



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

Accession No.: MH-09-12-D-1 Date(s): 9/27/09

Fieldworker(s): Maggie Holtzberg and David Filipov (Boston Globe)

Interviewee(s): Nancy Tunnickliffe and apprentice Sean Humphries

Event: Initial visit to apprenticeship

Place of Recording: NCT Piping Studio, Lansborough, MA

Recording Equipment: Microtrack II digital recorder Microphone(s): T-shaped electret

Recorded in: mono stereo

Tape Brand and Format: n/a Cassette 60 min DAT 65 min
Cassette 90 min DAT 95 min

Amount Tape Used: Cassette: ABS time 58:29 min; 4:41 min;

Related Accession Numbers: MH-09-04

Brief summary of tape contents: amateur versus professional piping; playing with musical expression comes last; pibroch as an aural tradition; learning through singing; meeting Jimmy MacDonald, taking lessons at his music camp; Nether Lorn Canteroch syllables, tuning and reeds; playing with a rock band or organist; number of pibroch masters worldwide, in USA; why singing is so important in teaching pibroch; laments; holds and cuts; pibroch as the original music (1450); no pipe bands or marches; theme and variation; Lament of the Only Son story; clarinet and embrasure; mixolydian mode; Jimmy singing while student plays; "voice in the fingers" makes for good pibroch playing; how endangered pibroch is; collection of 350 tunes; learning the code; plans for apprenticeship, focusing on pibroch as opposed to competition tunes; the stories behind the playing; story of how Nancy came to play the pipes, having a vision; Sean's story of why the bagpipe; earning a living as a piper; stories of discrimination for being a female piper; Nancy's work with orchestras; tuning up to play to Nancy's singing.

NCT . . . Not lived there [Scotland], been there many times. I've gone over there to compete, play, that kind of thing.

DF These medals (pointing to a piece of fabric with many medals pinned to it), you won in competition?

NCT These are my amateur medals. After that phase of competing I became a professional and I competed for about 8 or 9 years as a professional. We don't win medals at that point, we win money. So I don't have the bills to tack up there to show for that.

DF How much would you say you've earned?

NCT Oh I have no idea. I never actually cared about that part of it.

DF But you've won –

NCT Yes. At one point I ranked 7th in the Eastern U.S. Pipe Band Association. And then I became a judge.

MH So what is the distinction between amateur and professional? How do you cross over?

NCT (wry smile) With great difficulty. It's just one of those things where you reach a level in your playing where the judges who are listening to you compete; feel you are at a professional level of playing standard. And these are sort of unwritten standards but pretty much everyone agrees to what they are. The instrument is at a very high level, the fingering is completely accurate and consistent, phrasing and rhythm is appropriate to each style of tune. And then the emotional or expressive content really has to be there. And that's kind of the last things that falls into place as they're putting things together. It starts with the technique and then it gets to the rhythm. And then it gets to the bagpipe being really good. And then, eventually, it actually becomes expressive musically. But there's so much to do on the bagpipe at any one time, that it takes a long time to have good expression.

DF I'm also hearing that what is judged here is not a standard which has to be explained because . . . they are subjective.

NCT They are subjective. Yeah, the whole art is very subjective. Which I guess is part of the traditional art, in a way. It's not like a western classical music tradition in the sense that what we're doing falls into styles of playing. There are different lines of teaching that give different styles of playing. And they can be quite different in pibroch, in the classical music. And so what's sounding really good in a given style may sound not so good to someone else whose come through a different style. So there's an awful lot going on that's really part of aural tradition and goes way, way back to lines of teaching that are hundreds of years old.

DF And so, presumably, that aural tradition has to be kept alive, passing on, say from your teacher, from his great granddaddy to you through masters.

NCT Yeah. He's one of the very few people in this country of his generation of teachers who teach in the old style through singing. So I was very, very lucky to find him. And I found him by going to Scotland and listening to a competition that he was playing in. It was the Gold Medal, which is the premier competition in Scotland. One player after another came up and played and I was fairly new to pibroch and I was sitting there thinking, "This is really nice. Yeah, I'm starting to understand this music a little bit." And then Jimmy came up and played and it was a completely different experience to listen to him. His music made complete sense; it was really expressive. It involved me completely. And when he came off and finished I just ran right up to him and said, "Do you teach? This is what I want to do; I want to play like that."

