

SOUTH ALBERTA PIPES & DRUMS SCHOOL

PIPING CURRICULUM

Student: _____

A. INTRODUCTION TO THE BASICS

1. About the Band

- ☐ Website: <http://sabpipesdrums.ca> (student to log on and review)
- ☐ About the SAPD: history and organization
- ☐ Status as a student, becoming a member
- ☐ How long does it take to get on pipes or drums?
- ☐ Practice time and frequency

About the SAPD: history and organization

The South Alberta Pipes and Drums is a non-profit society registered in Alberta. We carry on a long tradition of piping and drumming in Medicine Hat and south-eastern Alberta (since at least 1912) and you can learn more about this history on our web site. We operate under the musical direction and overall management of Pipe Major Eric Kean. The band consists of a pipes section and a drums section. Band members are those who dress for parade.

School of Piping and Drumming

There is a school of piping and drumming where students (both young and old) can learn from experienced pipers and drummers.

- school operates from late September to end of May at Freemasons' Hall on Monday evenings

6:30: students arrive, warm up exercises, practise on their own

6:45 - 7:30 PM: band members help students in small groups or individually (chanter and drum pads/sticks)

7:30 - 8:00 PM: students and band members, both chanter and drums, assemble to practise sets, learn new tunes or focus on specific tunes

8:00 - 9:00 PM: advanced students and band members, drummers and pipers get together to practise band sets on pipes and drums

- new students are always welcome but the best time to start is in September
- annual fees for instruction are currently set at \$50
- piping students will be expected to purchase a practice chanter

- drumming students are expected to purchase their own sticks and practice pad (snare drums only), tenors their beaters
- when deemed ready by the Pipe Major, students may be invited to start on pipes and drums (some loan equipment available)
- when the student has mastered the band sets and shows acceptable technique, the student may be asked to join the band as a performing member
- even performing band members often attend piping and drumming schools which are offered at many locations, generally in summer

Playing with the Band

Each instrument and each student take different amounts of time to get to the point of playing with the band. Bass and tenor drum are easier to master than snare drums or pipes. A student's musical background, manual dexterity and willingness to practise all influence how much time it takes to move from chanter and pads to pipes and drums.

As a very rough guideline, it will take two years of practice chanter before moving to the pipes. Even then, there is another year of learning to blow steadily, tune the pipes and coordinate the various functions.

"To the make of a piper go seven years... At the end of his seven years, one born to it will stand at the start of knowledge, and leaning a fond ear to the drone, he may have parley with old folks of old affairs." (Neil Munro) 200 year old quote

Snare drums will generally take at least a year to learn the basic skills. Tenor and bass drums can be learned within a year to the point of beating time but the flourishes take considerably longer to master.

Practice time and frequency

As a general rule of thumb, frequent and short practices are better than infrequent and longer practices. A student should plan ahead for practice times, preferably the same time each day. Fifteen minutes up to an hour spent every day focussing on one particular movement is generally more successful than a marathon the night before school night. More time in each session is better up to a point. If you are making mistakes from fatigue or frustration, it is better to put your instrument aside and pick it up next day. Practise each movement slowly to get it right, speed will follow in due course. Getting it right is better than getting it fast. A good tip is to play a movement three times correctly, then move on.

Common practice problems:

1. *Playing to your strengths.* Focus instead on your weaknesses.
2. *Blind repetition.* Repeating a mistake will make it permanent. Constantly evaluate how you are doing. Play a movement correctly three times and move on.
3. *Playing too fast.* Get absolute control first. Speed will follow.

4. *Lack of focus.* Trying to cover everything in one session. Instead, focus on one particular objective.
5. *Always starting at the beginning.* Try starting on different parts instead.

B. BAGPIPE TUTOR

1. Handling the chanter

❑ Tutor book and chanter, sources

In addition to this SAPD tutor, there are various other resources the student can acquire:
[The National Piping Centre Highland Bagpipe Tutor, part 1](#)

❑ Handling the practice chanter

There are two types of practice chanter materials: wood (traditional) and plastic (modern) but most are now plastic or “poly”. Plastic practice chanters are manufactured by many different manufacturers (e.g. Dunbar, Walsh, McCallum, Naill, etc.) and are available through the band's suppliers (see links page on website). They are available in regular and long. The long chanter's finger hole spacing more accurately replicates the feel of the bagpipe chanter.

