



How to Listen to Bagpipe Music

Pipe music consists of two types: “Light music” (in Gaelic, Ceol Beag), which consists of marches, hornpipes, jigs, reels, strathspeys and slow airs, and “Piobaireachd” (pronounced “pee-broch”; in Gaelic, Ceol Mor), which is a stylized, solo classical form comprised of laments, clan gathering tunes, and celebratory songs that are recognized by their slowness and complexity. This guide focuses on the Light music, with hints on how to listen to and recognize Light music from the five elements of each tune: Structure, Time, Style, Tempo and Technique.

The **Structure** of each tune commonly consists of two main musical parts (called the binary form with the parts labeled A and B), with each part often being repeated. For example, “Scotland the Brave” is simply an A part followed by the B part, while “Green Hills of Tyrol” has A, repeat A, B, repeat B. This structure enables a tune to be repeated many times over to complete a long march.

Scotland The Brave

Musical notation for "Scotland The Brave" in 2/4 time. The piece is written on four staves. The first two staves are labeled 'A' and the last two staves are labeled 'B'. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4.

March

The Green Hills of Tyrol

Traditional

Musical notation for "The Green Hills of Tyrol" in 2/2 time. The piece is written on four staves. The first two staves are labeled 'A' and the last two staves are labeled 'B'. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/2.

Time and Structure: Marches are played in 2/4, 3/4, 4/4 and 6/8 time; the bottom number describes which note receives one beat while the top number indicates how many of those notes are in one measure. Most bagpipe tunes use 8 measures per part. Each part is often broken into 4 to 8 phrases, with one or more of these phrases repeating. So “Amazing Grace” goes (Part A) 1, 2, 1, 3, (Part B) 4, 2, 1, 5. Understanding this structure makes it easier to memorize the music.

Amazing Grace Hymn Melody

The image shows the musical score for 'Amazing Grace' in 3/4 time. It consists of four staves of music. Above the first staff, the title 'Amazing Grace' is written, followed by 'Hymn' and 'Melody'. The score is divided into two main sections. The first section contains four measures, with the first two grouped under a bracket labeled '1' and the last two under a bracket labeled '2'. The second section contains four measures, with the first two grouped under a bracket labeled '3' and the last two under a bracket labeled '4'. The third section contains four measures, with the first two grouped under a bracket labeled '4' and the last two under a bracket labeled '2'. The fourth section contains four measures, with the first two grouped under a bracket labeled '1' and the last two under a bracket labeled '5'. The music is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#).

The three time signatures 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 are called simple time since each quarter note is a beat. 6/8 time is called compound time because the six notes in a measure are divided into two dotted quarter note or three eighth note patterns. Thus, 6/8 time effectively has two beats per measure.

March **Glendaruel Highlanders** Traditional

The image shows the musical score for 'Glendaruel Highlanders' in 6/8 time. It consists of two staves of music. Above the first staff, the title 'Glendaruel Highlanders' is written, followed by 'Traditional'. The score is divided into two main sections. The first section contains four measures, with the first two grouped under a bracket labeled 'beat 1' and the last two under a bracket labeled 'beat 2'. The second section contains four measures, with the first two grouped under a bracket labeled 'beat 1' and the last two under a bracket labeled 'beat 2'. The music is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#).

For marches, think of each beat as a step (6/8 time has two steps per measure). Given 8 measures per phrase, there would be 16, 24, 32 and 16 steps per phrase, respectively, for our 4 time signatures. The usual 2/4 and 6/8 marches, thus, have 64 steps for the AABB sequence; 3/4 marches have 96 steps, while 4/4 marches have 64 or 128 steps, depending upon repeats. Drum Majors often universally count to 32 for 4/4, 2/4 and 6/8 marches, either encompassing the A part or the A and A repeat parts. 3/4 marches are tricky because you need to have three sets of left-right for every two measures so the accents are on the first, third and fifth notes to keep the marching rhythm. (Count to 6 instead of 4).

Determining whether a tune is 2/4 or 4/4 can be tricky when listening to it, but think of Drill Sargent cadence counts. “Sound Off, “One Two,” “Sound Off,” “Three Four,” is a 2/4 march pattern; it takes

two beats to express the musical thought, two bars to establish the musical idea or call, and a further two bars to resolve the idea (or answer the call). (8 steps or beats in total.)

