

Thoughts on solo piping for the new piper

Tad Myers

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These are some thoughts and suggestions for Jr. and Sr. novice and grade 4 pipers just getting started in solo piping. I was asked to put together a “short” guide after a friend recently noted that a fair number of new competing pipers seem overwhelmed and confused about what is expected of them and how to go about the competition process. So here goes.

- 1) Don't have a heavy breakfast. Eat something like fruit or something light but going up with a heavy breakfast under your belt is a sure way to lose your concentration.
- 2) Check in with the steward at your piping station as early as you can before your actual contest time. Contest times may move around a bit to accommodate other pipers who have conflicting contests or when a piper scratches or breaks down. You should not expect the steward to hunt you down to make sure you compete on time, you are responsible for making sure you are aware of your competition time and where you are in the list. Don't assume that your time is going to be held for you and show up when you think your contest should be; that's a good way to get involuntarily scratched.
- 3) Keep a 3 x 5 card with your tune name(s) on it in your sporrán. I can't tell you the number of times when I was competing solos that I walked up to a judge and when asked the tunes I was offering, pulled a complete blank.
- 4) Come well rested. Don't go out the night before and tie one on, or stay up all night, it will just cost you a contest.
- 5) If you're playing an unconventional or uncommon tune, bring a copy of the music with you for the judge's use. We've all been playing for a long time but none of us knows every tune.
- 6) Don't play band settings. Often bands will modify tunes to remove or change embellishments or even change the melody line itself to accommodate the abilities of the pipers in the band. Use accepted settings of tunes published in one of the many available music books. Many of the common marches for novice and grade 4 are published in the Scots Guards Collection.
- 7) Watch for the steward and the judge to see when to approach the bench. Usually after a competitor has finished the judge will be writing down final comments, filling out the required grading level sheets, and possibly jotting down notes to use for placing after the contest. Keep an eye on the judge to see a head come up looking for the next competitor or watch for the steward to give you the nod before walking up.
- 8) When you see the judge is ready, come up and introduce yourself to the judge, we are friendly people and like some human interaction at times. Personally I tend to be light hearted with each

piiper simply because I want them to feel comfortable with me so they can focus on playing their tune to the best of their ability.

- 9) The judge will then ask you for your tune and will write it on your scoresheet. Wait a moment to make sure he/she has finished writing the tune name in case they ask you to say it again (I'm getting old and have the memory of a goldfish so any help from you is great).
- 10) The judge will then say something along the lines of "take your time, whenever you're ready", this means go 15-20 feet away and fire up your pipes and get a final touch up from whoever is helping you tune your pipes while you play a nice easy tune to settle your nerves and your instrument. Take at least a minute or two and play before you start your competition tune even if you don't intend to change your tuning. In the MWPBA, light music piping contests allow you 3 minutes for tuning once you submit your tune to the judge. The contest is scheduled to include this tuning time so use it.
- 11) For grades 4 and below you may have someone tune you during your 3 minute tuning time. I implore all lower grade pipers to take this opportunity whenever possible. If your instructor is not available, ask any upper grade piper to give your pipes a final tweak. If no one is available, check with the steward, they are often pipers who can help you out. It's terribly sad to hear an otherwise excellent tune suffer because the instrument is not in tune.
- 12) If you are tuning your own pipes, practice tuning your pipes outside at home. It's important that you develop an ear for what your pipes will sound like with outside ambient noises going on. Be careful not to tune near any electrical equipment as electrical equipment operates at frequencies that are close to that of the bagpipe drones. Be careful if you are indoors not to tune near fans or air conditioning ducts as the pulses in the air from the fans or pumps will again be at frequencies that are close to that of the drones. There's nothing worse than going off and tuning your pipes perfectly only to come in front of the judge and realize you just tuned your drones to the generator of the meat pie vendor's truck.
- 13) When tuning, in my experience, the easiest way is to shut off your middle tenor and bass and first tune your outside tenor while blowing hi A. Follow it up with a bit of a tune to verify that you have in fact tuned the outside tenor correctly. Strike in your bass and perform the same procedure. Again play a bit of a tune to verify your tuning. Finally bring in your middle tenor and tune the middle tenor to the bass and outside tenor. Play a bit of a tune to final check that your drones are in with your chanter.

After much experience, you should be able to hear all three drones and tell which is in tune and which is out and tune while all three are running. This is a skill like any other and requires training your ear by doing it numerous times.

