



RNZPBA
EDUCATION
GROUP

MSR EXPRESSION

GREG WILSON
PRINCIPAL - PIPING
COLLEGE OF PIPING AND DRUMMING
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Presented by Greg Wilson - Principal of the College of Piping
March, Strathspey and Reel Expression

Introduction

So far in the RNZPBA Tutorial Series, we have covered aspects of preparation for a contest, placement of the beat within embellishments, reed manipulation and some aspects of the piping and drumming disciplines. It is time now to delve into what I consider the ‘meat and spuds’ of pipe band music: The MSR. If a band can get its collective fingers and hands competently around an MSR, then it is highly likely that they will make a good fist of the Medley, and any other tune combinations they choose to play.

The MSR is usually the most technically demanding pipe band music that we play. That is not to say it is unapproachably difficult, and should be relegated to the too hard basket! As a band, the 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).

You will note that I said ‘competing corps’. Many bands will choose to compete with the minimum number (or near to) of pipers and drummers that the RNZPBA Rules allow. Additional players are added to the corps once they reach the standard required. This is a good method of achieving the best performance possible at the respective grade level of the band, and will have the effect of motivating players on the fringe to work hard and play their way in to the corps. Conversely, many bands will have an all-inclusive approach because they are either struggling to reach the minimum number of players, or because their particular band has always had a policy of playing everyone, as long as they can passably get through the tunes/scores. The first approach is by far the better one and all bands should be working towards this.

Tune Selection

As already alluded to, 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. There are many traditional 2/4 Marches, Strathspey and Reels in readily available pipe music collections. It is a fair assumption that it would be best to select your tunes from one of the mainstream collections, especially if they are being selected for a lower grade band. There is no point in surprising adjudicators with the not-so-well-known 2/4 March “Wilson’s March Over the Sheep Yards” – they will almost certainly not know the tune and there is a much better than even chance that it will be of dubious musical merit! In terms of MSR tune selections, they should be tried and tested and be suitable for inclusion in a traditional MSR set.

Musical Appeal. Here is where there is some latitude. Not every tune will have the same appeal to all pipers and drummers – and that is fine. As well as being appropriate to the pipe band idiom, the tunes selected should appeal to the vast majority of the band membership – otherwise there will be little hope of the band membership actually practising the tunes at home!

Technical Difficulty. 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 a lower grade band. Even if the tune/score settings were simplified, it will more than likely ruin the musical integrity of the tune/setting. Bands are far better to choose simpler tunes that have a strong melodic line and that their membership can cope with (with a consistent effort). Give me a simple tune played well rather than a difficult tune played poorly any day!

Expression

I appeared to have digressed a little from the subject of this Tutorial, but what I have covered is relevant as a precursor to getting the ‘right’ expression out of marches, strathspeys and reels. I do not wish to get bogged down in musical theory and cloud the expression issue, but make no mistake; some understanding of musical theory **is** required. We are lucky however, in that musical theory relating to the Highland Bagpipe is a lot simpler (no comment required from the drummers!) than that of classical instruments where there are a multitude of keys, octaves etc. Let’s get started then.....

2/4 Marches

It is best to start with a little bit of Music Theory 101. I'll keep it simple, as that is the only way I know!

Time Signature: 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 marches, 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 a 2/4 march, 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 march 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.

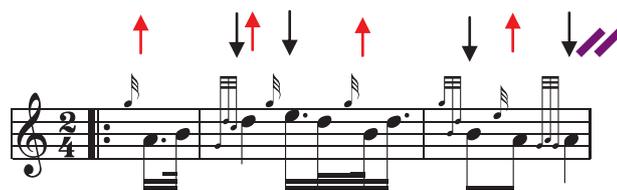
Phrase: This can be defined as a complete musical sentence, i.e. a piece of music that makes sense in its own right when taken out of the total piece of music it is part of. For 2/4 Marches, we generally use 2 bar phrasing where the musical sentence structure consists of 2 bars. Four of these 2 bar phrases make up one measure/part of the tune.

Motif: A fragment of a phrase.

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 march is something that we need to be able to comfortably march/walk in time to.

That's about enough theory for now. In the 2/4 March example, I have used the first measure of "Achany Glen", composed by Angus MacPherson.

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 too early. At the start of the measure, we also need to be careful we do not cut short the introductory bar (called an anacrusis) – it is an upbeat and needs its full note values played. Listen now to this phrase played on the practice chanter. 

