

## Memorising the Big Music

**Peter McCalister**

**Chair Karen McCrindle-Warren**

**CM** It is my honour to welcome Dr Peter McCalister to come and do a talk. From speaking to other people today I think it is maybe the most highly anticipated talk today.

I am sure we are all here because we love Piobaireachd. We love playing Piobaireachd, and anything that makes that a bit easier is going to be very welcome.

I'd also like to welcome Dan Nevans who is going to be coming to play some tunes. I am sure we all know him from the National Piping Centre, and his book Piobaireachd is for everyone.

So you don't want to hear me speaking. Lets get to the main event. Welcome Peter and Dan.

**Peter McCalister** Before I forget I have already given a handout, and if there is not enough please share between you. There will be questions afterwards. Also I have given out a tiny bit of paper saying name and tune on it. If you'd like to play at the ceilidh at four o'clock, you just need to put your own name on it and the name of your tune and give it back to me sometime before four o'clock.

This is going to be an interactive session. Why do pipers go off the tune? This is the question. If anybody has competed at this venue you are banned from answering this question. Where is that? Yes, Glenfinnan. A superb place to



to play Piobaireachd. The Piobaireachd board is out there on the edge of the loch. A wonderful venue if it is not windy or raining or midgy. Now, anybody can answer this question. Who is the judge on the left hand side of the picture? Malcolm Macrae? – no. Iain Macfadyen? – no. His name does begin with Mc. John Don MacKenzie? No, it is Dr Angus MacDonald. He is sheltering from the wind. It looks like a lovely day but actually it was freezing. Now, who is the

piper? Sandy Cameron? Yes, Sandy Cameron. I've chosen Sandy Cameron because he is a piper I really admire. In all the years I have competed against Sandy I have only heard him ever make one mistake. So he never goes off the tune. Why?

So I am going to talk today about how musicians memorise music, which is a relatively new habit, and I can talk about that at the end if you like. How do we memorise anything? I am going to talk about Piobaireachd, how we memorise that. Dan is going to come in and play a tune which we will have studied before



then so we will be testing him on his memory. We are going to start with this guy. This is Izak Perlman, born in Tel Aviv, who now lives in America. This is a recording from 1973 where he is playing Bach's Partita in D Minor. This is a set of pieces that lasts about 25 minutes. He is playing sitting down, because he had polio when he was a child so he always plays sitting down.

Interestingly Bach wrote this in 1720. Patrick Og died in 1730. This is the first piece of music on your handout. You don't need to look at the music. In fact

I'd recommend that you look at his facial expression when he is playing.

4 Giga

Partita No. 2 for Violin – J. S. Bach, BWV 1004

So, the question is, how is he memorising all those notes? The answer is, he isn't. He is memorising patterns of notes. For those of you who haven't seen this sort of music before, this is the music in front of you, but I've put in the key. So Bach is a very clever composer. By putting four or five notes together he suggests a key, in the same way that when you are playing a Piobaireachd the drones clashing with the chanter, or in tune with the chanter, suggest the key you

are playing in. So he starts in D minor, then he goes into A major, then back to D minor. He has a wee tricky bit here, but it is the same thing, one note down, the same thing one note down, the same thing one note down. Then he has a wee turn, then he is back to the end of the first phrase. Then he is clearly in C major here – this is a C major arpeggio, F major, this is a tricky bit, but the tricky bit is then repeated, then repeated, then repeated one note down. Then he finishes in F major.

So this guy is not learning a whole pipe of notes. He is learning a whole pile of patterns. Now it becomes more difficult when you have a modern piece. So this is a piece by Ravel called *Le tombeau de Couperin* – widely regarded as one of the hardest pieces



can play, or one of the hardest pieces you can play. This is a pianist from America called Wang, and I have printed out on the second part of your handout the climax of the piece. We can hear it now as she approaches the climax of the piece. I think you will notice when she gets to the climax of the piece.

