

Arranger notes on the Pachelbel Canon for pipes

(Jim Johnson, 2/6/2018)

This arrangement for the Great Highland Bagpipe of the piece by Johann Pachelbel commonly called "Canon in D" (original title: "Canon a 3 violins con Basso c.") was created in 1988. It was inspired in part by George Winston's "Variations on the Kanon by Johann Pachelbel", which appeared on Winston's 1982 solo piano album "December" (Windham Hill).

The present arrangement conforms closely in overall structure to both Pachelbel's original manuscript (1680?), which is available from the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (<http://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN728499177>), and the earliest accurate print version, which appeared in an article by Gustav Beckmann (*Johann Pachelbel als Kammerkomponist, Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 1 (1918–19): 267–74).

It deviates from the original only as needed to accommodate Highland pipers and the bagpipe. Specifically, to make the notation as similar as possible to standard bagpipe music, all note values were doubled, some dotted or syncopated notes were replaced with (equivalent-time-value) shorter notes and ties, and melody note stems were turned downward. Additionally, because the bagpipe chanter has only a nine-note range, i.e., from G on the treble staff to the first A above the staff, notes outside this range were transposed into this range. Finally, in some instances the A above the treble staff, which when played on the bagpipe tends to blend in with the drones, was used to replace rests (which the bagpipe cannot play) or to suggest certain of the original's octave leaps.

The piece consists of 27 four-bar melody segments, each of which follows the same chord progression. Harmonies emerge when two or more of these segments are played concurrently, as occurs when different voices begin playing the melody line sequentially, in canon style, at four-bar intervals. All segments but one occur in pairs, giving 13 pairs plus the singleton. Paired segments share a common rhythmic motif and appear in tandem, such that the second segment within each pair creates "seconds" (i.e., rhythmically matched harmony) for the first segment when the paired segments are played concurrently. Rhythmic and melodic motifs shift between pairs; for example, the first pair uses stepwise half notes, the second pair arpeggio quarter notes, and the third pair stepwise eighth notes.

It should be noted that the structure of the piece means that, if desired, it can be shortened by removal of one or more of its four-bar segments. Such cuts can be made either en bloc, i.e., across all parts in parallel (vertically), in which case each part loses one or more distinct segments, or sequentially (horizontally), in which case all parts lose the same segment(s).

The original arrangement was provided to the Simon Fraser University Pipe Band (SFUPB) in 1988. The first published audio recording on bagpipe of a reduction of this score appears, with correct attribution to the arranger, on the band's 1991 "Silver Anniversary Tribute" album. Colin Clansey performed all the parts, which were multi-tracked to produce the overall piece.

On their 2005 album "On Home Ground – Volume One" the full pipe corps of the SFUPB performed and recorded a reduction of the piece that included an added coda derived from the central segments with extended sixteenth-note runs.

Part four, which Pachelbel scored for bass continuo, is challenging to render effectively with bagpipe, on which this part's range necessarily overlaps with that of the three melody parts, effectively converting it from bass continuo to a fourth melody part. This deprives the piece of a true bass part and may distract attention from the first three parts. Additionally, the octave transpositions required to fit Pachelbel's continuo motif onto the bagpipe convert the original's extended stair-step descending line into a series of alternately descending and ascending two-note phrases.

The original bass line's attributes can be preserved if a (non-bagpipe) bass instrument plays the part, using Pachelbel's scoring, as the SFUPB did (e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMAZRgIpSyU>). Alternatively, if one or more bagpipes play the part, a delayed entry – e.g., until part three has finished its opening four-bar motif – can avoid conflicts with the melody parts. If non-bagpipe instruments are added, their scores will need to be transposed up by one half step to the key of E flat, or the instruments will need to tune higher to match the pitch of the bagpipe, which although ostensibly playing in D major actually plays closer to concert E flat.

Pipers unfamiliar with conventional western musical notation may be confused by the score's key signature and C naturals, which typically do not appear in traditional bagpipe music. The bagpipe chanter naturally plays a nominal D major scale, which intrinsically includes F and C sharp. To play C natural the piper must use false fingering, a technique unfamiliar to most pipers and that may feel awkward or not give the desired pitch. As an alternative, the C naturals can be replaced by C sharps, as done by the SFUPB.