In this example the first downbeat and upbeat are contained in the same note – the D crotchet. The second downbeat consists of a dotted E semi-quaver and a D demi-semi quaver, with the upbeat consisting of a B demi-semi quaver and a dotted D semi-quaver. We achieve a heavy accent on the first downbeat by:

- a) Holding the note for its full note value until the next downbeat arrives, and
- b) By playing an embellishment, in this case a throw on D, on the downbeat. Note that beat within the throw on D falls on the C gracenote.

Achany Glen

March

Angus MacPherson



The upbeat in this case is achieved by not coming off the D crotchet until the next downbeat arrives.

We achieve a weaker accented second downbeat in the bar by:

- a) Playing a high G Gracenote on the E, and
- b) Holding the dotted E semi quaver fractionally longer than its written value and cutting the following D demi-semi quaver fractionally shorter than its written note value. In other words, we are effectively borrowing time from one note within a downbeat and adding it to another note within the same downbeat. Note that we cannot borrow time from one downbeat and add it to another downbeat or upbeat – that would have a detrimental effect on the consistency of the tempo and timing in the tune.

The upbeat is achieved by playing the full written note values of the B demi-semi quaver and dotted D semi quaver.

In the second bar, the strongly accented downbeat is achieved by:

- a) Embellishing the B quaver with a doubling, and
- b) Holding the B quaver for its full written note value. Note that we do not have any other note within this downbeat to borrow time from in order to help accent this beat.

In the upbeat following, we simply play the full written value of the Low A quaver and wait for the next beat to arrive, at which time we will precisely move on to playing the birl movement.

The weaker second downbeat in the bar is achieved by:

- a) Embellishing the Low A crotchet with a birl (note that the downbeat falls precisely on the first Low G gracenote of the birl movement), and
- b) Playing the full written note value of the crotchet.

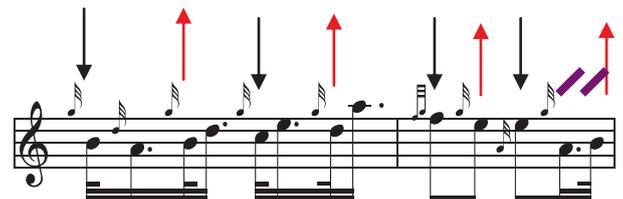
The following upbeat is achieved by playing the full written value of the Low A crotchet and waiting for the next downbeat to arrive.

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 Low A crotchet) to ensure we do not run this musical phrase or sentence into the start of the next phrase/sentence. It is relatively common for pipers to think of phrases as a question (first phrase) followed by an answer (second phrase), each separated by a musical comma (phrase ending). Sometimes the phrase will naturally end on the last downbeat in the phrase with the upbeat used as introductory notes to the next phrase. The last bar in each measure is a good example of this.

So, a little bit to think about here – and we have not got past the first two bars yet! However, once we are comfortably thinking about the 2/4 March in the question/answer 2 bar phrasing accented downbeat fashion, we can apply this to all of the 2 bar phrases in this tune and in all other 2/4 Marches. 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 relatively round with little pointing or expression.  Can you hear the difference? The second sound file, whilst pleasant enough (a good strong melodic line), doesn't really say anything and is rather flat and boring. The previous sound file sits the tune up – it's saying "have a listen to me!", makes it much more interesting and makes the most of the strong melodic line.

Lets look closely now at the second phrase, bars 3 and 4.



The strongly accented first downbeat is achieved by:

- a) Playing a high G Gracenote on the B demi-semi quaver, and
- b) Cutting the B demi-semi quaver so that it is a little more than fractionally shorter than its written note value (without overdoing it!) and holding the dotted Low A semi quaver a little more than fractionally longer than its written note value. Again, we are borrowing time from one note within a downbeat and adding it to another note within the same downbeat to achieve the accent.

The first upbeat is achieved by playing the full written note values of the B demi-semi quaver and dotted D semi quaver.

The second note group in the bar has the same note values in the same order and we are effectively doing the same thing with the length of the notes, but not to the same extent with the downbeat as it is a weaker accent that we want to achieve here.

