

# *Problems of Notating Pibroch :* *A Study of 'Maol Donn'*

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It is about 170 years since pipers first attempted to set down on paper the music of pibrochs,<sup>1</sup> and all who have tried readily admit the difficulty of the task. Early attempts were of two kinds. First, there were those made by musicians such as Patrick MacDonald, minister of Kilmore (MacDonald 1784); Alexander Campbell, editor of Albyn's Anthology (1816); and Elizabeth Jane Ross, later Baroness D'Oyley (who was brought up in the house of MacLeod of Raasay and whose manuscripts of 'Original Highland Airs collected at Rasay in 1812' is now in the library of the School of Scottish Studies). Each transcribed a small number of pibrochs in a form that would enable them to be played on the piano, flute or violin; accordingly they did little more than suggest impressionistically the complicated cuttings and graces that the pipers played. Their efforts are valuable today in so far as they are among the very earliest attempts to write down pibrochs, and though they are of little value as performance scores for pipers they at least give some clues to the rhythm, phrasing and structure of the melodies as they were performed in those days.

The other early type of transcription is the detailed one, often made by pipers themselves for other pipers to use, in which every note is recorded as it presumably was played. The earliest of this type is known as the 'Highland Society of London's MS' which contains 44 pibrochs, at least 12 of which were notated for the Society by piper John MacGregor from the aged Angus MacArthur probably during the last years of the eighteenth century. Donald MacDonald's MS (c. 1812) and Peter Reid's (1826) are other examples of this kind.<sup>2</sup>

All these transcribers must have found the process 'tedious and exceedingly troublesome' (Campbell 1816: 90), yet strangely enough the earlier transcribers were less apologetic about their efforts than those who followed. It could be that they were ignorant of the problems involved: however, it is equally possible that pibroch as it was played then presented fewer problems of rhythm and phrasing than it does today and was more easily understood. A century later at least one Gael complained:

Sir,—Can you, or any of the numerous readers of the Oban Times, inform me how it is that 'Piobaireachd' is the only species of the music of the Gael that has neither time, tune, melody or rhythm in it? Did the composers intend to puzzle and annoy, or is it the

performers who vie with each other in prolonging unconnected, meaningless sounds? I have recently listened to a champion playing, what he called, the "Massacre of Glencoe", but really no one could make head or tail of it, and am at a loss to understand how an intelligent being could call it a musical performance.

I am, etc.

CELT.

Edinburgh, 8 August 1893.

When quoting this letter in the *Oban Times* in his preface to *Ceol Mor* (1900) Major General Thomason admitted that this kind of criticism was not altogether new. It is a criticism which one can still hear today—even from native Gaelic pipers of considerable skill and musical ability.

In several modern publications one finds the method of notation qualified in terms like these:

It makes no pretence to be scientifically accurate, or even intelligible to the non-piper. Call it pipers' jargon and the writer will not complain.

(Campbell 1953: 17)

while later still MacNeill comments:

It may well be that the more incorrectly a piobaireachd is written the better it is for piobaireachd playing because the learner is forced to seek assistance from a piper who has been taught in the traditional manner. . . .

I have tried to balance convenience with possibility and have written the tunes as nearly as I can to the way that I play them . . . but I have not entirely abandoned 'pipers' jargon.'

(MacNeill 1968: 31)

Here we have the essence of the problem. The traditional manner of learning pibrochs was through the medium of *canntaireachd*,<sup>3</sup> the pupil learning his music from the chanting of his master and by patterning it on a chanter. The last 170 years saw this type of oral instruction gradually replaced as increasing use was made of the various published collections of pibroch. The teachers who work in the traditional manner today are few—and even they usually have a book with them which they use as an *aide-memoire*. Pibroch-playing today would seem to depend to a large extent on the success of the efforts of those who have notated pibroch music and of course on the ability of performers to reinterpret the notation. This paper attempts to highlight the problems that beset transcribers by comparing eight different renderings on paper of a part of one pibroch ground<sup>4</sup> and then to assess the practical effects of the success or failure of these efforts on present day performances of the same pibroch.

The first problem for any would-be transcriber is one of perception, and arises from the particular acoustics of bagpipes. How does he perceive the phrase structure of a melody played on an instrument that produces an unbroken stream of sound when played and so cannot mark the ends of phrases with short silences? In other parts of

Europe this problem is sometimes overcome by using the lowest note of the chanter as a resting note whose sound is absorbed into the rich harmonic spectrum of the drones so that one gets the aural impression of a break in the chanter melody. The playing of the Sardinian *Launeddas* is an example of this kind of solution, the *Launeddas* player taking great care to tune this lowest note with the aid of wax in order to reduce the size of the hole so that the note agrees exactly with a strong harmonic of the drone (Bentzon 1969: 23–24).

