

The difference between swing and lift and why it matters

UNDERSTANDING THESE TWO PIPING/DRUMMING TERMS CAN PROVIDE SOME WONDERFUL NEW WAYS TO PRESENT AND ENJOY YOUR MUSIC.

I often comment on how sad I am that many piping/pipe band musicians don't get to experience good 6/8 playing; the wonderful feeling of playing with swing.

So, if swing is such a good thing, what is it and how is it different to the lift we sometimes see on competition critique sheets?

My first port of call in this is to look for definitions of these terms in the general world of music. Interestingly, I found no definition of lift (other than an elevator), but a very good definition of swing. I'll discuss lift later.

Here's the best definition I found for swing:

Swing

“Swing is a form of notation in which the beat is divided into two parts, and the former part is longer and more accented than the latter.”

This is how our 6/8 marches (and 9/8 retreats) are generally written. Here is the first bar of a Hundred Pipers, consisting of beats divided into crotchets and quavers i.e. longer and shorter parts.



If played in the spirit of what is written, the music should exhibit swing. The problem is that we piping and pipe band musicians change this and play all four notes the same length, as if written like the next example.



Here, the four notes of the bar are all played the same length and there is absolutely zero swing effect. This is how we sadly play this and many other 6/8s and compound time marching tunes. I have seen bands attempting to get this swing by two ineffective methods:

1. Hammer the long note i.e. make it really really really long. This is a way of accenting the first part of the beat. I have seen this fail, because no attention was paid to keeping the QUAVER part of the beat SHORT. The effect was to simply slow the tune down and make it dull and lifeless (I use the term “ploddy”).
2. The other attempt I have seen is peculiar to percussionists. They accent the first part of the beat by hitting their drums harder. This may add an accented feel to the tune, but provides an accented non-swing rhythm. The issue is the LENGTH of the notes (or in their case the spaces between them), not the volume or accent on the beat.

About a decade ago, I took the Castle Hill RSL Pipe Band here in Sydney through some exercises in 6/8 march playing, using a particular method I felt would work. To this day, they are one of the few bands I have heard playing these tunes with swing. They “got it” – and they kept it.

But not all 6/8 marches consist of just crotchets and quavers; many have groups of three notes within each beat. Typically a dotted semi-quaver, a demi-semi-quaver and a quaver. If you look at lot of such groups, you’ll note that the quaver is nearly always the last note of the three, regardless of the order of the other two. This quaver ends up being played too long by pipers and drummers, just as those after crotchets are. They need to be kept just as short, or the swing will disappear just as much due to these quavers as anywhere else in the tune.

So, what about lift? Here I will rely on my own personal understanding, given that I failed to find a generally accepted definition. To me, lift is a general quality of rhythmic brightness; that quality which makes you want to tap your feet, clap your hands or strut forward when marching. The thing is that you can achieve lift with or without swing. It may come from expressing a 2/4 march with strong pointing or combining that with a lively tempo (without racing and losing expression). Lift makes the tune feel like it “wants” to keep moving forward brightly and you want to move with it.

If you play a 6/8 with swing and keep a lively tempo, it is likely to have lift as well.

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