

Ensemble Expectations for Grade 4 Bands



An Adjudicators' Perspective

A paper by the Music Adjudicators of Pipe Bands Australia (Victoria Branch)

Background

A focus for the April piping, drumming and ensemble adjudicators' professional development days in Warrnambool, was to find ways to better connect our work in assessing and critiquing contest performances with assisting bands in improving their standard of performance and musicianship.

With the goal of providing more guidance to bands, particularly in the lower grades, there was the acknowledgement that the most frequent interaction between music adjudicators and bands is in the assessment and critiquing of performances in competition.

Adjudicators realise they have a dual role on a contest day. Firstly, to determine the correct result for a contest; having the bands finishing in their deserved placing in relation to one another, based on the quality of the performance. This includes recognising the relative merit of performances between bands, using the scope of the points system. Secondly, written comments aim to give a band constructive comments that they can consider and implement in order to improve over time.

With this in mind, at the professional development days, adjudicators focussed their work on:

- Defining performance expectations for bands in different grades, beginning with Grade 4 in detail;
- How comments on sheets best convey thoughts about a given performance against an expected standard, and;
- How comments made for contest performance, with a clear knowledge and understanding of expectations, might be most productively and effectively used by bands to guide their own improvement.

Without doubt, one of the frustrations of adjudicators is providing consistent comments about areas of performance that could be addressed by a band, without evidence of improvement in those areas occurring over time. Reasons for this will, of course, be many and varied, but as a group, adjudicators feel that more could be done to define our expectations in order that band leaders might work towards achieving them.

With this said, adjudicators recognise the following:

- Some aspects of a band's set-up and performance – call it ensemble performance – are under the control, of the band's leaders; that is, the pipe major, leading drummer or tutor, and possibly lead tenor (though the latter is admittedly rare in lower graded bands). Examples of this include instrument pitching, tonal set-up, tune selection, medley construction, and tempo setting.

Conversely, some aspects of a band's ensemble presentation – relying upon musicianship – are in the control of the individual band players. Examples include consistency or stamina of blowing, or the execution of movements/rudiments. These are directly related to factors

such as natural ability, how a player has been taught, or learned, and practice, practice, practice!

- For some aspects of ensemble performance, there is little or no definable differentiation between bands across the grades. For example, the expected qualities of a standard introduction – rolls, drones, chanters, all to a clear beat – are fundamental and consistent. Every band, regardless of grading, should aim for the same result. Lower graded bands can achieve a technically good introduction, just as higher graded bands can manage bad ones. For the most part, however, the expectations for ensemble are easily differentiated between grading levels. It is this difference in expectation, and the abilities of bands within grades to meet them, that adjudicators keep in mind when assessing and critiquing.

The outcome of the adjudicators' work during the professional development days is in the table below, which details band level expectations for ensemble for Grade 4 Selection of Marches, and Grade 4 MSRs and Medleys. In due course there is the intention to expand the table to cover expectations for other grades.

This Grade 4 table is an effort to more clearly define expectations of performance for bands. It aims to achieve several things, chief among them being:

- To provide a reference for band leaders when preparing bands for competition.
- To provide bands with a resource to better interpret adjudicator comments on contest critique sheets.
- To raise, over time, the general standard of playing by Grade 4 bands.

Using the table

The table is structured by the **elements of ensemble** performance (leftmost column) that adjudicators use as a reference when evaluating a competing band. On many occasions – especially on an ensemble critique sheet – these musical terms will be used deliberately. Although the table ensemble broadly, piping and drumming adjudicators work within the same framework, but restrict their comments to one discipline or the other. Ensemble adjudicators look at the band performance as a whole.

In the next two columns, these elements of ensemble performance are given **descriptors** appropriate to the expected characteristics of a band's performance. Although within Grade 4, the Selection of Marches¹ – the contest element introduced to provide an 'entry level' opportunity for less experienced players and bands – is differentiated from full Grade 4 competition in particular areas.

The **elaborations** contain further explanations, advice, and references to other resources to consult for more detailed advice on performance.