The Barren Rocks of Aden

A 4/4 tune requires four beats to express the musical thought, and two bars to issue the call as in “We are the Army,” “the mighty mighty Army,” and another two bars answers the call (16 steps or beats in total). Instead of a Strong-weak pulse as in 2/4s, 4/4s have a Strong-weak-Medium-weak rhythm.

Blue Bells of Scotland

6/8 marches are known for their swing. “The Skye Boat Song” is a slow air, not a march, but it still illustrates the “swing.” While a 6/8 tune could consist of two sets of three eighth notes, it usually uses a set of dot-cuts (a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note and then an eighth note) to build a dom-di-dah dom-di-dah rhythm.

The Skye Boat Song



Style controls the shape of the music and its **Tempo**. For example, “The Skye Boat Song” is a slow air, which is played slowly (50 beats per minute, or 50 bpm) while “Glendruel Highlanders” is a march, played at 84 BPM. In Pipe Band music, the different styles include, slow airs, marches, retreats, strathspeys, reels, jigs and hornpipes.

Slow airs can be in any time signature and can be a tune written especially in a slow, lyric style, or they can be a march that is being played slowly (50-60 BPM). **Retreats** are 3/4 marches used to signal the end of the day, prior to the posting of the sunset watch (example: “Green Hills of Tyrol,” 84 BPM). It is in 3/4 time because the original Army orders called for 3 drum beats to signal the watch; when pipes were added, the Drum Majors chose 3/4 marches to continue the drum cadence.

Reels are 2/2 (cut time, symbol C) dances with accents on the first and third notes in the measure. They are fast with 140-160 BPM for dancing, but usually played at about 110-120 for piping contests. Reels use the binary form and use either AABB or ABAB as the main structure (32 beats), often repeating the whole thing 3 or 4 times for a dance. Band contests for the higher grade bands use a reel as the last part of the MSR format. “The Silver Spear” is written in cut time, wherein quarter notes act like eighth notes and eighth notes like sixteenth; the 2/2 notation makes the tune easier to read. Because the tune is effectively all eighth and sixteenth notes, it is a lively tune.

The Silver Spear

Reel



Strathspeys are 4/4 dances that use the “Scotch snap,” a sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth note (this pattern is also called a cut-dot). This provides a syncopated beat and is rhythmically opposite to the more common dot-cut. This cut-dot corresponds to the skip step in the strathspey dance. Some performers accentuate the first beat of the measure while others accentuate the first and third. “Orange and Blue” is a common strathspey, played by pipe bands and used in Highland Dance competitions. “Ghillie Callum” is another strathspey, which is often used for the Sword Dance. The tempo of this tune type varies between 120 and 132 BPM.

Orange and Blue

Strathspey

Hornpipes are tunes that can be played (or danced) fast (2/2) or slow (4/4), but are slower than a reel in either case (104-110 BPM). The sample below from part B of “Itchy Fingers” is typical of hornpipes; the alternation between High A and low A gives a bobbing character to the tune, reminiscent of a sailor dancing.

Itchy Fingers

Hornpipe

Jig, from the French, means to jump, so jigs are bouncy tunes, usually in a compound time signature (6/8 or 9/8). In “Paddy’s Leather Breeches” (known in Scottish circles as “The Irish Jig”), the triplets

Jig

Paddy’s Leather Breeches

Traditionnel

coupled with quarter-eighth note pairs give the tune its “bounce.” (No dot-cuts or cut-dots in jigs.) The accents go on the first and fourth eighth notes, giving a Strong-Medium rhythm. Jigs usually are played between the tempos of a reel and a hornpipe, or about 120 BPM.

The triplet and quarter-eighth note rhythms are also seen in “Banjo Breakdown,” which despite its seemingly modern name, dates to 1876 and was originally named “Yankee.”

Banjo Breakdown Jig Arranged by Pipe Major Donald MacLeod, MBE



What are all those little notes?

Most wind instruments can start and stop at will, and the volume of notes can be controlled by blowing softer or louder. Bagpipes lack this control because the air to sound the drones and chanter is provided constantly by the bag. (The piper does blow into a mouthpiece but that only keeps the bag filled.)

