

A Celtic Connection: Scotland at the Festival Interceltique de Lorient

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Résumé :

Présents au Festival Interceltique de Lorient depuis sa création en 1971, de nombreux musiciens écossais y ont trouvé pour certains l'opportunité de se produire pour la première fois à l'étranger, pour d'autres celle de voir leur art et leur musique reconnus à l'échelle internationale. Cette reconnaissance jona pour beaucoup dans l'essor de la musique écossaise des années 1970 et 1980. La présente contribution retrace le contexte et l'impact de la contribution des Écossais au Festival en s'appuyant sur les témoignages des musiciens, des articles de presse et les archives personnelles de l'auteur. Inscrite dans une réflexion sur les interactions musicales entre la Bretagne et l'Écosse depuis le début du XX^e siècle, cette contribution démontre qu'il y a là tout un champ de recherche encore largement inexploré.

Summarie:

Ilka year sin 1971, aye roun Lammas time, fowk frae a' the Celtic lands, and far ayont, hae been gaitherin at the auld haven o The Orient in Morbihan, Bretan³e, for braw music and richt guid crack. At first the Scots squad wis jist lads wi the muckle pipes – ordinar fowk frae touns the likes o Fa'kirk, Grangemouth an Glesca - but afore lang they were jined bi chanters, fiddlers, box-players, bands, dancers, hawkers and showfolk o a kinds, an frae a the airts, Heilan and Lowlan. Nou its jist wan grand stramash, the maist muckle o its kind in the hale world. These pickle lines gie the tale o the Scots musicianers wha have cam oer the years an hou they jined wi their Breton, Irish and Welsh brithers and sisters. It taks a keek at hou the festival gied them a space and time awa frae hame that helped heeze their herts and heids and steered them tae seek a voice and identity, tae rise aboon the "Scottish Cringe", tae hear byordinar sounds and tae hae the virr tae forge new yins o their ain oot o the auld. Gien the 2017 festival is cried "The Year o Scotland", an screevit in the licht and faa-oot o the Brexit stooshie, it reflecks on whaur it micht gan frae here and wunners whit the Meenisters an ither high-beidyins maun say, gin they attend.



My principal research interest is around Scottish traditional music in the 20th century. Much of my work seeks to map and understand the developments in instrumental music that occurred in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and laid the foundations of the healthy situation in Scottish music that we enjoy today. In this I am fortunate on a number of counts:

- many of the musicians from that period are still with us and are able to share their testimony and experience;
- there is a vast, if scattered legacy of recordings, ephemera, programmes, press reports, photographs etc.; and
- I myself was a practicing musician during this phase and experienced many of the events first hand.

I am anxious to identify turning points, individuals, institutions, influences, events, places and sites that were key to the revival processes. I am also interested in how Scottish musicians took their music to the wider world, how it was received and how it was sustained and moulded in return. In this regard it is clear that musical connection

and interaction with Brittany has been particularly important and that within this the Lorient festival has been crucial¹.

Since its inauguration in 1971 the *Festival Interceltique de Lorient* has now become “one of the most important cultural events in Europe. It is also one of the most visible manifestations of *interceltisme*...”². The roots of the festival may be found in the efforts of those in the Celtic revivals of the late 19th century and in particular the exchanges and borrowings between nations that were involved. Eisteddfod and Celtic Congresses served as important inter-cultural meeting points and the adoption of neo-druidism and Gorsed festivals in Brittany brought Scottish, Irish and Welsh poets, singers and musicians into direct contact with local musicians. The development of a new Breton musical culture in the interwar period built on this and was particularly inspired and influenced by the music of Scotland, particularly the harp and bagpipe traditions which served as models. This revival, however, did not involve simple adoption of instruments and tunes but was rather a slower process of strategic and gradual assimilation and adaptation. Associated with this phase were Bretons Taldir Jaffrennou and his son Gildas, Dorig le Voyer and Hervé le Menn and, from Scotland, piper Seton Gordon and harpist Heloise Russell Fergusson.

The year 1943 saw the foundation of the organisation Bodadeg ar Sonerion (BAS) which encouraged the formation of the first Breton pipe bands, or *bagadoù*, inspired by Scotland³. Experience of British military pipe bands and visits by ensembles such as the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band in the immediate post Second World War period were highly influential and by 1953 competitions were introduced and an international festival of bagpipes was established at Brest. Scottish and Irish pipers were regularly invited to serve as judges and as performers while musicians went from Brittany to study at the College of Piping in Glasgow. In time, the bagpipe festival

1. This paper is a preliminary exploration of the subject that will be expanded in due course.

2. Erwan CHARTIER-LE FLOCH, “1971. Création du Festival Interceltique de Lorient”, in blog *Histoires de Bretagne*, Uploaded 10 June 2010, URL: <http://ablogjeanfloch.over-blog.com/article-1971-creation-du-festival-interceltique-de-lorient-51023429.html> (Accessed 1 October 2016).

