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PIPING TODAY

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Early chanter a challenge to copy

IAIN DALL MacKAY's CHANTER

PRESENTATIONS in March at The National Piping Centre in Glasgow, Edinburgh University's Celtic and Scottish Studies Department and the 2006 Piobaireachd Society Conference at Birnham introduced Scottish Highland piping enthusiasts to the long lost chanter-sound of 250 years ago.

The instrument played at these presentations — by Barnaby Brown, Allan MacDonald and Robert Wallace — was a painstakingly created replica of a chanter that once belonged to the great 'Blind Piper of Gairloch', Iain Dall MacKay, piper to Sir Kenneth Mackenzie and to his successor, Sir Alexander Mackenzie.

Iain Dall (c.1656-c.1754), a student of Patrick Og MacCrimmon, was a gifted poet as well as the composer of some of the finest piobaireachd in the repertoire, including *Lament for Patrick Og MacCrimmon*, *The Unjust Incarceration*, *The Blind Piper's Obstinacy*, *Lament for the Laird of Anapool (Arnaboll)*, *The Prince's Salute* and *Lament for Donald Duaghal MacKay*.

In 1805, his grandson, Iain Roy MacKay, migrated to Nova Scotia, taking his family with him to settle in what became New Glasgow. With them went Iain Dall's chanter, to be carefully preserved as a treasured family heirloom. In March 2006, Rory Sinclair, a friend of Iain Dall descendant Michael Sinclair, took the chanter back to Scotland to mark the long-awaited completion of its replica.

Creating the replica was not as straightforward as its makers, Peebles-based pipe maker Julian Goodacre and piper and piping scholar Barnaby Brown, had initially hoped.

For one thing, the original chanter was not quite its original shape.

"We went out to Nova Scotia to measure the chanter in December 2000," said Barnaby Brown. "It was Dr Peter Cook who originally suggested to Julian Goodacre that this would be a good chanter to reproduce, back in the early 1990s when he was director of the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University.

"In 1994, on the advice of Hugh Cheape,



PEEBLES-based pipe-maker Julian Goodacre (left) tenderly displays the carefully preserved chanter that belonged to Iain Dall MacKay (c.1656-c.1754), while piping scholar Barnaby Brown holds the recently completed replica.

Julian measured and reproduced a lovely set of 18th century drones, now in the National Piping Centre Museum — and I have been playing these since 1998. But chanters — the good ones at least — are prone to damage and deterioration."

"Many of the old chanters in museums look as if they were never played, and I would be cautious about reproducing them. Iain Dall's chanter, however, was clearly the instrument of a working professional. The finger holes are very well worn, and a snap across the G holes has been beautifully repaired with a metal collar, we guess before 1805. The heavy wear and this careful repair suggest that it was much loved, not as a wall decoration, but for its sound.

In Halifax, Julian Goodacre and Barnaby Brown made careful, thorough measurements

of Iain Dall's ancient, now unplayable chanter. Over the years, the wood had gradually but surely contracted, pulling the bore into an oval cross section. Several cracks have been filled and reinforced with early hemp bindings.

Woodwind specialists reproducing early instruments had already calculated formulae to extrapolate original dimensions from time-distorted recorders. "Following their methodology, we measured both the major and minor axes all of the way up this oval bore then calculated the original circular bore dimensions," said Barnaby Brown.

Within three months, they had a prototype replica turned from pressure-treated applewood. Reeded up, however, the chanter displayed what Barnaby Brown at the time considered a "slight" problem: a tendency to double-tone on F and an unstable low A.

THE chanter that belonged to the famous 17-18th century bard and piper Iain Dall MacKay of Gairloch... and the replica of it that was completed this year by pipe-maker Julian Goodacre of Peebles and piping scholar Barnaby Brown.



THIS reproduction of Iain Dall's late-17th century chanter was made by Julian Goodacre of Peebles, in collaboration with piper and piping scholar Barnaby Brown. It rests on documents relating to the original measurements and the extrapolations that were made to correct distortions wrought by time on the original chanter, which was carefully preserved by Iain Dall's descendants in Nova Scotia, Canada.



