

Getting better

Some answers and direction in our pursuit to become a better musician and piper!

I've been spending some time looking at recordings and studying (in person) pipe bands from Scotland and around the world. While doing this I've been taking notes on key concepts regarding pipers reaching the next grade level. For instance say, a novice chanter player to first stage piper in the band, from gala day player to a first time competitor or finally a seasoned grade 4 player to playing MSR's/Medleys in competition, you get the idea. My hope in writing this blog was that you find the answers and hopefully a plan for your individual practice to get to the next level. This following isn't an official case study following stick guidelines, I was simply listening for the difference in piping styles and abilities from low grade 4 and above. I simply asked myself one simple question:

"What are the top reasons piper's fail to reach the next level"?

1) Sloppy Fingerwork

I suppose we all knew this was coming.

However, I think it's important to mention that, in this case, this means the rule, not the exception. In other words, sloppiness in fingerwork was the prevailing pattern in unsuccessful performances (as opposed to the occasional sloppy passage in a tune). Obviously, sloppiness can and will creep into anyone's performance from time to time. However, players that fail to reach the next level will have "chronic," consistent issues with:

- Regularly occurring, glaring crossing noises.
- Gracenote sloppiness - usually, gracenotes are too big and/or out-of-sync with the melody.
- Embellishments played poorly. Not only are embellishments themselves tricky, but they are also made up of gracenotes and note-changes - VERY easy to mess up if you're not careful (and well prepared for competition). Back to basics playing everything slow and deliberate is key to eradicating fingering issues!

2) Lack of Instrument Control/Steadiness

The bottom line? People are unsteady in their blowing; "sagging" or "surging" on their blowing on such a regular basis that it severely distracts from the music.

It's very easy to get lost in the fingerwork aspect of playing, and lose track of the concept of steady blowing. A consistent practice routine with a manometer, or pressure meter will quickly highlight issues and ensure you turn into the successful players.

3) Consistent Lack of Rhythmic Control

What is meant by this? Well, it's fairly simple really, players that are successful are able to keep a steady tempo throughout a tune and unsuccessful ones can't.

Many players will slow down during difficult sections, and speed up during the "easy" parts. Sometimes, the opposite is true.

Another common mishap is a continual acceleration throughout a performance, due to a habit of regularly rushing the beat.

A practice plan that utilises a metronome on a regular basis will help to prevent these issues.

4) Inability to Complete a Performance without "Blunders"

The definition of a "blunder" is simply a big enough mistake to hinder a performance.

Examples might include:

- A "Break Down" where the piper stops before the end of the tune/set.
- Forgetting to repeat a part.
- Major note errors that take the tune irreconcilably off track.
- Going "off the tune" in any other significant ways not listed above.

What causing these blunders, is it lack of preparedness, lack of confidence? Practice practice practice is key to a successful outcome. Know your piece front ways back ways even sing it in your sleep if needs be. Try seeing how well you know the piece, maybe play it in front of a distraction. Ultimately, if you're having trouble with this issue - it's time to get serious about not blundering.

5) Apparent Fear of Judge/Performance

One of the more interesting common factors from what I witnessed was that performance anxiety or nerves tended to be a huge reason pipers were unable to put together good performances.

Being fearful of playing in front of the judge tends to cause major issues concerning the first four problems; sloppy fingering, unsettled quality of instrument, rhythmic problems, and blunders.

What causes players to be scared of performing for the judge? For me I try and harness the nervous energy and tension while I am playing. I look to use this nervous energy to keep me focused throughout the set. Try and play more often in smaller groups in front of your peers and this will help with nerves and performance stress.

Interesting Omissions I discovered;

While the following did come up from time to time, it was quite interesting that none of these were regularly occurring reasons that a piper didn't reach the next level:

- Expression/Phrasing Issues.
- Tuning - Precision of tuning was NOT an issue when it came to distinguishing between successful pipers and unsuccessful pipers.
- Style/Interpretation - having a specific style of playing or setting/interpretation of tunes is not the reason for lack of success.
- Tempo - is playing too slowly a barrier to a successful performance. The answer to that has to be an overwhelmingly "No."

In conclusion: Successful Piping Performances Are More Than Just Practicing Some Tunes And Playing Them With The Band In The Competition Circle

To sum up, if you're a piper who is struggling to reach the next level. Let's turn to the successful pipers (at all levels) for guidance as to the right way to approach things. It's so much more than just practicing some tunes and then playing them in front of a judge.

What do the players that are winning and/or reaching the next level do to be successful?

Here are some common "factors";

- Many players have private tutors that they work with, online or in person, on a regular basis.
- Many spare no expense to travel around to a lot of contests and rarely or never miss practice sessions.
- Many of them spend a lot of time immersing themselves in bagpipe music and the piping social scene.

To me, the answer is clear: in order to be successful in reaching for new heights in our playing, firstly we're going to need a detailed individual roadmap to success. We're going to need a lot of repetition in playing competition pieces or playing lots of contests... although there are other ways to get performance repetitions. You need to immerse yourself in the art form as much as you can, enjoy it and want to emulate it.

So who is up for going that extra mile and attaining the next level!