Another problem in communicating and understanding the rhythm of pipe melodies is that there is no significant variation in the relative loudness of melody notes and so the player finds it impossible to give any dynamic accent to notes that should be rhythmically prominent.<sup>5</sup> This is to some extent solved by the use of different grace-notes. 'Some gracenotes are stronger to the mind of the piper than others, so he is able to introduce light and shade to his accents by the use of, for example, G gracenotes for strong beats, E or D gracenotes for medium and no gracenote for weak' (MacNeill 1968: 23). Not all piping schools choose to teach this, however, and although such a solution sounds good the system does not appear to be consistently used in the pibroch repertoire. Rhythmical prominence is in any case achieved in more than one way; often a note which is higher or longer than surrounding notes is perceived as the accented one.<sup>6</sup> These then are two acoustical reasons why listeners might misinterpret both the rhythm and phrase structure of a pibroch melody.

In spite of this anyone who has heard a good piper playing for dancing must have marvelled at the way he makes little of these two problems, for there can be hardly anything more rhythmically vital than a well played jig or reel. The trouble with pibrochs however is that, these days at least, they are usually played at an exceedingly slow tempo, despite evidence in earlier treatises—Joseph MacDonald's especially—that the tempo of Marches was quicker than that of Laments and that Gatherings 'are the most animating of Pipe composition . . . full of life and Fire' (MS [c. 1762]: 22). It is a basic fact that as one slows down the tempo of music so one hinders the perception of its pulse.

It could be argued that over the centuries this music has evolved in a way that makes little use of the basic musical element of metrical rhythm and that pibroch grounds have a timeless and quasi-rhapsodic nature where only three musical elements are employed; namely, relative duration of a non-metric kind, melodic tension between successive notes and, lastly, harmonic tension between melody notes and drone notes. Some modern performances give this impression. There is a popular tradition that the clan piper rose in status at the expense of the clarsach player during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and perhaps a clue to the structure of pibroch melodies can be found by tracing a connection between the repertory of the pipes and that of the clarsach. In Bunting's 'Ancient Music of Ireland'<sup>7</sup> there is a list of technical terms for the different styles of ornamentation used by Irish harpers which includes some that compare closely with Scots Gaelic piping terms. However, the few extant Scottish clarsach melodies clearly

belong to that class of regular-stressed four or eight phrase stanzaic songs known as *Amhran*. William Matheson (1970: 149–74) discusses a number of such tunes in his recent study of Roderick Morison (Ruairi Dall), MacLeod of Dunvegan's blind harper who lived in the second half of the seventeenth century. While he allows that the households of chieftains 'was the kind of milieu in which such musical borrowing could readily take place', he points more to the absorption of harp music into the repertory of the fiddle than into that of the pipe. Only one of Ruairi Dall's songs can be linked to a pibroch with any certainty.<sup>8</sup>

There is abundant evidence elsewhere, however, to suggest that most pibroch melodies consist of well balanced phrases which have an underlying metrical structure—albeit a flexible one—that assigns prominence to certain notes of each phrase. Joseph MacDonald (1762: 17–19) went to some length to explain what he understood by 'Time' in pibroch music and others since then have also done so. Furthermore, pipers have traditionally measured off their pibroch melodies by counting on their fingers and, when free to do so—that is when singing rather than playing the melodies—they will sometimes beat time or sway in time with what they conceive to be the underlying accents. It is a fundamental fact of human psychology that the mind normally attempts to group sound strands into culturally meaningful temporal patterns and is emotionally disturbed if such patterns as are initially established are not maintained.<sup>9</sup>

Only two of the transcriptions which follow later (Ex. 1) avoid giving any idea of rhythm and metre. One of these is in any case based on a modern performance. Ideally the transcriber should be intimately acquainted with each pibroch he transcribes; if not, he should endeavour to get his piping informant to sing or whistle the melodies also—for this will often make the rhythmic accentuation clear. A practice chanter does not make a good substitute for the pipes for two reasons. Firstly, the piper may change his way of playing the pibroch ground if no drones are being sounded. Secondly, many players tend to blow their chanters until their breath runs out and then recharge their lungs regardless of phrase endings, while others have learned the art shared by the Sardinian *Launeddas* players—they can produce a continuous stream of sound, even while drawing air into their lungs, by using their distended cheeks as a wind reservoir. In either case one gets little clue as to where phrase endings lie!

These problems of understanding the rhythmic basis and phrase structure of pipe melodies are further compounded by the particular nature of Gaelic music which, from the point of view of time and metre, is not the mathematically organised scheme of stressed and unstressed note values which one associates with both European 'art' music and other types of piping (marches, strathspeys and reels, *etc.*). Good native singers sing Gaelic songs with a flexibility of pulse and a delicate appreciation of the time and stress values of related syllables. The time values of the notes between the stressed notes vary continually. In most cases, however, transcribers have been content to adopt the notational system belonging to European 'art' music, one which developed out of a need to notate dance rhythms and vocal homophony of medieval courts.

Few early collections of pipe music appeared without the usual academic instructions on 'Time' together with one bar illustrations of 4/4, 3/4, 2/4 and 6/8 metre, and the pipe melodies that followed were unfailingly moulded into one or other of these metrical schema whether they fitted well or not.

