

MUSIC or NOISE

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(Being extracts from a series of lectures given
to Branches of the Scottish Pipe Band
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In this article I shall not attempt to deal with the usual technical details generally uppermost in the mind of the average drummer but rather discuss the relationship between pipes and drums. To my mind, our drummers have very few technical problems to worry about. Drumming today has reached a stage of enviable perfection, so much so that many drummers treat technique as the one and only thing that matters in drumming. There are, however, quite a number of musical problems worthy of consideration, and it is through the correct relationship between pipes and drums that a drummer can express a sense of good musicianship which is so often lacking in many of our contesting bands today.

On 11th October 1947, the Pipe Band Association called together in the Highlanders Institute representatives from the various Committees and members of the Panel of Judges to discuss pipe bands generally, and in my opinion this was a progressive step in the right direction. Unfortunately, quite a lot of time was taken discussing points in the contest sheets which did not allow much time for what was considered to be more important, namely, the members' contribution towards an all-round better performance of pipes and drums.

As a member of the Panel of Judges at that time, I was invited to attend and I must say I was very disappointed to learn that the old threadbare opinions about the pipers' outlook towards the drummers still existed in no small measure amongst us. You know the old slogans about the "Piper's labourer", that the "Drums were far too loud for the pipes", and that the "Drummers were there to keep time" and so on. One member made it quite evident that he was not in favour of drums and another stated that the drummers had contributed to an improvement in piping but he was not in favour of this ensemble idea.

Now, in an ordinary state of affairs, one would not be disturbed by remarks such as these coming from a few isolated bandsmen, but when this type of argument was put up by a few of our more enlightened members, I was left with the impression that we have still a bit to go before real progress can be made. We also had a discussion on the headings of the contests sheets, particularly on the word "time" and what was meant by the word. I learned at this meeting that a large number of players were not really interested in the drums while, on the other hand, many of the drummers were very indifferent to the pipes – in short, we have not yet learned to look on the pipes and drums as a musical combination.

While I agree we have quite a number of rather aggressive drum corps in our midst, I feel this could be remedied quite easily if each section of the band became a little more interested in each other's activities. The over-exuberance of many of our tenor and bass drummers, particularly in the first few bars of the March, Strathspey and Reel, may be the result of the other complaint that the chief function of the drums is that they are merely to keep time. No, the Pipe Major who complains that the drums are too noisy, and that their only function in a band is to keep time deserves all he gets because it is quite obvious he does not realise the potentialities of the instruments under his control.

Now, reverting to the word **Time** or **Tempo**, I would suggest that we, as a musical combination – that is to say, if we believe that a pipe band can produce music and would like it understood in every country in the world – should fall into the general practice by all and use the musical terms which are

applicable to a pipe band performance. What we must understand in relation to Tempo is that the relative rhythm of rapidity should be maintained at the speed of the introduction rolls. Many bands immediately slacken off after the introduction rolls, others increase the tempo after the rolls while some require three or four bars before the band is properly under way.

In dealing with the combination of pipes and drums, I prefer to use the word ensemble because I think it describes best what we mean by both sections of a band taken together for musical effect but, call it what you may, my chief concern is that we understand the subject under discussion. It is fortunate that we have a number of enthusiasts amongst us keen on a better musical combination but, on the other hand, we have still a very large proportion who might become a little more enlightened if they could be made to take a little additional interest in the combined effect of a pipe band and not look on the band either from a piping or drumming point of view.

We must admit that most pipers are not really interested in drumming because comparatively few know the first thing about it and, on the other hand, most drummers are more interested in technical opportunities of display than a sympathetic understanding and accompaniment to the tune. While it is true that drumming of recent years has contributed a lot to the present standards of band performance, it is equally true that the drumming section can still contribute much more and, as I said already, this further improvement can be made, not from the technical aspect but from a more musical collaboration with the piping section.