¹ Refer to <http://www.pipebandsaustralia.com.au/single-post/2017/04/20/Selection-of-marches-event-now-a-permanent-contest-rule>

Source acknowledgement: The table was inspired by, and in part adapted from, Alliance of North American Pipe Band Associations (ANAPBA) Music Board work on 'Performance Rating Rubrics for Adjudicators', which was tabled at the British Columbia Pipers' Association Annual Adjudicator Conference on 10 February 2018.

In applying this table, one approach would be to refer back to one or more competitions' adjudicator critiques and identify commonalities in performance issues that are highlighted. The descriptors in the table may then be used to 'translate' critiques into more direct actions and steps towards improvement. As a second approach, the table could also be used by a band, in conjunction with an honest self-appraisal, to set clear, specific goals for improvement, with the clear aim of working towards these.

A knowledgeable 'critical friend' associated with a band, who is able to make observations relating the descriptors to band practice, is also advisable. Band leaders, after all, are better leading the band by being in it, rather than 'stepping out', and should play their leading role during practice as they would in competition. Audio and video recordings of practice would also be useful for later analysis.

Finally, the table does provide a useful framework for targeted 'band education'. Over time, structured activities based around the aspects of ensemble performance, can be usefully provided to a developing band.

Element of Ensemble	Descriptor: Grade 4 Selection of Marches	Descriptor: Grade 4 MSR and Medley	Elaborations
Arrangement			
Tune selection	Tune selection is the band's own choice, however, use of the RSPBA Prescribed List of Tunes for the Selection of Marches, with drum scores developed according to average player ability, is recommended.	Tune selection is the band's own choice, however, use of the RSPBA Prescribed List of Tunes for the March, Strathspey and Reel, with drum scores developed according to average player ability, is recommended.	<p>[RSPBA Prescribed Tunes] "... have been carefully chosen to reflect the relative experience and ability of pipers and drummers in that specific Grade, presenting them with the opportunity to perform in contests, 'on a level playing field', as each piece is regarded as having equal 'weighting', and this should be borne in mind when making those choices for contest performances.</p> <p>This is important in regard to the effectiveness of the performance. If the degree of difficulty in the tune, and drum score, is set too high in respect of the band members experience and ability, the likely result may be 'note' and 'timing' errors by pipers and drummers, 'cutting out', uneven blowing, and difficulty in matching harmonic and drum accompaniment to the pieces being played. Through choosing, and practising, the most appropriate tunes, pipers and drummers should be able to focus on how the music is being performed, instead of thinking about how the technical elements are being handled. All of which has an impact on the 'ensemble' assessment, too. The old adage 'A simple tune played well, is better than a difficult tune played not so well', still has some relevance today."</p> <p>Source: https://www.rspba.org/html/prescribedtunes2017.php</p>
Introduction			
Words of command	Clearly called, denoting required tempo.	<p>The introduction is the first part of a performance an adjudicator hears, and its objectives are clear and straightforward; to begin playing in a structured, orderly manner. Making the best first impression in a performance rests on a good introduction, with playing confidence, tempo and overall sound established in these few seconds. Be aware of issues such as tempo change from the words of command into rolls, and immediately after the rolls into the first tune, and unwanted instrument sounds. Each element of an introduction occurs to a definite beat. Expectations of a good introduction apply regardless of band's grading. Refer to 3.14.3 "Pipe Band Introduction – Competition Performance: Essential sequence of events" in <i>RSPBA Structured Learning Book 3 (Advanced)</i>, p. 12</p>	
Rolls commenced and finished in unison	Silence between opening rolls.		
Smoothness, texture, sustaining rolls	Snares rolls not pulsing and sustained to terminal stroke.		
Drones introduced together fifth beat	Cleanly struck.		

