The Piper's Corner

by PFSFC Board Member Peter Walker

In this column, I began by talking about a lot of the ornamentation that pipers use, and how a fiddler might begin to adapt those ornaments. I then went on to discuss the march repertoire, and issues regarding phrasing of the various types of march. Before I move on to how pipers interpret strathspeys, reels, and jigs, which you already know how to play, I'd like to spend some time discussing the most prestigious, and to many, the most mysterious music composed for, and played on pipes: *ceol mòr,* known today as *piobaireachd* (pee-pear-ack).

The term *ceol mòr* means "big music"; and this was the primary art music of the Scottish Highlands, and the peak period of composition appears to be the 17th and early 18th centuries. It appears, in many ways, to have grown out of an older tradition practiced on the *clàrsach*, the wire-strung harp that preceded the Highland pipes as the highest-status instrument in Gaelic culture. The modern term for the music, *piobaireachd* (often Anglicized as pibroch), simply means "piping" - and that the term is synonymous with *ceol mòr* tells you a lot about its importance.

But what is *ceol mòr*? In short, it's a theme-and-variations form where the themal melody is never explicitly stated. The piece begins with a melodic variation on the theme, called the *ùrlar* (ground). There might be a second melodic variation on the ground, and then the tune proceeds with a series of ornament-based variations, returning to the ground at the end. The melody will not be played in time, but is phrased according to its meter and scansion - but more on that later.

Because piobaireachd is not played in strict time, the only way it can be learned is by ear. This statement is as true for fiddlers dabbling at adapting the idiom to their instrument as it is to pipers themselves. This, then, is not so much a guide for how to learn to play *piobaireachd*, as it is a guide to help you know and understand what you're hearing when you're listening to a *piobaireachd*, and some ideas on how one might adapt it to a different instrument.

Traditionally, pipers would learn a tune first by singing it with their instructors, using a musical language known as *canntaireachd*. This language, roughly, translates the pitch of themal notes as vowels, the gracenote that

introduces them as a consonant, and uses a series of fixed vocables to describe ornaments that often imitates their rhythmic structure. Once the tune, and its particular phrasing, was learned by singing, the student would move to the practice chanter. Nowadays, people learn the notes from sheet music instead, but singing the tune to vocables to get its phrasing is still a common practice, though the formal structure of the *canntaireachd* is usually abandoned.

How then does one begin? My own instructor once told me of a phrase common to *piobaireachd* teachers: "To get to the mother, first get to know the daughters". By this, he meant that the basics of the interpretation of a tune, insight on the ground variation can be found in the variations. Because of this, we'll actually begin by looking at variation sets first, before coming back to the ground.

The Lament for the Old Sword

We'll begin by looking at *Cumha an t-Seana Chlaidheimh* (Lament for the Old Sword). I will be using the Piobaireachd Society setting for this tune. It's a pretty straightforward theme, with a fairly conventional set of variations. The meter is 4/4, with a scansion in the ground of "heavy-light-medium-heavy". Here is the skeleton of the theme, though it's never played in this form.

Lament for the Old Sword - Themal Skeleton

Try playing through the skeleton to get a taste of the melody - though it's not very satisfying in this form! I've added a rough guess at the chords, so that the underlying harmonic structure of the tune is revealed. The harmonic structures common to *piobaireachd* are a discussion for the future, but I'll point this one thing out now - whenever the tune is in an "A" chord, the melody is consonant with the drones (which play "A" continuously through the tune). When the tune is in a "G" chord, the melody is dissonant with the drones. It is the tension built by dissonant phrases, and their resolution into consonance (or not!), that drives much of the music.

How do piobaireachd variation sets work? The most common form is to adorn the themal skeleton in the following way, so that each themal note in the skeleton above is expressed as:

(introductory grace) - themal note - ornament - connective note(s)

Each variation will have a characteristic ornament and connective note, and the value and type introductory grace will more strongly depend on the pitch of the themal note. The first "variation" is the ground, so we'll start with the second.