If we look back and try to imagine a band performance thirty years ago we shall observe that much progress has been made. Thirty years ago bands played tunes of a more simple, melodic nature which did not, to a large extent, make the same demand on the fingering technique of the average band piper. The drum beatings used, at that time, were much more laborious and mostly consisted of a few two-fours and six-eights. As time went on, we had more contests and from these contests emerged an ambition, by certain bands, to lead the field in something new in the way of tunes. The piping fraternity, in short, had turned their attention to the province of solo piping, and the good old band tunes such as the "Barren Rocks" and the "79th" were changed into tunes like the "Highland Wedding" and "Lord Alexander Kennedy". This desire to play the heavier type of tune was responsible for the type of drum rhythm we have today.

For a number of years just before the Second World War bands made considerable progress, drummers appeared to be anxious to make their beatings suit the melody, and there was a growing desire by all to read and write the score. In fact, we had actually arrived at something new in pipe band drumming. Pipe Majors had discovered that in a drum corps worthy of the name there were great possibilities of improving the general standard of a band performance. Unfortunately, however, and within the last few years, I have felt that there was a strong desire by many of our drum corps to indulge in technical display rather than fit the beating to suit the tune. We must never lose sight of the fact that a pipe band contest is not a technical drumming contest and that perfect ensemble between pipes and drums should be the aim of every band at a contest.

Many of our drum corps, particularly in the first grade (who ought to know better) are entirely ignoring the tune and putting up to the adjudicator a series of technical abnormalities which sometimes lack good taste or design. This type of drumming often takes shape in the over indulgence of the triplet slapped up in a series of runs which bears as much resemblance to the tune as horse chestnut does to a chestnut horse. At many of the contests last year I was surprised to find so many Grade III bands adopted such heavy competing tunes. I would have thought the type of tune best suited to this grade would be a melody within the technical ability of the average piper in the band. Surely the type of tune that should be adopted would be a melody within the capabilities of the poorest playing members and not the best; after all, a band only plays best according to its weakest members. Personally, I would much rather hear a band play a simple tune well than hear a

band of pipers and drummers wade through a heavy setting which does not give justice to the tune or the performers.

Perhaps I am labouring this point too much, but I am trying to illustrate the difference between technical ability and musical taste. A Pipe Major can have exceptional technical ability but he could also advertise poor musical taste by the type of tune he plays, and the general performance of his band. A drummer can have exceptional technical ability, despite the fact that his own compositions can verge on the vulgar or spectacular side rather than the musical. Much could be done towards an improvement in the combination of pipes and drums if the Scottish Pipe Band Association would allocate a number of points on the contest sheets towards the best ensemble performance. This would encourage bands to take more interest in the combined effort and without a doubt raise the general standard of many bands.

Our present method of adjudicating at a contest will never encourage collaboration between pipes and drums. A Pipe Major judging the piping and a Drum Major judging the drumming with no award for the best combined effort is hardly likely to improve the standard towards a more musical performance. Another obstacle in the way of a better combined effort is the present practice of awarding a drumming prize at some contests. As long as this prize exists, drum corps will go all out to get it and unfortunately, for band music as a whole, many drum corps feel that the only way to win it is to cram as much into a bar of 2/4 as is humanly possible.

We have with us several very efficient drummers indeed who I feel could do much by setting an example for the rest to follow. This I am sure would do much to halt the tendency of technical over-indulgence which is very prevalent today. While it is true that some of our best drummers set out to suit the tune by more or less setting their beatings in keeping with the pulse notes of the melody, they invariably spoil the effect by inserting too much dressing.

The subject under discussion up to the present has been the relationship between pipes and drums, but before proceeding further with a general talk on "Drums" I feel that I must say a word or two regarding a topic which seems to be of some consequence to drummers.

Of recent years many drummers in the Scottish Pipe Band Association have come to the conclusion that what they term the "old-fashioned" rudiments of drumming are now obsolete. It is now claimed that a drummer need no longer trouble himself with the rudiments but can become proficient in drum technique by practising simple drum scores in various stages of gradual advancement until he eventually becomes expert. For some unknown reason it would appear that I am considered to be in favour of continuing the old-fashioned rudimentary system and that I am opposed to any form of modern methods. In the first place I have no information regarding the results attained by pupils who have become expert by disregarding the rudimentary system, and I am not aware that anyone else in the Scottish Pipe Band Association has.

