

"Lost Pibroch": Introduction to the Set Tunes Series 2009

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That bagpipe music is traditional music seems indisputable. But whether it is also "folk music" is an altogether trickier question, although what the difference might be and what such distinctions might involve is not at first sight clear.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a succession of pioneering Scottish scholars shaped the concept of "tradition" in its modern form, and also defined what came to be considered as "folk music." Until recently it had been thought that this had been done in Germany by writers like Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) and the brothers Grimm (1785-1863). But in an important new study, *The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music": Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge, 2007), Matthew Gelbart has shown that not only was Scotland considered the heartland of "tradition" in the West by virtue of its rich and diverse cultural products – which we knew – but that Scottish scholars also made the decisive theoretical contributions to developing concepts of "tradition" and "the folk" – which we did not know, or at least not entirely.

Thomas Blackwell (1701-1757) and James Macpherson (1736-1796) laid the foundations of the study of oral epic poetry in their works on Homer and Ossian, and provided the inspiration for later Scottish scholars such as James Beattie (1736-1803) William Tytler (1711-1792) and Alexander Campbell (1764-1824), who with nineteenth century successors like Finlay Dun (1795-1853), William Motherwell (1797-1835) and George Farquhar Graham (1789-1867) created the modern concept of "the folk."

The idea was that certain elements within the common people possessed a uniquely valuable oral culture comprising tales, songs and instrumental music that had been transmitted from the remotest antiquity uncontaminated by writing and print. This may be one reason why the editors of *piobaireachd* were always so keen to insist that the music was "ancient" (although it may in fact have been a comparatively recent form).

Poetry and song were the main focus of the argument. Most of the theorists knew little if anything about the music of the pipe, at least in its higher branches – a thing not easy to find out, unless through a course of personal study with one of the (perhaps always rare) master teachers. As a result pipe music was left out of the equation, and has remained on the outside of this discussion ever since. With the exception of the epic poetry of Ossian, and the long narrative ballads, the forms on which the theories were based were small in scale: song lyrics and compact instrumental melodies, and it is interesting to speculate what kind of effect a complex and extended form like *piobaireachd* might have had on what was understood by the "folk" and the kinds of creativity of which they were capable. Short and simple forms were deemed the essence of "folk music" and all kinds of inferences were drawn about the charming, and largely imaginary, rustics who had created them: so not only might the concept of "folk music" have been different – perhaps dramatically so – but the concept of "the folk" themselves might not have sustained the inclusion of *ceol mor* in the equation.

Joseph MacDonald's *Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe* written c.1760 was the only developed account of the classical music of the pipe written during the eighteenth century but it was not available to most scholars when these theories were being formulated. It remained unpublished until 1803 when it appeared in an edition so corrupt that it continued to be little known even within the performer community. The only other published work during the next hundred years which discussed the form and was likely to be accepted as authoritative, namely Sir John Graham Dalyell's *Musical Memoirs of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1849), was wholly negative in its attitude to the bagpipe and its music, dismissing ceol mor as primitive and uncouth and more or less beneath the interest of musically sophisticated people. The most comprehensive account of piobaireachd to be issued in the whole nineteenth century appeared in the thoughtful and well-informed analyses in General C. S. Thomason's *Ceol Mor* in 1900. But *Ceol Mor* was privately published and had an extremely limited circulation: its influence did not begin to be felt until nearly a century later.

So did anybody outside the performer community know what piobaireachd was? The term – "pibroch" (also "pibrough" or "pibrach") – had been current in the Lowlands for centuries: and at least one earlier source could be using it in a way compatible with what we now mean by "ceol mor." For example the poet Allan Ramsay (1684-1758) has a couple of lines in his poem *The Ever Green* that describe how "playand Pibrochs, Minstralls meit / Afore him stately strade." But most contemporaries were like the poet Robert Burns – who was otherwise exceptionally astute and musically informed – in using the term in a much looser way, with the implication that it was a lively form. Burns wrote:

Amang the trees, where humming bees  
At buds and flow'rs were hinging, O,  
Auld Caledon drew out her drone,  
And to her pipe was singing, O;  
'Twas pibroch, sang, strathspeys and reels –  
She dirl'd them aff fu' clearly, O  
When there cam a yell o' foreign squeels,  
That dang her tapsalteerie, O!

Even in the later years of the 19th century a major popular publication like the *The Inverness Collection of Highland Pibrochs, Laments, Quicksteps and Marches, carefully & effectively arranged for the Pianoforte, and containing some of the most popular and favourite airs of the Highlands of Scotland* (six vols., Logan & Co., Inverness & Aberdeen, n.d. but 1878-9) was freely using the term "pibroch" to indicate any kind of lively bagpipe-ish sort of tune. General usage was so vague and loose as to be virtually meaningless.

"Pibroch" could also be used as a casual synonym for the bagpipe itself, as we see in the song "The Hundred Pipers" celebrating the invasion of England by the Jacobite army during the Rising of 1745-6:

The Esk was swollen, sae red and sae deep,  
But shouther to shouther the brave lads keep;  
Twa thousand swam owre to fell English ground,  
An' danced themselves dry to the pibroch's sound.

The author, Carolina Oliphant, Lady Nairne (1766-1845), came from southern Perthshire.

It was not until the later 20th century that the form began to enter the consciousness of educated Scots outside the performer community, as books about Scottish music began to cite it, and recordings of performances began to become available. So in the country that invented the concept of "folk music" in its modern sense, this vital strand of "tradition" containing musical forms of considerable scale and complexity was left out of the reckoning. As a result, there continues to be theoretical ambiguity about where to place pipe music in the musical firmament.

The essential ingredient in the definition of "the folk," that its members were illiterate peasants who produced music in a characteristically spontaneous and unreflecting way, did not sit at all comfortably with the sophisticated performers of pipe music who were highly trained, musically literate, played on expensive instruments, demonstrated a complex and demanding technique, and when publically visible were frequently sailing round the boards in full evening dress. So the concepts of "tradition" and "the folk" were not co-extensive: there was a gap, and pipe music fell into it. As a result, it remains substantially untheorised.

The concepts themselves are highly problematic. My own work has attracted criticism for using a definition of "tradition" that included written and printed sources, on the grounds that only orally transmitted material could count as "traditional." But there is a price to be paid for so narrow a focus, rejecting written and printed evidence. It means deliberately turning our backs on the overwhelming mass of the surviving testimony.

The notion of oral transmission itself is open to serious objections on a number of grounds. In his important study, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700* (Oxford, 2000) Adam Fox describes how the border ballad "Chevy Chase," also known as "The Hunting of the Cheviot," came down to the present. Its occasion was a bloody battle between the Scots and English fought probably in 1436 in which both the leaders, Earl Percy and Earl Douglas were killed and only a handful of their followers were left to tell the tale. The earliest source is the notebook of the minstrel Richard Sheale compiled somewhere between 1557 and 1565. Sheale seems to have taken it down from a printed broadside, which must itself have had a manuscript or oral source. Fox thinks the ballad probably started in manuscript, passed into oral circulation, and was subsequently printed; whereupon the process went into reverse: the printed texts generated orally circulating versions, which ultimately found their way into manuscript again in the notebooks of folksong collectors. There has been continuous dialogue between scribal, printed and oral material for hundreds of years. In the British context it seems impossible to isolate a "pure" oral dimension at any period since the Reformation.

Many assumptions surround pipe music and its interpretation; but an over-simplified view of orality and oral transmission is amongst the most misleading.

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