Chanters should never be exposed to extremes of temperature. Do not leave them on car dashboards in summer or in trunk of car in winter. They are best kept at room temperature and transported to and from practice without extended periods of high or low temperature.

Beginners often are "wet" players, meaning considerable saliva will end up in the chanter. Wood may absorb this moisture and swell. With both wood and plastic, it is good practice to disassemble them, shake out the excess moisture, and leave open to dry between practice sessions. Some poly chanters have rubber O-rings instead of hemp and may have moisture traps to prevent the reed from being water-logged.

The main parts of a practice chanter are the bottom (finger holes), the top (blow pipe), and the reed. The top and bottom are attached and held tight by either a wrapping of hemp or a rubber O ring. If the hemp gets quite damp, it will swell, making it more difficult to take apart the chanter.

To take apart a practice chanter, grasp the top in one hand, the bottom just below the junction point and twist off carefully. It is generally a good practice to loosen in the same way one would take a nut off a bolt. **DO NOT HOLD THE BOTTOM OF THE CHANTER AROUND THE FINGER HOLES.** The torque applied lower down can split a chanter bottom if the junction is tight. Once loose, draw the top straight off so as not to touch the reed.

The reed should be firmly seated in the chanter bottom. If loose, wiggly, it will not tune properly. When reassembling the chanter, take care to align top and bottom so as not to catch the corner of the reed as the top is twisted home.

A chanter carrying case can be made from an old sock, and a piece of cardboard tubing or plastic pipe. This will protect your instrument from mechanical damage.

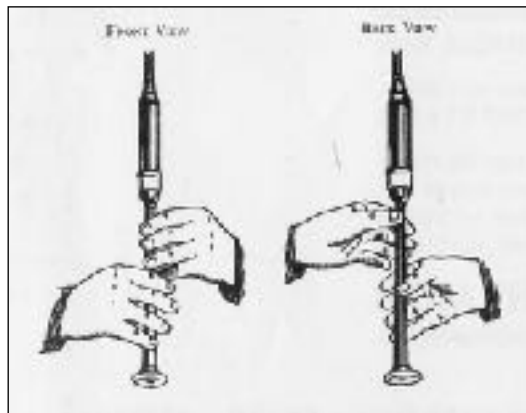
❑ **Adjusting the tone of your chanter**

Practice chanters were not developed as an instrument in their own right and therefore are often considered to sound a bit "cheesy". A broken or chipped reed will not sound its best. If it is clogged with saliva, take it out and blow it out in reverse direction. Ensure that it is firmly seated in the chanter. Sharpen and flatten by lowering or raising the reed in its seat.

If you blow too hard or too soft, the reed will not vibrate correctly. Over-blowing may "choke" the reed (a "squeal" and no sound). Under-blowing will not allow the reed to vibrate. Slightly more air pressure is required when playing notes on the upper hand.

❑ **Holding and playing the chanter**

Hold the chanter, covering the holes with first knuckle, fingers straight, firm not tight. The left hand covers the upper holes and the right hand the lower holes. (Note that historically, some players have held upper and lower hands reversed.) The left thumb covers the hole on the back of the chanter and the index, middle and ring finger cover the next three holes. The left baby finger does not do anything but can be kept in a "lifted" position or tucked behind. The right hand is used to cover the lower four holes. The right thumb should be positioned approximately opposite the middle finger. There is a tendency for it to rise up the chanter.



Be aware of the "*death grip*". Tension will cause the novice player to grip the chanter very hard, causing stress in the fingers and making raising the fingers more difficult. The chanter should be held loosely, just firmly enough so that it doesn't slide out from the grip. It is a good habit to play with the chanter above the table, as the instructor will be able to hear and see your fingering more clearly. Lift fingers only enough to get a clear note.

Place the mouthpiece in the middle of the lips. Keep the cheeks in tension, do not puff them out. Do not clench with teeth.