All instruments have their own system of exercises (including the pipes) and the various types of drums are no exception to this rule. If, therefore, we take for example the side drum technique displayed by many of our Grade 1 drummers I am sure you will agree that the "old-fashioned" rudiments have not been found wanting. I think I am right when I say that 99 per cent of our drumming experts in the Scottish Pipe Band Association arrived at their present stage of perfection through a system of exercises, call it rudimentary or any other name you like.

I have read with care, and much interest, a number of works by American tutors and I must admit there is a great deal in what they say, but even in America opinions are very divided on this subject. Personally, I am not concerned with the method of teaching drummers because most teachers have their own methods or systems and, provided that the finished article is all that can be desired, then I

do not see any reason to get worried over the matter. I am, however, surprised at the arguments sometimes used to prove that the "old-fashioned" rudiments are wrong.

As an example, take the terrific debate that sometimes takes place regarding the introduction of three-pace rolls. Those who are against the "old-fashioned" rudiments will point out that the rudiments fall down when you compare the number of demi-semi-quavers in the three-pace roll in 2/4 time against 6/8 time because the duration of the three-pace roll in 2/4 is exactly the same as 6/8. In short, if it is agreed that there are a specific number of demi-semi-quavers in the three-pace roll in 2/4 time, explain the reason why there ought to be more if the rolls are played in 6/8 time?

In the first place, are they demi-semi-quavers? Have we a musical symbol which accurately represents the number of taps in the three-pace roll when it is closed? It is always those who feel they have a grievance against the rudiments who raise this point with monotonous regularity. As far as I am concerned I have never heard an intelligent drummer, even if he does believe in a system of exercises, state that the symbols used to illustrate the three-pace rolls are demi-semi-quavers. In my opinion, the quality of the rolls is determined by the technique of the drummer as to whether he has the ability to play 17, 19, 21, 23 or 25 taps to close a three-pace roll.

I prefer to look on drumming as a percussion accompaniment to melody and not something apart from music in any sense whatever. The difference between 2/4 and 6/8 is a question of "time". There are as you know three times in music – "Duple", "Triple" and "Quadruple" – and these are subdivided into "Simple" and "Compound", but when the rolls are closed it is impossible to tell whether the introduction will be in 2/4 or 6/8 until one has heard the first two bars of the melody.

If we treat music as a science and that the symbols in music have a fixed duration like a definite mathematical mode of measurement, then it would be difficult to explain the difference but, happily, music in general is classified as an art and like all forms of art it is subject to certain licence. The duration of notes in music is mainly governed by tempo and, while I agree that the rolls have a specific quantity of notes according to the technical ability of the drummer, I do not agree that this proves the rudimentary system to be wrong.

If a piper plays a melody in 2/4 time he will play 32 quavers or their equivalent in an eight bar measure, but should he change the time to 6/8 at the same tempo as 2/4 time, he will naturally play 48 quavers with the result that the quavers and their equivalent are of longer duration in 2/4 time than in 6/8. My outlook in drumming may differ from some, but I honestly feel that we should concentrate on other matters which might be of greater interest and help to the less experienced drummers amongst us.

In conclusion, I agree that a drummer will eventually cease to look on the various rolls as fives, sevens, nines etc. after he has learned to read a drum score, but these names are not any more useless than the names of the notes on the lines and in the spaces after a piper has learned to play the chanter. The rolls are the only form of sustained notes on the drum and should accordingly be clean and even throughout except when otherwise marked, the quality of which I am sure is perfectly obvious even to those who are not drummers.

The prerogative in Pipe Band Drumming does not belong to any individual drummer. Drummers in the past have contributed much to the general knowledge now at our disposal, and I am happy to say we have a number of capable teachers with us at present who are carrying on the good work.

While I am on this subject I should say a word about the late Danny Tarrant who died during the recent war. To my mind Tarrant was an exceptional drummer in his day and he had a style all on his own. He did much to bring us up to our present standards. I personally was fascinated by his examples of Rhythm and Style, he always made his settings to suit the tune and was ably backed by a

good corps of drums. For a long period Tarrant led the field in the drumming world until a new style in drumming gradually came into favour. It was then that he made his first mistake. Instead of developing still further his own inimitable type of drumming, he decided to change to the new.

If we have any Danny Tarrants amongst us today I trust that they will benefit from his experience. My advice to young drummers is to take full advantage of the College and, while I agree that a drummer can display exceptional technique without any theory, it is only through sound knowledge of the elements of music that he can leave his contribution behind him. Much has been lost to Pipe Band Drumming because drummers could not write down their ideas and make their knowledge or expertise accessible to others.

It is over two years now since I resigned from the Panel of Judges. I took this step not so much because I did not like the Panel but mainly that I did not see eye to eye with a big percentage of our drum corps. Judging on the Panel is a thankless job! A judge can only please one band, partly please another two or three bands, and be very unpopular with a large portion of the remainder. As an adjudicator I found that some drummers appear to be a law unto themselves and most of those who complain about the decision are generally those who had a total disregard for any musical laws. They are chiefly governed by noise in one form or another and have little or no tolerance for the opinion of others. On several occasions recently I have been asked to re-join the Panel of Drumming Judges, but I regret I see no reason so far to alter my previous decision.

Like most of you, I look on pipe band music as a labour of love, but before taking up my place on the spectator's stand I would like to register a few comments on my experience as an adjudicator in the hope that perhaps some of you will achieve some benefit from these observations and if they should not appeal to others perhaps they can be treated as a basis for discussion.

In the first place, I have no intention in entering into any controversy regarding the subject matter of this article and, secondly, I wish my opinion to be treated merely as that of an enthusiast with, shall we say experience. As you know, music consists of three main constituents – Rhythm, Melody and Harmony – and while some will say that the application of the latter does not apply to pipe band music in general, surely you will agree that we could use the word “harmony” in perhaps another sense and apply it to the drum section in its relation to the melody.

With this subject in view I would like to turn my attention to a drumming contest sheet and discuss briefly the various headings. I shall take them in their relation as follows – Introduction, Tempo, Tone, Execution, Rhythm, Quality and Variety.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of the introduction rolls will immediately convey an impression to the adjudicators.

The rolls should be clean and even throughout with the bass and tenor drummers making a slight accent on the first beat of each bar.

TEMPO

The tempo should be maintained at the same speed as the introduction right through the march.

Three faults can be apparent:

- (a) The band increases the tempo after the introduction.
- (b) Slackens off after the introduction; and
- (c) The band takes three or four bars before they are properly underway.

I do not agree that the function of the bass and tenor drum is to keep time. Too many bass and tenor drummers are much too heavy, particularly in the first few bars of the march, strathspey and reel. This practice only advertises that a band is not capable of maintaining a strict tempo and is definitely frowned upon by both adjudicators.

TONE

This, to my mind, can be one of the main factors in improving the general standard of a band performance.

It is my opinion that the tone of many bands is much too thin and there is no doubt that the drums can do much to improve this. The double-tension rod drums with snares at both ends are much sharper than the old fashioned rope tension drums, and to properly balance the tone of the drums in general, the bass and tenor drums should be much broader than many of the bass and tenor drums used today.

Most of our bass drums are much too narrow to produce a good deep round tone and this becomes more pronounced by the extremely hard sticks used by many of the players. The tone of the tenor drum could be much improved by the use of tympani sticks, which are very light and fitted with soft felt heads.

The tone most conspicuous by its absence in many of our bands is a bass tone, and if drum corps would give half as much attention to the quality of tone on the bass and tenor drums as they do with their snare drums, much would be done to improve the general tone of a pipe band.

EXECUTION

In the first place, the drum setting must be well within the technical capabilities of the weakest playing members, otherwise the side drum setting will sound ragged in all double-forte passages. If the setting is too difficult for some of the drummers the following faults will be quite apparent.

- (a) Unsteady tempo at all forte passages.
- (b) Lack of confidence and precision when entering the double-forte.

Many bands make a one-man-show of their leading stroke because he has established a reputation in the Association as an individual. If it has been decided that the drum setting will take the usual form – eight bars piano followed by eight bars double-forte – then the difference between piano and double-forte should be made more apparent. The difference can only be illustrated by comparison and, if the volume of the piano is too loud, then it is impossible to illustrate a difference without banging on the drums which, after all, will not produce good tone.

