

2008

The Captain's Corner

www.thecaptainscorner.com

www.thecaptainscorner.ca

Ken Eller

THE CAPTAIN'S CORNER PIPING LESSONS



A complete year of bagpipe lessons including phrasing of the music and playing with control

© The Captain's Corner 2008

Index of Lessons

Pulsing

[Chapter 1](#)

Concepts of Phrasing – $\frac{3}{4}$ March

[Chapter 5](#)

Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban & Blind Archie MacNeil

Playing in Control

[Chapter 26](#)

Playing in Control – the theory

[Chapter 36](#)

Strikes

Lesson 1

Phrasing

We are about to start a series of lessons that reinforce the notions of pulsing. If pulses form the words of our music, then phrases become the sentences and the part is the paragraph. Thus, each part of music will be based on putting the pulses into phrases in a rhythmic fashion to make sense of the story being told in every tune. Where pulses were closely allied to the beat structure of every bar, phrases will be in line with the bar structure of every part. We will explore the notions of 2 – bar phrasing and single bar phrasing as they apply to the various time signatures in march, strathspey, reel, jig and hornpipe playing. The object here is simple – with a solid knowledge of pulsing you will be able to play a tune rhythmically, with the added advantage of highlighting the true underlining meaning of a tune hidden in the phrasing.

The Concept

The “sentences” of a tune are in the phrases and we will first consider march playing. All marches, regardless of time signature can be subdivided into 2 bar phrases. If we give these phrases alphabetic symbols A, B, etc, then the traditional structure of a common march looks like:

| A | | B |
| A | | C |

We see that the | A | phrase often repeats itself. Some would refer to this structure for a tune as being “question and answer”, referring to the | A | phrase as being the question (which is repeated) with the | B | and | C | phrases being the answers. Often the | C | phrase is referred to as the “summary” phrase in the part. Its importance cannot be overlooked as it is most likely repeated at the end of every part throughout the tune. Let’s attempt to pulse and phrase our first march, a $\frac{3}{4}$ march called

Torosay Castle. This will give us a start and understanding of this process. Future lessons will apply these techniques to a variety of marches, strathspeys and reels, etc.

Torosay Castle.

Retreat March.

PM J. Laurie.

The musical score for 'Torosay Castle' is a retreat march in 2/4 time. It consists of eight staves of music. The first four staves are grouped together with large square brackets, indicating a first ending or a specific section. The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 2/4. The score is written in a standard musical notation style with a treble clef.

Written with NotMusic (Cool Music Software Ltd.)

Torosay Castle.

Retreat March.

PM J. Laurie.

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Retreat March" by PM J. Laurie. The score is written for a single melodic line in 3/4 time, indicated by the treble clef and the 3/4 time signature at the beginning. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The music consists of eight staves of notation. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a first ending bracket. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, as well as rests. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Notice that the braces have been inserted at each of the 2 bars positions. Pulse lines have also been inserted in the first phrase only to give you a feel for the tune.

Put the phrase braces in parts 3 and 4 above and print out the clean copy for your records.

The Method

Play the first phrase over and over again until such time as you can take your eyes off the written score. Then proceed to the second or | B | phrase and do likewise. When you feel comfortable, play both phrases from memory. Since the | A | phrase repeats itself, pass quickly to the summary phrase at the end of the part and commit it to memory. Armed with a good knowledge of the structure, start to TEST your memory by playing all phrases together until you are satisfied that the “part is yours”.

Repeat this process with the remaining parts.

Next lesson, we will attempt this method with another march.

Good luck and let me know how you make out.

[Return to Index](#)

Lesson 5

We continue our study of phrasing with a look at a higher level competitive march – the highest order of march that a piper can play. Historically, the competitive march is a 2/4 with a minimum of 4 parts. The tempo ranges from 60 to 72 BPM for the solo piper and upwards of 84 BPM for the Grade 1 pipe band. The piper must keep the priorities straight when playing these heavy tunes. According to late Captain John MacLellan of the Army School of Piping, these tunes have been created by pipers for their listening enjoyment. Technique and musical performance are essential. The rhythmic presentation of all pulses must be maintained from start to finish. Extreme tempos prevent the performer from adequately executing or phrasing the tune. Thus, they are played slower than your common quick march to accommodate all these skills.

