

Bagpipe history

This is one of the more reasonable approaches to Great Bagpipe history I have seen. “The bagpipe, alongside the drum and the harp, shares the claim to being the oldest of musical instruments and attempts to establish a reasonable history have met with little success.” (From the Ulster-Scots agency site)

The antiquity of the Great Pipe seems to be a problem for many historians. Bagpipes are so old that they fell out of favor with the fashion minded upper classes very early on and so were not well chronicled in the written histories but they are found quite readily in the culture of the folk.

Increasingly, music and language are found to be profoundly related in many cultures. It is very interesting that the Great Pipe can be found along with Gaelic related languages in pockets all over Europe. You can quite readily follow the line back from the Highlands where piobaireachd was the savior of the Great Pipe in Scotland as it was fading from polite society throughout Europe, back through Ireland with the Scoti tribe, down through Spain with the Gaita De Fole, which is said to be the most ancient form of Gaita by the Spanish pipers, up through France into Brittany with the Veuze which was beginning to be revived in post war France, also said to be very ancient by Britton pipers, and into Germany where the Galls, as the Romans called them, first began their migrations.

A huge mistake made by many is to discount what the people in these areas say in favor of an academic's view. Many a historians “well researched” writings have been found wanting in fact along side the oral traditions of those who live the tradition. An example of this is calling the Irish Great Pipe a War Pipe. In Irish it is the Pib Mhor, Piob Mhor, Piobh Mhor, (the lenition changes for many reasons and I have to admit I don't understand it) pronounced Peev War, translating to Pipe Great not Pipe of War. Yes, the Great Pipe has proved it's self in war as a great mover of men all the way back to Roman times when troops were moved to the sound of the Utriculum not the drum. But the heritage of the Great Pipe is much wider than that.

I welcome this chance to talk about the Pib Mhor because it is my passion to play this beautiful, emotive instrument and to debate it's heritage as a profound influence on the development of traditional Northern European, American, and the world's music of today.

Ancient history

The Greeks tell us that the pipe was invented by Athena to embody the cry of Medusa's sister at the gorgon's beheading. Later as she played it near a pool she caught a glimpse of herself reflected in the water and became unhappy with the way it distorted her beautiful face. She throws the pipe away in distaste.

Marsyas the Satyr finds the pipe and learns to play them. His fame spreads till Apollo hears of it. The God challenges the shepherd to a contest. The winner can do whatever they want with the other. The pipes are judged the best until Apollo turns his lyre upside down and plays it. Marsyas can't do the same and so loses. Apollo hangs Marsyas from a tree and flays the skin from him. The skin is hung where the wind blows and fills it as a sort of foreshadowing of the bagpipe to come. The pipes and flutes associated with rustics and shepherds modulated during the sixteenth and seventeenth century into the varieties of the bagpipe, and Marsyas begins to be represented as a bagpiper. And so the rivalry between harp and bagpipe begins.

From Greece we move to Rome to our next noted piper Nero.

Dio Chrysostom wrote in 115 AD "They say he can...play the aulos both with his mouth and also with his armpit, a big bag being thrown under it, in order that he might escape the disfigurement of Athens,".

Some say he piped as Rome burned. One of the few early depictions of the bagpipes is the one Nero put on Roman coins. The bagpipe was the instrument of the Roman infantry. I recently saw a video of Roman re-enactors marching to the Utriculum.

Bagpipes proliferated throughout civilization. If you think about it the technology is quite simple and readily available. All that is needed is a reed, a chanter and drone of bone or wood, and a bag. Bagpipes existed in many forms in many places around the world. In each country the basic instrument was the same, a bag with a chanter and one or more drones. Some of these were mouth blown while others used a bellows attachment to supply the air. The bag provided a sustained tone while the musician took a breath and allowed several tones to be played at once.

Logic dictates that the pipe and its mode of play developed in very early civilizations. Pipe music has been appreciated by people since the first goat was skinned and a chanter stuck in its mouth by some shepherd in ancient Gaul.