The use of *canntaireachd* as a traditional means of oral instruction has already been discussed. It has also been transcribed as a syllabic notation and the Nether Lorn MS (c. 1791), sometimes known as 'Colin Campbell's Canntaireachd,' is the classic example of the pipers' practice of using the notated syllables as a mnemonic. The main drawback of *canntaireachd* on paper, however, is that it gives the reader no clue to the rhythm and time values of the syllables. We cannot rule out the possibility that some of the pibroch transcriptions made during the last century were made in two stages. First the *canntaireachd* syllables were noted down as chanted by the informant and only later were they converted to staff notation, possibly by another person who had not heard the original informant singing. It is reported that Angus MacKay took down a large number of pibrochs from the *canntaireachd* singing of his father John (Campbell 1953: 9); but whether or not he did it in two such stages we do not know. In 1910 the late Pipe Major William MacLean set down on the music staff the twenty pibrochs published in *canntaireachd* notation some eighty years earlier by Captain Neil MacLeod of Gesto,<sup>10</sup> while more recently the Piobaireachd Society has thought it fit to transcribe and publish some previously unknown pibrochs from the Nether Lorn MS.<sup>11</sup> Both authorities presumably invented time values for the *canntaireachd* syllables based on their study of the *canntaireachd* notation of other known pibrochs. This process is not without many pitfalls and can only be a valid exercise if one assumes that pibroch grounds are built from a very limited number of conventional melo-rhythmic formulae. Whether they are or not will need to be discussed elsewhere.

If all along there had been no real break in piping traditions and if players had used pibroch transcriptions as an *aide memoire*—the way that notated *canntaireachd* could be used—then the effects of misleading transcriptions would perhaps have been negligible. Many writers, among them Manson, Dalyell and Grant (see Bibliography), suggest however that Culloden and the events following the rebellion gave a serious setback to the Gaelic piping tradition. Some pipers were reported killed during the rebellion (including one of the famous MacCrimmons), another was afterwards convicted of high treason for carrying what was regarded as an instrument of war (Mitchell 1900: 664), while the general mood of depression that seems to have persisted throughout the Highlands for a generation was hardly conducive to such music making. We know that the MacCrimmon school of piping closed down some time around 1772 when Donald Ruadh MacCrimmon left Dunvegan, after quarrelling with his patron MacLeod. Although Pennant was entertained with piping when he visited the home of MacArthur, hereditary piper to Lord MacDonald of the Isles, during his tour of the Hebrides in 1774, he writes afterwards of the MacArthur 'college' as a thing that once existed 'in feudal times' (Pennant 1776: 347). J. P. Grant summed it up thus:



Outside Scottish regiments and a few favoured individuals, the pipe and the playing of it were for a whole generation after the rising of 1745-6 made illegal, and without doubt much of this traditional music must have died out during that period.

(Grant 1925: 55)

This might be overstating the situation—but certainly the Edinburgh aristocracy and officers of the British Army, towards the end of the period of the Disarming Act which was repealed in 1782, found it fit to encourage piping by forming a Highland Society and holding piping competitions. Many of the Lowland gentry began engaging pipers to serve them in the way in which pipers had once served Highland lairds. The newly formed Highland Society also began to offer prizes to those who succeeded in setting down pibrochs 'scientifically' on the music staff. Did it do this because of a feeling that a great tradition needed to be rescued before it was too late, or was it to try and give an aura of respectability to what had sometimes been described as the music of untutored savages? One wonders what the music sounded like at those early competitions. Angus MacKay's account of them (Mackay: 1838) shows that they were dominated by the MacGregors—the patriarch of that family of pipers was piper to Campbell of Glenlyon; the MacNabs, piper to MacNab; and the MacArthurs of the former MacArthur 'college' in Skye. John MacArthur had left his native island and was at that time a grocer in Edinburgh where he was widely known as 'professor' MacArthur. Surely at least those families knew what their music was and must have learned it in the traditional manner with no notation to help—or mislead—them. On the other hand the judges seemed often to know very little about pibroch and its traditions. This situation seems to have persisted on and off into the present century, and several pibroch players are reported to have played in one way to please themselves and in another very different and, to them, 'corrupt' way to please the judges.

From this time on the British Army stepped up its recruitment of Scottish pipers to the regiments: it is hard to say what effect this must have had on a form of music that originally belonged to the Gael and which, some will say, was based on the rhythms of Gaelic vocal music. Certainly the playing of marches, strathspeys and reels later became fashionable for competition purposes and many pipers maintain that this has had an adverse effect on the performance of pibroch. One can only hazard the wildest guess as to how far during the nineteenth century pibroch was taught in the traditional manner and how far teachers relied on published collections.

