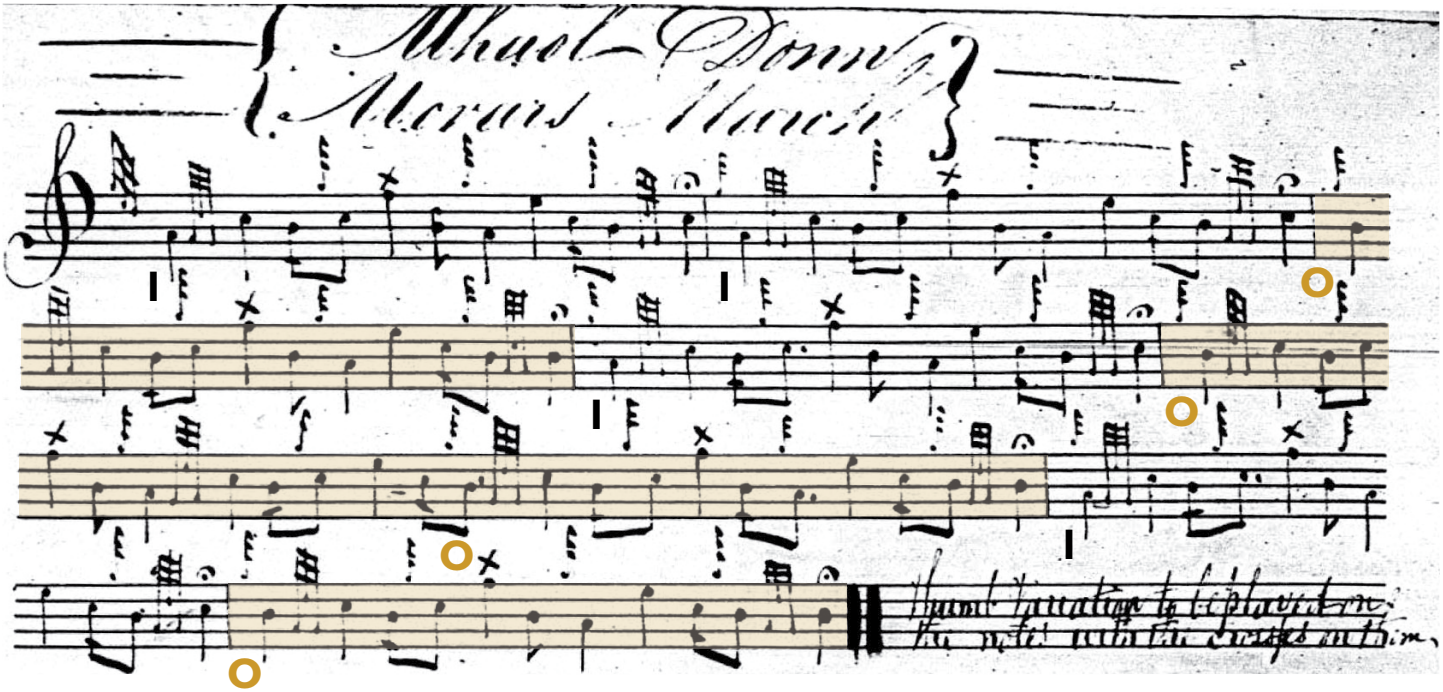
By Barnaby Brown

Scottish traditional grounds

PART 2: Maol Donn — 11O1 OO1O

Example 1. *Maol Donn*—MacCrimmon's Sweetheart: *Urlar*. In this setting, the only difference between unit **1** and unit **O** is the first and final note: consonant A…C becomes dissonant B…B. The musical shape of melodies built on this ground is normally enhanced by a development in the third Quarter (**OO**); this development will often be dropped in the variations, but examples lacking it in the *Urlar* are rare. The instruction at the end of the Urlar reads, "Thumb Variation to be played on the notes with the crosses on them." A complete performance is on the CD *Donald MacPherson—A Living Legend* (Siubhal 1). Peter Reid's MS (Glasgow, 1826) *f.* 21*v*. Facsimile at www.ceolsean.com/docs/PR titles/MacCrimmon's Sweetheart.pdf

