Piobaireachd: A Comprehensive Introduction to Ceòl Mór

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by

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Abstract

The Great Highland Bagpipe is one of the most emotionally evocative instruments in the world, providing people with reactions ranging from awe, grief, courage, pride, and occasionally immense irritation. The Great Highland Bagpipe and its music have a rich history that is hardly known in American culture. Piobaireachd is a complex and ancient musical form that is central to this bagpipe’s culture, development, and heritage. The importance of piobaireachd cannot be understated; in many ways it secured the survival of the Great Highland Bagpipe to today. This thesis explains the history and construction of world bagpipes, the musical structure of piobaireachd, canntaireachd and celtic oral tradition, and the history of piobaireachd itself. Together these subjects portray a comprehensive study of how piobaireachd has become the music it is today.
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Author's Statement

While most Americans have heard Highland Bagpipes, few have knowledge of piobaireachd. The intent of this thesis is to provide an introductory resource regarding this ancient musical form. This aims to benefit pipers without considerable cultural piping knowledge, other musicians, and all others who have a scholarly interest in bagpiping. There will be some technical musical aspects, which will be explained clearly in common terminology.

It is necessary to note that this thesis was written in conjunction with my semester studying abroad at the University of Limerick’s Irish World Academy. I studied Traditional Irish Music and Dance with the Highland Bagpipe as my primary instrument and Uilleann pipes as my secondary. In my coursework I also studied Irish dance, regionalism in Irish music and dance, Irish song, Irish language, and keyboard skills. I had the unique opportunity to learn about Scottish and Irish approaches to piping simultaneously.

In my main performance module I studied piping maintenance, technique, tunes, and structure. I focused a considerable portion on instruction in piobaireachd, given Michael Egan’s expert knowledge in the subject. I chose to study “Sir James MacDonald of the Isles’ Lament” and “The Men Went to Drink” with the hopes of
performing them in solo competition. At the end of the semester my performance module culminated in a 15 minute playing test where I performed a selection of pieces including both light music and ceòl mór, finishing with the urlar of "Sir James MacDonald of the Isles' Lamest."

To further my knowledge in highland piping I visited Scotland on several occasions during my studies. In Glasgow I visited the College of Piping and the National Piping Center. I viewed both of their piping museums and spoke with the College of Piping historian. In Edinburgh I visited the National Museum of Scotland to learn about aspects of Scottish history that influenced piping. I also travelled to the Highlands and several Scottish Isles, where piobaireachd developed. These travels helped direct and focus my research for this paper, which would not have been feasible without them.
Bagpipe World History and Mechanics

When people hear the term “bagpipe” they tend to picture a Scotsman playing “Amazing Grace” or “Scotland the Brave” on the Great Highland Bagpipes, or the *piob mhòr* (Donaldson 479). Most people without a strong appreciation for celtic music are not aware that “bagpipe” is a whole family of instruments, just as a horn can refer to many different instruments, ranging from cornets to sousaphones. In fact, “The bagpipe shares with the drum and the harp the claim to be the oldest of musical instruments” (MacNeill 9). Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to discern which of these is the oldest. Like the harp and drum, the bagpipe was not invented in one solitary place and then spread throughout the world, but rather developed independently in numerous regions.

Bagpipes possibly appear to have existed as early as the thirteenth century B.C. in an ancient Hittite carving (MacNeill 10). However, the lack of detail in this carving makes it impossible to know exactly which instrument is being represented. The bagpipe is possibly referenced in the Old Testament, although this is debated by scholars. In Daniel 3:5;10, the *Sumponiah* is mentioned, dating ca. 604-56 BC (*The Lutheran Study Bible: English Standard Version*). This instrument is a translation of the Hebrew ‘*ugab* (Adler 977). In some modern versions this is translated as bagpipe, although some scholars and earlier translations claim it represents the Double Flute
The oldest forms of bagpipes are believed to have developed in Asia, but Ancient Greek and Roman Civilizations were certainly aware of them.

There is in fact a large amount of evidence stating that the Roman military used bagpipes in their marches, "Procopius called it 'the instrument of war of the Roman infantry'" (MacNeill 10). There is also evidence that Emperor Nero (37-68 AD) played bagpipes himself. It seems that the Romans brought the bagpipe to England, where it then spread to Scotland. Bagpipes grew steadily after the empire and were immensely popular during the Middle Ages, leaving unique native bagpipes in "Scotland, England, Ireland, France, Italy, Spain, Yugoslavia, Russia, India, Poland, Greece, and Czechoslovakia" (MacNeill 12). The bagpipe's height of popularity was likely in the thirteenth century (Cannon 1). After the Middle Ages, daily life gradually switched to a more urban focus. Bagpipes, being dominating outdoor instruments, suffered in popularity as people spent more time indoors. Many nationalities attempted to alter their pipes, making them quieter and more appropriate for indoor playing. The Highland Bagpipes resisted any great modification, which allowed for their greater survival compared to other pipes in many ways.

The construction of the bagpipe can be broken into two primary categories, based on Anthony Baines' 1960 classic survey of bagpipes (Cannon 3). Bagpipes are broken into categories based on their chanter, which is the pipe that is fingered to produce the instrument's melody. Conical chanters are wooden and turned on a lathe. These typically have a more brazen sound to them and employ double reeds, the type of reed used in an oboe. The Great Highland Bagpipes (the instrument of focus in this
thesis) and the Italian Zampogna are in this category. The medieval shawm developed from the conical pipe chanter as well. Cylindrical chanters are usually wooden, but may be made out of other materials including bone, cane, and horn. Ireland’s Uilleann pipes and England’s Northumbrian pipes are the most common in this family today. Cylindrical chanters typically use a single cane reed (with the notable exception of the) Uilleann pipes), much like those used by the Highland Pipe’s drones. These reeds produce a tone which is quieter, lower, and mellower than a similarly sized conical chanter.

