RNZPBA
EDUCATION
GROUP

HORNPIPES AND JIGS

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Hornpipes and Jigs

Introduction

Hornpipes and Jigs are some of the most popular types of tunes played on the pipes. This surprises me. A lot of players at an earlier stage of piping development do not have the technical or musical ability to make these types of tunes sound anywhere near their best. They are hard work to play and, played poorly, even harder to listen too!

We hear some very accomplished pipers playing these tunes and making them sound sublime, and think that we can follow their example right away. What tends to be forgotten is that these accomplished players have a high level of technical and musical development, and have the ability to get their instrument sounding its best. Simply put, they have all of the basic building blocks of technique, maintenance, reed manipulation, and musical interpretation down to a fine art. If we want to emulate them, we need to follow their example and get the basics right too.

When we select music of these idioms for the band to play, we should adhere to the same philosophy I outlined for selecting tunes for an MSR; tune selections and drum score settings should be such that the weakest member of your respective competing corps should be technically challenged but able to cope with the technical difficulty of the tune/setting with concerted and consistent application (and assistance).

Tune Selection

As with Marches, Strathspeys and Reels, tunes should be selected on the basis of:

a) appropriateness to the Pipe Band music genre,

b) musical appeal, and

c) ability of the players to cope with the technique involved.

Let‟s have a brief look at each of these aspects in turn.

Appropriateness. Tunes selected should fit well into the piping idiom. We should not borrow from the pop or rock section of the musical world, nor should we try too hard to make some fine piece of Celtic music fit the limited bagpipe scale – we normally end up with a poor approximation of the original tune.

Musical Appeal. There is a lot of latitude here – more so than in the MSR selections. There are more than a few „modern‟ jigs and hornpipes that, played on the pipes with no harmony or percussion accompaniment, do not sound musically appealing in any sense. However, with some tasteful harmony and sympathetic drum scores, the effect can be devastatingly good! A lot of thought needs to go into the selection of these tunes and deeper thought given to the musical (including harmony and percussion) potential. The same could be said of street march tunes as well.

Technical Difficulty. Again, as for MSR selections, there is little point in a Grade 4 band listening to the Grade 1 World Pipe Band Championships and selecting tunes based on what the prize winning bands played. The general technical difficulty of the settings will invariably be well outside the comfort range of the membership of a lower grade band and it will therefore be impossible to achieve anywhere near a tightly integrated corps sound. A simpler tune, coupled with effective harmony and percussion will carry the day, every day.

Expression

You will be fortunate to have read and understood the tutorial on MSR expression as you will have a sound understanding of some basic music theory. If you are still struggling with this aspect, I urge you to study for and sit your RNZPBA College of Piping and Drumming Certificates, and for pipers at least, to read the music theory aspect of the National Piping Centre Tutor Book (or equivalent). We do not require an exhaustive chapter and verse on music theory, but we do need some. Music has both shape and form, and we need to understand how it has been constructed in order to be able to play and express it to its full musical potential.

Hornpipes

Time Signature: Hornpipes are written in 2/4 time. 2/4 is a simple time signature. The top number relates to “how many” and the bottom number is the type of note per bar. For 2/4 hornpipes, the time signature means “two quarter notes (or crotchets) per bar”. With simple

