

It's all about the music

BILL LIVINGSTONE

AT 68, Bill Livingstone has retired from competitive piping, both as a consummate soloist and as one of the world's most successful pipe majors.

At the core of his lifelong and continuing involvement with piping, is the motivation, allure and impetus of his passion for the music. And that is unabated.

Bill won his first Highland Society of London Gold Medal at the Northern Meeting in 1977. Two years later, he won his second gold medal, and in 1981, he won the Clasp at the Northern Meeting.

In 1982, he established the 78th Fraser Highlanders Pipe Band from what was left of the General Motors Pipe Band after the car-maker cancelled its sponsorship and, just five years later, took it to the very top as the first non-Scottish band to win the grade 1 title at the World Pipe Band Championships. The band's album, *Live In Ireland*, released that same year, would have a radical influence on pipe band performance around the world.

Over the years, Bill has continued to amass a glittering array of top-level professional solo piping awards and pipe band honours. But there has always been more to it than the trophy cabinet.

In 2005, he marked his retirement from top level solo competition with the release of his reflective, four-album set of *A Piobaireachd Diary* recordings: "I believe recordings can have a profound influence," he said at the time... "inspire people, and give people a love for the thing. That's what happened to me."

Piobaireachd continues to be his first musical passion. "I'm well into recordings for another two or probably three volumes of the *Piobaireachd Diary*," he said. "I'd like to bring out another two, three, or possibly four volumes."

It is for piobaireachd that Bill believes the Great Highland Bagpipe came into being. He explained: "The intervals and the tonality of the scale are so perfectly suited to it... the strange pentatonic scales and mixolydian mode.

"The long, sustained notes of piobaireachd

'At the very top of the tree, there are some great pipers who really, really 'get' it, but it's a thin layer'



Photo: John Savin @ designfolk.com

Bill in George Square, Glasgow with the 78th Fraser Highlanders at Piping Live! 2010.

and the complex looping of the original melodic statement in the ground and all of the variations... I just think it's incredibly beautiful, unique music.

"But," he said, "I'm not sure what it is that gives a piper the taste for piobaireachd.

"A musician either responds to a kind of music, or she or he doesn't. It almost seems as though you have to be hard-wired to really 'get' what piobaireachd is all about. I don't see a whole lot of pipers being really passionate about trying to understand what it's really about these days. Many people, good pipers, are playing piobaireachd just because they think they can get a prize in the piobaireachd competitions. At the very top of the tree, there are some great pipers who really, really 'get' it, but it's a thin layer."

His *A Piobaireachd Diary* albums set out to share his delight and fascination with those whose interest can be ignited. "I've had a lot of feedback from folk who have the series and, interestingly, many people asked for more conversation and chat about the tunes.

"I'd been a little self-conscious about doing that," he said. "I didn't want to be seen to be lecturing people about the way these tunes came about and how they ended up in the form they're in... that was never the intention and that's why they're called a 'diary'. I was trying to get across that every piobaireachd player travels a musical trajectory, and trying to describe how tunes came into my repertoire and arrived at the state in which they find themselves now.

"So I'm probably going to do a bit more of that, and with much the same approach: here's how I'm playing this stuff, here's how that came about, here are the influences that have worked their way into my head and — whether you agree, disagree, like it or dislike it — that's how it came to be."

He bowed out as pipe major of the 78ths after the Worlds in August and the following month, Bill spent a laid-back week and a half in Italy, happily immersed in piobaireachd with Italy's leading piper and piping instructor, Alberto Massi.

"He's one of those rare people who have a complete passion for the music and tries so hard to understand what makes it unique and where the subtleties are," he said.