3. Armel MORGANT, *Bagad vers une nouvelle tradition*, Spézet, Coop Breizh, 2005.

transplanted to Lorient and developed into an event with a broader inter-Celtic musical focus. The Lorient festival was largely the initiative of Polig Monjarret (1920-2003), a controversial figure but someone highly celebrated as a collector of Breton music and a driver of musical developments⁴.

The precise details of Monjarret's personal experience with and links to Scotland are not clear but there may have been a connection with Scottish folklorist and collector Hamish Henderson⁵. Of course, the highly popular Scots ballad *The Twa Corbies* is sung in Scotland to the Breton tune *An Alarc'h* or *Al Alarc'h* that was adopted by the singer Thurso Berwick, (Morris Blythman, 1914-1981) from Zaig, wife of Polig, probably in the late 1950s⁶. In 1972 the position of festival director was assumed by musician Jean-Pierre Pichard who brought his own connections with the Scottish musical world and began work with a Scotland-based national administrator on the selection of artists and representatives and developing the programme for each years' event⁷. This involved research visits to Scotland⁸.

Despite using so-called "Highland" bagpipes, the pipe bands of Scotland are principally an urban, lowland rather than a rural highland phenomenon, most having their roots in the army or in the towns of the industrial central belt. Prominent among the early visitors to Lorient was Muirhead and Sons Pipe Band that was established under the patronage of a timber company at Grangemouth near Falkirk in 1928. As early as 1952 they had participated in the *Fête de Cornouaille* at Quimper and had toured Brittany⁹. In 1974 the band made a long-play album

4. For a detailed description of developments during this period published in English see Yann BÉVANT, "Nations in Tune", in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium 2009*, Volume 29, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard, 2011, pp. 30-44.

5. Patrick MALRIEU, "Kanaouennoù", *Musique Bretonne* No. 237, October-December 2013, pp. 38-41.

6. Norman BUCHAN, *101 Scottish Songs*, Glasgow, Collins, 1962, p. 103, p. 154.

7. Gildas JAFFRÉ "Jean-Pierre Pichard, globe-trotter des Celtes!", *Ouest-France*, 27 October 2013.

8. The Scottish clarsach player and singer Rhona MacKay recalled, in a personal communication, that she was invited by Mr Pichard to perform at one of the first festivals.

9. *Muirhead & Sons Pipe Band finding aid*, Falkirk Archives, Records of Organisations: http://www.falkirkcommunitytrust.org/heritage/archives/finding-aids/docs/organisations/Muirhead_Sons_Pipe_Band.pdf (Accessed 1 October 2016).

Champion du Monde that was recorded at Lorient¹⁰. The title refers to the fact that they were World Champions in 1955 and 1956 and 1961 and later, under Pipe Major Robert G. Hardie, in 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968 and 1969. They last performed at the Lorient festival in 1976 and the band ceased playing in 1978. Another Falkirk based band, The Wallacestone Pipe Band, perhaps the oldest civilian pipe band in the world, became a regular visitor to Brittany at both the *Festival Interceltique* in Lorient and the *Fête de Cornouaille*. This was highly appropriate as by this time Falkirk was twinned with Quimper and strong personal and musical links with the famous band Bagad Kemper and other local musicians had been laid. In 1980 the band recorded its album *Stirling Bridge* for the Lorient-based record label Arfolk¹¹. Dougie Alexander, the Scottish administrator for the festival during the 1970s and 80s, had been a drummer with both bands.

The interaction between Scottish and Breton bands and pipers had consequences in terms of style, repertory and performance for both musical traditions but there were challenges and considerable conservative pressures from the Scottish piping establishment, as Gilles Goyat ably describes in the present volume. In addition to ensemble playing, solo Highland piping came to take a central role at the festival, attracting the finest musicians to its competitions. A key feature is the MacCrimmon Trophy (formerly Macallan), for which contestants are required to play a selection of music from Ireland, Brittany and Scotland before three sets of judges from each place. The prizemoney for the trophy is among the most lucrative in piping. There are also *Piobaireachd* and informal “Kitchen Piping” contests.

