

Bagpipe Fingerings and Tune Settings

By Bram van Melle © 2000

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Bram van Melle, WSPD, looks at the changes in style in the settings of tunes and the evolution of the basic doublings and fingerings in the "light music" of the Great Highland Bagpipe.

One of the most striking things a player of today notices when looking at older tune books is how the style of settings and manner of playing the doublings has changed since the beginning of the 20th century. The change is so radical in some instances that a player may be unable to even interpret older notations of tunes. This change is related to broader trends in pipe band performance practice, discussed in Pipe Band Performance Style, and this article focuses on the particulars of the fingerwork itself.

When looking at a modern tutor book one gains the impression that the manner of playing doublings has been settled for some time. In fact it was probably not until the 1930s that this became so. In 1934 the first volume of the Standard Settings of Army Bagpipe Music was published which, as its name suggests, attempted to achieve a degree of uniformity in the settings of popular army tunes. In doing so it also opted for the simpler forms of some doublings that had been used in the turn-of-the-century Logan Tutor. Later tutor books, such as Donald Shaw Ramsey's tutor and Captain John McLellan's editions of the Logan tutor, cemented this decision by likewise adopting the simpler variants.

The simpler doublings had probably been in widespread use for some time prior to the 1930s, and so the the Army Manuals may have reflected current practice rather than effecting any radical change. The older forms of doublings were most in evidence in the 19th century tune books, notably the 17 volumes by Glen, which had been reprinted many times and must have started to become "out of date" in their style of setting by the 1930s. Notably however, PM William Fergusson's "Bagpipe Melodies", published in 1939 (and including such popular tunes as The Clan MacRae Society, Kantarah to El Arish, and Australian Ladies), uses the older forms of taorluath discussed below.

The paradox of these developments is that the speed of playing marching and dance tunes seems to have decreased throughout the century while the ornaments have become simpler! Perhaps the explanation is that greater accuracy and expression in playing has been sought and the "simplifications" can be seen in this light.

The next sections consider in turn taorluaths, doublings and throws as commonly found in Victorian editions of pipe music.

Taorluaths:

Consider the following settings of John MacDonald's Welcome to South Uist composed by D MacMillan circa 1900. The first version is from David Glen's Collection of Bagpipe Music, a series that began in the 1880s. This volume containing this tune was published about 1910.



The second setting is from the 1960s and, other than changes in the mode of playing the doublings, is an identical setting. (As an aside, the later version, although effectively identical, is marked "© 1966"!). Note however that the 1910 edition is written out in "straight" timing suitable for playing as a quickstep, and the 1966 edition is written out in "cut" or "dotted" timing giving an expression more suitable for competition playing at a slower tempo.



The first point to notice is in the conventions of notation. There is a B-slur on the penultimate quaver of the line in both versions but the notation is different. The 1910 version shows a G grace note on a semi-quaver B followed by a touch (or slur) on another semi-quaver B. This was a common form of notating slurs (and similar ornaments) and although "harder" to read, it does better display the manner in which the ornament is played by clearly showing which notes are "grace notes" and which are notes in the ornament are played with the "full" or "correct" fingering. Otherwise however there is no difference in execution with the B slur in the 1966 edition. Many other ornaments are notated in similar form in early editions, but this article only considers those ornaments differing in the substance of execution rather than merely notation.

The most significant difference in this piece is in the taorluaths. There is an A taorluath in the first bar and a B taorluath in the last bar before the slur. The taorluaths in the 1966 edition are familiar to us all, but in the 1910 editions they are not immediately recognisable as taorluaths at all! First, they are written out in an analogous manner to the B-slur just described, with the "properly" fingered notes in the ornament written out as melody notes, and secondly the ornament is comprised of five rather than four notes. The 1910 "A taorluath" would thus be played:

1. G grace note on A (here missing because the preceding melody note is High A making this impossible)
2. Play low G
3. Play a D grace note on low G
4. Play A
5. Play E grace note on A

Step 4 is the different step from modern practice, and results in the extra note. The five note form of taorluath is that given in the early tutor books such as Glen's. Glen also gives simpler versions of ornaments as alternatives, but does not use these in the settings of tunes. The Logan Tutor however gave only the simpler versions, and thus, along with the Army Bagpipe Music settings, is primarily responsible for the versions used today.

The taorluath is a hard movement for beginners (the most "feared" of the normal ornaments) and even for experienced players it can be hard to "fit into" fast passages with clarity so it is unsurprising that the simpler form has found universal acceptance. It has the advantage of the two low Gs, giving "bottom end" to the movement, but avoids what must have been a certain muddiness in the early version caused by the adjacent low G and A which would lack clarity as well as being harder to play.