... Now for Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban.

The tune will be presented in three forms:

1. A clean copy for your records
2. A pulsed copy for your understanding of the basic rhythms
3. A parsed copy in two bar phrases to understand the sentence structure of the tune.

Recognize the fact that when you analyze a tune, your understanding of the music within can be on two separate levels:

1. Pulses
2. Phrases

Each level should complement the other.

Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban, composed by Archibald MacNeill, the blind piper

This competition style 2/4 March has been a favourite of pipers for generations. It was composed by Archie MacNeill, father of Alex who lived in Montreal. Archie worked in Henderson's bagpipe shop testing drones and chanter. It is a fact that his hearing was much more acute with his lack of sight. During the 50's he was a regular contributor to the Piping Times, a magazine dedicated to piping history, theory and music published by the College of Piping.



Alex scribing for father Archie at the highland games

Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban

March

A MacNeill
As played by Alasdair Gillies

Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban

March

A MacNeill
As played by Alasdair Gillies

The musical score is written in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature. It consists of ten staves of music. The first staff begins with a repeat sign. The music features a complex rhythmic pattern with many eighth and sixteenth notes, and various accidentals. The score includes repeat signs and first/second endings. The piece concludes with a final cadence.

Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban

March

As played by Alasdair Gillies
A MacNeill

Written with FlatMaster (Cool Mtr Software Ltd.)

[Return to Index](#)

Lesson 26

Playing in Control

Control of one's playing is perhaps the most important quality that a piper can bring to the table. Bruce Gandy, double gold medallist, has spent a career developing control drills that he constantly integrates into his playing. So successful has he been with his style of articulation, that even now, his son Alex is a clone of the master.

Now, why at this stage of your development must you return to drills and exercises? Number one reason has to be to keep whatever skills you have developed sharp and always up front. Secondly, from my teaching experience, my adult students suffer from one malady – they cannot raise the tempo of their tune without reaching a point early on where they lose control – technique suffers and more importantly, proper pulsing vanishes.

Control exercises set to the metronome will benefit players of all developmental levels. For the more experienced player, these drills will be a standard to maintain those skills and perhaps move to the next level.

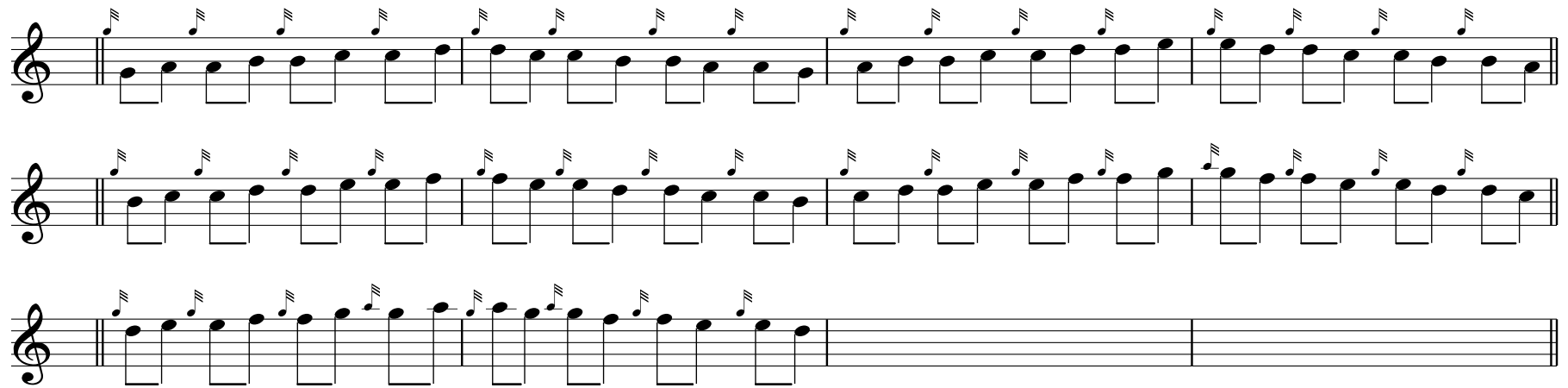
So what do you hope to gain by these lessons? Probably you will find that you will be able to successfully play tunes at the recommended tempos. Instead of playing your 6/8's at 78 BPM, you will be able to play them at 88 BPM. Strathspeys will raise from the introductory 104 – 108 BPM to 120 – 124 BPM. You get the idea – at last your music will sound like it should.

