

Crossing Noises, De-Bugged

To navigate between our nine notes successfully, pipers need to coordinate several fingers simultaneously. If we can't, we end up with crossing noises unwanted, unintended, uncontrolled interruptions that blemish our melody.

If you are a beginner or relatively new to piping, you might be trying hard at this point to eliminate crossing noises as you transition from one note to another. But even for our more seasoned and experienced pipers, crossing noises can easily find their way back into our tunes, despite our best efforts.

All note changes happen in a musical groove, and contrary to popular belief, 'slow fingers' or 'lack of practice' aren't to blame for most crossing noises. The culprit is usually rhythmic control (or rather, lack of). If you can't properly time when your fingers move into position to play the combination of melody and grace notes for any given tune, you will experience those frustratingly common sounds.

Some pipers also think that crossing noises only occur when 'crossing' from a bottom hand note to one on the top hand, or vice versa. However, there are far more opportunities for them to plague our playing than we may think. If we take into account all of the 36 possible note changes on the chanter that involve more than one finger moving at a time, then that's a lot of possibility!

A bit of analysis gives us much more complete information about when and how they occur. Now we will dive into the myriad of ways you could encounter crossing noises. Let's diagnose them into three distinct types:

1. **Lift/drop crossing noises:** this type of crossing noise may occur when you change from one note to another and lift at least one finger while dropping one or more fingers. So let's say from Low A to C – both of which are bottom hand notes, but this transition requires dropping the Low A finger (pinky) and lifting the C and B fingers, all simultaneously).
2. **Rolling crossing noises:** this one occurs when you unintentionally 'roll' from one note to another, but inadvertently pass through another note. So for example from Low G to B – to do this cleanly, you'd need to lift the Low A (pinky) and B (ring) fingers precisely together to form the B. But the rolling crossing noise makes its unwelcome appearance when the Low A finger is lifted first, followed by the B finger, then finally landing on the B.
3. **Phantom crossing noises:** these subtle 'ghosts' of fingerwork are not usually as obvious, and are sometimes known as 'false fingering'. A common example is an 'open' C, with only your D (index) finger down, instead of both the D and Low A fingers down. It might not sound 'too bad' on the practice chanter, but this 'ghost' sound is noticeably different on the pipes.

A few solutions can be to slow down your note changes, record and listen back for issues. Then practice your tunes including note changes slowly in context, bringing them up to speed gradually as you develop competency. But as I mentioned at the start of this blog, without great rhythmic control you will always struggle to produce good clean melodies without crossing noises.

We owe it to ourselves to eradicate crossing sounds not just because they sound objectively awful but ruin the quality of a performance. Proper scale navigation (clean note changes) is a prerequisite for **ALL** other fingerwork fundamentals, including the fun stuff that everyone wants to rush straight into, like fast Hornpipes, Reels and Jigs.

Like our parents said during meal times when we were little. "If you want to have dessert, first you need to eat your meat". So everyone, let's eat our meat and fix your crossing noises!