Various bagpipes evolved in a number of ways. Simple early versions of the bagpipe included mouth-blown instruments consisting of a single drone and chanter (Cannon 1). In various cultures the bagpipe was modified. Some regions’ earliest records show their native bagpipes existing with and without the bag concurrently, suggesting that the bag was added later to help the player sustain tones. Before the implementation of the pipe bag, pipers would have used circular breathing techniques to sustain their tones or would have taken short breaths. Circular breathing used to be a necessary skill in Western woodwinds but the technique has since abated in necessity to the point where only highly skilled performers and certain instruments have it as a common standard (Cannon 4). A bagpipe’s bass drone was implemented at a similar time as the bag, adding a layer of harmony to the chanter’s melody. The bass drone used a series of wooden joints for tuning, making it possible to match pitch with the chanter. Materials used for reeds, bags, the pipes, and ornamental mounts improved with time as well.
Though it is fairly certain that the Romans brought bagpipes to England, we do not know when pipes were used in Ireland or Scotland. Written records show pipers in England being paid to play for courts and they are also mentioned in literature as early as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in the fourteenth century (Cannon 7). Gaelic cultures could be stubborn when it came to adopting outside influences, for better and for worse. The Highlands are geographically isolated and as such, cultural influences spread more slowly throughout. It is safe to say that pipes were being used in Scotland and Ireland by 1400, if not earlier. The Highland Bagpipe likely originated with a single drone, although there is no evidence to support this (Cannon 14). It is again impossible to date when the second drone was added, but scholars suggest it was in the mid sixteenth century. A portrait from 1714 indicates that the bass drone was added in the early years of the eighteenth century (Cannon 15).

The *piob mhór* is what the evolved bagpipe that we know today as the Great Highland Bagpipe. While its overall design has remained fairly constant for the last two centuries, technology has greatly improved its playability in the recent fifty years. Bagpipes tend to be fickle instruments to keep in tune and require regular maintenance and playing if they are to sound first-rate. The invention of synthetic drone reeds made the Highland Pipes more approachable to beginners. These reeds operate similarly to traditional cane drone reeds, but are much more forgiving to moisture and stable in pitch, requiring less maintenance. Similarly, most pipers today use synthetic or cowhide bags rather than traditional sheepskin bags. Synthetic bags are cheaper, easier to install, and require much less regular playing to keep them functioning well.
These advances are incredibly useful for beginning and amateur pipers, making the pipes easier to maintain and allowing more time to be spent mastering fundamental and difficult fingering techniques and breath control. Despite these advances’ practical uses, leading pipers agree that the richest and purest sound still comes from pipes set up with cane reeds and a sheepskin bag.

The *piob mhór* is unique in many ways from most Western instruments, which set it apart from many Western tunes and making it suited for piobaireachd. Pipers are commonly asked what key bagpipes are in, and there is no easy response. For the purposes of musical notation, the Highland Bagpipe is typically written in a A minor, which is an octave scale starting on A with no sharps or flats (MacNeill 24). This scale has an additional low G, giving it a range of only 9 notes which is rather small compared to the chromatic multiple octave instruments that are in today’s orchestras. Some cultures such as the Bretons in France notate the Highland Bagpipe music with a B flat starting pitch. While their music is written in a simple key for notation, Highland Bagpipes do not tune to any given Western pitch:

In 1885 the pitch of the pipe A was found to be 441 c/s, which is practically the present standard A (440). In common with all musical instruments, however, the pitch of the pipe has been rising steadily, and in 1954 the pipe A was 459 c/s, while the standard B flat remains at 467 c/s. (MacNeill 28)

Today solo pipers are playing with their A tuned to about 476-480 Hz, which is sharper than a B flat. The most immediate consequence of the rising pitch is that the highest
notes in the bagpipe’s scale are beginning to sound faint and weak, becoming too high in pitch to be crisply played with reeds.

Lastly, it is important to distinguish the pipe’s scale from the Western equal tempered scale. Virtually all backgrounds of music recognize the octave, a 2:1 interval, as the basis of the scale (MacNeill 26). In Western music the scale is based around simple intervals that regularly divide the space between the starting pitch and the octave above. The bagpipe scale, however, employs intervals that are unnatural to the Western ear. A key in the Highland Bagpipe’s scale is the “limma.” By implementing this odd interval, the bagpipe is able to maximize the number of pentatonic scales that can be played in its nine note range (three). The intervals of the pipe scale also create truer harmonies with the drones’ overtones than a typical Western or just scale would (Cannon 6).

**Types of Great Highland Bagpipe Music**

The vast majority of people picture Highland Bagpipes playing light music, known as ceòl beag (MacNeill 17). This translates literally to “little music” and it comprises of tune types that pipe bands play and what people would typically hear in a parade: marches, strathspeys, and reels. There is also a category deemed ceòl meadhonach, or “middle music” which consists of slow airs and jigs. While there used to be a distinction between light music and middle music, the two are categorized
together today as “light music” or ceòl aotrom, a less derogatory term. Piobaireachd is then left with the most prestigious title of ceòl mór meaning “big music.”

These category names imply that piobaireachd is inherently more complex and difficult to play than light music, which is simply untrue. Light music presents pipers with technical tunes that can have truly expressive melodies (MacNeill 16). Originally light music was not written for the bagpipe; rather, it consisted of popular folk songs and other instrumental pieces (MacNeill and Richardson 38). Light music radically increased in popularity under the influence of the British military in the eighteenth and especially nineteenth centuries. In contrast, piobaireachd was the original music of the Highland Bagpipe, and in fact the music the pipes were built around. Pentatonic scales are the basis of about eighty percent of piobaireachd, giving them a noticeably non-Western quality (MacNeill 26). The oldest examples of piobaireachd were based on G, the lowest note of the piping scale. However, piobaireachd set in A has a very bright relation to the drones’ harmonics, portraying a completely different emotion than a piobaireachd in G. Least commonly, piobaireachd was written in pentatonic D scales (MacNeill and Richardson 37). Despite being the least common, piobaireachd in D is among the most celebrated in the piping canon, including Donald Ban MacCrimmon’s “Lament for the Children” which has been heralded as “the greatest single-line melody in European music” (MacNeill 18).