Both Angus MacPherson and the late Pipe Major William MacLean have recorded for the School of Scottish Studies details of the thorough oral tuition they received from Angus's celebrated father Malcolm (Calum Piobaire) and many contemporary pipers say that they learned their music through personal instruction from older pipers. Yet even Calum Piobaire is said to have had Angus MacKay's book always at his elbow when teaching. We know too that at the beginning of this century the Piobaireachd Society fostered the tradition by sending accredited teachers to various parts of the Highlands and Islands to give short courses to small groups of pupils and many of the

present pibroch players owe their knowledge of the repertoire to these efforts. We also know that although there was personal tuition by means of *cauntaireachd*, students were taught to read staff notation as well and that considerable weight was placed on such reading ability. The term 'ear piper' came to signify contempt for those pipers who did not read music notation and it is still used in this way today. Presumably the Society taught musical literacy to enable pipers to learn new pibrochs as well as to help them remember those they had been taught personally. Today many pipers learn the notes of a pibroch from a page and go along to a teacher later 'to have the expression added' or as a Uist piper put it—'to learn the song'. This presumably means that the pupil must learn to disregard some of the printed note values in favour of those suggested by his teacher. Clearly, considerable reliance is placed on the printed page today and especially on the publications of the Piobaireachd Society since nearly all of the earlier ones are now out of print. An analysis of the kind that follows may therefore be of use to pibroch devotees and to others interested in the tradition and it may cause pipers to give more critical regard to the publications they use.

Part of the opening of the ground of *Maol Donn*—popularly known as 'MacCrimmon's Sweetheart'—provides a useful illustration of the problem discussed so far. Eight different settings made during the last 130 years are presented below for comparison. The section quoted is a self-contained one which is immediately repeated in the ground. All the graces are included and the melody notes are numbered along the top for ease of reference. Non-pipers should note that in the pipe scale the notes C and F are approximately a semitone sharp and that pipe music is traditionally written without any key signature. (See Ex. I, page 48.)

The following points are worth noting:

- 1 Except for Reid (who gives a different gracing for note 3) and W. Ross (note 3 obviously a misprint) the settings all agree closely in pitch. This is probably due more to the fact that the earlier settings were often used as a basis for the later settings<sup>12</sup> than to the careful and exacting nature of the teaching of pibrochs.
- 2 The main differences lie in the area of rhythmic and temporal organisation. In the six settings that employ bar lines three different time signatures are used and the placing of bar lines varies considerably. It is impossible to tell how far the arrangers used bar lines purely as a rough and ready means of dividing off the melody into more or less equal lengths or how far they regarded them—as they should do—as an indication of the position of metrically accented notes. If the bar lines do indicate that an accented note follows them then each of notes 6, 7, 8 and 9 are shown as accented by one or other of the transcribers. Of the notes 7, 8 and 9 the E (9) is favoured in three settings, the A (8) in two and the B (7) in one.
- 3 Reid and R. Ross refrained from using any metric indications at all. Whether or not they were unsure of the structure of this particular pibroch cannot be said since





Ross notated all his pibrochs in similar manner—even those where the structure and metre are quite unambiguous—and Reid tended to do the same.

4 Some of the barring differences have probably occurred because both MacKay and W. Ross incorporated the introductory E (note 1), usually described by pipers as a 'cadence E', into the bar structure. This procedure can and does create more serious problems in other pibrochs than in *Maol Donn*.

5 Apart from these first two notes only note 8 differs considerably in the value allotted to it by the different transcribers. This may well be because some—with perhaps good reason—considered it to be the last note of a first phrase and therefore a note that can be dwelt on a little longer before the performer moves on. One certainly gets this impression from a number of modern performances.

Though only the opening of this pibroch has been quoted the differences analysed persist throughout the whole ground. The musical reader will appreciate them best by singing each setting while beating time according to the time signature quoted. It could be argued that these differences are of minor importance and reflect nothing more than the fact that various styles of playing have existed during the last 200 years—often attributed to the different 'schools' of instruction that flourished until the second half of the eighteenth century. But a difference in 'expression' or in gracing (usually cited as the major difference between the so-called MacArthur and MacCrimmon 'schools') is of less import than what we have here—a total lack of agreement as to the phrase structure and metre of the melodies. The archives of the School of Scottish Studies contain abundant examples of different renderings of the same Gaelic tunes. Texts, pitch, rhythm differ considerably in these variants but the melodic skeleton—the phrase structure—is nearly always preserved and clearly discernible; and, except for those written in syllabic verse, a regular musical metre, though a flexible one, underlies that structure.

Do these fundamental discrepancies exist because the early transcribers often lacked a real command over musical notation, or are they evidence of a greater collapse of the real *Ceòl Mór* tradition than is generally thought? If pipers have always known their music intimately and have taught in the traditional way—by chanting and patterning—surely the structure of pibroch melodies would not have become as open to doubt as is exemplified by these settings.

