

## Set Tunes 2008 Introduction: "What are the neighbours up to?"

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In related fields of music, the classics, pop and jazz, a great deal of research has been done into teaching and learning, indeed every aspect of the art. This is not so widely available in our own field, yet much of it seems directly applicable to piping and some of the parallels are very interesting.

In a recent interview, the concert pianist Angela Hewitt, a leading exponent of the keyboard music of J. S. Bach, explained: "Many people don't realise that Bach wrote hardly anything in the score in the way of precise indications about how his music was to be interpreted. Nothing tells us how slow or fast a piece should go; how loud or soft; how detached or smooth. One was expected to know these things if one had been well taught and had good taste. Treatises of the time give us some big clues, but much study is needed to understand baroque performance practice. Perhaps this freedom is why I never tire of playing it." (*Guardian*, 11 January 2008, p.14).

During the last two decades or so, researchers have learned a good deal about how professional musicians in the classical tradition practice and prepare for performance and recording. In a recent fascinating study, Andreas C. Lehmann, John A. Sloboda and Robert H. Woody, *Psychology for Musicians Understanding and Acquiring the Skills*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), point out that learning an instrument does not simply consist in mastering various mechanical finger movements and assorted matters of breathing and embouchure, but developing a conceptual understanding of the music concerned, how it is organised, why it is the way it is, and how it may be best expressed.

The expectation that one ought to be a technically "complete" player by the time one has reached one's twenties, means that for mastery to develop, serious learning has to begin in childhood. This generally means at least eight years old, but in some cases – such as the piano and violin – it can be as early as four. In the formal training of classical musicians the beneficially competitive nature of "conservatory culture" can inspire young players to excel and this is probably true whenever young pipers are taught in groups, or within a pipe band context. For example, they may use vacations to work intensively on their technique for the sheer pleasure of impressing their friends with the progress they have made when they meet again in several weeks' time.

Many people report shattering musical experiences in childhood as forming the basis of all their later accomplishment in the art, and this seems true also in piping. Andrés Segovia wrote of his encountering a strolling flamenco guitar player: "At the first flourish, more noise than music burst from the strings and, as if it had happened yesterday, I remember my fright at this explosion of sounds . . . rearing from the impact, I fell over backward. However, when he scratched out some of those variations he said were *soleares*, I felt them inside of me as if they had penetrated through every pore of my body." (Lehmann, *et al.*, p.47).

Regular and intensive practice, it emerges, actually enlarges the relevant parts of the brain to cope with the increased demand. This can have downsides too. About three-quarters of professional classical musicians experience health problems as a direct result of what they do,

most significantly perhaps muscular-skeletal damage and various kinds of hearing loss. Research using monkeys doing repetitive hand actions found that the cortical areas which controlled these movements enlarged and that this could put pressure on adjoining areas of the brain so that uncontrollable movement in adjacent fingers could develop over time. It seems possible that pipers may be particularly prone to this because of their frequent use of "fork" movements where neighbouring fingers go up quickly while others go down, which apparently has to happen more quickly on the pipes than on some other woodwind instruments. Here may be one possible source of the legendary *cruime*, said to be hereditary in certain piping families.

Various studies have identified optimal practice time (i.e. practice which results in serious and effective learning, because – obviously – like everything else practice time can be of varying quality) is probably at most four hours a day, owing to the physical and psychological demands it makes on the performer.

Lehmann, Sloboda and Woody report that studies of the interpretative and expressive skills of expert musicians find that some are very idiosyncratic—i.e. the more expert you are the more likely you are to depart from the expressive "norm"; less expert players are far more likely to time things in a "conventional" way. Sheer familiarity may lead expert players to continuously bend and shape expression even although they may be perfectly aware that these new roads through the musical glens may not be as "good" as the old ones. This seems to happen in every kind of music, as a quick check of early against more recent recordings of Chuck Berry performing his classic song "Sweet Little Sixteen" may confirm.

Studies find that top-flight performers generally prepare by listening to all the available "good" recordings of the piece in question. Then they turn to all the available scores; not just the published editions (the "official" complete Mozart edition for example is notoriously unreliable because of the doctrinaire and erratic way in which it was edited) but also as wide a spread as possible of earlier published and manuscript sources:

Key interpretational decisions are made early in the learning history of a particular piece and guide the rehearsal and memorization process. Learning a new piece of repertoire is, for most performers, a lengthy process that can require tens or even hundreds of hours spread over many weeks and months. A prevalent belief among music learners is that technical and interpretative rehearsals are separate processes that can be accomplished in sequence, first one, then the other...Detailed analysis of the actual behaviour of expert performers has shown a different story. Experts appear to formulate key interpretational strategies rather early on in the practice period. Many world-class performers steep themselves in the music through listening, studying scores, and reading before they go anywhere near their instruments. Thus they already know much about the music, and how they want it to sound, before detailed rehearsal gets under way. (Lehmann, *et al.*, pp.97-8).

