

The Piper's Corner

by Peter Walker

We're almost done with the Old Sword. But I wanted to point out that if you want to hear it performed by experts in piobaireachd, you can download an MP3 for £2 at <http://shop.collegeofpiping.org/mp3-download-lament-for-the-old-sword> - and there are multiple renditions on YouTube in addition to my own. Listening is always the best way to understand the phrasing of tunes of this sort! Check them out.

Starting next year, we'll be moving on to quick surveys of a couple other piobaireachds, but I want to get us started by talking about a specific class of these tunes. In our initial survey of Lament for the Old Sword, we saw one variation (the Dithis) that had both a singling and a doubling variation. The difference, in this case, was the connective note. In the Dithis Singling variation, the connective note was a low A, whereas in the Dithis Doubling, it was the same note as the preceding themal note.

There is a class of piobaireachd, called Breabach tunes, where we see both a singling and a doubling in most of the variations, but they come in a different form. Take the taorluath variation of Old Sword. The typical formula for this variation is a grace note to the themal note, a taorluath to the connective note A, and on to the next themal note, through the whole variation. Every themal note is followed by the ornament and the connective note.

In a Breabach tune, this is also the paradigm for the breabach doubling variation. But in the singling variation, the last pulse or two of each phrase will depart from this formula to have an ending more similar to what will be seen in a ground variation, and the piobaireachd will slow slightly on these end phrases in a way it will not do in the doubling.

Consider the following passage from the piobaireachd Struan Robertson's salute - the first line of the Taorluath and Taorluath doubling variations:

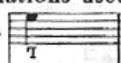
II. TAORLUATH

Line 1st. 

III. TAORLUATH DOUBLING

Line 1st. 

Abbreviations used.

Written 

Played 

This tune shows a pitfall of the way piobaireachd has been written. Because it has been shoehorned into Western musical notation, the themal notes are obscured, sometimes appearing as quarter notes, sometimes appearing as the last in a pair of eighth notes. Here's the themal skeleton of the first line, to help clarify.

Struan Robertson (theme, line 1)



Notice the differences in the final two pulses of the 2nd bar of the two taorluath variations. In the singling variation (II), the B and G quarter notes are played their full time, without ornament, contrasting with the phrasing of the previous bar and a half. In the doubling variation (III), these pulses are rhythmically the same (aside from the final themal note being given slightly more weight, with it ending a phrase). When played, because of this change in rhythm, the singling variation will feel like it slows considerably at the end of the 2nd bar, though the actual hold is only on the final pulse, whereas the doubling variation will simply plow through.

A similar situation occurs in the 4th bars of the singling and doubling (the first 2 pulses of bar 4 are written slightly differently, but played essentially the same). In the singling variation, the third pulse of the bar, E, lacks the taorluath ornament, and has a nice open birl to the final themal note, A, which is held because it is the end of the line. By contrast, in the doubling, even the themal note is different, being an A instead of an E, followed by a taorluath to the connective note A, and a d-grace note to the final themal note A (which is held longer than its dotted eighth notation would suggest; it is the last full pulse of the line). Again, the singling will seem to pause as the final bar winds down, while - aside from holding slightly on the final pulse of the line - the doubling will feel like it plows through onto the next line.

This type of "running through molasses" through the end of each 2-bar phrase in the singling, and "running on grease" through the same place in the doubling, is a characteristic of most of the variations in a Breabach tune.

So next fall, we'll start with all of Struan Robertson, and go through all its official variations from the Piobaireachd Society, and we'll reconstruct a couple that the Piobaireachd Society mentions, but doesn't print.