

CASE STUDY 7

CUMHA CHOIRE AN EASA
(CORRIENESSAN'S LAMENT)

SOURCESPipesRobert Meldrum Ms.

John MacColl [JMcC] Ms.	Early 1900's
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Piobaireachd Society Series [PS]	(1986: 481-3)
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Song Text

Celtic Monthly ¹ [CMo]	Vol.1.(1893:151)
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Elizabeth Ross Ms.	c.1812
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W. Melrose (Audio)

SOURCES AND DESCRIPTION

This is an eight-phrase pibroch in the form of four repeated phrases. The song consists of four phrases in ABCD form which are fully represented by the first four pibroch phrases, also in ABCD form. JMcC. has eight phrases, but the second set of four phrases in JMcC is so close to the first four that it can be regarded as a slight variant of these. This may be why the PS source regarded the JMcC score as 'structurally defective' and adopted another setting of this tune² where the four phrases are repeated to give an *ùrlar* of eight. The small melodic changes which occur in the JMcC repeat of the first four bars suggest the kind of alterations which might occur when a traditional singer continues into the next verse of a song. The manner in which the source was originally collected, however, is not known.

The JMcC setting is chosen for comparison because its melody is closer to the particular version of the song which is being compared.

¹ See also Vol xv (1905:135). This setting was also used by O'Baoill (1994:207) It also appears in MacKenzie (1841: 98),

² George MacKay [GMcK] Ms. (c1939.) The first two phrases are very similar to the JMcC setting but the settings diverge in the last two.

ANALYSIS.

The ER version is transcribed in Ex 1 with the pibroch version underneath. The *hiharin* figure with the introductory E is shown with a mordent on the low A for ease of presentation. Below this is another version as sung by Wm. Matheson, which appears in Collinson (1966:63) This was sung 'fast in free rhythm according to the natural stress of the words.' If the poetic rhythm of this song is now considered, it is not difficult to see that the pibroch setting could not possibly fit the rhythm implied by the song. If one compares the words with the ER transcription, as in Ex. 1 one can see how each note relates to one syllable.

Ex.1.

E.Ross. Transcribed 3 notes up to pipes by AMcD.



J.McColl. as in PSoc.



W.Matheson. Original Trans.F.Collinson. Transcribed 4 notes up by AMcD.



The rhythmic figures in the ER song version are in groups of two throughout, which is verified by Matheson's sung version shown at the bottom and also by the insertion of the words of the beginning of the song underneath the music. In the pibroch version, however, these rhythmic figures are more commonly in groups of three, represented by the echo beats throughout (see bars 2, 3, 4, etc.). It would seem that, if the song was adapted to the pibroch, the two-note motifs were transformed into three-note ones to fit the conventions of pibroch. This transformation is not a major departure from the rhythms of the song in that, if the echo beats are played in the older style of two very short gracings to the low G or low A for example, the rhythmical effect is similar to the two-note motifs of the song. This is because the echo beats can be played in a manner which makes the two clear stresses obvious. It is therefore not necessary to edit the above pibroch setting to the rhythmic style of the song as long as the

rhythmic style of the song is suggested in the pibroch performance. Whether one plays:

Ex. 2



is of no great consequence. However, if one played the echo beat as it is performed today:

Ex. 3



this would not be rhythmically appropriate .

It appears that in the development of the pibroch version, some notes have been taken into the melodic line which are possibly better left out. This particular characteristic has already been discussed in the introductory chapter in the section on Gaelic song and pibroch notation. This addition of notes distorts the rhythm of the melodic line, which must be played in a manner which allows the rhythm which has been identified in the opening phrase to be preserved. One area of the pibroch notation which may have the wrong time values allocated to them is in the sixth bar or third phrase. Reference to Matheson's version shows how extra notes are sung without distorting the performance. For example, in his fourth bar, at the change back to 4/4, these 'extra notes' are well accommodated because of the time values allocated. In the same way, one might consider playing the sixth bar of the pibroch version approximately as follows:

Ex. 4



The coincidence of the unusual turn of phrase between Matheson's version and the pibroch version at this point of the melody is further evidence of the close correlation which once existed between song and pibroch.