The following example shows an A taorluath in the context of a 6/8 tune, "The Princess Margaret, Ex Queen of Mexico's Jig" by W Sutherland.



Although the time values of the "melody" notes forming part of the ornament are different, the substance of the ornament is the same as the A taorluath in the 1910 edition above. Of interest also is the notation of the "grips". The first one, in the last half of the first bar, clearly shows the melodic basis for the ornament in the tune, although it would be played quite as today's grips are - the last note in the grip is an A rather than low G. Nowadays however the last half of this bar would be written out as a G grace note on a crotchet C followed by a normal grip onto a quaver E.

Compare these grips, essentially modern in substance, to the grip in the second bar of the 1910 edition of John MacDonald's *Welcome to South Uist*. This grip includes the "extra A" much like the taorluaths in the same edition - giving a four note rather than three note grip.

C and B Doublings

Early editions of pipe music reveal a high degree of flexibility in the playing of C and B doublings, with publishers not even adopting a consistent treatment within single publications - presumably the form favoured by the tune's composer was used in the published edition. Glen's Tutor gives a large range of alternative doublings. The general principle of playing doublings is first to make a G grace note on the melody note concerned and then to make a grace note with the note immediately above the melody note. When the melody note is below D the second grace note is usually a D grace note. This is how the C doubling is played in both versions of John MacDonald above. Look at the following example however, which is the second line of "We'll take the High Road" (more commonly known as "The High Road to Gairloch") published circa 1910.



Here the E doubling is played in the normal manner, but the C doublings are played with two D grace notes (i.e. the G grace note beginning the modern doubling is replaced with a D grace note). B doublings in contemporary editions likewise sometimes use two D grace notes. It is easy to see how this style of doubling evolved as it has a certain degree of common sense to it.

The modern form of the doubling, always beginning with a G grace note, sounds more effective, particularly as the G finger is stronger than the D finger and that it is easier to play two different grace notes quickly in succession than to repeat the same grace note. The variant shown above must have been used according to a player's personal preference. All players would have had a preferred method of playing these doublings which they would have used irrespective of the form given in the music from which they were reading.

Note also the manner in which the birl is written out at the beginning of the second bar of "We'll Take the High Road", again illustrating the "melodic" basis of the ornament.

The D Throw

The only ambiguity surviving in the playing of ornaments today is in the playing of the D throw. The College of Piping "Green Book" explains the three methods of playing this throw, recommending the four-note D throw which is used in the College's accompanying audio cassette. This is the older form of the throw and can be seen here in a circa 1910 edition of "The Midlothian Amateur Pipe Band" by F Beaton, along with the alternative forms of taorluaths and grips already discussed. (The "Amateur" gets dropped from the title in modern editions!).



- This version of the throw therefore includes the basic "G-D-G" movement common to the taorluath, grip, and C throw. This alone is a good reason for learning this version of the throw, although it can be seen that it will take longer to acquire facility in the playing of the movement particularly when it needs to be played fast such as in the above tune.

The three note throw can be played in two ways. These are sometimes referred to as the "light" D throws (as opposed to "heavy" D throws) and even derisively as the "California" D throw alluding to its popularity with amateur players! The first way of playing the the light throw is thus:

- While not as substantial sounding as the four note throw, this method has the advantage of ensuring that the player does not rush off the G or C too quickly robbing the throw of its impact. The third method of playing the throw is as follows:

- In playing this version one has to be careful not to produce an insubstantial ornament. This method is the easiest for beginners to play and seems to be the predominant variant heard in pipe bands today. It is also common with first class solo players as well (try making a digital recording of a soloist and slowing it down on play-back). Soloists pause imperceptibly on the G to give the throw a bigger sound. Interestingly this is the version recommended as least appropriate in the College of Piping Green Book.

Although a matter of personal preference, and a matter of the stylistic "school" and tradition in which one has learnt pipes, to my ear the three note throws do not sound as satisfying as the four-note throw which has a real "snarl" to it and more "bottom end". It is of course harder to play during the early stages of learning the pipes, and this is why most players opt for the three note version.

The four note throw really makes a difference in solo playing where the impact is wonderful, although it is of less consequence when playing in a band.

Conclusions

There are other ornaments not considered here, such as various forms of "touches" and "slurs", which also show considerable variation in early texts, but the three types of ornaments considered are the main ones and are sufficient to bring the salient points into focus. By way of summary therefore, a clear trend towards the simplification of ornaments can be seen as competitive band playing becomes more popular where "uniformity" and "precision" are the keys to success. Some of the character of the instrument is lost however when these considerations override artistic factors. It seems from recordings that while modern standards of performance are excellent they sometimes fail to achieve the "swagger" and individuality heard in pre-War recordings.

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