If, as one suspects, the answer lies in a combination of both factors then the complaints of 'Celt' and others who are perplexed by modern performances are understandable. Furthermore, there would seem to be little point in attempting to produce yet another transcription which would have to be based on twentieth-century performances, even though the measuring tools for objective and accurate transcription are now available. There is, however, at least one good reason for the exercise. The bases for analyses of pibroch structure have always been the use of the 'bar', and pibrochs since Thomason's time have been labelled as 664 or 4444 structures according to the

number of bars in each section of the ground. All of this is rendered suspect if one concludes that the barring may frequently have been wrongly deduced: in any case it would seem more sensible to attempt an analysis based on phrase structure rather than on arbitrary 'bars'. Ex. 2 (opposite) is a transcription of the whole of the ground of *Maol Donn* made from the recorded performance of a well known and highly respected piper.<sup>14</sup> The results were compared with the playing of three other informants to check for idiosyncratic variations.<sup>15</sup> Apart from the notes 2 and 8 discussed earlier with reference to Ex. 1 (all four performances varied considerably at these points) the differences were too small to be worth indicating. The notes have not been linked up to suggest any groupings but have been arranged to indicate the similarity of motifs and phrases as perceived by the first performer as well as by the transcriber and two other musicians.<sup>16</sup> Graces and cuttings have been omitted. For completeness one further source of information is added—the *cauntaireachd* vocables as they appear in the Nether Lorn MS. Set out below the appropriate notes in each stave they expose certain discrepancies which were not mentioned in the Piobaireachd Society's source analysis (P.S. 1938, 7: 206), but which we shall not discuss here.

On studying the transcription, the simple and logical ternary structure of the whole becomes clear. The central section contains a development of the two opening phrases and the whole could be described (using terms borrowed from European 'classical' music) as follows:

*Exposition* A nicely proportioned musical sentence of A B A B A C structure with clear points of repose (the last notes of phrases B and C). Phrase C is closely related to phrase B and could be regarded as a modification of it. All three phrases have a very close rhythmical relationship which gives a strongly monothematic feeling to the whole. Note however the asymmetric relationship between phrase A and the other phrases.

*Development* Framed between phrases AB and AC is a development of the rhythmic motif ( ↓ ↗ ↘ ) which unifies the exposition. Only the presence of crotchet rather than quaver 'A's prevents the onward drive of this rhythm right up to the end of this section.

*Recapitulation* A return to the exposition minus its repeated sub-section.

Each of the three parts is signalled by the use of a 'Cadence E' which clearly should not be regarded as an integral part of the melodic structure. The inclusion of this E, when the opening line is repeated, could be considered unnecessary and it is significant that Reid omits it at this point and shows a G grace note instead. A few pipers maintain even today that the E 'cadence' is a purely optional feature of pibroch playing and can be omitted if desired. Notice that the Nether Lorn *cauntaireachd* vocables which have been added do not show these E's.

This overall tripartite structure is confirmed by most authorities and the ground has been labelled by General Thomason as a 'regular three line pibroch' which he

EXAMPLE 2

"Cadence E"

The musical notation consists of six systems, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notes are quarter notes, and the lyrics are written below the notes. Phrasing marks 'A', 'B', and 'C' are placed above the notes, indicating different phrasing options. The lyrics are:

System 1: *hin-dro - o ho-ve - o hin-de - o ho-dro*  
 System 2: *hio-dro - o ho-ve - o hin-de - o ho-darro-do*  
 System 3: *hin-dro - o ho-ve - o hin-de - o ho-dro*  
 System 4: *hio-dro - o ho-ve - o hin-*  
 System 5: *- do - o ho-e - ho hio*  
 System 6: *dro - o ho-ve - o hin-de - o ho-darro-do*  
 System 7: *hin-dro - o ho-ve - o hin-de - o ho-dro*  
 System 8: *hio - dro - o ho-ve - o he - che - o ho - darodo*

denoted by the numbers 6 6 4—being the number of bars in his transcription. The Nether Lorn *canntaireachd* will be seen to consist of 32 words set out in the manuscript in three parts, which correspond exactly with the structure above (12+12+8). The other striking feature is the extremely economic use of the basic material.

While this transcription clearly illustrates the general structural features it is equally obvious that the note values, as they stand, fit none of the time schemes used in earlier settings.

Repeated listening uncovered no regular pulse nor any discernibly regular accents apart from a brief period towards the end of the middle section when the  $\downarrow \uparrow \uparrow$  rhythm becomes temporarily established (lines 5 and 6). If pibroch grounds do not have a metrical basis then to examine this performance any further is unprofitable and the difficulties facing the earlier transcribers are readily accountable. Presumably players can interpret the notation as they were taught, or as they choose, once they have learned the pibroch. But, as mentioned before, all the settings in Example 1 except the first and last use a time signature, and imply that there is a metre for the ground. Indeed one has only to shorten the note A at the end of each Phrase A in Example 2 to establish the  $\downarrow \uparrow \uparrow$  motif quite firmly and to give the whole ground a regular pulse which only slows up each time Phrase C is played (*i.e.* to mark the ends of sections).

