

The Piper's Corner

by PVSFC Board Member Peter Walker

4/4 Marches: Pointing the Way

We move now from the compound time, or 6/8 march, to the simple time, in this case in 4/4. The vast majority of pipe marches one might hear performed by a street band will be in 4/4 time, and though often compositionally far simpler than the 6/8 marches we've looked at previously, they do present their own unique feature: a bending of the strict interpretation of time known as "pointing".

We should step back for a moment and remember that, while a reeded wind instrument, the bagpipes do not allow for embouchure, not only because the pipes are removed from direct contact with the airstream by the bag (taking control of air velocity out of the equation), but because the bag provides air to multiple pipes simultaneously, and any changes in pressure will not only alter pitch as well as volume, but will do so differently for the chanter and each of the drones, putting the pipes out of tune with themselves (and any other instrument around them).

This puts the bagpipe in the awkward position of being incapable of stressing particular notes in keeping with the meter or scansion of the music. The bagpipe's volume is fixed by the physics of the chanter: in the case of a conical bore chanter like the Highland pipes, the lowest note is the loudest, the highest note is the quietest, and there's nothing the player can do to accent a given note (notably, cylindrical bore chanters like the smallpipes reverse this volume profile - the highest notes are the loudest, and the lowest the softest).

This means that all stress and accent on a bagpipe are implied, rather than directly expressed. This is accomplished by two methods. The first is by emphatic ornamentation, such as single grace notes, or double-pulse emphatic ornaments like doublings and shakes, which we have previously discussed, or even grips.

But the second method uses a form of agogic stress where a dotted note is given additional time at expense of the flagged note that follows it. This is what is meant by "pointing". The degree of pointing, that is, how much of the flagged note is stolen by the dotted note, can vary to imply different levels of stress, which we will see in 2/4 marches and strathspeys, but in the case of 4/4 time, the

general rule for pointing is "as much as possible!" We hold the dotted note for as long as it can be held, and play the flagged note as briefly as it can be played while still being perceived as a melody note. Because the beat in 4/4 time is on the quarter note, the largest note that can be pointed is the dotted eighth; a dotted quarter is not eligible for this treatment, as it ends on the upbeat, which is generally inviolable in pipe music. Pointing can occur in 6/8 time, but because in this case the dotted eighth ends on the upbeat, the largest note eligible for pointing is the dotted sixteenth. While pointing dot-flag pairs, one should remember that even eighth notes are not played with any stress, but perfectly evenly; it is the contrast between the highly pointed pairs and the perfectly even pairs that makes the 4/4 genre of music to stand out.

The tune I have given as an example is "Jack's Welcome Home" by Rob MacNeil, with the pipe setting used by City of Alexandria Pipes and Drums here:

Jack's Welcome Home March Rob MacNeil

The image shows a musical score for the march "Jack's Welcome Home" by Rob MacNeil. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of eight staves of music. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The music features a variety of ornaments, including grace notes, slurs, and accents, which are typical of pipe music. The melody is characterized by a mix of dotted eighth and eighth notes, often with a "dot-flag" pair, and is set against a background of steady eighth notes. The score is presented in a clear, legible format, with each staff containing a single line of music.

The ornaments used are typical of those seen in previous tunes. I do call your attention to one figure, at the start of the second bar in lines seven and eight - a doubling on a snapped figure. A doubling on a snap, seen frequently in

strathspeys, is meant to convey a triplet figure similar in timing to an open birl. Pointing doesn't just affect dot-flag notes. As we have previously seen, semi-melodic ornaments like grips and taorluaths often substitute for flagged notes, and as such are often eligible for pointing. In this tune, the taorluaths in the first and second lines of the tune are prime examples of this effect.

My attempt at a fiddle adaptation is here, using my standard convention of "T" for a tap on the beat, "D" for a delayed tap, and "H" for hammer-on. I have notated the pointing by replacing the single-dotted eighth notes with triple-dotted ones, though the timing is inexact, this conveys the severity of the agogic stress used in a 4/4 march.

Jack's Welcome Home
Fiddle Setting by P. Walker

Rob MacNeil

The musical score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of eight staves of music. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns and ornaments, with letters T, D, and H placed above the notes to indicate specific techniques. T stands for a tap on the beat, D for a delayed tap, and H for a hammer-on. The score shows a variety of rhythmic figures, including triplets and dotted rhythms, which are characteristic of a 4/4 march.

Next time, we'll take a look at 3/4 marches.