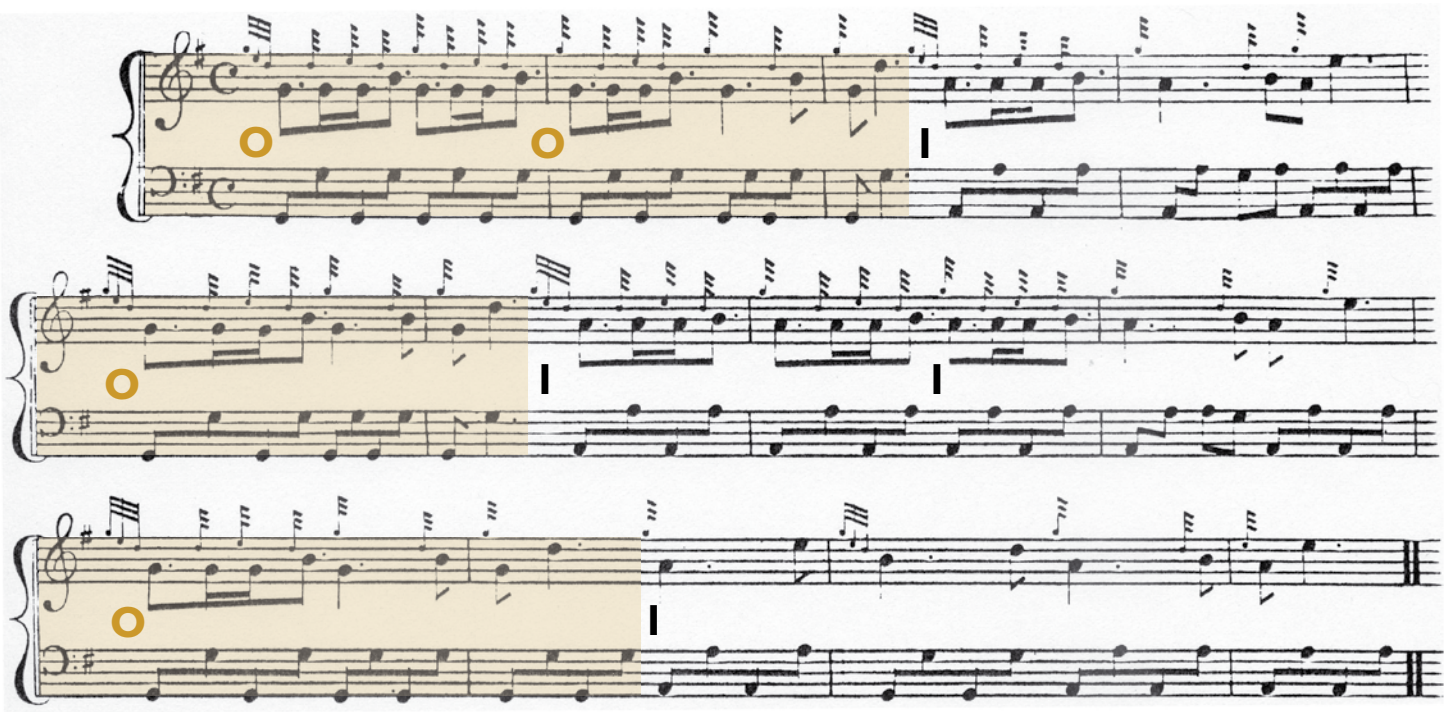
At the dawn of the nineteenth century, this ground was the lifeblood of at least 111 works of *ceòl mòr*. The precise number depends on where one draws the line between a variant and a new composition, because before the nineteenth century, individual pibrochs[1] were more fluid in form.

Relative to the *ceòl beag* tradition today, the creativity of master pipers was empowered to a greater degree. Like Luigi Lai, the Sardinian triplepiper, professional Highland pipers drew on their cultural inheritance to work up a unique musical journey. Their greatness was measured, not by faithfulness to a fixed text, but by their originality, maintaining strong connection with the collective past whilst individually shaping the future. Although memory failure clearly lies behind some of the substantial differences between pibroch sources, creativity was central to the piper's craft, particularly in the *siùbhlaichean* (the variation 'journeys').

Professional creativity drew on a stock of techniques, one of which may be unique to pibroch and forms the focus of this article because it is special and almost no-one knows about it. The first two examples, however, represent the most conventional ways in which this ground—a lifeless, binary blueprint—is transformed into living, breathing music. Examples 3–7 reveal an obscure, possibly medieval metrical game, which may intrigue composers and has until now been overlooked. Finally, Examples 8 and 9 support a richer understanding of the uneven (6,6,4) line arrangement, which has been a source of controversy since 1964. For a survey of previous research and an excellent summary of pibroch structure, see Cannon (2002:62–67).

In most music, the phrases are balanced—the questions and answers are equal in length. Flexibility of phrase length, however, is a defining quality of *sean nòs* (old style) Gaelic singing. This contrasts with *ceòl beag*, which is designed either to get people's toes tapping, or troops marching in time. The ground **11O1 OO1O** (Example 1) does not occur in light music; nor does its inverse, **OO1O 11O1** (Example 2). Instead, this ground represents some 15 cases of the heavy stuff—the single malts of Highland bagpipe music. That's one case per CD.

