Vol.1 in the Siubhal series:

Donald MacPherson—*A Living Legend*

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"some of the best tunes in the pibroch repertoire... There's an understated elegance to MacPherson's playing that is mesmerizing." *Piper & Drummer Magazine*

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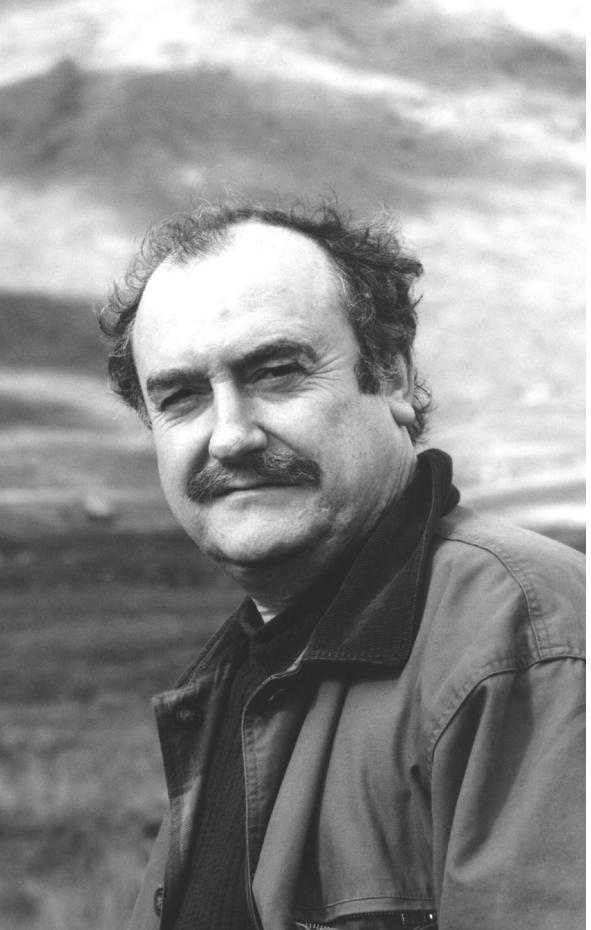
Foreword

SINCE THE UPSWING to devolution in 1999, and the first Scottish Parliament in 300 years, our national traditional music has enjoyed a massive uplift in popularity. It has metamorphosed into a coat of many hues and many colours—a kaleidoscope reflecting the complexity of Scotland's myth. And at its core is the purifying ice cold stream of pure distilled *Ceòl Mór*, the last unrecognised classical tradition in Western music.

Other territories have their piping traditions—the Sardinian *launeddas* springs to mind, but that consists almost entirely of dance music, whereas pibroch is abstract music. Its performance practice provides a fascinating viewing window into what instrumentalists were probably doing across Europe in the Middle Ages.

Through listening to this music, and a wheen of music like it, I relearnt what it was like to be both Scot and musician. *Ceòl Mór* is a living music, with much left to say about the human condition. Allan MacDonald is one of its greatest exponents.

I made Allan's acquaintance at Celtic Connections early in January 2002, only a few days after my own return to Scotland from 40 years in the wilderness to work at our very own and extraordinary Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. Extraordinary because it is the only conservatoire in the UK which takes its own national music seriously enough to award degrees in it. And it is the only conservatoire in the world to award degrees in performance up to PhD level in one of the most widely played classical music instruments in the world—the Highland bagpipe.



As someone who has always had an instantly emotional response to the pipes, it has taken me a fair while to learn to appreciate the intellectual rigour of *Ceòl Mór*, and the refined artistry of a player like Allan. Put simply, Allan is music, music is Allan. He is one of those rare beings for whom, with instrument in hand, anything is possible. This CD transported me to places I have never been before. If this is your introduction to *Ceòl Mór*, I wish I were you so that I could experience my journey all over again.

This CD is your starting point for an amazing intellectual and emotional experience.

