

Grace Notes

Had I known the effect my bagpipes would have on people and animals, I'd have learned to play them earlier. People who love music, or any of the arts, also love to respond to it. And with bagpipe music in particular there is no lack of opinion. Certainly, there is no middle ground. People hate it or love it.

“Squeeze your cat with one hand and play the piano with your other hand, and you'll have the sound of the bagpipes,” a friend told me. Indeed, for decades, my beloved instrument has taken it on the chin. Musical purists cite the bagpipes' skirl—that piercing wail—as obnoxious. And to an extent I have to agree with them. When it's out of tune the sound could probably remove paint. They also scoff at the idea of holding a leather bag beneath your arm and blowing into it. Perhaps it's just not as dignified as, say, the delicate fingering and precise embouchure required to play an oboe. In the family of orthodox musical instruments, bagpipes are the loud, insufferable cousin.

But after more than 24 years of practicing and performing, I've concluded that bagpipe music strikes something visceral in people and animals. My belief lies in the number of people who have stopped by to listen while I practice. Other people have asked me to play for a wedding or funeral, or give a presentation to a grade school class.

For the most part, they're curious. Think about it. Only for a few moments during a parade do most people get to see and hear a set of bagpipes. You probably won't find a piper in your child's junior high school band. Therefore, a bagpiper practicing in a park is like a deer in the woods. People want to stop and look, but they're cautious about those large, humming drones on the piper's shoulder and the wailing chanter in his hands.

Public curiosity became apparent to me one summer day in the early '90s. During a family picnic at a park in Tacoma, Washington, near Puget Sound, I took my pipes out and began playing. I faced the water and drew a little inspiration from Mount Rainier, relishing the melody of *Scotland The Brave* as it floated out across sun-capped crests on the waves. When I finally stopped and turned around, a half-dozen kids, none of whom were relatives, had lined up behind me, watching.

Since then I've met all kinds of people in parks, campgrounds, and beaches. More than one mother with her child has watched from a distance while I played. A few have approached cautiously and asked something like, "Can he, you know, just hold them a sec?" Many people want to know how they're played. "So you blow into that bag, and—then what happens?" Once a month or so, I find myself giving people a short, rudimentary lesson.

I've also noticed that the bagpipes' unique sound draws people—and a few other species—to take an interest, however fleeting, in the music. I had thought horses would be kind of high strung—like the musical purists—and therefore react unpredictably to the loud hum and the wail. But I've played my pipes near horses several times, and, initially, they'll show interest, sauntering to the corral fence and watching for a few moments. Then, like a group of high school jocks, they'll turn away, as if to say, "Yeah, whatever."

Birds are the high-strung ones. Some of them, among all creatures, are the musical purists. Ironically, it was with a male peacock, whose call sounds much like a bagpiper who's just been shot, that I had my worst confrontation.

I was to play a wedding held at an exclusive restaurant in the foothills of the Wasatch Mountains in Salt Lake City. The setting was any bride's dream: an undulating lawn, flower-lined walks, red brick terraces, a large pond with ducks, ivy-laced French Provincial architecture,

and willow, pine, and aspen trees. And peacocks. There must have been six or seven of them strutting around the lawn. For the most part, they remained aloof. But as the wedding party settled into their seats, and I took my place and waited for my cue, one audacious bird came up to me, his tail brushing the ground behind him. I was to play *Highland Cathedral*, a beautiful processional, to which the bride would walk up the aisle to her awaiting groom. I primed my bag with the required air, and when the cue came, I struck it with my open hand, and my pipes began that strong, ubiquitous hum. I had hardly begun the melody when the peacock went berserk.

Its call wasn't the single, distant and haunting *ah-HA-ah*, you hear in the jungle movies, but a series of them, in rapid fire, like he was sending out a warning. I figured he would stop after a few moments, but he continued through most of the tune. The bride remained impervious as she moved up the aisle. Many in the crowd looked amused, and I realized, then, that I had been upstaged by a bird.

