

Cape Breton Style Piping

By Janine Randall

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Cape Breton style piping is something that seems to be a new phenomenon and yet a very old style. A lot of renewed interest seems to be brewing about this "older" style of highland piping. But none of it makes a lot of sense unless you go back into the history of piping a bit and of course the history of Cape Bretoners and how they came to come to this part of Canada.

The "Clearances" as they are known; are a part of Scotland's darker history and one that has left a legacy that goes on today. The Highlands of Scotland and the Hebrides were filled at one time with people who had a strong Gaelic culture. This is where the clans and chieftains flourished. The bagpipe started here as well as "gaelic singing, dancing and fiddle playing." It is also necessary to point out that a large percentage of the highlanders were Catholic. The reformation never seemed to reach that far up into Scotland.

Between the Gaelic speaking, the music and culture and the large Catholic population; it is not unusual to see that the highlanders also had strong ties to Ireland. There was also a lot of commerce between the two areas with fishing, trading and the like.

During the mid-1800's it was discovered that the land that was rented by the "crofters" could be more profitable if used to graze sheep. The price of lamb had risen significantly. It also coincided nicely with a way to "rid" of people who were so "different" from the rest of Scotland. At that time Scotland was becoming more "Anglicized." After the battle of Culloden, the Clans never regained their strength and power. People in the highlands were herded into ships embarking for the "new world." Whole communities were uprooted and their houses and farms burned.

With these people came a culture that was forever lost to the rest of Scotland. The pipes were a "forbidden" instrument in Scotland; as it was seen as an instrument of war. Tartans and the speaking of Gaelic were also forbidden. Pipes were allowed in the military; as it was seen appropriate there - as were tartans. Hence the highland pipes took on a military, regimental characteristic - playing in large numbers and in regimental, "band" style. But this was not always the case. The Highland piper was a solo player originally in the Highlands. His music was for entertainment to the community; and was played at dances and all social functions much as a fiddle player today.

This is the style of playing that is finding a great resurgence in piping groups today. This movement is led by many great Cape Breton pipers today including Barry Shears, Paul MacNeil and Jamie MacInnes. The characteristics of this style of piping employ fostering techniques that enhance the pipers individual style instead of the stylings most used for competition purposes. It is also a "step-dancing" style of music.

It is interesting to note that the pipes from 200 years ago were in tune more to the key of "A" which is the same key that fiddles are often played in; (another very solo instrument in Cape Breton style.) Some theories go that the pipes were tuned more to Bb over the years

as competitions in piping grew. It seemed that the bands that were playing more in Bb sounded "brighter" and were winning more competitions. Eventually all pipes were tuned to Bb. But the older sets of pipes are still originally in the key of "A"; as is the pipe music that is written and all of the fiddle tunes.

Cape Breton style of piping today lends itself well to branching out to different types of entertainment purposes. Seeing someone play a square set with pipes and backup of piano and guitar is one of the most exciting events one can see in Cape Breton! To have a piper go through about 50 tunes in the same rhythm and sequencing as a Cape Breton fiddler is a sight and sound extravaganza that you wouldn't soon forget. It is a rather "wild" sound and makes for a rather "wild" dance event!

I had the pleasure of seeing this in "action" last year with Paul MacNeil on the pipes and Tracey Dares on piano, Dave MacIsaac on guitar at the Ceilidh Trail School of Celtic Music in Inverness, Cape Breton last summer. If you ever have the opportunity to see and hear the pipes in this way I highly recommend it.

It is important I think to also understand that a piper can play either style concurrently. The Cape Breton style should be seen more as a "branching out" of an individual's musical growth and not a replacement. People who love pipes; usually love pipe bands! Cape Breton style is continued advancement into a solo style, which recognizes individualistic stylings as an enhancement of the pipers own style.

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