

Hire a Highland Bagpiper for a Magnificent Send-off

By William W. Don Carlos

The image of the kilted bagpiper performing at a memorial is truly magical. The Scottish Highland bagpipes hearken back to ancient times when people gathered to commemorate the noble deeds of heroic lives upon battlefields under the open sky. Today the pipes are the living legacy of those great traditions. They can be used by anyone to create a magnificent send-off. You do not need to be Scottish to hire a piper. Among the remnants of the British Empire the pipes are still played in many places around the world such as: Hong Kong, Jordan, or India. You can find pipers throughout the United States just about as easily as upon the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle. They have now become a modern tradition for many cultures--far from Highland glens and misty Scottish isles. Living in the American Southwest, I have performed as a professional piper for hundreds of memorial services in Southern Arizona.

There are many different ways to utilize the pipes. In a funeral service bagpipes can be tailored for a unique tribute to your loved one. All death is considered to be a sad loss, but many memorials are designed to be celebrations of life. These memorials lovingly crown a long well-lived life, unlike services for situations like a sudden tragedy. Most of the memorials I have piped are for those who passed away in the fullness of time. Anticipating the end, they had the luxury of time to make careful plans with their families, plans for specific music selections including the Highland bagpipes. Scottish bagpipe music is diverse; most tunes are not dirges. A good piper is prepared to play according to the tone and specific circumstances found upon arrival at the service. A well-constructed memorial event has room for many moods. Sometimes sacred selections are ideal. Melodies from any source may be considered based upon their own special relevance to the family. The bagpipe chanter can play thousands of tunes with only a nine-note range. Some modern melodies can be played on the pipes, but many are impossible to render properly. Quite often, hymns or traditional selections are played at the beginning, but the family saves the best for last: "Going Home," or "Amazing Grace" to close the service. Pipes can only play at one volume level, so the final piece is presented beautifully

if the piper recesses away slowly while playing, leaving haunting echoes for the listener.

Many locations, such as churches, are wonderfully suited for playing the pipes. The acoustics inside large sacred spaces can be very impressive, but the pipes may also be used in smaller venues. The intensity of volume is mitigated in a small church if it is packed with people. The pipes are an instrument of dramatic impact rather than long duration, so it is often desirable to play them indoors to begin and then to conclude a religious service. Outdoors the pipes reign supreme. No other instrument has the same effect at the graveside. Many memorials also include military honors. The typical fashion is to first have final words of benediction, then the folding and presentation of the U.S. flag, followed by the bugler playing of "Taps." The service is then completed by a final tribute from the bagpipes. Another significant way for the piper to participate is by playing while the casket is lowered. The pipes may also be employed separate from the ceremony for an Irish-style "wake," or party, at home. Done properly, the bagpipes will enshrine the smiles and tears of this significant day in the majesty of this ancient and noble tradition.