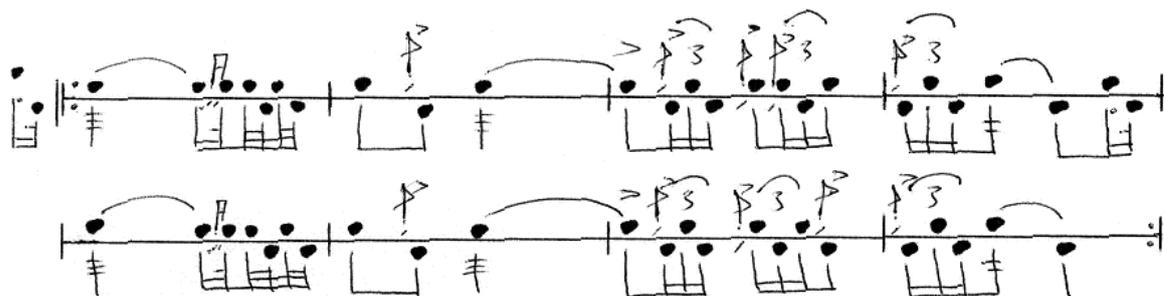
I have indicated the end of the phrase at the end of the E quaver in the second bar and before the Low A and B notes following. These 2 notes form the next upbeat and are effectively introductory notes to the following phrase. The musical sentence logically finishes on the E quaver after the Strike on E is played. Listen to this phrase being played, firstly with a round, expressionless style,  and secondly with the accenting of downbeats and attention to upbeats evident.  I hope you can hear the difference – it makes a huge difference to the overall effect of the tune. The first measure should sound something like this: 

If the tune is played at a quicker tempo, then there is less time to accent beats and some would say that it is not worth the effort – better to play precisely on the beat and achieve a very tight corps sound. But for me, playing the pipes is all about achieving and playing the best music possible – this requires a first class bagpipe sound, good technique and good expression. Anything else leaves me (and the vast majority of the audience, including adjudicators) cold. Some attempt at musical expression must be made, whatever the tempo.

Drumming - March

All drum scores are courtesy of Cameron Wilson, Principal (Drumming) of the RNZPBA College of Piping and Drumming.

Disclaimer: The drum scores presented should be viewed as merely examples and not definitive templates.



1st bar: begins with a roll because it is easy to stretch this note with the pipes.

2nd bar: missed the strong accent as a way of creating a two bar phrase, however the openness of the notes in the first group still acknowledges the existence of this stress.

3rd bar: looking at the piping notes here, they are all cut and dot – a drummer’s nightmare. However here the pipe notes mostly rise, which is good as the dotted notes lose some of their punch. Triplets are played here, softening the motif and so continuing the flow of the music, yet at the same time accenting each group with flams, keeping clarity of execution for the pipes.

4th bar: uses a degree of repetition with triplets to tie in with the 3rd bar, as another way to create a two bar phrase.

5th and 6th bars: mirror bars 1 and 2 for simplicity, and such repetition here can be used for continuity

with the pipes (their notes don’t change either).

7th and 8th: these bars are very similar to bars 3 and 4. In the pipe music bars 3 and 7 are the same, with only subtle change between bars 4 and 8. The change in the drum score can also be seen as subtle, however when comparing bars 3 and 4 with 7 and 8, you will notice more flow between 3 and 4 (indicating the measure is only half done), whereas in bars 7 and 8 there is more of a break – indicating less the notion of a two bar phrase (although it still exists), and more the completion of the measure.

Here is the first measure of the march played on the practice pad. 

Strathspeys

Time Signature: Strathspeys are written in common time (4/4). It is a simple time signature as the beat is divisible by 2. The time signature still has the same meaning as for the 2/4 March, but the top number is different. Here we have 4 crotchets (or quarter notes) per bar. Given it is a simple time signature, the top number also tells us how many beats per bar. So, for a strathspey, there are 4 beats per bar and each beat is worth one quarter (or a crotchet).

Downbeat and Upbeat: Each beat still has two parts: a downbeat and an upbeat. They are both equal in length. In a strathspey, we tend to concentrate on the down beats and leave the upbeats to look after themselves. If we are playing the long notes relatively long and the short notes relatively short, then the upbeats will be catered for.

Phrase: In strathspeys, we generally use one bar phrasing, although it really depends on what the music is saying to us. It could be, and often is, the case that there are 2 bar phrases as well.

Type of Tune: A strathspey is a dance tune and as such, it totally dictates the way we should be playing the tune. If we are playing a strathspey that cannot be danced to, then we are doing something very wrong!