The side drum technique should be clean and distinct with particular attention given to embellishments. The bass and tenor should naturally be heard but in proper balance to the band as a whole.

RHYTHM

To condense this particularly interesting subject I would say that rhythm is a succession of accented and unaccented notes and that the regularity of these accents constitutes rhythm.

The rule to observe in duple, triple and quadruple time is that the strongest note is the one immediately behind the bar lines. In strathspey time or quadruple time we have two accented beats, the first and the third, the first being stronger than the third beat.

Some of our drummers have a natural aptitude for rhythm and the instructor with this gift is bound to have a good drum corps. I could say that our drum corps are divided into three categories:

- (a) The drum corps with a good sense of rhythm and displaying a sympathetic understanding of the melody, good balance of tone and volume with the forte in unison. This type of drum corps is of great assistance to the pipes and a judge instinctively feels that he is listening to a band and not to two separate units.
- (b) The drum corps that entirely lacks rhythm and precision in any form, but meanders through the performance from the march to the reel. Sometimes they have a good leading stroke, but it is quite evident that the setting has been arranged to suit the soloist and not the capabilities of the forte drummers. They play with a monotonous volume and the time signatures are hardly distinguishable from each other.
- (c) The determined drum corps that plays with far too much volume and gets right over on top of the pipes, battering them down with accent on every beat. This type has invariably good technical drummers but they have little or no regards for the melody. They are much more conscious of their vigorous efforts than any enjoyment, have no deportment whatever, and think the judge is no good if they are not in the prize list.

Accents must be, in no way over stressed. Many of our drum corps are much too loud and if accent is put on top of their existing volume it would be all out of proportion.

The monotonous four-pulse beat by most of our bass and tenor drummers, which start on the march and finish up on the last bar of the reel, is certainly not conducive to good rhythm.

The bass and tenor parts should be a musical setting to the tune.

Quite a percentage of tenor drummers treat their drums as some sort of metronome, while others reduce it to an ornament by hardly touching it at all.

QUALITY AND VARIETY

Music, broadly speaking - that is if we are not going to be too theoretical - is a question of sympathetic vibration, and if a percussion accompaniment is played to a melody and bears no relation to the tune in parts, these parts can only be described as noise. It may be a very clever noise, but it is noise nevertheless.

I may be at cross purposes as to what is meant by quality and variety, but my interpretation is that quality refers to the setting in its musical relationship to the melody, and that variety refers to the opportunity of using various different exercises which also must be in relation to the melody, and this avoid monotony in any form whatever.

There is no doubt that we must treat a drum setting as something different to the complicated rhythmical displays used at a drumming contest and that the question of variety is more or less determined by the opportunity in the melody itself. The musical form of most of our pipe band marches is written in two-bar phrases. The drum part, therefore, must be treated accordingly. To disregard the phrasing and the general build-up of the melody is one of our chief faults. Many drum settings are much too crammed and I regret to say that quite a lot of this cramming can only be labelled sheer drivel without any meaning or design. Some drummers are now talking about modern rhythm, but a large percentage of these modern rhythms are totally unsuited to pipe music. Others

talk about modern technique used today compared to ten years ago show that the demi-semi-quaver is now much more in evidence than in the past.

I would also like to advise some of our corps not to put all their eggs in one basket and remember that the strathspey and reel is still to follow. A number of corps start off very well, but by the time they have reached the reel they make it quite evident they have long since reached the end of their repertoire. Sometimes by using rests in a drum score, periods of silence can lend the pipers opportunities to excel. Not only is the short musical rest another form of variety, but it can add character and expression to the setting.

It may be that I have expressed myself in some paragraphs in no uncertain manner, but I have held these opinions over a long period of time and, like all enthusiasts, I feel strongly on certain matters. To me a first class pipe band is one of the most stirring examples of martial music, and while many of the elements of music are not applicable, it is through those which can be applied to a pipe band performance that the standard will be raised still higher.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to say that the object of this article is not to try and illustrate music from an academic sense, but rather to try to encourage our younger drummers to start and really think about it, to make them want to hear more, to develop their awareness of the various elements that make up music, and lastly to create a keen sense of discrimination which will, I trust, provide them with a standard for all to aim at.

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