

Highland Music



Highland Piping

The Great Highland Bagpipe is the pre-eminent instrument of the bagpipe family. This includes various forms of bagpipes from cultures all over the world - from Spain to Yugoslavia, and from Russia to India. Bagpipes are descended from an ancient reed pipe. The fore runner of today's bagpipe accompanied the Celts from ancient Scythia via the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. It arrived in Britain with the Celtic peoples long before the Roman invasion.

Pipes are generally made from rare African Blackwood, and feature ferrules and projecting mounts to protect the wood from cracking or checking at its ends and from damage by impact. These may be made from nickel, plastic, silver, ivory or a combination. Lately, manufacturers have introduced pipes made of plastic. Although these are not in general use, many pipe bands now choose plastic for their chanter, the piece on which the tune is fingered. The pipe bag is made of sheepskin, cowhide or elk hide. Technology has also made available Gore-Tex pipe bags, which can be installed quickly and do not require periodic seasoning with leather treatment.

The present form of Highland pipe was reached in the mid-1700's when the third (or bass) drone was added. Other types of pipes, such as the Northumbrian pipes of Northern England, the Scottish small pipes, and the Irish Uilleann pipes have, like the Celtic harp, enjoyed a resurgence in popularity.

The solo players competing in the Games have expended many hours of preparation. As with other musicians, achieving a high standard means years of hard work, and this is aside from maintaining a complex instrument in peak condition.

Highland Drumming

Scottish military drumming may date from around 1800 and the Napoleonic wars, but the true pipe band drumming stems from the years following the Crimean War when regiments began to integrate drum corps with their pipes and the modern pipe band was born. Over the next 100 years or so, this marriage was to create an entirely new Scottish tradition and a new style of drumming that today we call side drumming. Probably developed from the drumming used in fife and drum corps, pipe band drumming required development to successfully complement the highly rhythmic 2/4, 3/4, 4/4 and 6/8 marches and quicksteps, as well as the unique sound of the pipes. Innovations were devised in pattern and accent to help the pipers express or "point" the melody, and to serve as a flattering accompaniment for the pipes.



Today's side drummer plays the most technically demanding and difficult style of music for snare drum. Only with extremely precise control can a drummer execute the complex combinations of rudiments inherent in a setting of drum music. The drum corps of the pipe bands you will see at the Highland Games incorporate three types of drummers: bass drummers, who work with the pipe major to furnish the basis for the band's tempo; tenor drummers, whose unsnared drums embellish the beating of the bass drum and side drums; and the side drummers, whose playing adds the primary dynamic element to the pipe band. Most of the solo drumming competitors have received private instruction, including basic training in the rudiments of drumming. Many additional hours of rehearsal are required for a drum corps to achieve the standard you will hear in pipe band competition.

Piobaireachd

Ceol Mor (literally "great music") can be linked to players with a Gaelic or Highland connection.

The origins of piobaireachd are lost in antiquity, as it stems from an oral traditions which has been passed down from teacher to student through the centuries. Even though some 350 piobaireachd tunes survive, the written musical scores are only approximations of the original compositions. For players to achieve tune proficiency, they must learn the tunes from skilled instructors who pass along what they have learned from their own instruction and gained from experience.

Tunes played in the piobaireachd events generally fall into one of several styles: laments, salutes, marches and other commemorative pieces. As the listener's familiarity with the music increased, these styles can be distinguished. For the most part, piobaireachd tunes of all types typically take 10 to 15 minutes to play. Each begins with the urlar (or "ground"), followed by successively faster and more ornamented restatements, or variations of the basic melody. The tune usually reaches its climax in the crunluath, the most complex and quickest of the variations. The competitor will generally conclude his presentation with the replaying of the melody introduced in the ground, in effect "closing the circle".

Because the tunes are complex and variations are often subtle, and because the pipes must be tuned perfectly and in a manner which will ensure a steady sound throughout the tune, piobaireachd requires a great deal of concentration and sometimes a lengthy tuning period. Listeners will usually be rewarded by pipes with a very "sweet" sound. This tone can be contrasted to the more strident tone and higher volume sought by many pipe band players.

To assist the competitors in getting their pipes "settled in" under performance conditions, the PHGA Open Piobaireachd Competition sponsors a special 2/4 March Competition. Each competitor plays an optional 2/4 march of his/her choice while tuning up for the piobaireachd. The march is judged separately.

The Highland Fiddle

Second perhaps only to the bagpipe, the fiddle occupies a place of central importance in the musical heritage of Scotland. The fiddle, or a crude instrument very much like it, has been played for centuries in Europe, going back at least as far as early Roman times. The name "fiddle" remains with us today principally because of its association with Scottish dance music. Acknowledging also the important contributions of the Scottish tradition to America's own rich fiddle heritage, we are especially pleased to see fiddling take its rightful place in the Scottish-American community of the Pacific Northwest here at the Portland Games.