

CONSTRUCTING A PIPE BAND MEDLEY FOR COMPETITION

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HISTORY

Pipe Bands used to perform March, Strathspey and Reel sets only in competition. In the 1950's the Edinburgh Police under PM Donald Shaw Ramsay started to incorporate hornpipes and jigs into their repertoire and shortly after, the medley was introduced into competition to allow bands a wider variety of music and to give play to some of the smaller tunes that bands seemed to be overlooking.

The medley has now developed into a complex structure rather than a few nice tunes thrown together. The intention of this article is to highlight some of the methods used to construct an entertaining and musical medley. The guidelines in no way are meant to inhibit the compiler/composer, however, good musical taste and some adherence to tradition are still called for when compiling a medley for competition.



Scottish Power

LENGTH

There are obviously constraints when compiling a competition medley as distinct from a concert medley. The first of these is the length. Generally in higher grades the rules require a 5 – 7 minute medley and a lesser time in the lower grades. Ensure that you check the rules and test the length of the medley from the first roll until the end of the performance, at tempo.

INTRODUCTION

Again there is often a rule constraint here. Most call for two three pace rolls with the band stepping off on the first beat of the roll. If you are trying to be inventive and vary from this, it is best to check the rules of the Associations who have jurisdiction in the places you intend to compete.

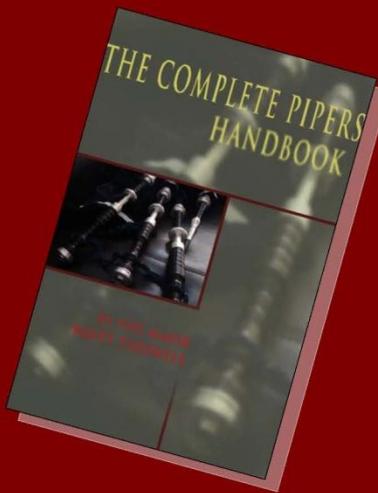
FEATURE TUNES

There are some important factors when considering writing a medley. The first of these are tunes that create an impact. The first tune that takes the band into the circle is of extreme importance. This is the tune that creates the first impression. It should make an impact on the listener, settle the band for a good performance and make the audience want to listen to the performance. Do not be swayed by current trends. So many bands play the round hornpipe intro which has become so common in recent years. It is not rare to hear comments in the judging tent complaining of the monotonous entry tunes.

I always think that the Air is another important punctuation in a medley. It gives the opportunity to show off the tonal quality of the band and demonstrates the quality of the construction and use of harmonies.

The next major feature is the closing tune. This must create an impact and obviously is the last thing the audience and judges will remember. Current trend is to have a hornpipe/reel with passages of harmonies. Jigs are also impressive. What is important is that the medley comes to some sort of exciting conclusion.

The use of reprises, tunes which change time signature or idiom etc. can make another tune a feature of the medley.



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FORMAT

There seem to be two common formats used in the modern medley. These are the march in tune, strathspeys, reels, air, jigs and hornpipes/reels. The alternate is the march in tune, jigs, air, strathspeys and reels/hornpipes. There are of course many variations, but these tend to be the basic structural format of most medleys. Try not to be too predictable, as this can make for a boring medley for judges or the audience who have to listen to many in a day, but also try to adhere to some of the traditional changes in idiom.

NEW MATERIAL

It is always good to have some new material in a medley. There is nothing worse than all old material that everyone has heard elsewhere. However, there is also a problem going the other way. Some medleys are full of new material, sometimes with limited musical appeal and the entire journey becomes a muddle and very forgettable.

A good medley will have some familiar music. A few of the top bands use familiar music to surround new material and give some breathing space. It breaks the predictability and nicely showcases the new material.



St Laurence O'Toole

KEY CHANGES

When moving from one idiom to another it is important to change keys. This can also be used when changing from one tune to another in the same idiom. A medley where the use of key changes is not properly utilised becomes uninteresting to listen to.

A simple way to gauge the key of a tune is to use the last note as a guide. If the tune finishes on a D chances are it is in the key of D. Try the key changes and ensure they are tasteful. With practice you will soon work out which keys fit best in progression. Tunes also transpose keys within their phrase structure, so pick tunes that contrast the previous keys.

BUILD UP AND RELEASE OF TENSION

Building up tension in a medley can be done with the use of tempo, harmony, or volume of drumming. Tension can be built up and then released to add interest and colour to the medley.

Do not forget the impact of silence for a short time from the drum corps. This can be very effective.

HARMONIES

Harmonies provide musical colour and contrast. This is ineffective if there are too many or not enough passages throughout the medley. Keep them tasteful and interesting. Try not to be predictable and look at using counterpoint rather than traditional thirds. There are basic rules for counterpoint in most music theory books.



Strathclyde Police

TEMPO

The various tempos that tunes are played at can be utilised to create impact and increase or decrease suspense or tension in a medley. Most top level bands will play the smaller tunes in a medley a little faster than a similar larger tune of the same idiom as played for example in an MSR. You should however select tunes and tempos that are within the capabilities of your band. There is nothing worse than listening to low grade bands fumble their way through medleys and tunes at tempos that they cannot manage. I think to a man most judges would prefer to listen to well controlled, cleanly played tunes from the lower graded bands.

LISTEN

Always take the opportunity to stand out of the band and listen to a new medley. Also try to get an experienced Pipe Major or judge to have a listen as some stage as well. Listen to ensure that the medley is interesting and in good musical taste, that it is not overloaded with harmonies or confusing bridging passages. See that the drum scores match what you are trying to portray, and ensure that obvious things like an over bearing mid section or poor positioning of pipers playing harmonies are addressed.

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