The early festivals featured folk song groups from Scotland. The highly popular duo The Corries were invited but declined to participate as they felt their distinct form of verbal communication with their audiences, so effective in Scotland, would not be successful

10. Published by SBE, Lorient.

11. <http://www.wallacestonepipeband.com/history>: “Arfolk est un label discographique indépendant née à Lorient en 1967 par Jo (Georges) Gagnic. Spécialisée dans la musique bretonne, la maison de disque s’ouvre ensuite à la musique celtique. Elle est rachetée par Coop Breizh en 1985.” URL: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arfolk> (Accessed 1 October 2016).

in France¹². However their contemporaries, the Scottish male vocal trio The MacCalmans, reflected more closely the traditional singing groups of Brittany with their entertaining repertory of historical ballads and sea songs. Along with other musicians associated with the festival, the group featured on the 1974 long-play record *Chants et Danses de Bretagne d'Écosse et d'Irlande*, the sleeve notes of which were written by Polig Monjarret¹³. That the band became highly popular in Brittany is confirmed by the fact that in 1979 they undertook a fifteen-concert tour of the region, dropping in to enjoy the festival between engagements¹⁴.

In 1975 the groups The Laggan and The Battlefield Band were Scottish representatives. The following year The Laggan released their album *Scottish Folk Songs* and The Battlefield Band their *Scottish Folk*, both made for Arfolk Records. A few years later the company issued Battlefield Band member Brian McNeill's solo album *Monksgate*. This commercial and artistic interest was important as at that time Scottish folk bands had limited access to recording opportunities in their own country and most looked abroad for contracts. Such recognition and endorsement also helped encourage the Scottish musicians to follow professional musical paths.

Gaelic song was represented, in 1975, by Kenna Campbell and her group Na h-Eilthirich which had won the folk-singing competition at the 1972 Gaelic Mod at Inverness. In 1979 Father Angus MacQueen brought a group of young singers from his Hebridean island of Barra who demonstrated *waulking*, the shrinking of tweed, to Gaelic vocal accompaniment. As reported in the Scottish press at the time, following a visit to the Lorient fish market, he took the opportunity to make statements about the unfair competition he claimed Scotland's island fishermen were suffering through French and Breton boats taking shellfish from Scottish waters. He also made disparaging comments on the music of the youthful, Lowland Scottish bands he encountered at the festival¹⁵. The following year Gaelic singer Christine

12. Personal communication with Gilles Goyat.

13. Concert Hall, SVS 2907.

14. Colin MACDONALD, "Tour time for the Scottish groups", *Glasgow Herald*, 1 September 1979, p. 8.

15. Brian WILSON, "'Pere' MacQueen – Not a man to mince his mots!", *West Highland Free*

Primrose attended and soon after Flora MacNeill of Barra and her daughter Maggie MacInnes became regular visitors.

From the outset, the Scottish musical delegations had included instrumental bands, typically comprising fiddle, accordion, keyboard, double bass and drums, to play for Scottish Country Dancing displays and in social gatherings. For instance, the Lorne Scottish Dance Band attended in the early 1970s when they too recorded for Arfolk¹⁶. However, as the 1970s progressed, the Scottish folk song bands also began to include more instrumental music in their programmes, under the influence of then successful Irish groups and, from Brittany, the pioneering output of Alan Stivell and others. This saw the emergence of a new type of Scottish ensemble centered around the bagpipe and its repertoire that was particularly appropriate for the Lorient event which, as late as 1976 was still officially titled *Festival Interceltique des Cornemuses*¹⁷.

Some groups simply adopted the great Highland bagpipe into their line-ups while others developed or revived smaller, quieter bagpipes that allowed for an easier blend with fiddle, harp and flute and integration into the informal sessions that became an essential feature of the festival. All of this took careful thought, knowledge and experimentation and it is perhaps no coincidence that key musicians in these pioneering ensembles had all been associated with the Muirhead and Wallacestone pipe bands and had been previous visitors to Lorient.

The Clutha, from Glasgow, were the first, with piper Jimmy Anderson of Falkirk who made their mouth-blown Scottish smallpipes, to be followed soon by The Whistlebinkies featuring Rab Wallace on bellows-blown Lowland bagpipe and smallpipes along with the fiddle and Celtic harp. On one early visit to the festival The Whistlebinkies met with Polig Monjarret who showed his manuscript collection of

Press, 24 August 1979 and Alan MCFADYEN, "The Sound and the Fury", Letter to the editor, *West Highland Free Press*, 14 September 1979. Cuttings in collection of the author.

16. *Danses Écossaises Vol. 2*, Arfolk SB 319. Other early visitors from Scotland included the fiddle-centered Wee County Scotia Players from Clackmannanshire that included a young Alasdair Fraser and the band Heritage from Fife.

17. 1976 festival programme and invitation. Collection of the author.