Photo: Mike Paterson

The quest for a more suitable reed began.

“The chanter has a huge reed seat and that was the only evidence we had about the original type of reed: the space it used to occupy,” said Barnaby Brown.

“No chanter reeds of the 1690s survive, and getting the reed right was a challenge that has taken years of trial and error. I suspect that in Iain Dall’s day, players made their own chanter reeds entirely by hand.

“The size of the reed seat suggests that the original reed had a much bulkier binding and staple. I do wonder what material the professional players of the 17th century used for their reeds. I don’t think we can rule out *Arundo donax*, given the shiploads of red wine imported to the isles from France and Spain. But I don’t think we can rule out local materials either: poorer pipers possibly depended on them.

“I’m sure Hebridean cane (cuilc) and elder would have made satisfactory drone reeds. For the chanter, I’m not so sure. Hamish Moore has suggested that elder might make good chanter reeds. He may be right, but we won’t know until it has been tried out by several gifted reedmakers, prepared to devote time to experimentation. There is an old belief that heather root was used, but I’ve never found heather

root wide enough for a chanter reed, and Dugald MacNeill informs me that Thomas Pearston (co-founder of the College of Piping) searched too, and never found it without worm holes.”

When the difficulties of reeding the first prototype reproduction began looking insurmountable, Barnaby Brown took another long, critical look at the original measurements and the extrapolations he and Julian Goodacre had used to make the replica.

“Normally, the throat end of a chanter is more prone to shrinkage, as that is where moisture from warm breath condenses and the fluctuations in humidity are greatest. I suspected that we’d over-compensated for shrinkage in the throat and upper bore region. I went back to the original data and took a second look, open to the possibility that perhaps the original chanter hadn’t shrunk quite as much as we’d thought.

“Julian and I spent a couple of days in Peebles in January 2006, experimenting with the dimensions of the upper end of the bore, filling the top of the chanter with beeswax and re-drilling the throat to 5/32 of an inch, then gradually bringing the reamer back up bit by bit and, at each stage, testing it with three different reeds to see where the optimum reaming depth was.

“All of this experimentation lay in the margin between our measured bore and our extrapolated ‘original’ bore — tiny differences, but with a huge impact on the behaviour of the critical notes F, piobaireachd high G, open high G, and high A.”

And they found that, with a slightly narrower throat and upper bore, the instability problems disappeared.

“With hindsight, we spent too long trying to solve the problem by adjusting the reed design alone,” said Barnaby Brown: “In fact, it was our estimation of the original throat that was the problem. The original throat is slightly wider than that of a modern chanter, and it was a mistake to make it wider still on the reproduction.”

Now it plays.

“We’re using a reed specially made — after a lot of careful experimentation — by Thomas Johnston and Ronald MacShannon of the Glasgow reed-making firm, Pipe Dreams. That I now have a working Iain Dall chanter is largely thanks to their expertise, dedication and generosity of time.

“Although these late 17th century chanters are more robust with thicker walls than modern chanters, you couldn’t in any way describe them as more ‘crude’: quite the opposite.

“The Iain Dall chanter is beautiful. The thicker wall produces a mellow tone and balanced volume top to bottom that makes it very attractive.

“One fascinating characteristic of the chanter is that the low A hole — the little-finger hole — is quite high, making it less of a stretch to play: this is the only aspect of the chanter that takes a bit of getting used to for a modern player. Otherwise, it behaves very much like a modern chanter, although I would say that high G is particularly stable and has a lovely tone. No wonder Iain Dall composed *Patrick Og* and *Laird of Anapool* — he had the perfect chanter for all those high Gs.

“The pitch, no matter what reed we’ve tried, settles about 50 cents sharp of A 440Hz: about half way between modern A and Bb. Chanter pitch today is between Bb and B, so the Iain Dall chanter is roughly a semitone below a modern chanter.

“The lower pitch and mellow tone give the chanter a warmth that, for recitals and personal enjoyment, is a definite asset.”

Barnaby Brown intends to put that asset to work — making better known some of the old, lighter piobaireachd repertoire that is no

longer played.

