

Scotland's Music © BBC 2007
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Iona
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John Purser: Imagine yourself in the year 563 on the Island of Iona, the southern tip at Port-na-curragh, a warm southerly breeze coming in, bringing with it a boat, full sail, a tall thin man standing in the bow of it, and his monks singing – his twelve companions– singing psalms, perhaps ringing their holy bell, making in for your shore with these strange new sounds coming at you. The first man that steps out on the shore is a man of command; an aristocrat. His name is Columba. He informs you that he has letters-patent from his relation, Connal MacCongal, King of Dalriada, the new kingdom founded by the invaders from Ireland: that he has been given rights to the island: that he is bringing a new faith. Hence his pet name Columcille – Little dove of the churches.

It would be natural if you were to treat this man with some suspicion: even more so if you knew that he'd been kicked out of Ireland. We don't know for certain what the misdemeanour was, but even his biographer, Adomnan, who knew people who knew Columba, even he admits that there was a council decision taken against him.

The story went that this man was responsible for the slaughter at Culdreimhne a couple of years before. Columba was praying for victory against his own teacher, Finnian, seemingly all because of a book he'd copied without permission. When Finnian discovered his book had been copied, he asked him not only for the original but for the copy as well, and Columba refused. Finnian went to the High King and the High King laid down a famous judgment, the first copyright judgment in the world. He said "To every cow its calf, to every book its copy." The books were made of calf-skin, so it was mother and child. But Columba was a proud man and he didn't accept the judgment, and for that reason the battle was fought and the synod sent him out of Ireland. Did he feel any kind of remorse?

There's a poem he wrote in Latin full of visions of Hell and precious little redemption. He's said to have composed it, singing, while working a quern – a hand-mill for grinding grain. Perhaps that will serve for remorse. We have the words but not the music. But we do have a traditional Gaelic quern song which fits the metre and the mood perfectly, so we'll hear that first, sung by Peter Morrison, and then part of Columba's poem to the same tune sung by Colin Heggie.

Trad – 'S i mo Brath
Peter Morrison
CD The Kilmartin Sessions
Kilmartin House Trust no cat no. Track 30
[School of Scottish Studies recording]

Trad - Altus Prosator
Colin Heggie
CD The Kilmartin Sessions
Kilmartin House Trust – no cat. no. Track 31

Columba's hymn is described as abecedarian because each stanza starts with a successive letter of the Latin alphabet, the first with Altus prosator to the twenty-third and last with Zelus ignis.

“Day of the King most righteous, The day is nigh at hand,
The day of wrath and vengeance, and darkness on the land.

Day of thick clouds and voices, of mighty thundering,
A day of narrow anguish and bitter sorrowing.

The love of women’s over, And ended is desire,
Men’s strife with men is quiet, And the world lusts no more.”

Part of St Columba’s poem, *Altus Prosator* with its powerful vision of Hell. But Columba also brought a vision of Heaven and a love of books and poetry and religious chanting.

By good fortune a small manuscript survives from the 14th century which contains several chants dedicated to St Columba. The manuscript comes from the island of Inchcolm in the river Forth, just opposite Leith. Like Iona, Inchcolm is dedicated to Columba – and a few of the chants in the *Inchcolm Antiphoner* may be old enough to be within five generations of Columba himself. This is one of them. O Columba insignis signifer. O Columba, proud standard-bearer. Cleanse our minds, that those gathered about you may sing and play with pleasure. For you, above all, we should sing with unrestrained joy. Hear us, your adherents.

Trad - Vespers Responsory for the Octave of St Columba
Cappella Nova
CD Columba Most Holy of Saints
ASV Gaudeamus CD GAU 129 Track 18

JP: The complex lyrical structure of that chant in many ways echoes the beautiful visual structures of the Book of Kells. Most scholars accept that the Book of Kells was largely produced in Iona, in the same scriptorium Columba himself will surely have initiated.

Here is another of those chants, also sung by Cappella Nova conducted by Alan Tavener. It’s equally beautifully patterned, calling on Columba as Mouth of the dumb, light of the blind, foot of the lame, to give a helping hand to those who have fallen, to strengthen the weak and cure the insane. “O Columba, hope of the Scots, bring us, through your merits, into the company of the blessed angels.”

Trad - Memorial of St Columba
Cappella Nova
CD Columba Most Holy of Saints
ASV Gaudeamus CD GAU 129 Track 23

JP: Outside the reconstructed Abbey on Iona, a building far grander than anything Columba ever had in mind, nature still asserts the beauty of her own music – and it was a beauty the locals often preferred to the sounds of Christianity.

Male Reader (Iain Macaulay): “Patrick of the closed-up mind . . . Patrick of the joyless clerks and of the bells . . . the rough voice of the bells has deafened me . . .

I have no liking for clerks, their music is not sweet to me . . I have heard music sweeter than your music, however much you are praising your clerks: the song of the blackbird in Leitir Laoi .. the very sweet thrush of the Valley of the shadow, or the sound of the boats striking the strand.”

John Purser - St Adomnan's Bell

John Purser

CD The Kilmartin Sessions

Kilmartin House Trust – no cat. no. Track 27

JP: This is the sound of an 8th century Celtic iron hand-bell, said to be none other than St Adomnan's. It's quite possible that it was. There are several such bells in Scotland and they have magical powers of healing and protection. Bell, book and candle are still used for exorcisms.