❑ **Chanter maintenance**

The chanter should be dried out between playing, especially if the student is a wet blower. If the hemp joint becomes overly compressed, frazzled or even rotten, it should be replaced (annually?). For cleaning, a pipe cleaner can be used regularly to run up the centre of the chanter and Q tips can be used to clean the holes.

2. **Reading the music**

□ **Bagpipe Music**

Historically, bagpipe music developed as an oral tradition (there was no written music). Often it was taught (in Gaelic) by starting with *canntaireachd* (sung music) in which each note had a particular name. *Piobaireachd* (pipe music) has today come to mean the classical music of the pipes, called *ceol mòr* (big music) as opposed to the more common *ceol beag* (small music), which includes marches, dance music, slow airs, etc. In more recent centuries, traditional music writing styles have been applied to pipe music and that is what we use today, although it does not always express what the piper plays.

□ **Some Music Theory Related to the Pipes**

The modern pitch of the Highland Bagpipe varies with the playing conditions but is always in the ballpark of “B-flat.” This is a substantial climb in pitch from the same instrument of 100 years ago or so when the bagpipe tuned in “A,” a fact still reflected in how bagpipe music continues to be written. The first factor that sets the bagpipe apart is the characteristic “hum” that defines the instrument. It is this background hum or “harmonic envelope” that is heard throughout a performance, and remains continuous as long as the instrument is being played.

The drones themselves create not one tone each, as is often too simply stated, but many “overtones” or “harmonics” that create an acoustic atmosphere of richness and depth of resonance that supports the otherwise high-pitched, shrill sound of the chanter. The end result is many frequencies competing for space. In the push and pull of the Physics, the tones or “notes” in the chanter get sorted out in the mix. Some work extremely well, others with varying success, and some “notes” are completely eliminated as a possibility because they refuse to harmonize or “chord” with the drones.

This is why the whole concept of “sharps and flats” is unknown in bagpipe music. This is also why pipers are often at a loss to play many more familiar tunes. The total absence of certain notes, critical in 12-tone or “Western” music- classical, jazz, rock, Latin, blues, and so forth, makes most of it problematic at best. Christmas carols and Hymns from any church music book are an interesting study in tonal warfare for the often frustrated piper, having all but one note to make the tune complete, and the equally baffled organist or keyboard player who can’t figure out why the piper keeps changing keys without even knowing it. Many people experiencing the bagpipe live for the first time are often disappointed when their requests go unheeded or unplayed. They have assumed that all music is equally possible on all instruments. It is not. “Danny Boy”,

“When Irish Eyes Are Smiling,” and even “Auld Lang Syne” make better songs than pipe tunes, because of the tonal problem solving that has to be done with them. This is why the pipe music deviates from the more familiar melody of the songs.

All “Western music” since about the mid 1700’s has been “equal tempered”, that is, all of the notes are tuned equidistant from each other to give us the system of tones that reign today in every form of music that we encounter, however artificially contrived or divided they might be. This allows for the interchangeability of scales and keys in all modern music. Not so with the bagpipe. The notes conform more to a pattern first derived by Pythagoras in Ancient Greece, specifically the mixolydian mode. Ultimately, it is the unforgiving nature of the drones that creates this unique set of tones and intervals that are “just tempered.” The scale consists of eight notes plus one extra below the “octave,” used with great effect and frequency in the music of the Highland Bagpipe. This gives us nine notes or, better stated, eight intervals to work with.

The scale of the bagpipe is remarkably limited compared to the tonal range of most other instruments. In spite of that fact, there are more than 10,000 tunes in existence that are played or have been written specifically for the Highland Bagpipe. They are all different although they may share several features or ideas in common. How is this achieved? The secret to the bagpipe’s endurance as a musical art form is in the magic of the scale. Within the seemingly limited range of just nine notes there are five “sub-scales” or “modes” that overlap using the tones available to create whole new worlds of musical possibility. This is where the major difference in bagpipe music and “Western” music arises. The “modes” or smaller scales within the scale are characteristically 5-tone or “pentatonic” scales. These are most commonly associated with the music of Asia, Africa and Native America. This is why the spirit of a Highland air can be evoked at the same time that an Asian strain can be heard when anyone noodles with just the black keys of the piano.

