by Benjamin Miller

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Evolution of the Highland Bagpipe within the Musical Traditions of Scotland and Cape Breton

THESIS — CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY — COMPARISON OF PRESENT TRADITIONS

THIS feature follows on from the introductory feature by Ben in issue 53. The following text is an edited version of the thesis, and each full chapter of the thesis will be made available online at www.thepipingcentre.co.uk/magazine as each chapter summary is published in *Piping Today*.

1.1 Key Elements of Cape Breton and Scottish Music

THE Scottish music traditions in both Cape Breton, Nova Scotia and Scotland rely heavily on a foundation of common 'forms' or tune types. In fact, they even share many of the same basic melodies. In order to understand how these two traditions differ in their performance, it is necessary to outline the basic format of the tune forms common to both.

The *reel* is a staple in every Scottish musician's repertoire and is played in duple time with two beats to the bar counted; 1 & 2 &…etc. This is generally written in 2/2, or cut time. Reels are generally comprised of two or more eight-bar parts.

The *strathspey* is another form unique to Scotland. Strathspeys are counted with four beats to the bar and are generally more reliant on 'dot-cut' rhythms (an unequal division of the beat) than reels, especially what is known as the 'Scotch snap' or Lombard rhythm of an accented cut note on the downbeat, followed by a longer dotted note. As with reels, these tunes are generally made up of at least two eight-bar parts.

The last form is the jig, which is characterised by a 6/8 rhythm, counted; 1 e a, 2 e a…etc. Historically, these are probably the least common tune type of the three in the repertoire of Scottish musicians, although they have become more popular in recent years.

Keeping these three forms in mind, it is a matter of performance practice, much more than repertoire, which separates the modern Scottish and Cape Breton idioms. The comparison of these three elements illustrates two different approaches to a common repertoire.

Tempo

When first listening to modern Scottish and Cape Breton pipe music, the most immediately noticeable difference may be the *tempi* at which tunes are played. In the Scottish context, reels are generally played at around 78-84 half-note beats per minute (BPM), Strathspeys at about 120 quarter-note BPM and jigs at approximately 120 dotted quarter-note BPM. These *tempi* represent the modern competition standards.

In contrast, the *tempi* in Cape Breton is generally faster. Reels are played around 106 half-note BPM. Strathspeys start at 160 quarter-note BPM and may rise with the ability of the player. Jigs seem to be the exception, usually clocking within five BPM of the Scottish competition standards. These measurements are largely taken from my own examination of various recordings of performers from Cape Breton.

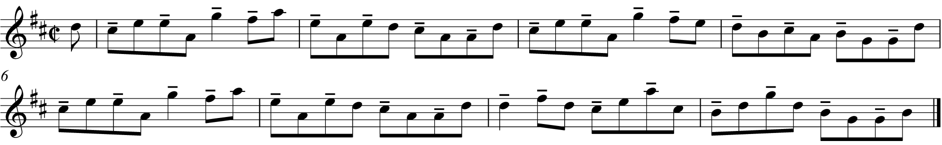
These drastic differences in performance practice are largely a result of the musical settings of the tunes in either tradition. The style of ornamentation and rhythmic elements in these tunes largely dictates the *tempo* that is physically achievable by the player. In essence – the more complicated the tune's structure, the slower it must be played.

Rhythm

Perhaps the most defining and divisive features of these two traditions is their use of rhythm. In the modern Scottish piping tradition, reels are generally played with a heavily accented dot-cut pattern. A typical example of this style can be seen, as demonstrated by R.D. Cannon, in this simple setting of a traditional Scottish reel: **Figure 1.**

The reason for this style is most logically suggested by R.D. Cannon in his book, *The Highland Bagpipe and its Music*. He suggests that with the slower pace of the tunes, there is "more room – and more need for – gracenotes and unequal timings to point up the expression". The result creates a much less fluid melody that does not lend itself to percussive step-dancing as seen in Cape Breton. These rhythms are unique to the competition and pipe band sphere wherein form is judged, rather than function.

Reels in the Cape Breton tradition are generally written round but any player will tell you that this is not the way they are played in practice. The actual rhythm is not quite straight, but neither is it dot-cut. It is something somewhere in the middle, sometimes referred to as 'swung' or 'pulsed'. It might be most closely represented if written straight, with a *tenuto* creating an accent over every quarter-note beat, as seen below at **Figure 2.**



Step dancer and fiddler Lisa Gallant and piper Bruce MacPhee of Slàinte Mhath pictured at the Celtic Colours Festival in 1999.