However, the two most recent settings in Example 1 indicate a long A (crotchet) at the end of Phrase A (*i.e.* note 8, Ex. 1). R. Ross's notation, as was said earlier, is based on the recorded playing of the late Calum MacPherson of the MacPherson school of pipers, which can be traced back to Angus MacKay's teaching and ultimately to the MacCrimmons. The other setting, that of the Piobaireachd Society, purports to represent the playing of J. MacDougall Gillies and the Cameron school of piping—which is also traceable back to the teaching of Angus MacKay. This would seem to give each setting the stamp of authority, different as they are, but for one more piece of evidence in the recorded performance of this ground on an old 78 r.p.m. disc by the celebrated John MacDonald of Inverness (1866–1953). He derived the bulk of his tuition from the doyen of the MacPherson family, Calum Pìobaire, as well as from the Camerons and was for many years an official instructor for the Piobaireachd Society. In his renderings there is no dwelling on the A in question and there is clearly a slow pulse throughout. The performance is more like that of Thomason's setting than any other, and it poses several questions relevant to our discussion. Does his playing reflect the teaching he himself received, or is it the product of a mature musician who is prepared to depart considerably from the teaching of his tutors even to the extent of changing the musical metre of the pibroch ground? If his rendering is indeed typical of the teaching he received then we must presume the Piobaireachd Society's setting to be inaccurate, and, if this is the case, we must ponder on the extent to which this setting has affected the performance of today's pipers, even those who claim to have been taught in the traditions of both the MacPhersons and the Camerons.

I can see no clear answer to any of these problems—I discuss them because they represent the difficulties that faced transcribers of yesterday and still face the non-piper musician of today who wishes to understand and enjoy pibroch music. There is another avenue of investigation that may help, though it is one which pipers are unlikely to approve of for it relies on evidence provided by present-day Gaelic singers in the Hebrides. Field studies suggest that there is no present-day pibroch playing in the islands that does not stem from the teaching of visiting instructors sent by the *Piobaireachd Society* earlier this century. Is there any apparent reason to suppose that the singing of islanders can tell us any more about the ancient instrumental art of *Ceòl Mór* than pipers themselves?

### *Pibroch Songs* ..

In the archives of the School of Scottish Studies recordings there are more than 75 different songs bearing close similarity to pipe melodies—many of them known pibrochs. Six different recordings are related to *Maol Donn* both melodically and textually. While we do not know how far pibrochs are derived from vocal motifs there is ample evidence to suggest that poets and singers liked to compose lines that could be sung to tunes based on pibroch melodies and even, as one piper said recently, 'make a four line *Amhran* out of a three line pibroch'. In either case it is possible that the text and rendering of related songs will give a clue to the musical performance of pibroch. For whether the song was inspired by the pipe melody or the pipe melody was based on the song it is likely that the rhythm patterns of the one will correspond to some extent to those of the other. There is too a considerable quantity of doggerel, probably composed by the pipers themselves, which helps them to recall the opening of a pibroch.

Gaelic song is still a living, uninterrupted oral tradition and songs which are hundreds of years old can still be recorded in the Gaelic speaking areas of Scotland. They will of course have been subjected to that constant process of modification, refinement and 'corruption' that is the hallmark of oral tradition. Notes may have been altered, texts forgotten, new ones grafted on, but the fundamental musical patterns of phrasing and rhythm are least likely to have changed. In this case one is justified in using evidence found in one tradition that is living, unbroken and purely oral to help evaluate another which has been subjected to the kind of debilitating pressures described earlier and which has relied for more than a century to an unknown extent on what may well be misleading transcriptions.

None of the informants whose versions are quoted below could say much about the historical background of their songs, and the origins of the pibroch are even more obscure.<sup>17</sup> However, in 'Ceol Mor Legends'—a manuscript volume of notes compiled by General Thomason, which he obviously intended to have printed as a companion to *Ceol Mor*—there is a picturesque account which appears to have been supplied by a



John Johnson of Coll. He was at that time piper to MacLean of Coll and trained in the tradition of the Rankin School of pipers mentioned in A. MacKay's published collection (MacKay 1838: 'Account of the Hereditary Pipers', p. 7).

This is a tune composed by Clan Ranald's piper—of the day—to a cow lost in a bog by a widow in Benbecula, South Uist. The cow was a noted one and greatly admired by the widow, as her only one apparently. It got lost in the common moss one day, and ultimately the whole neighbourhood turned out to look for it, likely in compassion for the owner, the piper among the rest; but its finding defied them, after their best efforts, nor was the skeleton of it found till over a year afterwards, by a mere accident.

The whole circumstance therefore afforded the piper a good theme to begin, which he did as if the widow herself was the author, thus:—

'Gad iumdrain a tha mi, si mo ghradh a mhaol dounn,  
Gad iarridh feadh fhraobhan, 's gad shlaodach a poul.'

This tune was also a great favourite with the old piper, though composed for a trifling matter, owing to its own merits and its plaintive air throughout . . .