Thus, the dynamics of a bagpipe tune must be provided in another way, as well as a method to impart subtle rhythm changes. Also because the pipes are constantly playing, a method is required for separating two notes of the same pitch. All of this “musicality” is provided in pipe tunes via grace notes and embellishments (all those little notes you see in the music). pipers call this **Timing** and **Technique**.

A single “grace” note often separates two notes of the same pitch. When a note should be accented in a phrase, a set of two or three notes introduces and then “doubles” the accented note. There are other types of accents, as well: Pipe tune composers have more than 7 dozen individual embellishments at their disposal. But most standard pipe tunes use about 15 types of embellishments.

Banjo Breakdown Jig Arranged by Pipe Major Donald MacLeod, MBE



Occasionally, the embellishments form part of the melody as in the GDE, where the B base note forms the background for the G, D and E grace note embellishment.

Usually there are at least as many finger movements to create the embellishments as there are melody notes in the tune. Even though the chanter only has 9 notes and cannot play accidentals (flats and sharps), the bagpipe is difficult to master because it is hard to tune, it has four reeds that can change pitch as the bag pressure and humidity changes, it takes much more breath to play than most other wind instruments, and the embellishments take a long time to master.

Band Competition

Bands compete at five grade levels in the U.S.: Grade I (highest), Grade II, Grade III, Grade IV, and Grade V (Grade V does not exist in UK competitions). In the Midwest Pipe Band Association, there are currently no Grade I bands (City of Dunedin in Florida and St Thomas Alumni are the only US Grade 1 bands) but roughly four dozen bands compete in Grades II to V. New bands typically start at Grade V. After a period of competition, if the band wins a number of contests and meets certain musical standards, the Pipe Band Association will promote the band to the next grade.

Bands must have a minimum number of players (per the table).

Grade	Pipers	Side drums	Bass drums	Tenor drums
II	8	2	1	1
III	6	2	1	1
IV	6	2	1	optional
V	5	2	1	optional

The music requirements differ between Highland Games, but the Wisconsin Highland Games have the following requirements by Grade:

Grade V bands compete playing a Quick March Medley (QMM). The marches may be any march in simple time (2/4, 3/4, or 4/4) and must have exactly 8 parts (for example, two four-parted tunes, four two-parted tunes, or two two-parted tunes and a four-parted tune). There is no time limit on the Medley.

Grade II, III and IV bands play either an MSR or a medley, depending on the draw for that competition year.

The MSR consists of a 2/4 march, strathspey and reel. Each section must be a four-parted piece except Grade IV bands play a “mini” MSR where the band may play two two-parted pieces or a four-parted selection. The band is not timed.

The medley must include four different tune categories (for example, march, strathspey, reel, jig, hornpipe, or slow air). There is no restriction to tempo or time signature. The medley is untimed for Grade IV and must be between 3 to 5 minutes for Grade 3 and 4 to 6 minutes for Grade 2.

Judging is done by four judges: two piping judges, a drumming judge and an ensemble judge. Piping judges listen for tempo, whether pipers are playing in unison, tone of chanters and drones, and musicality.

The drumming judge listens for the crispness of rolls, tempo, rhythm and expression, and whether the side drums are playing in unison. (They are not judged on their flourishing unless it affects the musicality.) This judge also rates the bass and tenor sections, designating Best Drum Section and Best Bass/Midsection awards in each grade.

The ensemble judge rates the band as to whether the pipes and drums are playing together, the overall sound of the band, the musicianship overall, and whether the band executes the arrangement successfully. If the ratings of the other judges result in a tie, the ensemble judge’s score breaks the tie.

Are you interested in learning to play the Pipes or Drums?

Local pipe bands are always looking to add members and provide instruction to beginners. New drummers are especially welcome and even if you don't play, bands need Color Guard members. Please talk to members of a band before you buy bagpipes or drums; they are a useful resource and can help save you lots of money and frustration. For example, pipers start on a practice chanter instead of pipes and drummers start on a practice band and not a drum; snare drummers use a different stick than marching band or orchestra drummers.

The Billy Mitchell Scottish

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Wisconsin Highland Games Labor Day Weekend

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