Photo by Colin Clark

A second aspect of this playing style is "drive" — the relentless, pounding downbeat, usually highlighted by the stomping of the player's foot on the floor. This is really more of a concept or an attitude in the player's phrasing, rather than a concretely identifiable element. Despite the near intangible nature of both of these aspects, they are something any Cape Breton musician seeks in both their own playing and when listening to others. A lack of swing or drive can render an otherwise flawless performance lifeless. It is important to note that neither these descriptions nor the written score can substitute for hearing this rhythm played by a competent performer of the Cape Breton style.

Returning again to modern Scottish piping, Strathspeys are characterised by holding dotted notes nearly to the brink of double-dotted and cutting the others accordingly. Also characteristic of the Strathspey is the 'scotch snap'. Within this piping tradition there is also a hierarchy of beats within each bar of Strathspey - sometimes referred to as its 'pulse'. The first beat of the bar is treated as a 'strong beat', the next as 'weak', the third is a 'medium beat' and the fourth is treated as 'weak' again.

This is manifested by the player holding and exaggerating the aforementioned dot-cut patterns to an even greater extent in relation to the strength of the beats. The stronger the beat, the more dotted notes are emphasised. These changes all happen while maintaining a constant *tempo*.

Figure 3.

In Cape Breton, Strathspeys take on a much different form. They are played very round in comparison to the competition style but as with the reel, they are not unaccented. In the Cape Breton idiom, Strathspeys are counted with four equal and heavy on-beats. The precise nature of the dots and cuts defies accurate notation. Sometimes, they may fill their written value, others they may be more or less weighted, depending on the player's own emphasis. The overall effect is at times closer to a 12/8 rhythmic structure than the written 4/4 time signature. This is especially evident in tunes that contain heavy use of triplets, which in practice are played almost perfectly even.

Within the Scottish piping tradition, there are two styles of jig that are played. The first is rhythmically similar to the rest of the competition-style piping. Within the jig's 6/8 rhythm, various arrangements may specify a dot on either (a) the first or (b) the last beat of the three note groupings, with the middle note cut. Below is an example of these two rhythms, as found in Scottish competition music collections:

Figure 4.

The second style is found in both the modern Scottish tradition and in Cape Breton. This style is written round but is accented by a slight pulse on the downbeat of every three note group. A mnemonic device sometimes used to show this rhythm is — "boat-bot-tom'. This phrase lends itself to a slightly heavier accent on the first beat ('boat') as needed in the melody. An approximation of this rhythm could be written as seen below: **Figure 5.**

While it is thought that the previous style was developed in 20th century Scotland, the more rounded style is thought to have come into the Scottish and Cape Breton traditions from Ireland.

Ornamentation

The use of ornaments within these two traditions has come to be governed by two different guiding principles. The piping tradition in Scotland has evolved in such a way that the complexity and difficulty of the ornaments in a setting has become a concern on par with the tunefulness of the melody. In fact, Cannon suggests that any "real [bag]pipe music" demands tunes that are "technically demanding as well as being good strong melodies".

The principle source of ornamentation in either tradition is made up of what pipers call gracenotes or sometimes 'cuts'. 'Gracenote' is a term borrowed from classical music, implying a short note with ornamental value. It is thought that both traditions at one point contained regional styles for these ornaments based on Gaelic vocal patterns. Today, both traditions have come to rely on a system of standardised ornaments for various rhythms.

In a general sense, these ornaments are used as an accent to a note, as bagpipes are unable to do this by increasing their volume. Another purpose is to outline particular rhythms on a repeated note, such as a triplet.

In contrast to the modern Scottish notion that technicality is an essential part of a good tune, the Cape Breton idiom generally stresses function over form. Hamish Moore, a major proponent of this Cape Breton style of piping, says that in arranging a tune, he "strips the page bare, adding an ornament only when it enhances the rhythm of the tune". This, he says, is an essential part of an oral tradition, such as the one that exists in Cape Breton.

Musical Examples

Pipe music is written nominally in the key of 'A', although the actual pitch tends to range between 'Bb' and somewhere just below 'B'. Rising pitch has been a trend within solo and pipe competition for the past few decades where a 'brighter' sound has been found more appealing. However, Cape Breton pipers have often retained a lower concert pitch to facilitate playing with other instruments.