E together and at pitch on seventh beat	Full sound and at pitch.	
Sustain the initial tempo into opening melody	Tempo matches words of command.	
Intonation		
Tone quality and tuning	Playing in the centre of the drum and using same type and shape of sticks.	<p>The Bagpipe is a ‘transposing Instrument’, which means that the sounds produced are different to what is written on the score. The ‘Low A’ on the Bagpipe is closely related in pitch to that of ‘B\flat’ – called B ‘flat’. As a consequence, the Final of each tune has to be identified in relation to the kind of scale being used. A tune with a ‘D’ as its last note is in the scale, or ‘Key’, of ‘E\flat Major’, and where ‘B’ is the ‘final’, the key is ‘C Minor’”.</p> <p>Source: https://www.rspba.org/html/prescribedtunes2017.php</p> <p>Further information regarding “Tonality” and “Transposition” is contained in <i>RSPBA Structured Learning Book 3 (Advanced)</i>, and also see “Scales”. See also, "Instrument Tuning – The Bagpipe" in <i>RSPBA Structured Learning Book 2 (Intermediate)</i>, pp.104-108.</p> <p>The tonal quality of drums is determined by what sticks and heads are used (more so with the bass/tenor section) and the ‘playing position’ on the drum head (the centre).</p> <p>Bass/tenor pitch intervals should be appropriate (forming a pleasing ‘progression’ like the notes in a scale). Both heads on a bass/tenor drum should also be tuned to the same pitch. When bass/tenor drums are stuck together, they should not produce a discordant sound; they should harmonise. With that stated, care should be given to how often tenors of different pitches are played together in a contest element.</p> <p>Bass/tenor drums should be tuned to achieve as consistent a level of ‘sustain’ (the natural length of the played note) as possible. Generally speaking, it is easier to sustain a note of lower pitch. Although tenor drums can often be ‘force tuned’ to a pitch, tenor drums of different diameters will naturally produce a note pitch within a certain range without harming tonal quality. Refer to: https://www.hendersongroupltd.com/library_drums_tenor.asp</p>
	Initial tuning in unison, bright with good snare response that complements the pipes. Bass/tenor section complementary/sympathetic to chanter pitch.	
	Pitch and volume must be achieved and sustained to a consistent standard.	

Sound balance	Drones in tune to 'Low A' (A constant).		<p>The advent of high quality, easy to use digital tuning devices has removed the necessity to rely upon a 'good ear' to tune in the first instance. With that said, devices should not replace an ability for band leaders to identify tuning issues by ear, and act to rectify them.</p> <p>Sound balance of drums in the bass/tenor section: some pitches 'carry' (can be heard) more easily than others. Lower pitches blend more with the drones. Higher pitches often produce a thinner sound. The same played weight on tenor drums of different pitches can produce different levels of sound penetration when the listener is outside the band. Evenness of heard volume, without being obtrusive, is the goal; tenor drummers will play at different weights to achieve a uniform perceived sound when listening outside the band.</p>
	Drone tuned to a modern electronic standard.		
	Drummers maintain some control of weighting, i.e. playing volume and dynamics (variation in volume), for musical effect.		
	The volume of one corps of the band should not dominate/obscure the other.		
	Presenting intonation on correctly tuned instruments e.g. maintaining consistent pressure	Solid intonation of sound quality on correctly controlled instruments e.g. cleanly struck and maintaining consistent air pressure	

Tempo			
Tempo	Reasonable and idiomatic tempos in marches maintain consistency.	Reasonable, idiomatic tempos in marches. But dance tunes likely to be at the lower end of the acceptable range. Maintain consistency with tempo throughout performance.	<p>'Idiom' refers to broad types of tunes; marches, airs and dances. Dances are further subdivided, for example, into strathspeys, jigs, hornpipes, reels, etc. Slow, 'laboured' playing is not good in any idiom.</p> <p>There are some basic rules with tempos. The tempo set by the introduction should be maintained consistently on the march into the circle and once in the circle itself, until that idiom concludes (see 'Introduction' in this table). Successive tunes in the same idiom (e.g. two marches or one strathspey followed by a second in a medley) should be played at the same tempo.</p> <p>A common characteristic of a bagpipe tune or drum score that is too difficult is an inability of the band to play it in a performance at 'reasonable' tempo. A second point to watch is a tempo drop in specific phrases, movements or rudiments within tunes. All of these adversely affect 'Integration' (see intra- and inter-corps unison, below).</p>
Time	Number of beats per minute synchronising metrical accent between pipers and drummers.		
Integration			
Execution	Clarity in the execution of movements/rudiments. Phrasing and expression with fluency of technique.	Consistent execution of the same movement/rudiment by all players, in time, is the key. This should be an early focus when learning tunes.	

