

A FEW REMARKS UPON BAGPIPES AND PIPE MUSIC.

HARMONY was defined by the ancients as "The succession of simple sounds according to their scale with respect to acuteness or gravity." This definition, however, answers better to our idea of what melody is. We should rather define harmony as "The result of the simultaneous production of two or more sounds according to certain rules, the adoption of which ensures a pleasing effect upon the ear." The combinations of sounds so made are called chords; they are either complete or incomplete, perfect or imperfect. In the common scale of an octave we find eight several and distinct notes, irrespective of sharps and flats. Seven of these eight notes have respectively belonging to them what are called common chords. A common chord is composed of the sounds produced by a certain note called the root of the chord and two other notes which are respectively a third and fifth above the root. Each of these common chords being made up of three individual members, is susceptible of being played or placed in three positions. The octave, or eighth note of the scale, cannot be said to have a chord of its own: it is only the first note of the scale repeated somewhat higher in tone, by way of completing a musical phrase. The seventh note, which is called the leading note, requires that the octave should immediately succeed it.

A melody is a succession of single notes so arranged as to produce a pleasing effect upon the ear.

Now supposing that we wish to add to a given melody its appropriate harmony, we must not accompany each note of the melody with the chord which bears its name, as we should produce a succession of sounds the effect of which would be most unpleasant and harsh. We shall find, however, that, in order to give free effect to the melody, we have frequently to vary the accompanying harmony, sometimes using that of the tonic or key note, sometimes that of the dominant or fifth note of the scale, and sometimes also the harmonies of the subdominant or fourth note of the scale and other notes.

Every note in a given melody is common to, or forms a member of, three several and distinct chords. By way of illustration, the note C may belong to the chord of F, in which chord it is the fifth or twelfth above, it may also belong to the chord of A, in which it is the third or tenth above, and it also may belong to the chord of C, in which it is the unison or octave. In the same way D, and every other note in the scale, belongs and is common to three several chords. Now the science of harmony teaches us, amongst other things, by which chord the notes of a melody are most appropriately accompanied and the position in which they should be used.

In treating as a melody the ordinary scale of an octave in the key of C, and endeavouring to accompany each note in that octave with that harmony which best suits it, we find that we do not require to use all of the seven distinct chords which we find in the compass of an octave, but that three will answer our purpose. These three chords are those belonging to the tonic or key note, the dominant or fifth of the key, and the subdominant or fourth. The remaining four chords are not in the instance of the melody before us required at all. We shall find on further examination of the harmony required by the melody before us, that two of these three chords are not used or required so frequently as the remaining one is. Indeed, we find that no less than four of the eight notes of the scale require the tonic harmony, two require that of the dominant, and the remaining two that of the subdominant.

The melody of our national air, "God save the Queen," is in its simple form composed of thirty-five notes, not reckoning merely passing notes or appoggiaturas. Now, of these notes no less than twenty-one, or nearly two-thirds of the entire number, are susceptible of bearing the tonic harmony, or the chord of the key note. Of the remaining fourteen, ten require the dominant harmony, leaving only four notes which must be accompanied by other harmonies. There is a tune, known no doubt to us all, called "Drops of Brandy;" in this tune we have a melody which only requires two harmonies, viz., the tonic and the dominant.

Were we in the same way to analyze other harmonized music, we should find it an almost invariable rule, that the tonic harmony is more used than any other, that next in importance stands the dominant harmony; whilst the remaining harmonies are comparatively but seldom called for.

Some instruments are capable of producing always the requisite harmonies to a given melody; others are capable of producing only the tonic and dominant harmonies; others, again, can only give the tonic harmony;

and some being only capable of producing one note at a time, are obliged to content themselves with the humble privilege of but producing a melody, without any harmony at all. The organ, the harmonium, the pianoforte, the harp; and the guitar, are all instruments upon which full harmonies may be produced. The accordion can only accompany a given melody with the tonic and dominant harmonies. The *French fiddle*, the Highland pipes, the Union pipes, and the Northumbrian large and small pipes, can only give the tonic harmony.¹ The flute, trumpet, clarinet, and the majority of instruments used in a full band, can only sound one note at a time; and therefore, if employed in performing the melody, cannot accompany that melody with any harmony at all. We shall confine our attention, however, to the Highland and Northumbrian small pipes; and, in order that we may thoroughly understand the peculiarities of pipe music, let us first examine into the prominent features which the construction of the bagpipes presents.

