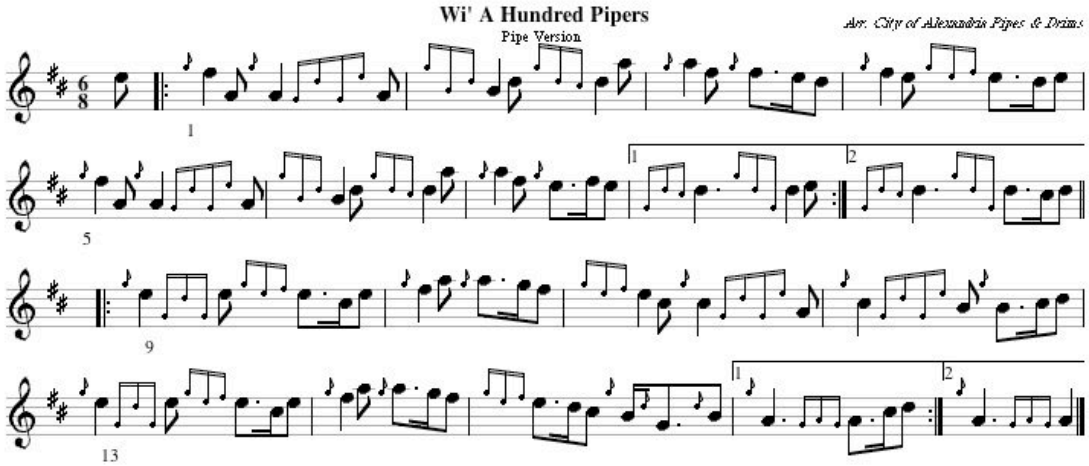
The Piper’s Corner

By PVSFC Board Member Peter Walker

We left our survey of bagpipe music last year with the notion of putting the ornaments together into a tune. This year, I'm going to present various types of bagpipe tune, demonstrate a few, and show how the ornamentation and idiom of the instrument come together to create the melody, and how a fiddler might try to capture aspects of "pipey-ness" in a performance

We'll begin with the 6/8 Quick March. Many of these tunes are sped up to become jigs, but we'll focus on them in the march context for now. Compound time tunes are a good way to begin in that there is very little flexibility in the interpretation of time. There are three prevailing rhythmic figures in a 6/8 quick march, which my own pipe major has us sing as vocables: the dotted quarter ("ah"), the quarter-eighth ("dai-do"), and the dotted eighth-sixteenth-eighth ("rum-pa-di"). Other figures, where they may appear, tend to be one of these rhythms in disguise. And they're always played literally as written. The tune I've chosen to explore is "Wi' a Hundred Pipers". We've had this in A-major in fiddle club before, and it takes advantage of the wider range available to the fiddle. I will give the tune in within the pipes' range, D-major in the first part and A-major(ish) in the second part. Here it is, as played by the City of Alexandria Pipes & Drums:



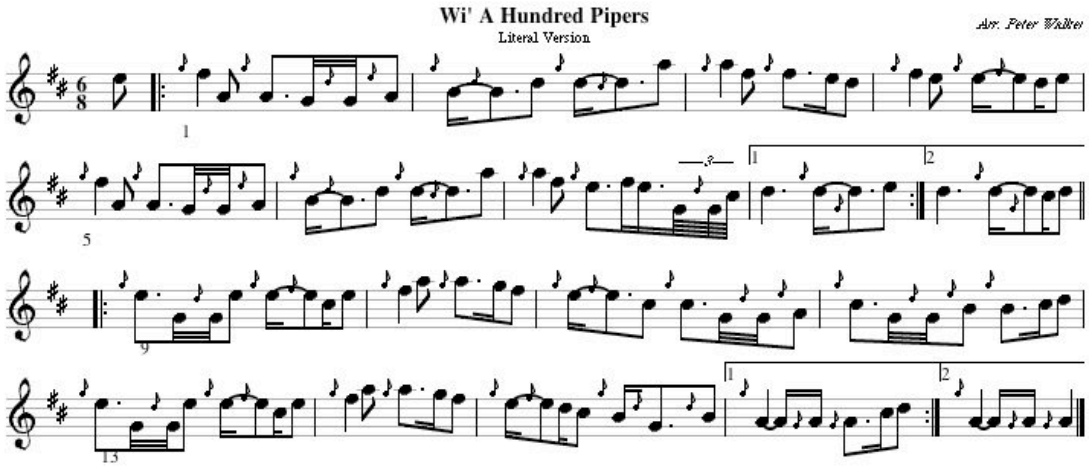
Let's first take note of the articulatory grace notes. There are numerous high