John Wallace
RSAMD, Glasgow
4 March 2007

Introduction

by Barnaby Brown

"This instrument produces what the Irish regard as the touchstone of fine musical sounds"

Richard Stanihurst (*De Rebus in Hibernia Gestis*, 1584)

PIBROCH is like fine wine—it adds a touch of class to any occasion, attracts myth and obsession, holds secrets to aficionados, and a small sip leaves a wonderful feeling. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, pibroch roused men's courage in battle, gathered clans when scattered, immortalized heroes, chieftains, and great events, and uplifted people's spirits when feasting, marching, rowing, or harvesting. Considered the highest form of piping (known in Gaelic as *ceòl mór,* the 'big music'), pibroch carries a bouquet of superiority, dignity, mystery, and romance. It brings to life the late-medieval history of Ireland and Scotland and endows Highland culture with a majestic nobility. Yet, the bagpipe is linked in most people's minds, not with great music, but with the clichés of Scotland: kilts, massed bands, buskers, and "Scotland the Brave". The ceremonial music of the Gaelic chieftains, 1550-1750, has kept a low profile.

Why is this? Opportunities to hear pibroch or have it explained to you are scarce, unless you are a Highland piper; or married to one. Its full glory is often concealed. Once discovered, however, its intricacies and delights continue unfolding for years.

Like Bach's fugues, structural depth accounts both for its perennial fascination and the failure by many players to appreciate or convey what is happening in the music. But these are not the only reasons it is underestimated or overlooked by the world at large. There are also deep prejudices, at least in the UK, and an intractable lack of confidence on the part of its artists, particularly those of Highland background. Often an object of ridicule, the bagpipe is not recognized as a serious musical instrument in many schools.

Competitions have dominated pibroch performance since 1781, and recitals were rare before the 1980s. The circuit of annual competitive events which now spans the globe has the positive effect of nurturing artistic companionship and technical excellence, but it has also bred cultural fundamentalism. Pibroch has been steadily institutionalized since the early nineteenth century, and the pursuit of an idealized version of the past has extinguished the variety which once clearly existed. Resistance to innovation has created new obstacles. At the premier pibroch events in 2006, the excessive periods of tuning (during which everyone talked) and appalling programming betrayed a performer culture indifferent to the audience. One heavy pibroch followed another from 9am to 5pm. No harper, singer, fiddler, professional storyteller, or even a light pibroch relieved the ear. No wonder the general public was absent.

The first serious attempt to tackle this problem was a recital organized by Patrick Molard in 1992. It was in Brest, repeated in Paris, with audiences that would put Scotland to shame. There wasn't a note of tuning on stage. 1500 people showed

up in Brest, 900 in Paris, and there have been regular pibroch recitals and educational events in Brittany ever since. Allan MacDonald was one of the artists, and he repeated the no-tuning-on-stage idea at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1999. People still talk about that night as the best pibroch concert in modern times. Allan set another milestone at the 2004 Festival by involving other instruments and an actor, creating four chamber-music evenings that set pibroch in its historical and cultural context. This won a Herald Angel award for its imaginative and creative approach, broadening pibroch's appeal to a mainstream audience.

So why has pibroch not yet emerged from its cocoon? Yes, competition players have been desensitized to the needs of listeners and, yes, musicality has been stultified by the transfer of power from living player to printed score — or, more recently, archive recording. But the root of the problem lies deeper. An economic and cultural depression blighted Gaelic-speaking communities throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exacerbated by brutal reprisals following the 1745 uprising. The structure of Gaelic society was systematically dismantled by a nervous Government; Gaelic-speaking leaders were executed, exiled, and replaced by those more attuned to 'British' norms; and this state-sponsored terrorism was followed by economic deprivation and population displacement on a massive scale. This has been well documented,[1] and we are still living with the resulting brain drain away from piping and collapse of cultural confidence associated with language loss.

