



RNZPBA
EDUCATION
GROUP

PIPING FOR DRUMMERS

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Piping for Drummers

In this first submission from the drumming fraternity, we hear from the 'other' side of the band.....I have taken the liberty of adding some 'helpful' observations on behalf of the pipers and the end result should be a well-balanced ensemble mix.....?

Drumming for Pipers

Well what does this mean? Is the above a statement for pipe band pipers condescending to scratch the surface of percussion, to see how they could mitigate the annoying staccato sounds of a performance? Drumming for Pipers. Or is it a furtive whisper for drummers, hinting at exposing some long dark truth that pipers cannot keep a beat, no matter which time signature is employed? Drumming for pipers.

Well it is both. And it is neither. It is both, insofar as pipers and drummers' recognise each other's existence based commonly on tolerance. Both pipers and drummers are needed for the existence of a pipe band, and both entities grudgingly come together to perform. On such occasions, they produce sounds that almost present the germ of an idea, that they are a composite unit. It is however, neither piper condescension nor drummer omniscience, should this germ of an idea

become manifest in the embracing of a collective whole. Ensemble.

In order to arrive at producing a unified collective sound – significantly symbiotic to arguably be called music – there are notions concerning the pipe band playing structure, structured playing and qualitative judgements, which can be identified.



Such notions and judgements will govern outcomes of piping for drummers.

The tacit playing structure in a pipe band sees pipers as being the dominant entity. There are more pipers (ideally), and they occupy the front of the band (whether marching or static). It is off the pipe music that drummers' make their settings. It is off the pipe pitch that drummers' consider *their* pitches. After all, as commonly commented, it is a "pipe band" rather than a "drum band".

Indeed the genesis of pipe bands (in the mid-nineteenth century), merely constituted six pipers. No drummers. Nevertheless, drummers were introduced soon after the establishment of the above six pipers. Why was this? (Rhetorical). Drummers' have their own tacit dominance structure: snare drummers are more numerous and louder than the bass section. Snare scores are technically much more demanding. Possibly enough said here, although one cannot fail to be impressed by flourishing tenors on their game, and this impression should be held into the next paragraph.

Most of the above should really be a lot of "so what", and mutual respect should broadly govern personnel interaction (excluding the odd expression of frustration from corps leaders). However quotidian attitudes behind such comments as "you're just a drummer", and the trickle-down "you're just a tenor drummer", undermine notions of mutual respect, and lend more towards the afore mentioned grudging acceptance. There are two points of interest that flow on from this dichotomy: (1), respect must be earned and (2), people need to work (and be allowed to work) on not being "just" anything.

Allow here, for the fact that pipers are the dominant entity. Now allow for the existence of mutual respect between corps in a band. The addition of drummers then, should be musically positive.

A suggested competency gauge, could be moving from the memorising of notes (the beginning of structured playing), to how such notes could/should be played. Perhaps once a tune becomes easy to



play, it is then that the playing of this tune can become musical (the reason for structured playing). Such a mind-shift will allow for individual focus to purposefully vary and fluctuate from piping to drumming and vice versa. For example, broader attention at breaks and tricky collective unison phrasing, and perhaps more singular attention with regard to blowing (if a piper) or light and shade dynamics (if a drummer).

The notion of a collective unit, is then actively embraced by the individual. Playing a piece

of music repeatedly, should then not result in mechanistic playing, but a constant battle to keep the brain attuned to the nuances of each consecutive playing, and so each time presenting a performance. Ensemble.

What might some of the mechanics be, which could produce such an outcome?

The brain has been mentioned.

Tune selection needs to suit both pipers and drummers. Some groupings do not easily lend to a percussive accompaniment. This could involve avoiding tunes with note groupings which are heavily cut and dot, for example.

Tune selection will also involve tune tempo – what tempo is good for the band, rather than a specific corps? This could mean an element of compromise is necessary, in order to maintain good ensemble (and possibly good relations).

Pipe corps expression, and their hopes and fears, need to be communicated to the drum corps. If what is happening in the pipe corps is effectively communicated, then the drum corps will be better equipped to produce settings that not only complement the pipe corps, but also assist and enhance the pipe corps. For example, it is more productive knowing which bars in a given strathspey do and do not conform to the

“strong, weak, medium, weak” beat configuration. Such bars do exist. An assumption that all bars are created equal, could well create push and pull between the corps in certain (unequal) bars.