And he said, (in Scottish brogue) "Oh well, I'm thinking of coming to America. I'll let ya know." And he did. And he came over the next summer and he started the Balmoral School of Bagpipe playing in Pennsylvania. [1978] So I went to those schools for many, many years. And it ended up that the reason that he's plays the way he plays is because he learned, and he teaches, through the singing. So his music makes so much more sense than someone who learns off the page and teaches off the page.

MH You may have already described this to David but tell me again the method of learning the tunes and the ornamentation through singing as opposed to, you know from a recording even or from the written page.

NCT Ok, sure. What we use is one of many systems that got frozen in time because it was written down. There were a lot of systems that were used for generations that were never recorded so we don't know what they were. But it's called the Nether Lorn Canteroch and it has a syllable, it's a Gaelic nonsense syllable, which is kind of an oxymoron for us, for each note of the scale. And then any ornament that you could play on that note makes the syllable change. So, the main note, the tonic note of the bagpipe is low A, we call it. It's syllable is en, but if you play a high G grace note on it, it becomes hun. (She demonstrates with the practice chanter.) And if you put a D grace note on it, it's dun. [Bob, Nancy's husband opens the door of the studio to let Django in, who refuses to be taken on a walk with Fiona.]

MH Is this A 440?

NCT No, it's changed over the years. It's now closer to B flat. It can be anywhere from 448 to 454. Bands a little bit higher, toward the higher end of that. We have a hard time playing with other musical groups or other musicians, so we basically stick to ourselves.

MH Yeah, well you'd have to. So I couldn't play with you.

NCT Well I could get us to B flat and we could play in B flat. And I can get to A but it sounds really weird. Yeah, mostly we stick together and are viewed as this odd little group over here that doesn't do anything with anybody else. So that's how the system works. There are syllables for different movements – a G grace note on A followed by a taralua, which is [she plays on the chanter] would be hun, da rit. So I, in teaching Sean would go through a whole tune. And he actually he's been working on "The Old Woman's Lullaby" through canteroch. And I would sing those vocables while he plays. And the way we are doing it now, it's a little bit of a compromise because he is looking at the music, but he's getting the timing from the voice, from the singing.

MH And why is he looking at the music?

NCT Because we're easing into it. Sorry Sean. Why are you looking at the music?

SH That's it.

NCT With this tune, which is "The Old Woman's Lullaby" we're going to really concentrate on him knowing the canteroch. We're going to do the music and the singing, (to Django) I love you too –

MH I know, I'm going to have to put him in the car.

NCT Oh no, he's fine. I just love him. And then our hope is that when Sean is really confident in the canteroch himself, I'll just sing the tune at him and he'll play it.

DF But, if I might step back for one moment, you were just saying that because the pitch of the instrument you play is not based on the same 440 A, by necessity, everybody in this school of playing ends up having to play by themselves. This is not like the mainstream – you can't play these bagpipes in a rock band.

NCT You can. You can. It depends on how much trouble you want to go to. We have bagpipe bands, with bagpipes and drums. What they do is they all buy the same make of chanter, which is the melody part of the instrument. And the same make of reed. And they put them into their individual bagpipes and they end up with the same pitch. What that pitch is, is of no particular interest to them, as long as it's the same pitch. One band might be 448, another band might be 452. Someone who wanted to play in a rock band or play with an organist in a church needs to get themselves to B flat.

DF The chanter isn't tuned to that, you actually have to adjust the embrasure.

NCT No, it's reed selection cause we don't really have an embrasure. We have a blow pipe. And the reed's down here.

DF So it's choosing a reed that will do it.

NCT Yup.

DF They don't just sell them in bulk?

NCT No. It's very hard to get a good reed that's in tune with itself, that gives a good scale on the chanter.

DF That also means that you have to know you're looking for a B flat, 448 and you go through a bunch of reeds, that's not it, that's not, until you find it.

NCT Right, if you want to play with a rock band or with an organ.

DF Do you bring along your digital tuner?

NCT Most people tuner now but you used to have to do this stuff by ear. And that was very difficult.

DF What about the old granddaddy

NCT He didn't care less. He could play any pitch that he wanted, as long as his chanter was in tune with itself. In the old days, they didn't play together. It was strictly a solo instrument. And when pibroch was at its heyday, which was 1450 to 1750, there weren't bagpipe bands to speak of. That's a much more modern invention.

DF So if you were going to put this in the context of the rest of bagpipe playing, is this a medieval art that's basically a small corner of the rest of bagpipe?

NCT Oh yeah (she laughs) it's very, very, very esoteric.