The strength of piping today owes much to the College of Piping in Glasgow, founded in 1944, and the *Piping Times,* its monthly magazine since 1947. The

Piobaireachd Society, founded in 1903, has also grappled with the editorial nightmare of publishing sources that are enigmatic, inconsistent, and which differ from the teaching received by oral transmission. One of the brightest developments in recent years has been the degree course launched in 1996 by the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, which has expanded in partnership with the National Piping Centre since 2000. Allan MacDonald was on the steering committee and is one of the principal tutors. An issue he constantly challenges is the lack of time or willingness on the part of competitors to risk something new, even when it has historical authority. It takes less time to go with the known, and the result for audiences is increasing boredom. As observed in the *Piping Times* editorial of July 2005, the interpretative convergence is stultifying: everyone sounds the same.

Considerable development is required before the conditions and prospects for aspiring pipers today are as attractive as they were in the seventeenth century. Estate papers record how students were sent to colleges on the isles of Skye or Mull by patrons who paid their board, clothing and tuition in full, with lifetime employment and high social prestige assured for at least 30 players at any one time: no chieftain was credible without a decent piper. Today, equivalent training inevitably means running into debt, and both social status and job security as a performer are a far cry from that enjoyed by pibroch's composers. Are we a more cultured society today than the pre-Industrial Gaels?

The most famous piping colleges were extinct by the 1770s, and a deterioration in training is evident in the earliest pibroch sources, none of which were produced

by the teaching elite of the 1700s—the Rankins, MacArthurs, or MacCrimmons. In 1841, a distinguished judge recorded a conversation with Angus Cameron, identifying the cause of this collapse. Cameron had won the 1794 competition in Edinburgh at the age of eighteen. Like all pibroch artists born before the 1860s, his first language was Gaelic. The judge caricatured his Highland English:

> *Though giving great praise to old rivals, and to young aspirants, he bemoaned the general decline of the art, for he said that there was not now one single "*real *piper —a man who made the pipe his business", in the whole of Appin. I suggested that it was probably owing to the want of county militia regiments, for the Highland colonels used to take their pipers with them. But he eschewed this, saying that we had plenty pipers long before the militia was heard of. I then suggested the want of training. "Ay! there's a deal in that, for it does tak edication! a deal o' edication". But then, why were they "no' edicated"? So he hit it on the very head, by saying it was the decline of chieftains, and their castles and gatherings. "Yes", said I, "few of them live at home now". "At hame! ou, they're a' deed! an' they're a' puir! an' they're a' English!"* [2]

By 1800, the gentry in the Highlands were exclusively English-educated. Pibroch became part of a booming new industry of Highland entertainments, more about *haute couture* and tartan, seeing and being seen, than about music or culture. The commercial success of these shows spawned the Highland games movement, which spread across Scotland from the 1860s onward, following the expansion of the rail network. But there were cries of cultural fraudulence. In 1884, Highlanders were urged to boycott the Argyllshire Gathering by the *Oban Times:*

let them show by their absence from these shows that they have awakened to a sense of their position and will not any more be made puppets for the amusement of Cockney visitors, or to flatter the vanity of Highland lairds. [3]

By 1890, the Northern Meeting was attracting 10,000 paying spectators. "The list of those present at the Balls… read like an international 'Who's Who'. Princes, Dukes, Ducs, Marquises, Earls, Counts, Comtes, Barons… eminent Indian grandees such as the Maharaja Holkar of Indore, Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, the Maharaja Gaekwar of Baronda." [4] The social climate was marked by deference and servility on the part of Gaelic-speaking pipers, and the conviction that *we* are civilized and *they* are not on the part of English-speaking gentry who were the employers, judges and arbiters of all that was acceptable in pibroch. Everything the gentry did reinforced their social superiority, and the extension of their sphere of control and influence into pibroch was, paradoxically, both the hand of death and the harbinger of the renaissance we are enjoying today.