"g" gracings through the tune. These are single grace notes, or in the case of grace notes between two high "a"s, echo beats. These serve to articulate the adjacent notes, in some cases especially because they separate notes of the same pitch. A fiddler could choose to adapt these with a tap on the beat, or just an extra bit of pulse on the bow when changing notes. Note especially the "d" grace notes in bar 15. The snap figure, ornamented like this ("g" grace note before the sixteenth, "d" before the dotted eighth) is called a "tachum" in the piping world. The extra articulation, beyond that already present in a snap, is what makes this figure so characteristically pipe-like. Now I want to call your attention to the emphatic ornaments. These begin with a "g" gracing, and follow on with a second grace note delayed a bit after the beat. As discussed in previous columns, this gracing serves to emphasize a note. We see doublings paired with shakes in bars 2 & 6, doublings (the first beat of bars 11 & 15 and the second beat of bars 4, 9, & 13), a shake in the second beat of bar 8. A fiddler might emphasize these a bit more with a delayed tap.

Now comes the real fun! Look at the taorluaths in bars 1, 5, 11 & 12, and the leumluaths in bars 9 & 13. Notice how they always occur between a quarter note and an eighth note? If you'll recall my previous columns, these types of ornaments take time from the previous note (in this case, the quarter), and take up appreciable time. So what's happening here? Well, what you're really looking at is a dotted eighth-sixteenth-eighth rhythm in disguise. The quarter note loses a sixteenth's worth of time to the ornament, which becomes two 3nd low "g"s, bisected by a "d" grace note, sometimes with an "e" grace note to the next melody note. A fiddler would find a clever melody note to play in place of the ornament.

Finally, each part ends with an ornament. The first part ends with a d-throw, a leumluath-like ornament that bubbles from low "g" through "c". I'd play that as a hammer-on from "c" to "d". The second part ends with a birl, but not the kind fiddlers are used to. It's a 2-pulse burl, basically stealing a little time from the end of the first beat to give to the second.

Here's what my "literal" rendering of this tune looks like.



What might the fiddle adaptation look like? Check in next time and see.