“The early sources of piobaireachd show quite clearly that a lot of music has fallen out of the tradition not, I’d suggest, because it was bad music, but because it simply wasn’t appropriate for the new function the great Highland bagpipe found from the late 18th century onwards: competition. These lighter tunes simply weren’t appropriate for that arena. Many of them are in the Campbell Canntaireachd manuscript.

“Now, I believe there is a place for these small works. It would be pointless to play them in the kind of competition we have today — but there are good reasons to play them in recitals and for pleasure: they are easier for unaccustomed ears to appreciate, a gentler introduction to piobaireachd than the long, heavy tunes.

“And they’re very appropriate for people learning piobaireachd, because they are less demanding.

“I’d love to give these tunes a new voice,” he said. “While I wouldn’t say they’re all of great musical stature, I think they’d change the image of piobaireachd for the better because they’d enrich the repertoire.

“As well as the consistently grand, slow, majestic, weighty tunes, we have a population of works that are light, even frivolous, genuine 17th century music — and it’s piobaireachd.

“Properly used in a Gaelic context, the word ‘piobaireachd’ just means ‘piping’ — but in English it has come to mean a particular type of piping—a subset of Iain Dall’s professional repertoire, and a sanitised one at that. Perhaps we should banish the word ‘piobaireachd’ and all the baggage that goes with it! If we just said ‘early Gaelic piping’ it might allow our minds to welcome back some great music, currently neglected, not for musical reasons, but because it doesn’t fit a pigeonhole carved into 20th century thinking.

“So, with the Iain Dall chanter,” said Barnaby Brown, “I’d like to open the repertoire to new audiences and encourage a broader understanding of the music, perhaps getting closer to 18th century thinking; some of the works played today haven’t changed very much, but others have been stretched to fit the competition mould, and might not be recognised by their composers,” he said.

“I think it’s good to encourage people to think, to choose... there is abundant evidence in support of different styles of performance. Pipers have had a strange habit of looking at the older sources and, because they don’t

square with what we play today, characterising the authors of the manuscripts as amateurs struggling to express themselves on paper, and they refuse to accept that what’s there on paper represents what they were playing. So they feel justified in ignoring people like Peter Reid and John MacGregor — people who took pains to describe to a high level of accuracy what they actually played.

“It’s an insult to our tradition and our forebears to write these manuscripts off as inept or inferior to what we do today... it’s a shame,” he said. “In the same way as playing Bach on period instruments has brought a deeper understanding and reinvigoration of his music, an historically-informed approach to early Gaelic piping might have benefits tomorrow that are not obvious today.

“What we do today has been simplified to make judging easier, and thanks to the processes of publication, we accept the ascendancy of one printed score which becomes the ‘authority’. Over time, as people increasingly use the same printed score, aspects of its notation enter the oral tradition... and we end up with stereotypical playing and a tradition that is less rich in its expressive capacity and musical breadth than that contained in the early manuscripts.”

“We should be seeking to expand the music and the tradition.

“Presenting the listener with greater choice is to the benefit of piping as a whole — it enables us to be more thinking and creative musicians, and we become participants in debates and issues that are being tackled by our peers in other musical disciplines.

“It’s a fallacy to imagine that piobaireachd was cut off from mainstream European musical culture; quite the contrary. Piobaireachd evolved in a society that interacted with traders, clergy and nobility throughout Europe. Chiefs were regularly in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Italy... and presumably they often took their pipers with them.

“The evidence of the music itself shows it has much in common with the solo instrumental music of a wider, pan-European area. We are fortunate that it happened to survive in the Highlands, whereas in Continental Europe the solo, improvised, instrumental traditions of that period have left few traces. We’re very lucky that in the early 19th century there were literate pipers who wrote this music down to a high level of accuracy. Other countries are not so fortunate.” ●

Retrieving Gaeldom's forerunner of the pipes

TRIPLE PIPES

LONG vanished from Scotland and Ireland is the triplepipe, an instrument as clouded in mystery as the artists who carved images of it in stone a millennium or so ago.

