

Where too from here?

The past month or so has included a significant amount of international news, but not on the usual topics. Typically, we would be reading about the various northern hemisphere games and competitions throughout Scotland and Ireland in particular, but also the North American circuit, and numerous other European and continental events. With none of those events taking place this northern summer, attention has turned to myriad other subjects, including how a band presents itself in competition. This could be a real innovation, but can we be part of the revolution?

Concert Formation

Various reports have suggested the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association (RSPBA) is considering a change in contest rules to allow bands to present a musical performance in concert formation rather than standing in a circle. In RSPBA contest rules, the “circle” is prescribed, whereas our own rules state “marching into the circle where it will take up a suitable formation”, so much less specific.

Evidence suggests that possibly the 78th Fraser Highlanders from Ontario in Canada may have been an early adopter of the open format, with notable Scottish band of the time Dysart & Dundonald of Fife, whose pipe major Bob Shepherd was very much in favour of the concert formation being adopted. However when formally trialled, the concept seemingly proved a difficult choice, with bands having problems getting themselves onto the board and into formation, and delays caused scheduling issues. I believe the format has been available to bands in the Midwest Pipe Band Association (USA) at the Chicago Highland Games for many years.

There have been a number of other vocal supports for change, including Robert Mathieson, former pipe major of The House of Edgar Shotts & Dykehead Pipe Band. Some of you may recall the 2008 World Pipe Band Championships, where the band had two very interesting elements in their Medley – the first being the inflated tenor drum, but the second coming in the last tune of

the Medley, named “The Big Turnout”, where first the tenor section moved to face the audience on both flanks of the band, and then the pipers also turning out for the last measure. This is obviously a high risk manoeuvre, but when interviewed immediately post event, Rob said the band was making a statement, and we should show some respect to our audience and have the courtesy to face them when playing.

See it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSRoZGVxWgE>



Here in New Zealand I can only recall a couple of bands who have chosen an open formation. McAlpines North Canterbury have done this a few times but certainly not recently, and an Auckland based band turned their tenor drummers outward throughout their performance at I believe Masterton in 2010. I’m not aware of others, but no doubt someone will let me know that I missed their band off the list.

And although it isn’t exactly what we’re used to seeing and hearing musically, take the time to watch Bagad competitions – there are many to choose from online. Sure, their bands include other instruments (the Bombard), and their presentations are much more fluid than traditional highland pipe bands, but for them, its been about presenting to the audience and adjudicators front on.

If ever such a format were to be promoted in NZ, there would be numerous factors requiring consideration, including:

- The most efficient way of getting a band on and off the board, including playing on from the equivalent of our current “Point A”, or should the band just start the performance in concert formation, without a march-up?

A band in a circle can sound different from the outside, at any given point around that circle. An adjudicator walking from one side of the pipe corps to the other will hear the effect of every player's contribution to the performance. If the band is in a face-forward position, yes surely the best place to listen would be from the front, so should adjudicators be able to wander from anything other than a fixed position?

- In concerts of the non-competitive variety, side drummers are often in an elevated position. Should this be a consideration? There must be a reason this is adopted from a concert performance perspective, so should the same be given to competition?
- RSPBA rules dictate that an opening tune should be of 60bpm or greater. Given the current rules also state that bands will march into a circle, would this apply if the band formed up first? Again, have a listen to some Bagad performances to see what possibilities there are. Perhaps 60bpm+ is too restrictive.

As a slight aside here, and this may terrify some of our less aged band members, but there was a time when the MSR was known as a Test Selection, and commenced with a Slow Air, then the March, Strathspey and Reel. For Grade 1 bands, then called "A Grade", the S/A was played through twice!

Interestingly, pipesdrums.com has picked this ball up and run with it, and have canvassed bands around the world to see what level of support there may be for the concert formation in competition, as well as a number of other current considerations. Its well presented, so definitely worth a read. See <https://tinyurl.com/yxvjnrnl>



Closer to home however, a brief conversation with Phil Mair from Wellington revealed that the organisers of Jenny Mair Square Day - the pre-Christmas contest held in the Palmerston North Square, may be looking at this as an option.

"Jenny Mair Square Day this year is considering making concert formation for the grade one and two medleys compulsory" Phil informs us. "If we go ahead, there will be no playing while forming up, rather bands will face the audience before the performance commences. The judges will not walk around, but be seated throughout the performance at a table, much like Breton contests".

So what's the objective here Phil? *"Not to lead the world, but as one of the few pipe band contests in the world this year, it fits the zeitgeist of the day. The downside is that it does not replicate what bands will be expected to do at the Napier nationals or any overseas appearances that are possible next year."*

"Jenny Mair Square Day will be streamed to a world-wide pipe band audience, starved of competition. If we go ahead it would give us all something real to consider, not just endless talk. Bands are used to doing concerts and it would answer the question; is

concert formation better for the audience and judges or not?"

Innovative Medley Construction.

Although we tend to turn up at practice night each week, month after month, and year after year, striving to do better than we did last time, or perhaps accepting that we won't, but we managed to get a couple of learners up on full instrument in the circle, there has been a change in what we do and how we do it over the past few decades, but the *pace* of change is sedentary at best.

Have we become boring? Are our medleys destined to fit the H/J/SA/S/R of M/S/R/SA/H/J conventions?

There have been instances where bands have tried to step outside the square. Take Toronto Police Pipe Band medley at the Georgetown Highland Games in 2009 (I believe they played the same medley in Scotland that year also - I stand to be corrected). If you've not seen this, check out https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiUqLT_VAw (or scan the QR Code). I'm not necessarily supporting the construction or concept, but its radical. Didn't set a trend, but could it today?



We had a band here too that tested the boundary of accepted versus the unknown. Remember what Temuka Pipe Band under P/M Chris Jones and D/S Colin Weston did back in the late 1990's? I haven't been able to find a recording - perhaps someone can post one for us to listen to.

And another example - go back to 1994 when 78th Fraser Highlanders marched to the circle with Waulking Songs - traditional Gaelic music sung whilst thickening (waulking) newly woven tweed. At the time, there was a degree of consternation within officialdom, but as P/M Bill Livingston said in his memoir, they commenced with two three-pace opening rolls and an introductory "E", in compliance with the rules. And they adhered to the minimum tempo requirement of 60bpm. We're lead to believe Bill was more than a little perplexed when advised the band would "not be disqualified" based on their chosen introductory tune.

So what's the message here?

I think it's quite simple really. We should ALWAYS look for innovation but need to accept that major change will take time. Incremental change can be managed through discussion and consultation, and if all parties are rowing in the same direction, this innovation will ultimately be better for our movement.

Youthful exuberance is to be encouraged, and institutional wisdom needs to be respected. Somewhere in the middle is an opportunity to continue the progression of this noble art of pipe band performance, and our collective resolve should be to make sure it happens.

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