Here are two settings of the popular Scottish reel "Cabar Feidh". The first comes from a mid-20th century collection titled *The Cabar Feidh Collection: "Pipe Music of the Queen's Own Highlanders"*. Notice the regular dot-cut patterns that appear throughout the piece, such as 'dot-cut-dot-cut' in the second beat of measure two, and 'dot-cut-cut-dot' in the first beat of

measure three. Another would be 'cut-dot-dot-cut' as seen in the second beat of measure seven. Also notice the large number of gracenotes and ornaments in this setting.

In contrast, the setting below comes from a collection of tunes printed in Cape Breton in 2001. This arrangement is based on the playing of piper Barry Shears, a native of Nova Scotia. Although the rhythm is written round on the page, it would be played so as to bring out the unwritten swing and drive. In terms of ornamentation, gracenotes appear almost exclusively on the on-beats ('1' or '2') and off-beats (the 'and'), or at times when they are needed to separate two notes of the same pitch. The more complicated ornaments are placed only on quarter-notes with a few exceptions to highlight the off-beat, as seen in the second measure of part four.

(Shears 2001, 43)

Below are three settings of a popular strathspey, "The Braes of Mar". The first comes from a Scottish regimental collection. The second is based on the playing of Cape Breton piper, Alex Currie, who was completely trained by ear and could not read music. While the first part in these two settings is almost identical, both in ornamentation and written rhythm, it is the massive difference in performance practice that sets these two styles of strathspey playing apart, rather than the written score. Another interesting issue with these settings is their use of completely different second parts and Currie's inclusion of an additional third part, bearing little resemblance to the Scots Guard's setting. Such deviations from the exact melody,as written in the more standardised example are expected in this type of aural tradition.

The third setting is a transcription from another Cape Breton piper, Ryan MacDonald. She takes a radically different approach in ornamentation and her overall concept of the melody, representing yet another example of the aural tradition Cape Breton players are working within.

(Scots Guards Vol. 1, 163)

(Shears 2001, 26)

(Transcription from playing of Ryan MacDonald – Vermont Bellows-pipe School, 2009)

The Braes of Mar

Trad. Scotland / Arr. Scots Guards

The Braes of Mar

Trad. Cape Breton / From Alex Currie

The Braes of Mar

Trad. Cape Breton / From Ryan MacDonald

The final comparison to be made in this section is in the realm of teaching and learning music within these two traditions. Learning practices in Scotland have developed into a very regimented and standardised routine. The path to proficiency is nearly the same for most successful Scottish pipers. The first step is usually the purchase of a tutor book and practice chanter. The practice chanter is used to teach proper fingering and learn tunes without dealing with the volume and complexities of a full set of bagpipes. Most pipers will not own a full set of pipes until they have mastered techniques on the practice chanter.

The teaching pattern will often be very similar to what one might learn as a student of classical piano. First it teaches the scale of the instrument, then various ornaments along with exercises to re-enforce consistency and speed. Ultimately a few simple tunes will be included to showcase what has been learnt. At this point, the instructor will generally move on to a selection of standard regimental tunes, such as *Scotland the Brave, When the Battle's Over, The Minstrel Boy*, etc. From here, the piper will usually begin learning material for a pipe band, or for solo competitions, or both.

While practices may have differed among earlier generations of Cape Breton pipers, this same process is generally used at least during the early days of a piper's career in Cape Breton due to the vast influence and reach of piping authorities in Scotland. At some point, a piper will often have to make the decision to pursue either the traditional dance music played in Cape Breton or to join the globalised competition circuit stemming from Scotland.

For pipers who move on to dance music, they have to relearn how to play by ear. Often this occurs in small groups where an experienced player will guide the group of pipers through a tune, playing in phrases or lines until the group can reproduce the melody.

Playing with other instruments, and later for dancers, these pipers are forced to modify their playing techniques to match the styles that are so essential in the Cape Breton dance tradition.

I.2 Context and Purpose of Performance Practices

One of the best ways to understand the technical discrepancies between modern Scottish and Cape Breton piping is to look at the practical purpose these differences in performance practice serve in dance music. Within the modern Scottish context, this is the tradition of competitive Highland dancing. For the Cape Breton tradition, this means examining the social dances held throughout Scottish communities in Cape Breton.

Modern Highland Dancing

The art of modern competitive Highland dancing began as an exhibition of traditional Gaelic step-dance, which was slowly transformed from an informal extemporisation of rhythmic steps to a standardised display of stately grace and great dexterity. While the first competitions in 'Highland dance' were comprised solely of a traditional group step-dance known as the 'four-hand reel' or 'scotch four', which focused heavily on fast and percussive rhythmic footwork ('stepping'), the competition dances seen today, such as the *Gillie Calum, Seann Triubhas* and the 'Highland Fling' have gradually come under heavy influence of ballet techniques from continental Europe. These balletic elements have raised the dances from a flatfooted position to one up on the toes and focusing more heavily on the figures than on the older percussive steps. Consequentially, it has changed the nature of the tempo and rhythm of accompanying music.

