

Piobaireachd in time: technology and transmission

The online piobaireachd series you are reading here exists because of a sequence of technical revolutions over the last three centuries during which piping traditions have been enlarged and renewed by players who were aware of the latest innovations and quick to exploit the exciting new possibilities they opened up.

Contemporaries observing the 19th century's development of mechanical typesetting and high speed rotary presses spoke in heady terms about "one of the greatest powers under God for the advancement of the civilisation of man."

In music especially the advances were enormous because the difficulties had been particularly acute. The traditional expense of hand engraving meant that published music texts were few and expensive. Even in major centres of music players had long worked from manuscript copies because that was the only affordable method. When towards the end of the 18th century, therefore, the Scottish music engraver James Johnson developed a new and cheaper technique for engraving onto pewter plates and used it to publish the classic song collection *The Scots Musical Museum* (which was largely edited by the poet Robert Burns), he also brought within the realms of financial possibility Donald MacDonald's pioneering piobaireachd edition *The Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia*.

Innovations like this, coupled with advances in typesetting, ushered in the era of the new cheap music movement led by firms like Novello in England and James S. Kerr in Scotland. This was recognised as a great advance in the mass diffusion of culture because it placed printed music—long the cachet of a wealthy elite—within the reach of almost everybody. The great Victorian editions of *Uilleam Ross*, Donald MacPhee, and, above all, of David Glen, bade fair to place a book of bagpipe music in its own specialised notation in every pipe-box in the country. The piper editors were pioneers in recognising and removing, step by step, the major barriers to the spread of a thoughtful musical culture.

A further advance was the use of compressed and abbreviated forms of notation, such as sol fa in music, which meant a double reduction in production costs. Firstly it accelerated and therefore cheapened the costs of compiling texts and secondly, by greatly reducing the physical size, made the resulting books much cheaper. General C. S. Thomason's great *Ceol Mor* edition championed these methods in piobaireachd with the express aim of placing the music "within reach of poor pipers . . . a matter . . . of the first importance."

For pipers this was especially significant because of the expansive, and therefore expensive, system of notation that they normally employed: twiddly bit, twiddly bit, twiddly bit MELODY NOTE, twiddly bit, twiddly bit twiddly bit, ANOTHER MELODY NOTE, and so on. Compared with this fiddlers simply had to contend with the occasional appoggiatura. This meant that while pipers could squash at most a couple of two-parted tunes onto a normal oblong page, the editors of fiddle music could get half a dozen or more into the same space.

In piobaireachd we can trace the early beginnings back to John MacDonald, a young Skyeman and servant of MacDonald of Kingsburgh who was involved in the escape of Prince

Charles Edward Stuart in the summer of 1746. (See the Commentary to "Lady Margaret MacDonald's Salute" where we see Lady Margaret in conversation with Kingsburgh and her reaction to the news that the Prince was at the bottom of her garden while the house was being searched by government troops). He later moved to Edinburgh, living with his brilliant son the bagpipe maker, teacher and music editor Donald MacDonald (c.1767-1840). It was Donald who established the pipe notation used today. But the cost of publishing *The Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia* almost bankrupted him when the subscriptions from the Highland Societies of London and Scotland which he had reasonably expected to be taken up and would have insured him at the very least against loss, failed to materialise. His experience showed that the market was not yet mature enough to support publication of this kind of music on this kind of scale, though this would happen routinely within two generations in the days of MacPhee and Glen. There was nothing "backward" or "primitive" in this; it was fully abreast of contemporary European practice. We should recall how difficult it has been to propagate serious music during the past two hundred years even in buoyant market conditions. During the 20th century recordings of nearly all avant garde classical music issued were possible only where some form of subscription was involved. (For further information see Timothy Day, curator of Western art music at the Sound Archive of the British Library, *A Century of Recorded Music: Listening to Musical History*, New Haven: Yale, 2000—a beautifully written and absorbingly interesting book).

When Donald MacDonald was unable to afford the cost of publishing the second volume of his collection he sent the manuscript to J. W. Grant of Elchies on Speyside, expressing the hope that he would be able to afford to continue the work. Grant was his leading gentleman pupil and grandfather of Charles Simeon Thomason who was brought up and learned his early piping at Elchies. When Thomason (1833-1911) left home for India in 1854 he was presented with his grandfather's pipes and a copy of this manuscript. He also took a copy of Angus Mackay's book which he had transcribed by hand himself (an indication of how scarce it had become even by this early date), only to lose the lot three years later at the siege of Delhi.

But the new age in publishing of piobaireachd and the growing displacement of manuscript by print was dawning even as Thomason set sail for the East. Something of the excitement of the period is captured in the following tribute delivered to the printers of Glasgow at their annual soiree on 14 January 1860:

...it is no exaggeration to say that the men now before me print every single morning in Glasgow more words, produce more matter, in twenty-four hours than was ever written by the hand during twenty four centuries before the invention of printing. Only think what an extraordinary thing this thing called a book is. Here, for example, a man is multiplied ten thousand times ten thousand over...he never dies. He is in a hundred places at the same time, and he lives on from generation to generation. You so multiply the man – you invest him with such extraordinary powers of immortality, that he lives in every house, and dwells...in every cottage in the land.