Piobaireachd Structure and Form
Piobaireachd is thoroughly complex type of music and it is frequently inaccurately described as slow and sad. In truth piobaireachd includes pieces with wide ranges of emotion, varying from tunes of "welcoming and gathering, pastoral and descriptive pieces, bacchanalian tunes and satires, as well as battle pieces and laments" (Donaldson 467). It is an exceptionally expressive music and takes a modified structural form of theme and variation. The theme is commonly called the "ground" or urlar. The Urlar is the foundation of the piobaireachd, although not necessarily the most important melodic strand, often preparing "the way for internal parts of still greater expressiveness" (Donaldson 468).

After the piper plays the ground, the key melodic notes will then be used as the basis for following variations. There are several different possible kinds of variations including singlings, doublings, triplings, thumb variations, dithis, siubhals, taorluaths, lemluaths, and crunluaths. Additionally, many of these variations have their own variations, such as a taorluath doubling or the three non-standard types of crunluaths: the crunluath breabach, crunluath fosgailte, and the crunluath a-mach (MacNeill 55). The variations progressively increase in technical difficulty, culminating in the rippling sound of crunluaths and possibly a crunluath doubling. Piobaireachd will have varying numbers and combinations of these variations before returning to the beginning to restate all or part of the ground. However, in older performance styles the ground was restated between certain variations as well as at the end of the piece.

A full piobaireachd can range anywhere from five to thirty minutes in duration. Typically the ground and each variation consist of three "lines." These are then
subdivided into 2 measure phrases which are arranged into repeating patterns (MacNeill 42). The patterns of these two bar phrases classify which form the piobaireachd is in. The small repeated phrases of piobaireachd can at first be draining or boring to a new listener. However, the repetition creates a quasi-hypnotic effect, evoking emotion in a similar fashion as certain types of jazz. If we label the first phrase “A” and the second phrase “B,” Primary piobaireachd has a structure of:

First Line: A A B
Second line: A B B
Third Line: A B

This form juxtaposes the two phrases together and artfully balances out in the final line (Donaldson 473). This basic structure is carried throughout the ground and each variation, although there are usually frequent minor variations from the exact pattern. Secondary piobaireachd is more complex than Primary, although this complexity creates more intricate melodies and tonal relationships. The first and second lines of Secondary piobaireachd have four phrases, while the third line only has two. The formed structure is:

First Line: A B C D
Second line: C B A D
Third Line: C D

This pattern will be followed in the ground and each variation, barring any irregularity.

In addition to Primary and Secondary piobaireachd, there are Tertiary A, Tertiary B, and Irregular forms. Tertiary A and B are quite similar, they are “made up of
tunes which have three equal lines, the first line being repeated" (MacNeill 66). Some theorists have proposed that these tunes should have their phrasing classified into four lines, but this is contradictory to the musicality of piobaireachd. Tertiary forms are then further categorized as Tertiary A or B based upon the predictability of their 2 bar phrases in each line. Tertiary A phrases follow no apparent pattern within each line. This complexity has created some of the best ceòl mór, including “Lament for the Children” and “Park Piobaireachd” (MacNeill 66). In contrast, Tertiary B’s phrases follow the regular pattern:

First Line: A B A C (repeated)
Second line: D B D C
Third Line: D B A C

Tertiary B piobaireachd is more restricted by phrase order than Tertiary A and as such had less unique melodies, although still beautiful. Lastly, many piobaireachd follow no discernable pattern whatsoever and are thus categorized as Irregular in form. The complete lack of regulation allows for diverse and complex melodies. These tunes are among the most difficult for pipers to learn, but their irregularity makes them some of the most appreciated. Notable Irregular piobaireachd includes “Lament for Colin Roy MacKenzie,” The MacDougall’s Gathering,” “The Finger Lock,” and “MacIntosh’s Lament” (MacNeill 80).

Canntaireachd and Piobaireachd Meter
Canntaireachd is a series of sung vocables that are used to portray piobaireachd through the human voice (MacNeill 30). We do not know how old it is, but comparatively recently it developed a transcribed onomatopoetic written form. Canntaireachd appears deceivingly complex initially and is rather straightforward in construction:

Melody notes are represented by vowels and diphthongs, and gracenotes are represented by consonants with the addition of various ‘releasing’ and arresting’ particles at the beginnings and ends of the resulting vocables. (Donaldson 449)

The written form bears resemblance to Gaelic, but varies in pronunciation. Vowels in canntaireachd sound similar to their corresponding Gaelic vowels, but canntaireachd consonants operate much differently.

Canntaireachd is similar in some ways to solfège, but is not limited to revealing only scale position in each vocable. Instead, canntaireachd can articulate a theme note with its grace notes, movements, and following tone into a single vocable (Donaldson 449). The best and most developed system of canntaireachd we have is the Colin Mór Campbell of Nether Lorn manuscripts from ca. 1971 (MacNeill 33).

Unfortunately the canntaireachd sung today is not directly from an original oral tradition, but rather has been relearned from written records.

Before 1803, staff notation was completely unknown in Highland piping and the instrument was completely taught by ear (MacNeill 30). Pipers would teach their students piobaireachd with a combination of singing canntaireachd and demonstrating
on the pipes. The very specific nature of piobaireachd does not yield itself to other instruments, as do many modern musical forms and compositions. The human voice in its versatility comes close and is the only exception. The voice is able to match the pipe's unique scale and approximate its expressions, but cannot convey the pipe's haunting tone. In an instructional setting, singing was naturally more practical than playing a full set of pipes when working with excerpts, memorizing the melody, and mastering aspects of expression.