Both the Highland and Northumbrian pipes are wind instruments. In all instruments of these kinds the receptacle for the wind is a bag. They all possess drones and a chanter. Every drone and chanter is furnished with a reed; and the wind, in passing through these drones and chanter, produces the music which these instruments afford. The chanter gives us the melody of the tune performed: the drones supply us with the accompanying harmony. In all bagpipes this harmony is unvarying, and is that of the key note, or tonic harmony.

Having noticed those points in the construction of bagpipes which are common to both Highland and Northumbrian pipes, let us now look at those in which the two classes of instruments differ from each other.

And first, with respect to the Highland pipes. In these instruments the wind is supplied by the breath of the performer, who blows through a mouthpiece or tube, which feeds the bag or wind chest.

Just in passing, let us observe that the Highland pipe is essentially a military instrument, and that the reason why the wind is left to be supplied by the breath of the piper, instead of by the bellows, which are common to other bagpipes, is in order that the piper may in battle the more readily use the short dagger, or dirk, with which he is commonly provided.

The Highland pipe is furnished with three drones. The first, and lowest in tone, of these drones produces the note A above gamut G.

¹ The ancient kingdom of Northumbria extended from the banks of the Humber on the south to the Solway Frith on the north, and it is quite possible that the Northumbrian large pipes are identical with the Lowland pipes. The use of the small pipes is, so far as I can learn, confined within the limits of the county of Northumberland; if this really be so, it may fairly be presumed that the use of the large pipes is of more ancient origin than that of the small.

The second and third produce the note A, which is the octave above. Logan, in his work called *The Scottish Gael*, says, "The drones are tuned to the E of the chanter, the two small ones being a fifth below, and the larger an eighth." If this were the case, we should have the tonic harmony upon the fifth note of the key or the dominant, or, in other words, the chord of the sixth and fourth, a chord which is only used as a suspension of the ordinary common chord, or the chord of the fifth and third. Logan must have intended to state, that the larger drone was an eighth below the other two.

All the chanters of the Scotch regulation pipes are what are called "plain chanters." Their compass is nine notes, which range from the G upon the second line of the treble clef to the A, which is the ninth above. The chanter is open at the end, and produces, when the performer's fingers cover all the keys, the lowest note, or G.

The scale of the chanter thus comprises an octave of notes in the key of A, with the addition of a ninth note—that note being the *leading* note to the lower key note. The drones can only play the key note, one in the unison, and two in the octave—tonic harmony, but, as musicians would style it, *very thin* harmony.

Turning now to the Northumbrian pipe, we observe that its construction differs from that of the Scotch in the supply of wind being provided by means of *bellows*, instead of by the breath of the piper. This very much lessens the amount of physical exertion requisite to play the pipes. Highland pipers, we fancy, must often wish that they could give some rest to their lungs at the cost of a little labour to the arm.

Another point of difference is found in the drones of the Northumbrian pipes. They formerly used to be only three in number; and where we fall in with plain chanters, they still are only three in number. The smallest of them produces the note G, which is the note upon the second line in the treble clef. The largest drone sounds the octave below; and the third gives the note D, which is placed between the two G's. It will be seen, therefore, that the drones of the Northumbrian pipes produce a more complete chord than do the Scotch. A fourth drone is now commonly met with, which sounds the D, or octave below the D of the third drone. When this fourth drone is used the lowest G drone is altered in its pitch a tone higher, so as to sound the fifth above, or A instead of G. That drone which sounds the D between the notes of the two G drones supplies the octave above the note of the fourth drone, and the smallest drone may either be stopped altogether or made to produce another A. The Northumbrian piper is thus enabled to play upon more keys than the Highland piper.

Another point in which the construction of the Northumbrian pipes differs from that of the Highland arises from our chanter being closed at the end, instead of open; and when all the eight notes with which this chanter is provided are covered by the fingers of the performer, no sound is produced by the chanter. The eight notes which the plain chanter of these pipes are capable of sounding are those which compose the treble octave in the key of G. Several additional notes have been given to Northumbrian pipes, and some possess a complete chromatic scale, ranging from the A below middle C to B in alto, comprising twenty-six notes.

Logan, in his *Scottish Gael*, notices two additional points of difference in our pipes, when contrasted with the Highland. They are, he says, more conveniently portable, and *much less noisy*. He also observes that they "are often wholly formed of ivory, and richly ornamented with silver. This adds much to their beauty and value."

Having glanced at the construction of bagpipes, let us now turn our attention to the music produced by these instruments, to those points in which bagpipe music differs from other music, and to those in which Highland bagpipe music differs from Northumbrian.

