Piping Sung: Women, *Canntaireachd* and the Role of the Tradition-Bearer[1]

JOSHUA DICKSON

ABSTRACT. *Canntaireachd* (pronounced 'counter-achk'), Gaelic for 'chanting', is a complex oral notation used by Scottish pipers for centuries to teach repertoire and performance style in the courtly, ceremonial *ceòl mór* idiom. Its popular historiography since the 19th century suggests it was fixed and highly formulaic in structure and therefore formal (as befitting its connection to *ceòl mór*), its use the preserve of the studied elite. However, field recordings of pipers and other tradition-bearers collected and archived since the 1950s in the School of Scottish Studies present a vast trove of evidence suggesting that *canntaireachd* as a living, vocal medium was (and remains) a dynamic and flexible tool, adapted and refined to personal tastes by each musician; and that it was (is) widely used as well in the transmission of the vernacular *ceòl beag* idiom - pipe music for dancing and marching.

In this paper, I offer some remarks on the nature of *canntaireachd,* followed by a review of the role of women in the transmission and performance of Highland, and specifically Hebridean, bagpipe music, including the use of *canntaireachd* as a surrogate performance practice. There follows a case study of Mary Morrison, a woman of twentieth century Barra upbringing, who specialised in performing *canntaireachd;* concluding with a discussion on what her singing of pipe music has to say about her knowledge of piping and the nature of her role as, arguably, a piping tradition-bearer.

In 2006, Professor Hugh Cheape of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig wrote of author William Donaldson's work, *Pipers: a Guide to the Players and Music of the Highland Bagpipe,* as effectively defining an 'ethnomusicology of piping' (Cheape 2006: 169). Implicit in this remark was a perceived dearth of such defining studies, a recognition that this was a field ripe for development, and an exhortation for further studies to emerge in a similar spirit of participant observation and socio-cultural insight. The reviewer's comment was prescient in that doctoral theses and published works have since emerged that have significantly contributed to our understanding of Scottish Highland piping in ethnological, sociological, compositional and performative terms from the points of view of scholar-practitioners.[2] It bears reminding, however, that his comment was predated by many years by the ground-breaking and arguably ethnomusicological studies of Robin Lorimer in the 1950s and 1960s, Peter Cooke and Christine Chambers in the 1970s, and Allan MacDonald in the 1990s,[3] among others. As Scottish bagpipe music constitutes a largely unbroken tradition, and as such is both an emblem of the past and an artefact of the present, it has drawn the attention of western and folk musicologists and cultural historians alike; the common factor between them being an insider's knowledge of the music and its traditions.

In short, we have seen in the past two decades an unprecedented rise in our understanding of the bagpipe as a cultural as well as musical artefact, articulated as never before through, as I once put it elsewhere, 'the performer's own grasp of his craft' (Dickson 2009a: 1).

Such gender-specific language now seems ironic, for the present work is an attempt to continue toward the realisation of an 'ethnomusicology of piping' by focusing on two intimately related, and equally neglected, subjects: pipers' traditional syllabic notation, known as *canntaireachd*, as it pertains to *ceòl beag*, or the 'light music' of the pipes; and the role of women as inheritors and intermediaries of Hebridean piping – that is, as tacitly significant tradition-bearers in historically a man's arena of expertise.

The present study assumes the following research premises:

1. women in the Hebrides, or indeed the greater Highlands and Islands, were until relatively recently barred from actively participating in the region's piping tradition on the basis of a general cultural taboo;
2. women so barred were commonly known to sing pipe tunes in *canntaireachd* – particularly for dances on occasions when a bagpipe or piper was not to hand; and
3. an analysis of the *canntaireachd* sung by Hebridean non-piping women within living memory, compared diachronically and phonologically to that of their piping male contemporaries, would afford a greater understanding of the extent to which women in the Hebrides could be considered legitimate inheritors and intermediaries of the region's historically vibrant piping tradition.

With these premises in mind, the study therefore pursues the following aims:

- to demonstrate that women's passive participation in an instrumental tradition otherwise denied them can be revealed in large part by their singing of *canntaireachd*; and
- to argue that women's historical exclusion from active participation in piping in traditional Hebridean life prior to modern emancipation, belied a deep understanding of the piping idiom afforded by upbringing, observation, their role as singers and the cultural primacy of the voice in the transmission of knowledge.

To begin with, I offer some remarks on the nature of *canntaireachd*, followed by a review of the role of women in the transmission and performance of Highland, and specifically Hebridean, bagpipe music, including the use of *canntaireachd* as a surrogate performance practice. There follows a case study of Mary Morrison, a woman of twentieth century Barra upbringing who specialised in performing *canntaireachd*, concluding with a discussion on what her singing of pipe music has to say about her knowledge of piping and the nature of her role as, arguably, a piping tradition-bearer.

Canntaireachd (pronounced 'counter-achk'), Gaelic for 'chanting', is a complex oral notation used by Scottish pipers for centuries to teach repertoire and performance style in the courtly, ceremonial *ceòl mór* idiom. Its popular historiography since the nineteenth century suggests it was fixed and highly formulaic in structure and therefore formal (as befitting its connection to *ceòl mór*), its use the preserve of the studied elite.[4] However, field recordings of pipers and other tradition-bearers, collected and archived since the 1950s in the School of Scottish Studies, present a vast trove of evidence suggesting that *canntaireachd* as a living, vocal medium was (and remains) a dynamic and flexible tool, adapted and refined to personal tastes by each musician; and that it was (is) widely used in the transmission of the vernacular *ceòl beag* idiom – pipe music for dancing and marching – as well.

The most significant research to date into *canntaireachd* as a living, vocal medium was conducted by Chambers (1980), who solicited the opinions of a wide variety of exponents in the late 1970s on the nature of *canntaireachd* (e.g. what it is, what it is not, and what it is used for). She divided the perceptions as coming from two basic categories of informant: pipers and non-pipers. She further divided the non-pipers into three sub-groups, two of which are relevant to the present study. The first were 'relatives (particularly female relatives) of pipers themselves … people who have taken an interest in *canntaireachd*, who understand it and who have absorbed all the related piping lore while growing up in a pipe-oriented family or community'. The second were 'those who imitate the repertory of sounds used by pipers,

but arrange them in a euphonic rather than systematically associative fashion'. In other words, '*canntaireachd*' is what traditionally or formally trained pipers do for the purpose of transmission, teaching and the highlighting of technical detail; non-pipers or informally trained pipers (e.g. travellers), imitating the sounds of pipe music in ignorance of what the sounds actually signify and whose purpose is entertainment, are instead said to be 'cantering' (Chambers: 17-35, 319-20).