Breton folk music and shared tunes that the band incorporated into their repertory and included on subsequent albums.

The younger generation of Scottish pipers that subsequently followed were less hidebound by the formal conventions of the pipe band world, absorbing influences of Brittany and Ireland more easily and being more willing to experiment. These included, in 1976, the short-lived but influential band Alba, with young Highland piper Alan MacLeod and the fiddle-led Tannahill Weavers, who added pipes to their line up shortly afterwards. In 1979 the festival featured folk groups Kentigern, with Dougie Pincock on smallpipes, and Molendinar employing two sets of Highland bagpipes along with fiddles¹⁸. The band Ossian, with Highland piper Iain MacDonald, also participated around that time.

Away from the concert stages and competition platforms, the festival offered endless opportunities for informal inter-Celtic interaction and exchange, often fuelled by cider, Muscadet and enthusiastic audiences and it was inevitable that this would have musical consequences. For many, it offered the first opportunity to perform outside their home country or area and such recognition and attention contributed greatly to the emerging confidence in Scottish musicians during at that time. The lyrical melodies, tune structure and modality of much Breton music struck a chord with young Scottish musicians not least because of its striking affinity with a strand of Scottish music then fashionable that was associated with the southern Outer Hebrides, the compositions of pipers such as Duncan Johnson of Glasgow and the influence of more relaxed styles of playing they also found in Irish music.

The epitome of this new wave was surely piper Gordon Duncan (1964-2005) who had a natural affinity with Breton music and was twice the winner of the Macallan Trophy at Lorient. His unique playing and compositions, including his piece *Lorient Mornings*, made him a

18. "Molendinar, ces Écossais qui font danser", *Le Télégramme* (Morbihan edition), 9 August 1979, p. 7. Two of the members of Kentigern have recalled in a personal communication with the author how they made an earlier visit to the festival after hitchhiking from Scotland via Paris.

hero of younger musicians both in Scotland and in Brittany. Another innovative “star” player was Fred Morrison who continues to perform and compete at the festival.

Festival-based influence and exchange among Celtic musicians was always two-way, or more correctly, multi-directional. Celebrated Galician piper Carlos Núñez, for instance, has noted how his own music developed after his first visit to the Lorient festival aged 13 when he linked up with and took inspiration from Scottish pipers, including Fred Morrison, and also Irish and Breton musicians. In return, Breton pipers, such as Jakez Pincet, became expert innovators and creators within the Scottish tradition¹⁹.

The Lorient festival has also been influential through its commissioning and presentation of new works, often of a large scale and involving a pan-Celtic instrumentation. For instance, the Scottish composer Eddie McGuire, who first attended the event with the Whistlebinkies in 1976, produced his *Épopée Celtique*, a substantial work for symphony orchestra and traditional musicians that was subsequently repeated and later used in an opening concert of Glasgow’s Celtic Connections festival. Indeed, the Glasgow winter festival, perhaps Lorient’s current rival in terms of scale, was born under the influence of the Breton event.

Performing at the first decade of Lorient festivals required the Scottish delegations to undertake a long journey by road and ferry, sometimes with hostile security checks (this being the height of the Troubles in Ireland) and customs inspections where musical instruments and records might be impounded. On one occasion, a work to rule by port staff left musicians stranded for hours at Roscoff leading to an impromptu cèilidh much to the delight of other passengers²⁰. In the face of such inconvenience, the early Scottish musicians were always jealous of their Irish counterparts who arrived by air flights and had received a Presidential send off the day before.

19. J. PINCET, *Musique Interceltique de Cornemuse. Highland Bagpipe Music from Brittany, Scotland, Ireland*, Vol 3, L’Hermitage, Pincet, 1983.

20. Colin MACDONALD, “Scots put protest to music”, *Glasgow Herald*, 17 August 1979, p. 2. Cutting in author’s collection.

However, things were to change. Over time the festival enlarged considerably to become more of a site of tourism and of commerce than one of cultural exchange and interaction. Rather than the original inter-Celtic presentation of a disparate range of related cultures there had been a trend towards a more homogeneous Celtic expression with the status of a major world music²¹. A world-wide market had also been opened up, facilitated by an enlarged European Customs Union, relatively inexpensive and easier air travel and digital communication. During the 1990s the Lorient festival entered a new phase that saw it begin to attract massive crowds and host international celebrity performers.