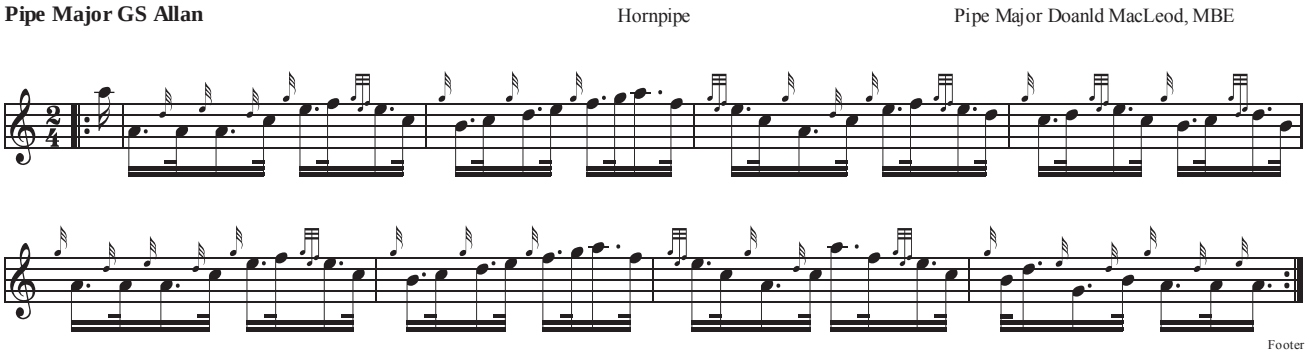
time signatures (4/4, 2/4, 2/2, 3/4), the top number also tells us how many beats there are in each bar. So, for 2/4 hornpipes, there are 2 beats per bar and each beat is worth one quarter (or a crotchet).

Downbeat and Upbeat: Each beat has two parts: a downbeat and an upbeat. They are both equal in length. Our 2/4 hornpipe beat is worth one quarter, so each downbeat and upbeat within this is worth half of that (one eighth, or a quaver). What we do with these downbeats and upbeats will come later.

Phrase: This can be defined as a complete musical sentence, i.e. a piece of music that makes sense in its own right when taken out of the total piece of music it is part of. For Hornpipes, we generally use 2 bar phrasing where the musical sentence structure consists of 2 bars. Four of these 2 bar phrases make up one measure/part of the tune.

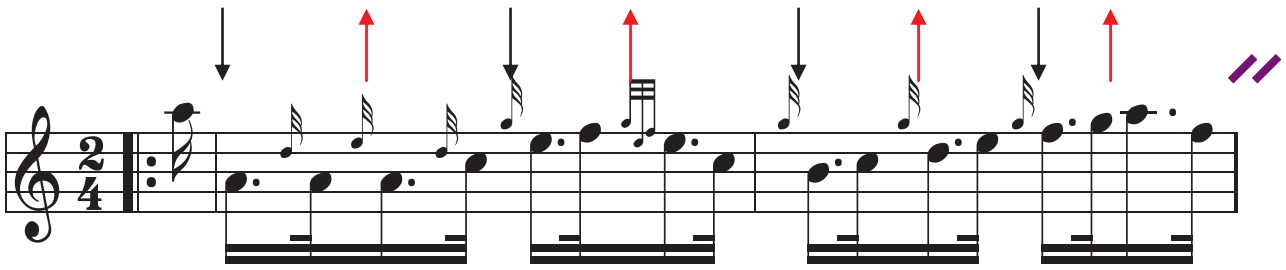
Type of Tune: This is an important aspect as it sets the scene and tells us how we need to think about the tune. A hornpipe is a dance tune, and the end result needs to be music that can be danced to – preferably a hornpipe dance!

Expression: Here we can talk about what we are trying to do with our downbeats and upbeats. We are essentially doing the same as in a 2/4 march, but not to the same degree. A Hornpipe will be expressed in a rounder fashion than a 2/4 march. A 2/4 march will „stand up" a lot more and a hornpipe will be rounder and more „fluid". Lets have a look at an example below. I have used the first part of "Pipe Major GS Allan", composed by P/M Donald MacLeod, MBE



Let"s have a close look at the first 2 bar phrase.

The red arrows indicate the start of upbeats, the black arrows indicate the start of downbeats and the symbol indicates the end of the musical phrase. What we are trying to achieve is a strong or heavily accented first downbeat in the bar and a weaker accented second downbeat in the bar. Note that weaker downbeats are not played short – they are still accented, but not as much as the stronger first beat in the bar. We need to be very careful that the upbeats are played to their full note value and that we do not arrive at the next downbeat beat too early. Unlike a 2/4 march, we play hornpipes in a rounder fashion meaning the longer notes are not held as long and the shorter notes are not cut as much. Listen now to this phrase played on the practice chanter.