Women and piping in Hebridean tradition: historiography v. reality
Today, women and men enjoy essentially equal status in the professional piping world. Women or girls possess equal access to piping tuition in Scottish schools (and of course privately), and access to all competitions, and have begun to achieve the highest awards. This 'emancipation' is a relatively recent phenomenon; women were barred, for instance, from competing at the Northern Meeting and Argyllshire Gathering (the Scottish piping world's two premier annual competitions) until 1977, following the passage of the Sex Discrimination Act in the United Kingdom in 1975. One of the first women officially to compete at the highest level, thanks to the passage of the Act, was Rona Lightfoot née MacDonald (b. 1936), a native of South Uist, who, like contemporaries Seonaid MacAulay née MacIntyre of South Uist's south end and Catriona Garbutt née Campbell of Benbecula, proved a noteworthy exception to the general cultural taboo against women piping in the Isles. As Lightfoot recently remarked to a journalist, 'Although girls and women didn't normally play the pipes I just copied my father and brother and picked up the chanter and learned by ear' (Muirhead: 10). It has been shown elsewhere that it was not unusual for young girls to learn piping in the mid-twentieth century Hebrides only to be discouraged as young adults; gendered roles in the apprehension of music and song seemed to become entrenched only in adolescence (Dickson 2006: 160). In Lightfoot's case, she simply carried on playing and was fortunate to have the support of her immediate family in doing so.

The status of women in the professional piping world has since risen dramatically, and in 2010, a Gold Medal for *ceòl mór* was awarded to a woman – Faye Henderson of Kirriemuir – for the first time.[5]

Conventional wisdom has it, however, that prior to modern times, a cultural taboo saw piping as unwomanly, and first-hand testimony by Hebridean (and other) pipers bears this out. The father of the late traditional ballad singer, Lizzie Higgins of Perthshire, is said to have burnt the chanter Lizzie had begun to play upon as a child, with the words 'I'll have no she-pipers in my house' (Donaldson: 67). 'It was out of the question in them days for a girl to play the pipes [in Barra]', explained a niece of Mary Morrison in a 1974 interview. 'Oh, it was unheard of' (SA 1974.110). Lightfoot, more circumspect, reminisced how 'sometimes, you would get the impression that there were those who said it was a masculine thing to do, that it wasn't feminine to do it' (Dickson 2006: 160). Calum Johnston of Barra recalled in conversation in 1964 that women 'didn't go in for pipe music, you see' (SA 1964.146), an opinion echoed by contemporary Neil Angus MacDonald when interviewed in 1977:

MM   *A bheil sibh a' smaoineachadh gum biodh boireannaich – an robh beachdan sam bith agaibh no aig ur n-athair mu dheidhinn boireannaich a bhi a' cleachdadh na pìobadh?* … Do you think that women – did you or your father have any opinion about women playing the pipes?[6]

NAM Well, it is said that some of the daughters of the MacCrimmons[7] sang the pipes. It was 'singing the pipes' that the old people said, not 'playing'. Donald Dubh had a daughter and she could go over *ceòl mór*, Donald Dubh MacCrimmon.

MM   But I understood that they weren't for women playing the pipes.

NAM It wasn't considered feminine to be playing the pipes [a generation ago … though there are] many today! (SA 1977.68)

Such views meant that the following verse in the traditional Gaelic song *'S e Morag a Rinn a' Bhànais'* ('It's Morag Who Made the Wedding') was to be considered satirical:

Bha Seonaid is fiodhall aice	Joan was there with her fiddle
Raghnaid is pìob aice	Rachel with her pipe
Mór nan dos is feadan aice	Mor of the drones with her chanter
'S sheinneadh iad a' ruighle.[8]	And they played the reel.

Despite the patriarchal nature of the piping tradition, the reality is that women have indeed played an important role in the inheritance, composition and transmission of the music of the pipe, though not always publicly. The largely invisible but still significant contributions of women to piping in Scotland generally have been broadly outlined elsewhere (Donaldson: 66-9). As '*Se Morag a Rinn a' Bhànais*' suggests, the role of women in piping in the still strongly patriarchal Hebridean community is no less complex. A brief survey of oral and literary evidence suggests that women, particularly those brought up in piping families, were keen life-long observers of their communities' cultural milieu and as such often acted as respected repositories of knowledge without whom breadth of repertoire and vibrancy of style would have been far less surely inherited from one generation to the next. As Neil Angus MacDonald mentioned in passing, piping folklore dictates that the wives and daughters of the famous MacCrimmon dynasty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were able pipers all, albeit largely out of the view of the public. One of Barra's most celebrated authorities on Gaelic music and piping, Calum Johnston, was known to possess songs intimately related to the *ceòl mór* idiom which he had learned from his sister Annie, who in turn had learned them from a local elderly woman.[9] Similarly, the late South Uist piper Calum Beaton reminisced about a pipe reel he had learned as a young man from his neighbour, who had learned it from the singing of a local widow who in turn had claimed to have been given the tune in *canntaireachd* by fairies (Dickson 2006: 26). Fellow Uist piper Alasdair Boyd owed a great deal of his knowledge of the words and melodies associated with *ceòl mór* to his childhood nurse, Anne MacLean, or *Anna nighean a' Phìobaire* ('Anne daughter of the Piper'), who would sing the words to accompany sewing and knitting (SA 1970.007). And one of the twentieth century's most celebrated pipers, the late John MacDonald of South Uist, was of the opinion that certain women at the turn of the century were, against all conventional wisdom, veritable custodians of local knowledge of the classical genre prior to the age of modern instruction:

DAM *An robh ceòl mór ann mus tàinig Iain Domhnallach Inbhir Nis? ...* Did *ceòl mór* exist here before John MacDonald [of Inverness] arrived?
JMcD Yes, but it wasn't so good. It wasn't so good but we had it.
DAM And who had it –
JMcD The women had it. There was one woman, *Màiri Dhomhnaill 'ic an t-Saoir*, the bardess – there wasn't a pibroch that she didn't know. In *canntaireachd*.
DAM What was her name?
JMcD 'The Daughter of the Fair-haired Piper'. (SA 1982.145).