Things were happening in Scotland too. In August 2007, around 10 years ago, the Minister for Foreign and Cultural Affairs opened a special pavilion at the 37th Festival to serve as a hub during that event's designation as the Year of Scotland²². Funded by the Scottish Government, through the Scottish Arts Council to the tune of 450,000 euros and supported by Visit Scotland, the initiative included displays on golf, scenery, food, haute couture kilts and tartans. There were opportunities to sample smoked salmon, whisky and beer that, not surprisingly, proved highly popular and there was traditional music and dancing led by a core of very hard-working, young musicians. These and other Scottish performers gave more formal recitals throughout the event. There were also film and photographic exhibitions.

On the eve of the 2007 festival, Linda Fabiani, Scotland's Minister for Culture and External Affairs, agreed to answer some questions from the Breton press that have relevance today. She was asked: "One of the old slogans of the SNP (Scottish National Party) is 'Independence in Europe'. As head of European affairs, do you consider that this slogan is still valid? If not, what is your strategy?" to which she responded:

21. Philip V. BOHLMAN, *World Music. A very short introduction*, Oxford, Oxford, 2002, pp. 77-81.

22. "Scotland in focus at French festival". Press Release, Scottish Government, 17 July 2007, URL: <http://www.gov.scot/news/releases/2007/07/17100337>; "Ministers put £300,000 into Brittany festival to boost links with Celtic nations", *Scotsman*, 8 July 2007; Phil MILLER, "Fabiani to lead the pipers at parade for Breton Festival", *Glasgow Herald*, 2 August 2007.

We seek to strengthen our relations with the European Union and consider that Scotland has much to offer. Scotland is a nation prosperous and strong links with the rest of the EU are needed to develop as a nation. Scotland has its own legal system which differs from that the rest of the UK and on this subject, as well as other affecting the Scots, it's just that the voice of Scotland rises and is heard in Europe²³.

This was a very early cultural outing for the new Scottish administration led by the SNP that had been elected only a few months before. Some musicians and observers expressed disquiet at the sums being expended, suggesting that it should have been spread more widely at home. Perhaps unused to such generosity and attention, others accused the new nationalist government of politicising cultural traditions for its own ends²⁴. However, most critics were unaware that the official involvement had in fact been the initiative of the outgoing Scottish Labour Party-led administration and had been long in gestation. As far as I am aware, this was the first and only official UK/Scottish Government involvement in the festival since its inception in 1971²⁵.

Looking back to the first decades of the festival it is clear that, whatever the motivation of its organisers – and it is difficult to place a finger on precisely what that might have been – the musicians from Scotland have always regarded participation as wholly apolitical. Most have been there solely for the chance to play in a relaxed and appreciative setting with like-minded creatives, to learn, share, have a good time or earn recognition, prestige and part of their living.

23. Jacques-Yves LE TOUZE, "Linda Fabiani, ministre des Affaires étrangères, européennes et culturelles d'Écosse : il est juste que la voix de l'Écosse s'élève et soit entendue en Europe", *Agency Bretagne Presse*, 1 August 2007, URL: <https://abp.bzh/7594>

24. "Lorient 2007", thread at *Hands up for Trad* discussion forum, URL: <http://forum.handsupfortrad.co.uk/discussion/11515/lorient-2007> and author's personal communication with participating musicians.

25. It has been suggested, in a personal communication from a working party participant, that an approach was made to the festival organisers by the Scottish Arts Council's Traditional and Folk Arts of Scotland Working Party in the early 1980s seeking closer integration of the event with Scottish arts policy but this came to nothing. See *The Traditional Arts of Scotland. Report of the Traditional and Folk Arts of Scotland Working Party*, Edinburgh, Scottish Arts Council, 1984.

The 2017 *Festival Interceltique* is to be the next Year of Scotland and the Scottish Government will be involved once more. In the light of current political developments in Scotland and the consequences of the 2016 UK referendum decision on leaving the EU we cannot help but wonder what the official representative will say this time²⁶.

26. As a musical participant at the 2007 festival I was disappointed that the chance had not been taken to celebrate the decades of musical links between Scotland and Brittany that the festival clearly demonstrates. Aware that 2017 will again be Scotland's year I suggested to the Scottish representatives and organisers that this offered a fresh opportunity to do so. On 22 May 2017, Fiona Hyslop, Scotland's Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs, launched the Scottish programme for the 2017 festival in Paris with a statement that stressed Scotland's French rather than specifically Breton links. She said: "France and Scotland enjoy deep cultural ties and have a mutual 'Cultural Statement of Intent' between our nations, which I signed in 2013. We share a rich Celtic history of storytelling and traditional music and a great love of piping. For Scotland to be chosen as Country of Honour by the Festival Interceltique de Lorient further cements this important relationship." <http://www.creativescotland.com/what-we-do/latest-news/archive/2017/05/unprecedented-spotlight-on-scotland-at-2017-festival-interceltique-de-lorient>