The ingredients you are looking for in a good musical diet are pulsing, technique and tempo. So, we start with simple control drills, all based on the metronome. Stick with the program and watch the results!

Control Drill #1

36 - 128 BPM in Steps of 4 BPM from memory

The Captain's Corner, 2008



Written with PiobMaster (Ceol Mor Software Ltd.)

Start this drill at 36 BPM. When successful completely, raise the tempo 40 BPM and upwards. Then repeat the sequence. One slight hesitation or note error means you start back from the beginning and build it up again. Each session on the drill should produce one level higher. Keep a record of your max tempo for each session. When you can play this drill at 128 successfully, you know that you have got it! That is perhaps the highest tempo any of our trad music would be played at.

[Return to Index](#)

Lesson 36

STRIKES

Strikes are a fundamental rhythm played in many tunes like 6/8 marches, jigs, hornpipes, reels, etc. Come to think of it, you will find the strike in almost any time signature. Do you have any of the following symptoms?

- B strikes – sounding shallow, missing the low G hole
- E strikes that sound like a “clunk”
- F strikes that are difficult to make
- Always behind the beat in jigs when playing strikes
- Lack of rhythmic consistency

... and the list goes on. Strikes can be revitalized and improved with consistent drill work, initially to set a standard for the strike rhythm and then afterwards to maintain the acquired skills.

Here is something for all players, starting with the B and E strikes. When you are playing, have a look at your two fingers on each hand, the baby finger and ring finger – especially on the bottom hand. These two fingers should move in sync with one another so that when you play the low A, the baby finger rests low with the B finger. If you are one who has been taught to keep both baby fingers high of the chanter, you are going to have problems with the B strike not closing or the E strike being out of rhythm. These two fingers high off the chanter make it a challenge to get all fingers down for the strike, with the chance that only the low A sounds for the B strike and the E strike is too heavy and lacks its “lightness”. So, first of all, check out your fingers and make a concerted effort to parallel up these two fingers on either hand. The various finger postures might look like the following.

Good Low A Height



Too High



Good A, B distance



Both Too High



So, the bottom line for making good strikes might very well start with good finger height, relatively close to the chanter keeping the baby and ring fingers on a parallel path, close to one another. If you are a player that raises both baby fingers high, you are in a non-comfort zone, so I strongly recommend some changes, no matter how painstaking it might be.

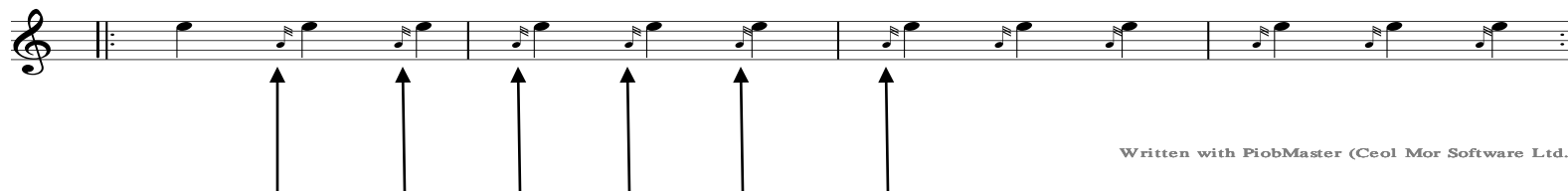
Now consider the strike itself. What exactly is a strike and how is it written in our music? The answer describes the nature of the strike. The strike is a single $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ note, meaning that it occurs in an instant, not over any duration at all. In fact, it marks a point between two notes of the same pitch. So, for example, an E strike is a simple Low A $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ note and nothing more. The finger motion is called a strike. To make a strike on E, first move to the E and then with intensity, drop the E finger to the chanter as if jabbing the hole. Similar with all other strikes - they are nothing more than a single $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ note, so don't think of them as dropping to a lower note and lifting the finger – jab it and do it briskly.

The sound files here will indicate the proper rhythm for the strike, so remember to first get to the melody note and secondly, jab the chanter with the correct grace note.