Musicians playing triplepipes are represented on St Martin's Cross in front of Iona Abbey, at Ardchattan Priory in Argyllshire, at Lethendy in Perthshire, and at Clonmacnois and Monasterboice in Ireland, images dating from the 9th to the 12th century.

Another 200 years pass before evidence of bagpipes indisputably enters the Scottish record.

The triplepipe has a 3,000-year history. Once widespread, it survives uniquely in the launeddas tradition of Sardinia.

Having spent the past five years on an island, now a part of Italy, that generations of invaders have regarded as a backwards enclave of banditry and superstition, piping scholar Barnaby Brown feels ready to promote a rediscovery of the triplepipe in Scottish, Irish and Early music circles of the 21st century.

"My first tip in this direction was when I visited Dr John Purser (Scottish music historian, writer and composer) in Elgol, Skye," he said. "After transcribing the unpublished tunes in the Campbell Canntaireachd manuscript, I'd become very interested in early Scottish music," he said. "John's knowledge is encyclopedic, and his enthusiasm's infectious. He showed me photos of triplepipes, an instrument I'd not seen before, on Irish and Scottish high crosses. Then he played me a track by launeddas player Efsio Melis... extraordinary music.

"I mentioned this to my pipe maker, Julian Goodacre, and he said: 'Oh yes, I've been crazy about the launeddas ever since hearing Aurelio Porcu at Saint Chartier, years ago'. He handed me a two-volume account of the Sardinian tradition by a Danish musicologist, Andreas Bentzon. Bentzon's work opened up the richness of the tradition for me. That very month, Ryanair announced that they were introducing daily flights from Stanstead to Alghero. I'd been looking to buy a place in Scotland but property



BARNABY Brown with Sardinian launeddas maker Luciano Montesci. They have worked together to explore and develop more Gaelic-sounding versions of the Sardinian instrument... "I began adapting the Sardinian instruments to sound more 'Gaelic'. I flattened the seventh, I changed the configuration and developed three non-Sardinian kunsertos to explore accompanying early Christian Celtic chant, and composing piobaireachd-style variations."

was far cheaper there... I decided to get into this thing properly and moved to Sardinia."

Andreas F. W. Bentzon made field trips to Sardinia between 1957 and 1962, recording all he could. "He first went to Sardinia when he was 17," said Barnaby Brown. "His last field trip was when he was 21. He died tragically of cancer in his early 30s but, in 1969, published a legacy on which every launeddas player now depends.

"People have often suggested that piobaireachd's pre-history lies in the harp tradition. But is it not more likely that it grew out of the triplepipe tradition? We see the instrument carved in prominent positions on high crosses, in contexts that suggest it had a high status in medieval Gaelic society.

"The crosses are obviously of an ecclesiastical nature and the players appear to be clerics. In several instances, they are placed opposite a harp or lyre player, suggesting that the tri-

plepipe might have been played in ensemble," he said.

"There's a rather large time gap between the carvings and the first traces of the bagpipe, but this doesn't necessarily imply a discontinuity. I'd suggest that people were playing triplepipe then somebody, somewhere, at some point, saw a foreign musician playing with a bag and thought 'that's a great idea'. As the bagpipe became standard during the 14th century, it supplanted the triplepipe in the Gaelic musical tradition."

Barnaby Brown holds that, in translations of medieval texts, references to 'bagpipes' are generally mistaken: "There's no hard evidence of a bagpipe in the British Isles before Chaucer," he said, "The sound of reed pipes with a drone in Britain before the 13th century was probably not bagpipes, but triplepipes."