I am not even going to try and tell you what the pattern is in this music, but somewhere in here there is a pattern. She has not learned every single note, she has made her own pattern, and somehow she has worked it out.

So how does memory work? Well memory is in two parts. There is the short term memory, and the long term memory. The short term memory is very short, maybe a few minutes only. The long term memory seems to be permanent. The

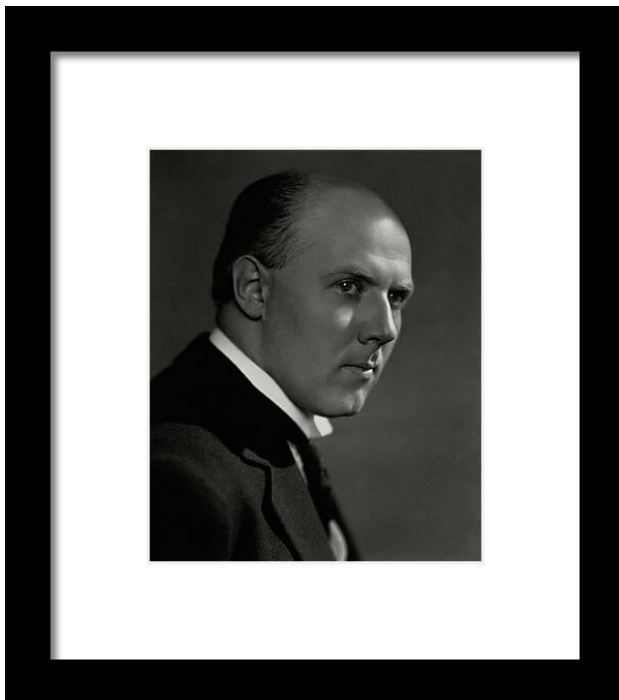
short term memory is finite, only seven items they think can fit into your short term memory. Your long term memory appears to be endless. You can keep on putting things into it and you will keep on remembering them.

So how do you get from one to the other. This is not rocket science. You take a little chunk of music, let's call it a bar, you memorise it, you do it again, and again. Then you go to sleep. This was news to me when I first started researching this. In your sleep, your short term memories are converted to long term memories.

It does not happen without sleep. Then you repeat the same the next day, and keep on doing that. If you do that, your memory will be long-term. Permanent, fixed.

So we have already looked at the patterns that Bach wrote, which help you to memorise. All pipers have an association in their mind, maybe a picture of the music, a pattern of what they can memorise.

While we are on that topic, I am going to look at the term photographic memory.



This is Walter Gieseking. He is a pianist from Germany in the second world war and played in America after the war. Walter could memorise a single concerto in a day. He would take it away from the music. Usually on a plane, or a train. He would look at it, see the associations and patterns. He would get to the venue, throw the music aside, and play the whole concerto. Quite an incredible feat. People used to say he had a photographic memory. I think a better term would be to say that he is really good at making associations. He is really good at seeing patterns.

You've seen people stand at meetings and talk effortlessly for an hour. Well how do they do it? They have a little hook from one little section to the next, it is actually all rehearsed in very great detail.

So I am going to test you now. Are you ready? This is my bank account number. Look at it. You have to memorise it. 3,2,1. What is my bank account

number? Probably correct, well done, but probably you will have forgotten it by tonight.

Now, harder. Here is my Visa card number. I want you to memorise my Visa card number. Are you ready? What is my Visa Card number? No answers. And the reason for that is because there are more than seven items. That is too great an amount of information for your short term memory to retain.

However, if you were wanting to memorise it you would maybe make it into chunks. It is so easy to see the four chunks. Like four bars of a piece. You can break it down into bars, and you put the bars into your short term memory. That is only four items.

So that, in short, is how short and long term memory work. Of course in piping we want the long term memory to work. We don't want short term memory. Here is Kim's Game. In the book Kim, by Rudyard Kipling, Kim takes precious stones, emeralds and rubies, and he and his pal have to look at them and memorise how many colours there are. So look at that, I am going to ask you how many different colours there are and where they are.