Variation 2: Dithis singling

The first variation played in this tune, after the *ùrlar*, is called the *dithis* (gee-ish), which is the Gaelic counter for "two persons". One might read even it as "duet". It sets the rhythmic pattern for all variations to follow. Ornamentally, each themal note is introduced with a single grace note (generally, high G, where possible), followed by a connective note (usually low A - always in this tune). The connective note is preceded by a second grace note; E when the themal note is low G, A, B, C, or D; high G or high A otherwise. The first line of the variation is shown below, and one can easily extrapolate the rest of the variation from the themal skeleton:

Lament for the Old Sword - Dithis Line 1

Important to consider is the timing. The phrasing of the theme is to express the length of the notes according to their weight in the phrase, a principle called "scansion". In the variations in this tune, the scansion is expressed as a simple "heavy-medium-medium-heavy", with the first and last themal note of a bar as the heaviest. Additionally, *piobaireachd* is "back-heavy", meaning the ends of phrases are more important than the beginnings. Thus, the end of a bar will be heavy; the end of a 2-bar phrase will be very heavy, and the end of a 4-bar line will be very, very heavy. Ends of parts and ends of variations will receive additional time. I have marked "M" for "medium", "H" for heavy, "VH" for "very heavy", and VVH for "Very, very heavy". The additional time between each degree of stress - expressed as duration - is incremental and subtle; and it is this

timing that requires the most practice.

This principle holds true for all the ornamental variations in this tune - but only to the themal notes. The connective notes are unaffected by the scansion. Within *piobaireachd* variations, connective notes, and ornaments for that matter, are all of identical length to one another - and the connective notes are often of similar size from variation to variation. This is a difficult task, especially while simultaneously applying the scansion to the themal notes.

Moreover, the approximate timing - scansion aside - of the *dithis* variation is a bit different from written. To get a closer approximation of what's played, one can reimagine the variation in 12/8; with the themal notes occuping 5/16 of time (longer, with fermatas of a value per the phrasing discussed above), and the connective note occupying 1/16 of time. This is illustrated in the rewrite of the first two bars of the line below:

Lament for the Old Sword - Dithis Line 1, rhythm

This variation would be played in the neighborhood of 75-80 themal notes per minute, not accounting for the fermatas.

How might a fiddler interpret this variation? Well, one might perform a third-finger tap in place of all the grace notes; but the most important thing about interpreting this variation is the relationship between connective note, always low A in this tune, and themal notes; and the phrasing of the themal notes. I show the first few bars in the next section.

Variation 3: Dithis doubling

Having looked at the *dithis* variation last time, we now move on to the remaining variations, beginning with the "doubling" of the *dithis*. The phrase "doubling" can mean several things in piping, in case of a *piobaireachd* variation, it usually means a repeat of a variation, slightly faster, sometimes with a simplified structure. In the case of the *dithis* doubling variation, it takes the basic form of *dithis*, but rather than going to low A as a connective note, going to the same pitch as the themal note, with (usually) the same grace note as in the *dithis* in between. The only exception is the high A, where an ornament called,

confusingly, a half-doubling, is played on the themal note, and thumb swipe to separate it from the connective note is performed. The first four bars of the *dithis* doubling are shown below:

Lament for the Old Sword - Dithis Doubling Line 1

The tempo will be picked up ever so slightly over the *dithis* singling.

How might a fiddler interpret this variation? As with the *dithis* singling, a grace note on note changes would be the most literal approach. But this grace note is mostly unnecessary, as a change in bowing direction will achieve the necessary articulation. A delayed tap on all the high As might convey the effect of the half-doubling ornament on this note in the *dithis* doubling variation. I've conveyed the first two bars of the *dithis* singling and *dithis* doubling below, in 12/8 time, to show how it might actually be played. Each themal pulse will receive 3/8 of time, before scansion is applied.

Old Sword - Dithis singling & doubling, Bars 1 & 2, fiddler's version

Variation 4: Taorluath

A term of obscure origin, *luath* meaning "a movement" in Gaelic, the *taorluath* (tor-loo-ah) variation is built around an ornament we've discussed earlier, but I'll recap here: taking its time from the preceding melody note, the ornament is a short low G, bisected by a D grace note, and with an E grace note at the change to the next melody note. In the case of the *taorluath* variation, the most common connective note after the ornament is low A - and is exclusively such in this tune. The important parts for a fiddler are the low Gs and the low A; the D and E grace notes are essentially just articulations.