Now, whatever may be the notes of the melody produced upon the chanter of either the Highland or Northumbrian pipes, we have always accompanying the melody one constant and invariable chord—an incomplete common chord in all pipes, but more incomplete in the Scotch than in the Northumbrian pipes.

If we take a melody not composed especially for this species of instrument, say, for instance, "God save the Queen," we shall discover, that although the chord which the drones supply is more often appropriate to the notes of the melody than otherwise, yet that the general effect of the tune when played on pipes is extremely harsh and displeasing. This arises in a great measure, if not entirely, from the circumstance, that although nearly two-thirds of the notes of the melody require the tonic harmony, yet those passages which require other harmonies are not arranged so as to disguise the requirement, and the phrases which require the dominant harmony are longer in duration than they would have been had the tune been written for the bagpipes. A melody may be constructed so as very seldom, and for a very short period at one time, to require any other harmony than the tonic; and the less such other harmony is required, the more pleasing will be the effect of the melody on the bagpipes.

If in the tune to which we have already referred, called "Drops of Brandy," we should dispense entirely with the dominant harmony,

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and only accompany the melody with the tonic harmony, we should interfere perhaps less apparently with the pleasing effect of the tune than would be the case were we to adopt a similar course with most other tunes. In this instance we do in effect treat those notes of the melody that *strictly* require the dominant harmony as passing discords, and are guilty of using a musical license which only the imperfection of the instrument played upon can ever warrant or make excusable.

As we have said before, the Northumbrian pipes possess four drones; three of which, however, are only used at one time; and the three sounds produced simultaneously are the key note, the fifth above or dominant; and the octave above. Now in the event of part of a given melody, written in the key of G, requiring the dominant harmony, we have two of the four drones which are capable of producing notes belonging to the dominant harmony; these two drones are the D drones, the other two would act as discords. It strikes us as being very strange that no manufacturer of bagpipes, knowing this fact, has not by some mechanical contrivance put the means within reach of a piper by which he may silence the two discordant drones, and at the same time allow the D drones to speak, and thus enable the performer at will to introduce the dominant harmony. Indeed, a fifth drone could easily, one would think, be made, which would not speak except when some key was touched; and the note of that drone being made to produce the sound of the fifth above the dominant, the performer might at the same moment stop two discordant drones and open two additional drones, and so enable us to have the dominant harmony as perfectly as we already have the tonic. The bagpipes would thus have a decided advantage over the accordion, an instrument which, possessing, as it does, the power of producing both the tonic and the dominant harmonies, nevertheless obliges the performer upon it to accompany some notes of a melody which require the tonic harmony with that of the dominant, and other notes which require the dominant harmony with that of the tonic.²

² Since reading this paper at the Castle, Mr. Kell, of Gateshead, has had the kindness to show me a very fine set of Irish bagpipes, which, upon examination, I found to have two sets of drones. One drone in each set is provided with brass keys, evidently intended to be played, *not by the fingers*, which, of course, would be required for the chanter, *but by the wrist* of the performer. As the instrument, when I saw it, had not affixed to it its pair of bellows, I was unable to determine the pitch of the notes of the drones, and more especially the effect which would be produced by moving a small knob of brass which I saw close to the bottom of the drones. This small knob may very possibly be connected with a valve which is intended to shut off, at the will of the performer, the wind from one set of drones and allow it to pass through the second set. Some Irish pipes may therefore be constructed so as to give, *not only the tonic harmony, but the dominant.*

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We may state that one, and the most important, peculiarity of all pipe music arises from the fact, that the melody composed for the pipes must be such as to require as little as possible any other harmony than that of the tonic; the less it requires, the more pleasing, other things being equal, will be the effect produced.

Having now noticed the leading characteristic of pipe music generally, as distinguished from ordinary music, let us now turn our attention to those particulars in which our Northumbrian pipe music differs from that of the Highland.

We have observed previously that the Scotch bagpipes are essentially instruments for military music. Now this fact at once discloses an important element of difference; for, as military music must necessarily be composed so as to suit the regular and measured tread of soldiers, we shall find that the bulk of Scotch pipe music is written in common time, or compound common time; our Northumbrian pipe music, on the other hand, being generally composed for social amusement, not for marching bodies, we find it written, perhaps more frequently, in triple and compound triple time than in any other. Our pipe music, therefore, has a more graceful and flowing character than Highland pipe music, although the latter is more dignified and more calculated to awaken strong emotions in the human breast. The peculiarity in Northumbrian pipe music which we have above pointed out would perhaps be more apparent than it is, were our pipers to refrain somewhat more than they usually do from disguising the written melody with ad libitum flourishes and grace notes.

