

The Judges Impressions

Brett Tidswell

More often this year I am hearing bands, Pipe Majors and even soloists discussing and asking about the judge's impressions at a competition. What the judge is listening for, not just the technical stuff, but the impression a band performance or individual leaves. This might not always be what you want to hear, but to be a good competitor it is essential to pay some attention to.

You obviously should not concern yourself with an individual's musical taste or styles etc. They are yours to choose but there are some basics that can enhance your performance and make it appear more polished and professional.

BANDS

First Impression

"A well drilled band." The first impression a judge gets is often seeing a band. A band that wears the uniform correctly and is disciplined stands out. A band that appears on the field marching smartly, halting together, taking pride in their appearance and getting the basics right means business. A band that is well drilled in starts and finishes leaves an impression. Good bands are all well disciplined and this is reflected in their first appearance. This does not mean a band has to look like marching girls. A band with "casual" drill movements can still execute them together and appear very smart. Also watch the focus and fiddling when standing "on the line".



Musical Impression

"Sound is King." The Highland Bagpipe is by nature an impressive instrument. If it is tuned correctly it is hard not to impress. Good chanter sound and drone chanter balance create a harmonic balance that all judges are listening for. A band with a really good sound makes the judges want to pay close attention to the music that the band playing.

Reducing the stand out technical errors, mistakes and bad blowing help create a better impression of the performance. These obviously detract musically, they leave a bad impression, and obviously they affect the bands result.

"Musically entertaining." Now put yourself in the judge's shoes. Most pipers will never get to judge a competition. Most stand on the sidelines, watch a few bands play, have a chat in between or even during the performance, pass comment and go to the beer tent, walk around and maybe come back when another band of interest appears. Imagine for a minute that you had to stand in the rain or blazing sun all day and listen to a multitude of performances all containing various degrees of similar technical issues. What a pleasure it would be to hear a well thought out and entertaining musical selection that contained, pleasing tunes, nice key changes, a build up and release of tension, a musical climax etc. An article on the basics of medley construction can be found at the www.schoolofpiping.com site. This can be the difference between a band fitting into the general population on the day or really standing out. Even with March sets, they can be improved with nice key changes etc. The last thing that you would want to lose the judges interest or bore the judge as that will not serve the performances results well at all. In this day and age of top bands wanting to get the edge over their competitors, I hear more and more top pipe majors asking for the judge's impressions of their medley constructions.

The aim in all of this should be to make the band a pleasure to listen to, sound wise, playing wise and with tasteful and entertaining tune selection and medley construction. It is quite often the case that a few small changes with regard to how a band presents as a unit and its music can make a huge difference on the impression it leaves upon the judge and also the listening audience.

SOLO PIPING

Be prepared and present well

"He knows his stuff." As a judge there is nothing worse than a competitor that comes up to the bench and obviously has no idea of what he is doing. Preparation is the key to success. Watch the professional solo pipers, they appear well dressed, they approach the bench knowing what they have to play, they have a bagpipe that is well set and tuned. They put the final gloss on the instrument and play a well rehearsed performance with confidence.

There are marshals at most competition that can assist in telling you when you are on, and what the requirements are for each event. *Never ask the judges.* This immediately tells them that you have not bothered to get your act together before appearing. As a competitor I want to know what I am playing before I start tuning. It helps to get my head around what I am about to play, how I am going to present it and helps settle the nerves.

Appear smartly at the bench and politely introduce who you are, don't just assume the judge knows, and introduce the tunes you are about to play. The judge will give you the go ahead and then settle yourself to play.

Tuning

Get your pipes well set before you appear so that any tuning routine in front of the panel or judge is as short as possible. Keep the tuning routine musical; it does not have to be boring and display a lack of instrument knowledge.

A well set bagpipe will not change a lot in a short period, but may take a minute or so to get back to the point where you left it when you moved from the fine tuning roo or area. Play something short and musical and listen to what the instrument is doing. It should be improving. You may have to tune the drones a very small amount to balance them up again, or to set them to the chanter, but appearing with a bagpipe that is not even close is a very bad first impression. Ensure that what you play from start to finish in your tuning routine is musical. Do not stop and let drones trail over, play unmusical or repetitive tuning phrases or over tune the bagpipe. If the pipe is not settling as you would expect play a short tune or Piobaireachd variation. Do not play a tune of the same type you are about to compete with as the judge will assume you have started on the wrong tune. Tuning a pipe early and then having to re-tune shortly after will only demonstrate that you do not know your instrument well.

Leave a lasting impression

Your presentation leaves a lasting impression. Be polite, be friendly and pleasant, have your performance well thought out and rehearsed. Demonstrate confidence, ability and tasteful preparation. Leave the judge thinking “this competitor knows their stuff!”

There is a lot of useful information on competing, bagpipe preparation, set up and the psychology of performing in “The Complete Pipers Handbook” from:
<http://www.schoolofpiping.com/handbook.html>



Tune Selection

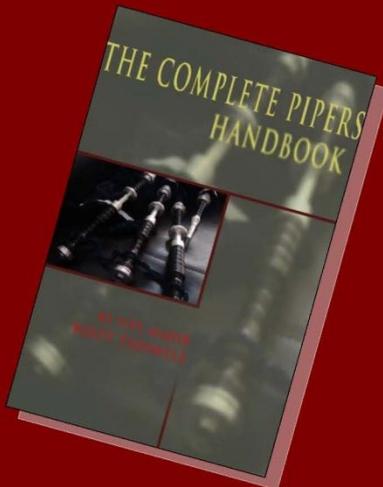
Do yourself, the judges and the audience a favour and select tunes that you can play well even on a bad day. Practice the tunes, not until you don't make a mistake, but until you can't make a mistake. There is a big difference. Listening to competitors flounder with tunes they cannot manage, have not adequately prepared or are realistically too hard for them is an embarrassment for the competitor and often the judge. The judges have to actually write something about such performances, leaving them open to later "expert" opinion and criticism. Watch the tunes with the difficult embellishments and ensure that you can play them well under duress. Most times the judges know the tunes and specifically listen for how well these passages are executed.

Choose a tune selection that is appropriate to the grade in which you compete, and remember that the requirements and expectations increase the higher up the ladder you compete. Not just with tunes, but with technical execution, musicality and presentation.

Be a good sport

At the end of the day we are playing music. You should enjoy performing for the sake of performing. The judge is an expert at what he does and is asked to make a decision, based on numerous factors as to who performed best on the day. If he didn't think it was you, so be it. It might be next week. Do not be afraid to ask for a verbal critique of your performance, most judges will happily oblige. Try to refrain from making excuses to the judge as to why things went wrong. If you think something happened that affected the performance ask the judge in question form if that could be the case. This will make you seem interested and willing to learn instead of arrogant and full of excuses.

Never question the judge's opinion. That will do you no favours at all. It leaves behind a bad impression, the results will not change and you will not prove any point. Like any good competitor in any field, take the decision and learn from it, so that you can do better next time. The important thing is to enjoy the experience and learn from it.



The Complete Pipers Handbook is a must for every serious piper. Never before has a more comprehensive guide been published. Maintenance, set up, refinement, tuning, setting up bands, performance psychology and **much more!**

Available from:
www.schoolofpiping.com
and selected stockists.

www.schoolofpiping.com