A wise friend the other day was talking about time. There is the calibrated time of a steadily ticking clock and then there is the flowy, non-calibrated time of meditation, daydreaming, and spacing out. His observations came up, oddly enough, during a conversation about Donald Judd’s love of bagpipe music and Scottish tartans. It turns out, rather wondrously, that they are all wrapped up with one another: time, Judd’s work, the music, the tartans, this beautiful and austere landscape. Give me a minute and I’ll explain.

Judd’s appreciation for piping ignited in the late 1960s, when he was married to Julie Finch, a dancer of Scottish heritage. He heard pipers for the first time, other than at parades, during a trip to Nova Scotia with Finch, and she later bought him a tartan as a present. The couple began picking up bagpipe recordings and once, while planning an event, Judd and Finch dropped by a New York store called Scottish Products and asked the staff to recommend a piper for hire. They suggested a piper named Joe Brady Sr. “That’s how it all started,” Finch said this summer. “It was Joe Sr. who introduced him to pibroch.”

The sound of bagpipes playing is at once familiar and unearthly, resolute and terribly solemn. Pibroch – sometimes written piobaireachd – is the classical form of bagpipe music, a complex composition that begins with a melody and evolves into a series of variations before returning, at the end, to the original melody. Pipers of old played pibroch as a lament for the dead, as a salute to a person or a place, to call the clan to gather, or as music to row by. It is heavy and hypnotic, so much so that it’s referred to at times as Ceòl Mòr, or “big music,” to differentiate it from the lighter fare of dances, military marches or reels. Judd loved it.

The artist struck up a lasting friendship with Joe Sr. and his son, Joe Jr., who was still a teenager when he began playing for Judd in the 1970s. Members
of the Piobaireachd Society met periodically at 101 Spring Street, Judd’s New York residence, to play pibrochs for no other audience but one another. “Pibroch is demanding,” said Joe Brady Jr. “It’s complicated and melodic. It requires time. Don liked that drone sound in the back and that it was marked by simplified rhythm and pattern. He understood pattern more than other people. It’s a minimalistic type of music – the rhythms are simple, but it’s amazing that you can do so much with just a few notes.”

One or both of the Bradys traveled to Canada, New York, and across Europe to play pibrochs at Judd’s openings. They were in Marfa every October, playing in the Arena during the Chinati Foundation’s Open House. The crowd at Chinati was always a mix of out-of-towners with sophisticated cultural backgrounds and Marfans, for whom the keening of bagpipes was unfamiliar sonic territory. The concentrated weave of the music requires concentration from the listener. Judd was adamant about silence during a bagpipe performance and could get testy about chatter among the audience. For Judd, the music demanded attention.

“When you were listening to music, it was not a background thing, just as art was not a backdrop to other activities,” said Flavin Judd, the artist’s son. “He had the same respect for music as he did for art.”

At the close of his Open House performances, Joe Jr. slowly marched outside, leading the crowd into the starry night and to a bonfire nearby. He paced deliberately around the flames, playing poignant laments. It was magical. Judd liked bringing the music to others. Shortly after Octavio Paz was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, in 1990, Judd decided that a celebration honoring the writer was in order. Paz gently declined an invitation to Marfa, but Judd opted to celebrate the author anyway, in Ojinaga, Chihuahua, sixty miles south of Marfa. Ojinaga’s mayor was eager to participate and the event unfolded in the city’s central plaza one evening. Judd and local dignitaries sat on the bandstand for speeches and readings of Paz’s work. Then came Joe Brady Jr. and his bagpipes. He marched around the plaza, playing tune after tune.

Judd did listen to other types of music. He liked classical music, bluegrass, and some country, and he admitted to his son that he thought the early Beatles songs were “okay.” He was, as Flavin said, an omnivorous collector of cultures.

“He was also collecting African masks and Shaker furniture and Native American blankets, but bagpipes are a special case. I have lots of good memories listening to it on the reel-to-reel. It sounded good in all of Don’s spaces. It is the music of my childhood.”

It doesn’t appear that Judd ever wrote about bagpipes, though he mentions his interest in them in an October 1993 interview with Regina Wyrwoll. According to Caitlin Murray, archivist at the Judd Foundation, ten books on bagpipes are included in his library at the Block, along with 40 references to Scotland, ranging from whiskey to historical texts on ancient Scotland. A chart of scales hangs in a kitchen at the Block, though no one recollects him trying to learn to play. Judd tended to wear tartan-plaid shirts and occasionally donned a kilt. He was
not, however, of Scottish descent, but that didn’t hold Judd back. Brady came back year after year to play the Open House, where Judd pied Brady with discussions about piping and Brady plumbed Judd about art. One October, Judd was rankled that the piper’s music wasn’t more of a forefront in the event. “He asked if I could come back for President’s Day weekend and for three or four years, we got pipers and drummers to go down for four days and entertain,” said Brady.