The adaptability of the Highland pipe music to military purposes is noticed by Pennant in his voyage to the Hebrides in the following terms:—

“The bagpipe has been a favourite instrument with the Scots, and has two varieties: and suited well the warlike genius of the people, roused their courage to battle, alarmed them when secure, and collected them when scattered; solaced them in their long and painful marches, and in times of peace kept up the memory of the gallantry of their ancestors by tunes composed after signal victories; and too often kept up the spirit of revenge by airs expressive of defeats or massacres from rival clans.”

Another peculiarity in the music of the Northumberland pipes arises from the fact, previously noticed, of the chanter being closed at the end, which enables the performer to play in the way designated by musicians as staccato, and prevents the otherwise inevitable slurring of the notes. This view is supported by the writer of the article in the *Encyclopædia*

Britannica under the word bagpipe, who states that the effect of this slurring of the notes is to make the bagpipes "in the hands of a bad player the most shocking and unintelligible instruments imaginable: but this," speaking of the Northumbrian pipes, "by having the lower hole closed, and also by the peculiar way in which the notes are expressed, plays all its tunes in the way called by the Italians staccato, and cannot slur at all." The writer then states, that "it hath no species of music peculiar to itself;" and afterwards remarks, that "it is surprising what volubility some performers on this instrument will display, and how much they will overcome the natural disadvantages of it."

We cannot agree with the writer when he states that it hath no species of music peculiar to itself; for although there is no reason why the small pipes should be *unable* to produce the same species of music which the Highland pipes produce, yet the purposes to which the several instruments are commonly applied differing so widely, one class of them being used for military purposes, whilst the other is principally used for social and domestic amusement, the music composed for them must likewise, and materially, differ in character. Besides which, the Highlanders have been very jealous to retain the simplicity of their national instrument; and we therefore find that Highland pipes have only the plain chanter of nine notes, whilst the Northumbrian pipes having undergone, through the ingenuity of succeeding makers of those instruments, most important alterations, in the addition of extra keys, do now commonly possess a full chromatic scale from A below middle C to B in alto, comprising every intermediate sharp and flat, or twenty-six notes; music has, therefore, been composed for our Northumbrian pipes which cannot possibly be performed on the Highland pipes. We cannot, however, regard it otherwise than as somewhat of a misfortune that so many notes have been added to the Northumbrian chanter; for our pipers have thus been enabled to perform melodies which were not composed for the bagpipes, and which are totally unsuited for them, and bagpipe music has, in a great measure, lost its original simplicity and characteristics, save those which are inseparable from an instrument with drones.

The history of the bagpipe is one the elucidation of which presents features of interest to an antiquary. We regret that the materials which are requisite to enable us to do anything like justice to the subject are not to be met with in this town, or, at any rate, we have been unable to meet with them. We may, however, be allowed, before we conclude, to subjoin a few particulars on this subject.

The bagpipe is an instrument which it seems pretty clear was in use amongst the ancient Greeks and Romans; to the former people it was

known by the name *Ασκαυλος*, to the latter by that of the *Tibia utricularis*. Dr. Burney, in his *History of Music*, mentions his having seen the representation of one in marble, of ancient Greek sculpture, which was in the possession of a Mr. Morrison, at Rome. Pennant, in his *Voyage to the Hebrides*, no doubt refers to the above piece of sculpture in the following passage from that work; he states that—

“There is now in Rome a most beautiful bas-relievo, a Grecian sculpture of the highest antiquity, of a bagpiper playing on his instrument *exactly like a modern Highlander*. The Greeks had their *Ασκαυλος*, or instrument composed of a pipe and blown-up skin: the Romans in all probability borrowed it from them, and introduced it among their swains, who still use it under the names of *Piva* and *Cornu musa*.”

Dr. Browne, in his *History of the Highlands*, states “that the bagpipe was in use among the Trojans, Greeks, and Romans.” That it was in use among the Romans, the following quotation from Suetonius will prove. Writing of Nero, the historian says, “*Sub exitu quidem vitæ palam voverat, si sibi incolumis status permansisset, proditurum se partæ victoriæ ludis etiam hydraulam, et choraulam, et utricularium ac novissimo die histrionem, saltaturumque Virgiliti Turnum.*” How much the admirers of pipe music must lament the unfortunate issue of that revolt which prevented the historian from recording the performance in public upon the bagpipes of the great Roman Emperor Nero! Pennant states, that “the figure of the instrument is preserved on one of Nero’s coins, but highly improved by that great master. It has the bag and two of the vulgar pipes, but was blown with a bellows, like an organ, and had on one side a row of nine unequal pipes resembling the *syrinx* of the god Pan.” Most probably this is an early and rude conception of the greatest of all instruments, the organ. “The bagpipe, in the unimproved state, is also represented in an ancient sculpture, and appears to have had two long pipes or drones, and a single short pipe for the fingers.”

