

The Origins of Piobaireachd. Dr Peter McCalister, Professor Hugh Cheape.

Chair Robert Wallace.

I am pleased to introduce the distinguished academic Professor Hugh Cheape and the distinguished doctor Peter McCalister. The floor is yours gentlemen.

PM Good morning.

I'm Peter McCalister. I'm a bagpiper. But I'm also a classical pianist, as you will discover. And because of that, I think it comes with the music from a slightly different angle.

My co-presenter is Hugh Cheape, who is a bagpiper. But he's also a historian, and a much more brainy person than I will ever be.

Theme and variations in Classical Music and its relationship to Piobairachd

Today we're going to tell you about the theme and variation structure. Piobaireachd is a theme and variations, but the same was happening in Europe for hundreds of years. I'm going to talk about that.

How did this structure find its way to the far west?

Hugh is then going to take over and talk about what the Gaels felt about themselves at that time, probably. And we're going to have some conclusions.

We are really not going to nail the origins of Piobaireachd, but we're probably going to maybe pose some more questions than answers.

Piobaireachd and Gaeldom.

For me, this topic came up from my visit to Sal Mor Ostaig. I was at



the Piobaireachd Society Summer School. I was standing in the library besided Hugh, looking at the Silver Chanter. I almost didn't realize who Hugh was.

I said, you know, Hugh, I study theme and variations in classical music, and it's all happening up here on the edge of the world. Is there a connection over the centuries?

He replied, hmm, let's go and have a look at the view, Peter. And he took me out to the windows. He said, you see all those mountains over there? That's Knoydart. It's a wilderness now.

But if we were standing here in 1600 and 1700, there were hundreds of houses there. You know, this was not the edge of the world, Peter. This was a cultural centre, and you're actually asking the wrong question.

Earliest theme and variations in classical music.

The Folia

In classical music, the earliest theme and variations on written record are called the folia, which I'm going to play you later on. It is a dance originally. It came from Portugal or Spain.

By chance, I was looking at an email from Ronald Smith, saying that in Piobaireachd he detects a Spanish Influence.

Spain was dominant in European politics in the 1700s. He goes on to describe flamenco dancing and the riffs of flamenco guitar. All sorts of stuff about tunes. I'll leave this at the back. Ronald really needs to come here and explain it to us.

The folia was a really, really popular theme. People wrote variations on the same theme for 300 years. Interestingly, when they started to come from France the theme was called a ground. Here is the first Folio.

Plays First Folio

Theme and variations developed over the centuries.



This is the front page of Bach's aria called the Goldberg Variations. He wrote 32 variations on a single theme. He altered the melody. He altered the harmony and the time signature and the speed and so forth.

And then about 100 years later, Diabelli wrote a very stupid theme, which Beethoven wrote 33 variations for. This was the pinnacle of writing for a theme and variations. Because after that, it seemed

to disappear. Maybe the genre had run its course. We don't know quite what happened.

A latecomer to the scene was Rachmaninoff who wrote a set of variations, which I will play you one of. But Beethoven was writing at the pinnacle of themes and variations.

Beethoven's extemporising

Now this is an important point for Pipers. Although he wrote these variations down, in general, when Beethoven played, he would just play any variation that he felt would come to his mind. Pipers would do the same at the same time.

In the 1600s and 1700s, a piper was judged by his ability or her ability to extemporise, to make variations up on the spur of the moment.

Classical Music and Piobaireachd - timelines

So the folia is about the same time as Donald Mor. Vivaldi, who I'm going to play for you, is about the time of Patrick Og, if you believe these dates of the McCrimmons.

Bach was writing at the same time as Donald Ban. We know that is a correct date, because Donald Ban died in 1746. Beethoven was writing right about the same time as John Mackay, the composer of Lament for MacLeod of Colbeck. More about John Mackay later.

I couldn't really think of a composer composing in the early years of the 20th century. In 1934, Donald MacLeod would have only been 18, and I don't think he was composing at that time. Although there's a new kind of renaissance in Piobaireachd writing now.

Let's now have a couple of examples to see what I'm talking about. Here is the folia, the big daddy of them all. And folia means madness. Because as they do the variations the players lose their mind.

Plays examples.

The Gaelic World

What was happening in the West Coast? Well, in piping terms, we're going to get to that in a minute.

