ALAP/ASAP: A Piping Concept.

I've taken what I think are the best bits from the Pipers Dojo on the above subject and edited them together to help you increase your knowledge of this playing style. I hope you all enjoy reading and try implementing these techniques in to your playing.

On the bagpipe, we cannot play a note with more volume in order to add expression to a phrase. Indeed our holy grail is to play at a steady pressure so that the pitch of the chanter and the drones remains constant. Nor do we have techniques such as *staccato* or *legato* available to us on the Highland bagpipe. On the Highland bagpipe, we express our music by holding notes longer than we would normally hold them, playing them *As Long As (Musically) Possible*(ALAP) and playing contrasting notes *As Short As (Musically) Possible* (ASAP).

Throughout this piece I will discuss the classical methods for counting music, specifically "dot-cuts," dotted eighth notes followed by a sixteenth note, and address the shortcomings associated with applying classical counting techniques to bagpipe music. I hope to contrast the traditional methods for counting with methods for counting ALAP/ASAP.

I present alternative methods for counting ALAP/ASAP, such as singing the notes while using different syllables. I will also discuss the dot-cut rhythm as it occurs in many types of bagpipe music.

If you have a background as an orchestral or band musician, you may have long held notions about how to play and count music. When playing a dot-cut, a violinist or a trumpet player might play the dotted eighth note with more volume and play the eighth note softly to add expression to a phrase of music. Varying the volume of the music adds contrast which is pleasing not only to the player but to the listener as well.

To play a dot-cut correct rhythmically, the classical musician may subdivide the beat into four sub-beats by counting using the syllables "one-ee-and-uh." The dotted eighth will occupy "one-ee-and." The sixteenth not will fall on the "uh."
If we were to graph this, it would appear like this:
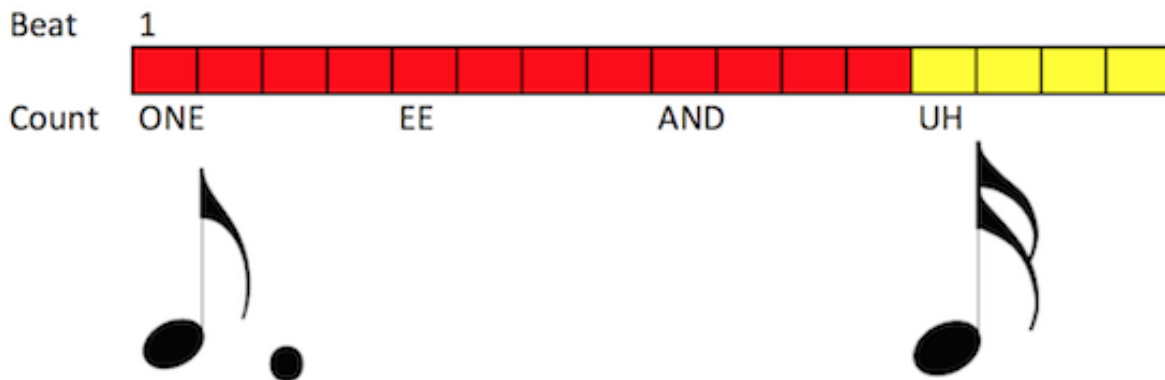
Dot-cuts are found in all types of pipe music and are strongly featured in strathspeys. Consider the second bar of the traditional strathspey *"Highland Harry"*:


Four dot-cuts in a row! We could certainly count these notes using the classical method. The first high G would be held while we counted the sub-beats "one-ee-and" and the cut sixteenth

note on E would occupy "uh." The throw on D and the D would be held as we counted "two-ee-and" the B would be held for the "uh", this would work. We could execute the rhythm counting in the traditional sense, though, would have drawbacks. There would be little or no contrast between the dot and the cut. The tune would not sound like a strathspey.

In order to add expression to the pieces that we play, you need to emphasise notes by holding them longer than you normally would. In a dot-cut, you hold the dotted eighth note *As Long As (Musically)Possible*, or *ALAP*. The consequence of holding the first note in a dot-cut ALAP is that you must cut the length of the sixteenth note in order to retain the rhythm. You play this note *As Short As (Musically)Possible*, or *ASAP*. Caution though here while the note is short you still have to sound it.

If we were to graph this, the dotted eighth note would occupy fifteen squares in the matrix and the sixteenth note would only occupy one (the sixteenth square).
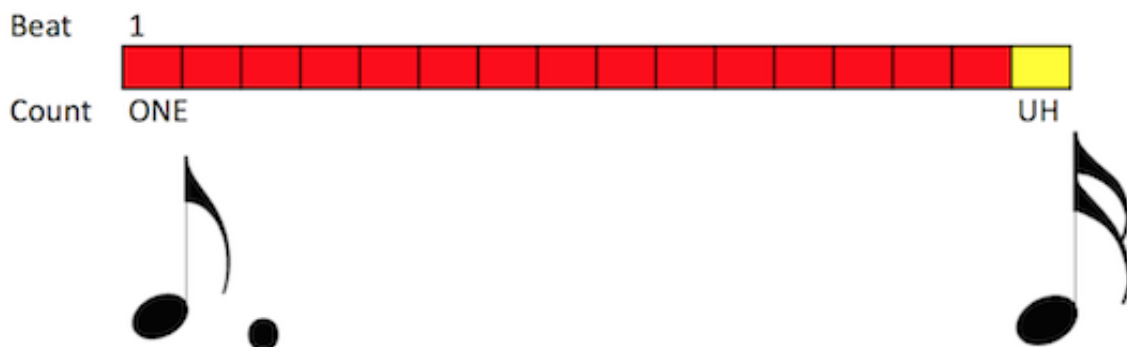
We could count this out by counting "one-ee-and-uh-two-ee-and-uh…" for each square in the matrix. However, that is a lot of counting. Rather than counting, we want to start with the ASAP. We want to play the ASAP as short as is

(musically)possible. From the length of the ASAP, we then deduce the length of the ALAP. In our graph, the ASAP occupies one square of the matrix, thus, working backwards, the ASAP must occupy fifteen squares.

Why do we "deduce" the ALAP? Our tendency is to rush. If we try to execute the ALAP before considering the length of the ASAP, we tend to rush the ALAP and play the ASAP too early. This is especially true if an embellishment, such as a throw on D, follows the ASAP. When we rush the ALAP, we also rush the ASAP, and we end up playing the note following the ASAP *before* the beat. When we start from the ASAP, playing it as short as is musically possible right before the following beat, then deducing the length of the ALAP we can eliminate, or reduce, the tendency to rush.

Rather than counting, pick a syllable, a short syllable, such as "uh." A syllable that you can sing ASAP. Use the short syllable, sing the ASAP as short as is audibly possible and right before the following beat. We can then "deduce" the length of the ALAP. Sing the syllable "dee" to represent the ALAP, stretch it until it is time to sing the ASAP. Sing the ASAP, literally, right before the following beat.

If we revisit *Highland Harry*, we can sing the melody in a manner similar to the following:

Sing	DEE-EE	UH	TRA		UH
BEAT	1		2		

Each piper will use her or his own syllables to represent each of the different notes and embellishments. Many pipers will adopt the method that their teacher used. The important point is to use a syllable that will approximate the sound of the embellishment and the note. The more important point, in terms of ALAP/ASAP, is the stretch the ALAP out as long as possible before singing the ASAP. Sing the syllable "uh," literally, right before the second beat.

Through time and experience trying these techniques you will instinctively know the correct length of ALAP and ASAP. It will come from the your heart and the music you reproduce will have much more life, depth and feeling to it.

Pipe Major,
Craig Herbert.