

# PIOB Aireachd

By Donald F. Lindsay

Introduction by Iain MacHarg



## What is Piobaireachd?

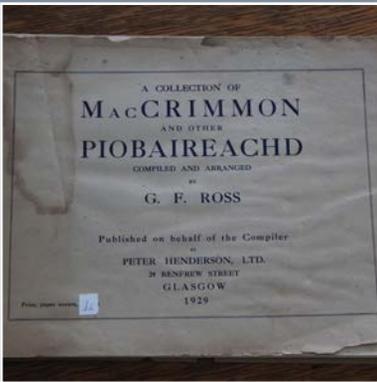
The word “piobaireachd” means pipe playing or pipe music, but is now used to describe the classical music of the highland bagpipe. Ceol Mòr is another name that is used that means “Big Music”. Piobaireachd generally consists of a theme or ground and variations that vary in number and complexity. It is most commonly performed on the highland bagpipe, but is also played on the fiddle and harp as part of a more recent revival.

## When did Piobaireachd first develop?

Most piobaireachds are assumed to have been written between the 16th and 18th centuries. Research into the ornamentation style of piobaireachd points to earlier origins in wire strung gaelic harp music. The crunluath movements of the bagpipe are particularly similar to the rapid descending arpeggios of the harp. Caoineadh Rìoghail (The Royal Lament ca 1649) is a harp tune similar in structure to piobaireachd with a theme and variations. It is said to have been composed by the harper John Garbh MacLean, Laird of Coll, on the execution of Charles the First.

As the tradition of scottish gaelic aristocratic patronage began to crumble due to political and cultural changes, the role of the harp went into a decline. The patronage of hereditary harpers was largely finished by the middle of the 17th century. The transfer from harp to bagpipes is assumed to have begun in the 16th century and with it the style of music that was to develop into what we call piobaireachd today.

# CEOL MÒR



## BETTER PIOBAIREACHD!

*Inspiring piobaireachd performances can come from a wide variety of backgrounds and performers. If you feel that there is more to bring out of your piobaireachd performances, perhaps some of the following suggestions may help you achieve your goals.*

### 1. Overview:

Look over the entire tune. Get a preliminary idea of the melody, the probable length of the phrases, a likely tempo for the Urlar, and appropriate tempos for each of the variations. Take note of any new or special movements that may need extra practice.

### 2. Listen

At some point, it may be helpful to listen to one or more recordings of the tune. Currently, recordings of piobaireachd are available in many places. Sometimes, doing a “search” on the web will lead you to recordings. The Piobaireachd Society web site is an excellent source of high quality piobaireachd recordings. Some good sources...

[www.piobaireachd.co.uk](http://www.piobaireachd.co.uk)

[www.rodymacleodpiobaireachd.com](http://www.rodymacleodpiobaireachd.com)

### 3. Metrical Pattern:

One of the most helpful guides in playing and interpreting *piobaireachd* is the “metrical pattern”. *Piobaireachd* does not normally have a regular beat, however it almost always has a repeating pattern of “pulses” which imparts a “natural rhythm” to the tune and which gives a beginning, middle and end to the phrases.

It is important to note that metrical patterns are only meant to be a *guide* to pulse-emphasis and phrase and line-end markings. There will always be certain notes which require “special treatment”. Example: the High A and F themal notes in the Urlar and Urlar doubling of “The Lament for Donald Doughal MacKay”.

We often see piobaireachd melodies represented as long lines of  $\frac{1}{4}$  notes, with little indication of the beginnings or ends of phrases. Here are some of the phrase “scansion” (pulse) patterns which you might find helpful in developing “musical” phrases, and showing line and variation endings. I will use 4 symbols:

## Meterical patterns in Piobaireachd

**S**, strong pulse (add time to the printed value)

**M**, medium pulse (subtract time from the printed value)

**M+**, medium plus pulse (add a little duration to the printed value)

**S+**, strong plus pulse (add a larger amount of time to the printed value)

### 4/4 (Common Time)

**S, M, M+, S+** e.g.: "The MacLeod's Salute" ("The MacLeod's Rowing Tune") Sometimes...

**S,M,S,M** e.g.: "The Big Spree" and occasionally...

**M,S,M,S+** e.g.: "You're Welcome Ewen Locheil" (N.B. - although this tune is usually printed in 2/4/ time, I was taught to combine 2 bars, making a 4/4 phrase.)

### 3/4 Meter

This is one of my favorites. These tunes have a great rhythm.