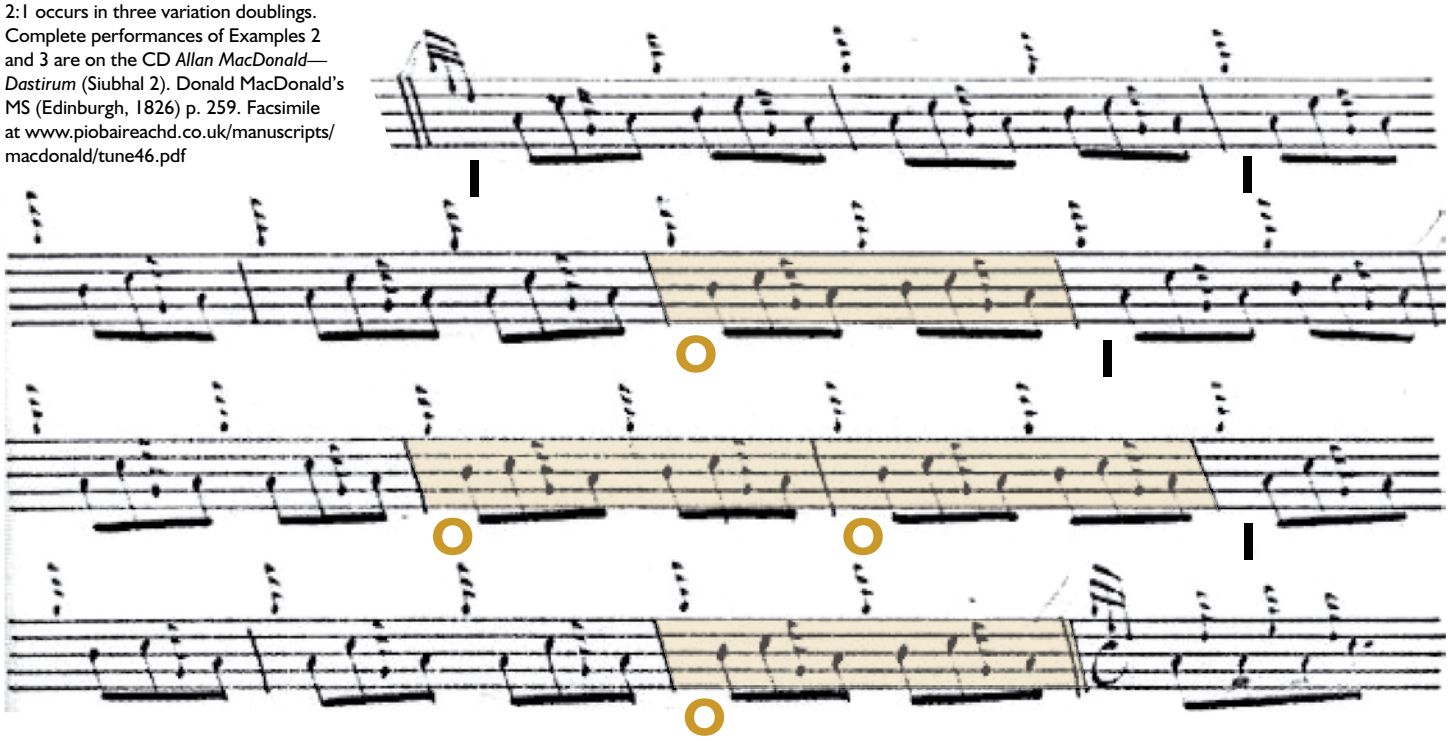
The importance of this ground, and the calibre of the music it generated, is demonstrated by its outstanding popularity in books, manuscripts and recordings. For example, in Donald MacDonald's book (1820), it occurs in