3,2,1 gone. How many red ones were there? 2? Gold star. How many amber ones were there? 1. So it is possible, even with a difficult thing like that. You can memorise a pattern. It is difficult. Later on, if we have time, I've got Kim's game for pipers.

Muscle memory. People talk about muscle memory. Your fingers just know the tune. Muscle memory is not memory. Muscle memory is a sort of habit. This is why pipers go off the tune, even the great pipers. They have played Anapool for forty years, they go on the boards, they make a mistake in Anapool. What's going on?

They didn't really know Anapool. They had memorised it using this repetitive kind of technique. But if I said to them play the third line of the first variation they couldn't do it. So in a way, your detailed memory has to be great. Don't just play it, break it down.

Approaching a new tune, you would need to know the structure of the tune. This is an irregular tune.

I asked Murray Henderson once how he memorises difficult tunes like this. He said, well I always start at the Taorlauth singling, because then I can see the shape of the tune. Maybe it is different later on, and certainly different as I move towards the ground, that's the way I start.

There will be things repeated, there will be a lot of repetition in Piobaireachd. But also there will be differences, and you will need to mark the differences. Sing the tune. We will come back to that. Practice away from the instrument. Don't practice on your pipes. Sing it, play it on any part of your body you want to play it on. Then practice it on the instrument, then repeat.

In Ronald MacDonald of Morar there are only seven bars. So seven items, quite handy. You need to learn those seven bars. You play bar 1, bar 2, bar 3, bar 4. You repeat the first line. Then you need to learn bar 5. Then you repeat bar 5. Then you play bar 2. You need to learn a new bar now, bar 6.

And this is the key to this tune, which many pipers don't know. You then play bar 2, bar 3 and bar 4 again. Always (except for the ground) – we'll come back to that. Then you have a new bar at the end. Seven items, quite handy.

Unfortunately as you go backwards through the tune from the crunluath doubling back to the ground, more and more differences appear. So differences become the problem. You need to learn the differences. You need to spot the differences and mark them. In my case I mark them on the music. I am a really visual learner.

But remember, you are not just playing the tune over and over and over. If you do that, you will be able to play it from memory, but when you go on the boards, and the judge picks up his pen, it will go, just like that.

So looking at the bottom of the tune, the crunluath doubling, the taorluath doubling you can see 1, 2, 3 and 4, and 5 again. And you can see a small change which I've marked with a yellow splodge.

A quick word about the ground. It is irregular. The third line has seven bars.

**Cumha Raonuill Mhic Ailein oig**  
 (Ronald MacDonald of Morar's Lament)

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116 No. 111. Ronald Mac Donald of Morar's Lament  
4:, 4, 4.  
I. GROUND.

Lines

1. 

2. 

3. 

II. VAR. 1.

1. 

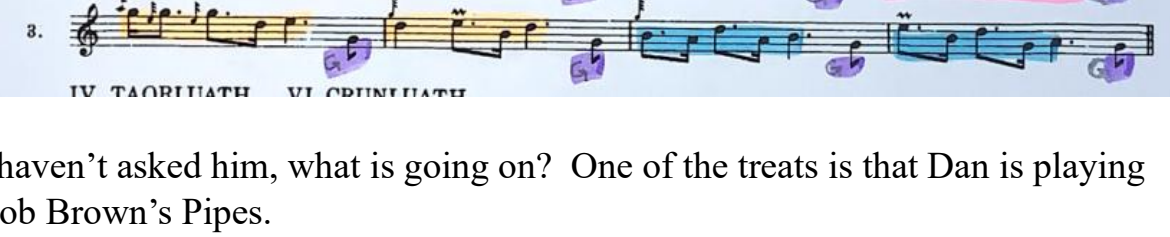
2. 