DF And therefore, defining it as a traditional art, it's not just bagpipe playing, \

NCT No

DF It's bagpipe playing in this particular style. And, not to be a journalist here but how many people in the world would say are the masters of pibroch?

NCT That's a good question. Wow. . . masters of pibroch? 150. Worldwide.

MH And in this country?

NCT Um, probably 10 or 12.

DF So there maybe tens of thousands who can play bagpipe –

NCT It's a tiny percentage.

DF And then that actually learn this [pibroch], there's 10 or 12 in the country and you're one of them.

NCT Who are really equipped, who know the repertoire well, who are able to pass along a style, and understand the style and teach it well, yeah.

DF So it's you, plus 9 or 11.

NCT Yeah.

DF (Addressing Sean) And why pibroch as opposed to, I don't know, Big Country?

SH Because of the tradition of it. There's a lot of bagpipers out there. There's a lot of competitors out there, whether pipe band competitors or solo competitors. But as you move on, you appreciate it more, you understand it more. And you want, I want, I should speak for myself. I want to learn the tradition, learn everything I can about it.

DF Have you won a lot of amateur medals?

SH Certainly not this many, but sure, I've won a few.

NCT Yeah, Sean's had a great year.

DF Everybody's modest in pibroch. You notice that? It's not like, (in Scottish accent with hip hop gestures) I can pibroch in your face. (laughter from all)

NCT No, that's pipe bands. Pipe bands do that. It's true, pibroch has a kind of academic, esoteric – some other players who are more band oriented often think of it as kind of effete. It's really not but it takes years and years of study to even just understand the music.

MH What is it about the voice that's so quintessential to the teaching of this aural tradition?

NCT Good question. The voice carries the melodic flow, the emotional content, the mood of the tune. Is it sad, is it triumphant, is it a pastoral tune? Probably 70% of pibrochs are laments. There's a lot of emotional content to them. Some of them are really tear-your-hair-out laments where this terrible thing has happened and how are we going to go on? And others are very sweet. So the voice conveys that. The phrasing, the timing of the holds and cuts. We do a lot with timing, what we call pointing. Holding and cutting, because we can't vary the volume of the instrument. We can't emphasize a note by making it louder. We can only emphasize it by holding it longer.

MH Well is that where the strathspeys came from?

NCT Yeah. Exactly.

MH The Scottish snap.

NCT It's kind of an extreme version of that. Although that's originally a fiddle style, as you know.

MH That's what I'm wondering. Did it come from the fiddle?

NCT No, in the old days pipers really just played pibroch. And the dance music was played on the fiddle. And there were no pipe bands, so there were no marches. There was no place to march and nothing to march on; there were no roads. Pibroch was it. It's the original music. That's why it's so crucial.

DF And you're saying from 1450 or so?

NCT That's when this style – the pieces are theme and variations. When that started to emerge and became distinct from just a slow piece of music, the variations started happening and eventually became set in patterns. If you had this kind of variation at the beginning of the tune, you would then follow it with these three other types of variations at the end. All of this developed over several hundred years

DF So this is not a controversy about all of this. It's accepted. I'm not going to go down the street and Angus MacFerson will say, "Aach nae, they're full of it."

NCT No, no. That's for real. The first tunes that could be called pibroch, that have that particular form, started to emerge around 1450 to 1500. And they probably came from a harp style, bardic harp tradition.

DF So the one that you were showing, the Lament of the First Born Son, --

NCT Only Son, yeah

DF Is that a hair turning one? Could I just briefly hear the story?

NCT Yeah, it's, oh, it was so sad. Padraig Mor MacCrimmon, the great family that really brought pibroch to its height of development, were the MacCrimmons. And Padraig Mor was kind of in the middle of that time frame. He and his wife had eight children and within a year they all died of some sort of fever or flu epidemic. And he wrote a lament for the children. I've got that a little bit backwards. There was one left, there was one who survived. And then he died. And then he wrote "Lament for the Only Son." But then he did have more children later, because his son Padraig Aug [spelling?], which just means Padraig the younger, succeeded him in the family hierarchy. He lost seven of his eight children, and then the last one.

MH When did they start writing this music down?