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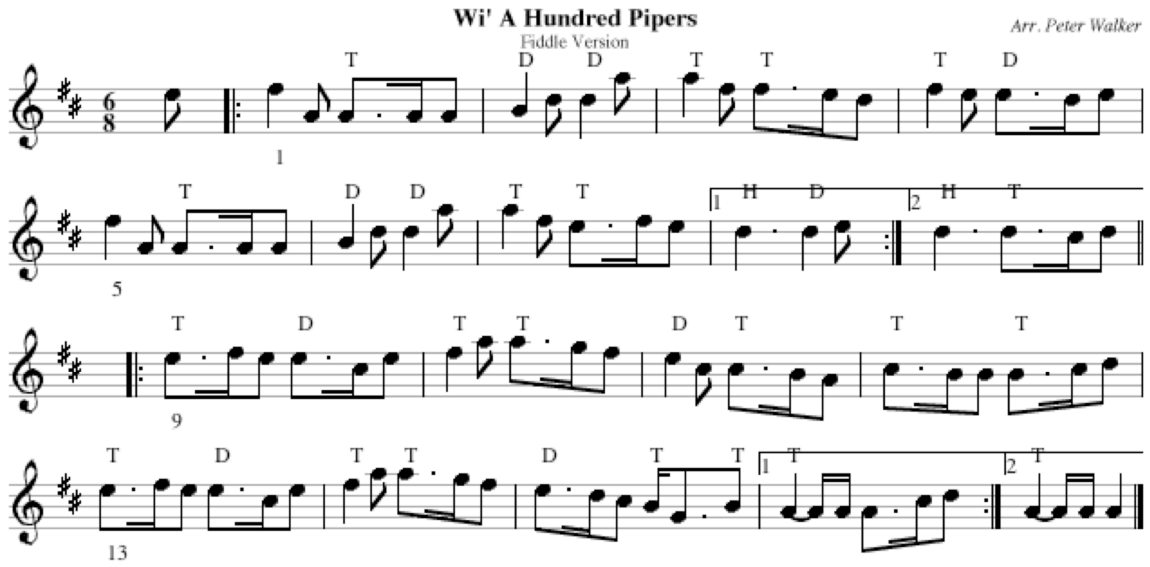
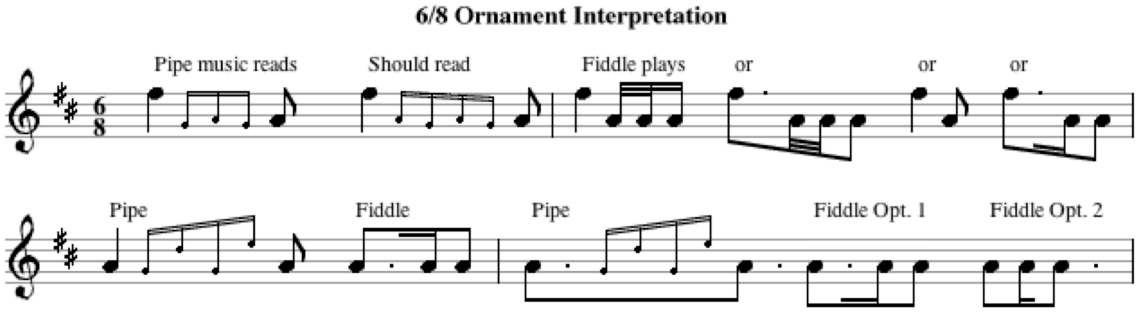
I last left you with the pipe setting of "Wi' A Hundred Pipers", a tune that celebrates the a legend that when Prince Charles' army captured Edinburgh and marched up to the castle, he was accompanied by a troop of pipers of that number (though the Jacobites never held the castle, and the reported number of pipers would have been an unlikely 3% of his total army at that point!). Often played as a jig, I gave it as a 6/8 march, and invited you to suggest the final fiddle setting of the tune. Here's my take!