The conclusion to be reached is that women's status as repositories was predicated on the cultural primacy of the voice in the transmission of tradition in Hebridean life and in turn on their command of *canntaireachd*.

Women and *canntaireachd*

Women often turned to *canntaireachd* as a surrogate for active performance on the pipes. According to the nineteenth century aristocrat, polymath and folklorist John Francis Campbell, the sister of celebrated Raasay piper John MacKay (1767-1848) would 'sit by the fire and dictate the words of *canntaireachd* and sing them as the piper played'; Campbell went on to quote his informant, Duncan Ross, piper to the Duke of Argyll: 'Many a time,' said Ross, 'have I heard old women, myself, out herding cattle, sing great music [i.e. *ceòl mór*] in the words of *canntaireachd*' (Campbell 1989: 34). Flora Boyd of Barra was not a piper, but nonetheless sang lyrically in an indicative and onomatopoeic Hebridean *canntaireachd*, having observed pipers teaching young pupils: 'The words they were saying, when they were learning the boys on the chanter … I know how to do the *canntaireachd* because of that' (SA 1974.112). Women were frequently in demand in their local communities as singers of *canntaireachd* for dance music at ceilidhs and weddings when a bagpipe (or piper) was not to hand, and were often acclaimed for their skills. Among the traveller families, 'diddling' as performance, for entertainment and dancing, was at one time seen as a woman's specialism (Chambers: 72-3). This was no less true among Hebridean Gaels, as piper Donald Morrison attested to Christine Chambers:

CC   Did you ever see people dancing to that kind of mouth music or diddling?

DM   Och yes … many, many times indeed … In my young days it was sort of – especially if there were youngsters learning dancing – you didn't have the facility of the piper all the time. The mother would maybe 'strike up', if you might call it that, start singing the tunes. (SA 1977.168)

Canntaireachd was in fact a lifeline to women who, brought up in families staunchly proud of their piping lineage but conservative as regards gender roles, wished to learn and play the pipes but were prevented socially from doing so. This was the experience of Mary Morrison, who learned her craft by observing the piping and singing of her male relatives:

EL   And was it [her brother] Donald that Mary learned most of her *canntaireachd* from?

N   Yes, from her brother. Auntie Mary was very keen to go, when she was young, but they wouldn't let her. It was out of the question in them days for a girl to play the pipes. Oh, it was unheard of.

EL   So you sang *canntaireachd* instead.

N   So she said, well, I'll do the next best thing. I'll play by mouth – mouth music. And I remember Auntie Mary used to do that at the dances.

EL   And I don't suppose people could keep off the floor when Mary was doing it.

N   No! They couldn't! (SA 1974.110)

In Chambers's evaluation, Morrison would have been a performer of 'cantering' rather than '*canntaireachd*'. But it is significant that the way Mary Morrison and other Barra women, such as Mary Ann Lindsay and Flora Boyd, learned their vocalising – that is, by life-long observation and assimilation rather than through active teaching and learning – was no different to that of Calum Johnston, Neil Angus MacDonald or any other male contemporary. How they *used* it is another matter: for women, or non-pipers, it was a medium for performance, whereas for men – active pipers – it was (and is) a tool for transmission and the shorthand musical communication of small details. But the traditional means by which both (piping) men and (non-piping) women acquired *canntaireachd* was the same.

This suggests that the inventory of sounds and how those sounds are used – in essence a vocabulary and grammar of *canntaireachd*, or a Hebridean 'dialect' thereof – would not significantly differ between a non-piper and a piper, man or woman. This hypothesis is supported by the data comprising Table 1, which compares the sounds used by five non-piping women and five piping men of southern Outer Hebridean upbringing across a 30-year period to convey the plain and accented pitches of the bagpipe scale, and Table 2, which compares how these sounds were organised and structured by the same sources to convey a range of ornaments typical of the *ceòl beag* genre. In both tables the onamatopoeism and general phonetic and structural characteristics are consistent across all sources:

Table 1: Bagpipe scale represented in *canntaireachd* by Hebridean women (non-pipers) and men (pipers), 1951-1981[10]

Bagpipe scale, plain and accented	Mary Ann Lindsay, 1976	Mary Morrison, 1951-74	Kate MacCormick, 1956	Flora Boyd, 1974	Kate MacDonald, 1966
Low G	in, hin, chin, din	um, hum, hin	-	im, him	in, hin
Low A	in, hin, chin, din, dim	um, hum, hun, hin, rin, chin	im, um, him, hum, chum	im, um, hum, him, rin	in, hin, um
B	o, ho, do, ro	o, ho, ro, do, bo, ba	o	o, ho, ro, bo, da	o, to, ho
C	a, ha, ta	a, ha, ra, da, ta, pa, va, re	a, ha, pa, ra, ba, he, re, pe	a, ha, ba	a, ba
D	a, ra, ha, dha, e, he, re	e, he, ve, re, a, da, cha, la	a, ha, pa, ra, va, da, e	a, ha, cha, ra, ba, rum	e, che, a, ra
E	u, hu, i, hi, pi, vi, dhi, po, ro	u, du, hu, ru, i, hi, ti, pi	i, di, e, he	i, hi, chi, dhi, ri	u, ru, e, he, i, hi, pi, ri
F	pa, va	i, vi, ri, li, bi, ru	-	i, di, dhi, ti, ri, hi, pi, hu	u
High G	i, dhi, vi, ti	pi, li, vi, chi, ti	i, hi, ri, di	i, hi	i, hi, ri, pi
High A	i, dhi, hi, pi, ti	i, ti, ri, li, bi, fi, vi	i, hi, ri	i, dhi	i, ti, ri, pi