The Sardinian triplepipe, the launeddas, made from three sticks of locally wild-growing

Pictured from the top:

TRIPLE pipes on the early 10th century Clonmacnois cross in Co. Offaly, Ireland. • Image: John Purser

IMAGE of triple pipe players from the Cantiga No.60, Court of Alfonso X el Sabio, King of Castille and León — Spain, 13th century. • Image: El Escorial, Biblioteca del Real Monasterio, cod.b.1.2

A TRIPLE piper is represented on the 10th century Lethendy stone in Perthshire, Scotland. • Image: by Tom E. Gray

AN early 10th century carving of a triple piper, on the West Cross of Monasterboice in Ireland. • Image: John Purser

AN 8th century Scottish representation of triple pipes on St Martin's Cross at Iona Abbey. • Image: John Purser

AN image of a triple piper is found in the "Hunarian Psalter" from 12th century York in England. • Image: Glasgow University Library, Department of Special Collections



Arundo donax cane, looks rustic and musically naive. Each pipe is fitted with a single-bladed reed — the size of cane smallpipe drone reeds. Beeswax on the vibrating tongues aids stability and tuning, and more beeswax around the sockets helps the player's lips form an airtight seal when all three reeds are put in the mouth. The sound is sustained using circular breathing.

"In fact, there is nothing naive about the triplepipers in Sardinia," said Barnaby Brown: "And the ears of the triplepipe maker are acutely tuned to the harmonics within any sound so, when they make a new instrument, they first spend hours, even weeks, getting the bass drone going. It's the most important part of the instrument because, if the harmonics are not in tune, it's impossible to tune the two chanters.

"Cane isn't perfectly cylindrical so, depending on where the nodes are and undulations in the bore, and on the reed itself, you may find that the 4th or 5th harmonic is a bit sharp or a bit flat, and that there are differences in the relative amplitude and intonation of the harmonics... that's what defines the colour of the sound. So, creating a beautiful bass, one where the relative amplitude and particular tuning of individual harmonics, with one or two perhaps singing out more than others: that's an art I'd say I have never experienced in as highly developed a form as in Sardinia.

"The triplepipe is all about what we search for in Highland piping: that perfect, just intonation which produces a mesmerising effect," he said. "The harmonic buzz is entrancing, especially for the player. Those three reeds resonating in your mouth and through your jawbone and skull — it's a physical effect similar to having the bass drone beside your head. That and the regularity of circular breathing create a wonderful sense of physical well-being.

"And there is the synchrony. The three reeds touch inside your mouth. And, because they are touching, even if on their own they are slightly out of tune, they pull each other into synchrony, and that's beautiful, a magical sound."

Playing duration, however, is limited: even an experienced, dry-mouthed player is doing well to keep the launeddas going with the reeds in perfect synchrony for more than 20 minutes or so.

"Your mouth needs to be dry to have the largest window of opportunity for perfect intonation," said Barnaby Brown. "You take your pipe out of the case, you put it into your mouth, you play... it takes maybe 20 seconds to come in, then you have 20 minutes of playing time, then you put it back in the case, wiping any moisture from the reeds. The only time you ever change the wax on the tongues is in the first minute of playing.

"You shouldn't take it in and out of your mouth because the humidity changes will give you intonation problems. If you're playing a lot, the reeds get easier and sharper, and might stop in mid performance. In that case, you'd carefully bend the tongues of the chanter reeds open, using your thumb at the root, and a knife at the tip; then let it rest for a few minutes," he said. "You can also add or remove wax from the tongues, to tune the chanter without altering its strength or balance of tone.

"Luigi Lai, the greatest living player and tradition bearer for Sardinian launeddas, plays particularly hard reeds and therefore has to play all his instruments frequently. But they stay in tune longer.

"A hotter climate helps and one doesn't really make triple pipes during the winter. The cane responds better during the summer and

the season for making instruments would be from Easter to October."

Having established himself in a remote part of northwestern Sardinia, Barnaby Brown went first to launeddas-maker Pitano Piera. "He sweetly gave me a punto organu in G, on which I began learning circular breathing," he said. "That part was easy: the hard thing was separating the two hands. On the Highland bagpipe, you have one chanter and play only one note at a time. With the triplepipe, you have two chanters, and two things going on at the same time. Your brain has to send different simultaneous streams of signals to each hand, and that was hard: getting my right hand to play one rhythm, and my left hand to play a different rhythm, and keep the circular breathing going."