My most endearing experience with animals took place just outside of Torrey, Utah, in the red rock region, near Capitol Reef National Park. I had been attending a writer's workshop, and my work had just been reviewed by an editor-at-large from one of the well-known publishing houses. Any earnest writer knows such an experience is often followed by hours of introspection, if not a few efforts to patch up what should have been thick skin.

That evening, after an expensive dinner, I took my pipes and walked about fifty yards from my motel to a bluff that looked out over miles of red sand and sagebrush to the Boulder Mountains in the distance. I began playing a dirge to the setting sun. A few people left their tables at the motel's restaurant and waved to me.

Feeling a bit more significant, I played some jigs and hornpipes. There was movement in the distance, and within a few seconds, through the sagebrush and juniper trees, came three

female deer. They stepped to within yards of the sandy cliff where I stood and stared at me intently. We were so close that I could see their dark eyes, their twitching ears, and their tongues as they licked their lips.

We stood there, fascinated, I like to think, by our common presence. Certainly, they had seen a human before. I alone was nothing new. It was the sound that captivated them. My imagination ran away with me, then, and as I played I saw one of them turn to one of the others and whisper, “Be careful, Mildred. Don’t get too close. We don’t want to scare him.”

It was the sound that captivated them, and it is the sound that captivates most people, too. A few evenings ago a grandmother said to me, “We were out on our porch and we heard you, and I said, ‘I know who that is.’ So we came over to listen to you.” She lives more than a quarter mile from the park where I was practicing.

To me, dozens of similar encounters each year indicate some primeval response is aroused, some instinctive switch is turned at the sound of bagpipe drones. The “ubiquitous hum” is simultaneously powerful and peaceful. Powerful in that it can command attention from great distances. Powerful in that, when several pipers strike in (start their drones) together, the sound seems as if it could pneumatically lift small buildings. And yet, they are peaceful in the way that mantra meditation, characterized by the recitation of OM AH HUM, seems to clarify consciousness. It is the white sound, the unblemished canvas upon which a piper paints an abundance of acoustic images.

Such renderings might be lyric or martial, joyful, majestic, or mournful. Most of the time, the names of bagpipe tunes will give you a hint to their nature: *The Clumsy Lover*, *The Drunken Landlady*, *Pumpkin’s Fancy*, *Gaelforce Wind*, *Maggie’s Pancakes*, *The Green Hills Of Tyrol*, *The 53rd Highland Division*, *The Mist Covered Mountains*, *The Battle’s O’er*, *The Haunting*.

And yet, compared to other instrumentalists, bagpipers have a limited palette from which to work. A pianist enjoys a range of 88 notes. A violinist gets around 53. A trumpet player with good chops will get 28-32. A bagpiper gets nine. Bagpipe music has no accidentals (sharps or flats). Although you may occasionally hear some sweet harmonies, you will never hear any changes in key or dynamics. Bagpipers always play at fortissimo.

One might think these constraints would produce music that is mundane or tedious. Actually, they have forced pipers to be more resourceful with the little they have, and the ingenuity has paid off. Instead of sharps or flats, bagpipers over the ages have embellished their music with collections of grace notes. These groupings of notes (each with its own name) have further distinguished the music. The style has been replicated, somewhat, by the fiddle and the tin whistle, instruments that share the pipes' cultural heritage. But I dare any of the other "orthodox musicians" to attempt a bagpipe tune and achieve a similar style.

I tried it once, years ago, while playing the trumpet in high school. With the whole high school band watching, a friend of mine (who, a decade later, would teach me the pipes) opened a bagpipe music book to *Scotland The Brave* and set it before me on a music stand. In front of almost every note a group of grace notes hung there on the music staff like a bunch of grapes. In most clusters there were three notes. Many had four or five. I made it through about eight measures of music before giving up. Sight-reading it on the trumpet was like driving a mini-van over a boulder field. My friend looked at me blankly and said, "Well, that sorta sounds like it."