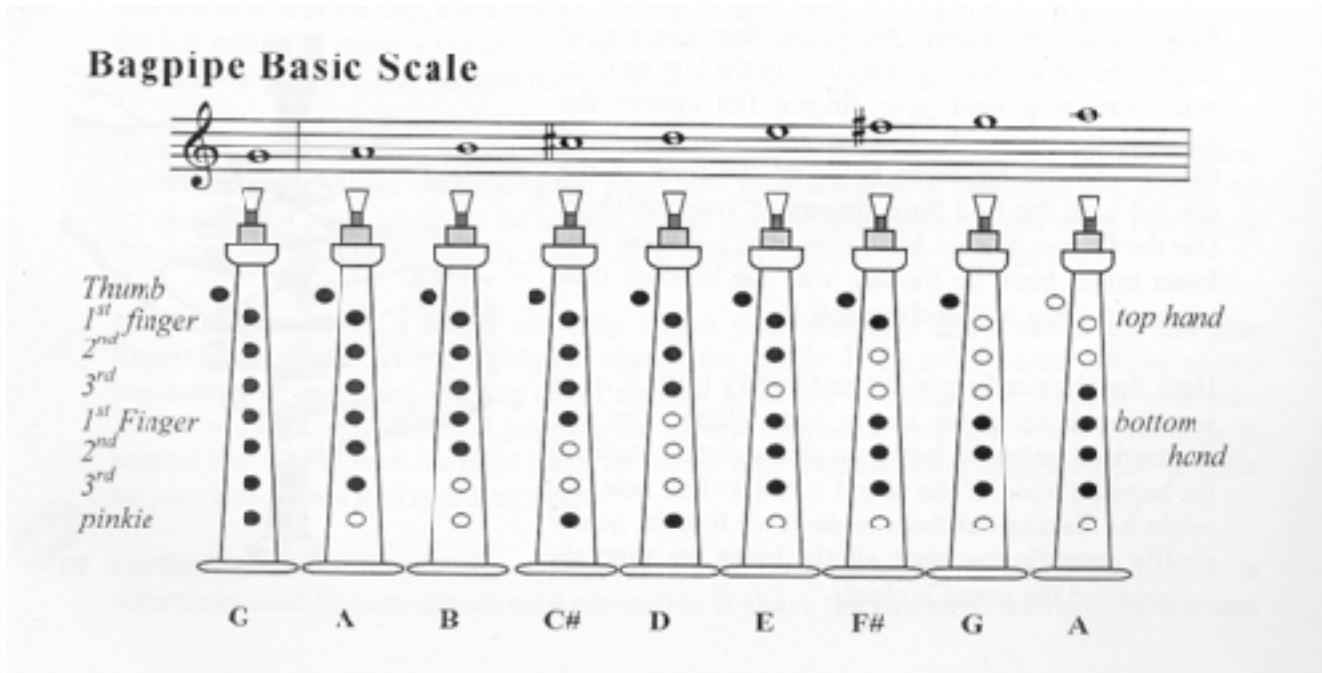
This aspect in combination with the presence of a droning sound as a keynote that is the common thread or missing link that relates bagpipe music more easily to music from outside Europe, and to European music itself from the Middle Ages and before. This is why in modern times there is little overlap of the repertoires of the Highland Bagpipe and Western Music. Regardless of the complexity of the tune, the music of the bagpipe is still one note at a time, one grace note at a time, no matter how fast or slow. Chords and harmonies in melodies are only possible by the addition of a second, third and even fourth piper, and this is heard everywhere in the world of Pipe Bands. Enjoy the “skirl” of the pipes.

-adapted from Dave McKenzie

□ **Names of the notes**

There are 9 notes to the bagpipe scale, which is quite limited compared to many musical instruments. With all holes covered, the lowest note is Low G. Lifting the right baby finger gives Low A. Various combinations of fingering will produce B, C, D, E, F, High

G, and High A. If your fingers do not clearly cover all the holes above the highest open hole (the note being sounded), you will get a buzzy sound, or maybe even a higher note than you were expecting. Crossing noise: a blip caused by fingers closing off holes of previous note before fingers have lifted off holes for next note. (see exercise)



On the bottom hand, the top three fingers (1, 2, 3) cover the holes with the middle section of the finger. The pinkie finger uses the end section. On the top hand, the end sections of the fingers are used as well as the end section of the thumb to cover the top back hole.