Bagpipe scale, plain and accented	Calum Johnston, 1953-65	Neil Angus MacDonald, 1976-81	Alasdair Boyd, 1970	Archie MacDonald, 1951	Patrick MacCormick, 1953
Low G	um, im, hum, him, hun	um, hum, chum	-	-	um, hum
Low A	un, in, hun, hin, chin, ro	in, hin, chun	um, hum, dum, him	um, hum, chum	um, chum
B	o, ho, po, bo, do, ro	o, ho, po, to, ro, vo, roi	a, ha, ra, o, ho, ro, do, dho	o, ho, ro, bo, ba	o, bo
C	a, ha, pa, da	a, ha, pa, ra, boi	a, ha, ra, ba	a, ha, ra	o, ho, do, ro, pe, re,
D	a, ha, pa, ra, e, he	a, ha, ra, va, ta, e, pe, be	a, ha	a, ha, ra, pa, e, ve	a, da, ra, ba, ach, pe, re, dhe
E	u, hu, i, hi, ti, vi, dhi, pi	u, hu, i, hi, ri, di, vi	u, i, hi, ri, vi, pi, oi, hoi, poi, hè, rè	i, di, u, o	i, hi, e, he
F	e, i, vi	i, hi, vi, ti	i, hi, oi, hoi, poi, e, he, ru	i, hi, ri, vi, he	i, hi, ri
High G	e, i, vi	i, hi, ri	-	i, hi, ri	u, hu, i, hi, dhi
High A	i, chi	i, vi, ti	i, hi, ri	i, ri, pi	i, dhi, ri, rich

Table 2: Sample of *ceòl beag* movements represented in *canntaireachd* by Hebridean women (non-pipers) and men (pipers), 1951-1981

Movements	Mary Ann Lindsay	Mary Morrison	Kate MacCormick	Flora Boyd	Kate MacDonald
Birl	rin, dirin, diririn	dirin, binim	pinim, minim	binim	-
Doubling on B	horo	doro, horo, boro	horo, choro	horo	-
Doubling on C	-	hara	para, hara	-	-
Tachum	tochin	dohin, dohim, dachin, achin	pachim, bahim	hinim	-
Throw on D	-	-	chere, chara	hara	hara
Strike on D	hara, here	ara, hara, chala, hala, hare	here, ara	hara	-
Doubling on E	huru	duru, hili, tili, pili	-	hiri	hiri, piri
Doubling on High A	pidhi	hili, hiri	hiri	hiri, piri	tiri, piri
Single-note triplet	hindinin, hininin	hororo, pororo, varara, hininin, huminim	-	humbinim, hororo, herere	haninin
Multi-note triplet	tobara	bibili, uvili, bilivi, haravi	humina	-	heara, tobara
Grip	br-, a-	-	padi	*[11]	-
Taorluath	-	binim, bidhim	-	-	-

Movements	Calum Johnston	Neil Angus MacDonald	Alasdair Boyd	Archie MacDonald	Patrick MacCormick
Birl	haninin	-	-	bininim, biririm	-
Doubling on B	boro, horo	horo, boro, boroich, toroich	horo	horo	-
Doubling on C	tara, hara	para, hara	hara	-	horo, doro, boro
Tachum	tachin, tarachim, harachin, borochin	aichin, taichin, hachin, hoichin, boichim	harachim, hahin	bachim, hachim, horochim	-
Throw on D	-	-	-	hara	dhe
Strike on D	bere	hara, para	-	ara	dara, bara, pere
Doubling on E	hiri	huru	piri	hiri, piri	-
Doubling on High A	-		hiri	-	dhi
Single-note triplet	haninin	chumbinim, huminim, himinim, hororoich	hororo	-	huminum
Multi-note triplet	habidi, hobara, hiriri		-	hiaru	-
Grip	-	bidi	dhro,dhoro	badi	-
Taorluath	-		-	-	

What was not evident in the tables was the extent to which the *canntaireachd* of the women involved conveyed other, more deep-rooted aspects of orthodox pipers' practice, such as internal consistency of the use of vocables representing conventional pipe ornaments, within the space of one tune or indeed across many performances of the same tune. To address these in greater detail, we turn now to our case study.

Mary Morrison

Mary Morrison, known as *Màiri Eóghainn Mhóir* or 'Mary (daughter of) Big Ewan', was not a piper, but achieved no small measure of fame in her lifetime for her ability to perform *canntaireachd*: her vocables were uncommonly articulate; her tempi uncommonly quick, but always controlled and nimble; and she often concluded her performances with a crowd-pleasing imitation of the piper's characteristic cascade of notes to the tonic low A. Although the tempo she employed when singing a jig was far quicker than what was and is considered appropriate for traditional solo Highland piping today, her status as an acclaimed and in-demand singer of *canntaireachd* for dancing in her native Barra community was a strong indication that such tempi were considered perfectly acceptable, perhaps even necessary, for accompaniment to the Highland Schottische or Eightsome Reel at the local *céilidhs* and wedding dances of the early to mid 20th century.

She was not without her detractors; particularly in response to the question of the authenticity of her *canntaireachd*. The normal reaction to her singing among authoritative pipers varied from cool to withering, focusing in the main on the idea that her *canntaireachd* was not the 'true' *canntaireachd* of a piper, but merely imitative doggeral. 'I could never listen to that woman,' stated Alasdair Boyd emphatically in 1970:

PC   You mean, the *canntaireachd* is wrong? Because she's using her own *canntaireachd*?

AB   I don't know what she's using at all.

PC   So there is a right *canntaireachd*?

AB   'Paddy's Leather Britches' is a beautiful tune. Now, Mary Morrison could never play it, but I could play it ... I could play it, many's the time I did (sings through the tune). I could play the tune, and she couldn't. I could never listen to that woman.

PC   Because she sings the *canntaireachd* wrong?

AB   I don't know, I wouldn't say she sings it wrong, but she doesn't know the tune. (SA 1970.007)

Note that Boyd does not fault Morrison's *canntaireachd per se*, but her timing and tempo ('she doesn't know the tune'). Neil Angus MacDonald was more circumspect:

MM   *A bheil thu eòlach air an t-seòrsa channtaireachd air a sheinn le Màiri Eóghainn Mhóir? ...* Are you familiar with the kind of *canntaireachd* performed by *Màiri Eóghainn Mhóir*?