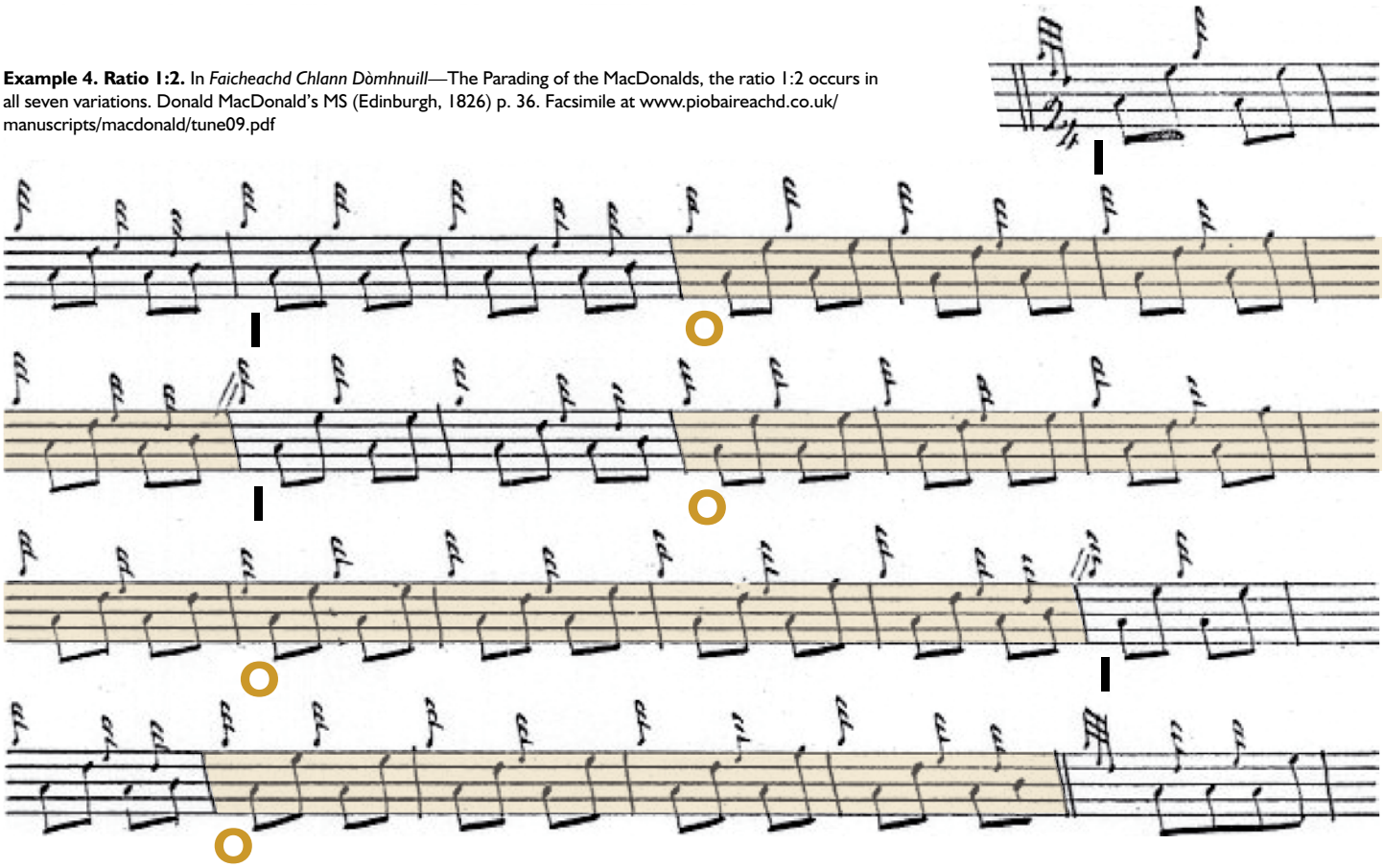
1 Both "piobaireachd" and "pibroch" are English words: each has the meaning *ceòl mòr*. The Gaelic word, with grave accent ì, *piobaireachd*, does not exclude light music. I prefer the spelling "pibroch" for several reasons: its usage in print is older than "piobaireachd" by about 200 years; it is established in international dictionaries; I don't see what the longer spelling achieves on concert posters abroad; and it protects clarity between Gaelic and English, eradicating the half-breed plural "piobaireachds" which appeared in Donald MacDonald's *Ancient Martial Music of the Clans* (1820) p.1 and reflects established English usage.

Example 2. *Ceann na Drochaide Bige*—The End of the Little Bridge: *Urlar.* This differs from Example 1 in three ways: units **I** and **O** are inverted; consecutive pairs **OO** and **II** are fused into single phrases that balance; and there is a melodic outburst in the final phrase to mark the end of the *Urlar*. Such creativity is often stripped back in the variations; this convention magnifies the emotional impact of the *Urlar*. Donald MacDonald (Edinburgh, 1820) *The Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia,* p. 38. Facsimile at www.piobaireachd.co.uk/Tune7.htm

Example 3. Ratio 2:1. In *An Tarbh Breac Dearg*—The Red Speckled Bull, the ratio 2:1 occurs in three variation doublings. Complete performances of Examples 2 and 3 are on the CD *Allan MacDonald—Dastirum* (Siubhal 2). Donald MacDonald's MS (Edinburgh, 1826) p. 259. Facsimile at www.piobaireachd.co.uk/manuscripts/macdonald/tune46.pdf

9 out of 23 works; in Peter Reid's manuscript (1826), in 16 out of 43 works; and on Donald MacPherson's CD *A Living Legend* (2004), in 5 out of 7 works. Taking the pibroch sources before 1850 together, it has a 26-point lead and forms 38% of the repertory. It was labelled "Primary" construction by Archibald Campbell in 1948, but I prefer the label "Woven" and rename Campbell's "Secondary" construction "Well-woven", borrowing terminology from Classical Gaelic poetry (Brown 2004).