Given that expressed expression has now become a given, it would seem arguable that the pipe corps not merely focus on their own unison, but also embrace the efforts of the drum corps. Dialogue could well open up, creating an atmosphere which in the end, is going to avoid corps playing in isolation from each other. Indeed it should engender corps wanting to play well for each other.

Drumming for Pipers? Drumming for pipers? It is both, and it is neither. Ensemble.

Piping for Drummers

Yes, we acknowledge that it is a **Pipe** Band that we are talking about and that it is the piping side of the band that provides the melodic line. Drummers were added for a reason; it made the beat more obvious for soldiers to march to. So maybe it is true that we pipers cannot keep a beat! However, that was then, and we utilise drummers in a pipe band today to very different effect. Instead of merely banging out the dominant beat for soldiers to march to, they are required to be an integral part of the total musical performance.

But what is it that pipers require from drummers? Obedience? Unquestioning subservience? Absolutely not! We require musical communication and a level of sympathy for the limitations of our instrument. For our instrument, great as it is, does have limitations in a musical sense: we have one volume (and it's not *that* loud), only nine notes and we have very limited options for accenting beats. In a solo performance, we can achieve subtleties in expression and technical execution that are not even remotely possible to achieve with a pipe corps. We actually **need** something else to provide accent, and to give some light and shade to the musical performance. A sympathetic drumming accompaniment fits the bill admirably.

The word *sympathetic* here is important. There is no point adding a percussion line or lines that

interrupts or impedes the musical flow of the tune. A focus on the 'best drum corps' prize must be firmly secondary to achieving a good ensemble with the entire band. Arguably, the most important relationship in a pipe band is that between the pipe major and leading drummer. They must be able to communicate on a number of levels, not least of which is a musical level. The pipe major must be very clear in his expectation of what he/she wants from the percussion line in various tunes, where dominant harmonies are going to be added and where an absence of or minimal percussion line is required, tempos that are desirable, and (generally) what dynamic effects are required. This does assume a reasonable level of knowledge on the part of the piper on what the percussion possibilities are. Where this knowledge is lacking, the leading drummer must feel able to freely contribute some possible percussion lines.....indeed, even where the piper has more than a passing knowledge of drumming, there must be open and two-way communication on the percussion accompaniment. The leading drummer, after all, does know what the options are. We pipers would do well to listen, discuss the options, make any compromises necessary for the good of the whole musical effect, and then

agree on the percussion line and what needs to be amended in the melodic line. Further, tune selection is something that the pipe major should discuss with the leading drummer; some tunes may not readily lend themselves to a percussion line, and whilst being a good tune in its own right, such a tune may not produce a good ensemble effect. This tune then should obviously not be included.

For me, it all comes down to communication. Personally, I need the input from the leading drummer as my technical drumming knowledge is much less than extensive. I need the leading drummer to understand the vagaries of my instrument and what and how the percussion element can enhance what the pipers are doing. The communication can never stop. It doesn't stop once the tunes are selected, scores written and all the tunes have been learned. A constant analysis of the ensemble effect being achieved is required, and changes discussed and agreed to where appropriate. A simple example is where the pipe corps drops the introductory notes to a particular part of a tune – the pipe major and leading drummer should look at what effect on the drum scores this has.

Things change. Pipe Majors over-estimate the abilities of their pipe corps. Key members leave the band. Tune selections don't always sound as good when your band plays them as when you heard the Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band play it. But the constant should be ongoing communication primarily between the two key players in the band: Pipe Major and Leading Drummer. Continual assessment on the standard being achieved in each of the pipe and drum corps is required and changes made where required. The whole point of having pipers and drummers playing in the same musical unit is for that musical unit to achieve a good ensemble sound, whilst still leaving room to show off (from time to time) the brilliance of the drum corps unisons or the pipe corps sound and harmonies.

I need drummers to provide much more than a beat. I need them to contribute to the musical equation and enlighten me on what is possible (and what is not). Pipers and drummers are different. Their instruments are very different. But what they are both contributing to is the exactly the same - **Ensemble**.

Cameron Wilson