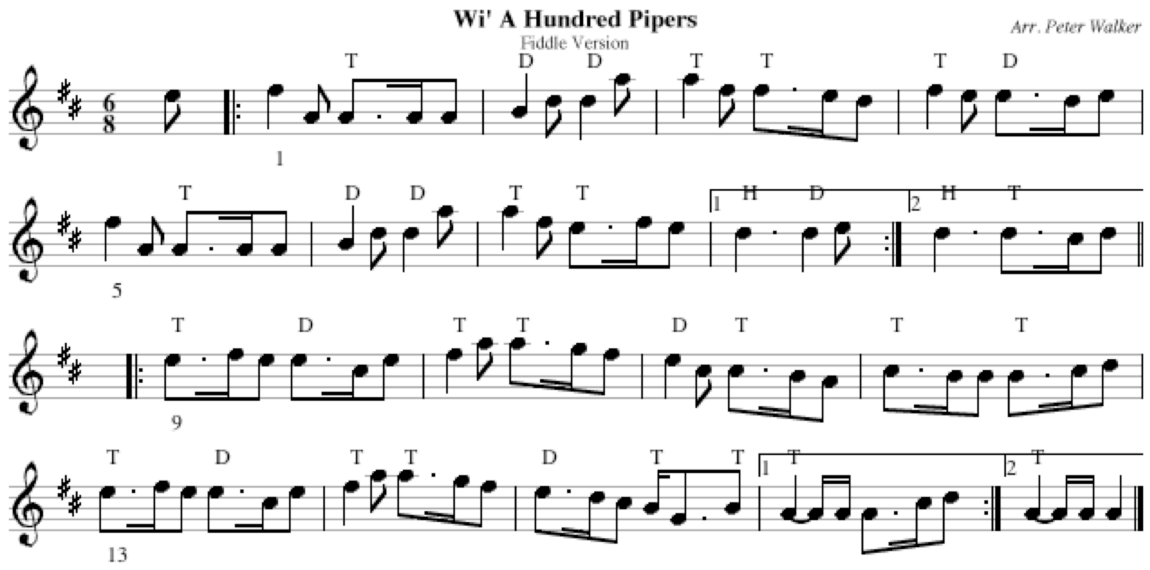
Before moving on to other rhythms, I'd like to do one more 6/8 march that's getting a lot of play at our Royal Mile jam session. It's a lovely tune called "The Heights of Cassino", remembering the four bloody Battles of Monte Cassino in January through May 1944. After a failed American attempt to take the strategic mountain in January, the Allies destroyed a 1500 year old abbey atop it, and the German forces moved into the highly defensible ruins, putting up fierce resistance, fending off a combined Rajput, Gurkha, and Maori assault; finally a combined force of 20 divisions of American, British, Indian, New Zealand, Canadian, Free French, Moroccan, and Free Polish troops captured the town and monastery after terrible losses on all sides. Like the 2/4 March The 24th Guards Brigade at Anzio, another tune about the Italian campaign in WWII, there is to my ear no glory in this melody, but rather an unburdening of a sweet

sadness. Here is another tune that should never be mistaken for a jig; but played as a stately pace, maybe at around 88-92 beats per minute.

The tune, given in the insert, is melodically simple; the second part differs from the first only by the first bar in each line; as does the fourth from the third. It's not especially heavily ornamented, but is carried on the characteristic heavily-swung 6/8 rhythm. The interpretation of the ornaments is as in Wi' A Hundred Pipers, with a couple of interesting exceptions.