NAM Yes.

MM   Do you think that was normal in local custom?

NAM Yes. But I think if your *canntaireachd* is to be authentic, you need to be a piper … there might be other opinions, but you must be a piper in order to speak and understand the *canntaireachd* (SA 1977.68).

Christine Chambers, like Peter Cooke before her, probed for more detailed answers when the topic came up in conversation with Donald Morrison:

CC   Could you have told that she (Mary Morrison) wasn't a piper from listening to her?

DM   Oh yes, you can tell.

CC   And yet she doesn't use, you were describing earlier how the women would, say, choose a 'D' and put that; she doesn't do that.

DM   No, well, perhaps, you're quite right there. Perhaps that was a very wide sweep, saying that.

CC   There must have been something that gave her away as a non-piper to you, because you *are* a piper.

DM   Well, it's just the little items like, maybe, taorluath movements … and stuff like that … a piper puts in more detail, and the embellishments are put in the correct place … where the non-piper would maybe just throw in doublings and taorluaths at random.

CC   Because he'd heard the sound from a piper.

DM   Yes, yes. (SA 1977.168)

Morrison, Boyd and MacDonald all called attention to the fact that she was not a piper, and suggested that her *canntaireachd* was simply imitative and therefore technically inconsistent ('the non-piper would just throw in doublings and taorluaths at random'). Donald Morrison's remarks relate to the question of internal consistency in the singing of *canntaireachd*. That is, a non-piper's singing is considered imitative of piping in the general sense, lacking the consistent use and distribution of vocables representing conventional pipe ornaments and vowels in relation to pitch afforded by the specialist knowledge of pipers alone. The singing of a non-piper is therefore considered cantering or diddling rather than 'true' or authentic *canntaireachd* in Chambers's evaluation (1980: 17-35).

My survey and transcription of the singing of five women (non-piping) and five men (piping) of Gaelic Hebridean upbringing recorded between 1951 and 1981, broadly represented in Tables 1-3, suggest that women's use and distribution of conventional vocables and vowels in relation to pitch were in the main no less consistent than the men's; that is, when a part of a tune was repeated as is customary in piping, the *canntaireachd* sung was, in the vast majority of cases, the same, down to the last phoneme. This suggests that the women were not singing imitative or conventional vocables randomly, but in fixed patterns retained in memory. Campbell of Islay remarked on this aspect of retentive, articulatory memory in *canntaireachd* among pipers in 1880: 'Each school of pipers of old,' he wrote, 'and every individual piper now has a separate method of singing … [they] repeat the same sounds in chanting the same tune, when it has been learned by rote and committed to memory' (Campbell: 6). Further on this point, Chambers (60) refers to the late Pipe Major Bob Brown – one of the twentieth century's most celebrated exponents – singing 'The Lament for the Union' twice across a span of eight years, a diachronic comparison of these two performances yielding that his vocables hardly changed at all, vowel or consonant. The upshot is that individual pipers trained formally and traditionally still evolve a style and vocabulary of accepted vocables and phrases unique in practice to that piper in several respects and, due to the habituation of the physical act of singing, will usually retain in memory that unique style and vocabulary over time. Each piper evolves a unique style of *canntaireachd* within certain limits defined by customary acceptability. The over-arching structure of *canntaireachd* – the wider inventory of onomatopoeic and conventional vocables, associative releasing or arresting consonants, clusters or digraphs – remains inviolable; they are the common palette from which the individual piper develops his or her unique style in the individual sense, including combinations of vocables, the choice of vowel sound in relation to pitch, choice and appropriateness of releasing consonant, and so on.

This consistency of style can be observed synchronically (within a single performance) and diachronically (across several performances of the same tune over time) in the singing of non-piper Mary Morrison.

As regards the synchronic analysis, Example 1 is a transcription of Morrison's singing the jig *'Bog Liath nan Gobhar'*, or 'The Shaggy Grey Buck', in 1965 during an interview with the late Rev. William Matheson. This is a traditional Gaelic 6/8 jig well established in the *ceòl beag* canon, having been in print since at least 1848[12] and presumably in oral circulation earlier still. The tune as it is normally played today consists of 12 measures (or parts in pipers' jargon) of eight bars each; pipe tunes are normally performed today in two or four parts, but it was not unusual in Hebridean tradition for pipe tunes for dancing to contain as many as a dozen, and each part in a pipe tune is customarily repeated once. Morrison's rendition of *'Bog Liath nan Gobhar'* in 1965 contained a mere five parts performed in the sequence AA X BB CC DD EE AA CC D. The 'X' represents Morrison filling the space of an entire eight-bar part by repeating the melody of what was bar 7 of part 1, which seems to serve the function of an elaborate interlude or anacrusis, creating a tension that is finally released upon beginning the second part proper. This is not the orthodox practice of pipers today, but it may very well have been the custom of Mary's brother or other local Barra pipers to do so at dances in an earlier generation.

Example 1: *'Bog Liath nan Gobhar'* as sung by Mary Morrison, 1965 (SA 1965.12)[13]

When Morrison repeats a part, the vocables sung are in the vast majority of cases identical in phonemic quality, structure and sequence to those sung the first time. Also, the internal structure of each part in Morrison's singing follows a consistent rhyming pattern, as in poetry: for instance, the last vocable in line three of every part transcribed above (corresponding to bar 6 of each part in the instrumental pipe tune), is a variation on [heohin/m], i.e. the [e] phoneme (corresponding in this performance to the note D on the bagpipe scale and similar in sound to 'ay', as in 'hay' or 'say') punctuating and marking a specific place in each part. The last part features the [e] especially prominently, with the third line featuring the [e] phoneme in every major vocable – i.e. marking by the quality of the phoneme the end of the tune.

