

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

Front Matter of a Thesis by Benjamin Miller

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INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

A key piece of the rich musical tradition in Scotland, the Highland bagpipe has become an iconic image of Scottish culture. Throughout the long history of this instrument, the pipes have undergone a multitude of changes from instrument design, to repertoire, to social status. This thesis examines the playing styles of the Highland bagpipe in both Scotland and in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, as related to dance music. Both modern competitive Highland piping and dance in Scotland, and the forms of social dance and piping found in Cape Breton are intrinsically linked to common traditions stemming from 17th and 18th century Gaelic communities in the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland, but convention in purpose and performance now differ in significant ways within these two settings.

Chapter 1 examines the differences in performance practice, functionality, and social application of the two traditions in contemporary practice. The chapter introduces much of the musical vocabulary necessary to the discourse in sections to follow. An understanding of the issues existing in the traditions of present-day Scotland and Cape Breton will prove essential to understanding how these two idioms have evolved to the state they are in today. Although many terms are held in common between the two, their interpretation often differs within these settings, sometimes considerably.

Chapter 2 provides a brief look at the common roots of the current traditions in anglicized Scottish society and in Cape Breton, which can be traced back to the culture of the Gaelic Highlands prior to the fall of the Jacobite uprising in the late 18th Century. Here is a society that has music and dance deeply embedded into its culture, with piping, fiddling, song and dance intrinsically linked together. They exist

in all practical terms, as one cohesive tradition. This chapter also examines large scale emigration from Scotland, particularly to Nova Scotia following the Battle of Culloden in 1746. Social conditions in Scotland at the time and the nature of these emigrations do much to explain the role of traditional Gaelic culture and society will come to find in the New World.

The third chapter focuses on the period immediately following emigration to Cape Breton with respect to the evolution of piping and dance in both the New World and the Old. In Scotland, this includes the decline of traditional Gaelic society, the advent of piping and dance competitions by the Highland Societies of London and Scotland, the standardization of repertoire, development of written collections of pipe music, and the creation of the martial, kilted Highland bagpiper as a figurehead of Scottish culture. In Cape Breton, this chapter highlights the preservation of traditional Gaelic society, including music and dance throughout the 19th and well into the 20th century, as well as the rising influences that growing urbanization and globalization would have on this culture, thus demonstrating the progression of the two traditions to present-day, as seen in Chapter 1.

In the final chapter, questions and issues offer a re-evaluation of the differences between the traditions in Scotland and Cape Breton and their relation to Gaelic culture. Also included in this section is a brief look at the re-introduction of Cape Breton style dance music to Scotland and the Scottish response. Questions still remain unanswered at the end of this thesis, inviting further research and examination. As an introductory investigation, it is important to examine the factors that have created the two traditions that are seen today in order to provide a starting point for future research.

ANALYTICAL METHOD

As an experienced piper in both of the styles discussed in this thesis, I have presented much of material within this paper similarly to the way in which I was exposed to this topic over a period of approximately 13 years. While I was trained from a young age in the modern style of Scottish competition piping, it was not until my late teens that I became aware of a co-existing “Cape Breton tradition” and gained a vague notion of their common past. I began to study both traditions, at first as opposing styles, before gradually fading out of the competition piping milieu. It is from this point of view that I write my first chapter, presenting the differences between the two traditions. From there, I present historical records of the Scottish and Cape Breton traditions, including their common roots in Gaelic Highland society.

Because many of the terms and facts presented in this thesis have been internalized over many years of my own musical life, much of the vocabulary specific to this music has been presented and defined without documented sources. This is especially evident during the first chapter, but this may occur occasionally later on in the body of this thesis. Let this not be seen as detracting from the academic quality of this discourse, but as an additional level of study within the two traditions, adding to the integrity of this work.

Much of the information which has informed the sections of this thesis pertaining to Cape Breton comes from sources not available in print form. Personal interviews, anecdotes, and firsthand experience within the tradition as it exists in Cape Breton are still some of the most valuable sources of information on this topic, gathered in a historically oral tradition. There are relatively few sources; as scholarship of the musical traditions in this area is a fairly modern endeavor. Additionally, the musical culture seen in Cape Breton is very much still alive and changing, therefore many sources on this of this topic written as recently as five or ten years ago may not exist

as seen then, and there may be new aspects present now. For this reason, I offer up for consideration my own impressions of the current tradition in Cape Breton based on personal experiences there along with those of my peers when necessary. Despite the issues of defining the present state of the tradition, scholarship regarding the history of music and dance in Cape Breton has proved relatively consistent where available and a relatively small pool of sources has been relied upon heavily to compensate for a lack of available information.