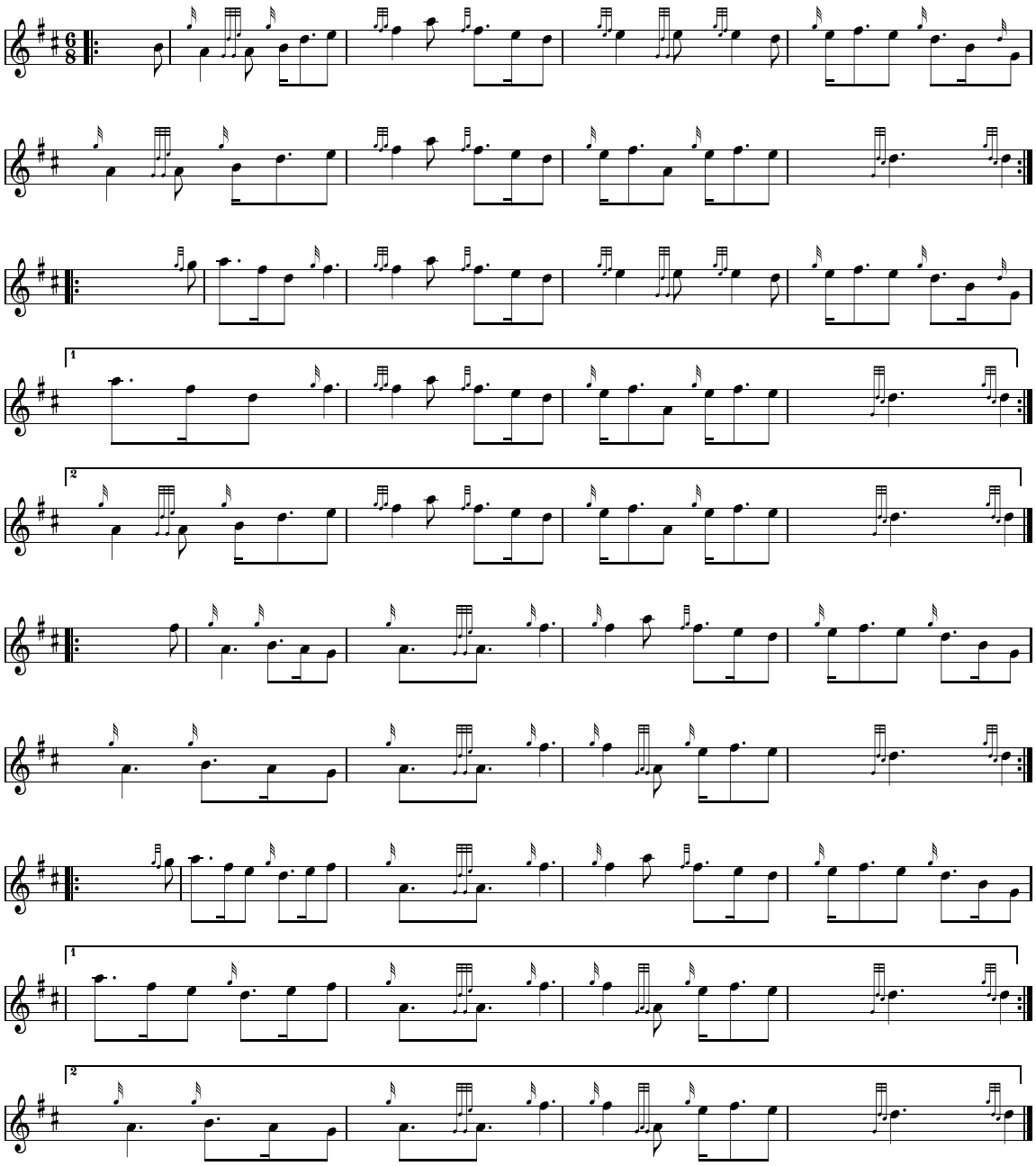
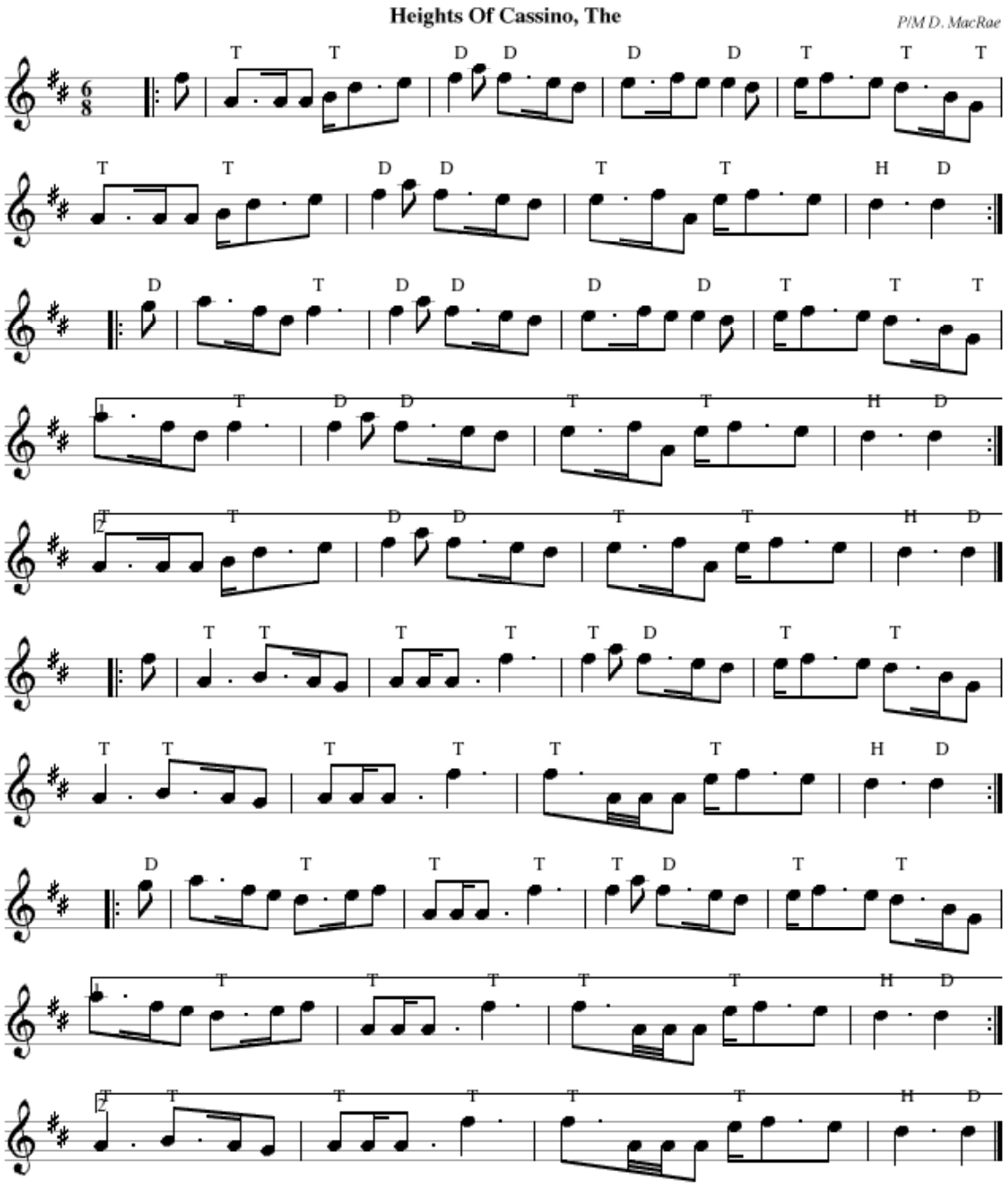
The first is probably a typo. In the next to last bar of the 3rd and 4th parts, we see a quarter note F to an eighth note A, with a 2-pulse birl in between. This is almost certainly supposed to be a three pulse birl, as it's essentially impossible to play a 2-pulse birl from any note other than low A. There are a number of ways to interpret this. One could play a quarter note F and then a very tight birl on the eighth note A. Another possibility is that the 2-pulse birl was notated not for the execution, to indicate timing. As you'll recall, a 3-pulse birl is like the fiddle birl, starting on the beat. But a 2-pulse birl is anticipatory, taking its time from the previous note and ending on the beat. If this is what is indicated, then the interpretation would be a dotted eighth F, followed by a birl on a second dotted eighth A. This is the interpretation I have chosen. Additionally, one could simplify either of these rhythms by excluding the birl.



The second interesting ornamentation is a dotted eighth A, taorluath to dotted eighth A, seen in the second bar of each line of the last two parts. It's an interesting figure. One might decide to interpret it as a swing triplet, like the quarter note A taorluath to eighth note A in the first bar of the tune. But the composer deliberately chose this rhythm. If we remember that taorluaths take their time from the previous note, and take about a 16th note of time in a 6/8, the alternate interpretation, which I have favored, is three low A notes: an eighth, a sixteenth, and then a dotted eighth, reversing the usual 6/8 march rhythm. It's very counter instinctual to play this, so one might revert to the simpler alternative.

So here's my fiddle version. As usual, "T" denotes a tap on the beat, "D" a tap slightly after the beat, and "H" a hammer-on, in this case, from C# to D.

The Heights of Casino March P/M D. MacRae



Now, the fiddle adaptation: