

2007 Tuition Series

Medley Construction

Presented by Greg Wilson - Principal of the College of Piping

Introduction

In this tutorial, we are going to look at medley construction. This is a critical aspect of achieving your bands potential in the competition arena. A medley which is not coherent and has tune selections and breaks/transitions that are too advanced for your members will highlight the weakest areas of your membership. Conversely, a medley that lacks variation and imagination will tend to be bland and uninteresting. Notwithstanding musical selections, the fundamental requirement to have a well tuned pipe and drum corps is still paramount. A relatively bland medley can still sound very good if played on finely tuned instruments. However, if everyone else in your grade is going to have finely tuned instruments, your medley construction, tune selection and execution need to be superior if you are going to stand out.

We have a lot more scope in medleys as opposed to MSRs in terms of tune selection, structure of the medley, harmonies, bridges/transitions and so on. Nevertheless, whatever is played must be executed to a high degree on finely tuned instruments with complete integration both within the pipe/drum corps and with each other. Ensemble. There we go, that word again. We must never forget what we are trying to achieve in pipe band music. It is not to come first in piping or to win the drumming prize; rather it is to achieve the best ensemble effect we can. If this is done a sufficiently high degree, then individual corps will fair well in their own disciplines.



78th Fraser Highlanders playing their Medley at the 2007 World Champs

Rules

Under current RNZPBA rules, we pretty much have a free hand in the medley discipline. As long as we march into the circle and play within our allotted time constraints, then we are ok. It is appropriate here to remind ourselves of the rules for the medley event:

5.3.3 The Medley will comprise a selection of various types of tunes chosen by the band and introduced by two three, or one five, beat roll.

(a) Grade 1 medleys will last for not less than five minutes nor more than seven minutes.

(b) Grade 2 medleys will last for not less than four minutes nor more than six minutes.

(c) Grades 3 and 4 medleys will last for not less than three minutes nor more than five minutes.

5.3.6 Assembly and method of presentation: Each band will march to the point of commencement, which will be marked by two flags situated fifteen metres from the centre of an eight metre diameter circle, and halt. When the Judges are ready, the Supervisor will ring a bell and the Band will march in band formation, playing into the eight metre diameter circle.

Having reached the marked circle, bands shall form their own circle or other suitable formation to complete playing their medley or set. A Drum Major may stand either inside or outside the circle. Conducting is optional, but the conductor will be a bona fide active member or tutor of the band and will not count as a playing member.

An outer concentric circle of 12 metres diameter shall be marked and all judges must remain outside of this perimeter. Upon completion of the Set/Medley bands shall march off the arena. Bands may play away from the circle at the discretion of the National Contest Supervisor.

A complete copy of the Contest Rules can be found on the RNZPBA Website www.nzpipebands.org.nz.

So we can clearly see from the rules above that aside from how we get into the circle and how long we have to play, there are no restrictions placed on the content of our medley.



Medley Construction Options

Even though we have a free hand in the construction of our medley, it would be prudent to listen to what established bands, both in NZ and overseas, are doing. We do not have to follow their lead, however unless we are in an established, trend-setting band that will get a good listen from the music judges, we would be best advised to follow a tried and true format. In the past, we have found two main construction formats:

Format 1:

March on Tune: 2/4 Hornpipe/polka, 2 – 4 parts
Jigs: 2 – 4 parts
Slow Air
Strathspeys: 4 – 6 parts
Reel/hornpipes: 4 – 8 parts

Format 2:

March on Tune: 2/4 Hornpipe/polka, 2 – 4 parts
Strathspeys: 4 – 6 parts
Reels: 4 parts
Slow Air
Jigs: 4 -6 parts
Reel/hornpipes: 2 – 4 parts

The number of parts for each type of tune is very flexible and will largely depend on the amount of time you have to play your medley in your respective grade. For example, a Grade 4 Medley would probably best be suited to 2 parts of opening Hornpipe tune rather than 4. Also, bands in higher grades may wish to compose elaborate breaks/transitions from tune to tune and therefore effectively reduce the actual number of parts played due to the time these transitions take up.