Recordings of reductions of "Canon", as performed by the Simon Fraser University Pipe Band

Audio recordings:

(tape, CD, download, and streaming)

1. "Classical Selection – Kannon" – Silver Anniversary Tribute (1991)
2. "Canon" – On Home Ground – Volume One (2005)

Video recordings:

(URLs for YouTube clips)

1. "Kanon" – Pipe Up Gala concert – Belfast Waterfront Centre (2010)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxHoKtA-bgo>
2. "Pachelbel's Canon" – Nous Sommes Prêts concert - Glasgow Royal Concert Hall (2015)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMAZRgIpSyU>

Video recordings of reductions of "Canon", as performed by others

1. Solo piper: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hB9bR679SFU&t=1s>
2. Solo piper: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obBtnV5mmFA>
3. Solo digital chanter:
http://www.marylandbagpiper.com/music/Pachelbels_Kannon.htm
4. Solo piper and piano: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykGNSi0DHIA>
5. Two pipers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ESmK4YFNtE>
6. Four pipers (Cleveland Police): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7TsDWgqJHM>

7. Nine pipers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2vxUp1nRRc>
8. Pipe band: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sld3y2bSRQ4>
9. Pipe band (Royal Scots Dragoon Guards) and orchestra:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xod2ZDzUR8U>
10. Pipe band (Hong Kong): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgKV9_c095M

Arranger's piping biography

Jim Johnson began piping in 1972 at age 16, taught by members of the Macalester College Pipe Band (MCPB) in St. Paul, MN. He later attended Macalester, where he led the MCPB for three years (1974-1977), sang in the chamber choir, studied classical music theory and composition, and twice attended the summer piping school at Coeur d'Alene (CDA), Idaho. At the CDA school in 1975 Johnson won the Medallion for amateur piobaireachd (classical bagpiping) competition, which included funds to travel to Scotland. With those funds, he traveled to Scotland to visit master pipers Donald Morrison and Andrew Wright from the CDA school, who arranged for him to tent-camp near the royal estate at Balmoral to study piobaireachd with former Queen's Piper Bob Nicol. He also spent two summers in Bellingham, WA with Skye Richendrfer, his successor as MCPB pipe major, where he and Skye competed with the Abbotsford Royal Canadian Legion Pipe Band under pipe major Ian McDougall (deceased), along with young prodigy Andrew Bonar (deceased).

Johnson continued piping, composing, arranging, and choral singing during his medical studies at the University of Minnesota (1977-1981) and postgraduate medical training at the University of Washington in Seattle, WA (1981-1988). In Seattle, Johnson competed as a solo piper, taught piping and composition for three summers at the CDA piping school (with master piper Andrew Wright: 1986-1988), led the Seattle Piping Society (1986-1987), gave a "Composer's Night" recital for the British Columbia Pipers' Association, arranged harmonies for the Simon Fraser University Pipe Band (SFUPB) – including for Neil Dickie's "The Haunting" and "Classical Bob", and the folk song "Togail cùrs air Leódhas" – and taught a course on arranging harmony at the 1988 SFUPB Highland Arts Festival. For the 1984 wedding of then-SFUPB pipers Alison Palmer and Jim Stewart, Johnson and several SFUPB pipers – including Skye Richendrfer, John A. MacLeod, Rob MacNeil, and Silver Star winner & Gold Medalist Jack Lee – played a bagpipe arrangement of Wagner's "Bridal Chorus" that Johnson and MacNeil created.

Several of Johnson's compositions appear in the "Macalester College Collection of Bagpipe Music" (1980), which was the first bagpipe music book produced by a custom developed bagpipe music engraving program (by Macalester College student Rick Mohr). Johnson's jig "The Magpie", composed during a medical residency rotation in Billings, MT, appears in "Robert MacNeil's Collection of Music for the Great Highland Bagpipe Book 1" (1990). Johnson is now Professor of Medicine at the University of Minnesota and an infectious diseases consultant at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center. He has renewed his connections with the MCPB, which is preparing "Canon" for performance.