<p>Phrasing</p>	<p>Accents should be present in marches and well defined rhythmically.</p>	<p>Accents should be present in marches and well defined rhythmically. Pointing in strathspeys with attention to S-W-M-W pulsing in this idiom; reels/hornpipes and jigs should relate to the dance idiom with particular attention to the metrical accent.</p>	<p>Metrical accents are the natural accents for a given time signature. These are not those accents specifically written into a score for drummers. Pipers, who cannot play accents by changes in volume, rely on the subtle ‘holding’ and ‘cutting’ of played notes to achieve the effect.</p> <p>The first beat of each bar is a natural strong (S) beat with weak (W) and medium (M) beats providing accent contrast. The natural metrical accent in duple time (2/4, 2/2, 6/8) is S-W. Triple time (3/4, 9/8) is S-W-W. Quadruple (4/4 marches and strathspeys and 12/8) is S-W-M-W. Other time signatures become a combination of these; the more rare 5/4 will be S-W-M-W-W (2 and 3), or S-W-W-M-W (3 and 2).</p>
<p>Unison (intra-corps)</p>	<p>Chosen compositions are within the capability of players within each corps to maximise the potential for all to play together.</p>		<p>Intra-corps refers to unison between any piper and the other pipers in a corps, or any drummer with the other drummers in the corps. In the case of drummers, intra-corps unison also applies between the bass/tenor section and the snare section.</p> <p>Prescribed tunes (Selection of Marches and March, Strathspey and Reel) are chosen specifically to maximise the potential for intra-corps unison. Developing a Grade 4 medley requires thoughtful tune selection (note the impact of tune difficulty on tempo, stated above).</p> <p>See also, ‘Risk minimisation’ below the table.</p>
<p>Unison (inter-corps)</p>	<p>Reasonable unison – the even notes are approximately the same length and dotted notes are longer than associated short notes.</p>	<p>Accurate unison in marches and slow airs with consistent treatment of short notes in dance tunes – triplets in strathspeys, ‘GDE’ groups and strikes played together.</p>	<p>Inter-corps unison is about whole band unity. Compatibility and consistency of phrasing, for example drummers playing drum scores that complement the phrasing of the melody, rather than disrupting it (unless deliberately using syncopation for effect), and tempo both minimise the ‘separation’ between corps; where one sounds out of sync/time with the other.</p> <p>See also, ‘Risk minimisation’ below the table.</p>
	<p>Bass drummer and lead snare focussing on the direction of the Pipe Major.</p>		

<p>Transitions/breaks and tune changes</p>	<p>Together in marches with well-defined movements between tunes.</p>	<p>Accurate, together, clean and well-defined changes between tunes.</p>	<p>In the construction of medleys in lower grades, ‘bridges’ linking tunes should be used sparingly. Changes in tune type should be clear and obvious, rather than hidden or obscure.</p> <p>Pipers can maintain pressure throughout a transition/break by ensuring they continue to blow consistently through the change and not using it as an opportunity to take a breath. This does require practice and discipline.</p>
<p>Finish/cut-out</p>	<p>Precise, clean and clear. Maintaining pressure, time, tempo and musicality to the last note. Drones cut-out as one, followed by silence. Drummers not playing beyond the last note of the pipes.</p>	<p>Just as an introduction gives a first impression of a competing band, the cut-out is the last thing an adjudicator hears. Ragged finishes within or between corps do not assist. All players should be clear on the duration of the last note played and sound/strike it confidently, yet cease playing in unison.</p>	
<p>Interpretation</p>			
<p>Composition and tonality</p>	<p>Snare tenor and bass scores should be complementary and sympathetic to the pipe melody – appropriate key changes.</p>	<p>“The use of ‘tonality’ refers to the various scales in which tunes are written. Tonality is defined by the ‘Final’, being the last note of any piece of music. Therefore, selecting tunes which alternate from scale to scale, for example, ‘Corriechoillie’ followed by ‘The Pipers Cave’, adds ‘tonal’ variety to the ‘set’.</p> <p>Each piece has its own ‘energy’ arising from the complexity of its rhythmical and technical construction, and this aspect must also be carefully evaluated in matching tunes. Some tunes are ‘busier’ than others, and ‘sound’ quicker. Therefore, placing a ‘busy’ piece before a less complex one may result in the latter sounding ‘slow’ or ‘laboured’.</p> <p>Source: https://www.rspba.org/html/prescribedtunes2017.php</p>	
<p>Melody</p>	<p>Simple compositions well played and appropriate to the standard of players.</p>	<p>Further information regarding “Tonality” and “Transposition” is contained in <i>RSPBA Structured Learning Book 3 (Advanced)</i>, and also see “Scales”.</p>	

