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**The Captain's Corner**

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# **MAKING AUDIO LEARNING VISUAL**

**Understanding the Pulses and Phrases within a Simple Time Signature Tune  
For Piping Instructors, Students and Drummers**

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For over 4 centuries, pipe music has been passed on from generation to generation of pipers by mouth music. With the voice there are so many advantages. You will hear:

- Stresses where a note is prolonged
- Passages where notes are combined without you taking a breath
- Natural places to take a breath
- Volume variations within music expressing accents or “snap”
- Pitch changes expressing moods and drama in the music
- Repeats of passages (phrases)
- Resolution of a tune

These are all nuances in our music that are not readily apparent in the written (visual) score. For years, they were understood with the aid of an experienced quality instructor – that is, passed down orally from one piper to another. But society has changed. With computers, photocopying, music software and the like, plus a progression to Western rather than Highland culture, students have become more visual in learning their music.

The genesis of my methods really must be credited to my piobaireachd teacher, John Wilson of Edinburgh and Toronto. In the early 60's I would go for my weekly lesson. He would sing the tune in an unheard of language; his pitch that of a chanter and “words” that rhythmically indicated the passages of the tune. He would articulate the words in what appeared to be verses of a poem, taking a breath at various intervals – quite often equally spaced and repetitive. Not being allowed to make notes, but just play, I would scramble on the way home to pencil his “voiceover” into my music, so I wouldn't forget the lesson. The syllables and words I used mimicked his. Little did I know that I was learning a form of canntaraichd (mouth music); not the ancient form from the Campbell Netherlorn MS, but my own interpretation. Music was indeed a LANGUAGE. To this day I use this method.

It is based on being able to recognize strong pulses or accents (volume difference) in our music. It doesn't rely on being able to vocalize the tune, although this is an asset. The important criteria must be the longer notes in a passage – those dotted 1/16<sup>th</sup>, 1/8<sup>th</sup> and 1/4 notes – all those notes your instructor tells you to hold!

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So often, we read these strong pulses in the music but don't play them. You have to question whether you really see them at all. Have you ever heard the statement "hold that note as long as you can, and then hold it some more"? Laughable and impossible at best, for I believe each of us has an internal "governor", like that of a car engine, which limits the duration of a note for some reason. These limits are too short and as a result we don't get the stresses in our music that we want.

The method we are going to use will always allow you to play in time – the best of both worlds where you will always play musically correct from the start and in time! The converse often happens, especially with the use of a metronome. We play in time but not musically correct!

So with this introduction, the method is quite simple. With the use of straight vertical lines I call pulse lines, I identify every note that is extended – dotted  $1/16^{\text{th}}$ ,  $1/8^{\text{th}}$  and  $1/4$  notes – and place this line immediately behind it. The result is a series of one, two or three "syllable" musical words, with the strong note being identified. I play the first pulse... take a breath... play the second pulse... take a breath... play the third pulse... take a breath, etc. Then I repeat the process blowing through those pulse lines taking all the time in the world. These pulse lines become the spaces between our words. Further steps allow me to shorten the distance across those pulse lines to create a passage of music that flows smoothly from beginning to end (i.e. reading faster). Remember that the space between musical words is not unlike the space between written words on a page.

Let's try the method for a simple  $3/4$  march. Once successful, we can easily upgrade the quality of the tune and consider similar techniques for strathspeys and reels.

## **Pulsing** **(The Words of Music)**

Music is a language much like English. The understanding of a passage is in the words, not the individual letters (notes). In music, pulsing is a method of determining the important “musical words”. This will allow you to put “space” or good pronunciation into your music. Here are some rules to follow for pulsing. Strictly adhere to them and you will play simple timed tunes with the best of them: pulsed, with good phrasing, rhythmic technique and in time.

**Rules:** Place a pulse line after

1. Every 1/4 note



2. Every dotted note (dotted 1/8<sup>th</sup> note)



3. Every pair of 1/8<sup>th</sup> notes



## The Shoals of Herring

Retreat

The image shows a musical score for 'The Shoals of Herring' in 3/4 time. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff is the treble clef, and the second staff is the bass clef. The third and fourth staves are also treble clef. The music is written in a simple, rhythmic style with a 3/4 time signature. Vertical blue lines are placed between the staves to indicate pulse lines. The music is written in a simple, rhythmic style with a 3/4 time signature. The notes are mostly quarter and eighth notes, with some rests. The pulse lines are placed at the beginning of each measure, indicating the start of a pulse. The music is written in a simple, rhythmic style with a 3/4 time signature.

Written with ProbbMaster (Cool Muz Software Ltd.)

In this 3/4 march (as well as in a 4/4 march) there are just three types of pulses or words as indicated. The time signature and tune type will define the rules for pulsing all your other music. A pulse, then equates to a word in a sentence. When playing a tune, never take a breath on your practice chanter in the middle of the pulse. This leads to incorrect rhythm; in other words, incorrect pronunciation. With the pulse lines in place, you can begin to play the tune one pulse at a time, taking a rest on the pulse lines. As a second step, you can play continuously, blowing through the pulse lines, taking as much time as you wish.

Finally, you should shorten the duration over the pulse lines as you become familiar with the tune. This allows you to put correct SPACE into your music. These pulses are re-occurring. The time signature and tune type will define the rules for pulsing all your other music.

## Phrasing (The Sentences of Music)

You read English in phrases, with punctuation, to form sentences. Phrases in music are often 2 bars in length, satisfying what many call a “question and answer” pattern. Marches follow this consistently. As with pulsing, there are set rules to follow to identify the musical phrases and eventually the sentences.

Rules – place braces around each two bars of the tune.

The phrasing pattern structure should be analyzed. Most often you discover a recurring pattern like

A	B
A	Ending

Phrasing allows us to put the “comma” into our musical language.

Having a look at the Shoals of Herring, you will notice that I have placed braces into the music to identify each of the two bar phrases. The first phrase repeats itself on the second line as the third phrase.

As the tune progresses, you will very likely see that the ending phrase of part one repeats itself in successive parts.

If we recognize this from the beginning, then the memorization issues minimize. We avoid re-inventing the memory wheel in each part!

## The Shoals of Herring

Retreat

The musical score is written for a drum set in 3/4 time. It consists of four staves. The first two staves are grouped together with a large brace on the right, indicating they are the primary rhythmic parts. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The second staff continues the rhythmic development. The third and fourth staves provide a bass line, primarily using quarter and eighth notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

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**Hopefully this brief description of my methodology will assist instructors and learners alike, as well as those drummers attempting to write rhythmic scores.**

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