The independence of the two hands opens a different musical scope to the triplepipe player. "Musically, if anything, it is more sophisticated than the Highland bagpipe," said Barnaby Brown. "You don't have just one drone, you have three. One is fixed and two are movable in the sense that, when your fingers are closed, covering all of the holes, the drone notes of the chanters blend perfectly into the sound of the bass drone, the *tumbu*, disappearing into its rich harmonic spread. Well-tuned, it sounds as if the two chanters have fallen silent.

"Sometimes the chanters drone at the octave and the fifth, sometimes at the octave and the major third: any note that can fool the human ear into thinking it is an overtone of the bass: then the chanter drone disappears, making it possible to play staccato. This brings an infinite variety of expression to the length or articulation of each melody note. The contrast of legato and staccato playing is scarcely used on the Highland bagpipe," he said, "but it provides rich musical pickings on the triplepipe.

"Each *kunsertus*, or variety of triplepipe, has a different configuration of the two chanter drone notes, and the four melody notes above each of these. But those melody notes can also function as a drone. So, by lifting your little finger on either chanter, you can change one or both of the movable drone notes in the middle of a piece. Your melodic range is

then limited by one note: you have three melody notes on each hand instead of four. But these two movable drones mean that you can play around with harmony in a far richer way than is possible on the bagpipe.

“It’s a completely different musical world,” he said: “one that, rhythmically and polyphonically, allows for greater creativity.

“You simply do not need more than nine notes to make a world-class piece of music, as piobaireachd composers have well demonstrated. It’s unfortunate that the makers of ‘medieval’ instruments so often feel compelled to add keys and notes to instruments, so they can play music of a later age. As far as the bagpipe or any instrument with a drone is concerned, this is a serious error of judgment.

“Adding notes doesn’t increase your flexibility and it hinders anyone who is serious about re-discovering medieval music. In fact, having fewer notes at your disposal stimulates creative brilliance — genius of a medieval sort, I admit, but isn’t the Book of Kells beautiful? Composing for triplepipe, that is the sort of aesthetic I am aiming at.

“The best tunes and greatest excellence in musical craftsmanship in piobaireachd and triplepiping occur where you use only six or seven of your nine available notes — and, for 95 per cent of the time, only five or six notes. That gives it a colour of its own, and leaves room for contrast and surprise, or the fulfillment of expectation.

“With more notes, the music often becomes bland, and this is true of a lot of modern bagpipe composition. In teaching bagpipe composition, I would always say, first, cut out three notes — then you can create something that is distinctive that is genuine bagpipe music and that won’t be boring because you can go to another key, you can create colour. In the launeddas tradition, they do this brilliantly.”

Barnaby Brown found himself in awe of the traditional Sardinian repertoire. “A bit like piobaireachd, it’s very special,” he said: “unique, vast and immensely rich ... extraordinary in its creative and imaginative scope, given that launeddas music is almost entirely in 6/8.

“A free tuning prelude is followed by a continuous stream of micro-variations. There are about six different types of launeddas — *kunsertos* — and each can be made in a range of keys. And each has its own principle “*nodas*” or variations... and a triplepiper typically carries



BAND-RE -- Barnaby Brown on triple pipes and Gianluca Dessi on guitar -- is joined by Andalusian percussionist Andrea Ubach (right): the line-up that features on the group’s recently released album, *Strathosphere...* “It’s me launching the Gaelic triple pipe; saying it exists, we had it 1,000 years ago and if we want to bring it back into the modern Gaelic tradition: here is the kind of thing it can do.”



Photos: Elinor Brown

20-30 instruments in his case.”

The difference between a bad launeddas player and a good one is that, in the course of a dance, a less expert player, knowing fewer variations, has to repeat sections. A great performance may present a string of 80 or so *nodas* but a learner would know perhaps only 10 principle variations, which are always played in the same order. The variable number of variations played, linking each principle *noda* seamlessly into the next, is the ‘improvisation’ and herein is the measure of the player’s greatness.