Naturally, the music's distinctive style precludes many other instruments from performing it. And rightly so. Over the years, the style has been woven into the fabric of Scottish tradition. Even if a tenor saxophonist could play *Flowers Of The Forest*, would anyone really

want him to dress in a kilt and ghillie brogues, stand in a windy glen in the Highlands, and perform?

Whether the Scots like it or not, bagpipes have become one of their cultural icons. Any bagpiper performing in public without a kilt will almost always be called to account for it, even by those who are not Scottish. During a wedding or a funeral, many are willing to become Scottish, however briefly, for the sake of having the pipes played at the service.

From a family with a Scandinavian surname:

Thank you for sharing your beautiful gift of music! It meant a lot to me personally and to Bruce's family to hear Amazing Grace played on your bagpipes. It's a song with special meaning and Bruce's mother's name is Grace and she was Lee's Amazing Grace...

I realize presenting these notes here borders on self-aggrandizement. If you think so, I apologize. I have kept these few missives over the years because they not only reinforce my belief about the pipes' visceral impact, but they also tell me I'm making people happy.

How can we ever tell you how much your Bagpipe music added to Scott's funeral and burial? Those who heard the pipes as they entered the chapel and those who listened at the graveside [made favorite comments]. We have viewed the video several times, and each time, those pipes thrill us and make us proud of our heritage. Thank you so much! (Will you play at our funerals, as well?)

From a Fine Arts Guild (which indicates I might be making headway among the musical purists):

Thank you so much for touching all of our hearts with your music and the history knowledge. We so much appreciated your time and

talents you shared with us. I'm sure now when we hear bagpipes we will have more appreciation for this instrument.

From a woman in a small, southern Utah town who had lost her husband:

I so wanted to send you our appreciation for a job WELL DONE. Monticello has not had a bagpiper here before and everyone remarked about their enjoyment of the tunes played. Keep in touch! (Learn "Loch Lomond" for me.) My Scottish people came from there!

The following letter came from a friend whose father had lived near my father in the same condominium neighborhood. These two older gentlemen, each somewhat irascible, had traded barbs during condo association meetings. My father had passed away just months earlier. When my friend phoned to inform me of his father's death, we joked lightly about how our fathers might be continuing their squabble in the Hereafter. I found myself in a position to talk him through his grief. I spent about an hour outlining what I had felt in the past months and what he might expect. The irony of the things left: sweaters, shirts, books, shoes, golf clubs—all the things that symbolize him. The habits and expectations that must be adjusted. How a day doesn't pass when I don't think of him.

A few days after the funeral, I received this from my friend:

Music has always been very important to my family. We all appreciate good music even though some of us (me) are not very musically inclined. I think I take after my father that way, since my mother has plenty of musical talent.

My father especially loved to hear the bagpipes played. It reminded him both of his missionary experiences and his family heritage. He had loved your playing ever since that summer day when you played at our family party. He would always remind me to make sure that when he died that I ask you to play at his interment...

...The entire family was deeply moved by the spirit present at the graveside as you played. Many wept as the sounds of Scotland filled the air on a cool autumn day. It was a very special moment for all of us—especially for our Father.

My only regret in playing the pipes is that I can't play them and write at the same time. My two favorite pastimes mutually exclude each other. Of course, this conflict is nothing new. A photographer who also enjoys fencing or a writer who loves to play baseball must deal with the conundrum of dividing their time. Photographing a portfolio of fencers or writing a novel about baseball are enjoyable but temporary compromises.

I have considered that I might be a better writer if I sold my pipes. I could become a better piper if I would just quit writing. On the surface, at least, it simply makes sense to commit to one thing and excel at it. In music, literature, sports, and stage, we've seen the inspiring results of such tremendous focus. But I have made people happy with both my piping and my writing. If I were to quit either of them, there would be fewer such people in my world. I'm perfectly willing to waffle in the hopes of making more.

Ted Olson