Before delving into the bulk of this paper, it will provide useful to establish a baseline understanding of one of the more ambiguous terms within this thesis, 'tradition'. Over the course of the work conducted in preparation for writing this thesis, the term has been used frequently, but with some level of discrepancy and no clear definition. For better or worse, tradition is generally associated with something perceived as 'old' or even ancient, however this can be rather misleading and is not always the case. An appropriate analogy would be a family who begins going to a certain restaurant for dinner each year on New Year's Eve. This event may become a 'tradition' among this group in only a few years. While the members of this family need not order the same meal or sit at the same table each year (although they are certainly may choose to do so), as long as they continue to visit the same restaurant, on the same day, and perhaps most importantly: for the same reason – to celebrate the new year – this tradition stands. What this means for defining the term is that tradition must refer to something started by someone or some group for a particular purpose. If a different person starts taking people to another restaurant the day after, this is not a part of the original tradition, but a new one entirely. This demonstrates that while a tradition may not need to be ancient, or fixated on the past, it must refer back to some original ideal to remain cohesive.

While keeping in mind the requisite attributes of an identifiable lineage and

a cohesive view of the history behind the movement, individual traditions often vary from case to case in most other regards. In the example of the “competitive Highland piping tradition”, there may be a heavy emphasis on “the way things are always done” – who plays what, when and where. In the “Cape Breton tradition”, the emphasis might be on more of a common bond shared by various elements in culture and community, with the “rules” of “how” (or “who”) left more open to interpretation. What is most important in both of these cases is a common idea of performance practice and societal norms within each respective socio-cultural group.

THESIS

This thesis centered on the evolution of Scottish Highland bagpiping following the fall of the Jacobite uprising in 1745. Prior to this point, the bagpipes played a key role in the musical culture maintained by Gaelic society in Scotland’s Highlands and Western Isles. Due to a myriad of changing social and economic factors following this revolution, much of the Gaelic population living in these areas was forced to relocate either to the city centers of Scotland or to the New World. Around this same time, two independent styles of Highland piping can be seen to emerge. The first, in terms of this discussion, is what will be called the ‘modern Scottish’ or ‘competition’ style of playing. While there are many issues concerning the implications of these two terms, they are used for means of simplicity and lack of a better descriptor. The competitive style is the most widely spread today and is prescribed in many countries the world over. Born out of romantic Victorian investments in the “pastoral” Highland way of life and the “noble barbarian”, this idiom is most generally characterized today by the regimented military Highlander, clad in full kilt and marching in parade formation among other pipers of a pipe and drum corps. The second style is that of the ‘dance-piper’ or ‘community musician’, who serves a specific function within

Gaelic society as a purveyor of community dance or work music that dates back before any account of reliable written history in the Highlands. This is a role without a uniform or any strict training, born out of a Gaelic society to serve this specific purpose, completely apart from the Anglo-Saxon culture present in much of the country.

Despite the long standing lineage of the community dance-piper, the growth of Victorian romanticism and the removal of the Highland Gael from his secluded environment into the distinct culture of urban life put the modern Scottish tradition in a position to overwhelm the Highland bagpipe scene as a whole. This change left almost no trace of the previous Gaelic tradition in Scotland. From a place of power, some forbearers of this style have often elevated their tradition's place at the expense of historical fact, leaving little room for the consideration of alternate conventions or styles of performance practice. To this day, many modern Scottish pipers believe that their pedigree as tenants of this style dates back before the written history of the Scottish nation. In actual fact their instrument, the Highland bagpipe, was not even seen in the country until after the 16th century. This is but an example of how deeply ingrained the idea of legitimacy-through-legacy has become within this culture. Similar phenomena can be found in the new forms of ballet-inspired Highland dance that grew out of this "new tradition" in order to accompany this style of piping, eventually overshadowing the older social dances of the Gaelic Highlands.

As changes obscured previous Gaelic musical traditions in Scotland, the dance-piping style was retained by emigrants who left the country for the New World before these transformations came into full effect. In many New World destinations, this tradition did not thrive. However, Gaelic immigrant communities of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia managed to preserve much of the Gaelic society and culture that was lost in other areas. Along with this community dance-piping practice,

the musical culture of 17th and 18th century Gaelic Scotland appears to have incorporated fiddle, song, and dance, in a near inseparable manner.¹ While Musical convention and general performance practice have evolved slightly over 200 years within the Gaelic communities of Cape Breton, they have done so in a society that is still connected to its original Gaelic identity in a way that is rarely seen throughout 19th century Scotland.

The narrative of the community dance-piper has been allowed little credence in Scotland since the rise of the modern competition tradition. Remnants of this older style were systematically dismembered by a revisionary sense of history and the use of shame to discourage future generations of its followers. Even after the rediscovery of what remains of this style in Cape Breton, the superiority grown out of the post-Victorian musical culture in Scotland has lead members of the Scottish competition tradition to discredit or ignore any alternate narrative that has attempted to gain equal standing. Nineteenth century terms used to ensure the dominance of this modern Scottish style, such as “tinker piper” may have faded out of use, but new phrases such as “kitchen-piping” have since been employed to discourage serious professional musicians, students, and historians from pursuing any music outside of the current competition style with any level of sincerity. The primary goal of this thesis is to trace the dichotomy and evolution of these two styles in Scotland and Cape Breton (1). Having done so, the history of this evolution will demonstrate that the long-ignored Gaelic “dance-piping tradition” and the more modern “competition style” stand equally authentic and legitimately deserving of serious scholarly exchange (2).