Pipe music and Gaelic Song were intrinsically linked in the clan system and canntaireachd essentially functioned as a combination of the two (MacDonald 42). In preliterate cultures such as the Highlands it was quite common for poets and musicians to function in the same role. This is seen in the evolution of the verb "seinn" in Gaelic, which can refer both "to play [the pipes]" and more commonly "to sing."

When piobaireachd was first being written, it undoubtedly had a mutually influential relationship with Gaelic song. Many piobaireachd or Gaelic air melodies would be borrowed and repurposed for the other genre, making it impossible to know which form a melody originated from. The meter of the Gaelic words in song also influenced the articulation of piobaireachd (MacDonald 50). The same was true other of celtic cultures like Ireland, where there was noticeable decline in Uilleann pipe slow airs attributed to the decreasing use of Irish. Without knowledge of Irish, pipers were not familiar with the vocal genre of Sean-nós, and were not playing their melodies. As time progresses, changes in expression, character, and melody develop between once paired songs and instrumental pieces (MacDonald 42). This eventually causes
disassociation, leaving only melodic similarity. Such is the case with piobaireachd today, due in part to the introduction of musical notation. Being contradictory to the intrinsic oral aural tradition of piobaireachd, notation only widened the hiatus between piobaireachd and old Gaelic song.

Piobaireachd is peculiar in its timing. It has neither meter nor tempo, although for the sake of notation these are added to some scores (MacNeill 31). Pipers did not make any significant effort to accurately notate the note length in piobaireachd because of its imprecise nature rooted in oral tradition. The duration of notes in piobaireachd is not scientific and measured like that of a slow air played to a gentle march. While there is evidence to suggest that piobaireachd in the eighteenth century was played at a much faster pace and sometimes even to an animated tempo, today's piobaireachd is not so. (MacDonald 15). One cannot learn piobaireachd merely from a written record without previous experience or the guidance of an instructor. Piobaireachd is usually taught face to face, even today, however, even in this setting pipers rely too heavily on the written score, as R.U. Brown is quoted by William Donaldson saying:

Piobaireachd must be transmitted by song from one piper to another in order to get the soul of it; the lights and shades. Most of the piobaireachd players of the present day rely on the score, but you cannot express in musical notation what you would like to. It is really impossible. (459)

These "lights and shades" are nuances up to musical and personal interpretation. Many new piobaireachd players have the tendency to slip into a march tempo at first,
being crippled by the simplified notation. Notated piobaireachd and written canntaireachd were traditionally used simply as memory aids.

Some pipers were so dissatisfied with notation misrepresenting expression that they devised alternate short hands. Dr. Roderick Ross published his first piobaireachd collection titled *Binneas is Boreraig* in 1959 (Donaldson 448). This was the first of five volumes that used a radically altered staff notation. This form used only three lines of the musical staff instead of the typical five. Furthermore, rather than using continuous staff divided by bar lines that falsely suggest a meter, Ross wrote each musical phrase on its own short staff with blank space before the next phrase.

**The History of Piobaireachd, ca. 1500-1914**

For the purposes of this thesis, the history of piobaireachd is categorized into three periods of time, as found in MacNeill’s 1968 book “Piobaireachd.” These categories are: Prehistory, concerning legends and tales before the earliest written records on piping in 1570; the MacCrimmon Era, covering the period from 1570-1825 when the MacCrimmon family created and fostered the growth of piobaireachd; and Post-MacCrimmon History, which will focus on the succession of the MacCrimmon style of playing and the foundation of the Piobaireachd Society. It is difficult to authoritatively date early events in piping history. There is some controversy regarding
timelines discussed in this thesis. This account aims to portray the most historically accurate and accepted positions without bias.

Prehistory -1570

There are few written accounts of piping before 1570 to tell how piobaireachd was invented. Highland culture factors largely into the sparsity of written records. Clans and chiefs formed the social structure of the Highlands and many other celtic cultures in the British Isles. These regions' historical records were kept through oral tradition, due in part to predominant illiteracy in Highland clans until the twentieth century (Cregeen 15). In Highland clans there would be appointed seannachie (historians) whose livelihood would be based solely on keeping the traditions, history, poems, songs, etc. of the clan alive through oral tradition (Cregeen 15). Gaelic oral tradition influenced the development of music and poetry as well. Despite the illiteracy, history and arts reached a level of artistic maturity in the clan system (Donaldson 454).

Unlike written records, there are many oral records regarding the history of the Highland Bagpipe and piobaireachd in Scotland before the MacCrimmons. Unfortunately in some accounts it is readily apparent that the history has degraded to fanciful stories contorted through successive generations. While oral traditions undeniably have a character of their own, they cannot be categorically dismissed as wholly inaccurate (Cregeen 15). Oral traditions had different focuses than written records and portrayed events differently based on personal reactions. Despite
predominant illiteracy, the Highland clan systems led civil and dignified lives with rich cultures. Many nineteenth century written records were nothing more than transcribed oral traditions. Politics, personal schemes, and other various influences sometimes skewed the transcription of records. Because of this, oral records will often be more accurate than their written form (Donaldson). Unearthing accurate historical source material from this time period requires observing oral and written traditions together and searching for continuity between them.

The predominant theory is that piobaireachd evolved from another form of music because by the sixteenth century, “The tunes were mature, sophisticated compositions with obviously many years of experiment behind them” (MacNeill 36). Some speculate that prior generations of MacCrimmons themselves invented piobaireachd, while others maintain that the MacCrimmons learned it in another region (Cannon 97). Regardless, a new musical form would have taken several decades of refinement to become as established as piobaireachd had become by 1600 (MacNeill 37). It is reasonable to assume that it was not invented entirely while the MacCrimmons served as the MacLeod’s hereditary pipers. If the musical form of piobaireachd came from elsewhere in the world, there are no records of it today. This yields the conclusion that this forebear was also developed in the Highlands of Scotland or in a nearby gaelic culture, leaving piobaireachd as its only record.