The Harp

But a major instrument in the early years was the Harp. This is the oldest harp in Scotland. It's the Queen Mary Harp. It is about the same age as the Brian Beru. So this is a very, very old instrument.

Harpers certainly wrote themes and had variations on them. And they used to fight with each other to who could make the best variations. Again, on the spur of the moment.

The Harp

- ▶ Patrick MacDonald (1784) “Such of [the harpers], as were men of abilities, attempted to adorn [the theme], with graces and variations, or to produce what were called good sets of them.”
- ▶ Joseph MacDonald (1760) “Thus [the pipers] proceed, diversifying the Adagio with all their various Cuttings, which from one to another plays upon the ear with an agreeable surprise”

This is Patrick MacDonald, the brother of Joseph MacDonald.

Joseph wrote almost exactly the same words in describing pipers who were diversifying the adagio, the grounds, with their cuttings, variations. He says “It comes upon the ear with an agreeable surprise.”

The pipers wouldn't have played the same thing twice.

I'm just going to play you a tiny little bit of War or Peace. And this is from our conference about 12 years ago.

Here's the theme.

Plays War or Peace played on harp by Simon Chadwick.

So we're going to skip over to that and make a variation just for one.

So we don't have any medieval harp music surviving to prove exactly what they were doing, but we knew they were writing themes and variations. But they weren't the only people doing themes and variations. And this is an evidence of pipers doing the same thing at the same time.

Lowland and other “Non Highland” pipes

In 1733 William Dixon wrote a whole pile of themes and variations in a manuscript. And this is usually called now the lowland piping music. But these bagpipes, and you can maybe help me with this, were all over Scotland. They weren't just in the lowlands. And the thing called the Union Pipe was around, which is now called the Uilleand Pipe in Ireland.

Many of you will be familiar with this music. I'm going to play you a bit of a very, very good piper playing from the William Dixon manuscript. It is hard to engage the audience with this music, because the music is repetitive. You've got to do something with it to engage the audience. You've got to do, like Piobaireachd, you've got to catch the audience's attention.

I'm sorry, all the lowland pipers do this. Their deportment is terrible. They all stare at the drones as if they're mesmerised by it I love this piper. I think he's brilliant. But he's not alone in that appearance.

The origins of Piobaireachd

I'm not mentioning the McCrimmons. You know the story - Petrus Bruno came from Cremona, 1475. That's it. Pobairaeachd arose.

But we think that the whole story is much more complicated than that. Over to Hugh.

Hugh Cheape

Well, thank you, Peter. That was barnstorming, just as I expected. I just wanted to mention one thing. Peter had a picture of Sal Mor Ostaig where we first spoke. He put the question to us, how is it that these complex ideas and performance details came to the edge of the world and Skye?

The Gaelteachd World View – a Maritime Culture.

We have to, in fact, rethink that the edge of the world and Skye is not Skye itself, not the Atlantic shore of the Hebrides. But in the Gaelic mindset the edge of the Gaelteachd is in fact Braemar, Blairgowrie, Dunkeld, Dumbarton and places further south.

So we've got a different view of the culture of Scotland. Just briefly, here is Tigh Piobaire in Raasay. It because it's an 18th century building. It has been modified, but basically the basic structure is an 18th century building, so is of the time that John Mackay was living and performing in Skye. So that's a wonderful survivor.

Of course it gives us a sense of performance and learning and teaching space. Here we have it. I might say that the far end of the building was the byre. But there's nothing like the warmth coming from animals and so forth. And the building, in spite of its age and adaptation, has all the signs of vernacular building, detailing, showing that it was 18th century.

I went to Skye in 2007 and I was charged with preparing new course materials for the new UHI. I was very struck that the material to hand was textbooks in English. And at the same time, having a fairly profound awareness that I, in the islands, was looking from west to east.

As Peter referred to, that it was looking in a different direction. Having largely, as an east coaster, being brought up with a view of Scotland from east to west, out to the Hebrides and that periphery. So west to east.

So what does this new perspective teach us? What can we discover from this west to east perspective? What is there on offer? What makes a difference?

Well, in fact, everywhere you look, you find signs of how this has been different. But, they're largely invisible to the modern eye. I'll take you briefly to this site in the west side of south Uist, an old church site. It is an amazing place. It is not cared for by the public purse so is in a very fragile condition.

If you are in the islands, you learn very quickly from oral tradition that this was a centre of learning. It is referred to by Gaels as a university. Is there anything strange about that? Not in the Gaelic mindset.

So, you go just over the dunes from this site. It is right on the coast, but it's hidden from the sea. There is this great booming sound very close to when you're there. And you go over the dunes and here is the Atlantic. Here is the sea-way.

You know immediately that islands are less remote than places deep inland. The Hebrides have always been connected to a wider culture.

This culture was a maritime culture. Of course we know all about the Vikings, the boat culture that they brought to the west coast.



There was boat culture of a big type there from the very earliest times. This is a little boat model from the

National Museum of Ireland. It is first century BC, the Iron Age. It represents a big boat. It has 16 oars and a big square sail. It was capable of going deep sea, of ocean going.

We find in Gallic literature a whole raft of what's called voyage literature. Voyages. And of course these include dream sequences perhaps. The Brendan voyage and so forth. But in reality it reflects, it holds a mirror to Gaelic culture.

The Lordship of the Isles

We have the Viking era also demonstrating the importance of a maritime culture. When the Viking influence weakened in the 12th century it was replaced by the so-called Lordship of the Isles. This was a major Gaelic kingdom which cements the west to east perspective.

This is how within the language and culture of the west coast there is deep down this west to east view of everything. But west to east also outward looking into the Atlantic and north and south.

I was very taken with all the values.

I might just say just one problem comes from the Lordship of the Isles. As you see it occupies a large proportion of Scotland. And this is 1400s. This got up the noses of the kings James III, James IV and James V. And they wanted to get rid of the Lordship of the Isles.

Part of the Gaelic mindset on the Lordship of the Isles was that it occupied half Scotland and a house. So they were just over 50% shareholders. This really got up the noses of the Stuart kings of Scots.

They eventually got rid of it by reason of dividing and ruling and by feudal law and so on.

So the Lordship disappears. But meanwhile it leaves its traces. I am very curious as to James III, IV, V. That's all about the Renaissance coming to Scotland. No one ever seems to consider that the

Renaissance equally might have been very much part of Gaelic culture.

I've taken this as an example of a place where the Renaissance should be visible. Of course it's not. The place is neglected. Castle Tioram on Loch Moidart is fine example of the Renaissance detailing but is also a wreck and a ruin. The castle of Glengarry. As you can see you can't get near it. It's fenced round.

Just as an illustration of attitudes. I was very taken with the outrage that met with the blowing up by the Taliban of the great Buddha statues in Afghanistan in March 2000. A little bit after this, the great Castle of Duntulmthe, the Macdonald stronghold in the north end of Skye, was bulldozed over the cliff by the Island Council. Why? Because it was seen as a danger to tourists.

So what is the left of this European looking and Renaissance influenced culture in the islands?

Well here is a most extraordinary statement in a report to the government in 1750. The report for the government in 1750 is anonymous, but probably written by Rev Alexander Macbean (c. 1686-1762), minister of Inverness.

He makes this extraordinary statement about the western districts of the mainland. Of Morar, south and north Morar, Arisaig and Moidart. And this extraordinary attitude at the end.

“The people in general of all ranks in this barbarous place are much better acquainted with Rome, Madrid and Paris than they are with London or Edinburgh.”

How extraordinary.

Peter McCalister

That's really all we're going to just say. I will mention briefly that there were links to the Irish music in the early days. This gradually

decreased as the schools of piping grew up in Scotland. I've already mentioned the Harpers trying to outdo themselves with writing variations. They died out to be replaced by the Pipers.

Links to the continent were strong, mainly by sea.

I am going to tell a new story here about Scotland and France. Tom Speirs told me his dad used to go down to the docks in Leith where the ships came in from France bearing wine. They packed the wine in cane. They took the cane off the packaging and chucked it into the sea. But Jock was standing there. He wasn't the only reed maker to say, you see that cane? I'll have that thanks very much.

I've mentioned Patrick and Joseph MacDonald. They were from Sutherland. They were just as at home in a salon in Edinburgh and Glasgow as they were in Sutherland. They would have known the folia. They would have played the folia.

The history of Ceol Mor has really only been written by people in the Central Belt. The Gaelic history is yet to be written.

I've got one more video to show you. It was a wee bit of a laugh. About the road to Boreraig. It's a wild and woolly place now. But it wouldn't have been back in the day. The McCrimmons would not have taken the wee windy road. They would have nipped across in a boat to Dunvegan.

So we need to think again about our perspective of what life was like then.

Any questions?

RW I would like to ask, do you have any definite evidence of a theme from the continent being taken up by pipers and adapted and coming to Piobaireachd or something similar?

HC Well, I haven't particularly studied Ceol Mor. from that point of view. I think that because the question of the origins of Ceol Mor are

so complex, to me anyway, having thought about it for a number of years and asked the same question.

I'm really not sure, but from my own findings of these links with the continent, right through to the eastern Mediterranean, there is, if you like, in the Gaelic mindset, a track that's going from the eastern Mediterranean through Spain, up the west coast, the west side of Europe, through into Ireland, Scotland, and then further north.

I've noticed that ideas, music, all these things, probably instruments as well, the influence of instruments, seem to come on these tracks. So, that's as far as I've taken it. I'm past going any further than that. But I offer you that.

Duncan MacGillivray I was interested to see what the Reverend McBain had to say about the inhabitants of the Highlands and Islands. re we to deduce from that that the Reformation in the final analysis cast a terrible shadow over Scottish and Highland culture?

HC That's a very loaded question Duncan. I believe so. For several generations, the Reformation hadn't effectively made much impact on the islands. Now, and of course, as Jacobitism comes on the scene, that suddenly becomes a big political issue. Hence, remarks like that.

That anonymous report, of course, was to give the government a picture of how disloyal, how traitorous, and how loyalty to the Church of Scotland was a very weak issue still in 1750, which was of course immediately after the Jacobite Wars.

DM Regarding the reference to Rome there, I know that Robert Tannehill, for a fact, couldn't get any material published if he acknowledged it came from Catholic Irish. The publishers wouldn't touch it. That's it. So Burns kept it quiet. So it gives you an indication. I think we underestimate the impact of Catholicism.

HC Not, I mean, if you're looking at it, if you retreat into this west to east view, it becomes a given almost. This resistance to the

Reformation or just keeping clear of the Reformation and of the elite classes at least get all their education on the continent. That filters down, you know. There are several examples of leading Gaels in the west who are called so-and-so French John, Spanish John, so on.

It's just that they were educated in the continent. The further you go back, the more common that is. It was a natural course.

Against that was demands to be educated in English, in the schools and the lowlands. And that was often anathema. It leads to, and I hope I'm going to get this written up, that, and it's following on points made by Sorley McLean and the late Dr. John McInnes, that the Gaels were nation, a medieval nation.

That's what makes it easier, I think, to understand this different world view and this sort of west to east perspective and all that that brings.

Charles Finney

Well, I'm sort of playing on this theme. It reminds me a bit of Johnson's account, you know, from 1763 with his tour of Scotland. He marveled at the country houses he went to. Their libraries, he said, equalled those of anyone in the big cities, London or Edinburgh.

Would that have also applied to the instruments and other types of music that they would have imported from the continent?

HC Well, as far as I can see, most of the influences of the baroque, maybe through fiddle music and so forth, come into the islands. And that, I think it's always assumed that that's an east to west movement.

There is no reason not to deny or neglect that it's come on the seaways and with the trade with Spain and France and the Mediterranean.

PM If I can just chip in there as well. We need examples. So back in the day traditional music and classical music were not separate. There was just music. So we now have split it up into kind of chunks and

you're a classical musician and you're a traditional musician and never the two shall meet.

Patrick and Joseph McDonald just covered all genres. As far as I present, they were playing music. So that's an interesting way of looking at it.

HC That's right. If you find yourself studying this you very quickly have to get past this modern folk/ classical dichotomy and realise that it's all music

Jack Taylor You referred to the fact that the kings and so on were very keen that the Lords of the Isles and their families should look to Edinburgh and London for their education, not Europe.

I seem to remember something called the Statutes of Iona. The clan chiefs were called to Iona and told by the monarchy to send their children to the schools in Edinburgh. Also that must to ban these travelling musicians. They're very bad, they're all drunk and they're really not very good. And that was about the early 1600s I think.

