

Let Piobaireachd Flourish

Piobaireachd Society Conference

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Introduction

It's a pleasure to be back here at the Piobaireachd Society Conference. I was last here in 2018 when I gave a talk entitled 'Beyond the Performer Community Through Progressive Programming'. That talk centred around work that I was engaged in at that time alongside my friend and colleague Calum MacCrimmon – current piper to the Clan MacLeod and direct descendent of the famous MacCrimmon's of Boreraig. We were working on a project called The Big Music Society – something of a riff on your own society's name. We were seeking to expose ceol mor to a wider audience through facilitating collaborations and performance opportunities that would improve the accessibility of the great music. Some of that work is still available to watch online.

Since then, the project has fallen somewhat into abeyance. Time marches on, creative priorities shift, professional commitments build and life gets in the way. However, the seeds from which the Big Music Society grew still hold promise and hopefully we'll be in a position to continue that work in the future.

Today's talk has a curious title. I proposed Let Piping Flourish – an opportunity to discuss my book, of that title, in which I present what I call a “musical history of Highland Piping in Glasgow”, Let Glasgow Flourish being the city's motto.

What we have before us though is Let Piobaireachd Flourish. A seemingly small change to the title - made without consultation, I might add - may seem minor. Piobaireachd does, of course, literally mean piping. But as we all know, today, it means something more specific. Let's not forget, titles matter. They shape questions. And questions have the power to shape futures – as we shall see in just a moment.

After careful thought, rather than try to frame today's talk within the context of the book, exploring the question of Glasgow's influence on piobaireachd specifically (I will, nevertheless, point at instances in which the topics cross-over), the renaming felt like an unsolicited gift – the contrarian in me was secretly delighted! With this, there was the opportunity to change the question. And so, questions have become the foundation of today's talk. I'll be asking a number of them as we progress....

So, let me take the liberty of asking the first: has piobaireachd flourished?

In What Sense Has It Flourished?

When one looks to the health of piobaireachd in the late 19th century we are led to believe it was in a position of terminal decline – in need of a serious shot in the arm. The series of articles which appeared in the Oban Times in early 1903 under the heading “The Passing of the Piobaireachd” are considered to have provided the rationale for the establishment of the Piobaireachd Society that year. The articles were attributed to an anonymous correspondent with the initials A.M. and were, subsequently, anthologised and published in pamphlet form by the Piobaireachd Society. Years later, James Campbell of Kilberry, asserted that he judged them to be the work of his father Archibald Campbell – one of the giants of this Society’s history.

So, in 1903 a young Archibald Campbell – only 25 years old – full of enthusiasm and, quite possibly, the arrogance of youth (not to mention the privilege of his education and elevated place in society) wrote the following grandiose and foreboding words in the first article:

“...the question may now be asked – has piping advanced during the last 300 years or not? The answer is - no! Today there are thousands of players on the pipes, but of true pipers how many? The present writer knows of six who are worthy of the name. There are probably not more than 10 in the whole world. Three hundred years ago ten as good, if not better, could have been mustered in Skye alone. Not that there may not be just now in Scotland twenty or even thirty players, each of whom can render eight or ten piobaireachds in good enough form to win the gold medal at Oban or Inverness with any one of them. This does not make him a master of his craft. More than this is needed.”

In the concluding article in the series, his words take on a more alarmist tone:

“...there is no time to waste. Men are dying, tunes are perishing, knowledge is waning. There are four pipers alive in Scotland today [no longer are there six!], and should they all, by some evil chance, die tomorrow, piobaireachd playing would receive a blow which might kill it outright, so slender is the thread which links our degenerate era with the golden days of past years. To sum up the substance of these articles, the writer’s purpose has been not to prove, for no proof is needed, but to draw attention to the barbarous apathy with which our present generation treats the subject of piobaireachd music. He has reminded the reader of how few piobaireachd are heard nowadays, and how pipers play piobaireachd solely in order to win prizes in competitions, judged frequently by men without the slightest elementary knowledge of the subject. He has tried to show that the fault lies, not with the present-day professional piper, but with those on whose patronage the piper is dependent.”

We’ll return to that final statement later.

He finishes with a rallying call which foreshadows Kennedy's famous "Ask not what country can do for you" call:

".... All that is hoped for is that some readers of this paper, which circulates among Highlanders in every quarter of the globe, will be induced to think over the matter, and consider what he personally can do to save Ceol Mor."

Now, if we take these words at face value, without any sort of critical analysis (we can leave that for another day – and another speaker!), what we see is a young man with laudable intentions. And ultimately, the concern expressed in these words underpins the foundation of the Piobaireachd Society.