The MacCrimmons have a nebulous history before the birth of Donald Mor MacCrimmon in 1570. It is clear through genealogical records that Donald Mor’s immediate ancestors changed their surname, though the previous surname is uncertain
The MacCrimmons, "were appointed hereditary pipers to the MacLeods an Dunvegan...tradition says that the first hereditary piper was Finlay, appointed about AD 1500, and that he was followed by his son Iain Odhar, who was succeeded in 1570 by his son Donald Mor" (MacNeill 36).

There are several different theories for where this family came from before Finlay. Many of these are easily dismissed, including origins from Druids and Norse cultures. One credible theory is that they came from Ireland. This theory is based shakily on the phonetic similarity between the Irish word *crimthan* meaning fox, and MacCrimmon (MacNeill and Richardson 17). However, due to the Statute of Kilkenny which was severely crippling native Irish freedoms at the time it is unlikely that an Irish piping family would have been able to emigrate to Scotland. The statutes were made in an attempt to curb the Normans' adoption of the native Irish culture, restricting Irish rights and their ability to associate with Normans. As such, Irish bards, poets, and pipers were banned from coming amongst groups of English people (Walsh). The second potential theory is that the MacCrimmons came from Harris and were originally MacLeods (MacNeill and Richardson 18). This is feasible, since the MacLeods had a long and established piping family in the Outer Hebrides. However, there would be little incentive for a family member to break ties with such a respected piping name.

Lastly, the most plausible theory is that the MacCrimmons came from Cremona, Italy (MacNeill and Richardson 19). The MacCrimmon family officially supports this theory: "According to Captain Neil MacLeod of Gesto, Iain Dubh MacCrimmon told him in 1826 that their ancestor had been Pietro Bruno who left Cremona in
1510...suffering religious persecution," (MacNeill and Richardson 19). Various efforts have been made to see if this relative is recorded to have lived in Cremona, but the results were inconclusive. Cremona is a region famous for music and producing some of the greatest luthiers in history, notably including Antonio Stradivari, born 1644 (Hill 6). In a coincidental link to the MacCrimmons, while Antonio Stradivari's family is clearly documented to have lived in Cremona for several centuries, Antonio's birthplace is unknown. A combination of war, poverty, and famine caused many families to emigrate the city in the seventeenth century, suggesting that Stradivari was born somewhere else and returned to Cremona later in life to learn his legendary craft (Hill 9).

The MacCrimmon Era 1570-1825

When piobaireachd was formed, pipers came from two main groups: shepherds and professional pipers (MacNeill 9). The bagpipe was ideally suited for shepherds and others caring for grazing animals because they served the twofold purpose of alleviating boredom and also signalling livestock. The many professional pipers who played for their clan held a comfortable social status. Clan pipers were often close to the clan chiefs and some even had their own servants (Cannon 52). They would play in a variety of functions, including mornings calls, nights, battles, ceremonies, etc. Pipes would often play for walking marches and accompany people working in repetitive tasks such as rowing, harvesting, and shearing (MacDonald 18). In many cases, as with
the MacCrimmons, the chief would assign land to higher servants of the Estate (Cannon 53). This led to the rise of hereditary pipers, harpers, bards, physicians, and some law officers. The families would pass their trade on to their offspring, retaining the land. Some bards and physicians had legacies spanning 500 years (Cannon 53). This could not be matched by any piping family. The most famous of the hereditary piping families are the Rankins, MacKays, MacArthurs, and MacIntyres. These piping names were legends of sorts among pipers and were held in sublime opinion. The MacCrimmons were perhaps the most revered and are certainly the most historically recognized today, known for their incredible skill and influence in piobaireachd.

The early history of piobaireachd starts with Donald Mor MacCrimmon, who was born around 1570 (MacNeill and Richardson 21). Through unknown circumstances, Donald Mor became the first of the MacCrimmon hereditary pipers to the MacLeods. He began piping for the Laird of MacLeod of Skye in approximately 1620. The MacCrimmons retained this role for several generations, becoming one of the most historical and wealthy piping families; we know that, “According to the Rev. A Clark, writing in 1845, the MacCrimmons were remembered in Skye as ‘well educated, inter-married with the most respectable families and ... universally regarded as vastly superior ... to the common class of the country people’” (Cannon 54).

In his role as hereditary piper Donald Mor also led a college of piping at the Galtrigall, a settlement along the coast of Loch Dunvegan, near the MacLeod’s seat at Dunvegan Castle (Cannon 54). Like much of the MacCrimmon’s history, the exact details of the piping school and curriculum are not known and are disputed by
differents scholars’ beliefs. Most scholars agree that Donald Mor founded the school, but some claim it to be from as early as 1500, before the time of Donald Mor MacCrimmon (Donaldson 401). Regarding course work, some historians estimate the school would last five to eight years, while others maintain that a piper would spend all of twelve years at the college learning the craft (Donaldson 402). The exact date is difficult to determine as many pipers in the eighteenth century greatly exaggerated the prestige, attendance, and duration of piping schools. Regardless of this, it is certain that the college was renowned and that chiefs from various clans in the Highlands would send their pipers to master the craft at colleges like this. During the same time period the MacArthurs, Rankins, and others had similar colleges operating, but the MacCrimmons’ left the largest mark on piping history, considered the most prestigious of these institutions (MacNeill and Richardson 20). Donald Mor remained the hereditary piper and master piper at the college until his death in 1640 (MacNeill 37).

Donald Mor’s son, Patrick Mor succeeded his father and was in turn succeeded by his son, Patrick Og, in 1670 (MacNeill 37). Patrick Mor is most famous for the tragic tale of his family and piobaireachd it inspired:

The usual tale, mentioned in passing by Angus Mackay...is that Padruig Mor MacCrimmon went one day to church with his eight sons and that within a year seven of them were buried in Kilmuir churchyard. The survivor was Padruig Og. Padruig Mor is said to have taken his inspiration from the keening of his wife. (Haddow 94)
“Lament for the Children” was thus composed ca. 1650 and to date is one of the most iconic pieces of ceòl mór and indeed considered by some the best single line melody to ever come from Scotland (MacNeill and Richardson 21). During Patrick Mor’s heading of the college the MacCrimmon name reached international fame among pipers.

