

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 (“Ceol Mor” in Scots Gaelic) of Scotland, 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 theme note, 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.

Following this 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” last 25 minutes, a real feat 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.

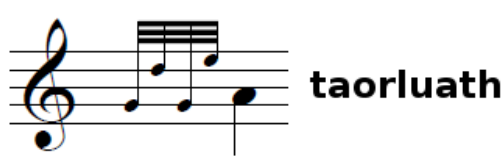
The first variation after the ground is often a “siubhal” (or traversing) that couples the theme note with a note higher or lower, preceding the theme note. The theme note is held for a bit longer and the following note is cut, the lengths determined by the piper to establish the interpretation of the 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” note. 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.