

Grey's Notes

by Michael Grey



The best I ever played

WHEN I first starting competing in Scotland and going around the competitions, there was no shortage of fun to go along with the games. Like today, only it seems to me that then there were more eccentric, larger-than-life types around the whole of the scene. It may have been my youthful, wide-eyed interpretation of what I experienced that makes me think this. But then, on reflection, I don't think so.

I think my mum, and people of her generation especially, would call these folks, "characters". "He's a real character," said of the man who'd stand out from the crowd with an eccentric way with words, or unique ability to hold a group enthralled. Or maybe just simply make you look — or think — twice. To be a character is different from having good or bad character traits. A "character" is the sum total of all his character traits — the good, bad and, yes, the ugly. You knew that was coming. Still to be anointed "a character" is a good thing: people remember you and you're usually a person who brings something interesting to a social scene or situation. And finally, people who are the real "characters" that pepper our world rarely know they've made that mark. Blissfully unaware.

One of the characters of my early piping career was a Glaswegian. A piper. And to be fair, a lot of the characters of my memory of those days — and these days, for that matter — are pipers from Glasgow. The man in question: not all that tall, a solid if not compact frame and a good, well-fed rectangular-shaped face that affirmed his good island stock. He seemed always positive — happy even — as he made his way on the boards in his trademark short-cut tweed jacket and stylish Balmoral bonnet. And as you might expect, he was well-liked by his fellow competing pipers.

When faced with the — from time immemorial — post-solo contest piper's salutation, "how'd you get on?", he would reply the same way. Every. Single. Time. He'd say: "The best I've ever played in my life." And that was that. No false modesty. No pretence. Just a frank statement of fact as he saw it; he had played the best ever. Tempo could be out the window,

pipes discordant, technical misses aplenty. It never mattered, his tunes were his best. And his best tunes, for the record, were known to be very good indeed.

Of course. We would laugh, and not always with him. People being people, so often on the wrong side of compassion. But, still, no one thought too much about it. He was a real character.

In reading a recent online report of a piping event I was struck — again — at how brutally and unhelpfully critical we can be in publicly assessing each other's performances. Comments like: "We don't know where he gets his tuition but he'll never get a prize playing that way", or "the band's medley construction is simply poor" are not uncommon.

I suppose there is a place for literary criticism, a gracious acknowledgement, I know, or music and art criticism, in general. Critical assessments might bring broader understanding to words, sounds or images. And pipers are drawn to these critical assessments like nothing else.

Musicologist Winton Dean says music is probably the most difficult of the arts to criticise because music does not specifically relate to human sensory experience. While there are words for how we feel: anger, jealousy, anger, love, there are no specific notes on the any musical instrument that specifically aligns with one feeling or emotion. For instance, a bagpipe "E" does not precisely translate to a human emotion like, say, pity or embarrassment. Music can mean many different things to any one listener. This alone suggests musical criticism is profoundly subjective. Said Dean: "There is no counter-check outside the critic's own personality."

The closest thing we have in piping to counter-check a critic's perspective is the competition. Groups of critics — or judges — gather and from the process of competition, we have a distilled appraisal of merit.

Pipers must be among the judgiest people on the planet. It begins with the constructive direction of teachers and carries on through to a rigorous individual and group competitive



framework. The performer often even transitions to the formal critic: the hired judge.

But paid or not, pipers listen to pipe music through a filter of phenomenal bias, one often leaning to the flip side of positive. The piper laying out anything but the most blessed set of tunes might be pronounced a better player of a rusty saw, or, if lucky, a "you've played better".

When it comes to public piping criticism I have evolved in my thinking. I've published books and released records and so it's likely this has influenced my outlook, and I imagine I am in a good place to talk of the subject. All my projects received their due, one way or another. Subjective evaluations have spanned the critical spectrum from crap to not. And if we acknowledge that musical criticism is one of the most subjective, such criticism in a piping context is so much trickier.

Piping is a very small world. We all know each other or are only one or two degrees away from a good connection. If we're lucky there may be 100,000 of us in the world. 100,000? A small city — or large town. There's less than 1000 currently active in the global Grade 1 band scene. 1000? That's a village, surely. The active top-line solo scene might be fed and watered in a ten-a-penny hotel function suite. Again, it's a small world and the world of piping is especially so.

And so while we get all judgey (as is our fate) in how we listen to our music, the last thing we need are more public layers of criticism — subjective criticism — by people we know — or not. I'm surely pissing in the wind in any hope for a change but put your mind back to the great characters. Glasgow's back-in-the-day Balmoral man and his perennially positive mindset. He had a kindred spirit in Mozart who said: "I pay no attention whatever to anybody's praise or blame. I simply follow my own feelings."

Certainly always seek to improve but surely there's nothing wrong with a little dose of "the best I ever played", no matter how the fingers fly. ●