



July 7, 2017

On a Saturday morning this spring, I stood with Oona, my Irish wolfhound, in a biting wind listening to a Highland piper wail away.

The ancient, alien sound got under my skin as it usually does, but then, piping is in my blood.

Sure, Oona's father, the mighty Stanley, was born near Falkirk, Scotland, but technically, she's a dog. Dogs have their own taste in music. Oona tolerated the pipes as she does so many inexplicable human things.

Portal to the ancient world

Piping is a portal to the ancient world. Bagpipes have an eerie timbre. Which is probably why to some people, they sound like somebody's strangling a cat. A piper can be seen engraved on a 3,000-year-old Hittite slab in the Middle East. The pipes are a descendant of the first known musical instrument, a bear-bone flute played by Neanderthals 60,000 years ago in a cave in Slovenia.

What melodies they played is a mystery, but the flute makers were moved by primeval urges that led us by the ear across the eons to rap music, jazz, rock tunes and country ballads that are all around us today.

Apparently, to be human is to make music, even if it's blowing through a hollow bone or just banging two rocks together.

Acutally, apes make a sort of music banging rocks together, so making music may not be limited to just us big-brained bipeds. Dogs howl, and not just when they're lonely. Every pack like mine has its own anthem.

Finn, our other wolfhound, used to begin and Sully and Bentley followed his cue, each barking or yipping in a slightly different note so that all their voices were heard.

Group howls tell the world that they're here and they're a unique group. Finn liked to lead choir practice at 1 a.m. You can see why I ramble.

The language emotions

Music is the language of emotion. It transcends cultures. It affects our heart rate and shapes our mood. A few notes of an old song can take us back years. Music alters mental states. It's a

powerful thing.

Scientists studying prehistoric cave paintings in Europe recently discovered that the figures tended to be clustered along sections of cave walls that had the best acoustics. They suspect that back in 35,000 B.C., whoever viewed the eerie figures of beasts and hunters did so accompanied by some kind of music. It was some mystical, magical rite practiced deep down in the bowels in the earth.

Today, there's a whole field of study devoted to reconstructing ancient musical instruments like the lur and the carnyx and an array of flutes and lutes and weird horns. Bits and pieces have been found in bogs or riverbeds or dug up in caves and, while they're pretty sure they can put them back together correctly, they're not so sure they know how to play them.

Caesar described the sound of the carnyx during the Gallic wars as "barbaric" and "harsh" and "suited to the tumult of war." Which makes sense because the carnyx, a six-foot-long bronze horn topped with a boar-head bell, was a war horn used enthusiastically by the Celts to ruffle and unnerve the enemy. Which makes it a forerunner of the Great Highland Pipes used with such effect by the Scots later on.

In the British Isles

Bagpipes have been around in the British Isles for centuries. In 2003, diggers unearthed a set of pipes in County Wicklow, Ireland that dated back to 2,000 B.C. They were used in weddings and ceremonies and village dances. In the 1300s, the Scots introduced the Great Highland Pipes. The Scots thought they were pretty great because they could raise your hair up to

nine miles away and easily cut through the din of cannons and muskets fire. The Scots added a third drone because two didn't shake loose enough fillings.

When the British tried to break the Highland clan system in the 1700s, they not only took their weapons and kilts, they squelched the pipes, too. At least one piper was hung for inciting a riot — by playing the pipes. After so few scruffy Highlanders made mincemeat of the British for so long, the English wised up and incorporated them into their military — and gave those units back their pipes. And their high, wild sound was heard above battles around the world from Waterloo to Balaclava to the Battle of Cowpens in South Carolina. Piper Mad Bill Millin led British troops onto the beach at Normandy on D-Day in WWII.

It's said you either love or hate the pipes, although people of Irish or Scottish descent seem to fall heavily into the "love" category. A genetic link? Maybe. A 2009 study by King's College in London suggests that our inherited DNA accounts for more than 50% of what influences our musical preferences. Music is a deeply personal, emotional thing, so our life experiences color the rest.

All I know for sure is that since I first heard them in a school assembly when I was 8, the pipes have tugged at me. In my late 20s, I attended my first Highland games at Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina and, as it worked out, the moment I laid eyes on the tent for Clan MacMillan, more than 100 pipers and drummers massed on the field behind me decided to fire it up.

I was skewered and hammered by a blast from the past. Scots

Wha Hae rang in my ears for days. And, lo these many years later, I still need regular pipe infusions to avoid feeling stale and stretched.

So I don't think what Cam McAzie, an Australian rocker, does with the pipes at all strange. You can see him on YouTube playing AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" on a special set of bagpipes. They shoot flames straight out the drones. Really. I haven't shown Oona yet, but I think my Scots/Irish hound would be duly impressed. She has a bit of a wild streak, too.