□ Crossing Noises

There is a funny blip sound called a "crossing noise" which occurs when the fingers playing one note arrive on the chanter before the fingers playing the next note leave it.

Position your fingers for D, then make the E note by raising the third finger of your upper hand and dropping the top three fingers of your lower hand and lifting the pinkie, all at once but not quite: if the lower hand closes too quickly before the E note is clear, there will essentially be a LG sound in between, the "crossing noise". It can occur at other crosses as well and here is an exercise to practise the crosses without the noise:



□ Symbols and Their Meaning

- the 5 lines and 4 spaces on which music is written is called a staff
- The Treble Clef (an antique G): starts on G (*student can ignore*)
- F and C sharp (*sometimes left out, no practical impact*)
- Time signatures: numerator, number of beat in the bar, denominator which note takes a beat, e.g. 2/4: two beats in a bar, quarter note takes a beat; 4/4 is “common time” (c)
- Introductory notes must match up with timing in closing bar
- Bars break up the line of music for timing
- Phrases are two bars long, but don't usually start and stop on the barline
- Parts are like verses and contain a full musical theme
- repeat a part if indicated by colon at end barline
- Whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes, sixteenth notes, 32nd (grace) notes
- Dotted note is given half again as much time, usually attached to a cut note
- Ties
- Identify where the beat falls
- Tempo (speed) is not indicated but relates to the type of tune (e.g. jig vs. lament) and skill of player
- Rhythm is a steady beat with emphasis given by long and short notes

Title of tune



Double bar line

Grace note

Type of tune



Leumluath

D throw

Often composer's name



Birl Repeat





one bar

Half note Quarter note

Eighth note

a phrase (two bars)

Introductory note (time taken from last bar)

Opening barline

Time signature

F# and C#

Treble clef (ancient G)

3. **Embellishments**

- ❑ a feature of pipe music that is somewhat unique and compensates for the inability to change volume and the relatively limited range of notes
- ❑ emphasize the note following
- ❑ generally fall on the down or up beat
- ❑ can be as simple as a single grace note or as complex as a taorluath (tor-loo-ah)
- ❑ are assumed to have “no time” themselves, instead they take their time from the melody note following
- ❑ the beat falls on the first theme note of the embellishment (generally the second note of an embellishment)

3.1 **Grace Notes**

- ❑ G, D, E to emphasize and separate melody notes
- ❑ time value of grace notes is a 64th, essentially no time
- ❑ takes you to the melody note
- ❑ LG grace note
- ❑ Practise exercise #1 “G, D, E Grace Notes”

3.2. **D Throw**

- ❑ heavy and light throw, focus on light
- ❑ must hear LG, D gracenote to C
- ❑ practise Exercise #3 “Throw on D”

"Scots Wha' Hae" (first part)

- ❑ tune supposedly sung on march to Bannockburn by Robert the Bruce
- ❑ words by Robert Burns
- ❑ holds and cuts, impact on melody
- ❑ note repeat symbol at end of first part

3.3. **Echo Beats**

- ❑ echo beats generally separate two similar notes
- ❑ examples: play F, tap an E gracenote, play E, tap LA gracenote
- ❑ practise exercise #2 “Echo Beats and Strikes” (first 2 bars only)

3.4. **HG Doubling**

- ❑ a “doubling” means an embellishment that includes a theme note which is the same as the following melody note
- ❑ for example, play F, lift and return F finger, then lift off again, finish on HG
- ❑ practise exercise #9 “Doubling on HG”

"Scots Wha' Hae" (second part)

3.5 **Half double F**

- ❑ considered a half doubling because there is no HG gracenote to start

- ❑ usually occurs after HA
- ❑ for example, play HA, then F, then G gracenote on F

3.6 Strikes on B, C, D

- ❑ strikes start with a HG gracenote and can be light or heavy (include a LG)
- ❑ Light and heavy strike on D
- ❑ Strike on B
- ❑ Strike on C
- ❑ practise exercise #2 “Echo Beats and Strikes”