In the Strathspey example, I have used the first measure of “The Caledonian Canal”, composed by Andrew Wright.

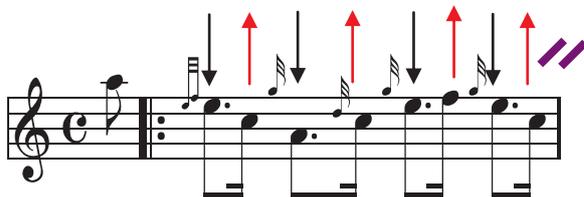
Caledonian Canal

Strathspey

Andrew Wright



Let's have a close look at the first bar.



Each of the four note groups in this bar consist of the same note values in the same order. In terms of accenting, we are trying to achieve a stronger accent on the first beat, a weaker accent on the second beat, a medium (heavier than weak, but not strong) accent on the third beat and a slightly fuller weak accent on the 4th beat to mark the end of the phrase.

In this bar, we achieve this by the various embellishments on the notes (the heavier the embellishment, the stronger the accent we can achieve) and by the following:

- a) Strong accent: Hold the long notes longer than their written value and cut the short notes by the same amount so that we do not break time;
- b) Medium accent: Hold the long notes longer than their written value, but not as long as for a strong accent and cut the short notes by the same amount so that we do not break time; and

- c) Weak accent: Play the full value of the notes, remembering we still have to cut the short notes to help achieve the ‘lift’ in the tune.

We do not want to over-do the accenting by cutting too much or holding notes too long. If we do, we will achieve a very stilted and un-musical effect. We still need to hear the short linking notes, so we cannot afford to cut them too much. Listen now to a sound file of this bar with too much accenting.  Not great.

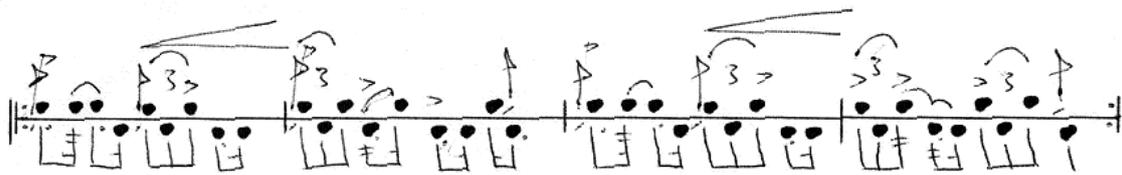
Now listen to a sound file of this bar with little or no accenting. 

Hopefully, you will have heard how ‘round’ and lifeless the tune is played like this. Pretty hard to get excited about and rush to the dance floor!

Listen now to a sound file of how this bar should sound.  Hopefully you are on the dance floor now!

If we try to achieve a Strong, Weak, Medium, Weak⁺ (SWMW⁺) accenting pattern, listening closely to what the music is telling us (in terms of 1 or 2 bar phrasing and how much to accent each beat), then we will not be too far from the money. The final sound file here is the first measure played twice, with the SWMW⁺ accenting and one bar phrasing in place. 

Drumming - Strathspey



1st bar: so here we have a classic strong weak medium weak bar. However in the pipe tune (I have it on some authority), the second weak beat here is argued to be a weak “plus”, which will then flow towards the second bar more, as it is a little fatter than the first weak beat. Looking at the drum score, the first group is a flam with a tight five-stroke roll going onto the second group. You will remember that above in the march, there is a roll to start because it can be easily stretched. Well it is equally easy to stretch air, and this option was chosen as the use of a flam here is very definitive in indicating a change in time signature (being staccato and loud), and also the dropping of pipe pitch onto the second group can be mimicked on the drum using the roll as something lower in pitch.

The triplet in the third group has a softening effect (a medium beat rather than strong), and the crescendo onto the 2nd bar blends (as with the pipes) through the weak “plus” beat onto the strong beat of the next bar. The accent at the end of the triplet (in addition to the flam at the start of the triplet) mellows the beat also, as volume is shared over two notes (all lending towards a medium weight).

2nd bar: accented flam triplet onto a six-stroke roll – echoes the 1st bar but in a softer more legato way – the strong accent is just as prominent as in the 1st bar, but you will notice there is more flow either side, which ties the two bars together somewhat (again phrasing).

The last group in the 2nd bar is cut and dotted – separating it from the 3rd bar – again indicating phrasing of the first two bars, and musically marking the half-way point in the four bar line.

3rd bar: as with the first.

4th bar: the triplet is accented twice – which could indicate a mellowing of the beat (as with the third group in bars 1 and 3) – however, with the following lazy six-stroke roll which flows over the second beat (which is weak anyway), space is created and so still allows for the double accented triplet to perform the function of being strong.

The last two groups in the 4th bar in the pipe tune, consecutively have space and then tightness. With the space, a triplet has been used to bridge the gap, with a moderate diminuendo feel (although not indicated in the score written) onto the flam for a number of reasons: this feel echoes the 4th bar strong beat (and so is not as loud, establishing it as a medium beat), it substitutes for not playing the dotted note in the pipe tune in the last grouping (which in this instance would be unhelpful to play, as keeping the volume down would be tricky), and sets the scene to crack into playing the four bars again.

Here is the first measure of the strathspey played on the practice pad. 

Reels

Time Signature: Reels are written in split or cut common time (2/2). It is a simple time signature as the beat is divisible by 2. The time signature still has the same meaning as for a 2/4 March, but the bottom number is different. Here we have 2 minims (or half notes) per bar. Given it is a simple time signature, the top number also tells us how many beats per bar. So, for a reel, there are 2 beats per bar and each beat is worth one half (or a minim).

Downbeat and Upbeat: Each beat still has two parts: a downbeat and an upbeat. They are both equal in length. In a reel, we like to achieve a stronger first downbeat per bar and a weaker (but still accented) second downbeat per bar. We also need to ensure we play the full note values of the upbeats in between downbeats.

Phrase: For reels, we should be using 2 bar phrasing, much like we do in a 2/4 March.

Type of Tune: A reel is a dance tune and as such, it totally dictates the way we should be playing the tune. The style is rounder than that of strathspeys and this dictates how we approach the tune.

There are basically two styles of reel playing – the East Coast way and the West Coast way. East Coast as in the east coast of Scotland and West Coast as in the west coast of Scotland and the Hebrides. The east coast style is more dot and cut and the west coast style more round and subtle. Within an MSR set, the type of reel we are generally playing lends itself more to the east coast style, and for Medleys, the reels are more often suited to the rounder west coast style of playing.

Suffice to say if we completely dot/cut the tune to an extreme, it will be very stilted, unmusical and will not lend itself to being danced to. The completely round style will suffer from the potential malaise of being very ‘samey’ and uninteresting as well as being relegated to a mere technical exercise. Somewhere in between would be good, with a leaning to either an east or west coast style.

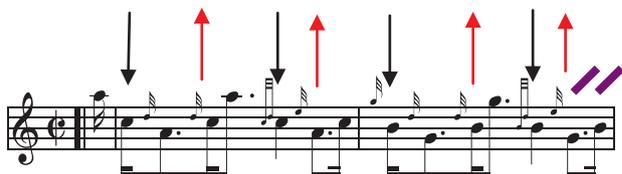
For the Reel example, I have used the first measure of “Thomson’s Dirk”, a traditional reel.

Thomson's Dirk

Reel



Let's have a close look at the first bar.



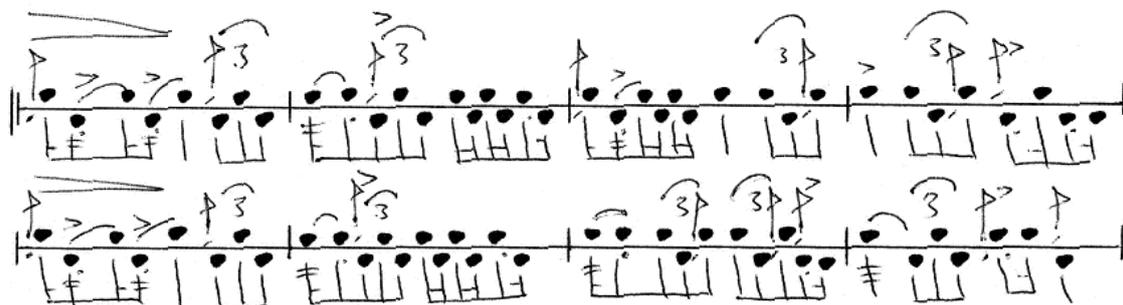
The first downbeat in each bar should be strongly accented and the second downbeat in each bar should be more weakly accented. The full written note values of the upbeat note should be played in order to achieve the upbeat effect.