Because in most times and cultures bagpipes were peasant instruments and associated with persons of low social status such as shepherds and farmers and even (gasp!) Gypsies - not much seems to ever have been written about them. Writers tended to concern themselves with matters of interest to their more sophisticated audiences - courtly concerns, politics, philosophy, warfare and of course religion. Bagpipes, unlike some other instruments, played little or no role in these arenas and so were no more likely to be chronicled than was peasant footwear. Furthermore, music historians could (and still do) conveniently all but ignore bagpipes when tracing the development of other wind instruments, because most of those instruments do not seem to have passed along the same paths as bagpipes, which can be viewed as offshoots of the apparent main branches of woodwind evolution - it is possible and common to trace the development of, say, the oboe from the earliest one-piece cane reed-pipe through the modern orchestral version without ever stumbling across a single bagpipe.

I will present the theories I have developed through the study and research I have conducted.

Three traditions

Today's musicologist separates the piping world into 3 traditions. The Nordic, Eastern, and Celtic traditions. Today we will focus on what I call the Celtic Configuration bagpipe. This tradition is the pipe configuration of a conical chanter with a split reed and one to three drones played with a mouth blown bag.

The pedigree of the Great Highland Bagpipe

The Celtic configuration great pipe seems to be inextricable from the Celtic culture it's self.

The Gaels or Keltos or Celts, as others called them, were a pre-Roman civilization that stretched across Europe and the British Isles for many years before the Roman legions rolled across the lands they had called their own. The Celts were a semi-nomadic herding people that ranged from Germany down through France and Spain and up through England and Ireland. Caesar himself writes of stopping the Great Celtic migration, which seemed to occur periodically throughout the Celts reign in Europe. Scholars never learned the Celtic civilizations alphabet and so the writings of Celtic historians have been lost. Most of the culture was oral and passed on through song and verse. The saying "The pen is mightier than the sword" is played out with sad consequence when it comes to Celtic history and culture. But if we take the evidence available to us today and carefully compare it and follow it's clues we can begin to piece together the pedigree of the Piob Mhor.

Veuze: Breton Great Pipe

Traveling as far west in France as you can, you come to a peninsula whose north coast is just across the English Channel from Cornwall. Wales, the Isle of Man, Ireland and ultimately, Scotland are not very far away. This is Brittany, "Breizh" in the Breton language, a Celtic language related to Welsh, Cornish, Manx and Scottish and Irish Gaelic. The Breton people are close cousins of the Welsh and Cornish. In their migration to the far western peninsula of what today is France, the Bretons retained a Celtic heritage, which had once stretched across the European continent, before Roman and Germanic expansions.

After the Second World War and during the cultural revivals of the 1970's a bagpipe called the Veuze is rediscovered and studied. The veuze is a one-drone bagpipe found traditionally in southeastern Brittany and in the northern part of the Vendée. Played alone or with the accordion or fiddle, this instrument is perhaps the oldest of the bagpipes found in Brittany and has changed very little in form since the Middle Ages. Those who are familiar with other bagpipes will find that the tone of the veuze is similar to that of the gaita of Galicia, Spain, or the cabrette of the Limousin and Auvergne areas of southern France. The veuze disappeared from Brittany for several dozen years before pipers began to research it and locate old instruments. It was only in the mid-1970s that the instrument saw a real revival thanks to the work of the organization "Sonneurs de Veuze".

In Brittany the Great Pipe retains its place as the instrument of choice for the Fes Noz, a dance party that retains its regional flavors in the music and dance performed there.

Gaita De Fole: Galicia's Great Pipe

On the North West corner of Spain on a piece of land that, interestingly enough also juts toward the British Isles is the Ancient land of Galicia. This area is also proud of its Celtic cultural underpinnings and promotes, as it's national instrument the Gaita. This bagpipe has sprouted many forms but the original was a conical bore chanter with split reed, a large skin bag and a drone over the shoulder. The most popular today is the Gaita Gallega, which has a bass over the shoulder, and one or two drones across the chest. The Band Gaita has three drones played in the familiar manor on the shoulder. Galician's use the pipes in grand processions of Saints through the towns and in parading the Giants. The pipes are also used in dance music and to play with drums through the streets as a kind of town crier telling people when to get up and other parts of the day.

