Border Pipes

The border pipes are a musical instrument that is a close cousin of the Great Highland Bagpipe.

It is commonly confused with the Scottish smallpipe, although it is a quite different and much older instrument. The name, which is modern, comes from Scotland's border country, where the instrument was once common and many towns used to maintain a piper. The instrument was found more widely than this, however; it was noted as far north as Aberdeenshire and, south of the Border, in Northumberland and elsewhere in the north of England. Other names have been used for the instrument - Lowland pipes in Scotland, and in Northumberland, half-long pipes, this term now referring particularly to surviving examples from the 1920's when there was a partially successful attempt to revive the instrument.DescriptionThe instrument has a conical chanter, in contrast to the cylindrically-bored Scottish smallpipe, and hence sounds at pitch, rather than an octave lower, as the latter instrument does. It is also much louder than the Scottish smallpipe, though not as loud or raucous as the Great Highland Bagpipe. It blends well with string instruments. The chanter has a thumb hole and three finger holes for the left hand, and four finger holes for the right hand; there are also two transverse holes near the open end of the chanter. The instrument also has three drones in a common stock, typically tuned A, a, e, though other tunings are also found. It is driven not with breath from the player's mouth, but instead is supplied with dry air by a set of bellows strapped under the player's right arm. This stops moisture condensing on the reeds, with consequent tuning changes. Dry-blown cane reeds also last very much longer than ones exposed to moisture. Some instruments are made with plastic rather than cane reeds.The compass of the chanter is nine notes, from G to a, though some higher notes are obtainable on some chanters by 'pinching' and overblowing. As with the Highland pipes, the basic scale is a mixolydian scale on A. Some chanters can play semitones however, and some old tunes, for instance Bold Wilkinson or Wat ye what I got late yestreen, suggest a dorian scale may also sometimes have been used, requiring a c natural instead of the c sharp of the mixolydian scale. This could be achieved by cross-fingering or half-holing.MusicThere is a distinct body of music for the instrument - many of these survived in the fiddle repertoire after the playing of Border pipes died out in the mid-19th century. Others survive in manuscript. Most notably, the William Dixon manuscript, dated 1733, from Stamfordham in Northumberland, was rediscovered by Matt Seattle in 1995, and published by him with extensive notes. The book contains forty tunes, almost all with extensive variation sets. Some of these are limited to a single octave, and many of this group correspond closely to tunes for Northumbrian smallpipes known from early 19th century sources - Apprentice Lads of Alnwick is one of these; others are melodically and harmonically richer - using the full nine-note compass and the G major subtonic chord - a fine example of this group is Dorrington. Another early, though limited, source is George Skene's manuscript fiddle book of 1715, from Aberdeenshire. It contains four pieces in bagpipe style, all variation sets on Lowland tunes. A later important source, from south of the Border, is the Vickers manuscript from Northumberland - many tunes in this have the characteristic nine-note compass of pipe tunes. A later Scottish source, from the early 19th century, is Robert Riddell's Collection of Scotch, Galwegian and Border Tunes - besides some tunes for fiddle and some for smallpipes, others clearly have the range and the idiom of Border pipe tunes.An important difference between the music of the Border pipes and of the Great Highland Bagpipe is that many melodic figures in older Border pipe music typically move stepwise or in thirds rather than by wide intervals, and lack the multiple repeated notes found in many Highland pipe tunes. This suggests that in contrast to the Highland pipes, Border pipe music neither needed, nor greatly used, the complex graces which are so characteristic of Highland pipe music. Modern attempts to reconstruct a musically valid playing style for Border music such as the Dixon tunes have been very successful, and several respected pipers play in such a style. This is characterised by simple gracings, used sparingly, mostly either for rhythmic emphasis or to separate repeated notes. The tunes from Skene's manuscript contain more complex written-out gracings, and many more repeated notes than the Dixon tunes, so it is reasonable to conclude that the playing style in the 18th century varied from place to place. Many Highland pipers nowadays use the Border instrument to play Highland music in a Highland style, treating it as an indoor version of their own instrument. As the modern instrument is still fairly newly revived, ideas on playing styles are still evolving.The Lowland and Border Pipers' Society was formed in 1982 and has played a large part in the revival of the instrument and its music. In Northumberland, the Northumbrian Pipers' Society has played a similar role for both Border pipes and Northumbrian smallpipes. The instrument is now once again widely played, and the original Border repertoire for the instrument, particularly the Dixon tunes, is becoming better known. The Lowland and Border Pipers' Society The Northumbrian Pipers' Society

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