Patrick Mor’s son, Patrick Og, suffered considerably less tragedy than his father. At the age of 25, he was the youngest of the MacCrimmons to become hereditary piper (MacNeill and Richardson 23). This certainly was a large mantle to bear, but Patrick Og had been working for his father as an instructor for several years prior. During his tenure he became one of the greatest pipers of his family’s legacy. He was well renowned not only for his ability, but his brilliant teaching methods. He shaped the development of piobaireachd in many ways, including discarding the variation known as the barludh (MacNeill and Richardson 45). This was a complex eighteen note variation, essentially twice the length of a standard crunluath, that he dismissed as overzealous ornamentation detracting from the melody. During his time as hereditary piper the piping school was moved to Borreraig, a settlement still along the coast of Loch Dunvegan. It thrived in its new location under his direction. He died in 1730 at the age of 85 and was succeeded by his sons Donald Ban and Malcolm (MacNeill 37).

Malcolm MacCrimmon’s fame was largely overshadowed by the Jacobite Rising of 1745 (MacNeill and Richardson 25). This was a complicated affair which was part of the religious civil war in Britain. While many clans fought for Charles Edward Stuart (commonly known as Bonnie Prince Charlie), the MacLeods fought for the UK
Government Army. At this time the MacCrimmon family had garnered national respect among pipers to the point that Jacobite pipers refused to play while Malcolm was held captive as a prisoner, earning his release. Donald Ban was killed at the Rout of Moy in 1746 and his brother composed another famous MacCrimmon piobaireachd: “Lament for Donald Ban.”

The fallout of the Jacobite Rising influenced piping through the Act of Proscription of 1746, also known as the Disarming Act (Act of Proscription). This aggressive act was quite similar to the previously mentioned Statutes of Kilkenny in Ireland. However, the Act of Proscription was more severe in Parliament’s intent to eliminate all Highland culture. Parliament hoped this would in turn destroy the clan system, preventing further rebellion. It became illegal to dress in the Highland custom, speak Gaelic languages, or bear a weapon of any sort. While the act did not specifically ban bagpipes, their association with war made most authorities consider them a “warlike weapon” according to the act: “...it should not be lawful for any person or persons... to have in his or their custody...broad sword [sic] or target, poignard, whinger, or durk, side pistol, gun, or other warlike weapon” (Act of Proscription). The piper James Reid was hanged until dead on November 6th, 1746 on the mere charge of carrying his bagpipe (MacNeill and Richardson 25).

Piping suffered accordingly, causing virtually all to give up the instrument altogether; as Alexander Haddow states, “A pipe does not lend itself to surreptitious use” (24). This period is regarded as perhaps the most dangerous in history for the survival of piobaireachd (MacDonald 13). Generally during this time, tunes were
passed down only through the sung vocables of *canntaireachd* (Haddow 24). *Canntaireachd* would have been sufficiently accurate in preserving piobaireachd, except that the Act of Proscription forced pipers into solitude, divorcing sung *canntaireachd* from being played on the pipes. This relative solitude incurred a great number of variations and settings of tunes, both in melody and articulation.

Since the MacLeods, MacCrimmons, and a few other clans had fought with the Government they were exempt from some aspects of the act and were allowed to continue piping (MacNeill and Richardson 49). However, they still were banned from kilts, tartans, and other aspects of Highland dress. The other way piping continued during this dark time was through the military. In 1757 the United Kingdom made efforts to create battalions from the old Jacobite clans to use for their own benefit. Over seventy-five battalions were created in this way, and each were allowed to enroll two pipers. The ban on piping was not lifted until 1782, mainly through the work of the Highland Society of London (Act of Proscription).

This period of general atrophy resulted in mass confusion and variations of tunes when the ban was lifted. The effects are noticed today in the limited variation in style between different types of piobaireachd. In light music the differences in expression between marches, strathspeys, and reels are quite noticeable. However, in today's competitions, piobaireachd is played relatively similarly, regardless if it is a lament, salute, or gathering. This standardization and loss of musicality began in the aftermath of the Act of Proscription with attempts to standardize the increasingly varied settings caused by pipers' isolation (MacDonald 14).
Malcolm MacCrimmon died in 1769. With the clan system crumbling under the Act of Proscription, the role of clan or full-time piper was waning. The college faced dwindling numbers and its future was uncertain. Despite this, Malcolm’s sons Donald Ruadh and Iain Dubh still played as hereditary pipers to the MacLeods (MacNeill and Richardson 26). Donald Dubh led the college until MacLeod could no longer financially support it, offering to take control of half of the MacCrimmon Borreraig land, providing the rest of the land still lease-free. Donald Ruadh took offense to this and resigned his role. While Iain Dubh took on the role of hereditary piper from his brother, he did not continue the college, ending its legacy (MacNeill and Richardson 26). Donald Ruadh went to America where he fought in the war of Independence as a Loyalist, eventually returning to Skye in 1892. Iain Dubh died in 1822 at the old age of 91. Both Donald Ruadh and Iain Dubh had piper sons, but they did not follow in working for the MacLeods, ending the lineage of MacCrimmon master pipers.

Post-MacCrimmon History:

Immediately following the MacCrimmons, two families played a large role in continuing their piping legacy: the “of Gairloch” and “of Rassasy” names (MacNeill 37). Iain Dall MacKay was a blind piper from Gairloch. He was considered to be Patrick Og MacCrimmon’s brightest student, and his prowess was passed on to his son, Angus, and grandson, John Roy. Unfortunately, the young Gairloch pipers emigrated to
Canada, which was quite common at the time (MacNeill and Richardson 51). This emigration helps explain the significant piping presence in Nova Scotia today.

