit into time signature. You started off with a time signature. Do you always start off with that?

SS Once I'm composing I'm not thinking of time signature at all. I am just thinking of phrases. Even this morning I was thinking of Lament for Captain MacDougall. It's 4/4, and there are four pulses. I keep getting five pulses in the first bar.

Then there is the argument, at the end of the ground in Captain MacDougall, the way it is written with five couplets, some people take one of the couplets out to make it 4/4. I was taught the tune to play the five couplets. I play the five couplets in four pulses.

You could write that down a 2 and a 2 and a 2 and a 3. Sings. So if the person who wrote it down had written it like that, that argument wouldn't have raised its head. The music on the page can throw up all sorts of complications.

Ian Duncan It's interesting that you take your mobile phone out when you get an idea. Donald MacLeod did that with fag packets. I'd also compliment you both on your sound. You had a wonderful sound. I take it that these are modern day Glens. And you even took you own bagpipe maker with you. What model were you both playing?

Ben Duncan Mine is David Glen.

SS Mine are David Glen. But I've also got a J and R Glen as well. They are very steady. The drones went out a bit with me, just with the temperature, playing in the cold. Another five minutes and they would have been absolutely solid. Yes they are a really lovely set of pipes. That is one of the Kintail pipe chanters that I play. That's the plastic one.

Les Hutt Regarding the earlier point to do with the pulses in the later variations, with the pauses. That's the way you play it. But you have written the tune as well, so you are quite entitled to add that extra layer of expression.

Also I was thinking, could you put another variation in there? Sometimes when you are writing things like that it is knowing when less is more.

SS You could definitely put more variations into that. But then you are thinking of the overall duration. You weren't getting any more than twelve and a half minutes out of me today.

Robert Wallace When the commission came in it was for a lament, obviously for the chap's passing, and his late wife wanted a tune. You say you are looking for inspiration. How much did that effect what you came up with? Nothing is in the name, it is all in the music. But here you have the name first. You knew it had to be a lament, so in fact you'd have to write to that commission wouldn't you?

SS You are looking to come up with a tune that is very smooth and gliding. There is nothing sort of aggressive. I suppose you could make that lament aggressive in a way, just by how you time it. You could be a bit more clipped. You just have to play it smooth.

A lot of the tunes I have written have my own personal style in them. There are certain combinations that I use. Sings low B D. I like B to D. I use that a lot. There is just something about that combination. I just love doing it.

Robert Wallace Can you tell us Stuart where people can access your music?

SS My books are in some of the retailers. I did that when they first came out. Mainly it's through my website. You can buy my books as hard copies, or you can buy a digital book. The only thing about a digital book is – I learned how to do it, and I was happy that I could produce a book. But you

know that, when it goes out there, the book just spreads all over the world. Somebody buys one of your books then there are 20,000 copies all over the world.

But for me at the end of the day it is not about making the money. I write music and put it out there. If people enjoy it that's fine. I don't want to force them to like it. It is up to them at the end of the day.

Robert Wallace Thanks very much Stuart. That concludes this talk. It just remains for us to thank Stuart.