3. 

III. VAR. 2.

1. 

2. 

3. 

IV. TAORLUATH VI. CRUNLUATH

I haven't asked him, what is going on? One of the treats is that Dan is playing Bob Brown's Pipes.

Dan Nevans plays Lament for Ronald MacDonald of Morar.

Thank you very much Dan for that marvellous performance. The pipes are in danger of stealing the show here. Bob Brown's pipes are in the keeping of Dan. Dan is the custodian of the pipes at the present time. He will leave them over here for you to have a look at if you wish.

So, another tune. This is Lady Margaret MacDonald's Salute. This is a secondary piobaireachd.

So line one phrase A, phrase B, phrase C. Line 2, phrase 2, phrase 1 reversed, phrase C. Line 3, phrase B, phrase C.

This is one of the very few perfect secondary piobaireachds. Once you have learned those phrases, there is nothing else to learn.

So how do you learn such a difficult lower hand tune, which centres round the note B? For me, as a visual learner, it is all shapes. So you can see my shapes, and the music below it.

T. SINGING

A B C

SECONDARY PITCHES.

LINE 1: A B C

LINE 2: B A C

LINE 3: B C

For me, when I am playing a lower hand tune. That low G, D, low A, C is that shape. If Barnaby Brown was here, he would be going – sings – to help his audience sing along.

For me I can see that shape. Then, second part of the phrase, a bit harder. The second phrase, fairly easySings. The last phrase is more tricky, it starts on B. Sings. And you have the so-called devil's chord low G to C, then hiharin.

So that is what I see when I am playing this music. When I am playing this music, I see that in my head all the time. And once you've learned that you've learned the whole tune. There is nothing else to learn. Nothing at all. Ground, first variation, taorluath, crunluath, they are all exactly follow that pattern. I am not suggesting that it is easy, but that is one way of going about it. Lower hand tunes particularly, all those low Gs, and Bs and Ds, where are they all, where do they come?

For me I get a shape, and I actually draw a shape. If you take The Viscount of Dundee, again the shape of it is very unusual, some of those later variations, if you get the shape in your head, you've got it.

So, we are going to finish now. Iztak Perlman, who is going to be eighty in August, was asked how does he memorise music? And you will see some of the things we have talked about are on this slide.

He looks at the music, even when he knows the music – and the Music Committee will say the same thing. Keep the music on the stand, even though

you know it. Sing, before you sleep. We will come back to the first point he makes in a second – about don't overthink.

You should be able to start anywhere in the music and play it. You can't say, oh if I start at the beginning of the third line I'll get the second phrase. You need to know what the second phrase is, and be able to play it.

Andrew Wright used to practice in the dark. He would sit there with his pipe chanter, no reed in it, in the dark and just finger the music. The family would come in and say hey Papa what are you doing? And he was practicing. That's what he said – I can feel the music in the dark.

Write out the music. I wonder if they still do this at the Army School, because in the early days of the Army School they wrote out all the music. My teacher in Ireland, who was in the Army School in the 60's wrote out everything that he played. All of it. And he taught me to do the same.

Practice away from the instrument. Work backwards from the end of the piece. Fascinating that he should come up with the same conclusion.

I interviewed a few professional musicians I know to see if they had the same conclusions. They came up with something very slightly different. They listen to the music, to recordings, and try and get the shape of it in their head.

Get the difficult bits right. Don't rely on your finger memory. Don't just play through it thinking oh yes I know that, I know that. Because if the judge picks up his pen, he will put you off.

When you are actually performing, trust your memory and enjoy the performance. That is quite hard to do, because you are thinking – am I in the third line? But if you have really memorised it, you can do that. Iztak Perlman says "just enjoy the music" – his first conclusion.

Hard pieces are easier to memorise than easy pieces. This is a fascinating statement. So if you take something like Bach who has all those wonderful and very easy patterns to see, that is apparently quite easy to play, but to memorise it is difficult, whereas that second piece of music, really hard to play, and by the time you have worked it all out you have memorised it.