John MacKay of Raasay was born ca. 1767 and was known in his time as the most technically skilled piper alive. He was born as “an orphan herdboy on the island of Raasay, who was befriended by Malcolm MacLeod of Eyre and sent for tuition ‘to the MacCrimmons and the MacKays of Gairloch’” (Cannon 55). Specifically, he was taught by Iain Dubh and Donald Ruadh MacCrimmon and Angus MacKay of Gairloch (MacNeill 38). In addition to his virtuoso piping abilities, John MacKay is notable for passing down the MacCrimmon style of piping to modern musicians. His brightest students were his son Angus MacKay (1813 to 1858), Angus Macpherson (1800-1887), and John Bain MacKenzie (MacNeill 38). However, the nineteenth century was radically changing piping as a profession and a written record was all too important.

Oral tradition quickly lost pragmatism as the clan structure diminished. Hereditary roles and oral traditions could not survive as they had. While there was no longer a privileged class of scholars and poets, the appreciation for heritage was able to survive long enough to reach the nineteenth century, where it thrived (Cregeen 15). In some cases the seannachies were supported by upper class patrons. Similarly, some pipers would enter private service (MacNeill and Richardson 50). These positions were quite limited in comparison to clan piping and therefore the better positions typically went to the most skilled pipers. Many other pipers chose to join the military (Cannon 50). While they would certainly have enough time to practice and
develop personal skill, there was little growth in the art for these pipers, isolated from other pipers' influences and advances.

Piping was facing noticeable decline by 1780 and many feared for its survival (MacNeill and Richardson 51). In yet another exemption from the Act of Proscription's ban on arms, cattle drovers were allowed to carry weapons to defend themselves from thieves. Many drovers played pipes as well with this liberty. In an attempt to preserve the art of piping, the Highland Society of London started an annual piobaireachd competition. The first competition was, "held in 1781 at Falkirk, at the annual October Tryst when the Highlanders came to sell their cattle" (MacNeill and Richardson 51). The competition continued, eventually being held in Edinburgh starting in 1784. In the period from 1826 to its close in 1844, the competition was held triennially. John MacKay competed in the 1792 competition and won. It was the only competition he played in, and winners were not eligible to compete again.

John Mackay's son Angus followed well in his footsteps as one of the dominant pipers of his time. He famously published his 1838 collection of 61 piobaireachd, marking a new chapter in the preservation of piobaireachd (MacNeill and Richardson 55). Until this point, the preservation of the MacCrimmon style depended on accurately passing down the tunes through canntaireachd. Printed music significantly provided the first "permanent" record of tunes. While this affected piping and history, printed music had relatively underwhelming consequences when it was first released. Printed books would be mostly bought by upper class pipers due to their price. As late as 1872, "MacKay's small collection cost six shillings - about half a week's wages for a
working man” (Cannon 49). Regardless, Angus MacKay contributed to piping greatly. He won the competition in Edinburgh in 1835, forty three years after his father. He also played as the piper to the, “Laird of Islay [and] he received an invitation in 1843 to become piper to Queen Victoria” (MacNeill and Richardson 55). Additionally, Angus MacKay invented the 2/4 competition march, a form of light music, that took off in popularity with military pipers.

Light music, or ceòl beag, quickly grew in military piping, even as piping itself seemed to be in danger of continuation. This has been closely connected with the increase of musical literacy in the eighteenth century, which directly encroached on the Highland oral aural tradition (Donaldson 460). Pipes were more or less a solo instrument through the nature of piobaireachd before light music came about. Pipers would occasionally play together, but certainly not in the organized fashion they do today (MacNeill and Richardson 49). Ceòl beag grew in part when drums accompaniments were added. The first recorded joining of pipes and drums was in 1848 when a ship travelling on the foggy St. Lawrence river ordered pipers and drummers to play together on deck to ward off potential collisions. By 1853, with the start of the Crimean War, pipes and drum regiments had effectively replaced fifes and drums regiments.

John MacKay’s other incredibly successful student was John Ban MacKenzie, who was born in Strathpeffer in 1796 (MacNeill and Richardson 55). John Ban, or “Fair John,” was a professional piper in a series of successful rolls. In 1833, “he was appointed principal piper to the Marquis of Breadalbane at Taymouth Castle in
Perthshire" (MacNeill and Richardson 55). John Ban’s influence led to Taymouth Castle becoming one of the centers of piping in the nineteenth century. Additionally, he won the competition in Edinburgh in 1823. He was a masterful piper and instructor. A special event was held at Edinburgh where former winners of the prize pipe were allowed to compete to earn the title “King of Pipers.” John Ban won the first of these events and one of his students won each of the three latter.

Donald Cameron was John Ban’s most influential student, and was one of the three to win the King of Pipers title. Cameron lived from 1810 to 1868 (MacNeill and Richardson 54). He is known for having founded the less common style of piobaireachd, or the “Cameron” school of thought. Cameron taught his sons Colin, Alex, and Keith, and his brother Alex, all each of whom were successful pipers. Donald Cameron is also unique in that he may have been the first strictly competition-focused piper (MacNeill and Richardson 54). While Cameron was incredibly successful himself, and his four main pupils each achieved great piping feats, Cameron’s style of piobaireachd is not commonly used today. Though he influenced many tunes, most players articulate piobaireachd with the supposed MacCrimmon style that John MacKay of Raasay used. Aside from Donald Cameron and his family, other significant pipers leading into the twentieth century were Malcolm Macpherson (also known as Calum Pioaire, 1834-1898), John MacDougall Gillies (1854-1925), and John MacDonald (1866-1953) (MacNeill 39).
Today most pipers playing piobaireachd are aware of the Piobaireachd Society. Today it serves at a great resource for publishing manuscripts and encouraging the continuation of the artform. However, the Society did not always meet the standards which it was founded upon, having a somewhat controversial history. In Autumn of 1902, Capt. John Campbell, yr. of Kilberry issued an invitation to form a Piobaireachd society (Donaldson 282). Campbell was a scholarly man and served as a soldier in line with family tradition. He served as an officer in Argyll and the Sutherland Highlanders. He and his brothers, Angus and Archibald were the co-founders, all amateur pipers.

