

The Beat – get on it.

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How many of us have heard the saying ‘get on the beat!’, and how many of us truly understand what this simple statement really means? It is rarely appreciated to the extent it needs to be – that the beat is THE most important thing in our music.

One observation that is regularly made when I’m teaching pipers is the absolute obsession people have with technique, and the near-total disregard for the beat. Have we got our priorities wrong? I’d suggest we have, in a big way. For example, is it merely a case of *trying* to play a C doubling, but not knowing/thinking about *where* to place it, that sits at the heart of the problem?

In reality, anyone can be taught to play a C doubling. It is simple enough via repetitions. The *real* skill is in putting that doubling in its correct place – i.e. with the G gracenote precisely on the beat. How many of us go to this extent when practising, or teaching? Or do we simply listen out for a clean C doubling and go no further?



Craig Masson teaching at the City of Adelaide Pipe Band classes

Instructors, when teaching a tune to someone, focus strictly on the first bar and where all the beats fall. Then, have your charges focused on playing their technique **precisely** on those beats. Do not move off that bar until this is happening. From there, you have a template. In the case of doublings, it is the G gracenote that is played on the beat, of course. When teaching, try to minimise the risk of people focussing on merely playing a clean doubling, as they often want to. It's of no use if it's not on the beat - because all the musical flow and rhythm will be lost to poorly **placed** technique, whether it's correctly played or not.

By focussing on the beat, technique will be steered and pinpointed to the right areas in the music, and forced to conform to the rhythmical patterns of the tune. This makes the tune make a lot more 'musical sense' and it also creates a discipline that can be governed by various means – metronome, clapping etc. It also gels a group together.

By learning to prioritise playing right on the beat, pipers become more adept at self-monitoring their practice (especially when unsupervised). They don't simply go through the motions of playing correct notes and clean technique, and perhaps reinforcing problems in the process.

The music lies there, waiting to be realised when beat and fingers recognise each other and form a partnership and understanding. This is done by recognising the relationship between technique and beat in the first instance, starting in the first bar of every tune learnt/taught. I'd encourage you to try this yourselves. You'll be surprised how a simple shift in focus can change things for the better.

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