7. High A Doubling

- ❑ Play HA, brush thumb down across HA hole (but leave E finger in place) to create brief HG, back to HA
- ❑ Practise exercise #10 “Doubling on High A”

“Amazing Grace” (first ending only)

- ❑ HG and LG gracenotes, D throw,
- ❑ Memorizing a tune phrase by phrase
- ❑ Note 3/4 time signature, beat foot
- ❑ Note repeat symbol for different second ending (introduced later)

8. E Doubling

- ❑ Can be started from various notes
- ❑ For example, play LA, play G grace note to E, play F, then E
- ❑ G and F gracenotes should be clearly separated to allow E to sound between them
- ❑ Practise exercise #7 “Doubling on E”

“Amazing Grace” (second ending)

- ❑ Note no repeat symbol for second ending
- ❑ E doubling prior to ending

“Ho Ro, Mo Nighean Dhonn Bhoideach” (“The Brown Haired Maiden”)

- ❑ note repeats: only 9 different bars of the 32 total
- ❑ first tune of a three tune set played by the band

3.9 C Doubling

- ❑ play a G grace note on C, then a D grace note on C
- ❑ B and LA fingers remain off the chanter throughout the movement
- ❑ practise exercise #5 “Doubling on C”

3.10 B Doubling

- ❑ play a G grace note on B, then a D grace note on B
- ❑ LA finger remains off the chanter throughout the movement
- ❑ practise exercise #4 “Doubling on B”

“High Road to Gairloch”

- ❑ Gairloch is on the west coast of Scotland
- ❑ The second phrase of the first part is the most difficult
- ❑ Note the third phrase is a repeat of the first
- ❑ The first and third phrases of the second part are the same
- ❑ The fourth phrase of both parts are the same

11. F Doubling

- ❑ play an E, then a G grace note on F, then again, finishing on F
- ❑ make sure the F is heard between the G grace notes
- ❑ practise exercise #8 “Doubling on F”

“Highland Laddie” (sometimes “Heilan’ Laddie”)

- ❑ Burns set words to the tune, and it is commonly used by Highland regiments
- ❑ Most students find the runs in the first difficult to play accurately; they are shown as 32nd notes but are often played as hold-cut-hold-cut, or slightly “pointed” (means emphasizing some notes as opposed to “round” where all notes have the same time value)
- ❑ Note in the second part, the triple notes are composed of a sixteenth note followed by two thirty-second notes
- ❑ The band commonly plays the set in the order: High Road, Highland Laddie, Brown-Haired Maiden; but pipers must be prepared to start on any of the tunes!

3.12 Leumluath (Grip) and Taorluath

- ❑ Leumluath (loom-loo-ah) is also called a grip
- ❑ Make sure there are three distinct sounds: LG, D, LG
- ❑ A Taorluath (tor-loo-ah) simply adds a E
- ❑ practise exercises #11 "Leumluath" and #12 "Taorluath"

3.13 Birl

- ❑ 3 styles possible: figure 7, tap and pull, or double tap
- ❑ start on LA, close and open the LG hole, then repeat, pulling finger clear
- ❑ often found at the end of tunes
- ❑ practise exercise #13 "Birl"

3.14 Thumb Grace Notes

- ❑ when on HA, a brush of the thumb down over HA hole will create a HG grace note
- ❑ can also be "jambled" in certain circumstances
- ❑ practise exercise #10 “Doubling on HA”

3.15 Tachums

- ❑ play D, G gracenote on C, D grace note on LA
- ❑ Should sound like "ta-dum"
- ❑ practise first bar of Cock o' the North

4. **Types of Tunes (introduction to the Band Sets)**

- ☐ 4/4 March (common time) no repeats
- ☐ 2/4 March
- ☐ 6/8 March (9/8, 12/8)
- ☐ 3/4 Retreat
- ☐ 4/4 Strathspey
- ☐ 2/2 Reel
- ☐ 6/8 Jig and Hornpipe
- ☐ Slow Air and Lament
- ☐ Piobaireachd