

Grey's Notes

by Michael Grey



It's big. It's bouncy. And it's spectacular

I think it was this past January when it came to me. It was one of those crisp, cloudless and cold sunny days, a kind of winter's day so familiar to those of us who live in my part of the world. The sky was screaming an indescribable deep blue. And why? Why blue? A short simple question – surely the archetypal young child's question, one asked just as a glimmer of awareness of the world beyond the back garden begins to show itself. Blue sky? Something to do with refracting light, I thought. Why blue? And *this* blue? Um, the temperature. Yes, it is the cold temperature and the universal prism...

At the time I didn't know, really. I had an idea and could babble out something that might shut a kid up and get a C- on an elementary school test. Maybe. In the off chance you don't know NASA tells us "blue light is scattered in all directions by the tiny molecules of air in Earth's atmosphere. Blue is scattered more than other colours because it travels as shorter, smaller waves."

Phew. When you start thinking of all the questions that might easily be asked of the common things around us it is awfully humbling to acknowledge what you don't know. There are not many questions more fraught and charged with potential risk and fall out from a faulty answer than the simple: why or what? Why is it that at street crossings the man is green – when he's not red? Why do we sometimes say "noon" for 12 o'clock? Why do things like fingers and toes wrinkle when left in water?

Again, we look to one of the brightest to ever live to remind us. Einstein: if you can't explain it simply, you don't know it well enough.

Aligned with my blue Ontario sky was a grey January Glasgow visit and a panel talk on piping innovation – and tradition. Dr Gary West facilitated the discussion – one where I was very happy to be a participant. The talk was lively and left me with the sad realisation that I'd again be the fair recipient of a C- if anyone asked me the simple question: what is traditional music? Or, even, what is "traditional" piping – which is more precisely the question I am talking about today.

Since that day in January I've asked a boatload of accomplished pipers (about six to a boat) and

one professor of anthropology that question. To the person, variants of these words quickly follow, "that's a really hard thing to answer". And, after 20 minutes or so, usually in a place with air a little hotter than at the time of the question's asking, there sits a couple of thousand spoken words (sort of) addressing the questions of what and why. Hell's bells, even The Piobaireachd Society precedes its definition of piping's big music with the words, "to describe a piobaireachd is not easy".

It must be said that a simple explanation does not necessarily translate to something that is not complex. People spend their lives examining simple questions of knotty subjects. People like Drs. West and Simon McKerrell, for instance, have done yeoman's work in the area of piping and Scottish traditional music – as both musicians and academics. Once more, Albert E. shines a light: everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler. I'm not an academic and as a person who has spent a lifetime paddling though the waters of piping, it annoys me that an easy explanation of "what is traditional" doesn't easily come to me.

It seems, too, we use the word traditional a lot in our lives – beyond any musical or arty connotation. To the new guy at work: "Come along to the Station Bar, we all traditionally go there on a Friday night." Or "the band traditionally tune up at the Green on the Barras end of the Greendyke Street entrance". Simple language. And these "traditions"? Three or four years old – maybe?

If you live long enough, you might be lucky *cough* enough to see one of your tunes be called "traditional". This has happened to me more than once – and I don't consider it luck, especially. For instance, a reel I made in 1985, *Fleshmarket Close*, is played by people from time to time – which pleases me – but it's frequently labelled "trad". Carnaptious feelings aside, this is interesting in the context of wrestling with an easy definition of traditional. In piping terms, where does "traditional" fit on a time continuum? Is it possible to set precise parameters?

Well, using my *Fleshmarket Close* example, it would appear, no, is the answer. And, yet, in all efforts I have encountered to define traditional music, a time element is almost always used as

a marker. Tunes performed over a long period (usually several generations), says the International Council of Traditional Music, an NGO associated with UNESCO. Their definition continues: "They are most often folk songs, country dance or similar types of folk music but they can also be pieces from known early composers and may have been the 'pop music' of their time."

In anything I've come across related to a clear definition of traditional music, a few words and phrases do burble up: the tradition is alive, it changes and there is an evolutionary dynamism to the music. There is a strong oral element with the music passed down from player to player (certainly this would have been integral to the survival of music before recording technology). In fact, it is the oral element that has allowed a broad variance to settings and styles – this is especially true in the time before the radio and Victrola. Traditional music, too, is reflective of culture – especially local culture. It reflects the vernacular where it was incubated. And, finally, the form is the music of the people, of folk.

It's this and – I know – so much more. I've come to think of all piping as traditional, regardless of if you're seated in a chair playing in a church hall, in a pub with a bouzouki and MacBook or in a castle drawing room. As a living tradition, innovative changes push and pull and ricochet around what is believed to be the foundational tradition. Some changes become part of the never-ending life of the tradition, some influence and some fall away. And what is believed to be traditional is in the ear of the listener: it is the experience of the listener that stands as a traditional filter – or definer. Their experience and their local view defines what is traditional music – to them. Their geography, kin and, yes, language will surely inform what music is sensed as traditional.

On that, to the promised punter's definition, I look to pornography and the famous 1964 US Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. Said Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in his judgement: "... But I know it when I see it [pornography], and the motion picture involved in this case is not that."

Traditional music? Traditional piping? I know it when I hear it. It's big. It's bouncy. And it's spectacular. ●