But there's an even more mysterious kind of music carved on an 8th century stone cross just outside Iona Abbey. Its central panel shows two musicians. One has a plucked stringed instrument, the other a triple pipe with two chanters and a long drone. In Argyllshire and Perthshire there are two more cross slabs with triple pipes and harps, and there are another two images in Ireland. Sadly, no actual triple pipes survive in either country. But a story of them survives in 10th century Gaelic. It tells of a set of triple pipes made from a three-forked sapling. The sapling grew from three streams of blood that burst from MacDichoime's nostrils and mouth. Unfortunately for MacDichoime, he and one of St Brigid's trainee nuns fell in love.

Brigid demanded the return of the girl or for him to give her his triple pipes. Thus cruelly divided, he gave her the pipes and was dead within a week with grief for the loss of them – they were, after all, made from his own life's blood.

Brigid is said to have featured it on her battle banner but also to have dismembered it. Why? Was she adopting it or attempting to suppress it? Anyway, how do you play the triple pipes? What did they sound like? The answer lies in the ancient launeddas, the Sardinian triple pipes, as Franco Staffa of the Cultural Institute in Cagliari tells us.

Franco Staffa: Actually the first artefact which reproduces the launeddas is a bronze age figure. And it describes a man playing the launeddas naked and having a huge erection which means I believe that he's very pleased with it. Now archaeologists date this back to the 8th and 10th century BC, but speculation has it that if they produce the bronze motif at the time probably the music of the launeddas had been going on for much longer.

JP: Just like the launeddas, the Scottish and Irish triple pipes have no bag to keep the air supply going, so you have to circular breathe with three cane reeds in your mouth and your cheeks swollen to make your mouth into the bag. Two of the pipes are chanters and one a drone, so you have to use both hands to finger the two chanters simultaneously. The temptation to reconstruct these pipes was overwhelming. The Celtic Connections festival funded the venture, and Hamish Moore and I went to Sardinia to find out how triple pipes were made and played.

Patsy Seddon, Rick Bamford, Hamish Moore

Benedicam Dominum

Patsy Seddon, Rick Bamford, Hamish Moore

Choral Vespers from Iona Abbey, BBC R3 June 1997

JP Voice-over: This is Hamish playing his reconstruction of the triple pipes, Rick Bamford with the bell and Patsy Seddon singing a psalm in Latin, in a style that Brigid's young nun might have used to sing to her lover's accompaniment.

JP: You might think that reconstructing instruments from carvings on Pictish stones and improvising music for them, is a self-indulgent local exercise. Not so.

Franco Staffa: Now we didn't know of different other cultures which made use of an instrument with two chanters and a drone and no bag, until a man came to Sardinia to introduce us to some sort of instrument similar to our launeddas which he found reproduced in a bas-relief somewhere in Scotland. This is of most interest to us because it opens new paths in new directions and also makes us believe that the Sardinian culture was not a closed culture but an open culture which had changes with many other cultures including Celts as far as Scotland.

JP voice-over: The psalm Patsy's singing is the same one St Columba was copying out shortly before his death, and she stops at the words where he stopped himself:- "They that seek the Lord shall not want for anything that is good."

FS: We believe this reconstruction is very interesting also because the Scots and the Irish certainly have a lot to contribute to our culture. This does not necessarily mean that we have to abandon our traditional way of playing the instrument but it's very interesting that as a development of this, a Scotsman, Mr Barnaby Brown, has actually moved from Scotland to Sardinia to work on this and now he has his own band playing in the northern part of Sardinia and producing music with deep roots in both cultures.

Barnaby Brown and Ann Heymann – work in progress
Barnaby Brown and Ann Heymann
private recording, used with permission

JP: The sounds of triple pipes and clarsach as depicted on the early Celtic Christian crosses. We cannot be certain that Columba himself heard such sounds, though it's likely enough. He loved music and was a fine singer. Called by the midnight bell, he would join the *Mediae Noctis*, which was written down in a Celtic manuscript not long after his death.

Trad - Mediae Noctis
The Sixteen/Harry Christophers
Choral vespers from Iona, BBC R3 June 1997

JP: The Sixteen conducted by Harry Christophers in Iona Abbey itself. Columba's last day alive was spent copying a book – the psalms - the very same texts that he'd copied from his teacher Finnian all those years ago. He knew them by heart, of course, so it was no loss when he couldn't complete what he was doing, knowing that his hour of death had come.

We may picture him in the magical summer glow of a June evening, making his way to the church, aching with age and years of self-denial, and accompanied by the insistent call of the corncrake that no doubt kept all the monks awake through many a long summer night. It's said that when he reached the church, his servant Diarmid saw him surrounded by angelic light, and it is this beatific vision which is remembered in one of the mediaeval chants in his honour, sung here by Cappella Nova, and with which we end.

“O mira regis - O wondrous clemency of Christ the king! The whole church gleams with the signs and wondrous portents of Columba. The people vie with full voices in blessed remembrance and prayers to the devoted father . . .”

Trad – Vespers Responsory for the Sunday within the Octave
Cappella Nova/Alan Tavener
CD Columba, most holy of Saints
ASV CDGAU129 Track 17