What plunged pibroch into shadow is "bookish" judging: the transfer of authority from master player to printed page. In a comprehensive study of this process, William Donaldson writes:

They clung to MacKay's book and considered departure from it, even in the smallest detail, as 'wrong'. Their formal education encouraged them to look for a fixed, original, authoritative score and they consistently failed to grasp that variety and fluidity were inherent qualities in traditional music, signs not of corruption and decay but of well-being and vitality. [5]

John MacLennan (1843-1923) witnessed the rise of this controlling impulse. He complained to the *Oban Times* in 1920:

The piper may have a far better setting of the tune, but he dare not play it, and his own natural abilities are curbed; he must simply play note for note what is put before him; he is simply a tracer or a copyist, and is not allowed to become an artiste. [6]

A culture of servile adherence or military conformity soon prevailed, with original dissenters dying off in the 1920s and subsequent challengers ostracized vindictively, particularly between the 1960s and 1980s. Fortunately, it is now recognized that there is far more to pibroch than what you hear at the competitions. Pipe Major Angus MacDonald (1938-1999) admitted, "I have learned more about pibroch since I stopped competing than I ever dreamed there was to learn".[7]

After rising to the top, conforming to the orthodox playing style, Allan MacDonald broke ranks. Since 1990, his refreshing, soulful interpretations have won the hearts of a much larger circle and helped to stimulate fresh thinking. In this he has several predecessors, but Allan's colossal musicianship and integrity have carried the swell of discontent gathering over the twentieth century to a watershed. He embodies a new era in pibroch, one in which scholarship and tradition are cross-fertilizing each other with valuable results; above all, one where communication with the audience comes first. Comments like "You nearly took me off my seat!" from an elderly lady in Skye gave Allan greater satisfaction than any of his prizes.

What the piping world lacks more than anything else is a discerning audience of non-players—something the current event format will never achieve. At the

most prestigious competitions in Scotland, the audience rarely numbers more than forty, the Glenfiddich Championship at Blair Castle being a noble exception. In his complete recording of William Byrd's keyboard music, Davitt Moroney writes, "Appreciation (let alone affection) is difficult to acquire without direct contact with the music", and the same is true of pibroch, which is described in *The New Grove Dictionary* (2001) as "an esoteric repertory performed only by and for aficionados". This is accurate today, but need it remain so? The beauty of Allan's playing and the content of these pages are a bid for greater accessibility. The title *Dastirum* is an encouragement to artists, promoters, film makers, and patrons to help pibroch reach beyond the ghetto of the competitions. Despite its major place in Scottish history and the extraordinary love for things Highland across the globe, how often do non-pipers get the opportunity to hear our instrument's finest music? *Dastirum!*

New listeners may find the "big music" easier to appreciate in smaller doses, framed by something more familiar or an illuminating explanation. The track notes that follow open with historical material compiled by Hugh Cheape, Allan MacDonald and myself, followed by some discussion of the music. The recording is testament to a remarkable artist at the height of his powers and offers a balanced sampling from the cellar of over 300 works. We hope it unlocks a complexity of delights that will continue unravelling for years. Each work has been refined by generations of oral transmission and boasts excellent structure, velvety overtones, and a long finish. *Slainte!*

1 Cumha Alasdair Dheirg Mhic 'ic Alasdair
Lament for Alasdair Dearg of Glengarry

Chanting of the Urlar
0.37 *Urlar* • 2:01 *Siubhal Òrdaig*
3:16 *Ludh Sleamhuinn Singling* • 4:08 *Doubling*
4:48 *Taobhludh*
5:43 *Crunnludh*
6:32 *Crunnludh a mach*

ALASDAIR DEARG, or Red Alasdair (probably because of his hair) would have become chief of the Glengarry MacDonalds had he not died in about 1630. This lament appears to be his sole memorial. His life and career have been obscured in conventional history because he died before his father, the unusually long-lived Donald of Laggan (1543-1645). The MacDonalds of Glengarry (from 1660 spelt MacDonell) were in dispute with the Mackenzies of Kintail over land in Lochalsh and Knoydart. The Mackenzies had been empowered by King James VI and I to squeeze the MacDonalds out, but Glengarry resisted, pursuing territorial rights forfeited to the crown in 1493. Alasdair Dearg's step-brother, Angus, achieved greater fame by being the product of Glengarry's first marriage and, in 1602, by his death in combat on one of these territorial expeditions.

A portrait survives in the Museum of the Isles, Armadale (reproduced on the inside front cover), showing the *beau ideale* of the Gaelic warrior chieftain, con-