So, where are we today some 120 years or so later? Let's ask some questions:

Is more repertoire in circulation?

Without a doubt. The policy of Set Tunes has been responsible for expanding the number of tunes in circulation. Despite critiques on the influence of set tunes, from the policy's inception through to the present day – special mention here for a particularly strong argument made here Simon McKerrrell a few years ago – there can be no doubt that more tunes, overwhelmingly from the so-called classical canon, are part of today's piobaireachd playing eco-system.

Are there more masters than Archibald Campbell observed all that time ago? More than four (or six... or ten??)? Definitely. Unquestionably. I would imagine that counted within his number would have been Alick Cameron, John MacDonald, maybe Angus or Jockan MacPherson, William MacLean and John MacDougall Gillies.

MacDougall Gillies, incidentally – and as a digression – is one point at which our discussion here intersects with my study of piping in Glasgow. As the main channel through which the so-called 'Cameron school' passed, his move to Glasgow in 1890 can be seen as symbolic of the increasingly urbanised nature of piping at this time. His renowned status as one of the leading authorities in the early 20th century was consolidated through the teaching that he largely conducted in Peter Henderson's shop on Renfrew Street in Glasgow city centre while serving as that business's manager. The passing on of his knowledge to a younger generation proved enormously influential not least because among his many students were Archibald Campbell himself, as well as his later collaborator on the Piobaireachd Society Collection Sherrif Grant, Rothiemurchas.

Is knowledge more widely diffused?

Once again, I think it would be safe to answer in the affirmative. While the shroud of mystery that perhaps once cloaked piobaireachd has still not been entirely shed, knowledge of its form, technical characteristics, performance conventions, and origin myths, are undoubtedly more widely known. The relative accessibility of information would, of course, be the reason for this. Advances in communication (and, thereby, transmission of knowledge) throughout the 20th century are crucial here; technological advances in radio, recording, printing, and the internet, each, in turn contributing to

wider diffusion. Likewise, the growth and relative ease of travel (nationally and internationally) that arrived following the Second World War played its part.

Again, we have an intersection with the topic of my book here as we look at some of the key individuals who were able to leverage these advances in the cause of spreading knowledge. I refer here to two other titans of this Society's history: Seumas MacNeill and John MacFadyen. The almost evangelical zeal with which these men – born and bred Glaswegians – pursued the task of spreading the good word of piobaireachd in the mid-late 20th century has had a profound influence. Now's not the time for a potted history of these men but the fact that they were both very much products of their environment – Glasgow – is a crucial part of the narrative I explore in the book.

Finally, what of Archibald Campbell's declaiming of the "barbarous apathy" he witnessed among "the present" generation - as he put it?

Well, as one of the piobaireachd judges at the recent National Piping Centre Junior Competition, at which over 50 piobaireachds were heard across two age categories, the attitude there could be described as anything but apathetic. While the quality of playing was variable, the earnestness and enthusiasm of each competitor is strong evidence of a culture of respect and care for piobaireachd among a young generation.

Then, when one looks at the solo piping scene we have today, in both amateur and 'professional' classes, the number of players appears to have been on the ascendancy for decades. Of course, this is anecdotal – I don't have the statistics to support the assertion but, in Scotland alone, the combined number of active competitors across the CPA grades, premier grades and CLASP grades feels like a high tide mark.

On all of these counts, a positively flourishing image emerges.

But..... and I think you've probably been waiting for the 'but'..... Flourishing can mean different things. A tradition can flourish in terms of preservation, pedagogy and institutional support — while remaining curiously static as an art form.

And so, to our next big question:

Has it flourished as art?

Let's consider this idea of a flourishing art form. What aspects of an art form and the eco-system it inhabits need to be in a particularly fertile state for the art to flourish?

I'm going to discuss two areas in which I think there is scope for improvement. So, let's start with **active creation and innovation**.

Active Creation and Innovation

I imagine most of us would consider a flourishing art form to be one in which new work is plentiful. A glance through the enormously useful archive of PS Conference proceedings and transcripts on the PS website shows that the topic of composition has been on the agenda at this conference many times. In addition, you don't need to look through the pages of the Piping Times and other periodicals for very long to see that composition of new piobaireachd has been the subject of much discussion since the mid-20th century.

So, what has come of all this discussion? If we consider anything composed in the last 40 years or so to be 'new' then a convincing case can be made that we're living through an age of plenty. Indeed, the area on the Piobaireachd Society website for new compositions (there's an area on the site for new compositions!!!) has a healthy number of around 70 pieces. I'm sure this is just the tip of the iceberg. My own book contains a few relatively new pieces too: Salutes to the Glasgow Highland Club, the Scottish Pipers' Association, Seumas MacNeill and John MacFadyen. There are laments for the Old Govan Burgh, John MacFadyen, (again – clearly an eminently appropriate subject for piobaireachd compositions), and Robert Reid – as well as a few others which are not part of the classic canon.