- 14) There is no need for a “band attack”, just bring your pipes up, take a couple deep breaths, get your feet tapping your tempo and start into the tune when you feel ready. There is no judging an “attack” in a solo competition, the judging only starts when you are actually playing the tune.
- 15) Be mindful of appropriate tempos for the tune idiom. For instance, 2/4 marches for competition in the lower grades should be in the 58 to 68 range. Don’t play a tune too slow or too fast, both extremes will make it difficult to present the tune musically. Playing too slow will make the tune hard to follow both for you and for the judge and will exacerbate any timing issues. Playing too fast will make the tune sound frantic and out of control.
- 16) In the MWPBA marching is not required in any grade so if marching throws you and is affecting your performance don’t march. If you are not going to march I personally prefer that pipers stand facing me about 8-10 feet away at a 45 degree angle with their drones facing out. That gives me a good balance of drone to chanter sound.

Even though marching is not required, it is worthwhile to note that marching while playing is a very effective way to control tempo and expression and in my opinion should be a skill that all pipers should work diligently on.

- 17) If you are marching to your tune, you should start about 8-10 feet in front of and to the left of the judge with your drones facing out. Use one pass from left to right for one time through a part. Turn while marching and march in place until the start of the repeat of the part and then march back to your original position. Again turn and march in place until the beginning of the next part then step off. Often pipers will march for the first 3 parts of a tune and then march in place or tap their foot for the last part. This is my preference and is a pretty typical method of marching while competing. There are numerous online videos of top pipers marching while performing like this that can be very helpful.
- 18) Don’t compete with a tune that you’ve chosen to work on a particular embellishment. Choose tunes that feel good in your hands, that you like musically, and that use embellishments that you are strong with. Too many times I’ve had people come up in front of me with a tune they chose specifically to work on a particular embellishment only to have it go completely off the rails when they get to that particular embellishment. Choose embellishment working tunes for work at home, not for a contest. The contest is where you want to showcase your best skills and your best playing, not your worst embellishments.
- 19) Try to ignore the judge while you are playing. The judge will be writing things on the score sheet as you are performing, don’t get distracted wondering what they are writing or worrying that they caught that mistake you just made...they did. Try to focus on something that does not include the judge in your field of view. If you do catch the judge writing, just think to yourself ‘they are writing nothing but glowing comments on my award winning performance’.

20) Remember that judges are normal people trying to do a subjective job of ranking an artistic performance. Each judge will have different criteria on which of the three elements of piping are the most important in his or her mind. Some judges focus largely on technique with the mindset that musicality is the product of proper technique. Some judges prefer musicality to technicality allowing that the music and its expression is the most important aspect as long as minimum proper technique is attained. Others focus largely on the instrument itself noting that without a good sounding instrument whatever sound the piper is making is almost by definition not musical. Don't fall into the trap of trying to compare the rankings, placings, or comments from one judge to another as there will be dramatically different focuses for different judges.

21) The following elements; technicality, musicality and tonality, make up the three areas that each piper will be subjectively judged on. Here is a short description of each.

- a. Technicality refers to things such as the timing of the pulses in a taorluath or a doubling, or the placement of a birl or heavy strike in relation to the beat, or the clarity and crispness of gracenotes, or the consistency of gracing and embellishments. When we are looking at technicality we are assessing the technical ability of the player, the ability to perform the notes, embellishments and gracings correctly.
- b. Musicality refers to things like tune expression, consistent and correct treatment of phrasing, correct treatment of note values in beat groups, and tempo. When we are looking at musicality we are assessing the musical impact of the tune and whether it comports with that tunes particular idiom. For instance, are you playing a 2/4 march with the accepted musical treatment for a 2/4 march. This is where things get subjective because each judge has a different learning history and that learning history will often color a judges perception of "what is acceptable for this type of tune".
- c. Tonality refers to the tone of your instrument. This encompasses things like tuning of the chanter and drones, the balance of the drones to the chanter, the tone qualities of your instrument, the steadiness of your instrument. What we are looking for tonally is an instrument that is well tuned, well balanced, and steadily blown, that produces a warm pleasing sound.

22) Only the top 6 performances in any contest will receive a placing. If there is not a placing listed in the box on the lower right side of your score sheet, you were not in the top 6.

23) Champion supreme points are awarded based on reverse order of placing up to the number of competitors not to exceed 6 points. Thus in a six or more piper field, first place receives 6 points, sixth place receives 1 point. In a four piper field, first place would receive 4 points and fourth place would receive 1 point. Points are tabulated through the entire competition season.

