

Ceol Mor Catharsis

My sisters love the bagpipes. Friends love the pipes. People I don't know in the park or at a gig tell me they love the pipes. As a piper I am always glad to hear it.

But there is a kind of music I play that not everyone loves. It's called ceol mor, which means great music. It's also called piobaireachd (pronounced "pibroch" or "pea-brock") which means, simply, "piping." It was the original great highland bagpipe music.

It is referred to as the classical music of pipes. In form, piobaireachd comprises a theme (the "ground" or urlar) followed by a structured set of variations with increasingly complex ornamentation, ultimately returning to the original, simple theme.

Most of the time when someone hires a piper, they're wanting to hear marches and dance tunes—jigs, hornpipes, strathspeys, reels—along with a slow air or two, always nice.

A funeral is a bit different of course. When someone calls a piper for a funeral, they're usually looking for a hymn or slow air. Sometimes that's all they want – one, maybe two tunes. In the U.S., *Amazing Grace* is a familiar and regular choice, as is *Going Home*. Those closer to their Scottish roots might request *Flowers of the Forest*. I've never been asked for a piobaireachd.

About piobaireachd, my sister says with a bit of a scrunched face, "I don't get what you get from that." Now I admit that, like whisky, piobaireachd is an acquired taste.

Except when it's not. Sometimes, as intended, it speaks right to the soul.

One Friday I had been asked to play at a memorial service. It was a particularly difficult time for the family as it was the second funeral of a family member within a week. The service was at a beautiful stone church. My charge was to play for 25 minutes prior to the service as mourners arrived, and then for a bit afterwards. There were a few particular requests, with the rest of the music left to me.

With latitude and time to fill comes opportunity. So it was that Friday. I began with a few familiar airs as mourners arrived and entered the church.

Still having a good bit of time before the start of the service, I decided to play the piobaireachd *Lament for Donald of Laggan*, a classic written some 350 years ago. As piobaireachds go, it's a short one.

I checked the drones, then began. From the corner of my eye I noticed a small group of approaching people who stopped. It was unusual that they did not walk by into the church but stood still to listen while I played the entire piece, a little over eight minutes long.

Upon finishing, I looked over and at once recognized the woman who had hired me by her red hair—the sister of the deceased. It was the family. They thank me and proceeded into the church.

When the service ended, I played two specifically requested tunes immediately as folks exited the church. As there again was time, I decided to play another piobaireachd, *Lament for Mary MacLeod*, another 350+ year-old composition, this one approximately 13 minutes long, a beautiful piobaireachd.

As I played, the brother of the deceased separated from the small crowd and moved around the corner from the south entrance to the westside doorway. From my vantage point I could see both the group of family and friends, and the brother. Out of sight but for me, he huddled by the side entrance he hid his face in his handkerchief and let go. A catharsis.

When it was done, his sister came over with tears in her eyes, nodded to her brother, and said, “Thank you.”

The piobaireachd had served.

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