On the relationship of vowel to pitch in *canntaireachd*, Chambers (133) refers to a strong correlation between pitch and choice of vowel sound across all types of vocalising, onomatopoeicism being consistently applied. Buisman later corroborated this by demonstrating the traditional 'regions' on the pipe chanter scale that are represented most consistently by specific vowels in the historical written sources (Buisman 1997-8: 27), and this is in turn confirmed by the oral data compiled in the present Table 1. The data indicates that the Hebridean 'dialect' of *canntaireachd*, including that of Mary Morrison and other non-piping women, associated vowel to pitch generally in the following onomatopoeic descension from narrow and velar to broad and labial (or alveolar):
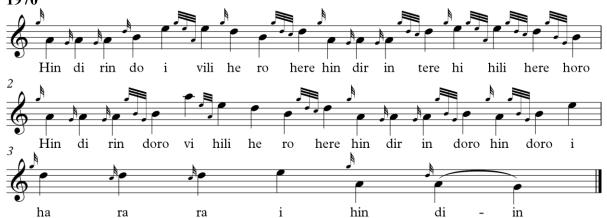
Table 3: Vowel-to-pitch assocation in *canntaireachd* by Hebridean exponents, 1951-1981

High A High G	} i
F	i, e
E	u, e
D	a, e
C	a, o
B	o, a
Low A Low G	} m, n

But, as Tables 1 and 2 confirm, Chambers also comments that systematic, or consistent, relating of vowel to pitch among any group of musicians was elusive; i.e. although some individuals within any group associated vowel to pitch with more consistency than others, variability was wide. Chambers (135) cites one formally-trained and renowned mainland piper who used as many as ten different vowel sounds to represent one pitch in a single example of *ceòl beag*. Contrast this with Mary Morrison's '*Bog Liath nan Gobhar*', where the vowel quality of the vocable [heohin] was consistent in every part.

As regards the diachronic analysis, compare Chambers's account of PM Brown's performances of the pibroch 'The Lament for the Union' (60), in which he sang the tune twice over an eight-year period displaying no significant changes, with the following transcriptions of Mary Morrison's singing of a passage of *ceòl mór canntaireachd* over a 20-year period. Morrison sang the pibroch song 'Cholla Mo Run', which is associated with the pibroch 'The Piper's Warning to His Master', for School of Scottish Studies researchers on at least eight occasions between 1950 and 1970, customarily ending each performance with a burst of *canntaireachd*. Morrison's neighbours and family considered it her masterpiece. The free rhythm and irregular tempi may reflect an earlier, more rubato and declamatory pibroch performance style in the Western Isles – if not expounded by the classical families, then by the rank and file pipers and singers to whom *ceòl mór* repertoire and style may have diffused as the status of the classical families waned in the 18th century. Example 2 compares the first strain of each performance:

Example 2: Variorum of *'Cholla Mo Rùn'* vocables performed by Mary Morrison, 1950-1970

1950 (CW0034E)
Hindirin do i hili hero here hindirin tere hi hili here horo / hindirin doro vi hili hero here hindirin doro hin doro i / harara hi hin din

SA 1951.11
Hindirin do vi hili hero here hindirin tèrè hi hili here horo / hindirin doro vi hili hero here hindirin doro hin doro vi / harara hi hin din

SA 1965.12
Hindirin do i hili hero here hindirin tèrè hi hili here horo / hindirin doro vi hili hero here hindirin doro hin doro i / harara hi hin din

SA 1965.52
Hindirin do vi hili hero he him here hi hili here horo / hindirin doro vi hili hero he hinin doro hin doro i / harara hi hin din

SA 1965.56
Hindirin do vi hili hero here hindirin tèrè hi hili here horo / hindirin doro vi hili hero here hindirin doro hin doro i / harara hi hin din

SA 1965.107
Hindirin do vi hili hero here hindirin tere hi hili here horo / hindirin doro vi hili hero here hindirin doro hin doro i / harara hi hin din
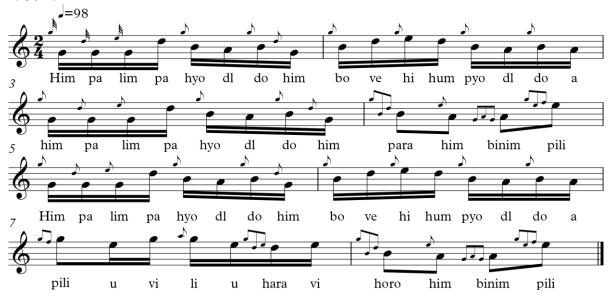
SA 1967.72
Hindirin do vi hili hero here hindirin tere hi hili here horo / hindirin doro vi hili hero here hindirin doro hin doro i / harara hi hin din

SA 1970.164
Hindirin do vi hili hero here hindirin tele hi hili here horo / hindirin doro vi hili hero here hindirin doro hin doro i / harara hi hin din

We see similar diachronic consistency in her performance of *ceòl beag*. In her singing of the following unnamed traditional quickstep march, recorded on at least seven occasions between 1956 and 1974, Morrison displays the strong onomatopoeic consistency and vocables typical of Hebridean pipers' *canntaireachd* such as [horo], [pili] and [hindirin] placed in a manner appropriate to the pipe tune; whilst her [didl] and [hyodl][14] were examples of the use of laterally and/or nasally released voiced and unvoiced stops normally observed in singers of both Hebridean *canntaireachd* and Perthshire traveller diddling (Chambers:46). Example 3 compares the first part, or measure, of each performance:

Example 3: Variorum of unnamed quickstep vocables performed by Mary Morrison, 1956-1974

Him pa lim pa hyo dl do him bo ve hi hum pyo dl do a

him pa lim pa hyo dl do him para him binim pili

Him pa lim pa hyo dl do him bo ve hi hum pyo dl do a

pili u vi li u hara vi horo him binim pili

SA 1956.060
Himpalim pa hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a himpalim pa hyodl dohim para hum binim pili / himpalim pa hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a pili uvi liu haravi horo hum binim pili

SA 1965.12
Himpalim pa hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a himpalim pa hyodl dohim para hum binim pili / himpalim pa hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a pili uvi liu haravi horo hum binim pili

SA 1965.48
Himpalim pa hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a himpalim pa hyodl dohim para hum binim pili / himpalim pa hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a pili uvi liu haravi horo hum binim pili

SA 1966.17
Himpalim pa hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a himpalim pa hyodl dohim para hum binim pili / himpalim pa hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a pili uvi liu haravi horo hum binim pi

SA 1967.72
Hindirin ta hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a hindirin ta hyodl dohin tara hin dirin tili / hindirin ta hyodl dohim bove hi hump hyodl do a pili uvi liu haravi horo hum binim pi

SA 1970.164
Hindirin ta hyodl dohin bove hi hump hyodl do a hindirin ta hyodl dohin doro hin dirin tili / hindirin ta hyodl dohin bove hi hump hyodl do a pili uvi liu haravi horo hin dirin ti

SA 1974.110
Hindirin ta hyodl dohin bove hi hump hyodl do a hindirin ta hyodl dohin doro hin dirin tili / hindirin ta hyodl dohin bove hi hump hyodl do a pili uvi liu haravi horo hin dirin tili

The main feature of change discernible in the above variora is the occasional switch from such phrases as [himpalim pa] to [hindirin ta] and [hum binim pi] to [hin dirin ti]; this is

an example of the use of homorganic junctures – when the releasing segment or consonant of one vocable occupies the same place of articulation as the arresting segment of the previous vocable. It is a hallmark of Gaelic, and by extension the *canntaireachd* of Gaelic-speaking pipers. So in both '*Cholla Mo Rùn*' and the unnamed quickstep march we see a clear consistency in the use of vocables and the authentic grammar of *canntaireachd* over the period in question, further underlining Morrison's credentials as a piping tradition-bearer in the Hebridean context.

Conclusions

Taking Chambers's definitions into account, the *canntaireachd* of Mary Morrison and other women appearing in this paper's tables may fall into the category of cantering rather than 'true *canntaireachd*' due to their common performance context as contributions to ceilidhs, general entertainment and to provide music for dancing; the fact that some aspects of Mary Morrison's performances beyond the tunes themselves were purely imitative; and the fact that they were not formally trained pipers but 'picked up' what they knew from pipers in their families, musical circles and communities. They did not sing *canntaireachd* in order to swap tunes with pipers, teach pipers certain passages or correct errors in ornamentation or melodic line (though this latter has been documented in Perthshire[15]), which is what Chambers observed to be some of the main functions of pipers' *canntaireachd*.

However, despite the scoffing of some of her male contemporaries, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that Mary Morrison shared aspects of authentic pipers' *canntaireachd* to an equal extent with male, bona fide pipers in her community, such as consistency and retention of vocable memory and usage (both within a given tune and diachronically across repeated performances of that tune) and her command of associative vocables and their appropriate placement.

Chambers was at pains to affirm the importance of understanding the indigenous evaluation of a musical custom or idiom as a bulwark against an unbalanced or less than complete understanding of the music in question on the part of the 'outside' scholar. The traditional Gaelic or Hebridean evaluation of piping has been shown elsewhere to classify a 'good' piping performance as prioritising *timing* over *technique*, or rather, precision of timing and rhythm over precision of fingering and embellishment, due to traditional Hebridean piping's frequent functional context as dance music (Dickson 2006: 214-5). In this evaluation, the singing of Mary Morrison *et al*, can indeed be regarded as piper's *canntaireachd*, for the following reasons:

- their inventory of vocables was largely identical to that of pipers similarly recorded;
- their inventory of constituent sounds and phrases for *ceòl beag* was likewise identical;
- the way they assembled and combined such sounds into vocables and repetitive phrases was in the main consistent with pipers similarly recorded;
- their internal consistency of vocable usage synchronically and diachronically was almost absolute, which suggests that they did not place vocables at random, but retained physical and mental memory of the vocables' articulatory shapes and appropriate placement, a characteristic of all traditionally trained, *canntaireachd*-singing pipers;
- they used vocables representing conventional pipe ornaments, and placed them in the main at points in tunes appropriate to their technical and traditional execution by pipers, such as the birl, the grip and the throw on D; and
- their singing could be regarded as imbuing a real or potential pedagogic function – one of the acknowledged main functions of Chambers's 'true' *canntaireachd* – since they conveyed the tempo, timing and internal rhythmic dynamism of a tune

appropriate to their musical culture. In other words, their singing conveyed all that a piper brought up in a Gaelic Hebridean community context that favoured timing over technique would need to know in order to learn and master a typical tune in his tradition's main performance context (the *céilidh*). In short, a piper could just as well *learn* from their singing as be *entertained* by it.

The tables offered in this paper contain an inventory of sounds/vocables from five non-piping women and five piping men across Barra, South Uist and Benbecula, showing that differences in sound and vocable usage were few, in turn suggesting that a style and breadth of vocabulary was common to all, regardless of gender or whether or not one actually played the pipes. This affirms the intuitive conclusion that *canntaireachd*, insofar as the Hebridean tradition is concerned, is (or was) something inexorably absorbed rather than actively taught and was, prior to the rise of piping among women generally in the late twentieth century, considered by women to be a precious link to a tradition denied them in the fuller sense; a link on the basis of which Hebridean women could, and did, undertake a significant role as bearers of the community's most vital instrumental tradition.

NOTES

[1] My thanks go to Roderick Cannon and Hugh Cheape for their invaluable comments on drafts of this paper.

[2] See West, 2003; McKerrell, 2005; Cheape, 2008; Forrest; Dickson, 2009.

[3] I refer in Lorimer's case to interviews he conducted with pipers such as Bob Brown and Bob Nicol (e.g. SA 1953.062-3 and SA 1953.256) and Calum Johnston (SA 1964.145-6), which led to greater recognition of pipers' own evaluations of their craft in modern scholarship – notably absent in prior writings on Scottish piping. See also Cooke, 1972; Chambers, 1980; MacDonald, 1995.

[4] See Grant: iii-vi; Moss; Buisman (1987, 1994a-b, 1997-8); and Donaldson:83-8.

[5] Argyllshire Gathering, Oban, August 2010.

[6] Interview extracts which begin in Gaelic were originally recorded entirely in Gaelic, and have been translated into English for the purposes of this paper by the author.

[7] The MacCrimmons were a family of pipers based in Skye who enjoyed a very high professional status as hereditary pipers to the chiefs of Clan MacLeod for about two centuries until c. 1822. See, for instance, MacKay 8' Poulter & Fisher; Campbell, 1948: 9 and Donaldson: 80.

[8] As sung by Calum Johnston, SA 1953.252_253.

[9] See for instance *'Bruadar Dhierdre'* in Johnston: 178-9 and SA 1964.146.

[10] See References for a complete list of the recordings from which data comprising Tables 1 and 2 are based.

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[11] Flora Boyd's rendition of a quickstep march included a sound which I have chosen to represent with an asterisk (*) and which can likened to a voiceless palatal fricative similar to the sound of a jazz drum kit's hi-hat. The tune's context suggests that the sound was meant to convey a ripple-like movement known to pipers as the 'grip'.

[12] The tune appears as 'Nameless' in Donald MacDonald's *Quicksteps ...* of 1828; as 'Am Boc Luideach. The Shaggy Buck' in Angus MacKay's *Piper's Assistant* of 1843; and in Wiliam Gunn's *Caledonian Repository of Music*, first published in 1848 under the title 'Am Bog Glas'. Pipers today most often refer to the setting found in *Scots Guards Standard Settings of Pipe Music*, Vol. 1, 1965 p. 273-5. The setting sang by Mary Morrison departed melodically from these printed settings in significant respects, a product of the variation that emerges in oral tradition.

[13] This and subsequent music examples use conventional Highland bagpipe notation, in which all main note stems point downward and all gracenote stems point upward. The gracenote arrangements are editorial.

[14] The [dl] element is pronounced as in the second syllable of 'fiddle'.

[15] Chambers (1980) relates an anecdote of Belle Stewart, of the well-known Perthshire traveller family, correcting her husband's performance of a pipe tune by 'cantering' the correct version.

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Webography and Recordings

Most of the following recordings of *canntaireachd* and discussion evidence can be consulted online via www.tobarandualchais.co.uk.

1950 CW0034E Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
- '*Cholla Mo Rùn*'

SA 1951.11 Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
- '*Cholla Mo Rùn*'

- '79th's Farewell to Gibraltor'
- 'Reel of Tulloch'
- 'Highland Wedding'
- 'Paddy's Leather Britches'
- '*Dé Chuir am Mulad Ort Oidhche do Bhainnseadh*'

SA 1953.062   Pipe Major Robert U Brown, Balmoral
- Various *ceòl mór*; discussion

SA 1953.063   Pipe Major Robert U Brown, Balmoral
- Various *ceòl mór*; discussion

SA 1953.256   Pipe Major Robert U Brown, Balmoral
- Various *ceòl mór*; discussion

SA 1953.32   Patrick MacCormick, Hacleit, Benbecula
- '*Cailleach a' Ghlinn Dorcha*' (a.k.a. 'The Cameronian Rant')

SA 1953.33   Archie MacDonald, Garryhellie, South Uist
- 'Portree Men'

SA 1956.060   Mary Morrison
- Unnamed quickstep march

SA 1956.158   Kate MacCormick, Hacleit, Benbecula
- Unnamed quickstep march
- 'Devil in the Kitchen'
- '*Calum Crùbach*'
- Unnamed reel

SA 1958.26   Patrick MacCormick, Hacleit, Benbecula
- Unnamed reel

SA 1962.23   Donald Ruadh MacIntyre, Snishval, South Uist
- '*Cailleach a' Ghlinn Dorcha*' (a.k.a. 'The Cameronian Rant')

SA 1964.145   Calum Johnston, Barra
- Various *ceòl mór* and *ceòl beag*; discussion

SA 1964.146   Calum Johnston, Barra
- Various *ceòl mór* and *ceòl beag*; discussion

SA 1965.12   Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
- Unnamed quickstep march
- '*Seann Triubhas*'
- '*Conas an Dranndain*'
- '*Bog Liath nan Gobhar*'
- '*Cholla Mo Rùn*'
- 'Reel of Tulloch'
- 'Lady of Glenorchy'
- '*Tarbh Mhic Eòin*'

SA 1965.48   Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
- Unnamed quickstep march

SA 1965.52   Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
- '*Cholla Mo Rùn*'

SA 1965.56   Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
- '*Cholla Mo Rùn*'

SA 1965.62   Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
- '*Conas an Dranndain*'

SA 1965.66	Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
	• *'Cholla Mo Rùn'*
SA 1965.107	Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
	• *'Cholla Mo Rùn'*
SA 1966.17	Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
	• Unnamed quickstep march
	• *'Port Dannsa'*
	• 'Smith of Chilliehassie'
SA 1966.96	Kate MacDonald (Mrs Archie), Garryhellie, South Uist
	• *'Cailleach an Dùdain'*
SA 1967.72	Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
	• *'Cholla Mo Rùn'*
	• Unnamed quickstep march
SA 1970.007	Alasdair Boyd, Oban
	• Various *ceòl mór* and *ceòl beag*; discussion
SA 1970.164	Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
	• *'Cholla Mo Rùn'*
	• Unnamed quickstep march
SA 1974.110	Mary Morrison, Earsary, Barra
	• Unnamed quickstep march; discussion
	• *'Dannsa Ruidhle'*
SA 1974.112	Flora Boyd, Barra
	• Various *ceòl beag*; discussion
SA 1976.26	Neil Angus MacDonald, Inverness
	• Various *ceòl mór* and *ceòl beag*; discussion
SA 1976.77	Mary Ann Lindsay, Oban
	• Various *ceòl beag*, inc. 'Dark Island', 'Hills of South Uist', 'Black Bear' and 'South Uist Golf Club'
	• Own composition 'Leaving Lochaline'
	• Own composition 'Mary MacKay's Birthday'
SA 1977.68	Neil Angus MacDonald, Inverness
	• *'Bog Liath nan Gobhar'*
	• *'Làir Iain 'ic Phàdruig'*
	• Discussion
SA1977.168	Donald Morrison, South Uist
	• Discussion
SA 1981.054	Neil Angus MacDonald, Inverness
	• Discussion
SA 1982.145	*Seonaidh Roidein*, Daliburgh, South Uist
	Discussion