- 24) At the bottom of the score sheet there are 4 categories with a check box in front of them. These are for the judge to convey to the piper where their main strengths are and what areas need improvement. I find that most pipers in the lower grades will often fall into the 2 or 3 category, meaning 1 or 2 of the “musicality, technicality and tonality” requirements need improvement for this grade.
- 25) Be aware that adrenaline will affect your perception of time which changes your perception of pitch and tempo. This is the “I was in an accident and it seemed like it took forever” syndrome. All too often I’ve had pipers come up and start playing, and their chanter goes sharp from where they were just tuning and their tempo goes off the rails and when asked afterwards they had no clue that happened. The only way I know to overcome this is to experience it and be aware that it happens. Recording a performance can be a good way to address these kinds of performance anxiety driven issues
- 26) Do your maintenance! Don’t come to a contest with a ratty, falling apart bagpipe and expect to get a prize. All too often I’ve seen old slipping chanter tape closing holes or drones slipping down and going horribly out of tune or even drone reeds falling into pipe bags in the middle of a performance. Don’t be that person with the dumpster pipe.
- 27) Practice, practice, and more practice. Playing through a new tune a couple days before a contest is an almost guaranteed way to break down. Make sure you have your tune(s) on auto-pilot and that you can play them when the adrenaline kicks in and your conscious brain shuts off and you have to revert to muscle memory to make it through.
- 28) Practice outside in front of people. Performance anxiety gets to all of us; the best competitors have performed often enough in front of an audience that they become accustomed to the adrenaline and anxiety. Remember, the uninformed audience is your friend, they love bagpipes no matter your ability. There’s nothing like the confidence gained from playing in a park and having the squirrels sack out contentedly on a branch while you play...yes that happened to me.
- 29) Blowing, blowing, and more blowing. We all hear the term “blowing tone”, what does that mean. In the simplest terms, blowing tone means maintaining a constant bag pressure and thus constant drone and chanter pitch while you are playing. When the bag pressure remains steady within a small variation, you will be able to tune the drones such that they “lock”. This means that the pitch change of the drones moving up and down is so small that it becomes indiscernible to the human ear. When that pressure/pitch variation is further reduced you will be able to “lock” the chanter meaning you will not be able to discern pitch changes between subsequent playing of the same notes in a tune. This is difficult to attain and requires controlling the pressure between releasing the bag while you are blowing and squeezing the bag while you are taking a breath.

There are numerous ways to practice this skill, I prefer using a manometer which gives an instantaneous pressure response and will visually indicate when you are blowing too hard or too soft, and where in the blowing process these pressure changes occur.

- 30) Never underestimate your opponent's ability to screw up worse than you do. Don't let a note error throw you off the tune, or cause you to break down. I've seen too many pipers bail out after a few note errors only to be informed by me afterwards that they had a lock on a prize even with the mistakes because the other pipers had not played well. Unless you are egregiously off the tune, keep your focus on the moment and keep playing.
- 31) You should expect direct candid commentary on your score sheet about the quality and consistency of the three areas of your piping performance. You should expect some commentary on your instrument, the chanter and drone tuning, and the quality of the tone. You should expect some commentary on your technique, areas that could use improvement and possibly some direction on how to go about that improvement. You should expect commentary on your expression, treatment of the tune, and your adherence to the tune idiom. You should expect the judge to be professional, courteous and treat you with the respect that any competing piper deserves.
- 32) You should not expect that the judge will give you a lesson after your competition. We have a limited amount of time and spending too much of it on any one person denies others of their performance time. You should not expect to be derided or insulted or in any manner treated disrespectfully. Simply put, any judge that cannot convey objective criticism in an instructive manner without being demeaning or rude should not be a judge.
- 33) If you find you have questions about comments (or the legibility of comments) on your scoresheet and you want to address them with a judge, you might stop in and talk to them in the beer tent after the contest. Most judges are happy to discuss your performance if you address the issue cordially and start off by bringing them a beer. Me personally, as you have probably noticed by the length of this "short paper", I am hard to shut up when I get talking bagpipes so I'm more than happy to discuss a performance and give any guidance I can.
- 34) Remember that the judges really do want you to do well; they judge because they love the music and the instrument and want to give back to the art that has so inspired them. I think I can safely speak for all judges when I say there are few things that are more enjoyable than a well-played tune on a beautiful pipe.

If you have any questions that are not covered here I'm always available in the beer tent, come look me up...and bring a beer.

Cheers

~Tad