Barry Shears writes that "the current style of Highland dancing is both physically demanding and usually requires a lot of jumping." He adds: "The rhythm and tempo of the [accompany-

The White Spot Highland Dancers and the Northwest/White Spot United Pipe Band performing at Piping Live 2011.

Photo by John Slavin @ designfolk.com

'Given the attributes sought out in Cape Breton-style dancers, it is easy to see why the tempos must differ considerably from those in the competitive Highland dancing'

ing] music has been altered to accompany these changes, playing it much slower and moving the expression from simple time (rounded) to compound time (pointed)."

As Shears notes, these newer, more dramatic manoeuvres cannot be performed adequately at the faster step-dancing speeds seen in the four-hand reel and other old dances which rely more on percussive footwork. The current standard tempos set for these dances by the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (SOBHD) range from 92-124 quarter-note beats per minute for strathspeys and 66-72 half-note BPM for reels. When tempos are decreased, pipers often exaggerate note values (both long and short) and increase the amount of and complexity of embellishments used, as these are the only forms of dynamic expression possible on the bagpipes. The end result for pipers is a more complicated and stylised technique for dance music playing to match that of the modern Highland dancer.

Cape Breton Step-dancing

Dances in present day Cape Breton are largely comprised of 'square sets' that are essentially 'Gaelicised' versions of the circle dances from mainland Europe known as Quadrilles and the Saratoga Lancers that were imported from the United States during the 20th century. They follow the same general patterns or figures of these dances but have been set to the traditional jigs and reels of Gaelic Cape Breton society. Additionally, they have been supplemented with traditional Gaelic steps borrowed from the Scotch Four and the larger 'Eight-hand Reel' that were brought from Scotland.

These steps are added both while travelling through the figures and during separate segments included specifically to showcase an individual's step-dancing techniques.

Regardless of the type of dance, the focus in Cape Breton is on the rhythmic steps. Ethnologist Frank Rhodes visited Cape Breton in 1957 and spent time attempting to define the earlier tradition of Cape Breton step-dancing brought by earlier immigrants of the 18th and 19th centuries. He characterised stepping as "a continuous marking of the rhythm with toe and heel beats" and compared it to various clogging traditions that once existed throughout Europe. He further remarked that it is done "low and close" to the floor and compared them to the earliest noted Hebridean dances in Scotland which were necessarily "neat [...] with little or no arm movement, as appropriate for dancing in confined areas".

An additional objective in Cape Breton-style dancing is to match the exact rhythm of one's steps to that of the melody. Given the attributes sought out in Cape Breton-style dancers, it is easy to see why the tempos must differ considerably from those in the competitive Highland dancing. In this tradition, strathspeys are ideally played at around 160-175 quarter-note beats per minute and reels between 104-108 half-note BPM. At these speeds, there is very little room for any extra dotting and cutting of the rhythms and the rhythms sound very even in comparison to those in modern Scottish piping. The ornamentation in this type of playing is reduced only where it is necessary to enhance the rhythm. This tradition, unlike that of the competitive exhibition dances, has not modified the rhythms found in the music; neither has the music changed the nature of the dance.

I.3 Social Applications and Settings for Piping and Dance

Piping in Competitions and Highland Dancing

Outside of military and civilian marching bands, competitions make up the majority of public performances of modern Scottish bagpipe music. In the modern competition, *Ceol Beag*, the Gaelic term 'light music', used for dance music and marches, is present in both solo performances (primarily sets of a March, Strathspey, and Reel) rated by judges, and as an accompaniment to Highland 'exhibition' dances that are judged in a separate event.

The first piping competition dates back to 1781. It was sponsored by the Highland Society of London and held in Falkirk, Scotland, comprising of 13 pipers. The Society began the event in an attempt to preserve pipe music, which they thought was in great decline.

While competitions began as small gatherings of aristocratic 'judges' selected more for their "enthusiasm" and "support of the Highland lifestyle" than any particular knowledge of the music, they steadily grew and were eventually relocated to Edinburgh, as most of the performers came from that area.

Piping competitions became more of a spectacle as the Romantic era came into full swing, drawing crowds of over 1500 in the mid-19th century.