Some classically trained musicians deliberately avoid listening to other people, for fear that their own "originality" may be compromised. The great majority of players, however, preparing for performance or recording, usually listen intensively to other performances. This is particularly true in jazz and certain kinds of traditional music. For example, in Japanese traditional music, there is a high degree of pressure on learners to be able to exactly

reproduce their masters' style before they are considered entitled, by growing judgment and experience, to depart from it intelligently.

Unsurprisingly, it emerges that people who are good at sight reading are usually good at other kinds of musical memorisation, and that while beginners and the limited performer plod along from note to note, the experienced and the talented tend to apprehend music in chunks and phrases, so that a highly developed expectation of what the music is likely to say – and hence an intuitive sense of structure and idiom – is a crucial factor.

On ensemble playing, contemporary research says little that any observant person with pipe band experience would be unaware of. This is particularly interesting in view of the recently proposed "super band" made up of global all-stars which may physically assemble perhaps only a few days before major events. The research suggests that some advanced musicians are able to perform effectively ensemble with very little, or perhaps even no, rehearsal. Good jazz musicians who had never played together before can turn out highly professional-sounding performances completely impromptu because they know the idiom so well and are so deeply steeped in contemporary performance practice.

Another familiar phenomenon in the piping world which is replicated elsewhere is the frequently-complained-of wide spread of marks by piping and drumming adjudicators at the big competitions. Research shows that skilled professional adjudicators, themselves musicians of the highest quality, vary in their assessments according to who they think they are listening to. The same (unfamiliar) piece played by the same orchestra call forth radically different assessments and valuations when the test group are told that the performers are a crack ensemble, and when they are told on a later listening that the (same) group is a band of decent amateurs. This result is very consistent, and has been replicated in other test groups.

This raises the central issue of the role of literacy in modern piobaireachd playing and how many performers go primarily to written or printed scores and how many get their grasp of idiom and expression largely – perhaps even exclusively – from recorded sources. How many of the performer community, even at a high level, look at a written score and confidently infer good idiom and expressive nuance in a tune they do not already know? One of the major difficulties in modern piobaireachd playing is that the recorded repertoire does not contain a great variety of different interpretations; indeed most of those enjoying competition success (and hence likely to be recorded) are as uniform as a row of paling posts. Most modern players work with a single edition, edited by a single editor and his close disciples producing a single interpretation (*Kilberry* or the "left hand page" of the *Piobaireachd Society Collection*, second series) in a single dead uniform performance style.

Since the performance tradition has been narrowed in this way, as I have argued in the Set Tunes series and in my books *The Highland Pipe and Scottish Society* (Tuckwell 2000; 2<sup>nd</sup> impression Birlinn 2008) and *Pipers* (Birlinn 2005), the only way to recover the situation and return to the mainstream of musical tradition would appear to be through a sensitive reading the old idiomatic pre-Piobaireachd Society scores. This has been the object of the Set Tunes series since 2001.

The following tunes are included this year with full pdf scores, MP3 files and commentary:

**Gold Medal:**

- "The Blind Piper's Obstinacy"
- "Sobieski's Salute"
- "The Stewarts' White Banner"
- "Clan MacNab's Salute"
- "The King's Taxes"
- "My King Has Landed in Moidart"
- "The End of the Great Bridge"
- "The Park Piobaireachd" (no.2)

**Silver Medal:**

- "Hector MacLean's Warning"
- "The Rout of the MacPhees"
- "Lament for the Castle of Dunyveg"
- "The Little Spree"
- "The Massacre of Glencoe"
- "I Am Proud to Play a Pipe"
- "Corrienessan's Salute"
- "Kinlochmoidart's Lament"

Three tunes, "The Stewarts White Banner," "The End of the Great Bridge" and the "Park Piobaireachd" (no. 2), which were set in 2001, have been updated to meet the modern standards of the Series and now replace the earlier entries.

Two of the Silver Medal tunes, "The Little Spree" and "The Massacre of Glencoe," were previously set in 2004 and for these MP3 files have been provided to bring them into conformity with recent practice.

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