A Guide for Competing Pipers

I have written this guide to further expand the available resources available on my website, www.patrickmclaurin.com. It covers topics ranging from tune selection, grade levels, attire, performance rules and standards, and tuning.

Grade levels

There are 7 grade levels used to qualitatively describe the ability of a piper who intends to compete. They are, from least to most experienced, practice chanter, grades 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, and professional. It is of note that practice chanter and grade 5 are for people very inexperienced in piping and competitions held at these levels are usually not sanctioned by any of the U.S. piping associations and are offered at the sole discretion of the games' organizers. Grade 4 is usually split into two grades, junior for those under 18 and senior for those over 18. Grade 5 is a relatively modern invention in the U.S. for band competitions as no such grade exists, solo or band, in the U.K. Grade 5 was established to allow bands that were not grade 4 to still compete. Grade 5 band competitions are becoming more popular in the U.S. as street bands dabble into the competition arena. Despite its popularity in the band arena, grade 5 is not technically a competition grade used for solo competitions and is used simply as a descriptor of any piper who is not capable of playing at a grade 4 level.

Differences between grade levels

The differences between grade levels are not sharply defined and may vary between piping associations or by region of the country. The reason for this discrepancy is the low population density of pipers throughout the U.S., particularly in the western ¾ of the country. Unless a piper travels extensively, each piper's grade level will be affected by the abilities of other competing pipers in the immediate area. Despite the efforts of the three well established piping associations in the U.S., this is unavoidable. However, in general, most people will be in the correct grade level based on their playing ability. I am not a definitive source on the subject, but I will outline the expected abilities of a piper in each grade level.

Practice Chanter – One should be able to play simple tunes on the practice chanter.

Grade 5 – One should be able to blow the pipes for at least 10 minutes, be able to achieve a rough tuning, and play without a gross number of errors.

Grade 4 – One should be able to blow the pipes for 30 minutes to an hour, be able to tune the drones to a balanced chanter, and be able to play more difficult tunes with a minimal number of errors. Concerning chanter tuning specifically, the notes low A, C, E, and high A should be well tuned. The remaining notes, low G, B, D, F, and high G should at least be roughly tuned. These notes do not form easily heard harmonics with the drones and thus some variation in tuning is acceptable.

Grade 3 – One should be able to blow the pipes for at least an hour, be able to tune the drones to a well balanced chanter where all the notes are in good tune, and play with minimal errors that are more occurrences of randomness than consistent faulty fingering of a specific movement.

Grade 2 – One should be able to blow the pipes for at least an hour, be able to fine tune the drones to a well balanced chanter where all the notes are in good tune, play without error, and give the music simple expression. Fingering should be clean and uncluttered. The distinction between grades 3 and 2 is probably the smallest and usually boils down to consistency, or the lack thereof, over several competitions.

Grade 1 – One should be able to blow the pipes for at least an hour, be able to fine tune both the drones and the chanter, play without error, and give the music expression and character. Occurrences of the same embellishment should sound exactly the same each time and crisp fingering (not fast, *crisp*) is a necessity. Crisp fingering implies that each note and grace note is clearly heard.

Professional – One should be able to play any tune without mistake on a finely tuned bagpipe with full expression and crisp fingering.

Tune requirements

To accommodate the different levels of players, tune requirements are different for each grade level. Though each competition is different, in general, the tune requirements are as follows. M = 2/4 March, S = Strathspey, R = Reel, H = Hornpipe, J = Jig, and P = Piobaireachd.

Practice Chanter

M Two 2 part 2/4 marches

Grade 5

See grade 4, solo competitions for this grade are rare.

Grade 4

M One 4 part 2/4 march

P Piobaireachd (ground/urlar only)

Air One slow air with 2 or 4 parts

Grade 3

M Submit two 4 part 2/4 marches, play one of them

P One piobaireachd

Grade 2

M Submit two 4 part 2/4 marches, play one of them

SR One 4 part strathspey and one 4 part reel, play them in series

P Submit two piobaireachds, play one of them

6/8 One 4 part 6/8 march

J One 4 part 6/8 jig

Grade 1

M Submit three 4 part 2/4 marches, play one of them

SR Submit two/three 4 part strathspeys and two/three 4 part reels, play one of each in series

P Submit two/three piobaireachds, play one of them

6/8 Submit two 4 part 6/8 marches, play one or both

HJ One 4 part hornpipe and one 4 part 6/8 jig

Professional

MSR Submit three to six 4 part marches, strathspeys, and reels, play one of each in series

P Submit three to six piobaireachds, play one of them

6/8 Two 4 part 6/8 marches

HJ Submit two/three 4 part hornpipes and two/three 4 part 6/8 jigs, play one/two of each in series.

Some competitions, usually professional, are very specialized and involve playing different sequences of the tunes listed above such as MMSSRR, MM'SS'RR', MSRHJ, etc. It is not uncommon to see variations and this is only a very rough guide. Consult the association you are a member of for specific tune requirements. Another type of

competition, entitled Open, is open to anyone in any grade to compete in and usually involves playing a MSR, HJ, or medley. If these events are sanctioned, they are called Knockouts, if not sanctioned, Kitchen Piping competitions. Professional and Open competitions are the only ones with prize money. Professional used to be called Open so there is some ambiguity.