Here's the bar of this variation to show the pattern, followed by how a fiddler might interpret the first four bars. Timing is difficult to convey, but I've given my best guess. I've marked the fiddle versions 12/4, rather than 12/8, from now on to make them easier to read, so now a themal pulse takes 3/4 of time. The important thing to realize is that the two sixteenths followed by the eighth are

fairly open, not like a tight birl you might see in a reel.
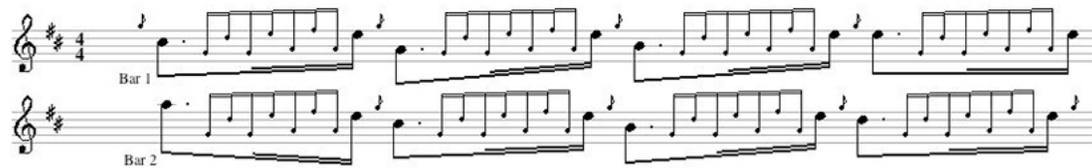

Lament for the Old Sword - Taorluath Variation

Lament for the Old Sword - Taorluath Variation (fiddle version)

Variation 5: Crunluath

Again, the meaning of *crunluath* is obscure, though I've seen it rendered as "the crowning movement" and "the round movement". Curiously enough, a figure of this name appears in Bunting's book on Irish harping as a harp ornament. A *crunluath* ornament is a *taorluath* to a low A, which is itself bisected by an F grace note, generally followed by an E connective note. It's the largest ornament routinely played in *piobaireachd*, and it's a big one. Here's again the first bar written out in pipe notation, followed by the first four bars of a fiddler's interpretation.

Lament for the Old Sword - Crunluath Variation

Lament for the Old Sword - Crunluath Variation (fiddle version)

Variation 6: Crunluath a Mach

But we have one more variation in this tune. The phrase *a mach* is Gaelic for "outward", though in this case it might mean "inside out"! In this, the formula of the previous variation of "themal note, *crunluath* to connective note E" is changed for only three notes: B, C, and D. On these notes, the themal note is absorbed into an introductory ornament, and it's the connective note E that's held out the length remaining length of the "beat". For these notes, it's the connective note E, and not the themal note, to which scansion is applied. The remaining notes are unchanged from the *crunluath*. I've shown the original first two bars, and then the fiddler's representation, to show how these three notes are realized.

Lament for the Old Sword - Crunluath a Mach variation

Lament for the Old Sword - Crunluath a Mach variation (fiddle version)

To help make sense of this variation, I've notated the putative themal note above the figure whenever it is B, C, or D. This is a difficult variation, and is often left off in competition. Indeed, piping associations maintain a list of the only *Piobaireachd* tunes where this must be played in competition; if a tune is not on that list, even if it has a *crunluath a mach* variation in the official settings, one may skip it. If this variation is played, the tune ends after this variation, and a voluntary "dismount" to the tonic (A, here). If not, one returns to the ground, or more commonly, the first line of the ground (without repeat) before ending.

Combining what I've shown above with the themal skeleton in the previous part, you are now equipped to play all the ornamental variations in this tune. The important thing to remember in the variations, tempo-wise, is that the connective notes will feel fairly consistent from variation to variation, and, in this tune, there will be the perception of a slight tempo increase with each variation. In some cases (like between *taorluath* to *crunluath*), the perception of tempo increase mainly comes from the fact that the ornament is longer, eating up more of the themal note's time. But it's important not to forget the scansion - the first and last themal note of every 1-bar phrase should be played heavier than the notes in the middle, and the ends of each 2-bar phrase, 4-bar line, 8-bar part, and 16-bar

variation should each gain increasing, if subtly incremental, weight.

The ornamentation in the *taorluath*, *crunluath*, and *crunluath a mach* variations may seem daunting, but the best approach is how pipers learn it - practice the ornaments as a module, slowly, evenly, and then pick up the pace until you can play through them quickly and consistently. The *taorluath* and its connective note should feel like a 3-note ripple between themal notes; the *crunluath* and its connective note like a 5-note ripple between them. The *crunluath a mach* on B, C, and D should feel like a 6-note ripple before the elongated connective note E. In some cases, this will combine with the *crunluath* of the preceding pulse to create a 11-note ripple between the previous themal note and the elongated connective E!