I don't think it's a leap to suggest that all this composition is a consequence of the wider diffusion of knowledge already discussed. Perhaps another contributing factor is that a cadre of aspiring composers is now more able to put their work out into the world because they have a platform through which their work can be published. Technology, once again playing its part. The democratising effects of the internet ensuring a place where everyone (or anyone's) voice can be heard.

So, again, a sense of health and growth quickly emerges.

We could go on to explore why, when so many **new** pieces of piobaireachd exist, do we still hear, almost exclusively, music from the classical canon in competition – with the notable exceptions of music by John MacLellan and Donald MacLeod. The refrain that “well, so few recent tunes stand up to the old ones” and that a process of natural selection occurs, is tempting but doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Natural selection in piobaireachd doesn't exist because of the power of the set tunes to guide which repertoire is in circulation. I can assure you, I have learned, practiced and performed quite a few tunes that should have gone the same way as the dodo!

I'd like to think this is the type of thing the Music Committee sometimes discuss when considering which tunes to set. So, let's leave that open for now.

How about another question? Given the exceptional and, dare I say, completed work of preserving old works of piobaireachd, should attention be turned to supporting the evolution of the language in which new music is written?

Musical forms can, and do, change. They absorb new influences, respond to new circumstances, and reflect the concerns of the time in which they are created. Great art does not emerge in a vacuum.

The historical repertoire of piobaireachd is full of such responses. The great laments, gatherings and commemorations that populate the canon were not written as museum pieces. They were often composed in response to real events, real people, and real social circumstances. In time they have become monuments to past events but it was not always thus – they were, once, of their time.

By contrast, much modern composition in piobaireachd tends to operate within an inherited structural framework that has remained remarkably stable for well over a century, while continuity in the naming conventions creates a facade of contemporary cultural relevance. The familiar ground and variation format, the established vocabulary and sequencing of embellishment, and the overall arc of development remain largely unchanged; while laments, salutes, gatherings – and perhaps, sadly, ‘massacres’ – point at contemporary events, both personal and of greater social significance.

New pieces are certainly being written, but they are most often written *within* the tradition rather than expanding its possibilities.

When I was considering what I might say in this talk I received a message from Bruce Gandy, a notable composer of contemporary pipe music – and one who was approached by the PS, along with three others, for a newly commissioned piece in 2022. Aware that I was considering this question of a flourishing piobaireachd tradition he said the following, *“as a composer I’m kind of baffled. How far can I “go off” the standard styles of tunes or variations, where it still might be called Piobaireachd”*. That a renowned composer – a composer with several celebrated collections and work popularised by some of the most successful pipe bands in the history of that art – would be concerned about parameters or defining characteristics as they might pertain to his work’s acceptability, is, I would suggest, symptomatic of a tradition resistant to development.

At this point, we have another intersection with the topic of my book – and, indeed, two of the pieces of piobaireachd which are contained in it. As some of you will no doubt remember, in 1990 Glasgow was awarded the status of European City of Culture. In recognition, and to celebrate this important designation, William Grant and Sons offered a prize for the composition of a new piece of Ceol Mor to mark what is now often cited as a significant turning point for the city. The contest was administered by the College of Piping and, ultimately, judged by Iain MacFadyen and my own childhood teacher Angus John MacLellan – both of whom also feature prominently in the book. In the details that were published with the contest announcement in the Piping Times of October 1989 I would draw your attention to point 6:

*“THE COMPOSITION NEED NOT NECESSARILY BE IN THE TRADITIONAL
PIOBAIREACHD FORM. IT IS FELT THAT AN ATTEMPT SHOULD BE MADE AT THIS
TIME TO DEVELOP SOMETHING NEW. PREFERENCE IN THIS COMPETITION*

THEREFORE WILL BE GIVEN TO AN INNOVATION, PROVIDED IT CAN STILL BE ACCEPTED AND RECOGNISED AS CLASSICAL MUSIC FOR THE HIGHLAND BAGPIPE”

That statement is worth pausing on:

1. The capitalisation of the point. There’s a clear sense that this point is of the utmost importance.
2. The phrase “that an attempt should be made **at this time** to develop something new”.... “at this time”.... From that, I take the implicit acknowledgement of the forces of modernity – at the start of the final decade of the 20th century – and an awareness of the importance of contemporary cultural relevance.
3. “provided it can still be **accepted and recognised** as classical music for the highland bagpipe”.... Pretty subjective stuff there I’d say.... Acceptability... Accepted by whom...? And how do we define ‘classical’?