The modern piping competition comes in two broad categories, those which feature only competitive piping, usually upper level qualifier and championship-type competitions; and those which incorporate other elements such as dancing and athletic games. In the earlier case, competitions are usually held indoors. At these gatherings, the audience is generally other pipers who are competing or pipers who have come to hear a performance of a master player. The latter type, including the 'games', are generally held outdoors.

The nature of piping competition represents a very different attitude and outlook for players than the hereditary role of community musician, as seen in earlier Gaelic society. This aesthetic, whether in the 19th century or present day, puts the emphasis on technical difficulty, individual virtuosity and the replication of an idealised form of this music that has been set in stone. Few pipers of any tradition would deny that a well executed demonstration of such technical mastery is exciting to see, but for others it may remain a tedious exercise, lacking the social element and accessibility of a vibrant dance-piping tradition. Despite these factors, competition is often held as the ultimate, if not only, place for true Scottish piping today.

A dance element was present in these competitions from their early days in the late 18th century. At first, this consisted of the traditional Gaelic dance known as the 'Scotch Four' or 'Highland Reel', for two couples involving a combination of travelling in figures and stepping (percussive solo step-dance).

Like the piping repertoire, these dances became increasingly formalised to better serve their new purpose as exhibition pieces. First, structured solo step-dances such as the *Seann Triubhas* and the *Gillie Calum* were added, along with the addition of ballet techniques to further their perceived grace and technical difficulty. The current style is characterised by dances done at a stately speed with emphasis on dexterity and with a fair amount of jumping involved as seen in 'classical' ballet. As with the piping tradition, this new concept of competitive Highland exhibition dancing puts the focus on difficulty, technique and virtuosity, creating a new set of requirements for both the dancer and the accompanying musician.

Piping in House-parties and Cape Breton Step-dancing

While much has been written about the connection of piping and step-dancing to Gaelic society in Cape Breton, little has been said about the actual context. Since the arrival of Scottish immigrants to the shores of the Canadian Maritimes, there has been music wherever people gather *en masse*. First comes the account of John Roy MacKay (grandson of Iain Dall MacKay, the blind piper of Gairloch) playing a new composition, The Departure of Piping from Scotland, as his family sailed from Scotland in 1805. From the other side of the ocean there is also an account of settlers sailing from Moidart, Scotland to Prince Edward Island and dancing a Scotch Reel on the shore of their new country. Throughout the existing literature on music in Cape Breton society, pipers and fiddlers alike are designated as 'community musicians'.

At present, there are two broad contexts in which Cape Breton-style Scottish music can be found. The first is in informal 'sessions' or parties, generally at someone's home or in a local pub. Musicians get together to play common tunes in the repertoire and to pick up new ones by ear. The real essence of these is the communal exchange of ideas and the common love of the music.

In contrast to the competitive piping scene, with its isolated focus on solo pipers and virtuosic skill, the Gaelic community tradition is inclusive of both other instruments and a variety of playing levels.

The second context for traditional Scottish music in Cape Breton is the group dances that are common throughout the island. While the traditional Highland dance known as the Scotch Four has become somewhat of a scarcity since the 20th century, modern dances tend to feature larger groups, favouring square sets. These dances can be found at almost any imaginable communal gathering.

'...modern competitions has moved the focus from social interaction to perfection of individual technique in much same way as the evolution of the piping tradition in Scotland'

Group dancing, particularly to the music of pipers, has been a key feature in Gaelic society since long before the mass immigrations to the New World in the late 17th century. Musicologist George Emmerson notes that this was true for societies throughout most of Europe before the decline of the bagpipe on the continent in the 12th century.

In short, the fundamental difference between this type of dancing and modern Highland dance is its social function. The evolution of the Scottish competition dance tradition, from the Scotch Fours to the exhibition dances in modern competitions, has moved the focus from social interaction to perfection of individual technique in much same way as the evolution of the piping tradition in Scotland. Both dance traditions evolved from the common seed of early Gaelic social dancing. While both types of dance gradually changed form, the dances in the Cape Breton repertoire maintained the community elements and the Gaelic cultural ties lost in modern Scottish competition dancing.

In both Scotland and Cape Breton, the connection between these dances and the music that accompanies them has been among the largest influences on performance style for pipers and other melody players. It is in this way, that social-cultural changes came to have such a great effect on the styles of music played in both of these locales, demonstrating a direct link between cultural values and performance practice. Upcoming articles in this series will explain exactly how the cultural environments of Scotland and Cape Breton effected the development of these two traditions. ●

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