The song 'Cumha Coire'an-Easain' is stated to have been composed by John MacKay (1666-1754) [MacKenzie 1841: 95]. It is more commonly known by his Gaelic title 'Am Piobaire Dall' (The blind piper). There is no melodic relationship between this pibroch and the one called 'Corrienessan's Salute.' The Salute, however, may have been composed by the blind harper, (John) Roderick Morison (1656-1714). As Matheson (1970: 157) has already shown, it is a variant of Lament for the Harp Tree. Matheson suggested in conversation with the writer that the two blind musicians and poets knew each other and may have been at the same hunting party which occasioned the performance of The Lament for the Harp Tree and which subsequently became mistakenly known in variant form as Corrienessan's Salute. The Lament for Corrienessan may therefore represent a *tour de force* by the blind piper Iain Dall³.

Archie Kenneth (1989) suggests a melodic connection between Dàn Dhearg or Dargo which appears in Patrick MacDonald (1784: 18) and Corrienessan's Lament. The relationship is quite difficult to detect, however, because the form of the song is different and the melodic lines and their respective rhythms are quite different. All this evidence still does not nullify the relationship (eg. cf. CS 1 and 2) and Kenneth points out that a variant form in J. F. Campbell (Vol 3: 61) has the same melody as the variation of the pibroch. These associations once again raise questions on how 'new' melodies are created in an oral tradition. Although the rhythm in the variation is very different to the song, a common melodic line does exist. The rhythm of the song Coire an Easa has characteristics of duple time whereas the *dàn* in MacDonald's (1784)

³ Whyte (1911: 180) states in the historical notes to Glen's pibroch collection that *Am Piobaire Dall's* poem Coire'n Easain was adapted to the Salute to Corrienessan composed by Ruairidh Dall, Iain's father. The PS Series (Book 8: 224) states that the identification of Ruairidh Dall as the composer can only be a conjecture. It is more likely that, as Matheson suggests (1970: 157), the tune Lament for the Harp Tree was a favourite of the *Ruairidh Dall* and that he played it at Corrienessan, after which event the titles were mixed up. PS (Book 8: 224) discusses the appearance of a title 'corines' in Angus MacKay's handwriting which was subsequently interfered with by an unknown writer. The title may therefore have been suspect.

has triple time. The variation can more easily be associated with the J. F. Campbell version because of its crotchet or double quaver beats with a duple time effect. One has to beware, however, of comparing a pibroch variation, rather than an *ùrlar*, with other melodies which have words, as this comparison might give a false impression of rhythmic characteristics which only existed in an instrumental variation.

When the notation and rhythm of the song, is different to that of the pibroch version, as in Cumha Choire an Easa, one is faced with a decision regarding the style of performance to adopt. For example, does one play the song version on the pipes and apply the same rhythmic scheme to the rest of the *ùrlar*? One has to take into account the characteristic that, whatever the song version(s) might tell us about the rhythm of the tune, it may not be possible to replicate the rhythmic scheme exactly because of the particular features of pibroch convention. But conventions such as echo beats themselves in their original performance style are most likely to have arisen from the rhythmic scheme of the Gaelic language. In this way, it should be possible to represent the rhythms on the pipes fairly closely. There are, of course, a number of areas which have developed in the instrumental tradition by becoming more technically advanced, as it were. One example is the long three-note introductions on low A which became the more technically demanding birl already discussed. There are remnants of rhythms which were closer to the Gaelic language in a number of areas such as in the more clearly identifiable three beats in the pibroch taorluaths in contrast with the light music taorluaths. This probably explains the use of the term 'taorluath' in the variations of tunes which have the four-note motifs eg. GGGB and AAAC as frequently occur in the Gathering tunes.

If the pibroch player bears the rhythms of the song in mind, even within the apparent constraints of pibroch convention, which have, to some extent, created a hiatus between the two idioms, the following notation is a suggested style of performing this tune.

See Ex. 5 overleaf.

Ex.5



There are no cadences because the rhythm implied makes the use of this kind of ornamentation too restrictive. The echo beats have to be played much faster than they are at the present day. What is noticable is that the notation has changed little from the JMcC version shown earlier. The implication of this is that the main problem lies not so much with the details of notation as in the manner of its interpretation.

CONCLUSION.

This pibroch is a good example of one which was influenced not only by the four-stress song tradition known as *amhran* but also by the syllabic poetic tradition. In the process of adapting a song to the pibroch tradition, some notes were added and motifs of two pulses on one beat were, initially, made into a pibroch convention of three pulses on one stress - equivalent to Joseph MacDonald's 'crahinin'. Despite the changes which appear to have occurred with the adaptation to pibroch conventions, the tune can still be played in a style which identifies it more clearly with the rhythms of the song and the tradition from which it came.