**M, M, S, M, M, S+** i.e. Two small phrases joined together to make a larger 6/4 phrase.

e.g. "The Unjust Incarceration", "The Lament for MacDonald's Tutor" (except for Variation IV which is in 4/4)

### 2-4 Meter

Many of the tunes which are printed in 2/4 meter are often converted to 4/4 by joining 2 bars together, to make a longer phrase and the 4/4 concepts then apply. e.g. "The Company's Lament", "The Finger Lock", and the variations of "The Groat"

### 6/8 Meter

Another one of my favorites.

**S, M, S, M** and sometimes, **S, M, M, S**

As a young piper, I first learned "Black" Donald's March in 4/4, and later re-learned it in 6/8. In both versions, two bars are joined together, to make a larger phrase. This could be considered to be 8/4 in the simple time version, or 12/8 in the compound time version.

### 12/8 Meter

When I learned "The Lament for the Laird of Anapool" from Donald MacLeod, he conveyed the tune in 12/8 Meter. 12/8 is the "compound version" of 4/4. Each pulse is translated from one and two note groups to dotted 1/4, 1/4 +1/8 and 3, 1/8 note groups. The stress patterns that were applied to 4/4 Meter, can be applied to 12/8, as appropriate.



Donald Lindsay won the MacDougall-Gillies trophy for piobaireachd and placed 3rd in the marches at The Northern Meeting, becoming the 1st North American Piper to win a prize in the "majors".

He studied with Bob Brown starting in 1966 and Bob Nicol in 1973.

In 1985, he placed 4th in the Oban Silver Medal, and 2nd in the Inverness Silver Medal.

In 1986 he placed 1st in the Silver Medal Final at Oban. Lindsay co-founded the Invermark College of Piping with his father, James F. Lindsay, in Petersburg, NY in 1961.

#### 4. Singing:

Now, all of these “technical guides to interpretation” can be extremely helpful in bringing more music out of one’s playing, but I would be very misleading if I didn’t speak about **the most important piobaireachd tool...**

### Singing !

Singing, above all methods and techniques, is the way in which the soul of piobaireachd has been passed on from teacher to pupil, over the centuries. This is how my teachers, and their teachers’ teachers, transmitted the “lights and shades” of piobaireachd performance from one generation to the next.

What is “singing” as applied to piobaireachd playing?

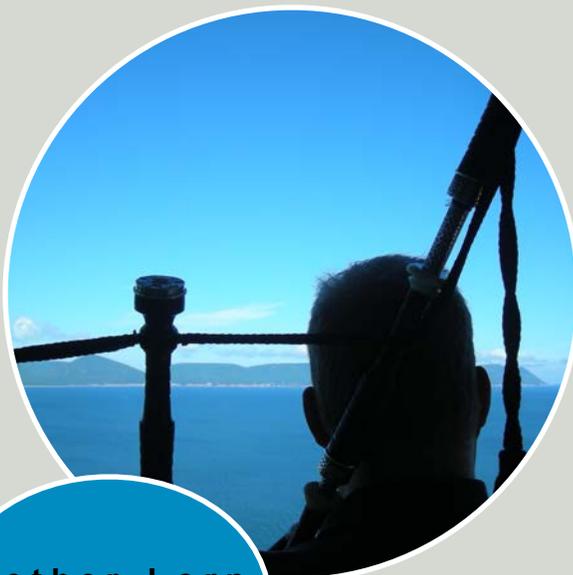
It is vocalization of the melody. It is not necessary to use any “formal canntaireachd”. While systems such as the Nether Lorn Canntaireachd provide a convenience for the academic study of piobaireachd, for the purposes of “discovering the

soul” of the music and experimenting with the best metrical pulse for the tune and the degree of application of the meter, to get the best “balanced” version of the tune, it is entirely valid to **make up your own informal syllables**. If you have a good recorded model of the tune to study, listen to it, and sing it in your own canntaireachd to make it your own.

This is only one application of singing. Certainly, it is the best way to transmit piobaireachd from one piper to another. Probably one of the most important applications of singing, is to **edit the interpretation**.

### Singing in piobaireachd is a synonym for editing.

When you sing over your tune, use it to strengthen and modify phrases, to bring out the exact



### Nether Lorn Canntaireachd

feeling and idea that you want to convey. An often used phrase by Donald MacLeod in teaching piobaireachd: “What we are going for here is balance.”

