

Rhythmic playing and control

Before reading further into this article, ask yourself these 3 simple questions and please be honest with yourself!

1. When you play, are you hitting the beat accurately?
2. Are you, like some pipers, struggling with this piping fundamental?
3. Can you easily identify exactly what should be on the beat?

Someone commented on a Facebook post recently, "Why do all pipers rush?"

This is an interesting question because we do all rush. Nobody, however, is habitually late to the beat, that's not a thing, we are always rushing! So we've really taken our eye off the ball. Now when it comes to playing with rhythmic accuracy, what's the thought process behind playing with great rhythmic accuracy?

We need to improve our skill at identifying the *exact* thing that should go on the beat. We need to get so good at it that, over time, it becomes instinctive to be able to visually pick out where the beat's going to be, remember this will take time. For now, whenever you approach a piece of bagpipe music and, if you seriously approach it, doing something like this is highly recommended, especially if you're not really getting it. Again, that's a generalised statement but we're not really getting it, so we need to do it. Let's look to our metronome here, just to keep us honest.

If you don't have a metronome, then what do you do? Start by making sure that your foot, or the sound that the foot makes on the floor completely eclipses the beat. Then if your tempo is not perfectly steady, now it would be helpful to have a metronome but at least we're practicing lining up what we're playing with a real tangible thing.

Over time we can develop that rhythmic accuracy and control. Once the metronome is on, we line our foot up with the metronome and then we line our playing up with our foot.

Why is it so important to play to our foot? In the real world, we're not going to bring a metronome out once we have crossed the competition line or as we are about to perform, at least I hope not. So now our foot over time will always be there for us. That's why you notice 999 out of a 1000 of the world's best players are audibly tapping their foot when they play. Have you ever noticed that? Remember, if your foot lines up with the metronome, then your playing is going to line up with your foot. Therefore, it should all be synchronised in the perfect world.

Do you all understand that concept?

Identify the thing that should go on the beat is the next step and I want to talk about that in a second. Remember then as we play, the goal is 100% solar eclipse of the beat with that thing. Notice that at no point here other than turning on the metronome, have I said the beat has to be perfectly steady. You notice how I'm not really even talking about that, that will be a natural byproduct of being able to 100% solar eclipse the beat.

It's just like blowing steady really isn't our top priority at this point. Playing with steady tempo isn't either. Obviously don't get me wrong as that's important, but the number one priority is being able to play with rhythmic accuracy. It's pretty hard to tap your foot

unsteadily really. And actually it might not be perfect, but it's not going to be drastically unsteady.

Now, back to Identifying the thing that should go on the beat, you have to do that part first. You have to make sure you *can* identify it because what happens if you don't ID it?

For instance; you have a "C" doubling that falls around the beat, what part of the doubling actually falls *right* on the beat. Nine out of ten people who don't ID where the beat should go will play the G gracenote part of the doubling either before or slightly after the beat rather than *on* the beat.

Where the doubling isn't really aligned with the beat correctly, as it should be, it is because we haven't identified that crucial instant. Remember that the G gracenote has to be aligned. Because we naturally do this. That's a more natural rhythm, I think, by default and that's what comes out unless we're sure we identified the correct portion of the doubling to go exactly on the beat.

But by not identifying exactly what should go on the beat, we're never going to be able to figure out that's wrong and that will become a bad habit, which will be difficult to change.

James McGillivary's book "Rhythmic Fingerwork" explains these concepts in great detail, as well as providing loads of exercises for each embellishment. Excerpts from the book were handed out to members in late 2019 and I would strongly recommend any piper who wants their playing to get to the next level as well as being taken seriously by their peers to get a copy and immerse themselves in it.

Let's drop the lazy habits, or better still, let's change and correct these for good!

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