

Piobaireachd



Piper Louise Marshall plays to a crowd from atop a hill in Scotland, in the tradition of piobaireachd being used to gather the clan.

Piobaireachd (pronounced “PEE-brock” and meaning piping) is the classical music, or Great Music of Scotland (“Ceol Mor”(kee-El more) in Scots Gaelic), which dates back to the 1500s. As with many classical compositions, the tunes are intended for soloists with great technique and are written loosely in order to allow the musician to express her own interpretation of the tune. While many people associate piobaireachd with laments, the music style also includes gathering tunes, odes to honored persons, salutes, and rowing tunes to pace sailors as they rowed across the sea. A characteristic of piobaireachd is that it is played slowly and deliberately (around 50 beats per minutes compared to 80 to 100 BPM for most bagpipe music).

Traditionally, piobaireachd has been taught using stylized “vocables” to express the notes and their duration. While there is a “standard” set of vocables called the Campbell Canntaireachd, most players develop their own system. Recently, some tunes have been written in traditional staff notation but parts of piobaireachd cannot

be easily expressed using this notation. Some specialized piobaireachd staff notation is trying to address these issues; even though it looks like standard bagpipe music, it is played differently using piobaireachd rules.

A piobaireachd tune starts with a theme called the “ground,” or “urlar” in Gaelic; this part contains a stylized theme, which forms the basis for following parts. Unlike Light Music, piobaireachd can have differing numbers of bars in phrases (or even be completely irregular), and the rhythm can vary throughout the tune. The drones may be tuned differently than standard pipe band settings in order to establish musical tension.

Following the first playing of the theme, which can take about two minutes, a number of formalized variations follow with a return to the ground at the end. In competitions, Grade 4 pipers are required to play the Ground plus the next variation; higher Grades can play 5 to 12 variations. Some piobaireachd tunes have up to 20 variations, which stretches your listening skills and the piper’s technical skills, especially to keep the pipes in tune that long. The “Lament for the Harps Tree” lasts 25 minutes, a real feat of stamina for any musician.

Light Music has grace notes and embellishments to separate notes and to emphasize notes, as the bagpipe cannot start and stop notes as with other wind instruments. Piobaireachd has many more, specialized embellishments, more than 70 in all, that the composer can use to different effect. Unlike Light Music grace notes that are very short in duration, the piper can express artistry by playing grace notes of different lengths as well as speed and slow the tempo throughout the tune.

The first variation after the ground is often a “siubhal” (or traversing) that couples the theme note with a note higher or lower, preceding the theme note. The theme note is held for a bit longer and the

preceding note is cut, the lengths determined by the piper to establish the interpretation of the theme as piobaireachd does not have a strict tempo.

A “dithis” (pair) may be next with the accented theme note followed by alternating cut, lower notes (often A and G).

Piobaireachd often uses a “grip,” or leumluath movement. The Grip is a D grace note framed by low G gracenotes (that is, three gracenotes). Grips are usually difficult because of the finger movement from the low G to the melody note.



The taorluath is a grip with an added E gracenote at the end. (four gracenotes) while the crunluath has



three gracenotes added to the taorluath: a low A, an F, followed by a low A (a total of seven gracenotes). Normally gracenotes are played on the beat, followed quickly by the melody note. But for grips, taorluaths and crunluaths, the melody note must be on the beat, so the piper must time the embellishment just before the beat, making it more difficult to play well.

Bs, Cs, and Ds are called “a mach” notes and “a mach” variations depend on the playing of this combination of notes. When the taorluath or crunluath variations are played with a mach notes, the variations are called “taorluath a mach” or “crunluath a mach.”

As you listen to the ground, try to pick out the “theme.” The composer will play doublings and other embellishments against this note. Listen to how the drones set a musical plane and create a musical tension against which the melody plays. Try to listen to each bar or phrase and listen to how it differs from the previous bar or phrase, and try to predict the next bar’s or phrase’s direction.

In longer pieces, listen for the changes in the variations. You may not know what the embellishment is, but you will hear a difference in the embellishment. Listen for the return to the urlar, or ground. This signals that the piece is finishing and it should bring the variations full circle to complete the tune.

Example: ”The Glen is Mine



Notice how the theme is repeated with different introductory and connecting phrases. The second measure repeats the first but the connecting phrase into the third measure is a C-B instead of B-A. These little changes are trying to set the musical plane for the variations to follow. The “theme note” is

E, the eighth note with the “bird’s eye” or fermata in the first measure. This will be important in the first variation.

First variation 
1st variation

In this tune, the theme is repeated twice in each uralr measure. In this variation, the first theme phrase is replaced by a set of eighth notes, which then get repeated throughout the variation. This is a siubha: The theme note (E) is held longer than the preceding higher cut note.

Sometimes, the variation is doubled, or even trebled, to further develop the theme. In this tune, the second theme phrase in each measure is replaced with a variation, so there are two variations in each measure. In piobaireachd parlance, the variation is doubled. Notice that the second variation maintains the theme note (A).

Doubling 
Second variation 
theme note

In the uralr, we identified E as the theme note. In this tune, the second variation develops some musical ideas around this theme note. The tension in this variation is built using the connecting phrases, changing from E-B to E-C in these three measures.

Hopefully, these examples will help you better understand piobaireachd tunes and guide your listening. Unlike Light Music, piobaireachd involves concentration on the part of listener as well as the piper. But understanding some of the basic rules and ideas of piobaireachd can make listening more rewarding as the piper takes you through his or her interpretation of the tune. In time, you can appreciate that the musicians who play piobaireachd are at the top of their craft.