The extract is not quoted in order to suggest that this is the origin of the pibroch *Maol Donn*. Pibrochs were not usually composed for lost cattle but to provide ceremonial music for the Gaelic aristocracy in the form of Salutes and Laments or to foster clan spirit with Gatherings and Marches. Johnson's account helps to explain the textual content of the songs that follow, and lends weight to an old tradition one is constantly coming across: namely, that pipers often had words in mind when they composed their opening pibroch themes.

In example 3, extracts from four variants give an idea of the process of continuous modification that folk songs undergo in a living oral tradition. The first three extracts come from the middle of a song which refers to cattle rustling. Semi-bar lines indicate stressed notes and all the variants have been transposed so that they can easily be compared with each other and with the pipe melody.

In the first two the use of a dotted bar line suggests doubt in the mind of the transcriber as to whether the first or the second syllable of the word *t'shaotainn* is regarded as the stressed one. In normal speech it would be the first. Mrs Munro's Skye variant—which is no longer pentatonic—suggests a connection with the 'thumb' variation rather than the ground—for in thumb variations a 'high A' replaces certain notes of the ground—in this case, the note F each time. The late Alasdair Boyd—who was himself a piper—gives a version which he heard and possibly once played. But he was doubtful of the accuracy with which he had recalled it.

The example that follows was provided by Mrs Kate MacDonald of Garryheillic, South Uist. It is a simple and lovely rendering which, as in all her performances, expresses with great subtlety the delicate interrelationship of language rhythm and melody in Gaelic song, while highlighting the resulting problems of setting sounds on

## EXAMPLE 3

Donald Macpherson

Log 201 (1949)



Cha bu shea-[ə]-bhach leam t'fhaotainn, mo ghaol mo Mhaol Donn:

Kate Douglas

Log 1649 (1949)



Cha bu shea-[ə]-bhach dhomh t'fhaotainn, mo ghaol mo Mhaol Donn:

Kirsty Munro

SA 1958/43



Thig an tòir oirnn fhìn, 's air mo làimh ni thu lor-[ə]g:

Alasdair Boyd

SA 1970/2



'S mi gad ruith feadh an aon-aich, b'e mo ghaol thu Mhaol Donn:

EXAMPLE 4 *Maol Donn*

Mrs. K. MacDonald

SA 1970/309/7



Cha bu sheal[ə]-bhach t'fhaotainn, 'se mo ghaol am Maol Donn;  
dhomh



Cha bu sheal[ə]-bhach t'fhao-tainn 'se mo ghaol am Maol Donn.  
dhomh



Cha bu sheal[ə]-bhach t'fhao-tainn, 'se mo ghaol am Maol Donn;  
dhomh



Gad iar-raigh 'sgad fhao-tainn 's dha shlao-dadh a toll.

paper. The fact that the first phrase is more like the pibroch ground than any of the other quoted versions merely underlines the fact that for generations members of her family have been famous Uist pipers. It was transcribed with the aid of a time signal and the notes are arranged spatially according to their duration ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  cms. = 1 second).

Here the metre of the poetry corresponds perfectly with the musical metre, and as a result the word *t'fhaotaim* presents no problems. As with the earlier examples and, in fact, all songs that are not sung for dancing, the accents do not follow in rigidly timed succession. The singer takes time between phrases without destroying the gently onward flow of the melody. The duration values of the unstressed notes vary continuously, and do not fall into any of the simple time patterns used for European 'art' songs: neither  $3/4$  nor any other time signature will do it justice.

To return to the pibroch ground, the melodic relationship between it and the song is obvious and, what is more important, the notes which take verbal accents in the song correspond to notes in the pibroch which, because of length and pitch, can be considered the prominent or accented ones. This similarity should suggest to pipers a logical pattern of metrical accents. Of all the eight settings quoted that of Thomason appears to be the most logical. He alone suggested that the pipe melody begins with an anacrusis just as the song does. Pipers could well revert to his setting if they have access to it—for it is unfortunately out of print—providing that they take their cue from the renderings of traditional singers and do not make the pulse a rigid one.<sup>18</sup> Taking into account Thomason's setting, John MacDonald's performance and the song structures, the writer considers there is a musical metre to this ground, one which centres on the stress patterns implied in Thomason's  $6/8$  setting and which the piper should strive to explicate without of course playing in strict  $6/8$  time. Support for Thomason's setting will be found in the melodic skeleton of the variations that succeed the ground and thumb variation. There the theme notes in every setting are identical and correspond exactly with the 'stressed' notes of Thomason's ground.

The modern performances quoted in Example 2 may all be criticised to the extent that neither Thomason's pulse pattern, nor any other, underlies the music. Too often the 'Cadence E' is prolonged in a way that brings the flow to a halt—possibly not in the mind of the performer but at least as far as listeners are concerned. Similarly, the presence of the long A (note 8), which was discussed at length, tends to disrupt the melodic flow unnecessarily.