Piob Mhor: Irelands Great Pipe

In the Leabhar Gabhala (Book of Invasions), a mythological history of Ireland; The Sons of Mil, the immediate ancestors of the Irish people are sent by their father to check out the misty Isle he can see from his tower on the shores of Galicia. King Mil's sons bring the Celtic culture to Ireland and I believe they bring the Great Pipe with them. The history of piping in Ireland extends over a span of thirteen centuries. The earliest references are in the ancient law tracts and annals. Some high crosses have carved depictions of early pipes (10th century) and from the 15th century onwards references become more frequent. All of these pipes were mouth-blown instruments. The Piob Mhor had a profound effect on the music of Ireland. Many of today's authors attribute the Irish traditional musical aesthetic to the Piob Mhor.

Grey Larson-- The *piob mór*, like the pastoral bagpipe, had no capacity for momentary interruptions of the flow of air. Thus, their melodies were constant, unbroken streams of sound. Any articulations, by necessity, were created *solely* by movements of the fingers. The implications of this can be understood most clearly when imagining the player of such a bagpipe playing two consecutive melody notes of the same pitch. Since the flow of air cannot be interrupted, you can see that the second note can only be produced by *articulating* it with a fingering technique. The varied use of these fingered articulations became an integral and sophisticated element of Irish bagpipe music.

The Fiddle Music of Donegal by Michael Robinson-The fact that many of the tunes come from the (great) piping repertoire has influenced this style. The range of the Piob Mor is nine notes—a single octave A to A, plus the G below. Any tune confined to this range can be played in two different octaves on the fiddle without leaving first position. —These players prided themselves on their technical abilities, which included playing in higher positions, and sought out material, which would demonstrate their skill. —Although such virtuoso pieces are elsewhere played

nowadays in a semi-classical style, the Donegal fiddlers never lost sight of the folk tradition and successfully adapted these tunes to the traditional playing style.

GHB: Great Pipes in Scotland

It was in the year 503 AD that an Irish tribe called the Scoti came across the Irish sea to establish the kingdom of Dalriada in what is now Argyle, Scotland. They came from a land that was well known in this time for "music and poetry, as well as learning in general, cultivated by a highly skilled professional class." During the 12th century, the Scots had three "art," or high-class instruments. There were the *cithara*, *timpanum*, and *chorus*. The *chorus* was an early type of bagpipe. It consisted of a simple wind bag, or other wind-chest, with an inflation pipe and a drone, or chanter.

Even though southern and continental influences were heavy in most Scottish courts, Irish musicians remained popular in the Highland courts, and documentary evidence suggests that Irish and Scottish music remained similar at this time, and were indeed considered the same.

Historians may speculate on the origins of the Scottish clans' piob mhor, or great Highland bagpipe, but the Highlanders were the ones to develop the instrument to its fullest extent and make it, both in peace and war, their national instrument.

As bagpipe use faded throughout most of Europe, a new form of music was starting in the Highlands. Beginning with Iain Odhar, who lived in the mid-1500s, the MacCrimmon family was responsible for elevating Highland pipe music to a new level, according to historians. This music is called piobaireachd (pronounced piobroch). This classical music is an art form which can compare to the music of any other country and most of it was composed 100 years before the piano and without written notation.

