

BRIEF MESSAGE FROM A FILM-MAKER TO A MUSICIAN WHO AFTER SIX MONTHS OF ATTEMPTS HAS BEGUN TO DISCOVER THE GREAT HIGHLAND BAGPIPE.....

Mike Leggett

Four years ago in Edinburgh I quite by chance encountered a film, one of several that Ricky Demarco was showing, by a native Scottish filmmaker, Margaret Tait. Brief, in memory, glimpses of an old Edinburgh which seemed as far away as Sutcliffe's Whitby but in fact were only ten years distance; and the voice of an 'old time' music hall variety artiste, Lilane, singing a quite unplaceable melody-with-lyrics flowing in an irregular pattern of repeated words and musical phrases.....

Then in Bristol at the beginning of 1975 to see some more of her films and to talk and to discover, though not having seen the film again, that the piece of singing had been arranged by the film-maker herself according to the structures and disciplines of an old Scottish form of pipe playing known as Piobaireachd or Pibroch. Another film shown there, the Big Sheep, was a similarly careful assembly of a series of events that occurred over a shorter period of time in the Highlands of Sutherland and Caithness together with a complete Pibroch piece played on pipes by John Macaskill (who in recording it played through three times before arriving at the requested duration of fifteen minutes; the other two takes were within a minute of this).

And so this old music began to appear as something other than the mournful improvisations of some lonely crofter.

But the local library had no books to offer which would help to explain and even now after four months of waiting for the requested volumes nothing has appeared. And the one recording in the gramophone library provided little on the sleeve notes; it seemed that either few writers knew much about the music or that it was something the pipers themselves wished to keep only to them and their sons. (It is said that a piper is only worth his salt if he is the seventh son of a seventh piping son.....)

But then a meeting in the summer of 1975 with a piping collector of pipe and voice music in recorded and book form began to relieve the informational drought. "The Kilberry Book of Gaelic Music" by Archibald Cambell explained succinctly the various forms of music for the Great Highland Bagpipe: the marches, strathspey, reel, jigs and pibroch, the latter often being used to describe all five but nonetheless remaining quite distinct when applied to what the pipers refer to as a 'higher' or classical form. What exactly was meant by this immediately became more difficult to grasp relying as it did on written musical notation both in the spoken kind (old Gaelic by which the exact fingering and duration are passed mouth to mouth in the way certain vowel sounds change in the recitation of a continuous piece) and in the more conventional score favoured now by most pipers allowing as it does reading by non-Gaelic speakers (though neither of which I am able to follow without reference to a piper playing). In the short time available then, only an impression has been gained of this strictly disciplined and yet somehow contemporary musical form.

The Great Highland Bagpipe consists, as many will be aware, of a skin bag pressurised by a pipe (without reed) from the mouth and held under the armpit, from which four pipes allow air to escape at a controlled pace passing over reeds similar to that found in the oboe. Three of the pipes are of different but fixed pitch whilst the fourth, the chanter, is variable according to holes opened or closed by the fingers of both

hands. It is said that it was the MacCrimmons of Skye who in the 16th century laid down the first Ground for the pipes together with its Variations. This was passed from piper to son, practised till perfect such that the piece could be passed on further; it was only later that score notation was used to preserve the compositions, many of which refer to battles between the clans and of course the English. The Ground it seems is not intended to be descriptive of the particular event or emotion referred to in its title; it would simply be coincidental with the time at which the composition was made. The Ground itself would often repeat either in whole or in part as would the variation which in proceeding through the piece would become technically more complex to play, involving the introduction of rapid finger movements played such that the composite note produced, referred to as the Grace note, would immediately precede the variation's melodic note; throughout but more particularly on the move from one variation to another, the time signature would also change. Hence the interpretation open to the piper in playing a piece so precisely scored is wide and to complete, the ground would be repeated after the variations.

It was at one of the regular Northern Meetings held in Inverness that a piping competition demonstrated the vigorous attempts by the Highland Society of London and the Piobaireachd Society to preserve the tradition and discipline of Pibroch playing. The sight of kilted and piped players standing in odd corners of a modern hotel's car park tuning up (a seemingly endless process) was incongruous enough and certainly wasn't improved by listening to eight differing ten-minute tunes selected in random order for a succession of competing pipers to play. Reminiscent of scout evenings in the local church hall the contrast with the collectors' recordings going on for forty minutes in the silence of the West Highlands seemed too great to believe. But it dawned after a while that it was only here that the music was being played in a manner, if not a place, directly connected to the time of its composition. Many of the listeners, not many of whom were under forty, followed the carefully prepared and practised pieces in some books published by the Society and documenting the ancient tunes. It was said that should a piper make an error in playing he should stop playing, salute the judges as he did before he played and leave the platform. In the second Pibroch competition between fourteen prizewinners from previous years who would prepare four tunes from a selected six, several had to do just this; but it transpired not because they had played a wrong note but because the 'expression' required had been too difficult to master. As they played they walked slowly around the platform, concentrating intently.

In spite of the military background of the pipes and their playing there seemed demonstrated in the occasion an identity of community without its repugnant elements (there is little of an aristocracy in Scotland) and in the music, a celebration of Celto-Pictish environments and the vastly rich culture of those almost forgotten peoples.

Other books recommended by pipers:

"The Traditional and National Music of Scotland" by Frances Collinson who has also written a complete history of the bagpipes.

"Piobaireachd" by Seamus MacNeill published in paperback by BBC Scotland as a handbook to accompany their local broadcasts.

Other material including records can be had from the Institute for Scottish Studies in Glasgow.