

THE BAGPIPE – HISTORY – EFFECTS – FORMER AND PRESENT STATE OF ITS PROFESSORS, &c.

The pipe is one of the most ancient instruments of music. It was in use among the Greeks, by whom it was named *piovala**, and its form, as represented in some ancient sculptures, was not unlike its modern appearance. That People probably derived it from the barbarians, i.e. the Kelts, to whom they acknowledge themselves indebted for a great part of their music. The instrument was also well known to the Romans, and the Italian peasant still continues to perform on a Bag-Pipe, of a construction much in character with the modern rudeness of the people. Giraldus Cambrensis, who died in 1225 mentions the pipe as a British instrument, and it was used among his own countrymen in Wales, but gave place to the more pacific and voluptuous harp. The last Piper of whom we ever heard in the principality was “Shon na Peepy”, or John the Piper. There is in the chapel of Roslyn the sculpture of a cherub playing on a Bag-Pipe, with a book spread before it, proving that in an early age, the Bag-Pipes were played, not by the ear alone, but from musical notation. That chapel was erected by William Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, as far back as 1416. But older instances of performers on the instrument might be adduced**. The northern nations were in the most early ages acquainted with the Bag-Pipes, which are a sort of mouth organ, but whether the Gaël derived the instrument from others, or invented it themselves, it seems impossible to ascertain and the question is not perhaps of great importance. This much is incontestable, however simple it may originally have appeared, it has been brought by the Highlanders to the utmost perfection; and its form and construction are as peculiarly their own, as the music to which it is so well calculated to give proper effect. The Irish freely admit that the Bag-Pipes were introduced to them by the Scots of Albany.

The *PIOB MHOR*, or Great Highland Bag-Pipe, therefore, appears to be the only national instrument in Europe; and it is sacred to Scotland, to whose inhabitants it speaks a language which no others can appreciate, and excites a feeling in their breasts to which others are strangers. The sound of the Highland Pipe has stimulated heroism, by the sonorous notes of the loud *piobaireachd*, and by its soft and wailing strains it has subdued the rougher feelings of our nature; it has melted the lion-hearts of sorrowing clansmen, as they bore the body of their chief to the resting place of their fathers, or brought back remembrance the virtues and misfortunes of departed friends. Its sprightly tones have enhanced the happiness of the Highlander at the festive board or social fireside, and beguiled the tedious hours of his winter’s solitude. Its notes solace the shepherd on the lonely heath, and charm the guileless maid in the occupations of a pastoral life. When assembled on the green, the Highland youth, forgetting the toils of the day, meet from their distant hills and straths, and mix in the sprightly and exhilarating dance, with an ecstasy which to strangers is surprising. Every face brightens with delight – every heart

* *Piob Mhala*, pronounced *vala*, Gaëlic. Logan’s “Scottish Gael,” vol ii.

** There is a *piobaireachd* known by the name of *Bealach na’m Broaig*, composed at that battle in 1299, which is now perhaps the oldest piece extant. This species of music was not, we may believe, first composed on that occasion

glows with kindly feelings, and the nerves of old and young thrill with unaffected joy, as they respond in graceful and invigorating evolutions to the enlivening notes of the Piper's chanter.

What a fine spectacle is beheld in the intrepid march of a man in advance of his companions, and in the face of a well-appointed enemy, with no weapon in his hand, labouring enthusiastically with great physical exertion and musical talent to encourage his comrades to deeds of hardihood and glory, pealing forth those martial strains which distant generations have heard with burning hearts, - which are so congenial, - so soul-stirring to every Highlander. The long sounding airs composed in consequence of unprovoked attacks, or revengeful and sanguinary inroads on unoffending clans may, by the ultra-sentimental, be thought unworthy of preservation but the clans of older times could allege as good reasons for going to war as modern politicians, although their arguments were not so refined and sophisticated.

The advantages which are derived from the strains of this noble retainer of a Highland chief, are manifold. He is to rouse the courage of his clansmen to battle, and alarm them when menaced. He is to collect them when scattered, solace them in their long and dreary marches, or solitary and painful bivouacs, to keep up in the time of peace, the memory of their ancestors, and impart to the mind of the young the feelings and generosity which distinguished them - by music composed after memorable victories and well contested by hapless fields, or dissuade them from evil, by tunes which commemorate the distress produced by the indulgence of unbecoming passions.

It is to catch its echoing tones among the blue mountains of its native country; to sit on the heather banks beside the stilly loch and ancient Dun; listening to the notes so sweetly mellowed by distance; as the swell on the evening breeze; to hear the melody wafted wide o'er the silent lake, or breaking through the roaring of the mountain stream and rushing of the fitful wind, - thus it is to hear the Bag-Pipe as it ought to be heard.

When the system of clanship was broken up by the civil wars, the Hereditary Bards were discarded from the retinue of a chief, and their patrimonial farms were resumed by the Lairds. The undeniable utility of the Bag-Pipes in war and at the banquet led to their adoption among the Gaël of the hills in place of the less inspiring and gently sounding harp; and although the duty of the Pipers was not altogether to preserve the traditional history of the clan, yet their care was to hand down to posterity the music which was composed in commemoration of the deeds, honourable and important to the appropriate families.

It was formerly the practice for gentlemen to send their Pipers for instruction to the celebrated master, paying the cost of their board and tuition; but the performers now are chiefly educated at their own expense, which induces them to attempt the accomplishment of much in as short a time as possible; hence they play incorrectly, a residence of one or two years being altogether insufficient for their proper qualification. Formerly six to twelve years were devoted to the acquirement of Piobaireachds alone; for the professors would not allow Reels and Quick-steps to be played in their establishments. The life of a Piper in former days was one of comparative ease and dignity; he was allowed a servant or *gillie* to carry his Crios-nim, or knapsack, and when he finished his port or tune, the instrument was returned to the servant.

The state of society has rendered it now unnecessary for gentlemen to keep up the imposing retinue which formerly graced the castle of a chief, and added splendour to his

[Return to index](#)

progress abroad. Except on such occasions as that, when his Majesty visited Duneiden, the Highland Lairds dispense with the appendage of so formidable a tail; but the Piper still retains a becoming station in the establishment of landed proprietors, and although there is no longer that celebrated college in the Isle of Skye, which sent out so many eminent performers, yet the diligence and ability with which those in the profession at the present day apply themselves to their studies, encouraged as they are by the frequent competitions or trials of skill, where the meritorious are handsomely rewarded, enables us to say that the present generation can boast a number of well qualified performers.