NCT 1803. So prior to that, if Sean and I were sitting here in 1700, well, I wouldn't be sitting here in 1700 cause women weren't allowed to play but anyway, I would simply sing the tune to him. And he would sing it along with me, and gradually, as he got the gist of it, he would sing it along with me. We would sing it together. We would take long walks and we would sing, sing, sing, sing. And then he would play it on his bagpipe. There was no practice chanter, no intermediate instrument to learn it on. You just simply got it in your head, memorized the singing and then produced it because if I were to sing, he hun o tra, that would be G grace note on low A, plain B, followed by a D [?]. And he would know.

DF So you sing the notes the way that they're named in this book?

NCT Um-hum.

DF And when did women start playing bagpipes?

NCT That's an interesting question. There are lots of different thoughts on that. In this last one hundred years, certainly, women have been playing the bagpipe. And it's grown tremendously; probably more than half of my students are women. And women are playing at all levels of competition now including professional. But when I was first in the professional, I was one of three that I knew of.

DF Of the 150 that we were talking about.

NCT Yeah.

DF And, I always hate asking this question in the United States but, how old are you and how long have you been playing?

NCT I am 59 years old –

DF I'm 46. I always do that, because people don't like saying – same thing when you ask people how much they earn. [silence] Oh, we weren't going to go there.

NCT Dead silence on that one! [laughter]

DF \$105,000, plus change.

MH Nice.

NCT Wow. Gotta go into journalism.

DF Yeah, well you wouldn't want to go where I went. [we later learn that DF earns the high bucks because he goes into very dangerous places doing war reporting.]

Sean?

SH I'm 38 and I've been playing probably about ten years. I was thinking – with Mary McCloud but that was longer ago.

NCT I started playing at 23, which is considered very old.

MH But you were already a wind player-

NCT I was a clarinetist from the time I was 7.

MH Would you tell that story?

DF Before you do, clarinet is a reed instrument and you do have an embasure. The reed is up here and it's standardized.

NCT Yes.

DF There, you are blowing into a blow hole and the reed is someplace else. I can't play clarinet if I walk up to play it. Like, I won't make a sound until I learn.

NCT That's right.

DF Here the issue is more about breathing control and

NCT Breathing. Anybody can blow a pipe and blow down. There's no embasure.

DF With clarinet, as a wind instrument, you already have certain ideas about breathing, fingering, and phrasing.

NCT How astute -- You have to unlearn all of that. It's actually harder (she laughs) I realize now to come from another wind instrument and confront a bag that's between you and your reed. So with clarinet, I would have sound on the clarinet when I blew. I would stop making sound when I took a breath. So with clarinet you have to figure out, I'm going to play this phrase and breathe there and the music is generally written with breaths in the appropriate places. With the bagpipe, when you blow into the bag, your arm pushes the air out through the reeds and your blowing has no acquaintance with what you're playing whatsoever. It was torture for close to a year for me to unhook my blowing from what was coming out of my fingers. What it did give me was manual dexterity probably beyond the average 23-year old.

DF And an ear.

NCT And an ear. Which I also had to unlearn because this is not a diatonically tuned instrument. It's a different scale.

DF So it's not going to be 12 notes.

NCT It's 9 notes.

DF But all the accidentals?

MH No, they are just a different mode.

NCT It's a mode, it's a mixolydian mode essentially.

DF Did you play anything before coming to this?

SH Never.

DF Could you sing?

SH Not well.

DF But in tune?

SH No.

MH Really?

NCT It doesn't really matter. Jimmy MacIntosh always says, "It doesn't matter if you are a crow or a Caruso. Just sing your pibroch." I mean, listen to Jimmy. [Nancy reaches behind her and pushes a button on her cassette player. Jimmy's voice can be heard singing along with a piper mirroring his notes.] He puts so much – there is so much expression. He goes [she demonstrates a glissando] which you can't do on a bagpipe.

MH Yes, that was exactly the question Jim Cowdery had. That glissando thing – you can't do that on a bagpipe so what's the point of learning, doing that with your voice to get to the playing of the bagpipe?

NCT It's called, "the voice in the fingers." When you have that voice in your head, singing it like that, you play it differently than if you you're singing, he il o . . . it comes out totally differently. And that's what makes good pibroch playing. So you really can't play pibroch well unless you sing it. So as a judge I'm always writing on my score sheet, "Sing your tune. Sing your tune. Sing your tune" cause I can always tell when people don't. It comes through in their playing.

DF Will you be able to show us that? What it would sound like for someone to play that figure without singing it, and then what it sounds like when you sing it?

NCT Yeah.

DF Because we'll hear it presumably, right?

NCT Yeah, I think you will.