The Piobaireachd Society of Scotland’s first meeting was held on Monday, January 19th, 1903 (Donaldson 283). It was attended by Capt. Charles A. H MacLean of Pennycross, Capt. Malcolm MacNeill, D.B MacDougall, Somerled MacDonald, and James MacKillop jr. of Polmont, who functioned as secretary. The Society’s apparent original intent was quite noble: they aimed simply to encourage the playing of piobaireachd at an amateur level. They also sought to acquire printed and manuscript sources of piobaireachd. The membership requirements were originally that, “the candidate for election must be a player of Piobaireachd on the Highland Bagpipe, or the committee must be satisfied that the candidate has the love of Piobaireachd thoroughly at heart” (Donaldson 283). Professional pipers were not originally allowed to join. While only five were present at the initial meeting, there were fourteen founding members of the Society. The group was meant to be a small and select group of piobaireachd scholars. However, the group dynamic changed rapidly with altered entry requirements.
The requirements for membership were greatly relaxed and the group exploded in numbers. The group was founded primarily of "lesser and middle gentry" but soon the group was predominantly British aristocrats, populated with dukes, marquesses, and earls (Donaldson 283). By the end of 1903 there were thirty-eight more members than the founding fourteen. In 1904 alone there were 28 new members. The dynamic changed from a group of humble scholars and scholars to a wealthy arts club of sorts. By 1905 there were comparatively few actual players of piobaireachd. The Society's headquarters moved to London and the politically troublesome "of Scotland" was removed from the Society's name. Soon after, the Society developed the new aim of sponsoring a professional piobaireachd competition at the Argyllshire Gathering.

This competition broke the status quo and implemented new rules. Rather than allowing performers to select their own tunes and settings, the Society provided a set list (Donaldson 284). They provided competitors with free scores but required the contestants to play them strictly as written. The Piobaireachd Society had the new intent of standardizing the varied settings of tunes that came out of the 1746 Act of Proscription. The Society would "judge where necessary between different renderings of conflicting authorities and take steps to preserve and publish the manuscript sources" (Donaldson 284). The performers protested the idea of following a provided tune list, their main complaint being the difficulty of relearning their repertoires to the Society's particular setting. This was very time-intensive and effectively made it impossible for part-time and semi-professional pipers to enter the competitions.
On Thursday, September 15th, 1904 a meeting was held in Oban. President General C. S. Thomason did not attend, however, because he had been warned of an imminent coup to remove him as president and change the Society's goals (Donaldson 288). Charles Adolphus Murray, 7th Earl of Dunmore sat in the chair in Thomason's absence. He was formerly elected as the new president. As a result the secretary/treasurer James MacKillop resigned his office. In early spring of 1905 the Society published a new collection of piobaireachd tunes, which was met with overwhelming dissent and condescension from the piping community. The Oban Times claimed that the majority of the tunes were simply reprinted from other previous sources and that the written preface and notes (composed in the Gaelic language) were riddled with grammatical errors and cultural cliches. The Piobaireachd Society's president issued a rebuttal which only resulted in more precise criticisms, thoroughly illuminating all errors, tune by tune. When the Society met later in June of 1905, the Society was politically led by supporters of the new president. After a failed motion to redefine and distribute the position of secretary, John and Angus Campbell, James MacKillop, and General C.S. Thomason resigned from the Society altogether. Most other piobaireachd playing members resigned within a year as well.

The Campbells' and Thomason's truer motivations for founding the organization came forward after their fallout with the Piobaireachd Society. The Society was founded partially with a common desire to promote General Thomason's published collection Ceòl Mòr (Donaldson 292). Thomason had a vision of standardizing the variations of existing tunes, and Ceòl Mòr was the first large collection of piobaireachd
at the time. Printing was expensive so Thomason had developed a notational shorthand and key so that pipers with basic knowledge of piobaireachd would be able to teach themselves the tunes. Thomason and the founding Campbells believed that piping as a tradition was in danger. They were troubled that the majority of professional pipers elected to play a limited selection of tunes, albeit very skillfully. They believed that consciously limiting their repertoire stagnated the growth and even propagated the degradation of piobaireachd.

Angus Campbell furthermore had a confrontational relationship with the performers of the day. In his open letter of resignation he stated that he believed that most of the best competitive pipers of the day intentionally stifled the wider dispersion of tunes and tutelage out of self-interest to stay at the top of their field (Donaldson 292). Thomason was considerably less abrasive. He was humbly saddened by Ceòl Mor's lack of success, believing it could have helped reawaken piobaireachd as an art. He wanted to disseminate piobaireachd to pipers of all classes rather than limiting it to the aristocratic professional pipers who currently dominated the competitions; he is quoted writing “Profits I never expected, but I candidly confess that I did look to the Society to help me in reducing the cost of my book to a figure placing it within reach of poor pipers - a matter surely of the first importance: and my failure in realising these hopes has been a far greater disappointment to me that the pecuniary loss to which I own” (Donaldson 294).

Piobaireachd has continued to evolve since the troubled formation of the Piobaireachd Society. The Great War naturally radically altered the direction of piping
with many units actively recruiting pipers with increased wages (Donaldson 317). Many of the Society's goals and motions were put on hold and never returned to because of the war. Many other factors helped develop the Society to where it is today. The Piobaireachd Society has released an updated collection in a set of 16 books. With advances in printing, comprehensive collections became affordable to pipers of all classes. Today the Piobaireachd Society operates quite effectively as a resource for fledgling to professional pipers. For the last decade there has been a resurgence in Piobaireachd which continues to grow.
Works Cited