Higher grade bands may have completely different formats altogether. Their technical execution abilities will be of a high standard, therefore more adventurous tunes, harmonies and formats can be employed. Remember, whatever the format, tunes, and harmonies, we need to have finely tuned instruments to showcase the music we are performing.

Tune Selections

In this section I want to look at a few fundamentals for selecting tunes. I am specifically focussing on advice to bands in Grades 3 and 4 here. As the level of technical and musical proficiency improves, more adventurous tune selections can be made. In many cases, tunes may be selected that appeal to the Pipe Major because he/she has heard another band playing them, or they may just like

the melodic line. Both valid reasons, but be wary. If you are in a lower grade band and the tune you are thinking of choosing has been played by a very good Grade 1 band, it may not suit your playing membership because it is beyond the technical ability of your membership. The tune may also have a predominance of minor notes (HG, F, D, B, LG). If your band has blowing inconsistencies, these notes will tend to protrude in a less than flattering fashion.

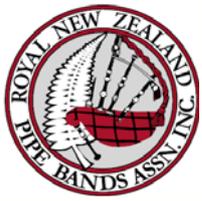
Introductory Tune: This tune should exhibit a number of critical qualities. It should be immediately musically appealing to the listeners (adjudicators and audience alike), have a strong melodic line and be well executed and expressed playing into the circle. If your band has issues with inconsistent blowing, I would strongly recommend you choose a tune that is in a major key i.e. a tune that has a preponderance of major notes in it (LA, C, E, HA).

Jigs: The bottom line here is that we achieve a nice 1-2-3 jig rhythm. It is fine to select either 6/8 or 9/8 jigs. Jigs must be played at a tempo that makes the tune **sound** like a jig. If the tune is too complicated or technically demanding for the members, it will be played too slow and the music will suffer. If the music is suffering, we are not doing our job (at any grade level) of producing good music.....your listeners will be suffering too!

Slow Air: A simple, major key slow air would be very good at the lower grade level. Something that has a very simple but strong melodic line that will showcase well tuned instruments and to which harmony can be added. Consistent blowing in slow airs is paramount as listeners have more time to hear how each individual note is sounding and how the drum score is contributing sympathetically to the melody.

Strathspeys: Again, tunes with strong, easily recognisable melodic lines are required. A good test is to consider whether the tunes would be suitable to be played for a Highland Fling. If it can't be danced to, then it will be harder to sell as a believable strathspey.

Reels/Hornpipe finishing tunes: We naturally select rounder styles tunes for our finishing or climactic section of the medley. Often, they are written solely for this purpose. We need to be careful when selecting these tunes as many of them do not have a great degree of musical merit and rely on harmony and percussion effects to bring out their best. This is fine as long as we take the whole package of melodic line, harmony and percussion to achieve the overall effect. Tempo is as important here as it is for the jigs. If the tempo is too slow, any positive climactic effect is liable to be at least severely diluted and at worst non-existent. Too fast, and the climactic effects are lost in a jumble of notes in the race to see who can finish the tune first. Controlled (but not over controlled), believable tempos are required throughout the medley.



Just like selecting tunes for the MSR, tunes for the medley need to be within the technical ability of the members of your band and be appropriate to the pipe band idiom. Once each individual member has complete control of the technique and expression requirements of each tune, the real task of putting the band performance together begins. If there are a preponderance of note errors and inconsistent expression from drum and pipe corps alike, there is absolutely no point trying to stitch the performance together as a group. Each individual **must** be able to play the tunes competently for there to be any hope of producing an even passable pipe band performance.

Key Changes

Within the medley it is important to consider key changes, particularly when progressing to another tune of the same type. A key change will help to break the monotony of having the same tempo and create interest within the tune style being played. At the basic level, I am talking about moving from a tune that finishes on a lower note and is in a major key to a tune which starts on a higher note and is in a minor key. An example here is moving from the strathspey “Mac an Irish” to “Sporting Jamie”. Listen to how the melodic line changes from major to minor key and how there is a general ‘lifting’ effect from the first strathspey to the next 

Mac an Irish

Strathspey

Traditional

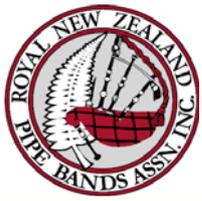
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Sporting Jamie

Strathspey

Arr P/M D.S. Ramsay, BEM

Similarly, we can stay in a minor key from the first strathspey to the second strathspey as in the next example. Transitioning from “Louden’s Bonnie Woods and Braes” to “The Keel Row” is an example of this.  Notice how the first tune is finishing on D, and the second tune starts on F. This creates a ‘lifting’ effect from one tune to another.