DF We're musicians. I think it would be interesting. That's something that's probably better heard than described.

NCT There's a lot of freedom in the time of the tune that if you come through the singing process, you know to take. You use that freedom of the phrase. You may pick out a note as particularly poignant and hang on it a little longer. If you're looking at the music, you tend to play it in a more cut and dry way and a lot of the expression is lost.

DF Now during that lesson [we had listened to on the cassette] the student made a mistake. He got a squeak. How sacred is this music and how patient are the teachers?

NCT Oh endlessly patient, I think.

DF In 15th century raga, it's a sacred text so if you make a mistake, it's almost like a sin. You could have your pinky chopped off.

NCT No, we don't work that way. It's such a pleasure that people are, in this day and age, learning this music and it's still going on from 400, 500 years ago. It's just the greatest thing that people like Sean want to learn.

MH Well, I have a question about that. Is it somewhat endangered? Would you say pibroch is an endangered tradition, and canteroch?

NCT Yeah, it always has that feeling to it that it of needing to be saved. It's a little bit of the White Knight syndrome that feels real good to us. We're working to keep the tradition going. But this collection (the bound collection) the repertoire of about 350 tunes, this exists. This is being printed right now in Glasgow. There are enough people worldwide playing this music that it's not going to go anywhere. But most don't know anything about it. In fact, most pipers don't play it.

DF How old is that tome?

NCT My particular volume of it I got in the eighties. So it's falling apart.

DF What is it?

NCT The Pibroch Society and they were founded in the 1750s I think. The Highland Society of London. When people were leaving the Highlands like crazy and being transported to other parts of the world to break up the clan system and all that, a number of Highlanders ended up in London and wanted to preserve the music. Over the course of time, in 1800, they actually held a competition to ask people to write pibroch in staff notation to help save it. Eventually, these books were the outcome of that. The very first book where it was written down (she reaches for a

thin red volume) successfully, and this one the prize from the Highland Society of London – this is a copy of the complete theory of the bagpipe written in 1803 by Joseph MacDonald. And he was the first guy who managed to write pibroch down. And this book was like a key. What we used to call this movement, is now going to look like this, is essentially what this book is saying. And then he had a few tunes and a lot of instructions. And a few bits of tunes to show the different styles.

DF Now, we can read that and sing it, but that isn't going to be

NCT No, that isn't how it goes at all.

MH Really? Why? Sing that. Can you sing that line for us?

NCT Let me find a tune that I know. Oh – this is, (she sings) but if you look at this, this would be (more singing).

MH I see what you're saying.

DF I see what she is saying but I don't know how in the world you get from there to there.

MH Because I think you learn these ornaments.

NCT You learn the ornaments.

MH And then, when you see them here, you –

DF Right, but they also require attenuating the timing.

NCT Absolutely.

DF This is what you were saying in the beginning, that quarter note is only a quarter note on paper. And everybody who knows this style, understands that code.

NCT Yeah. Code is the word, right.

DF And when he gets done, you'll going to be able to do the same thing.

NCT That would actually go – (she plays on the practice chanter.)

DF Since you're doing that, can you play it the way the students who are not singing it do it?

NCT (We all laugh) I'll try. (she plays)

DF Well you rushed.

MH I think I get it, the part that you are questioning is the timing. Is it different every time?

DF You could hear that there was more of a lilt at the end of each phrase.

NCT Here, look at this. This is the "Lament for the Only Son". This is a very, very sad lament, obviously. This is the one where Pdraig Mor finally lost his other son, his last child. And I was taught to make this grace note, on this low A here, big, because it indicates finality, and the same thing there. So I would play this – (she demonstrates). Whereas, it's written (she plays with more even timing).

DF Which is, you know, not killing me either. It's pretty pretty.

NCT It's pretty, but it's not pibroch.

DF It give is extra weight.

MH It's like it's living

DF Now do you hear that? Do you get that?

SH There's varying degrees of understanding. I guess from my level I could hear a less experienced player, the difference between them and the next level up. Where, I think, the expression, it's not just whether you get it or you don't. There's sometimes when you introduce the expression into it, but then you're missing it other places in the music. But from a listening standpoint, yeah, certainly not the subtleties between two similar pipers but I can tell to varying degrees.

DF OK, I've got to jump to a question that is way beyond this conversation which is how does the money this combo won get spent?

SH Some of the things we put in, like getting you a digital recorder in addition to your cassette.