Anyway, if the potential for a progressive outcome prevailing was suggested in the announcement, the result did not live up to it. The winning tune, named *The Glasgow Piobaireachd*, by Sandy Forbes, is recognisably piobaireachd form – albeit with some rather challenging phrasing and idiosyncrasies in the scoring. In the prize giving write up in May 1990, the writer (Seumas MacNeill???) noted

“The suggestions that a new form of classical bagpipe music, other than piobaireachd, might be developed had not turned out to be successful. Nevertheless interesting attempts at this had been submitted by Jacky Pincet of Brittany, Angus Lawrie of Glasgow and Duncan Johnstone, also of Glasgow.”

In my book I’ve included *The Glasgow Piobaireachd* and Duncan Johnstone’s piece, *Salute to the Bell That Never Rang* – an allusion to one of the symbols of St Mungo contained within the City of Glasgow’s coat of arms.

Johnstone piece is conventional in some regards and not in other. I find it a very pleasing tune (entirely ‘acceptable’ in my opinion – not especially controversial or experimental) and have performed it on a number of occasions, perhaps most notably at the opening concert of the annual Celtic Connections festival at Glasgow’s Royal Concert Hall last year.

Performance contexts

This brings me to a second area in which I think there is scope for growth: performance contexts. As I mentioned at the beginning when I was last here in 2018 my talk was about the project I was engaged in at that time, and was titled: *The Big Music Society - Beyond the Performer Community Through Progressive Programming*. My concern then was not with repertoire or artistic evolution as such, but with the contexts in which piobaireachd is performed.

It's perhaps unnecessary to dwell too heavily on this point today – you can, of course see a video of that talk via the PS website! However, to summarise, the central observation was a simple one: that the overwhelming majority of performances of ceòl mòr take place within competitive environments, and that in most instances, this environment does not encourage audience engagement.

In most musical traditions, the concert stage is the place where music lives publicly. It is where repertoire is shared with listeners who are not, necessarily, themselves practitioners. It is where interpretation, atmosphere and narrative can be shaped with, and in response to, the audience.

It would be remiss not to acknowledge the efforts that have been made in this regard. The Piobaireachd Society's annual St Cecilia's Recital is a valuable example of piobaireachd presented in a concert setting, where the music is given space to breathe outside the competitive arena. Initiatives such as this point towards what might be possible if performance contexts were allowed to broaden further.

When competition becomes the dominant – and in many cases the only – platform for performance, something subtle begins to happen. The music risks becoming something that exists primarily for its practitioners rather than for listeners. Let's not forget Archibald Campbell's alarmist words back in 1903, warning that *"pipers play piobaireachd solely in order to win prizes in competitions"* – that's perhaps truer now than ever....

Now, I want to be clear that this is not an argument against competitions, per se. Competitive piping has played an indispensable role in sustaining the tradition. But it is worth asking whether the structures that were so successful in preserving piobaireachd have also, perhaps unintentionally, limited the ways in which it is encountered by the wider world.

If piobaireachd is indeed a great musical form – I believe it is, having the unique ability, in pipe music, to communicate complex emotion – then it should be capable of communicating powerfully beyond the relatively small circle of people who already understand its conventions.

But, despite all the good work done to diffuse knowledge, preserve music, improve judging, and discuss composition, to quote, once again, our young, enthusiastic Archibald Campbell from 1903 *"More than this is needed."*

What Might Be Done?

So, if we accept that there are areas in which piobaireachd, as an art form, might yet grow... what, if anything, might be done?

Let me return, briefly, to Archibald Campbell. In those Oban Times articles of 1903, amidst all the alarm and hyperbole, there is one line that feels particularly relevant today. In diagnosing the problems of his time, he writes:

“the fault lies, not with the present-day professional piper, but with those on whose patronage the piper is dependent.”

It’s an interesting thought. Because, in many ways, the same might be said now.

There is no shortage of ability. No shortage of dedication. No shortage of care for the music. But there may be a shortage of something else.

Patronage — Then and Now

The idea of patronage runs deep in the history of piping.

We are used to telling a story – partly historical, partly mythological – of the Highland piper as a figure of elevated status, supported by the household of the chief. A professional musician, yes, but one whose role extended beyond mere entertainment: a custodian of memory, a composer, an artist.

Now, whether that system was as stable or as generous as we sometimes imagine is open to debate, and there are people here far more knowledgeable than I am on this matter – though I missed it, I suspect Hugh Cheape would have touched on it this morning. But the principle is what matters: that great music was made possible because time and attention were supported.

