

Getting the Feet Tapping: Encouraging Pipers to Play for Cape Breton Style Percussive Step-Dancing in Scotland

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Since the first Cape Breton-style percussive step dance courses were held at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic College on the Isle of Skye, in the early 1990s, there has been interest in step dance in Scotland. Sabhal Mòr continues to offer week-long workshops annually, as does the Gaelic festival Ceòlas, which takes place each July in South Uist in the Outer Hebrides, with visiting tutors from Cape Breton Island. In addition, every year step dance is taught to young people attending most of the 44 annual *feisean* that are held throughout Scotland. “Fèis” is the Gaelic word for “festival” or “feast” and refers to music and dance instruction usually aimed at young people (<http://www.feisean.org/en/>). There are weekly classes in a number of different locations, along with occasional workshops in other areas.

It sounds as if step dance is thriving in Scotland, but is it? The step dance class environment could be considered a safe environment in which aspiring dancers can learn new skills or improve existing skills. But what opportunities exist in Scotland for performance outside the classroom or for using step dance in a social dance context? The answer has to be “very few”. This situation does not tend to encourage dancers to maintain their skills outside the classroom, as there is nowhere to perform. By contrast, in Cape Breton, solo step dancers perform between sets at square dances, as well as at variety concerts across the island. Square dances are held regularly throughout the summer and even throughout the year, albeit less often and in fewer locales. At other events and music sessions in Cape Breton, dancers will also spontaneously get up and step dance.

The lack of suitable dance performance contexts in Scotland is exacerbated by a lack of suitably performed dance music. This may appear strange, as Scotland and Cape Breton share a lot of common repertoire and a strong musical heritage. The interpretation of the music, however – its “swing” and rhythmic emphasis – differs in each of these locations, which in turn affects its suitability for particular forms of dance. In Cape Breton, dance is an important part of the music and so there is a close fit between them. An audience can find it hard to sit still and may feel compelled to move with the music, as it is indeed dance music. In Scotland, the opposite scenario is frequently the case. Many musicians are not particularly interested in dance and prefer to create a “listening” culture,

with performances often displaying musical virtuosity.

Two dancers with whom I spoke felt unable to step dance spontaneously at ceilidh dances, the informal social dances that take place frequently throughout Scotland. Both are keen ceilidh dancers, and have attended a variety of step dance classes over the last 20 years. One noted that she only ever step-dances when she attends courses, and feels that she loses her ability to dance between them. She attributed this directly to the music played for dancing in Scotland:

I kind of thought, in theory, that almost any traditional Scottish music should be suitable for step – you know – you should be able ... I would imagine you could step dance to it. But I’ve found that that’s not the case, that there’s lots of music that isn’t regular enough for dancing to.

Although the music played at Scottish ceilidh dances largely shares a repertoire with the dance music performed in Cape Breton (including jigs, strathspeys, and reels, as well as Scottish 6/8 marches played as jigs in Cape Breton), it is often played significantly faster in Scotland and with a different emphasis. The second dancer with whom I spoke, who often attends and participates in ceilidh dances, noted that it was not usually possible for her to fit her steps to ceilidh dance music. The performance style does not work:

Sometimes with ceilidh bands you think mm, no, it wouldn’t work. It is too kind of tumpty–tumpty–tumpty–tum. I’ve found myself in ceilidhs thinking oh, maybe I could do a few steps here and there, and it just doesn’t fit. It doesn’t go, no.

In Aberdeen, in Northeast Scotland, there are signs that this balance may be shifting. Scottish Culture and Traditions ([SCaT](#)) was established in Aberdeen in 1997 as a teaching organization to encourage participation in the traditional arts: music, song, and dance. It is based on Edinburgh’s successful Adult Learning Project, now known as the [Scots Music Group](#). SCaT has offered step dance classes since 1998, but it is only in the past year that one of the music classes has started specifically to focus on playing for step-dancing.

The idea of pipers playing for percussive step-dancing may surprise the Scottish music connoisseur, as piping is one of the most regulated forms of music to be found in Scotland. Pipers commonly learn to play either in a pipe band or by attending lessons in solo competitive piping. The first steps in learning to play the instrument consist of learning the complicated sets of grace notes that are used to ornament tunes, punctuate rhythm, and augment musical interest in the absence of dynamics (which are not possible on the pipes). Competitive piping, whether solo or in a band, encourages a technical skill and virtuosity that creates a style of performance that can be too complex to accompany step dance.

In 2014, Iain Richardson was asked to teach a bellows-blown pipes class at SCaT. Bellows-blown pipes have an elbow-operated bellows that keeps the bag full of air, instead of the mouth-blown air bag on conventional Highland Bagpipes. Iain decided to take the opportunity to train pipers to play for step-dancing rather than teach the conventional, highly ornamented style of playing. He had attended a number of step dance classes over the years and was concerned about what he felt was a lack of suitably performed dance music. On his first visit to Cape Breton in 2006, he became fascinated by the drive in the music and how good it was for dancing. From his perspective, in Cape Breton, dancing accompanies the music rather than the other way around. He has tried to develop this in his own playing. I asked him about his classes.

PB: How did you become interested in playing for step-dancing?