"Alberto approaches piobaireachd as pure music, he plays it for the sake of making music without being concerned at all about entering a contest and winning. We have struck up an

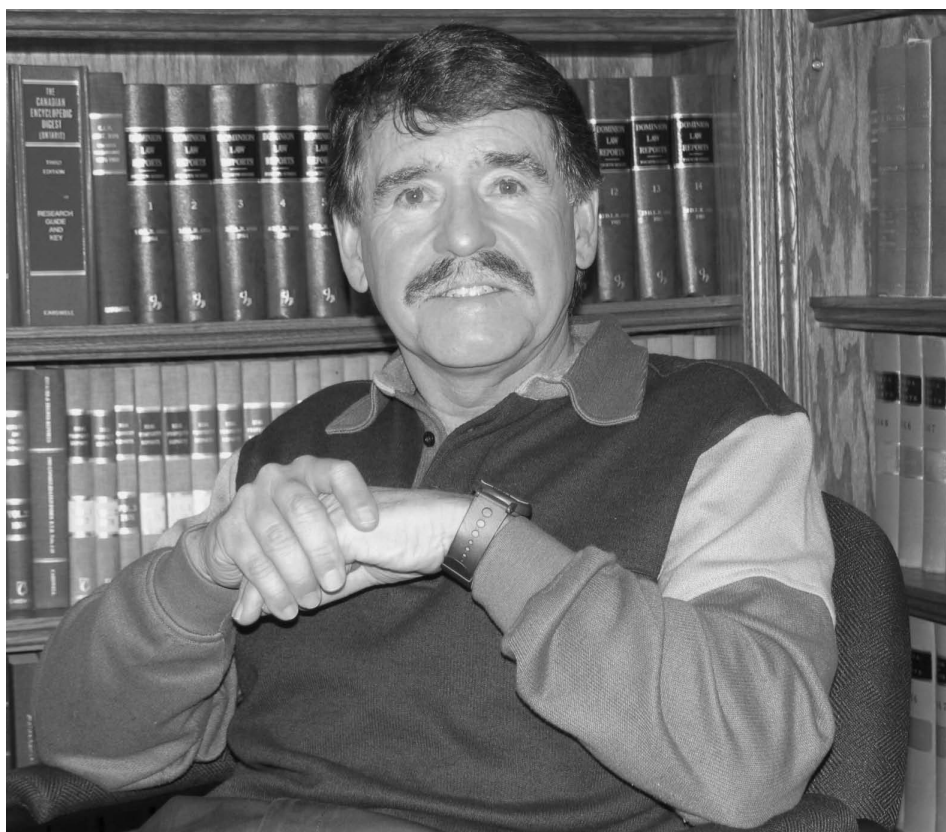


Photo: Mike Paterson

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amazing friendship. It's always a wonderful time we have together."

Back home in Whitby, Ontario, Bill is happy to step back from the demands and responsibilities of pipe majorship.

He admitted: "I'm lucky. I can still play and I've had this freakishly long career and that, in and of itself, is as good a reason as any to get out of the way. I didn't want to be that guy about whom people say, 'God almighty, is he never going to disappear?'"

"At the moment, I'm quite happy not to have any serious obligations in front of me ...no deadlines, no being away every single Sunday to band practice."

But it seems as though Bill would be pleased if, under the leadership of new pipe major Doug MacRae, the 78ths decide to take a few musical risks.

"I am concerned about what's not happening in pipe bands," he said. "The top bands in the

world have reached a point of perfection that makes it very hard, really, to tell them apart. They have wonderful tone, terrific tuning, good integration and are generally error-free. So what are we doing? We're on a plateau where there's this single-minded determination to be absolutely precise at any and all costs and eliminate any risk that might be involved in the material we're going to play... so the opportunity for creativity and expansion of the way a pipe band can actually work is really being compromised.

"A lot of it derives from the tyranny of the World Pipe Band Championships. That may sound hypocritical coming from someone who's taken his band to the Worlds 27 years in a row. But I wasn't doing it blindly. I see the constant narrowing now of material and how it's played and the formulaic copying of what worked for somebody else — instead of some real, independent thinking. There's hope from

Brittany but that's because they have a whole different approach to things.

