

The Piper's Corner: Understanding Bagpipe Music

by Peter Walker, PVSFC Board Member

Fiddlers often find themselves playing bagpipe music. As a piper myself, I can't for the life of me think why! Seriously, though, there are a lot of good marches, and plenty of other tunes and airs that are worthy of being in a fiddle player's repertoire (and many more that...well, my mama said if you can't say something nice...). In this series of columns, I hope to shed some light on the whats, whys, and wherefores of bagpipe music, so this music becomes less opaque to the fiddler. In future installments, I intend to address bagpipe ornamentation, principles of stress (called pointing), different types of bagpipe tunes, and eventually the nature of piobaireachd. But for now, we'll start with two simple concepts.

"The Nine-Note Party Favor"

At my first bagpipe lesson, this is what my instructor called the thing. He even denied it was a musical instrument at all - no rests, no dynamic range, a single key signature. But he was just making a point - you'll have bagpipers (usually people who've never touched another instrument) claiming it's the pinnacle of difficulty and expression in music. Clearly these people have never seen a pipe organ played! But really, it is a nine-note party favor, one that comes with a colorful costume.

The nine notes of the bagpipe form a simple Mixolydian scale with a flattened 7th on top and bottom. We write these notes G, **A**, B, C, D, E, F, G, and A. I boldfaced the first A because it's the tonic. Now, strictly speaking, that C and F are sharp, but for some reason it's suppressed in printed pipe music. Don't be fooled! Add two sharps in your head when you're looking at tunes in pipe collections. Old pipe music was largely dual-tonic; that is, often it would have a phrase in A, followed by a phrase in G (think "The Devil in the Kitchen"). Sometimes this role was reversed (G Lydian mode, like "The Bob of Fettercairn"), or the two keys would be in B minor and A (like "The Ale is Dear"). The scale of the bagpipe is ideal for this kind of music, but it is pretty limiting to the modern ear. Recently, more and more music has been written for the bagpipes in the key of D major, forcing a retuning of the chanter's D (which used to be sharp relative to most intonation systems, but has come down to make tunes in this key seem more melodically satisfying).

So every bagpipe tune you see will have these nine notes. If you see a tune with

more than these, it's already been adapted for fiddle. Similarly, tunes and songs adapted for the bagpipes will be "squished" to fit this scale, and though they may be popular on the pipes, the squishing gives the adaptation away. Examples are Scotland the Brave, Amazing Grace, Auld Lang Syne, and The Londonderry Air (aka Danny Boy). Many is the tune in A major that saw its G# (e.g., "Highland Whisky" flattened to fit the pipes And others saw a high B turned into an ornament, or a low F-sharp turned into a low G.

But wait! I've been fibbing to you. Because though pipe music is written as if it's in the key of two sharps, it's now played somewhat sharp of three flats! So our scale really is 25 cents sharp of Ab, **Bb**, C, D, Eb, F, G, Ab, Bb.

Why do we write it one way and play it another? It is because the pitch of the instrument has come up in the last couple of centuries relative to most other instruments. When Joseph MacDonald - a trained violinist who studied the pipes as a young adult - wrote his manuscript on the Highland pipes in 1759, he felt the scale of the bagpipes was close enough to call its tonic "A." But A drifted pretty high in Victorian times, with the "Queen's Hall" standard, A became more than half-way to what we now call Bb. When it drifted back down, the Highland pipes stayed up there. For a while, then, it was in vogue to play with brass bands, so Bb was a perfect key for the instrument. But that fell out of fashion at a time when competition judges and pipe majors were looking for a "brighter" sound for bands. So mistaking "sharp" for "bright," up the pitch climbed almost to halfway between Bb and B. Sanity has crept over the community in the last few years, and now it's just sharp of Bb now. At the same time, a movement to "play in A" began, and so you're seeing more solo and "Celtic" pipers having chanters made in concert A to be more fiddle friendly. Sorry we can't do more about the volume!

One more slight fib must be revealed. It's really not nine, but more like eleven and a half notes. Many chanter/reed combinations can play a note close to C-natural and F-natural as well, and a very few can play something close to G#, with an alternate cross-fingering. Even fewer can play a high B! But the tuning on these notes is usually suboptimal, so they're better for passing tones than notes one holds on. And formal bagpipe music never uses these notes; woe upon you if you actually play "Lochiel's awa' to France" in a proper A minor in competition.