Pipes in the army

Pipe bands may be seen as a relatively new phenomenon as distinct from the bagpipe itself (which has no clear origin, being found in countries throughout the world for thousands of years) and perhaps not particularly Scottish, having developed from the formation of army bands around the end of the 18th century. At that time the British Army boasted twenty-two pipe bands made up from eleven Highland Regiments, one from each of their home and away battalions. Two centuries later, whilst the regiments might have changed somewhat, the number of bands within the British Army had remained almost constant. There was a time when the Scottish bagpipe and its music might have been lost forever. After the defeat of the Jacobite army at Culloden in 1745 and the passing of the Disarming Act of 1747, the bagpipe, though not mentioned in the Act, was treated as an instrument of war and was therefore forbidden along with weapons and Highland Dress. The Act was repealed in 1782, probably to allow the raising of Scottish regiments. The first Highland Regiment to be raised was in 1757 and in 1854 the fifes of the English regiments were replaced by the pipes of the Highland regiments. Even to-day the army refers to these pipe bands as pipes and drums.

Pipes in competition

The Scottish bagpipe, however, was not originally intended to be used as a group instrument and has been preserved in its present form, not by bands, but by a type of

music known as piobaireachd (pronounced .pibroch.), simply meaning .pipe playing., or Ceol Mor (the big music), dating back to the 15th century. Its origin is obscure, but it is associated with the legendary piping family of the MacCrimmons who are said to have run a piping school at Boreraig on the island of Skye until 1773. The MacCrimmons were the hereditary pipers of the MacLeods of Dunvegan who lived in Dunvegan Castle and in 1967, Dame Flora MacLeod instituted the Annual MacCrimmon Memorial Piobaireachd Competition at Dunvegan Castle. The trophy is a silver chanter and the competition is open only to winners of the highest piping awards.

After the repeal of the Disarming Act the Highland Society in London held an annual bagpipe competition. In 1784 the competition was transferred to Edinburgh and from 1785, as now, competitors were required to wear Highland Dress. Piping competitions were solely for the playing of piobaireachd and it was not until 1859 that prizes for strathspey and reel playing (Ceol Beag . little music) were introduced in the Northern Meeting in Inverness. Marches, that is, pipe tunes for marching, originally referred to as quicksteps, were introduced at round the same time. Angus MacKay (1813 -1859), Queen Victoria's first piper, is credited with introducing the competition type march and he left a collection of piobaireachd in both staff notation and in canntaireachd (pronounced - canterrock).

Until the late 18th or early 19th century, pipe music had been transmitted from player to player by canntaireachd, which is a form of singing where each note is represented by a different vowel and embellishments are represented by consonants. This form of teaching is regarded, even today, as the proper way to learn piobaireachd, but the move towards staff notation was probably necessitated by the inevitable acceptance of Ceol Beag as a legitimate form of pipe playing. The MacCrimmon tradition disapproved of the playing of light music and it was forbidden in their school, probably because it could be played on other instruments and was not therefore, strictly speaking, pipe music. Nevertheless, by the mid 18th century, reels and jigs had become an integral part of pipe playing. The Highland Society believed that strathspey, reel and jig playing helped in the fingering of piobaireachd. Clearly this could have been a face-saving way of allowing their introduction into competitions.

In 1903 the Piobaireachd Society was formed to preserve the music which itself had preserved the instrument. It established a piping school at Edinburgh Castle in 1910 which was taken over by the army in 1959. The debt owed to the army for the development of light music, particularly marches, which provides the repertoire for pipe bands is widely acknowledged, as is its support for the preservation of piobaireachd, a form of music not usually associated with band performances.

The Scottish Pipe Band Association came into existence in 1930 and in 1980 was granted the title of The Royal Pipe Band Association. This is now a world wide organisation responsible for a range of competitions including the World Pipe Band Championship. The first pipe band competition on record took place in 1905, but the World Championship was only instituted in 1947, after the Second World War. This popular interest has had the effect of lessening the interest in piobaireachd, the very reason

for the Highland bagpipe being extant. The attraction for most pipers lies in the competition type tunes, but recently there has been a resurging interest in piobaireachd and also in canntaireachd. Band competition tends to focus on well tuned pipes, the absence of errors and an integrated band performance between pipes and drums.

The Great Highland bagpipe is the most technologically advanced version of the Celtic Great Pipe and so is embraced by many of the proponents of Great Pipe culture today. It is amazing how the Piob Mhor has found it's way back into the many traditions it evolved from.