NCT Sean's going to come, he comes about every third week and we're going to continue learning the canteroch. It takes a long time to incorporate it; it takes awhile of me singing to him while he plays for him to make the connection between the syllable and the movement. And

then, we'll sing together for a period of time. And then we're going to close the book and he's going to learn a tune without using the music at all.

DF Will taking a digital recording of you singing – and since you can't walk with him like the masters would, will that help Sean? Is that something he can practice to at home?

NCT Absolutely.

DF Do you live in an apartment where people scream, "Shut up!"

SH No. I used to but no. Luckily I have a lot of neighbors that are appreciative.

MH And you live out in a more rural – when they sent in their work sample, we loved Sean's because he's outside and it's sort of windy. And then there's this dog comes up, but he's outside on the deck and you can see that it's rural.

SH I guess to further answer your question, I think, because one of the things that Nance and I have talked about, being a competitive bagpiper, you're so focused on the competition and at my level, you sort of lose sight of the appreciation of the music. Where, with the grant, the intent is to get away from the focus being on the competition and working solely on the understanding and appreciation of the music, without having competition get in the way of that. In addition to the pibroch, you compete in light music as well, whereas, now the focus is going to be on the pibroch.

MH So it almost feels like a luxury to be able to spend more time doing that.

SH Absolutely.

DF Now I'm ready to stop asking questions, but it's up to you.

MH The one story is about how you came to it

SH I love hearing the stories.

MH It is part of it. That's a really good point because what's slightly different from just music lessons and an apprenticeship, is this very thing, where you're getting the background, the values, the stories. That's how traditional music is usually passed on. It's really important.

DF That is really important.

MH And you don't get that when you go to your weekly clarinet lesson. Or your weekly bagpipe lesson.

DF And I have one more unprofessional request to make. Makes it a lot easier that the dog is here. When my ride picks me up, both of my kids are music students. Would you mind if they listened?

NCT Oh, no, that would be great.

SH The other thing that we can do, which would be a real live experiment, is with the "Old Woman's Lullaby" having me play the ground and then you play the ground to see the difference.

MH And the story that I wanted Nancy to tell, and I'd love to hear your story too, is how you came to the bagpipe. I also did want to know if you ran into any discrimination or if you were one of so few women in this tradition, there must have been people out there against it. You don't have to tell us that now, but tell us how you came to that instrument at 23.

NCT Well, I had played the clarinet since I was 7 and actually I was a frustrated trombone player. I wanted to play the trombone and my mother, unbeknownst to me, went to school and said the band director, "No trombone." She didn't think it was ladylike. And so I was offered flute or clarinet and I chose the clarinet. I played it for 15 years, right into college. And didn't love it because it wasn't my first love, it wasn't what I really wanted to be playing. I went to Yale as a junior and I went to the music dept to sign up for lessons, assuming I would play in the orchestra. And the clarinet teacher there had a different fingering system that he taught than the fingering system I had been taught – there's French and German. And he said, "You'll need to completely relearn your fingering system," and I thought, this is the end of me and the clarinet.

I went home, very discouraged and upset. And I sat down in my kitchen to think about what I was going to play because it obviously was not going to be the clarinet anymore. And I'm sort of sitting there like this, looking at the ceiling, and all of a sudden, honest to God, right up there on the ceiling was this little light, in a kind of a cloud effect, and a highland bagpipe. . . . I am not, you know – It was a vision. Of a bagpipe and it was all lit, very glowing. I remember I looked at it and I said right out loud, "Oh no. Please, anything but the bagpipe." But it didn't go away. So I waited a minute. And then it kind of changed to a picture of me, from the waist up, playing a bagpipe. And I couldn't have even told you how you play the bagpipe. I didn't know, but there I am and I'm playing the bagpipe. So I said to it, "O.K., I'm going to call the music store in New Haven and if they have a bagpipe, O.K." So I went to the phone, I called Goldy Leebro in New Haven and I said to them, "You don't have a bagpipe, do you?" And they said, "Oh, but we do. We have one bagpipe." So then I had to get on my bike and pedal down there and buy this horrendous Pakistani instrument that was falling apart and the bag was completely shot. It didn't hold air at all. And the reeds were stuck in the wrong places and the pipes were in the wrong stops, it was just a mess. But I didn't know, so I brought it home and for several months tried to get a sound out of it. And it was so leaky that when I would blow into it, I would faint eventually. So I would stand by my bed (we are all laughing at this point) trying to get a sound out of this thing! So I would at least land on the bed and not hurt myself.