In the early 1990s, Judd lightly explored creating a bagpipe and pibroch museum in Marfa at a building called Bingham Hall, sometimes referred to as the Chinati’s office and the Arena. A few rooms in the building were dry-walled in preparation for the museum, but although Joe Jr. remembers Judd talking with his father about building a collection, the plans never passed the idea stage.

One of the rooms in the Block is beautifully and simply installed with Judd pieces. There is a bed in the corner and a Shaker bench. Against one wall is a glassed case. Inside it: bagpipes, their inclusion in this room’s collection an indication of how much he valued the music. Within the same building, in his winter bedroom, are arranged his collections of Native American weavings and ceramics, old turquoise jewelry, and locally-made leather crafts and gear. Stacks of tartan blankets are piled on the bed. They are deeply hued, with intersecting color fields and stripes lovely and vivid. Elements of both the music and the tartans informed Judd’s work.

Sometimes this is pretty obvious, such as in the tartan-like images Judd produced toward the end of his career. Judd worked with master printmaker Robert Arber on a suite of twenty such prints. Though this 1993 suite never went into production, bon a tier prints of all twenty hang on the wall of Arber’s Marfa print studio. They are rather magnificent. The blocks of color and the grids of thick and thin lines mesmerize: viridian, cadmium red, orange and yellow, ultramarine blue, cerulean, cobalt, permanent green, black. They are not illusionary or spectral, like the changing reflections that are created by, say, Judd’s mill aluminum boxes at Chinati. Instead, these are flat, non-reflective and non-glossy. Their surprise comes from their power as a group— all those interacting bold lines—and the unexpected turns of color when lines intersect. The grids are simple, direct. They are what they are, rather like roadmaps indicating routes amid the landscape.

Everything seems to come back to the land. Judd’s shimmering mill aluminum pieces and his concrete boxes marching in Marfa’s grassland impose a human order, pattern, and rhythm on a land that is particularly harsh and untamable. At Chinati there is play between what is permanent— these old rocks and this old sky—and Judd’s boxes that aim at permanence. The concrete boxes stretch out before us, accompanied by the trills of a curved bill thrasher and measured by footfalls and deepening shadows. How much time do we have? How long is long?

The Scots lived in a similarly wild place, unforgiving in its climate and beautiful in its rocky sparseness. They wove textiles that were many-colored, like their landscape, and perhaps the fields and intersecting lines of their tartans were, in a sense, a reflection of their rolling moors and hardscrabble hillsides, putting order to what is fundamentally not able to be ordered. There is rhythm in the hills and a pattern to the seasons; those ancient weavers may have acknowledged those natural and inescapable rhythms and patterns in the very cloth they wore.

And what of time? A ticking clock is one marker of time, but my wise friend posits that music is another language that marks time’s existence. While some music is more readily clock-like, with a measured, reliable time signature or beat, the music of pibroch is decidedly more abstract. A pibroch’s variations of melody are played above a sobering, continuous drone that is the bedrock of the piece. The melody unfurls, drifts into shifting variants, and repeats; the drone can’t be escaped. Judd’s favorite pibrochs were “Desperate Battle of the Birds” and “Flame of Wrath,” where the viciousness of battle flickers in the low notes. Think of those sinuous notes afloat over the undulating folds of the moor, calling clansmen to come, come. The patterns of music weave and wane in the air, criss-crossing like lines in a tartan. The time that a pibroch marks is meditative, somber, and spreads out, field-like. Hearing a pibroch played indoors puts you in mind of the out-of-doors, says my friend, and he is right. Hearing one played outdoors makes buildings and street lights seem to fall away until just the stars and wind and silence remain. As says my friend, the only clothing that will do is a kilt.

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3. DONALD JUDD, UNTITLED, SET OF TWENTY WOODCUTS IN CADMIUM RED, CADMIUM YELLOW, CADMIUM ORANGE, ULTRAMARINE BLUE, CERULEAN BLUE, CORAL BLUE, PERMANENT FEBT, VIRDIAN GREEN, BLACK, ALIZARIN CRIMSON, 1992-93. (DSS 271 - 294) PRINTED BY ROBERT ABBE, ABBE AND SON.