"There's hope in, for example, the explorations of the Toronto Police Pipe Band. They've decided to pursue their own vision regardless of the consequences and I wholeheartedly endorse that whole way of thinking. That's not to be confused with an endorsement of their particular material; that's another issue.

"Taking the whole thing by the scruff of the neck and giving it a good shake and setting out to make it better, more fun, more interesting, more musically attractive to a broad audience... it's important to be thinking about these things."

Bill is clear in identifying the critical baseline: "It's about playing inventive, creative, broadly appealing music, always having respect for the tonality of the instrument and the integrity of the music — which means it must come from some kind of Celtic, West Highland, Irish root. It has to be able to be played on a bagpipe or violin... it has to have that kind of authenticity. Within those limits, the possibilities are really endless.

"We need to see that kind of material being played in a concert format. The problem is that, unless you win a world championship, or come close to it, nobody's going to come to your concert because of the stupid environment pipe bands thrive in."

He is referring to the hierarchy of events and performance opportunities that are crowned by participation in the World Pipe Band Championships.

"If you want to consider an analogy," he said, "it's like somebody saying 'Let's get the best 10 string quartets in the world and invite them to play in Glasgow in August, outdoors, in driving rain and wind, and let's have the audience stand yards away so nobody can get a clear hearing or view of what's going on'. That's the preposterous nature of what we do. It's self-defeating."

It is a situation that calls for some fresh gusts of creativity.

"One of the essential characteristics of a great pipe major is that there's some kind of creative juice flowing," he said, "and, yes, there are people with some good creative ideas and composers of good tunes... but, in terms of raw creativity, it's time to knock the walls down and start thinking in a completely different way.

"However, nobody wants to do that," said Bill. "They've devoted all this time and energy to the single-minded pursuit of the World Pipe Band Championships and they won't compromise any chances they have there by doing something risky. To see the consequences of taking the system on head-on, all you have to do is look at the fate that befell the Toronto Police Pipe Band at the Cowal Highland Gathering this year."

They finished in last place and as Bill explained: "It's not too different from what happened to the 78th Frasers back, I think, in 1994, when we walked into the circle playing a waulking song. We had recognised the rules... we had compromised what we were doing to meet the rule that requires you to play two very long, slow, stupid three-pace rolls... and then we marched on in this kind of stately, French Foreign Legion kind of march. I thought it was wonderful.

"Then some guy with a swagger stick under his arm came to me before the march-past and said, 'Pipe major, you'll be pleased to know your band has not been disqualified.' Not disqualified? No, they did something much more punitive: they buried us.

"Disqualification would have been very controversial. Telling us that our material was rubbish protected them from that, and that's what we're facing. The *raison d'être* for a lot of pipe bands is simply to be in that arena.

"So they're getting more and more refined at playing together on perfectly tuned instruments and, at some point, that gets pretty stagnant."

Moreover, it is past time, Bill believes, for pipe bands to shake off the militaristic accessories that continue to characterise their appearance and presentation.

"What the modern pipe band does now has literally nothing to do with the military," he said. "To see how deeply rooted we are in that history, you just have to consider the mock military trappings that adhere to all pipe bands. I can't think of a less comfortable way to play a physically demanding, difficult instrument than to put on 20 pounds of wool. What could be worse?"

For Bill, it is the music that matters... it always comes back to that.

"I very clearly remember being home on a visit while I was still in law school. My wife Lillian and I were at my parents' home, probably for Christmas, and my father, who was a good light music piper, had just got these two *Pibroch* albums — vinyl recordings on the Waverley label that had been put out by the Piobaireachd Society. They were of John MacLellan and John D. Burgess, two of the day's great piobaireachd exponents, playing some of the classic piobaireachd repertoire: the *Lament for the Viscount of Dundee*, *The Battle of the Pass of Crieff*, the *Old Men of the Shells*, *Black Donald's March*...

"I listened and listened and listened, and I was absolutely transported by it; I haven't been away from it since." ●



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