<p>Musical arrangement (shape)</p>	<p>Appropriate arrangement of tunes which are presented in a logical sequence.</p>	<p>Reasonable level of construction/structure through sequence of tunes. Impact on first listening. Clarity of structure.</p>	<p>Whilst the Selection of Marches and March, Strathspey and Reel tunes are a band's own choice, the RSPBA Prescribed Tunes List forms a useful guide to tune choice. Ordering of tunes is an important consideration. Refer to the elaboration for 'Composition and tonality' above, concerning key changes and relative tune complexity.</p> <p>Medleys, however, involve the free choice of tunes within a time limit. Selecting tunes from different idioms to produce an entertaining, dynamic and musically varied performance is the goal. 'Logic' should be applied to the progression of tunes. Beginning with a march, then a jig and air progression, followed by a strathspey and a concluding reel is an example. Another common approach would be a march, strathspey and reel before an air and then concluding with a jig. In these examples, the 'shape' of such medleys is pleasing due to the natural variation in the sequence of tunes, and ending with high impact, high energy idiom. Conversely, a march into a reel, then strathspey and jig, then concluding with an air, would be an illogical way to structure a medley because it disrupts the natural flow between idioms, and would conclude on a tune lacking in energy.</p>
<p>Harmony</p>	<p>Appropriate and tasteful use of simple harmony. Subtle use in the presentation.</p>	<p>Effective use of harmonies complementing the melody line. Subtle use in the presentation.</p>	<p>"Where harmonies are added, care should be taken to prevent over-complication of the 'listening' experience, and the execution of the harmony itself in time with the melody, and the contribution of the drum corps. 'Simple' can be more effective, than 'complex'"</p> <p>Source: https://www.rspba.org/html/prescribedtunes2017.php.</p> <p>The melody line should always be clearly discernible when listening from any point outside the band. This can be influenced by where pipers playing the harmony parts are located around the playing formation.</p>

Risk minimisation

Aside from the elements of ensemble musical addressed in the table above, lower graded bands can minimise the risk associated with competing in several practical ways, which largely influence ensemble 'Integration'. It will be noted that these involve 'physical' factors, rather than musical ones.

Examples include:

- The leading drummer should be situated such that they can watch the foot of the Pipe Major for tempo and break cues.
- Pipers should focus their attention on the fingers of the Pipe Major (i.e. their view should not be obscured in any way). Chanters should be directed inwards to the centre of the circle (towards the bass drum) to avoid sound 'escaping' through the gaps.
- Ideally, the bass drummer is centrally located in the playing circle, having the ability to watch the Pipe Major's foot for tempo and break cues.
- In the playing formation in the circle, excessive gaps between individual pipers (and drummers) should be avoided, to promote playing 'as one'. The physical separation of players simply makes it more difficult to play together; it is less easy to hear one another. Large gaps lets sound 'escape' and faults with individual players are easier to detect.
- Give thought to where pipers and drummers with differing levels of ability, experience and temperament are located in the playing formation. In general, interposing weaker players between stronger ones is advised, and exposing weaker players (e.g. drummers on the flanks of the snare section) should be avoided. Refer also to the elaboration in the table relating to 'harmony' and how pipers are situated in the formation.
- Bands that are smaller in number should aim to keep their circular playing formation in the centre of the contest circle itself. Often bands march into the circle such that pipers are right on the inner circle, leaving drummers towards the centre. As adjudicators must position themselves beyond the outer concentric circle, this disadvantages both pipers (the adjudicator can be very close), and drummers (the adjudicator is too distant).