What an intriguing bit of family history! How did you, in particular, develop your interest and skill at playing the bag pipes. Was there a particular person or event that really peaked your interest?

Over the span of my life, I've had numerous serendipitous encounters with Scotland's national instrument, starting in my teens with a redheaded piper whom I briefly dated in high school. However, at that time, I was more interested in the girl than the pipes. In college I had a roommate, who would play pipe-band albums at obscene decibel levels to annoy the neighbors. But although the sound of the pipes intrigued me, there was never enough of a lure to overcome the myriad distractions of an intemperate youth and tempt me to fully embrace them. It wasn't until decades later, after maturity and career and family intervened, that the call of the pipes sounded again more prominently. I began hearing their plaintive wail time after time while we mourned the tragic events of 9/11; initially to honor the victims and first responders, and later the soldiers who followed. And so it was then, in the early years of the 21st Century, at the ripe old age of 40-something, having no previous musical training or ability, that I was subconsciously primed to entertain the ridiculous notion of learning to play the Great Highland Bagpipe.

Wow! You are an inspiration to all who have nurtured the desire to bring the pipes to the heart of their personal Scottish longings.

But, as with most novice pipers, that journey initially began with a simple practice chanter and the College of Piping tutor (the "Green Book") of basic fingering exercises. After noodling around for a few months, I determined that I really needed a proper (i.e. living) tutor, whom I found in the person of Greg Cook - a piper with the 42nd Highlanders Regimental Pipes & Drums. It was he who taught me the fundamentals, and with formal instruction I progressed rapidly. Within another few months, I was able to play basic tunes on my first pipes – a set of 1960's era Gillanders & MacLeods that I still play to this day, handed down to me from one of the Armenian in-laws - but that's a whole 'nuther story.

Over the next decade, I took inspiration from top pipers past and present. I listened to every solo piping recording I could lay my hands on, to better understand and absorb the expression and idioms that most pipers of Scottish descent grew up listening to, but were novel to me. I eventually sought advanced instruction from local piping icons John Allan and Aaron Shaw. In 2012, I entered the solo piping competition circuit to test my mettle against other pipers and to obtain additional feedback from knowledgeable judges. That culminated in winning a solo piping championship in 2014.

Despite the fact that many countries and cultures have found their music blended into that of the 20th and 21st centuries, that has not been the case with the music of Scotland. If anything the music and songs of Scotland has influenced that of other countries. (think Burns). The Great Highland Bagpipe is synonymous with Scotland. I am sure you have many stories from your experience. Would you be willing to share 1 or 2?

It would be a mistake to assume that Scottish music in general, and pipe music in particular, is static and immutable. Bands like the Red Hot Chili Pipers have transcended tradition, fusing rock & roll and pastoral instruments with modern rhythms that appeal to cross-generational audiences. However it is precisely because those older traditions are at the same time lovingly embraced and preserved that the Great Highland Bagpipes has become an icon of Scottish culture everywhere that the British Empire once held sway; which is to say around the globe.

Joining the ranks of pipers has indeed opened-up opportunities for adventure that would otherwise have never been available to me. I've played for former presidents & sitting first ladies, governors, mayors, congressmen, police chiefs, Medal of Honor recipients, returning servicemen, veterans, notable business leaders, movie stars, and celebrities. I've also performed with legendary bands on famous stages, and have appeared on local and national television. I've piped across the towns, glens, and lochs of Scotland, ships at sea, mountain peaks, and desert sands. But to bring the tale full circle I'll relate an experience that occurred several years ago in my paternal ancestral homeland, Germany.

Arriving in Berlin for a business meeting I had a few hours to stretch my legs from the long flight and explore nearby sights. I hadn't walked far before I heard the unmistakable skirl of the pipes from a few blocks distant. Following the sound I found a busker dressed in his best approximation of Highland attire, inexpertly playing familiar, if somewhat out of tune, compositions from the canon of traditional Scottish composers. I listened for a while, and when he paused to take a break, we struck up a conversation of sorts; he speaking broken English and I, having not a scrap of the Father Tongue beyond "gesundheit," my own poor English. I offered to tune his drones, gave him a few other tips, and dropped a handful of Euros into his pipe case before returning to my hotel. What struck me most about the encounter was the reverence with which that piper held for the instrument and the culture that it represented! Although clearly at the beginning of his own journey on the path to becoming a piper, his passion and commitment was plainly evident.

What a fascinating and captivating story! What has also been your experience with the Celtic/Scottish diaspora here in Southern California. The music of the pipes is almost better than a DNA analysis to identify the true Scot through tears or toe tapping. What has been your experience with the youth, especially those of Celtic origins?

I have to confess that I lived in the Los Angeles area for close to 2 decades before even becoming aware of the Scottish gatherings and attending my first Games as a piper. Now they've become a part of my almost monthly routine. Their absence due to the pandemic has been acutely felt. Since becoming a piper and embracing my Celtic ancestry I've joined a number of Scottish organizations, including my Clan association, and have enjoyed the camaraderie and sense of belonging that a shared cultural connection engenders.

As a solo piper I've always envied the nimble fingers of my more youthful competitors, while at the same time appreciating their interest in and dedication to perpetuating the Scottish arts; even at such a young age. Although I have no personal experience with Highland dancing, nothing pleases me more than to wander over to the dance pavilion; first and foremost to observe and learn from the expert piper who plays for the dancers. But I'm also encouraged to see the wee lads and lassies who are assuming the mantle of upholding those valued traditions.

My one reservation is the observation, over the years, of a gradual decline in participation at the various Games; not just from the general public, but also from the aging population that normally staffs the Clan tents. If the diasporic Scottish community in Southern California, and indeed across the country and around the world, is to thrive then it's imperative that we continue to encourage and support the next generation! I often wonder what level of piping I might have achieved had I started earlier in life (although from my own biased opinion I've still not yet peaked).

It's through organizations such as the St. Andrew's Society and the clan associations that we enable our heritage to be kept alive and passed-on. Nonetheless, anecdotal evidence aside and notwithstanding the loss of an entire year, I have faith in the resilience of the Scots to rebound and return stronger than before. That has been our history! I look forward to the next chapter of my life as a piper, and as a proud member of the Scottish-American community.
Alba gu bràth!

Terrific Richard. And I just now realized that, by serendipity, the thread of the Thistle interviews for both July and August embrace musicians - no doubt an indication of the central role that music and song has played in stitching together the essence of Scottish culture and history! Again, a special thanks to you.