So this went on from October to, I don't know, March, when the St. Patrick's Day parade came along. And the St. Patrick's Day parade went by my dorm and I ran out to the very first bagpipe band. And the guy who appeared to be in charge with the red sash and I said, "Help me! Help me." He gave me his card and I started to take lessons with him. And he was a wonderful teacher. I was very lucky; I picked the right guy. His name was Malcolm MacDonald and he was from Nova Scotia. And that was my story.

DF Wow. There are a few things about that story – one is, aren't you glad your vision wasn't the Moog 200 or the tuba.

NCT Yeah, it could have been anything. I was kind of expecting a trombone.

MH And the fact that you stuck with it is remarkable.

DF That's the other part. Through this failure, I mean like, I don't know how many guitar players buy a guitar with terrible action, couldn't play it and threw it away.

NCT I know. I marvel at that because there have been other things in my life where it hasn't worked out well and I've just said, "nah." But this was a complete and total obsession from the moment I had the thing in my hand. I was NOT going to give it up.

DF But to summarize, the fist bagpipe that you got in New Haven, it wasn't an instrument that worked.

NCT It was junk.

DF And so you're trying to make it play and it's making you faint and just causing you all kinds of agony. And it wasn't until you found Malcolm MacDonald, who happened to be marching by in the St. Patrick's Day parade. And even that, St. Patrick's – different culture, although they do have bagpipes.

NCT Yes they do.

DF It's a complete random thing.

MH And then you got a decent instrument?

NCT Yeah, the very first thing he said was, first you need a practice chanter. I didn't even know that we learned on this. You don't learn on a bagpipe, you start on a practice chanter. So he got me that and gave me lessons until I was actually ready for the bagpipe. Then we got an instrument from Scotland that was good.

MH Sean, do you have a, well, you probably don't have a comparable story –

SH Certainly not as good a story.

DF No, he had a vision of a Scottish ale.

SH There is one similarity. I guess my thought, originally, as a child goes back to, what was the original "Amazing Grace" record that was out?

NCT The Royal Scots Lagoon Guards.

SH I remember my grandmother had that and playing that. My father's parents both died when I was young and they were both from Scotland. And I always felt I missed an opportunity. At seven years old, they died, but I didn't get to know them. My father didn't really know much so – watching the parades growing up, I felt a connection. You know, hearing the bagpipes, getting the chills with the bands going by. But really it started in my twenties where I had gone to my sister-in-law's brother's funeral. He died at a young age and they had a bagpiper there and a filled church and there wasn't a dry eye in the place at the end. At that point I said I want to play an instrument that evokes that type of emotion. So, similarly, although it wasn't a full stand of pipes, I got the Pakistani practice chanter, out of a catalog. They had the rosewood practice chanter and began with a book that I couldn't do anything with. I had difficulty finding an instructor.

MH Where were you living?

SH I was living in Attleboro at the time. Luckily the internet had just come out at around that time, so it was easier to start a search. So there was a local teacher that was only a couple of miles from me that I was able to locate. So I played with him. At the time, I knew nothing of pibroch. It was light music with the intent of playing in a band. From there, understanding the competition aspect of it a little bit more and then getting into the pibroch. At that point my instructor said I can't take you any further. You're going to have to go someplace else. Which brought me out here and I certainly feel very blessed to have been with Nancy. And I'll embarrass Nancy a little bit cause with every competition season, talking with other competitors, with Nancy being a judge also, you never hear any competitor compliment any judge or person more than Nancy about how nice she is. How great she is with her comments on the score sheet. With me, I came here and learned a lot, after the fact but I don't mind driving the hours to get here. (It is a 3-hour drive) I'm sure there are some folks that are closer to me but I wouldn't stop coming here.

DF But you started playing together here before you won the award.

SH Yes.

DF How long have you been playing together?

SH Probably about six years.

DF So the apprentice mentor relationship, when you give these grants out, it's something that's already established.

MH In the majority of cases that's true. There are exceptions. It's often people who have found each other and are working together at some level.

DF Gotcha. And what do you do when you're not playing your bagpipe?

SH I work for CVS.

DF And is this your full time occupation?

NCT Yes, this is my full time occupation. I teach, I judge, I play.

DF Can you make a good living doing that?

NCT not like yours. [we all laugh]

DF Now you know what mine is, don't you. That's why I throw that out there.