So hard pieces are easier to memorise than easy pieces. Not sure if you agree with that.

Finally, the conclusions from the Music Committee. I am not going to go over these in all detail – I have actually printed out every single word in the handout. I couldn't actually even find a way of editing that, because it is so wonderful

Sing a lot. Practice away from the instrument. Take the hard bits and practice them. Don't just play the tune, pick the hard bit. Build up chunks. Phrase structure. Colour code the phrases. Practice with the music on a stand, even when you know it. Memorise the tune, rather than just playing it.

A collection of various items, including bottles of Highlanders Pipe Bag Dressing and Johnson's Baby Powder, a Swiss Army knife, a red thermos, a black air filter, a yellow spool of thread, a metal band, a wooden ruler, and a feathered stick, all arranged on a wooden tray.

I'll give you longer. Concentrate. Some of the items are for a piper of my generation. You might not actually know what they are.

Good luck with your memory.

**Uwe Their** – you think you have made a mistake, and what do you do?

**PM** Many a time I've asked myself that question, and thought "Did I play that third line?" And you think about asking the judge. I don't know the answer to that question. I think you are over thinking. So you've got to the end of the second line, and you are thinking – have I played that?

**UT** – so in the second bar it may be that you are constantly playing a high G gracenote, but it is actually an E gracenote.

**PM** – I'm sorry not to help you. If you are making a mistake and playing it wrong, then you are going to memorise it wrong. So maybe keep the music in front of you for longer.

**Francis Chamberlain** Do you find it easier to memorise things from Kilberry or from the Piobaireachd Society.

**PM** That is a good question. I usually find the Kilberry slightly easier. Because in the Piobaireachd Society books the print is slightly tighter – isn't that right? But I always use the Piobaireachd Society books anyway. I agree, the Kilberry is slightly easier because the music is opened out. Not a lot in it maybe. I know a lot of pipers use the Kilberry instead because they like the layout.

**Q** – would this carry over to light music as well do you think?

**PM** – I'd have to ask the light music experts. I am not a light music expert.

**Audience member** – yes same technique.

**PM** If I was playing Mrs John McColl, if I said play the third part, second phrase – there are pipers who can do that, Bruce Gandy is one of them.

**Robert Wallace** You maybe touched on it there. You come off and you think you have maybe missed a line or something like that, but in fact you haven't, what is it? Is it just practice and memory, or is it that your subconscious is keeping going, but the conscious side of your brain – or the anxiety?

**PM** Overthinking it maybe. If you've done your work, gone on there, enjoyed your performance, you'll be fine. You've got to trust your own memory.

**RW** somebody who was listening might say to you "no you were fine" , so what is making you feel anxious then?

**PM** Overthinking.

**Logan Tannock** – The Devil sitting on your shoulder.

**PM** – saying “you’ve made a mistake, you’ve made a mistake”.

**LT** The other piece of advice is that once you have made the mistake, don’t think about it, because you can’t do anything about it.

**PM** The classic is the piper who says I think I’ll play the third line again because I don’t think I played it. That is so common.

**Scott Nicholson** – What if you have to learn a tune that you don’t like? I find it harder to learn something I don’t like.

**PM** Murray Henderson was the one I had this conversation with. I’d recorded him playing Tulloch Ard, not the famous Tulloch Ard, but another one. He said he didn’t remember that at all. I said, well you did play it. Yes, he said, I didn’t like it. Then we had this discussion about playing tunes you don’t like, and that is when he said start in the Taorluath Singling and just learn the damned thing.

For the competing pipers it is a bit of a grind. It is much better for us in the Piobaireachd Society to learnt tunes that we like.

**Derek Fraser** Just building on from what we talked about from Robert – you’re not sure if you’ve played the line – so you get it, you’ve got the phrases, I know where I am, AAB, ABB or whatever you are doing. But is there not another process that is whenever I get to the end of line 1, line 1 tick, so a sort of mental check-list.

