

Memorizing Music

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Due to the nature of what we do, as pipers we have to memorize the music we play. Often I hear of pipers struggling to learn tunes or saying it become more difficult as they get older. Confidently it can be said that it does improve with practice, similarly with sight reading, which is very important in learning how tunes go and making memorization of tunes easier and quicker. One task will help the other if undertaken properly.

Environment

Select an appropriate environment to work in. Free from distractions, so that you can give the tune 100% of your attention. For example sitting in front of the television or on a room full of screaming kids is probably not a good idea. Try to make this a concentrated effort and a pleasant and positive experience.

Analyse the music

Once you have selected the tune to be learned analyse the music. Decide on idiom, playing style, notes that may require expressive treatment, note groups that may cause difficulties, beat and pulse placement and phrase beginnings and ends. Play the tune through to help with this process.

Rote Learning

There will be an element of rote learning to the memorization of a piece of music. You will have to play it over and over. Not only until you do not make a mistake, but more importantly until you can't make a mistake. The piece must be memorized and then rehearsed. There are however more effective methods than just playing the full tune over and over.

Identify Phrases

Once you have decided the phrase structure and identified the beginning and ends of the phrases, you will notice a pattern appearing. Often the last phrase in each part is repeated and quite often the second phrase as well. Commonly the composer uses the opening phrase of each part as the third phrase as well. If you understand this learning the tune will be much easier. Once you have identified the phrases you can colour the matching phrases with a highlighter pen. This will reinforce them in your mind and help reinforce the phrase structure in your mind and assist you in producing a musical interpretation of the tune.

In the example of the reel Alick C. McGregor below you will see we have highlighted the corresponding phrases including each anacrusis to the phrase. The Phrase B has only a small variation from phrase A on the end which is circled to highlight it further. Phrase C is identical each time apart from a variation with the anacrusis. If you struggle to recall a small variation a symbol of some kind will always help.

Alick C. MacGregor Reel G. S. MacLennan

Learn in Phrases

Do not try to learn the whole tune at once. Learn it in phrases. It is simpler to memorize a phrase than a whole part and similarly easier to learn a part than the whole tune. You may decide not to start at the beginning, but to learn the end phrase that repeats at the end of each part first. Play the phrase over and over until it is familiar to you. Get it right in terms of technique and rhythm. Ensure each note group is precise in terms of cleanliness of embellishments, their placement on the beat or pulse and also start to insert any emphasis or accenting you wish to develop. This method gives you a chance to rapidly learn small parts of the tune and to properly analyse the music, your playing of the phrase and reinforces the phrase structure in your own mind.

Turn the Music Over

As soon as you are able, turn the page over and play the phrase without the music. Repeat it several times and go back to the manuscript and check the source. Ensure you have the phrase correct and continue this process until you are confidently playing the phrase. Repeat this method with the other phrases until you have a whole part off and then play the part in its entirety.

Write the Tune Out on Manuscript

If you have trouble learning the tune or a part, try writing it out in manuscript paper. You can use different colour pens to help identify phrases or passages you are struggling with. Just the act of writing out the part, identifying note structures and embellishments can be a useful reinforcement of the tune and greatly aid memorization.

Use Symbols

The use of symbols can be another useful tool in areas where you have problems. Circling unclear note groups or unusual note combinations, highlight them with an

arrow, Indicate beats and pulses in passages where they are less obvious. These symbols help reinforce these passages in your mind.

Again the use of colour assists as a visual aid.

Play the Tune in the Dark

Turn the light off and play the tune in the dark. This really helps some people who prefer tactile learning. It takes the visual aspect out of the memorization process, which for some can become something of a crutch, for others it is just not effective.

Sing the Tune

The older generation of pipers tried to drum this into us incessantly. Many of them were totally or at least partially musically illiterate, but were excellent players taught primarily by the oral method. This is a great way to get the maximum amount of music out of a tune, but is also a great reinforcement in your mind of how the tune goes, assists in memorization and is great for those who are auditory learners. You can also sing the tune anywhere at any time. Pipers tend to do it a lot, a tune might be going through your head and you find yourself playing along on a pencil or bus seat.

Listen to the Tune

Either record the tune, or obtain a recording of the tune by someone you would like to emulate and listen to it over and over. This can greatly assist some in learning a tune quicker, can reinforce in your mind how it should be played and some auditory learners may find this the quickest method of learning a tune.

Distributed Practice and Sleep

We wrote some time ago about distributed practice and how shorter, more regular and concentrated practice sessions of 30 minutes or so can be a lot more effective than longer sessions. Also how sleep can reinforce the days learning. Some days you struggle with a piece of music, only to find the next day you have improved with little or no effort in between. This is the mind making sense out of your learning during sleep.



Sleep reinforces what has been learned

Play the Tune Up on Pipes

This creates a new element to memorizing the tune. Once you have the tune right on the practice chanter it is often harder to recall it on the pipes whilst you have many other things to concentrate on. Your blowing, the strength of your instrument both make it more physically demanding and taking your attention away from the tune. When you get up on pipes, both your environment and your perception of the environment changes.

Visualisation

Many find it helpful to visualise the manuscript while they are playing. This can be very helpful, especially when you have used visual aids and symbols to help you through the learning process.

Like learning for an exam, and finding you can't remember anything when it comes time to write on an exam paper. It is often helpful to visualise the place where you may have to perform whilst you are learning a tune. It gives your mind the appropriate trigger to remember when needed. The information is always there, but sometimes the appropriate trigger is not in place to recall the information we need at the time we need it. It can also help to settle us down and take away the stresses that often block our memory when we are performing in a strange environment.

Practice Memorizing Tunes

It may seem like stating the obvious, but the more you learn to memorize tunes, the better you get at it. It is a learned skill. It is the same with sight reading. The more you analyse and learn tunes, the quicker and more accurate your sight reading becomes. The better your sight reading becomes, the quicker you will learn tunes.

In Conclusion

Try out the methods above and see which ones work best for you. Several may work well. Some should be a staple diet for memorizing tunes, such as analysis, phrase structure and singing. Try to keep your practices interesting and not too demanding. Try to make the tune memorable and put in the attention to detail to play it well. Keep reinforcing the tune, and keep referring to the manuscript to ensure you have not strayed from what is written. Most importantly enjoy learning new music, there are a lot of good tunes out there!



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 selected stockists.