E Strikes on the Metronome

Metronome Drill for timing Control MM = 36 - 128

The Captain's Corner, 2008



A musical staff in treble clef showing a sequence of six eighth notes. Each note is marked with a double bar line and a vertical line through it, indicating a metronome strike. Below the staff, six vertical arrows point upwards to the first six notes, indicating the timing of the metronome strikes.

Written with PiobMaster (Ceol Mor Software Ltd.)

The metronome mark is on each of these strikes, so increase the tempo using the E strike as the time keeper. Do likewise with F, C, B and low A strikes to improve the efficiency of playing the strike in an instant, on the beat.

B Strikes on the Metronome

Metronome Drill for timing Control MM = 36 - 128

The Captain's Corner, 2008



A musical staff in treble clef showing a sequence of six eighth notes. Each note is marked with a double bar line and a vertical line through it, indicating a metronome strike.

Written with PiobMaster (Ceol Mor Software Ltd.)

Make sure both fingers are covering the hole – Low G sound must be prevalent. Repeat these drills with the metronome over and over until consistency is achieved.

This same drill can now be duplicated with high A, G, F, D (light and heavy), and C strikes listed below.

All Strikes

Metronome Drill for timing Control MM = 36 - 128

The Captain's Corner, 2008

Written with PiobMaster (Ceol Mor Software Ltd.)

light heavy

The image shows a single staff of music in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of ten measures. The first four measures contain quarter notes with stems pointing down, and the last six measures contain quarter notes with stems pointing up. Two vertical arrows point upwards from the text 'light' and 'heavy' below the staff to the fifth and sixth measures, respectively. A small copyright notice is located to the right of the staff.

Now do the same drill, with the following phrasing:

All Strikes

Metronome Drill for timing Control MM = 36 - 128

The Captain's Corner, 2008

Written with PiobMaster (Ceol Mor Software Ltd.)

The image shows a single staff of music in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of ten measures, each containing a quarter note with a stem pointing down. A small copyright notice is located to the right of the staff.

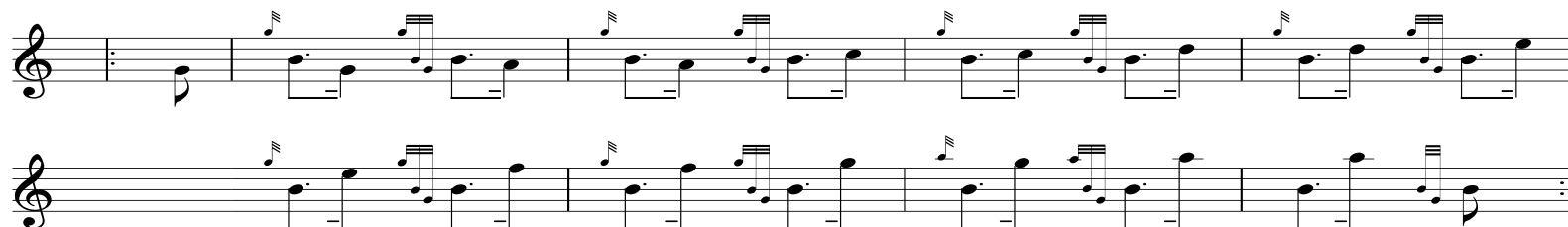
From this point, I like very much what Jim McGillivray does in Rhythmic Fingerwork in Chapter 5 – Strikes. He sets up drills for all strikes from all notes. A careful read of the text will point out where the beat should fall in each case as he explores different time signatures and different rhythms. He is quick to point out that the strike is a most versatile rhythm that must be mastered

through drill. A series of strike drills can be set up on any note from all notes. Rhythm is the important ingredient. Below is an example of a drill for strikes on B, as given on Page 68 of Jim McGillivray's Rhythmic Fingerwork. Design your own for other strikes.

B Strike Example (Rhythmic Fingerwork - Exercise 108)

Metronome Drill for timing Control MM = 36 - 128

The Captain's Corner, 2008



Written with PiobMaster (Ceol Mor Software Ltd.)

Listen to the audio file for the rhythm of each. There will be other examples as well for you to create yourself. Work hard at the strike rhythm in all time signatures and if more work is necessary, please purchase Jim's book.

[Return to Index](#)