NCT There have been years when my living was \$5,000, after the expenses involved in making my living. It's not that bad now; it's sufficient to my needs, but it's a tradition where, in Scotland, in the old days, you gave your teacher a bottle of scotch at New Year and the lessons were free.

DF Is Laphroaig really your scotch of choice?

NCT No, not at all. That was given to me. I can't stand Laphroaig. I like the east coast, flowery malts. Actually, my very favorite is Highland Park. [more talk about what David likes]

MH Can you give me an example of a male who did not accept a female player and what they said and how they acted? Looking back-

NCT Well there have been any number of instances where people have called the house, for instance, looking for a piper. I am assumed to be the piper's wife. Also, when I was competing, early on there was a judge who, as I got better and moved from the highest amateur grade, told me, "Well you should not be playing pipes anymore because you're going to be a professional soon. You're going to be earning money. And you're going to be taking money away from the male competitors. And they have families to support. So you should stop piping." [laughs]

MH What year was this?

NCT That was in the late eighties. Then there are others who have said things like, "Well, you play very well for a girl."

SH Tell your story about competing in Scotland.

NCT Which one?

SH The one

NCT Oh. The one about the piper who shall remain nameless.

SH Him.

NCT There's a guy who is still competing now. This can't go into any publication cause he's relatively well known. He was a pipe major in one of the British regiments and went over to Scotland to compete. I was competing against him and against people of that ilk. And I was in my final warm up room, doing my final tuning for the Silver Medal competitions. It was a very big deal for me. I was terrified and just trying to get everything perfect. All of a sudden, the door to what I thought was my tuning room just blew open, Whack! And there's this five foot tall, five foot square GUY standing there with his bagpipe. He just walked in, started up the bagpipe and his bagpipe was about twice as loud as mine. And he just started to play. He was standing right next to me and of course I couldn't hear my own bagpipe to tune it so I went over to the other side of the room. And he just kind of followed me over there. And so when I went on to actually compete, I was not at my calmest. It was tough. And I'm sure it was on purpose. We all were supposed to have our own little tuning room, but he liked mine.

DF He just was going to intimidate you.

NCT Yeah. And he did. [laughter]

DF When you win competitions in Scotland, does it become a big deal because you are a woman? Does it make the local news?

NCT It's a very big deal. It doesn't happen all that often yet. It's still in the stages of the Silver Medal as opposed to the Gold Medal. We're still waiting for numbers of women to win at the Gold Medal level. A friend of mine went over and won the Silver Medal and that was just huge. In fact, one of the conveners of Gold Medal competition retired after she won the Silver Medal because he said, "The day is coming when a woman is going to win a Gold Medal and I don't want to be here when that happens." And he said that on the stage, to the audience, in which she was sitting.

DF Wow. And Taylor Swift thinks she got it bad.

NCT The whole, the tradition is very bound up in the military. It has all that aspect to it now.

DF There are women in the British military.

NCT Yeah. I wonder what their lives are like.

MH That's a great picture of you behind - where was that?

NCT This was at the Kennedy Center. I was playing a symphonic piece with a bagpipe part. I was about to go, right after that, to Lockerbie, this was right after the Lockerbie event, the crash. I was about to go there and play as a gesture of American goodwill toward Scotland. A reporter from TIME Magazine came out and took that. It's still my business card, it's about 20 years old. And this is John Williams here. The Pops was playing the "Orkney Wedding with Sunrise" with

the Boston Pops. That's been a great gig, the orchestra playing. I've done that about 100 times. And then I had a great gig with the Scotch Whiskey Institute. A 30-city tour.

DF This is Robbie Burns.

NCT Yes. My husband is quite a Burns expert and reciter of Burns' poetry. He can do "Tam O Shanter" from memory. The Laphroaig came from the composer of the "Orkney Wedding with Sunrise" that I'm playing with Boston Pops. After the premiere, he gave me the bottle of Laphroaig. He wrote all over it, so I keep it up there. Peat, peat, peat, it's like drinking soil as far as I'm concerned.

MH Well do you want to try working together a little?

NCT and SH Yeah. Sure. [they both unpack their pipes and get them ready for tuning] Nancy mentions that her daughter Gwen is a highland dancer and points to her medals in this.

Nancy puts on her pipes, starts to blow into the bag, and asks, "How's Django going to be?"

MH Oh, we'll see. [A loud drone begins and then is accompanied by argpeggio like tuning notes. After about 30 seconds, Django starts barking. I realize I need to take him out to the car.]