That the piper was, to some extent, freed from the immediate pressures of earning a living in order to focus on the work itself. Today, that model has all but disappeared. In its place, we have something quite different. A culture in which most pipers – no matter how committed – must balance their musical work alongside work commitments, teaching, performing, competing, and the general demands of life.

And so, the question – yet another! – becomes: where, within that structure, is the space for sustained artistic exploration?

The Limits of Modern Support

Of course, support does exist.

Some pipers, particularly those working at the more creative end of the tradition, will at some point look towards organisations such as Creative Scotland or the Performing Rights Society Foundation in order to realise more ambitious projects – albums, touring and periods of research and development. But here, piping finds itself within a much

broader ecology – competing alongside artists working across every discipline: theatre, dance, visual art, and music of all types.

And rightly so.

There is no reason why piping should be privileged within that landscape. The idea that it should – what we might call a kind of *bagpipe exceptionalism* – is not one I would wish to argue for. But the reality is that within that system, piping is unlikely ever to be a priority. And so, a gap exists.

Not a complete absence of support – but a lack of support that is specifically attuned to the needs of this tradition, and in particular to the kind of slow, exploratory, and often uncertain work that artistic development requires.

A role for institutional patronage

It seems to me that this is where an organisation such as the Piobaireachd Society might, potentially, make a significant intervention.

Not by replacing what already exists – I’m aware that the PS already has a facility for offering grants; indeed, the Big Music Society received a modest contribution towards our first ever project back in 2015 – but by explicitly extending that mission into the realm of creation.

Let me suggest two possible approaches.

1. A Dedicated Fund for Creative Work

The first is relatively modest in scale, but potentially far-reaching in impact: the establishment of a dedicated fund to support new and exploratory work in piobaireachd.

This needn’t be vast. Even a small number of awards each year – designed specifically to **buy time** – could make a meaningful difference.

Time to compose. Time to study. Time to engage with the archive. Time to try things that may not immediately succeed.

Because that, ultimately, is what is required: not simply funding for outcomes, but support for process. And, let me not sugar coat this, what outcomes there are will, inevitably, not be met with universal acclaim. But, what they should do is challenge us by creating work which may not fit neatly into existing categories, and express ideas that may not yet have proven their worth.

Work, in other words, that takes seriously the possibility that piobaireachd might still become something more.

2. A Piobaireachd Artist in Residence

The second proposal is more ambitious and draws on a model that already exists.

At the University of Edinburgh, the Traditional Artist in Residence programme has, in recent years, supported musicians through multi-year residencies. Last month I had the great pleasure of performing at the University in an event to mark 75 years of the School of Scottish Studies alongside the current artist in residence: Fraser Fifield. Fraser, a talented piper and multi-instrumentalist has over the past three years in the post created a substantial body of work in response to the archives held by the university. I was playing a suite for duet of Highland pipes and saxophone with Fraser called the Ardoch Suite, music he had composed in response to recordings of the last native gaelic speaker in Deeside, and which included a piece in what he described as the 'pibroch style' named for her.

This is a salaried role, typically part-time over a fixed period of three years, and in which the artist is given time, resources, access to archival material and tradition bearers, and creative freedom to pursue their work.

One might imagine a similar model applied within our own world: a Piobaireachd Artist in Residence.

Someone given the time and support to:

- engage deeply with the repertoire and its sources
- develop new work
- explore alternative approaches to performance
- contribute, perhaps, to teaching and discussion within the community

Not as a representative figure. Not as a competitor. But as an **artist**.

Why This Matters

Because without such structures, we risk creating a situation in which the music is preserved with extraordinary care, performed to an exceptionally high standard, studied, analysed, and discussed in great detail ...and yet remains, in a sense, creatively constrained. A tradition rich in inheritance – but limited in its forward motion.

Conclusion

So – has piobaireachd flourished?

In many respects, unquestionably, yes. It is better preserved than perhaps at any point in its history. More widely taught. More widely understood. Performed by more people, at a higher level, than ever before.

If flourishing means survival – then it has flourished. If flourishing means institutional success then it has flourished. But if flourishing, as an art form, implies something more – ongoing creation, development, and renewal – then the answer is, perhaps, less certain.

What we have, I would suggest, is a tradition in a state of relative health... but not yet in a state of full artistic vitality.

If we wish to see piobaireachd not only preserved, but truly flourish as an art, then the challenge is clear: to create the space, the time, and the support in which something new might emerge. Because, ultimately, traditions do not flourish simply by being protected.

They flourish when they are allowed to grow.