**PM** A lot of pipers do that. And it is a good idea, particularly in Piobaireachd, which is a slow music. Get them ticked off in your head as you go through the tune.

**Q** Your pictogram, or whatever way you did it. The first one is meant to be low G, D and the second one low A, C.

**PM** I just didn’t do it terribly well. But for me that is the key for the lower hand tunes. I find the lower hand tunes quite tricky. Some of them are virtually tuneless, so where are you going to go with that. Top hand tunes like Ronald MacDonald of Morar, is actually relatively easy, because it is so beautiful. The difficulty with Ronald MacDonald of Morar is the differences.

**RW** You won the Gold Medal with War or Peace. You talked about bottom hand tunes. How did you work your way through that because it can be a bit of a

**PM** Repetitive music, yes.

**RW** So how did you do that?

**PM** I'm not sure if I'd recommend this, because the Competing Pipers have a separate place they have to go to really memorise the tune. Not particularly that piece, because it is quite hard being a continuous melody without any lines in it really. Some pipers, and I don't know if you will agree Darach, play the first line of the Taorluath of say Aulder, then the first line of the Taorluath of another tune, then another, then the second line of Aulder, so that you really know it.

I did do that sort of detail with War or Peace. I did find it really hard, because there is no lines. I just thought of it as phrase 1 and phrase 2. You have to make your own structure. The structure has to make sense to you. Some people don't like this visual memory thing. It is not for everybody.

**FC** Can you give us some idea of how long it takes to learn a tune.

**PM** I had this conversation with Murray. He can learn it in a day. He is a genius. It also depends which tune you are talking about. So if you wanted to learn something like Melbanks, which is very regular, it all fits together beautifully, that's fine, you could easily do Melbanks in a day. Easily.

But, we could chat about Anapool. I would say that it would take several weeks to learn the Laird of Anapool, because the third line of all the grounds is intensively difficult to memorise.

And somebody said about modern tunes. Modern tunes are hard to memorise. I think actually somebody said that modern composers don't think about the player.

**Jack Taylor** I think that modern tunes are written on the stave, whereas the old tunes weren't. They were written to be passed on. Whereas modern tunes aren't. So the composer can put in that wee bit there, oh it will be quite nice, which it probably is, but it makes it much harder to memorise. It is taking it out of the oral context.

**PM** So here is a question for Jack Taylor, or maybe Bill, who went to the Bobs. They sang to you didn't they, then you go the pipes out and played it?

**JT** You had to know it before you went.

**PM** Right right right right.

**JT** There was no point – you never went with the book and played it through on your chanter. So could I do Scarce of Fishing today Bob? But you'd learnt it.

**RW** I worry that all this is very mechanical. There is the icing on the cake which is the music of the thing. You are talking about learning the basic notes, the basic structure. On top of that would come..

**PM** I don't want to take up too much of your coffee time, but if you have really memorised the tune, got your technique going, and the pipe is fine, then you can start to bring out the music. But if you try and bring out the music before you know the tune, you are putting the cart before the horse.

**Q** Would you suggest listening to the tune, or looking at it first?

**PM** I am a visual learner, so I look at the tune, but I spoke to my friends, one of whom is a professional cellist who learns concertos, and he listens and listens and listens to lots of recordings. He almost knows it backwards before he has picked the music up. If you are going to listen, you have to listen actively.

**JT** Yes, you have got to say "I'm memorising it".

**PM** The big slide in the middle was the pipers who say "I know Farewell to the Creeks". But if you say play me the third part, second phrase, they won't know it, because nobody has ever sat down and analysed Farewell to the Creeks. But in Piobaireachd we do have to do that sort of detail. We can't just play it through.

And the great players who go off the tune – they don't really know it. Something gives way under the stress of competition.

Done. Thank you.