“The master player is able to stretch out the principle *nodas*, never playing the same variation twice,” said Barnaby Brown. “It is about very subtly changing one note, one rhythm, or one little effect — there’s a fabulous recording by the 78 year-old Antonio Lara that lasts 13 minutes and illustrates this process wonderfully. It has all of the qualities one might expect in a Bach fugue: an evolving argument leading to a succession of climaxes with points of repose between, and moments of melodic beauty that contrast with passages of textural delight. The old masters of launeddas — Efsio Melis, Antonio Lara, Aurelio Porcu, Dionigi Burranca — combined the cerebral side of music with a spontaneous musical creativity that is passionate, rhapsodic, melodic and flowing. I think all great music, the music that endures in any tradition, combines these opposite forces to give it its musical depth.”

Sardinia’s launeddas dance music tradition was fundamental to community life in south and central parts of the island.

“Basically, every village had its launeddas player,” said Barnaby Brown. “They were employed by the bachelors who went around every year to collect grain and gifts for their launeddas player because it was only at the dances after Mass on Sunday that unmarried youths were

allowed to meet and hold hands — under the gaze of the village elders, of course.

“The dances are similar to Breton circle or chain dances. Everyone joins in, forming a circle in the piazza, and the circle gradually makes a clockwise rotation. Now and then a couple, or several couples, go to the centre and display their virtuosity: an opportunity for the guys to show off.

“The young men wanted the best launeddas player for their village festivals, because that would attract girls from all around.”

Stories are told of the jealously protective pride of the old launeddas masters, a trait Barnaby Brown compares with the “almost druidic pride” of the great Highland players of the past. “Music is one of the most powerful overt expressions of any social group,” he said. “Leading practitioners can hold a powerful spell over the community, and that power is often displayed in proprietorial and egotistical behaviour. We live in a very different world today, one where people go out of their way to explain things to learners of all abilities, but that’s a fairly recent attitude.

“Some of the older masters of Sardinian launeddas were notorious, not only for being difficult socially but also, even if their apprentices’ parents were paying handsomely for tuition, for going out of their way to make it impossible for their students to progress beyond a certain point. If you taught your pupil your best variations and he was a good enough player, you might lose your festival contracts to him. What tended to happen was that, when a player was retiring, he would choose his favourite pupil and only then teach him all the best stuff.

“An ambitious student — and there are many stories of this sort of thing — who once hid under the platform to hear his own teacher play, and was discovered, had all of his reeds broken

by his teacher in a fit of anger.

“I think a similar jealousy may well have been a part of the problem in 18th century Scotland. There’s not a lot of evidence, but I wonder whether the closure of the MacCrimmon college was not partly to do with a feeling that students were not up to scratch. This unwillingness to teach inferior students would correspond with the way older players in Sardinia disliked giving their riches away too easily: one chooses one’s initiates carefully.”

In Sardinia, the launeddas tradition was all but lost by the 1970s.

“In the 1930s, Mussolini set about unifying Italy in language, customs and manners in the same sort of way that King James I and VI began doing throughout Scotland and Ireland in 1601,” said Barnaby Brown. “Anything peculiar to a locality was frowned on and, in clothing, language and culture, people were encouraged — in certain ways, forced — to embrace a modern pan-Italian identity.

“Triplepipers lost their status and livelihood and, by the 1970s, there really weren’t any young players,” said Barnaby Brown. “It’s only been since the 1980s that the launeddas has come back to life — in no small measure thanks to Andreas Bentzon. Through his work, younger players have been able to salvage the tradition in a state of relative richness.

“And Dante Olianias has done sterling work in Sardinia, going out on a limb to raise awareness and promote the value of a tradition that was being completely overlooked. He struggled against the musical climate of Cagliari back in the 1970s and really changed things for the better. Most importantly, he went to Copenhagen and found, not only the recordings, but also cine film taken by Andreas Bentzon. He has edited a beautiful film and published three CDs to go with Bentzon’s transcriptions so, for the first time, people could look at the transcriptions and hear the music.

“Although few people nowadays know the steps of the old village dances, there are some excellent young launeddas players around — Andrea Pisu, Roberto Tangiano, Stefano Pirras and others — but now the dance music is performed on stage with microphones and the people just stand, listening.