Tune selection

Relative to the number of *hard* competition tunes there are very few easy tunes. I have listed a few below. There are several ways a tune could be labeled easy. The two categories I use for 2/4 marches are 1) very few embellishments and 2) lots of quarter notes. These categories are not mutually exclusive, though tunes falling under both categories usually conform to both categories to a lesser degree than a tune falling purely in 1 or 2.

4 part 2/4 marches

1) The Conundrum; Helen Black of Inveran; The Young MacGregor; The MacNeill's March;

2) Major C.M. Usher, OBE; Duncan MacInnes; King George V's Army; Miss Delicia Chisolm;

1 & 2) Achany Glen; Muir of Ord;

Other tunes that do not fall under either category that are appropriate include Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban, Arthur Bignold of Lochrosque, Mrs. H.L. MacDonald of Dunach, The 79th's Farewell to Gibralter, Tommy MacDonald of Barguillean, and Paardeburg.

Needless to say, once you are at a high grade level where strathspey, reel, hornpipe, and jig playing is relevant, you should be able to play most tunes. However, I include a list of those that I feel are easier. It is, in fact, hard to find a hard 6/8 march so I omit a list to not further any bias I have towards tune selection.

4 part strathspeys – The Caledonian Society of London; The Doune of Invernochty; The Firth of Lorn; Lady MacKenzie of Gareloch;

4 part reels – Jock Wilson's Ball, Captain Lachlan MacPhail of Tiree, Kalabakan; Back of the Moon; The Brown Haired Maid; Dolina MacKay; The Keel Row; Lexy MacAskill;

Major David Manson; The Sound of Sleat; Traditional (as found in Donald MacLeod's book); Willie Cumming's Rant;

4 part hornpipes – Clydeside; Pipe Major George Allan; Donald MacLeod;

4 part jigs – Cork Hill; Glasgow Police Pipers; Paddy's Leather Breeches;

Competition Day

Many things must come together in order to ensure a successful performance during competition.

Attire

Besides travel arrangements, you must haul not only your pipes but also a costume, if you will, to perform in. In a solo competition, standard attire includes button down shirt, tie, kilt, belt, sporran, hose, flashes, ghillie brogues, and glengarry or balmoral, with a day jacket optional. Quite a bit of our music is modern and has been written by those in the British regiments over the last two hundred years or so, at least music that is of the format suitable for competition. Thus it is only fitting that we also inherit the uniform worn by those first involved in organized competition. It is a fact that the modern kilt isn't the same as the large 'blanket' of wool worn by highlanders hundreds of years ago. Kilts were even confined to the highlands as it is easier to climb a mountain in a kilt than pants whereas in southern Scotland, pants were far more prevalent. However, as I step down from my soapbox, if you want to compete in North America or Scotland, you have to wear it.

Tuning

Tuning is crucial, what an understatement. Arrive early to the competition venue. Check in at the registration desk and figure out what times you are competing. Although differing bagpipe setups prevent me from giving you precise advice on how to go about tuning before a competition, there is one thing you must avoid: playing too much prior to your performance. Once you are in front of the judge, you have a maximum of 3-5 minutes to ensure that your pipes are in tune prior to playing your tune selection(s). This time should be reserved for any last minute *fine* tuning that you realize you need as you start up your pipe in front of the judge for the first time. Ideally, you will have done such a great job tuning prior to your performance that no refinement is needed.

So, how do you do such a great job of tuning? First, consider how long your performance will be. If you are playing a 15 minute piobaireachd, getting your pipes out and tuning for 2 minutes is a great way to ensure that your pipes will be out of tune 5 minutes into the performance.

I digress, if you have ever played a funeral, typically you play as the casket is being carried to the gravesite and then again at the very end, which could be 5 - 45 minutes later. Each time you play will be fairly short so the best way to tune is to get your pipes out, tune them up as fast as possible, and then push all the air out of your bag. Start up again 5-10 minutes later and guess what, your pipes will still be in tune. Since the end of the funeral could be 45 minutes down the road, you can't very well walk away to tune again, you must know that your pipes will be in tune. This is the best way to ensure your pipes will still be in tune. Between the first time you play and 45 minutes later your pipes are just going to sit there, so when you play at the end, it will be just like you pulled your pipes right out of the box. Since you didn't warm up your pipes enough for them to 'settle in,' they will be in as good of tune at the end as they were at the beginning. So, if you are going to play several competitions in a day, all with relatively short performance times, something similar to the funeral scenario is the way to go. However, as in the higher grades, if you are going to play a 6 minute MSR, tuning for 2 minutes shouldn't be enough.

But, with today's level of moisture control, 2 minutes might be plenty of time for tuning. However, I would play long enough that the initial tuning has gone out and your pipe has settled in, about 5-10 minutes. It is crucial however, that there be as little time as possible between this 5-10 minutes of playing (and the retuning) and your performance time. The 3-5 minutes of tuning you have in front of the judge will be used to get your pipes humming again and re-finely tuned.

A few last tips: 1. If there is shade, don't leave it until competition time. 2. Don't play for an hour prior to a 3 minute performance; play 3-8 minutes.

After you play, be sure and thank the judge, salute him/her, or whatever suits your personality, but acknowledge them somehow. Some judges, time permitting, go over your performance with you, but this is infrequent and reserved for the lower grades, in my experience anyway.

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