There is an obvious danger that the melody played in strict time might bore the listener because of the extreme economy of melodic material. The song has an ABAB' structure the first line of which contains all the basic material of the pibroch. Economy in this case involves repetition and the 'ground' demands careful shaping by the player if interest is to be maintained, and it may well be that his desire to sustain interest tends to lead to rhythmic distortion. Constant reiteration of simple motifs need not be

interpreted as a sign of the anonymous composers' paucity of invention. Repetition possibly had an important function in pibroch music especially in those martial pibrochs that can be identified as Gatherings (*Cruinneachadh*). They often consist of easily identified clan signals which, it is presumed, were continually sounded while marshalling men and encouraging them on the battlefields. In view of the repetitive content of pibrochs it must be no accident that many of the associated songs now survive as lullabies and dandling songs. It is only when one sits solemnly indoors at piping competitions and similar occasions to listen to this music, perhaps performed imperfectly and certainly divorced from its original setting, that repetition might sound wearisome.

This paper has attempted to illustrate some of the problems of transmitting pipe music both as it once was and as it is performed in this age. Implied in the argument is a criticism of present day performance and understanding of pibroch music as well as a criticism of some of the more recent publications of the repertoire. It seems likely that the devotees of pibroch will continue to perform this music—albeit in different social settings from the original one. Most of them believe that through their performances they are preserving an authentic musical tradition. Their audiences have not always been convinced by their efforts and, judging by the lively and occasionally acrimonious arguments that dominated the correspondence columns of the *Oban Times* and other publications at various periods during the last 70 years, neither have some pipers. This study of *Maol Donn* suggests that it still may not be too late for a useful reassessment of our knowledge and understanding of this art.

## NOTES

- 1 The word 'pibroch' is an anglicised form of the Gaelic *piobaireachd* which literally means 'piping'. However today it identifies that part of the repertoire of the Highland pipe known as 'Ceòl Mór'—great music as distinct from *Ceòl Beag*, the small or light music for dances and military marches.
- 2 See the preface of the Piobaireachd Society's Vol. 1 of *Piobaireachd* (1925) for a fuller list of other MS sources.
- 3 *Canntaireachd* literally means 'singing'; the teacher sings the pibroch to his pupils but uses instead of words a system of non-lexical vocables that communicate the pitch of melody notes as well as the types of graces and cuttings to be used.
- 4 The ground (Gaelic *an t-urrlar*) of a pibroch is its basic theme, on which a series of mainly conventional variations are built.
- 5 I use the terms 'rhythm', 'accent', according to the useful definitions of Meyer (1956 : 103): 'The perception of rhythm involves a mental grouping of one or more unaccented beats in relation to an accented beat' and 'Rhythm is accented when it is marked for consciousness in some way'.
- 6 *Maol Donn* (Ex. 1) gives a clear example of this. The ungraced note 6(F) is heard as the rhythmically prominent note in spite of the fact that the C preceding it is given a G gracenote.
- 7 Cf. Bunting (1840: 24-8) for a list of Irish harp terms.
- 8 Matheson's discussion of the relationship of *Cumha Craobh nan Teud* (The Lament for the Harp Tree)

to Morison's poem 'Feill nan Crann' (*op. cit.* pp. 154-6) also centres on the same problems of accentuation as this present paper. Like *Maol Donn*, 'Cumha Craobh nan Teud' can also be found transcribed in a number of different settings. G. F. Ross's setting (1929:8) is much closer to the accentuation needed if the pibroch melody is to fit Morison's poem than the version Matheson quotes from *The Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor*.

- 9 Cf. Meyer, *op. cit.* Ch. 3, for a discussion of the Gestalt theory of 'spontaneous organisation of simple shapes' and its musical implications within different cultures.
- 10 Pipe-Major MacLean's MS based on Neil MacLeod's *Collection of Piobaireachd or Pipe Tunes as verbally taught by the McCrummen pipers in the Isle of Skye* (Edinburgh 1828) is now in the library of the School of Scottish Studies.
- 11 See P.S. 8: preface.
- 12 Most of the editors give details of their sources and most of these can be traced back to the work or teachings of Angus MacKay. Thomason however quotes W. Ross as one of his sources.
- 13 R. Ross employs a three line stave rather than the conventional five, but to facilitate comparisons I have taken the liberty of re-writing it on five lines.
- 14 Captain John MacLellan, Director of the Army School of Piping, Tape SA/1967/32. Note values were determined with the aid of a superimposed time signal giving pulses every 1/10th second and the whole played back at slow speeds during transcription.
- 15 The late Pipe-Major William MacLean, Tape SA 1953/4, the late Calum MacPherson, Tape SA/1959/34 and Mr Calum Johnston, Tape SA/1967/69.
- 16 Miss Morag MacLeod and Mrs Ailie Munro—both colleagues in the musicological section of the School of Scottish Studies.
- 17 Cf. P.S., 7: 206 for a discussion of the various titles given to this pibroch in the different sources.
- 18 Often one hears from Gaels the statement, 'You have to have Gaelic to be able to play pibroch music well', when perhaps they really mean that one should have intimate knowledge of the language rhythms and performance styles of the traditional Gaelic singers—which of course implies a deep knowledge of Gaelic language and culture.

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