In this example the first downbeat is made up of the first two LA notes (the dotted semi-quaver and the demi-semi -quaver, adding up to one eighth) and the first upbeat consists of the dotted LA semi-quaver followed by a C demi-semi quaver. The second downbeat has the dotted E semi quaver and the F demi-semi-quaver with the upbeat made up of the following dotted E semi-quaver and the C demi-semi-quaver.

We achieve a heavier accent on the first downbeat by holding the first dotted LA semi-quaver note for slightly longer than its full note value and cutting the following LA demi-semi-quaver slightly shorter than its written note value. The amount of holding and cutting is not as marked as in a 2/4 march as the overall effect we are trying to achieve is a rounder dancing style.

The upbeat in this case is achieved by playing the full note values of the remaining LA and C in the first note group.

We achieve a weaker accented second downbeat in the bar by doing the same as for the first heavier accent but not doing it as much.

The second upbeat is achieved by playing the full written note values of the dotted E semi quaver and C demi-semi -quaver.

End of the first phrase. In this case, the end of the first phrase naturally falls at the completion of the last upbeat in the second bar. We need to ensure that we *slightly* accent this upbeat (by playing the full written note value of the dotted High A semi-quaver) to ensure we do not run this musical phrase or sentence into the start of the next phrase/sentence.

I hope this has given you the flavour of what we are trying to achieve. In order to play good music, we need to think about what we are trying to achieve within each musical phrase. As I have said in earlier tutorials, this requires a modicum of theory knowledge and *thinking practice*, i.e. a conscious effort to think about how you are playing a tune as you are playing it.

Listen to this first phrase again, armed with the knowledge of downbeats and upbeats and see if you can hear the effect. ♫▶ This next sound file has the phrase played almost totally rounded with no accenting. ♫▶ Can you hear the difference? Similarly, here is the first phrase again with more strongly accented down beats. ♫▶ This last sound file is more akin to what we would be trying to do with a 2/4 March and is not particularly suited to a hornpipe dance rhythm.

Jigs

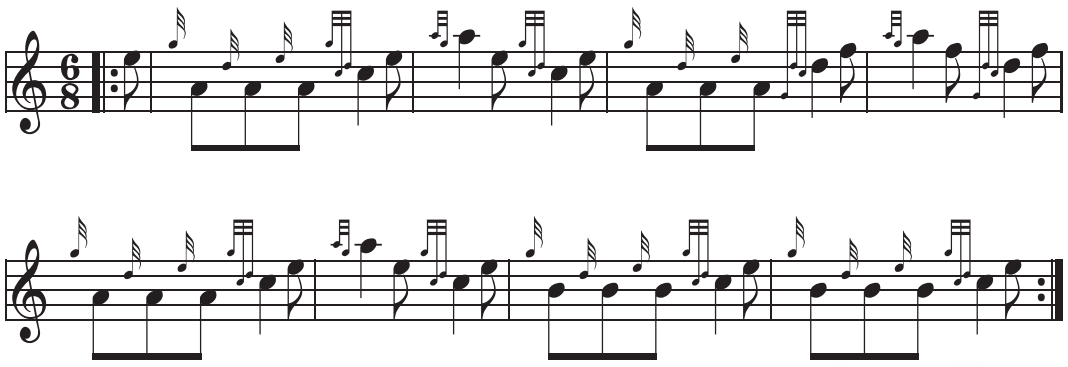
Time Signature: Jigs are written in compound time, normally 6/8 or 9/8. As such, the beat is divisible by 3. The time signature still tells us how many of what type of note per bar there is. In a 6/8 jig we have six quavers (or eighth notes) per bar and a 9/8 jig will have nine quavers (or eighth notes) per bar. To establish the number of beats per bar, we divide the top number of the time signature by 3. 6/8 jigs will have 2 beats per bar and 9/8 jigs will have 3 beats per bar, each beat worth three quavers or a dotted crotchet.