In one of the plates which are inserted in the first volume of Burney’s *History of Music*, is the representation of the *Tibia utricularis*, taken from a bas-relief in the Court of the Santa Croce Palace at Rome. It is rude in construction, but it is evidently the early form of the same instrument which we now recognize as the bagpipe.

The question arises, Are the Scotch and we indebted to the Romans for the introduction amongst us of the bagpipes? Pennant considers that we are. In his *Voyage to the Hebrides*, he says, speaking of the two kinds of bagpipes found in Scotland:—

“Neither of these instruments was the invention of the Danes, or, as is commonly supposed, of any of the Northern nations; for their ancient writers prove them to have been animated by the Clangor tubarum. Notwithstanding they have had their sæck-pipe long amongst them, as their old songs prove, yet we cannot allow them the honour of inventing this melodious instrument; but must assert they borrowed it from the invaded Caledonians. We must still go further, and deprive even that ancient race of the credit; and derive its origin from the mild climate of Italy, perhaps from Greece.”

One circumstance, however, deprives Mr. Pennant's view, in our opinion, from being entitled to be received, and that is the fact of the use of these instruments having been almost exclusively confined to the northern part of the island of Great Britain. Surely the Romans, in the course of their gradual occupation of the island northwards, would, if they had introduced the instrument, have found in some of the southern districts of the island Britons who, in that comparatively unmusical age, would have been quite charmed by the novel notes of the bagpipes, and by whom the knowledge of the method of its construction would have been easily acquired, and the practice of its music retained.³

It is very probable that the use of this instrument was imported into Greece and Rome from some nation lying to the north of that country and city, which, in its turn, owes its introduction to the Scandinavians, from whom it is not unlikely the Caledonians received the knowledge of the instrument and its powers. We also think it probable that the Northumbrian pipe is a local variation of the more ancient Highland pipe.

Angus Mackay, in the introduction to his Collection of Highland Pipe Music, states that Giraldus Cambrensis, who died in 1225, mentions the pipe as a British instrument, and that there is in the chapel of Roslin the sculpture of a cherub playing on a bagpipe, with a book spread before it, proving that in an early age the bagpipes were played in this island, not by the ear only, but from musical notation. That chapel was erected in 1446. He also states, that there is music for that instrument known to have been composed in 1299, upon the occasion of the battle of Bealach na 'm Broaig.

We are unwilling to conclude without adding one word upon the charms to a Highlander which the sounds of the familiar strains of the bagpipes awaken. Macdonald, in the preface to his work upon the Ancient Martial Music of Scotland, says—

³ One of the “Canterbury Pilgrims” was a bagpiper. The use of the bagpipes, however, in the south of England is, and appears always to have been, extremely rare.

“In halls of joy and in scenes of mourning the bagpipe has prevailed; it has animated Scotland’s warriors in battle, and welcomed them back after their toils to the homes of their love and the hills of their nativity. Its strains were the first sounded in the ears of infancy, and they are the last to be forgotten in the wanderings of age. Even Highlanders will allow that it is not the gentlest of instruments; but when far from their mountain homes what sounds, however melodious, could thrill round their hearts like one burst of their own wild native pipe? The feelings which other instruments awaken are general and undefined, because they talk alike to Frenchmen, Spaniards, Germans, and Highlanders, for they are common to all; but the bagpipe is sacred to Scotland, and speaks a language which Scotsmen only feel. It talks to them of home and all the past, and brings before them on the burning shores of India, the wild hills and oft-frequented streams of Caledonia; the friends that are thinking of them, and the sweethearts and wives that are weeping for them there! and need it be told here to how many fields of danger and victory its proud strains have led! There is not a battle that is honourable to Britain in which its war blast has not sounded. When every other instrument has been hushed by the confusion and carnage of the scene, it has been borne into the thick of battle, and far in the advance its bleeding but devoted bearer, sinking on the earth, has sounded at once encouragement to his countrymen and his own coronach.”

We have all of us heard the story of Jessie Brown of Lucknow. Whether that story be true or false we know not: after reading the above quotation from Macdonald, it seems probable enough. We must say that we should almost regret being obliged to regard the story as a myth.

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