



What is Piobaireachd ?

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It seems a straight forward question to ask but the answer simply raises a whole series of further questions. The Gaelic word Piobaireachd simply means 'piping', i.e. what a piper does. The narrowing of the word's meaning to a specific type of pipe music is a relatively modern development, probably a result of the instrument and its music increasingly being played by non Gaelic speakers. As an alternative the more specific term Ceol Mor, translated as 'Great or Big Music' (along with its corollary Ceol Beag or 'Little or light music') has also found favour. However, this is also a modern development with little historical evidence to justify it.

Ceol Mor is the only one of the two terms to appear in the older manuscript sources and even then it is not that common. The earliest is a song by Mary MacLeod dating to circa 1695 – 1718 in a context which her editors interpret simply to mean that the subjects home was 'full of music'. The next example from a poem relating to the Grant family which dates to circa 1718 uses the term to describe dance music. The last example from the late 18th to early 19th century uses it to describe the song of the mavis, (Song Thrush).



The earliest record of it being specifically applied to the music of the bagpipe, (or for that matter to the music of any instrument), only dates back to 1875.

The most common word used in the older sources to describe music is 'ceol', but again its historical meaning was very wide. There is a tendency for musicians today to think of it simply as instrumental music, but as there is no word for 'to sing' in Gaelic then it has to be remembered when interpreting 'ceol' in older texts that it may in fact be describing song, accompanied or otherwise.

Clearly, attempting to define what 'pibroch' was from the older contemporary Gaelic sources is fraught with problems, but as it is generally agreed that it starts with the 'urlar' or ground, then beginning with a look at its origins seems a sensible starting point

Historical studies, like most of life, tend to go around in circles and those on the early history of piping in Scotland have been no exception. But despite, or perhaps because of a number of stushies during the seventies and eighties, the more sober work continued in the background and this does support the case for the origins of what we now call pibroch lying in the North West Islands and Highlands of Scotland. Why that should be the case is now also supported by the recent, more general studies on Gaelic Scotland, and especially the historical connections between here and Ireland.

Sufficient on that topic has now been published to raise questions regarding how well treating both Ireland and Scotland as one common Gaelic Culture zone really works. For example, it has become clear that the more formal Irish structure with the File or poet at the pinnacle of the cultural tree was only partially replicated in Scotland, and that primarily through poets who were Irish and associated with Clan Donald south, who in any case had interests in both countries. From the Irish perspective Scotland rarely featured at all, and then only as a peripheral Gaelic appendage.

Likewise for most of Gaelic Scotland, especially post reformation, Gaelic Ireland was not a major factor in its cultural and religious life. Or as it has been put, 'anything north of Kyle of Lochalsh to Inverness was outside the reach of the Lordship of the



Isles and thus escaped the full benefit of cultural interaction with Ireland', (McLeod 2006). Furthermore, within Gaelic Scotland the area to the north and west now regarded as the 'heartland' of Gaeldom today was itself at that period peripheral to most of Gaelic Scotland. Gaelic speaking, certainly, but actually only a few hundred years from having been part of the Norse world, a fact which modern DNA studies are increasingly demonstrating.

While it is not yet clear what, if any, relevance it has to piobaireachd, it is interesting to note that the earliest depiction of a bagpipe anywhere near that northern area comes from an early 16th century Scandinavian map which has a neat little drawing of a man playing a two drone pipe standing on the Faroe Islands. Standing on firmer ground it is not too surprising that piobaireachd should have appeared in an area that was not dominated by the main Irish-centered Gaelic cultural world. However, the Scottish Gaelic vernacular song form, known as 'Amhran' (commonly 'oran'), was certainly an influence on the piobaireachd urlar or grounds.

'Amhran' was itself a musical form whose roots, according to the late William Matheson, were international and had historical affinities with the medieval chanson. But the 'ground' was just the start or framework on which piobaireachd is built. What turns it into what we now call 'pibroch' is directly and uniquely related to the nature of the instrument on which it is played. All instruments have their own particular characteristics which are then fully exploited by the players. For example, what seems to have been a mouth music accompaniment to dance, when it came into contact with the violin moving into the highland area of Scotland was transmogrified into the fiddle-optimised instrumental form called 'Strathspeys', so named from the part of the country where they seem to have first occurred.

Turning to the mouth blown highland bagpipe, as it is now called, it must be admitted that in comparison to many other instruments it suffers some major disadvantages. While it has a sort of chordal background supplied by the drones, they are fixed and so changing harmonic colour depends on the contrast between the individual notes of the chanter and that fixed drone. Volume is also fixed, so removes another variable



option. The number of notes are limited by the number of fingers and the open chanter provides a constant flow of sound, making the invention of 'grace notes' almost a must as the only way to separate two consecutive notes of the same pitch.

It does, though, have one great advantage. With the constant and stable flow of air when the finger holes are opened, the pitch response is instant and steady until the next note is required. Furthermore, the fingers lying across the chanter holes operate like a series of levers only requiring a short up/down movement. This is anatomically and physiologically very efficient, and studies on musician finger speeds have demonstrated that, as would be expected, woodwind players have the fastest finger speeds with the pipers leading the field by quite a margin. Together with the nature of the instrument it allows pipers to deliver up to eight discrete notes in under one second.

The instrument, though, is only one part of a performance. It also requires a listener to absorb the sound through their ears. Human ears, like eyes, have a physiological variability, even those attached to the same head. However, the grey stuff in-between has long grown used to reconciling the differences. But as it involves the brain, the response to sound includes an element of anticipation. This is similar to the process whereby a listener can complete a speaker's words before he has finished his sentence; this is the essence of piobaireachd playing.

The balance of the timing between the themal notes and embellishments, a subtlety which is not captured in the standard written music, enables the 'anticipation' element in the brain to effectively carry the melody through the decorations. Reinforcing the theme notes in the memory was probably the reason for the ground at times being repeated during the performance. It is also behind the effectiveness of slightly slowing the tempo before entering the final 'movements'. Pipe music is linear, that is, one note can only follow another, therefore slightly reducing the tempo has the effect of increasing the actual duration of the melody notes and in the mind compensating for the extra time taken by the longer embellishments.



Finally, the point has to be made that this has been primarily about the technical relationship between the piper exploiting the nature of his instrument and neat fast fingers. That in itself is not a musical judgement since many instruments do not need to move some or any fingers at all, (fiddle bow hand, plectrum hand or trombone for example): they have other musical characteristics way beyond the highland pipes technical limitations.



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[content/uploads/2016/01/Urlar-evolution.jpg](http://www.altpibroch.com/learning/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Urlar-evolution.jpg))

This background survey has of necessity been brief but as it perhaps moves into controversial territory, at least in terms of some earlier histories of Gaelic Scotland. Anyone wishing to delve further into the arguments should start with the latest academic works relating to the subject. For an examination of the cultural influences around the various 'clan's the volume by M. Pia Coira, 'By Poetic Authority - The Rhetoric of Panegyric in Gaelic Poetry of Scotland to c. 1700', makes a good start. A wider overview of the pan-Gaelic area can be found in 'Divided Gaels - Gaelic Cultural Identities in Scotland and Ireland c. 1200 -c.1650', by Wilson McLeod; which should also be read in conjunction with a review of it by Aonghus MacCoinnich in 'History Scotland' volume 6, No 5, Sept/Oct 2006. Almost an article in itself, while taking issue with some of the book it actually further emphasises the contrasts.



A point made by Dr McLeod was that the 'Norse' element had been subsumed under the Gaelicisation of the earlier populations. A fresh look at that aspect can be found in two papers by Andrew Jennings. 'One Coast Three Peoples' in 'Scandinavian Scotland – 20 years on' ed, by A. Wolf (2009); and 'Latter-day Vikings: Gaels in the Northern Isles in the 16th Century' in 'Selected papers from the Inaugural St Magnus Conference' (2001). These last two articles can be found on-line.



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Evolution of Piobaireachd Urlar (or grounds)