Use the singing-editing process to literally experiment with “taking a little off here” and “adding a little bit there”, until you feel you have built the phrases, the line ends, the transitions from singling to doubling and the tempos that represent your idea of the tune.

### Nether Lorn Canntaireachd

	G	A	B	C	D	E	F	HIGH G	HIGH A
Scale	em	en	o	o	a	e	ve	vi	I
Scale with G gracenote	him	hin	hio	ho	ha	che	he	hi	
Scale with D gracenote	dam	dan	to	do					
Scale with E gracenote	em	en	eo	eo	ea				

## 5. Movements

I have not encountered any “movements issues” which cannot be improved with the right approach. Sometimes, this requires some “out-of-the-box” thinking.

**Example:** A movement that often comes under scrutiny is the crunluath. The ideal crunluath should have a “rippling” sound, and each movement should flow smoothly. Typically, the rhythm of the crunluath is not balanced, or in the case of younger players, the movement is too “tight”, resulting in lack of articulation of each of the seven grace-notes.

The fix for younger players is often a matter of relaxing the hands and slowing the movement down, slightly. When tightness in the hands gets in the way, playing the movement slowly on the practice chanter, and “lifting and dropping” the D, E and F grace-notes until all seven grace-notes are absolutely even will bring about a smoother, relaxed and better articulated movement.

If a “slurred” sound (lack of crisp articulation) is the problem, reverse the approach, and make the D, E, and F grace-notes very small and very crisp, while the low G and low A grace-notes are large and

equal. This will ultimately lead to a crisper movement. When using this approach, treat each low G and each low A grace-note as an accented pulse.

**Do you have piobaireachd movements which cause you difficulty? E-Mail the magazine, and we will address your concern in the next issue.**

## 6. Motivation

Too often, we hear piobaireachd renditions that are more techno-mechanical, and less emotive. In developing interpretations, the tune’s background can sometimes provide direction, insight and motivation for the performer.

The joy in “Salute on the Birth of Rory Mor MacLeod” is transparent. The use of the A major mode and the culmination of motives on High A and F---two notes often used by piobaireachd composers to express love and gladness--- provide an excellent basis for the interpretation of this fine tune.

The “Groat” (“The Drunken Groat”) has a focus on low G in the variations and on D in the Urlar. Knowing that this fine tune is likely a birth celebration suggests that the interpretation should be “bright” and should portray optimism.

“A Flame of Wrath for Squinting Patrick”---The elements of anger and revenge that Donald Mor MacCrimmon must have certainly felt in creating this piece would offer useful suggestions on how to approach this tune.

“The Glen is Mine” has long been a favorite with pipers. The optimism and brightness is unmistakable here.

While some background details may be helpful, not all details of the tune’s history are always to be trusted. The collectors of piobaireachd gave us wise counsel when they advised us to not judge a tune by its title. So often, tune titles can be misleading as to the intent of the composer.



**Bob Brown**

**Example:** According to Bob Nicol, “The Little Spree”(a.k.a. “The Wee Spree”) was not a tune about frivolity, but was a reference to a Catholic Mass, held in a hidden woodland “corrie” during a time of religious persecution.

“In praise of Morag” (Marion’s Wailing). There are a few stories about this tune. According to some of the old pipers, this tune portrayed Prince Charles’ escape after the 1745 Rebellion, when he was disguised as a woman, and given the code name Morag. The first variation portrays the galloping of his horse, as he escapes the pursuing British Army.

Despite these difficulties, the best source of a tune’s story can give us insights that reveal the nature and spirit of the melody. “A Flame of Wrath for Squinting Patrick” clearly portrays Donald Mor MacCrimmon’s anger at the murder of his brother, Patrick. The joy and beauty in “Mary’s Praise” is clearly present throughout the tune. When legends and histories of tunes are not available, listening to the melody, thinking about the phrase arrangement and considering the mode often suggests an interpretive approach. Here are some examples of tunes motivations that I have used to optimize the feeling in piobaireachd:

The Finger Lock: I think of warriors preparing for battle, and I try to bring a sense of urgency and intensity to the tune.

The Unjust Incarceration; I understand this tune to be about Neil Vass’ imprisonment and mis-treatment on the Bass Rock. I was taught to portray the lamentation of his fate, the prisoner’s protestation of his treatment, and to present a “high pitched keening” in the third line.

More to come in the next issue!

Donald Lindsay



Practise hard!  
L. L. Brown  
Balnoral.