HC Yes, 1609.

JT It always struck me that they tried to squash that kind of music down but the music that actually survived and in fact flourished at that time was Piobaireachd.

HC Yes. That's right.

JT I suppose that mirrors what you're saying about the strength of the area.

HC Yes. There is one other fact behind that which comes out of this West Coast history and that is that that area say from 1200 to 1650 both Ireland and Scotland with its extensions and obviously onto the continent is part of what the modern sociologists would call a culture province.

In Ireland particularly, language, literature and music were cultivated in the schools and you find endless references in Gaelic to going to the schools in Ireland because there was this notion of moving around and exchange. I don't think that gets nearly enough airing.

So the piping schools tend to be looked at from the wrong end. We're looking at them from just when they're disappearing 1760s and 1770s without actually going back deeply through the history of those families.

What is so curious to me is that those families link themselves in with this culture province and the schools in Ireland. The idea was still prevalent in the early 18th century of a sort of Erasmus exchange. You've got to go, you've got to move.

You get it very nicely in Iain Dall MacKay's life history. He goes, as it's said in Gaelic, on travel, on circuit. In other words they were not going to be boxed in.

RW Hugh, why then was there no Piobaireachd developed in Ireland?

HC Well, I think that partly the rewards and patronage were different. The Lordship of the Isles, which was such a powerful influence, had left its mark on musical performance in the islands. That notion of pursuit of excellence, which was the schools, memory training and so forth, travelling, was part of the West Highlands and Island thing.

That is one of the big questions. I'm beginning to think it's all a sort of organic and natural movement that Piobaireachd emerges in the West Highlands.

Of course, what's more important is that it is caught up by bodies like the Piobaireachd Society, who were aware that piping was under threat and so forth, and that it was being forgotten. There is much more initiative and effort in Scotland to record all this.

So we are much more aware of Ceol Mor. Now it may be that Ceol Mor, in one form or another, exists in song and so forth. Our colleague Alan MacDonald contends that there is Irish Piobaireachd. But it's out of sight.

Logan Tannock You made a point earlier about the links between Piobaireachd and classical music. Surely the one that springs to the mind of the Hebridean in literature would be Mendelssohn and MacDonald's Banner.

PM Yes. That's an example of it going the other way, where Mendelssohn came to Scotland and thought, this music's okay. Beethoven did the same thing. Beethoven knew about the Scottish music and wrote a whole pile of Scottish songs.

HC He was hired by George Thompson to write scores for Burns's songs. Burns wrote a poem on a window here, you know.

John Forbes I was interested in the parallel with variations in classical music. There are many examples where there are variations in classical music, which follow a sort of similar structure rhythmically, where the first variation is simple quavers, then there's a tripling variation, and then there are simple quavers.

So I've wondered whether you think that we don't have minor variations in Piobaireachd, simply because the instrument doesn't really allow that. So have we concentrated more on rhythmic variations in the development?

PM Yes, we haven't got much to do with an instrument. All we can do is change the speed and the length of the notes. We can't change the key very easily, and we can't change the volume. We can change the speed, so we can do things. We've got to excite the listener.

That's the thing that really gets me when I look at some of the players that I'm looking at a lot of recordings in preparation for this talk. The players who excite me are the ones that I've showed you.

We've got to learn that as Piobaireachd players as well. We need to engage the audience, somehow or other. And the writer, the composer, knew that, so they wrote things that they thought were going to be good.

I am not decrying the Piobaireachd Society collection here, but the early pipers would not have played Battle of the Bridge of Perth repeatedly like that. Mozart and Beethoven would never have done it. Never, ever, ever.

There's a good story about Mozart who was near death. He met Beethoven who was 16. ABeethoven was a bit of a jumped-up lad. He played a bit of music. He said, Mozart, master, give me a theme, and I will extemporize upon it. So Mozart said, well, here you go, and played him a theme.

Beethoven started, and he didn't stop. And eventually Mozart goes to his pals and tells them that this guy's going to give the world something to think about. Again, that was him exciting the listener.



Finally here is a picture of Hugh Cheape playing in the Kremlin. He and Iain MacFadyen were invited. Iain piped in the Haggis. Hugh was the outside man playing the guests in.

And here is a video of Dudley Moore playing Beethoven.

Thank you.