



Scottish Culture and History



Short History of the Bagpipe

Bagpipes are not unique to Scotland. Various forms of bagpipe have evolved in countries as diverse as India, Russia, North Africa, and a number of countries in Europe (Ireland, Finland, Germany, France, Spain) and the Middle East. It was probably introduced to Scotland either by the Roman legions or by the Irish.

The Scottish bagpipe is unique in having three drones, and also by being used for military music by Scottish regiments

References to forms of bagpipe date right back to the Greeks 2500 years ago, and the Romans used it 1900 years ago. The first British reference is a Northumberland pipe around 1200, and it was around this time that the instrument became very popular right across Europe. Most of these bagpipes, including the Scottish ones were similar, and had two tenor drones by 1500. The Scottish instrument developed its third drone, a bass drone, around 1700, and from then on the music for the bagpipe tended to be martial, as its main use was by Scottish soldiers.



An early form of Bagpipe



The Scottish Highland Bagpipe ?

Today's bagpipe has the following parts:

-  A mouthpiece used to blow up the bag;
-  a chanter, which is the bit used to play the tune (it has 9 notes)
-  three big drones, each of which plays a single constant note (two treble, drones and one bass).
-  a leather bag held under the arm and filled with air by blowing into a pipe to the piper's mouth. The piper fills the bag with air, which causes the drones to skirl constantly, and the tune is played on the chanter.

There is much scope for decoration of the bagpipe. The leather bag may be covered with a decorative velvet or Tartan cover. And the drones, which are made from quality polished hardwood, can have very decorative silver mountings. Tartan or cord can be added to further embellish the instrument.

Why has it evolved this way?

The answer seems to be, "because it has". Because ancient people probably liked the idea of a continuous sound, the air bag enabled that to be accomplished. Its loud volume is a function of its being developed as an outdoor instrument for use in battle. In fact, the recruitment of Highlanders into the British Army in the 18th century was probably what enabled the bagpipe to survive until today. The martial music has developed into the music used by the pipe and drum marching bands of today.

Martial Music

The sound of the bagpipe does carry — it is said to carry around 6 miles. Also, the skirl of the pipes, with their high penetrating notes, could be heard above the noise of battle.

Down through history there are records of the bagpipe in battle

- 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 In a great clan fight at Perth in 1396, "Clans stalked into the barriers to the sound of their great warpipes."
- 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 At the Battle of Harlow in 1411, the Highland army advanced to the sound of the pipes.
- 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 At the Battle of Inverlochy in 1431, bagpipes were again heard. In 1549,
- 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 At a battle near Edinburgh, the Scots "encouraged themselves to arms by the sounds of their bagpipes."
- 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 Lord Lothian, in 1641, writes: "we are well provided of pipers."
- 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 In 1651 at Stirling, Patrick Mor MacCrimmon, the "prince of pipers" played for Charles II.
- 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 During the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, the Highland Army conscripted every piper they came across.
- 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 Even the Duke of Cumberland had pipers in his army at Culloden, though he seems to have been unclear what a bagpipe was, saying "What are these men going to do with such bundles of sticks? I can supply them with better implements of war."
- 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 Carrying a bagpipe was considered to be as much a crime as carrying arms during the Jacobite rebellion when it was classified an "instrument of war"



Highly decorated Pipes

Classical Bagpipe Music — Piobaireachd

The MacCrimmon family are often credited with the development of "bagpipe music" — Piobaireachd (pronounced Piobroch which just means "piping" in Gaelic) now refers to the great classical music of the bagpipes.

Piobaireachd consists of a basic theme (the ground) with variations on it. The ground is usually played slowly, and based on the pentatonic scale. The variations on the ground start comparatively simply, but get more complex and more difficult to play as they progress. Having wound its way through these increasing complexities, the Piobaireachd ends by going back to the original slow ground. The whole cycle may take from 10 to twenty minutes.

A Piobaireachd would usually be composed for a particular occasion and that occasion would be re-lived each time the tune was played.