The speaker was the Rev. Dr. Norman MacLeod of the Barony, Dean of the Chapel Royal and one of the sharpest minds in mid-Victorian Scotland who would go on to write the introduction to his friend *Uilleam Ross's* important *Collection*.

Within a generation Sir David Grove was writing excitedly in the preface to *A Short History of Cheap Music* (London: Novello, Ewer and Co, 1887) that:

The same causes which have created the immense periodical literature of our day have brought about the equally extraordinary cheap music which we now possess, and while they have given us the *Daily Telegraph* for a penny and the *Illustrated London News* for sixpence, have also given us a still more valuable acquisition – *The Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt* for a shilling. It is the division of labour, the spread of machinery, the extension of travelling and transport, the invention and use of labour saving processes of all kinds unknown to former generations....When the house of Novello was founded no one could have dreamed of the change that was so soon to arrive. When the present writer was in his teens, the price of music was more than twenty times what it now is. The first guinea that he recollects having given to him, in 1837, was expended in a pianoforte score of *The Messiah* which is now published at a shilling. Good music at all out of the common line was either enormously dear or in manuscript, and had to be copied..."

By this time the pipers had already set out their own distinctive stall, beginning with *Uilleam Ross's Collection* which appeared in 1869. When his third edition appeared in 1885, it had expanded to forty *piobaireachd* (from just 20 in 1869) and more than four hundred pieces of light music (from just over 200 in 1869). The price, remaining at 30 shillings throughout, indicates the dramatic fall in the cost of printing and publishing this material, enabling Ross to offer twice the content in 1885 that he could in 1869. Purchasers got a lot for their money—a large and choice collection of tunes, attractively arranged in the latest style. Each *piobaireachd* was published in staff notation for the first time and included some of the greatest tunes in the tradition: pieces like "The Lament for the Children," "In Praise of Morag," "Scarce of Fishing" and "The Lament for Donald Bàn MacCrimmon."

Donald MacPhee brought out his *Collection of Piobaireachd* in 1879, undercutting Ross by making available thoughtfully edited versions of some 37 tunes from the central core of the repertoire priced at 15 shillings. By the 1890s it was being issued in two volumes which could be had for just 4 shillings each. MacPhee's *Selection of Music for the Highland Bagpipe* appeared in 1876 and contained 150 marches strathspeys and reels for 6 shillings. Fifteen years later the price had fallen still further and it could be bought for a couple of shillings. The cheapness of MacPhee's books meant that they were often used as basic instructional texts until well into the 20th century.

In 1876 David Glen brought out the first volume of his *Collection of Highland Bagpipe Music* which was eventually to run to seventeen parts and contain more than a thousand tunes. By the early 1900s he had got unit costs down to about the equivalent today of 2 pence a tune. His *Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd or Highland Bagpipe Music* which began to be issued in parts in 1880 was available in its collected form in 1905. It contained 100 pieces of well-arranged and beautifully printed ceòl mór fully written out in all their parts for £1.15 shillings, which likewise today would be less than 2 pence a tune.

By this time C. S. Thomason was finalising his system of musical shorthand which would allow the whole repertoire to be issued in a single volume. His *Ceol Mor*, published in 1900, remains the largest collection of this kind of music ever issued.

It was also, by some distance, the cheapest. The 1905 edition was advertised at two guineas

(£2. 2 shillings) and contained some 286 tunes, working out at less than 1p. a tune.

Thomason wrote of his intention:

that profits—should there be any—would be devoted to "Ceol Mor" as an art...I did look . . . [for help] in reducing the cost of my book to a figure placing it within reach of poor pipers—a matter surely of the first importance . . . many musically uneducated young pipers...have taught themselves from my book alone, and have been profuse in their admiration of its simplicity.

The support which was refused Thomason signalled the very different climate which was to prevail as the great Victorian editions were allowed to go out of print to be replaced by the Piobaireachd Society's 'authorised' competition texts during the next three generations.

However, in England in the 1970s the enterprising reprint firm EP of Wakefield restored access to many of the great published piobaireachd collections.

EP's venture was made financially possible by the cheap photocopying technology then becoming available. Within a few years this also began to be overtaken by new electronic media which were to be even cheaper.

At the dawn of the present century Ceol Sean of Springfield Illinois introduced CD-Rom technology to bring the classic piping collections to a new international audience with a democratic access not achieved for a century. Meantime the power and flexibility of the net enabled authentic old scores to be made available entirely free of charge. *pipes/drums* and Ceol Sean are truly the heirs of Thomason and Glen.

* * *

Music examples for the current series have been typeset using "Music Publisher 6" by Braeburn Software of Selkirk. MP3 files were created using GoldWave v5.10 (© GoldWave Inc. 2005).

I wish to acknowledge the support of the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for access to copies of manuscript sources.

The writer asserts copyright in the electronic text, but since the intention is to make this material as widely available as possible, it is hoped that visitors to the site will feel free to download whatever they wish for the purposes of private study.

© Dr. William Donaldson
Aberdeen, Scotland
26 September 2006