IR: I actually took up the pipes in the early 1990s because there seemed to be a lack of good playing for Highland dancing. I was introduced to step-dancing in the 2000s, and it seemed natural to try and learn how to play for step dancers. I attended a week at Ceòlas in South Uist in 2006, where Angus Mackenzie from Mabou in Cape Breton taught a class in piping for step-dancing. I have made many visits to Cape Breton since 2006 and have tried to emulate the style of performance that I have heard, because it is so closely related to dancing. My bellows pipes were made by Hamish and Fin Moore, both great dance players with strong connections to Cape Breton. Fin has given me many tips and suggestions over the years about how to adapt pipe music to make it more suitable for step-dancing. This involves choosing ornamentation and pulse so that the music has the right fluidity and drive. If I'm playing music and nobody is tapping their feet, then I know something's wrong!

PB: Why did you wish to teach piping for step-dancing?

IR: I was invited to teach the bellows pipes class at SCaT and when I asked the class what they would like to focus on, it seemed that there was interest in learning a style that was somewhat different to the competitive Highland piping repertoire, particularly as bellows pipes are a different instrument to the full Highland bagpipe. Piping for dancing and playing with other instruments were both suggested by the class members. Learning to play in a style suitable for dancing has been a challenging but rewarding process for the class. It's a somewhat novel or alien concept to many pipers to put the conventional settings of pipe tunes aside, to simplify the ornamentation and work on the drive and to put the dancer, rather than the tune, first.

PB: What results have you noticed?

IR: The class, which includes experienced players all the way through to relative beginners, works really well as a unit despite the different piping backgrounds of the participants. I think we produce a good sound with a strong beat and at the end of the first year everyone seems to have grasped the basics of what's required for dance playing. There was a real epiphany when I split the class in two, taught a simple step to half the class and got the other half to play. I could see the "aha!" moment when I told the piping half to just listen to the dancers and then to come in with the dancers' rhythm rather than just taking off at their normal speed. Some of the more advanced players have started playing for the step dance class. I think it's great for them to have an outlet and a real purpose to their playing, which this provides.

David Wilson is a very competent piper who has attended Iain's classes over the last year, and had attended piping classes at SCaT for a number of years before that. He has discovered that he thoroughly enjoys playing for dancing. I asked him about his experience.

PB: What interested you about playing for step-dancing? What did you know about it before you started?

DW: The obvious connection is Iain [Richardson] and his enthusiasm for pipers to be exposed to step dance. I have always wanted to get rhythm into my playing, so playing for dancers seemed an obvious connection, but I also have felt a little restricted by the small numbers [of pipers] in earlier classes. Although I don't consider myself to be particularly proficient, the regular introduction of beginners holds back both the pace and complexity of tunes we play, so any opportunity to stretch is something I am keen to look at. So if I'm honest, it was more about the ability to try new

tunes as anything else – but I was in for a surprise! And a pleasant one too.

PB: Did you know much about step dance when you started attending the class?

DW: No, not really – I was aware of the step class but didn't know how intimately connected to pipe music the steps are. Several years ago with a different tutor, we tried playing for the step dancers, but as a class we couldn't keep things tight enough. It was a bit of a disaster.

PB: What challenges have you faced, and do you enjoy playing for step-dancing?

DW: Love it! The main issue I had when playing with a pipe band was the obsessive focus on technique – the standardization, the “this way or not at all” [attitude]. I still love the sound of a good band. But playing for dancers is a different discipline – the focus is not on the embellishments but on the music, the beat, the delivery. The first time I played on my own for dancers it just made sense, the connection between the steps and the music.

Yes, it's different from playing the pipe band repertoire. To me it gives some purpose to the tunes, brought home by me making a mistake and stopping playing, but the dancers kept clicking out the rhythm – waiting for me to start again. That still makes me smile and want to do it again! The tunes are simpler to play but need strong rhythm. The best tunes on the pipes are not the best for dancing to, so it's made me go looking for strong melody where embellishment is not the essence of the tune. For example, the tune “The Mason's Apron”: the modern variation version is something like eight parts long and full of triplets and embellishments – lots of fireworks. But the original reel still works beautifully as a dance tune – simple and a good, strong melody. So you look for tunes for a different purpose and the old ones are always good!

A general lack of availability of suitable music to dance to has limited the growth of Cape Breton-style step-dancing in Scotland but, as Iain and David exemplify, there are signs that this situation may be changing. If organizations providing step dance classes also offer classes in playing music for step-dancing, it might encourage musicians and dancers to interact and enable musicians to understand the needs of step dancers. What is particularly heartening about the Aberdeen example is not only how much David enjoys the skills and challenges of playing for dancing but also that Aberdeen's step dancers now have another musician available who understands their needs – and there will hopefully soon be many more such musicians in the area.

Related Resources

[Step Dance Scotland](#) is a Facebook group for sharing information about step-dancing – events, classes, workshops – in Scotland.

Scottish Culture and Traditions; website www.scottishculture.org. This organization was established in 1997 to promote and encourage traditional Scottish music, song, and dance. It began with five such classes and now offers a range of 30 weekly classes in different instruments at various levels of ability, step dance, ceilidh dance, and song. SCaT holds regular fundraising ceilidh dances and hosts training workshops in a variety of subjects ranging from tutor-training to using P.A. equipment.

[Cape Breton Music Media Historical Society](#) is a Facebook group that hosts a variety of archival material, particularly videos of music and step dance. Browsing this resource offers the viewer the opportunity see many different individual styles of Cape Breton step dance and some excellent musical performances.