Now it's time to hit the ground (*ùrlar*) running.

Variation 1: Ùrlar

Not all variation sets are as formulaically constructed around the themal skeleton as Lament for the Old Sword, and we will cover tunes where this is the case later, but the themal skeleton is always more controlling over these than it is over the ground, or *ùrlar* (Gaelic for "floor") variation. The *ùrlar* can be thought of as the "main melodic variation" of *piobaireachd*, though sometimes the *ùrlar* has its own variations, again to be discussed later. But most notably, the *ùrlar* may put weight on what would otherwise be connective notes, rather than themal ones, or change the themal note in a few places. Similarly, unlike the variation sets, the ornamentation can not be formulaically applied to get from the themal skeleton to the full ground variation. Each ground has to be learned separately. Similarly, while meter and scansion may be simplified or subdued in the rhythmic variations, it is fully expressed in the ground. For example, this tune's scansion is "heavy-light-medium-heavy"; but in the variations, that's often simplified to "heavy-medium-medium-heavy"; but in the ground, the more complex weighting is used.

So let's look at the ground of this tune.

Lament for the Old Sword - Urlar (ground)

We'll take the ornamentation & phrasing bar by bar. But don't fear: there are only six unique bars (and two are extremely similar!).

Line 1, bar 1: The first pulse is not snapped, and the C is played fairly open. The ornament between the As is a leumluath, and is two low Gs separated by a small D grace note. The ornament between the A and the B is called a "cadence" or "introductory E". Here, it essentially is a very short G grace note, followed by longish E and a medium D grace note before the themal pulse C. Cadences also add weight to the preceeding note, so the scansion of this bar is more correctly "heavy-medium-medium-heavy". The ornament between the C and E is an "edre"; basically short semi-melodic notes (EAA), with a tiny F grace note between the As.

Line 1, bar 2: The first ornament, between the high A and the C, is a "hodro". Similar to the "edre", it consists of three short semi-melodic notes (CGG), with a tiny D grace note between the Gs. The next ornament is another cadence, same as in bar 1. The third ornament is another edre, again as per bar 1. The final ornament is a "d-throw". Piobaireachd usually uses the light version of this ornament, so I'll interpret here as a semi-melodic G and C, separated by a tiny D, before going to the themal pulse D. The final pulse ends a phrase, so it should be a little extra heavy.

Line 1, bar 3: Same as line 1, bar 1.

Line 1, bar 4: Similar to bar 2, the ornament between the high G and B is a "hiodro", and is identical to the hodro in Bar 2, except that it begins and ends on low B. The final ornament is a d-grace note birl, but here would be played fairly open, with three semi-melodic grace notes (DAA) with short low Gs between the two As, and the last A in the ornament and the themal pulse A. The final A ends the line, so it should be heavier than the last note in line 1 bar 2 on the first repeat; and a bit heavier still on the second, as it ends the part.

Line 2, bar 1: First ornament is an edre, as above; second is a d-throw.

Line 2, bar 2: First ornament is a hodro, then a cadence, than a d-throw. Again, the cadence extends the value of the previous note, and the final pulse should be a bit heavier, to indicate the end of the phrase.

Line 2, bar 3: Same as line 2, bar 1.

Line 2, bar 4: Almost the same as line 2, bar 2, but holding the B, and with a hard percussive ornament to A at the end. The weight of the final pulse should be similar to the first repeat of line 1, bar 4.

Line 3, bars 1-2: Same as line 2, bars 1-2.

Line 3, bars 3-4: Same as line 1, bars 3-4. The only thing to note is that the scansion requires that the final A be held longest here, as it is the end of the variation.

Here's how one might most literally interpret this, removing all the very short graces and leaving in the semi-melodic ones.

Lament for the Old Sword - Urlar (ground)

You'll be able to find video of the pipe, and suggested fiddle, versions of this tune in the "Piper's Corner" playlist at Fiddle Club's new YouTube Channel, named PotomacValleyScottishFiddle:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkJHDa9hqkYu0TZ08vn6sPg