Notation Software for Pipers

How I practise with CelticPipes and what I think of PiobMaster

Without sheet music you will not get far on the Great Highland Bagpipe. You soon read the melody fluently, but the embellishments take longer: doublings, grips, taorluaths, birls and throws. A good notation program writes them down cleanly and plays the tune back. Difficult passages can be looped until they sit.

I have been working with CelticPipes since March 2020. I started with version 3, shortly after it came out, and since May 2026 I have been using the new version 4. Here I describe what the program can do and how I practise with it. Finally, there is a section on PiobMaster, a second notation program for pipers.

1. Why sheet music on the computer?

Many tunes only exist as a copy of a copy, scanned at an angle or handwritten. On the computer it becomes a clean sheet of music that you can change and reprint at any time. Listening is worth even more. The program plays the tune at the right tempo, slower if you like, and shows which note is sounding. At the beginning on the practice chanter this helps a lot, because you hear beforehand how the tune should sound.

2. The CelticPipes program

CelticPipes is a notation program built from the start for the bagpipe and other Celtic instruments. It is made by ChorusLogic Ltd in Scotland, and the first version came out in 2007. The current version 4 was released in May 2026 and runs on Windows, on the Mac (including Apple processors) and on Linux. The program itself is also available in German.

Besides the Great Highland Bagpipe it supports the practice chanter, Scottish smallpipes, tin whistle, flute, bodhrán and the drums of a pipe band: side drum, tenor drum and bass drum.

3. Writing music with all the embellishments

Notes and rests are placed into the bar from the toolbar, with sound if you like, so you hear straight away what you write. All the embellishments of Highland music are included, from doublings, grips, taorluaths, birls, throws, shakes and peles to the cadences and echoes for piobaireachd. You can set how long the gracenotes last and how much time they take from the melody note. You can create your own embellishments and reuse them.

You can open several tunes at the same time and copy bars or whole lines from one to another. Every step can be undone. Single tunes are combined into a set, and seconds and harmonies are added as extra parts.

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I mainly use it to copy out music that I receive as paper copies. Paper is easily mislaid if you don't file it, or it tears. In CelticPipes the tune is stored permanently, and I also keep it in my cloud. That way I can open it at any time, on my phone or tablet if necessary, and print it as often as I like.

While copying I also read the music carefully once, and what I have written myself I remember better.

4. Playback and practice

For me, playback is the most important reason for such a program. CelticPipes sounds like real instruments and not like beeps, and the drones can be made louder or softer. A tune plays from the beginning, from a certain bar or as a marked section in a loop. That helps with the passage that just won't sit. Tempo, count-in and metronome can be set freely, the note being played is highlighted in the score and the page turns by itself.

New in version 4 is a slider for “pointing”. It determines how strongly dotted rhythms are played, from round to sharp. In marches, strathspeys and reels you can clearly hear the difference. The tune then sounds as if a piper were playing it.

I first practise a new tune slowly, depending on the tune at 30 to 50 beats per minute, and then increase the tempo step by step. Difficult passages I play in a loop and play along. For that I don't have to look for a tune somewhere on the internet.

5. Sharing and passing on music

Among pipers, music has been passed around in BWW format for years. CelticPipes opens these files and, if you like, converts a whole folder at once without touching the originals. It can also read BMW files, ABC and MusicXML (.xml, .musicxml and .mxl, for example from MuseScore, Sibelius or Finale), older CelticPipes files (.cep, open only) and on Windows also files from PiobMaster (.pio) and DrumScriobh.

It can export PDF for printing, PNG and JPEG for websites, MusicXML, BWW and ABC for other programs as well as MIDI, WAV and MP3 for listening. Your own tunes are saved as .cepx, a compressed file containing MusicXML, i.e. an open format. Anyone who changes program one day does not lose their music. From within the program you can also reach a tune library with tunes from other users, and you can publish your own tunes there.

6. Recording from an electronic chanter

Since version 4, CelticPipes can record directly from a digital chanter. You play the tune and the program writes down the notes. It explicitly supports the Blair Digital Chanter. The Blair sends about one octave lower than the written bagpipe pitch, and a single tick box corrects this. A built-in MIDI monitor shows what the chanter actually sends. This makes setting it up easier. So you no longer have to enter a tune note by note by hand.

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7. My experience

I got version 4 with the first released build. At first it still had a few quirks, which have since been fixed for the most part. By now I can work with it very well again and have not found any further problems. The developer delivers improvements regularly, most recently two updates in September 2026.

I have to praise the support explicitly: it is first class. You get a quick, fitting answer to a precise question. And if you do find a bug, it is fixed as quickly as possible, usually in the next or the one after next version. I have not yet found anything that bothers me. I am completely satisfied with the program.

8. Costs and trial

CelticPipes can be tested free of charge for 30 days with all functions, ideally with your own tunes right away. After that there are three options (as of October 2026, prices in British pounds):

- Perpetual licence for version 4: £69 one-off, bug fixes and minor updates included, major version upgrades cost extra.
- Annual subscription: £32 per year, all updates and upgrades included.
- Monthly subscription: £4 per month, cancellable monthly.

Users of older versions get the upgrade at a reduced price. Current prices are on the developer's website. I have used CelticPipes on a subscription from the start and today pay the annual subscription with all updates. That is affordable for me, and I pay it gladly, because the program really helps me a lot with my practice.

9. Who is CelticPipes for?

At the beginning it helps to hear a tune before playing it on the practice chanter. Later you use it to practise difficult passages slowly and in sections, and to set your own music cleanly and share it. Pipe bands get pipes and drums on one page.

That is why CelticPipes is worth it for beginners just as much as for advanced players. Of course you first have to get to know the program. The quickest way is simply to try everything out during the trial period. The manual is unfortunately only available in English.

10. PiobMaster for piobaireachd

A second notation program for pipers is PiobMaster by Ceol Mor Software & Publishing from Scotland. It is mainly intended for piobaireachd (pibroch), the classical music of the Great Highland Bagpipe, but you can also write any other tune with it. The current version PiobMasterPro 5.0 runs only on Windows 10 and 11.

For playback PiobMaster uses recordings of a real bagpipe played by Angus MacColl, plus practice chanter and smallpipe sounds. PiobMaster 5.0 can also record notes directly from an electronic chanter. So far the developer has only tested this with the Fagerström Technopipes. Old BWW and BMW files can be imported, MIDI files imported and exported. A single licence costs £149.99 one-off. A trial version can

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be downloaded free of charge beforehand. On Windows, CelticPipes also opens PiobMaster files, by the way.

I bought PiobMaster in version 4. For piobaireachd it is a good notation program, but not quite easy to use. You need time and English, because the manual and help are only available in English. Personally I find the price of £149.99 too high.

A major drawback for me is the licence: after a few days the program keeps asking for a new registration, as if I had never activated it. This has happened to me several times, and each time I had to contact the developer. At the end of September 2026 it stopped working again. I asked once more and by mid-October had received no answer. I don't want to run the program down, but I stick to the truth, because anyone reading this page relies on what I say. Perhaps it only affects me. Whether you buy PiobMaster is everyone's own decision. The free trial version helps with that.

11. CelticPipes in my lessons

In my lessons I am happy to show how I practise with CelticPipes. Simply write to me via the contact page on dudelsack-regensburg.de.

As of October 2026. Information on the programs according to the developers' websites celticpipes.com and ceolmor-software.com. Prices may change.

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