

Guidance on the selection and performance of MAP tunes in RSPBA Contests.

In general terms, the issues to be addressed in selecting and performing MAP tunes include tempo, technical difficulty, tonality, rhythm, ensemble, 'breaks', and corps playing.

TEMPO is affected by many factors, such as the type of piece, e.g. March, Strathspey, or Reel, etc., its **technical difficulty**, and the ability level of the performers. If the piece challenges the ability of the performers, for example, inexperienced juveniles, then it is unlikely that its tempo will be in keeping with the expected '**Lively and Spirited**' interpretation of the March rhythm in a contest. Notwithstanding this, it is anticipated that pipe bands which are obviously in a 'learning' situation may not be able to match the expected criteria until sufficient competency and experience is reached, though allowance will not be made for this in a contest. Therefore, to achieve the best musical effect, it is important to select tunes within the areas of capability and experience of the pipe band.

The 'correct' tempo of any piece is always a matter of choice in relation to its style or type, and has long been a point of discussion among musicians who are engaged in repeatedly performing long-established traditional or classic pieces of music. However, guidelines can be drawn as to what tempo is most appropriate. This also applies to other music out with that of the bagpipe. For example, to play a piece given the tempo mark 'Allegro', meaning 'quick, lively, bright', could only be achieved through learning and experience. However, with the invention and extensive use of the 'metronome' (from about 1810), 'Allegro' has been assessed as having a tempo range of between 120 and 160 beats per minute. This offers the performer some latitude in the tempo of the piece according to its type, and the interpretation of the melody.

Suggested tempo for MAP:

2/4 March – approx. 78 beats per minute;

Strathspey – approx. 120 beats per minute;

Reel – approx. 84 beats per minute.

TONALITY is the use of a succession of different scales to provide variety and contrast in a medley, or 'set', of tunes. This aspect of medley construction can easily be identified through the traditional grouping of the set of marches:

'Scotland the Brave' (final note 'Low A'); 'Bonnie Galloway' (final note 'D');, 'Rowan Tree' (final - 'Low A'); and 'The Black Bear' (final - 'D').

It is the 'Final' of a melody which identifies its particular scale.

RHYTHM is the result of the regular recurrence of 'strong' and 'weak' pulses, and is the means by which the 'characteristics', or 'idiom', of different types of music is defined, especially those pieces designed to inspire action such as the well known dance, the 'Waltz'. This is achieved, firstly by the tempo, and secondly by the accurate observation of 'relative note values'. The subdivision of the beat note into particular 'note groups', provides the vitality and distinctive quality of the various types of music.

'Vitality' is not created by playing quickly, but by playing the relative note values accurately. A common fault in playing a 'Strathspey', which is written in 'simple time', is not playing the note values accurately. Each bar consists of four crotchets, with each crotchet often subdivided into a 'note group' consisting of a semi-quaver and a 'dotted' quaver, providing a 'pointed' effect to the tune. This 'idiom' is frequently referred to as the 'Scotch Snap'. Nonetheless, in the effort to execute this type of tune, it often happens that the *pointed* effect of the note groups, the 'Strathspey' idiom, becomes lost as the note values in these groups are wrongly played, as crotchet and quaver, drifting into 'compound time' and sounding 'rounded'.

This is also the case with Reels, where the differences in value between the 'dotted' and 'cut' notes become less obvious, and less *pointed*, if not observed by the performer, becoming 'round' and uninspiring.

Ensemble means the combined musical effect of all instruments in performance. In striving for 'good' ensemble, it is of the utmost importance that the Pipe Major and Leading Drummer actively collaborate on all aspects of tune selection, to ensure the most effective accompaniment and support for the melodies by the percussion section of the pipe band.

This must include the anticipated tempo of the pieces in performance, so that drum scores of the most appropriate technical difficulty and dramatic effect can be developed. This is another example of a typical fault in pipe band performances at contests. Where the beatings are designed for a particular tempo, but the actual performance tempo is slower than planned during the 'uptake' to the opening piece, the drummers spontaneously have to try to assess how stretch out the content of the beatings in an attempt to adapt to a tempo which has not been thoroughly rehearsed. This occurs often when, after the tempo has been set by the Pipe Major, followed by the introductory 'opening rolls' at that tempo from the drum corps, the pipers over-emphasise the notes at the beginning of the tune, during uptake, causing the tempo to 'drop'. Conversely, if the beatings are complex, and a quicker tempo arises during uptake, this means the beatings have to be crammed into shorter periods of time.

In either situation, the all important ensemble effect will be lost to some degree, and frequently it is a matter of 'degree' which decides the outcome of a contest.

Corps playing is a hugely influential aspect of any performance, and is best achieved by each member of the band focussing on the either the Pipe Major or Leading Drummer, to ensure that they are playing 'in time' with the band leaders. Each person has a slightly different sense of 'time', and without that concentrated effort to focus on the 'time-keepers' of the band, the musical and dramatic impact of the performance is diminished. This can be most obvious where those elements of harmony from pipers, or bass section, do not accurately coincide with the melodies and their 'high points'.

'Breaks', the moment of changing from one tune another, have to be clear and precise. It's another common fault, and is an area which requires great concentration. 'Good breaks' do not occur easily, and pipers and drummers must prepare themselves for each coming 'break' to another tune. This is just as important where the 'breaks' lead to a change of idiom. To fail to have precise breaks reduces the dramatic effect of a sudden change in tempo, rhythm, and idiom, spoiling the excitement and tension of the set. Where the rhythm and tempo changes at these 'breaks' in a 'March, Strathspey and Reel' set, pipers and drummers must think ahead to the anticipated effect and try to produce it instantly.

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