Louden's Bonnie Woods and Braes

Strathspey

Traditional

The Keel Row

Strathspey

We can also stay in a major key from tune to tune, making sure that we progress from a lower finishing note in the first tune to a higher starting note in the next tune. An example is transitioning from “Mac an Irish” to “O’er the Bows to Ballindalloch” 

Mac an Irish

Strathspey

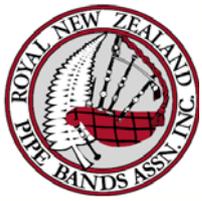
Traditional

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O'er the Bows to Ballindalloch

Strathspey

The key is to follow the general rules above, but in the final analysis, you must let your ear tell you what sounds good, and what will have the desired effect.



Breaks

This is another area where there is much more scope and flexibility than in MSR playing. We can use standard breaks in medleys to good effect, but some more elaborate breaks with the use of harmony can enhance the performance and make it stand out. Some examples include playing the first part of a reel in Jig or Strathspey time (depending on what type of tune you are breaking from) before commencing the reel time of the same tune. The slow air could also be replaced with the first part of the tune immediately following it (strathspeys or jigs) played as an air. This can be more or less successful depending on the melodic line of the particular tune.

A fundamental element of a good break between tunes is that pipers blow through it. By this I mean that if we are ending one tune on a long D for example before transitioning to the next tune/time signature, pipers must not take a breath at this time. There are few things in life worse than a long, sagging, poorly blown D!

There is almost no end to the options for transitions between tunes. If need be, don't be afraid to seek assistance to compose breaks that suit the tunes in your medley. Also, don't be afraid to be adventurous, but always remember that well tuned instruments, sound technique and good expression must not be sacrificed.

Harmony

Tasteful harmony added to the melodic line can greatly enhance the aural experience of the listener/audience. We need to guard against overusing harmony because it can also cloud the melody we are trying to enhance. There are many different permutations and combinations of harmonies that can be composed – it is not my intention to cover this topic in that much detail. If required, seek help to compose suitable harmonies, but do not feel that they are compulsory. They will only enhance a performance where the pipe chanter intervals are very accurate and all chanters are well tuned together.

Summary

There are no hard and fast rules for medley construction or for tune selection within a medley. But do remember your audience. They (judges and listening pipe band public) expect to hear tasteful tunes in the pipe band idiom, well executed and on good instruments. Tunes from outwith the pipe band repertoire are much better left outside the competition arena. Tunes need to be

within the technical capability of your membership. Just like in the MSR selection, well played simpler tunes will beat poorly played difficult tunes any day.

Much thought needs to go into transitions/breaks between tunes and the order in which the tunes are played. This is where a few heads are usually better than one. Bring in the musical leaders of the band (yes, pipers and drummers!) so their thoughts and experience can be included in the mix.

This tutorial has barely scratched the surface of medley construction and all that it involves. It may have raised more questions and issues than it has actually answered.....and that's great! We need to continually expose ourselves to pipe band music from within NZ and overseas to hear what is happening, how medleys are being constructed, what types of tunes are being used and how harmonies are contributing to the performances. It is an individual responsibility to inform ourselves. Once we have a pretty good idea of the options, we can apply some of what we have heard and learned to our own band.

There will always be grey areas and complete knowledge will never be vested solely in one person. Ask for feedback on your medley construction and tune selection well before the competition season. This can be done through the RNZPBA College of Piping and Drumming or from a knowledgeable person in your area. Through all the trails and tribulations of tune selection and the organisation of them, harmony composition (and who is going to compose and play them), remember that the process should be rewarding and fun with a quality product at the end of it. There are plenty of great tunes out there just waiting to be played so spend some time searching for them and spend even more time thinking about how the selected tunes might be arranged to form a coherent and interesting medley.

Greg Wilson



Shield for 3rd place, Juvenile World Championship