The first strong downbeat (commonly known as a ‘tachum’ in this case) should be played with the C semi quaver cut slightly shorter than its written note value and the following dotted Low A quaver held slightly longer than its written note value. **Be careful** that the C is not too cut as the effect will be too dramatic and will give the reel expression which is too pointed and not in keeping with the dance. Again, the time taken off the C semi quaver should be the same amount as that added to the dotted Low A quaver in order for the tempo to remain constant.

The second weaker downbeat in the bar consists of one crotchet note only and we cannot borrow time from the upbeat following it...this will unbalance the timing of the tune. We simply hold the note for its full written note value and embellish it with a doubling to assist in the accenting. Upbeat effects are achieved by playing the full written note values of the notes concerned.

Listen now to a round version  and a dot/cut version  of the first measure. [Hopefully](#) you will clearly hear the differences. Listen now to the first measure being played with more appropriate accenting.  By far, the most musical effect is achieved in the first sound file you heard.

Drumming - Reel



1st bar: the pipes are wanting to push at the whole first group, and not just having the first cut and dot notes being strong. The feel is less staccato and more legato – making the notes run more as a wave. In the drum score, this wave is supported with a roll grouping, which decrescendos (just like a wave). There is pipe emphasis in the middle of the second group in the 1st bar, and the drumming has a flam triplet, which is enough to recognise this, while at the same time runs towards stressing the next bar.

2nd bar: this is very similar to the 1st bar in the pipe tune. Here the drum score echoes the 1st bar, with the same emphasis but with less vigour and flows through the second half of the bar more – giving rise to the notion of a secondary bar tied onto the first more dominant bar (two bar phrasing).

3rd bar: the pipes play the same as the 1st bar. Since there is little movement from the pipes so far in the first three bars, the drumming moves away a little to create interest. The first group in the 3rd bar leans similarly to that of the 1st bar, but mellows in the second part of the group with

an open five. This sets up the 4th bar for the long note at the start. In addition the triplet flam tap which ends right flam, right tap, is softer than ending right flam, left tap – creating more flow, and also is a teaser for the 7th bar triplet flam run.

4th bar: is a marker bar for the halfway point in the measure – the crotchet note at the beginning tells us this. The drumming should not gloss over this note, as it would undermine what the pipe tune is doing.

5th and 6th bars: as above with bars 1 and 2.

7th bar: is a kind of counterpoint to all the previous bars which have preceded it. It still emphasises the strong note, but then emphasis is put on the end of the next two sub-groups. This gives some balance to the continual repetition of motifs in the pipe tune, and also sets up the last bar as an ending measure bar.

Here is the first measure of the reel played on the practice pad. 

Breaks

Back on to the general theme of MSR expression, it would be remiss not to say a few words on the breaks between tunes. The key factor here is that the band as a single entity must get it together! We cannot have the drummers doing their thing and the pipers doing their thing with the mid-section trying to bridge the gap!

The break from the march into the strathspey can be very simply done in March time. All that happens here is that we add an extra beat in March tempo to the end of the march and commence playing the strathspey on this extra beat.

The break from the strathspey into the reel can also be simply done in strathspey time by adding an extra beat in strathspey tempo at the end of the strathspey and commence playing the reel on this extra beat.

Carefully done, and with all corps in the band doing it together, the effect can be very good. For the more adventurous, the break into the reel can be held slightly longer than the one beat in strathspey time, but this makes the task of all corps playing the start of the reel at the same time a little more difficult. This requires a lot of practice and very clear, physical dictation from the Pipe Major. There was a trend a few years ago for what I term a ‘hanging’ break where in effect 2 beats in strathspey time were added before breaking into the reel. I see no reason to endorse this type of break in the MSR scenario – fancier, elongated breaks and bridges should be left to the medley event where there is a lot more latitude.

End Note

Playing good music is a thinking persons' game. Dividing a tune up into musical sentences or phrases gives us reference points that we can aim for, rather than starting at the beginning of a tune and flying though to the end of it. It's not all about getting to the end of the tune (although, we do need to!), rather it is *how* we get to the end of the tune, *how* we treat the various downbeats and upbeats and *how* we mark the end of the phrases with a musical comma. This all requires some thought, guidance, and above all, thinking practice (that is, think about what and how you are practicing as you are physically practicing it!)

Meat and spuds are not fancy. They are good, clean-cut, fine tasting and honest foods. That's how we want our MSR's.