Love of flexible phrase-lengths manifests itself everywhere in pibroch, and to discuss this ground without embracing that fact would distort the picture. In this music, it is vital to see phrase irregularity, not as a problem or difficulty, but as a source of delight, an emotional necessity touching the soul. In 1784, Patrick McDonald, minister of Kilmore in Argyllshire, drew a parallel with the practice of "the most





Example 4. Ratio 1:2. In *Faicheachd Chlann Dòmhnuill*—The Parading of the MacDonalds, the ratio 1:2 occurs in all seven variations. Donald MacDonald's MS (Edinburgh, 1826) p. 36. Facsimile at www.piobaireachd.co.uk/manuscripts/macdonald/tune09.pdf

polished and improved musicians" of his day (i.e. classical musicians). He writes in the preface to his *Collection of Highland Vocal Airs:*

"It is professedly an object of attention and discipline with them, occasionally to disguise the measure. This is returning to nature: it is the genuine dictate of emotion and sentiment. It needs not, therefore, be a matter of surprise, that an untutored Highlander, whose feelings are strong, and whose impression of measure is probably weak, should depart still farther from regular time."

Sometimes, pibroch's expressive freedom produces **1**s and **O**s of different lengths. The resulting complex metres are a musicological curiosity. They have long confused editors and been avoided by players, but may fascinate composers outside as well as within the piping world. By shining the spotlight on this aspect of metrical virtuosity, making sense of what is otherwise a bewildering technique, Examples 3–7 draw us closer to the highly-educated mind-world of the composers.

It is important to remember that pibroch was, in its heyday, unwritten. Only after the professional colleges had collapsed, as a result of changes in musical fashion and a lack of pupils, did pipers begin to write *ceòl mòr* down. From the outset (1797), their manuscripts consistently represented the Woven ground in unequal lines:

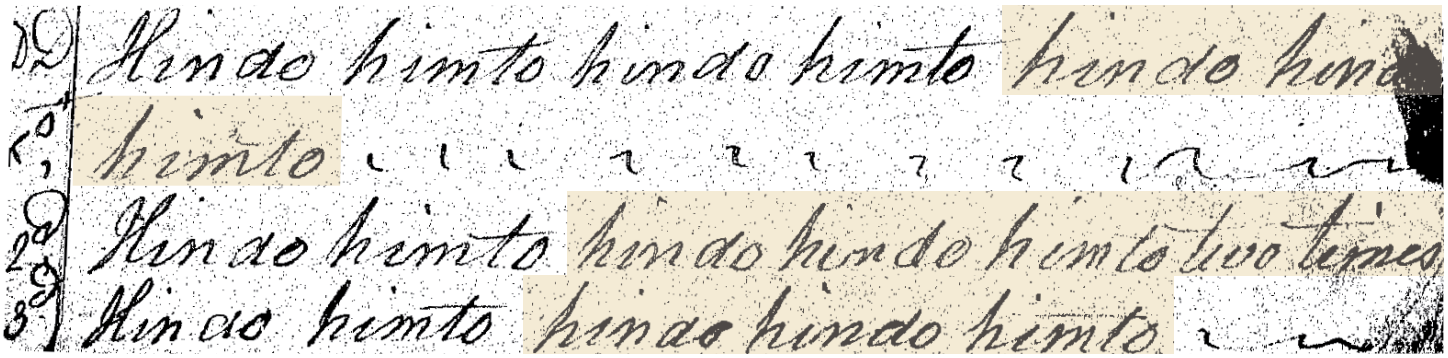
1 1 O
1 O O
1 O

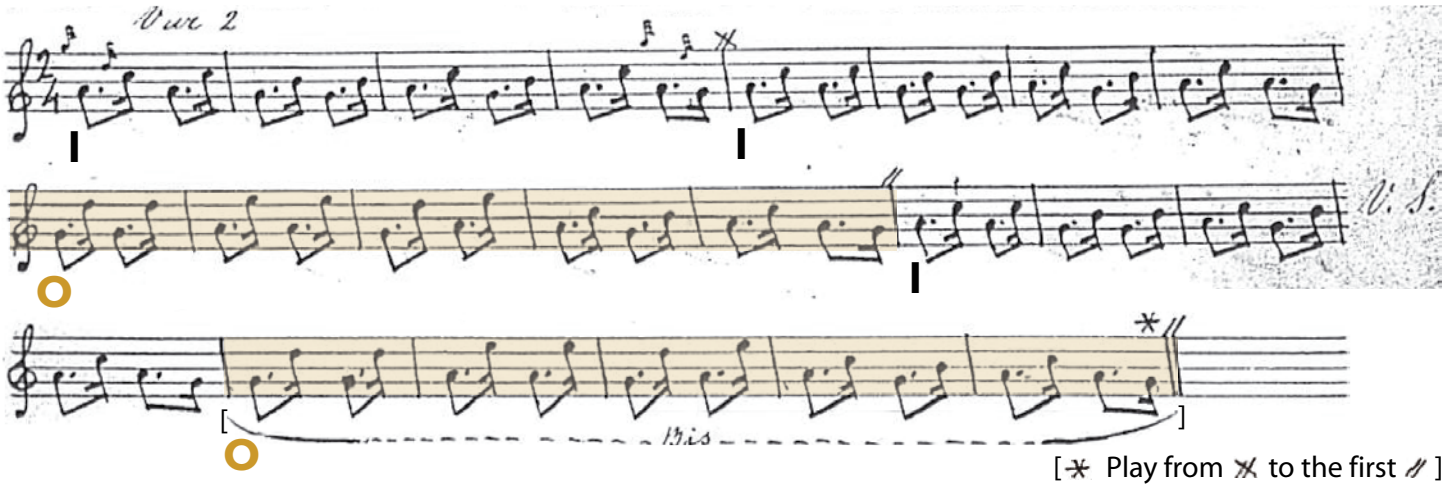
Evidence closer to the time and culture of the composers, however, indicates that they

Example 5. Ratio 2:3. In *Ceann Drochaid Innis Bhàiridh*—The End of Inchberry Bridge, the ratio 2:3 occurs in the final variation, in which contrast between **1** and **O** is almost eliminated:

1 **2/4** *hindo himto*
O **3/4** *hindo hindo himto*

Colin Campbell's MS (Ardmaddy, Nether Lorn, 1797–*c.*1819) vol. 2, no.81. Facsimile at www.ceolsean.com/docs/NL titles/The End of Ishberry Bridge.pdf. For staff notation and a discussion of the title, see www.pibroch.net/articles/bjb/2000.pdf





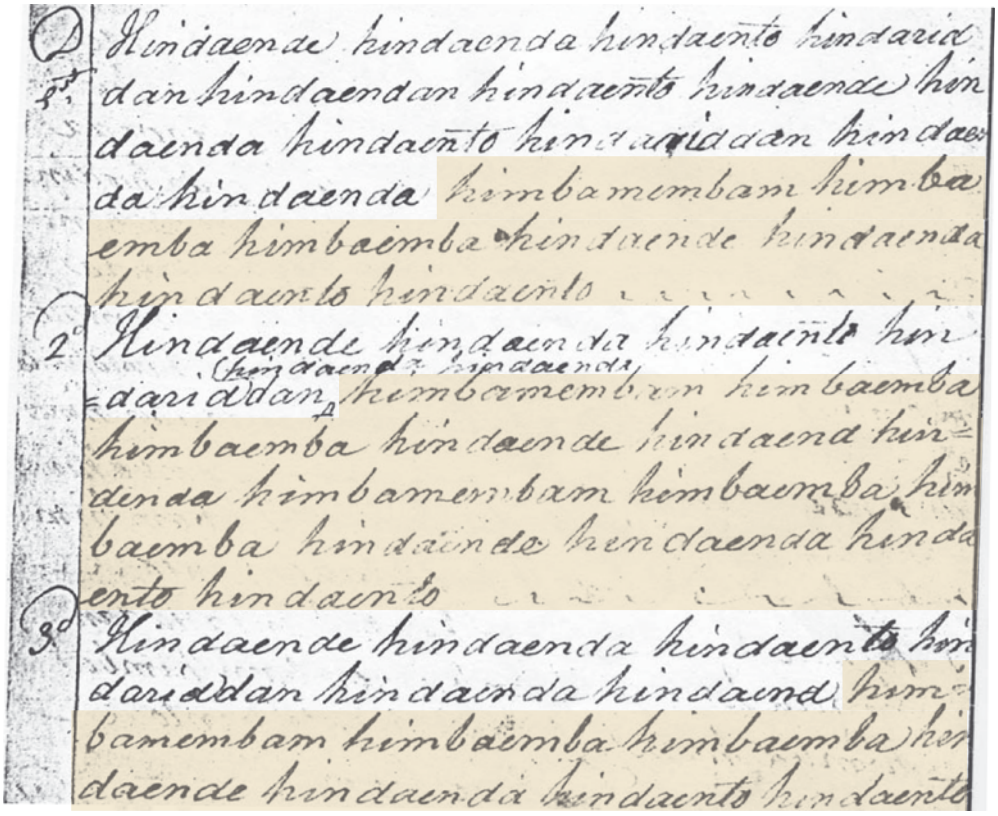
Example 6. Ratio 4:5. In *Cruinneachadh na Fineachan*—The Gathering of the Clans, the ratio 4:5 occurs in all six movements. Angus MacKay's 'Kintarbert' MS (*c.*1840) no. 23. Facsimile at www.piobaireachd.co.uk/manuscripts/kintarbert/blarvuster.pdf. This ratio also occurs in all six movements of *Kingairloch's March* (Colin Campbell's MS, vol. 2, no. 39). For sustained instances of 5/4, see Brown 2000.

originally thought of it in symmetrical halves:

1 1 O 1
O O 1 O

Either arrangement functions as a visual template, guiding the mind and facilitating the processes of composing, performing and listening. The use of one or other makes no difference to the music, only to how one thinks about it. Yet, as Roderick Cannon observes, "opinions are coloured by the pipers' deep-seated feelings about the music. Arguments about metre tend to become emotional, and will probably continue to do so for some time to come" (2002:67).

The heat of arguments in the 1960s and 70s has now cooled and can, I believe, totally evaporate in the light of a powerful insight which Cannon first shared with me in 2004. He suggested that neither arrangement is right or wrong: that they each co-exist, and probably did so in the composers' minds. This appears to be an *intentional* structural syncopation. It could be described as a large-scale hemiola, or calypso rhythm:



spanning eight or sixteen bars instead of one.

Given the fascination with interlaced patterns in late Celtic art, the symmetry between the two halves of this ground may have had extra-musical significance. In the nineteenth century, Gaelic fisherman plaited coloured threads to protect their boats at sea and it is likely that pibroch's composers believed in such charms. Might its design have been intended as a musical incantation to invoke otherworldly powers?

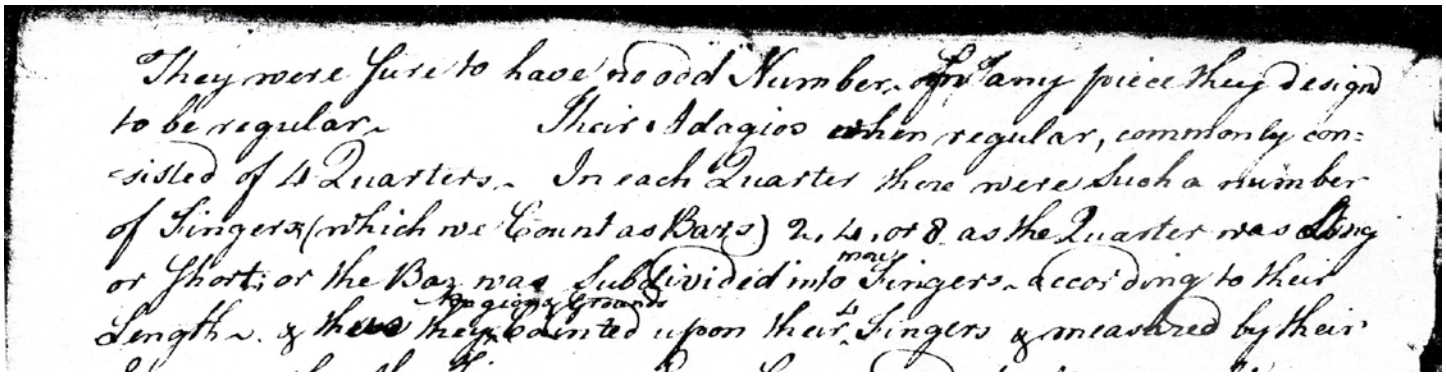
Harder evidence pointing to the even-lined arrangement includes: the metrics of Classical Gaelic poetry; Joseph MacDonald's treatise of *c.*1760 (Example 8); medieval Welsh music theory (Example 9); and the "Ornate" ground, discussed later in this series, which incorporates the Well-woven ground as its third and final Quarters (Brown 2005: part III).

In 1613, the Anglesey harper Robert ap Huw divided the sixteen units of *bryt odidog* into four by inserting dots (Examples 9b and 9c). The only difference between this Welsh ground and the Woven ground is that, in *bryt odidog*, each half is repeated (marked "bis" in Example 9c). Might this once have been the practice in Scotland—at least in the accompaniment of Classical Gaelic poetry, if not in pibroch?

Example 7. Ratio 6:7. In *Cumha Dhiùc Hamilton*—Lament for the Duke of Hamilton, the ratio 6:7 occurs in the *Taoludh Geàrr* and *Crunnludh Fosgailte* Doublings as follows:

1 **6/4** *-de -da -to -dan -da -da*
O **7/4** *-bam -ba -ba -de -da -to -to*

Colin Campbell's MS (Ardmaddy, Nether Lorn, 1797–*c.*1819) vol. 2, no.1. Facsimile at www.ceolsean.com/docs/NL titles/Duke of Hamilton's March.pdf

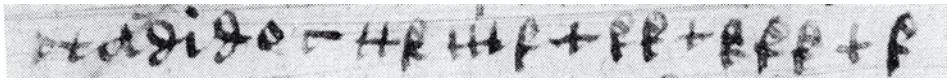


Example 8. Joseph MacDonald (c.1760) ***A Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe… With all the Terms of Art in which this instrument was originally taught by its first Masters & Composers in the Islands of Sky & Mull.*** "They were Sure to have no odd Number in any piece they designd to be regular. Their Adagios [Grounds] when regular, commonly consisted of 4 Quarters. In each Quarter there were such a number of Fingers (which we Count as Bars) 2, 4, or 8 as the Quarter was Long or Short; or the Bar was subdivided into more Fingers, according to their Length". From the edition by Roderick D. Cannon (The Piobaireachd Society, 1994) pp. 64,141; MS p. 32.

To my mind, the sections **OO1O** and **11O1** respond to each other like two poets in a bardic contest: one introduces a new variation, the other resolves it according to strict rules. When I witnessed a bardic contest in Mamoiada, Sardinia, it struck me that the great delight caused to the audience when a response observed complex conventions, yet achieved something special beyond them, was precisely the creative context in which *ceòl mòr* evolved.

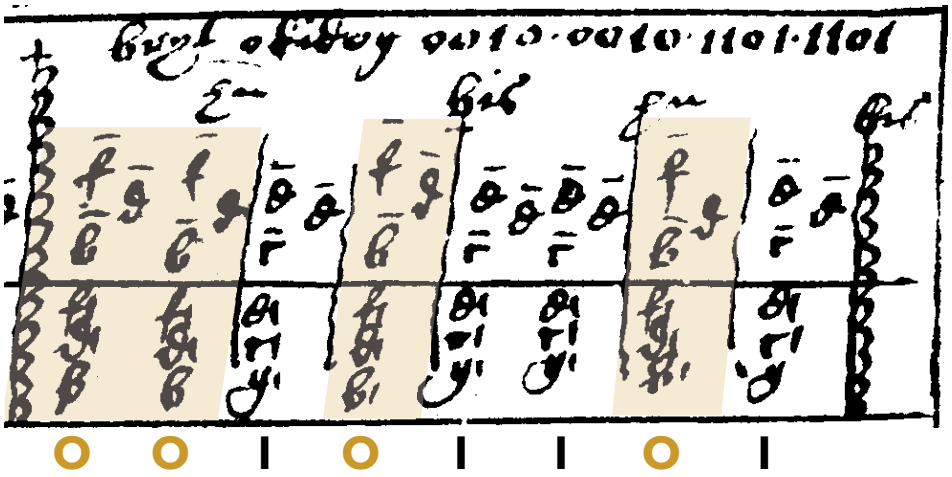
Understanding musical structure is vital to creativity in pibroch interpretation. It helps to raise the level of playing from the three "S"s (safe, stultified, stereotypical) to a higher plane of cultural authority, more informed, more alive. It can also deepen audience engagement.

Creativity upon grounds was once the lifeblood of unwritten musical culture across Britain, and *ceòl mòr* is significant beyond the word of piping. It is key to reviving the performance of a magnificent literary inheritance: the early British poetry, originally sung to the lyre, tiompàn or harp, but currently read in silence. If pibroch were shared more enthusiastically, particularly at early music festivals and the Celtic departments of universities worldwide, it would inspire and guide the revival of this heritage. The cultural life of the Gaelic chieftains embraced harp music, poetry and piping, and this richer context cultivates a deeper appreciation of *ceòl mòr*. The benefit is reciprocal. ●



Example 9a. [br]yt adidoc ttkt ttkt kktk kktk (c.1480)
This ground is thought to have been on the exam syllabus for Welsh musicians between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. Although not commonly used in solo instrumental pieces, its inclusion as one of the 24 measures suggests that it governed bardic and ensemble performances, much like a 16-bar blues governs structure in jazz. See Part 1 in *Piping Today 38,* p. 48. Reproduced in Sally Harper, *Music in Welsh Culture Before 1650* (Ashgate, 2007) p. 81.

Example 9b. bryt odidog — OO1O:OO1O:11O1:11O1 (1613)
Robert ap Huw's MS, p. 107.



Example 9c. Harp tablature for an elementary illustration of *bryt odidog* (1613).
Note the instruction "hn bis" (this twice) above each section, **OO1O** and **11O1**. In professional works of *cerdd dant*, each digit would normally have more length (2, 4, 6 or 8 beats) and more harmonic interest. Robert ap Huw's MS, p. 34. Facsimile at www.pbm.com/~lindahl/ap_huw/

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