“Where it goes, now that the music has lost its original function, is an open question. In Scotland in the 18th century, we invented the competition and piobaireachd found its new

function and began to develop in a new way. I’m sure something of the sort will happen with launeddas. The tradition is so rich and so beautiful ... it will survive but it’s going to change and that’s not a bad thing.”

Having familiarised himself with the instrument, however, Barnaby Brown embarked on a very different path to that of the young players of the emerging Sardinian revival.

“The traditional Sardinian repertoire is their territory,” he said. “I was curious about the origins of piobaireachd and more interested in exploring my hypothesis that piobaireachd developed from a Gaelic triplepipe tradition.

“To make the Sardinian instruments sound more ‘Gaelic’, I flattened the seventh, and changed the selection of melody notes on each chanter in relation to the drone. My aim is to create a family of triplepipes suitable for accompanying Celtic Christian chant and *sean nos* singing, and on which you can compose variations that tie in with the earliest surviving Gaelic,” he said.

“The musical grammar I’ve found most applicable is that copied by the Welsh harper, Robert ap Huw, in about 1613. This examination syllabus for Welsh harpers in the 16th century was claimed to have been laid down in Ireland in the late 12th century and, although that’s a shaky tradition possibly invented at the time to give status to its central system of 24 designs, it is perhaps no coincidence that several of these Welsh designs appear in piobaireachd verbatim, and a similar mentality pervades piobaireachd generally.

“So I’ve used these symmetrical patterns of consonance and dissonance as the basis of my own composition.” One of these works features on the album he has recorded with Sardinian guitarist Gianluca Dessi. They have played gigs together for the past two years as the duo Band-Re: presenting Highland pipes, smallpipes, triplepipes and whistles accompanied by guitar and bouzouki to audiences all over Sardinia. On the album, *Strathosphere*, they are joined by Catalan percussionist Andreu Ubach.

“I was bowled over to find here in the capital of northern Sardinia, a Sardinian guitarist and bouzouki player who was using DAGDA tuning and already had a huge Irish repertoire and some Scots tunes,” said Barnaby Brown “We began collaborating. Thanks to gigging with Gianluca, I’ve seen the remotest villages of Sardinia — and the Sardinians really know

how to put on a party.

“We developed our own music. I’ve composed a number of things and Gianluca’s great at hearing something once and instantly coming up with a brilliant guitar accompaniment, so we do a few Gaelic songs, a few Burns songs, some original music... and I play a medley of ceol beag and ceol mor to kick off the gig on the great Highland bagpipe.

“What audiences have most appreciated is when I bring out the triplepipe, and explain that it is not just a Sardinian instrument, but a Scottish one too. This is a bombshell. They are quite possessive about their tradition, but they like what they hear. I explain that we foolishly allowed it to die out a millennium ago. It gives great satisfaction that someone from outside should take so much interest and show a respect they are not accustomed to seeing.

“With Band-Re (canntaireachd for the crunluath movement), I play the triplepipe in a way that combines Sardinian tradition with medieval and modern Gaelic music. And I’ve had fun experimenting with Arabic rhythms: Celtic-Arabic fusion I suppose. The triplepipe solo on the album, named after John Purser, uses a lot of ideas stolen from piobaireachd.

“This CD launches the Gaelic triplepipe; we’re saying that this instrument exists. Ireland and Scotland revered it 1,000 years ago — enough to carve it on several high crosses. If we want to bring it back into the modern Gaelic tradition, here’s what it can do.”

Barnaby Brown, recently returned to Glasgow, believes the triplepipe is an instrument that can usefully be usefully explored by anyone with a taste for Celtic music.

“But it’s not a developed industry and you can’t just go into a shop and buy a launeddas that’s any good. Some people would rather exchange instruments than sell them.

“If you want a good instrument, it’s best to hop on a flight to Sardinia and meet people like Franco, Pitano, Luciano, Orlando... and I have put up a website, www.triplepipe.net, to share what I have learned and help people make contacts. And I would be happy to give triplepipe lessons in Glasgow to anyone who’s interested.

“It’s not everyone’s cup of tea — like piobaireachd, some people have a strong aversion to triplepipe music — but it is certainly a magnificent expression of mankind’s musical genius.” ●