Downbeat and Upbeat: I do not consider the upbeat in jig time. Strictly speaking it would consist of one and a half quavers and it would be very unmusical to try to split the note group up like this. Remember that the beat in compound time is divisible by three and will not naturally produce an upbeat. Instead, we can look at marking the first downbeat in each 2 bar phrase and marking the end of each phrase to prevent us running the musical sentence together. This marking will be necessarily more subtle than in a more dot/cut type of tune as jigs tend to be rounder and played at a faster tempo than dot/cut tunes.

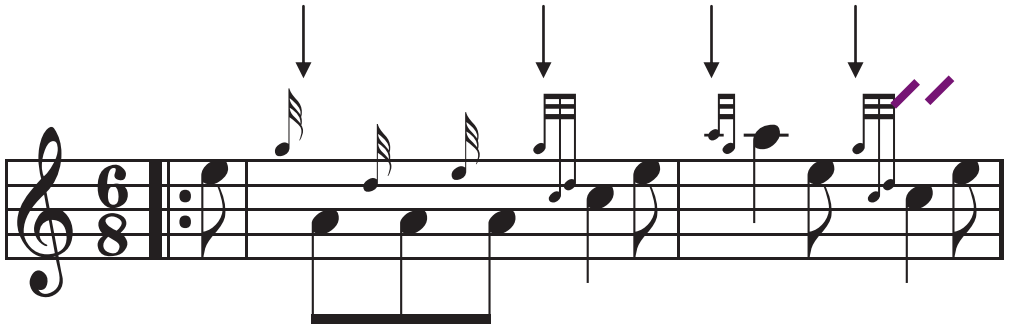
Type of Tune: A jig is a dance tune and as such, it totally dictates the way we should be playing the tune. It needs *sound* like a jig and be played at an appropriate tempo that can be danced to.

In the Jig example, I have used the first measure of "The Banjo Breakdown", arranged by Pipe Major Donald MacLeod, MBE:

The Banjo Breakdown Jig Arr. by Pipe Major Donald MacLoed, MBE



Let‟s have a close look at the first 2 bar phrase:



The first beat consists of the 3 quavers on LA (the GDE gracenote grouping). The marking of the first accent is very subtle considering the tempo the tune needs to be played at, the rounder style of expression and the 1-2-3 rhythm we are trying to achieve. In this case, we effectively mark the first downbeat by having a HG gracenote (a more dominant gracenote) on the first LA quaver. This helps mark the start of the beat and make it stand out relative to the two LA quavers that follow.

The second beat in the bar consisting of the C doubling on a C crotchet followed by an E semi-quaver is played with full note values and within the 1 -2-3 rhythm, but no attempt to accent is made. The C doubling will provide any emphasis that is required.

The first downbeat in the second bar requires little accenting, merely playing the full note values of the High A and E. The second downbeat in this bar also marks the end of the phrase so we do not want to leap off the C crotchet after playing the C doubling. Perhaps we need to think about playing the C crotchet slightly longer than its written note value and the following E quaver slightly shorter. Listen now to a sound file of this 2 bar phrase. ♫▶

The 1-2-3 rhythm should be clearly evident along with slight accenting being achieved at the start of each bar. The sound file of the first part illustrates how the end of each 2 bar phrase is marked. ♫▶

Summary

Again, playing good music requires us to think about *what* we are playing and *how* we are playing it. Regardless of what type of music we are playing, or what instrument for that matter, some intellectual effort is required (consciously or subconsciously) to bring out the best in the music. We need to think about what we are doing *as we are doing it.* The mind needs to be focussed on the present and the music that is being produced and not in neutral letting the fingers do the work without any higher guidance.

For these faster dance type tunes, we need to have very good basic technique. Tempos are also important – too slow and we effectively destroy any hope of a coherent dance rhythm and too fast we inevitably loose the rhythm and melody in a jumble of notes all trying to get ahead of each other.

I look forward to hearing some truly musical hornpipes and jigs, both at pipe band events coming in the next couple of months and at solo piping competitions. Surprise me – in a good way!

Notes: