

The Functional Midsection: Three Steps Closer to Bridging the Gap

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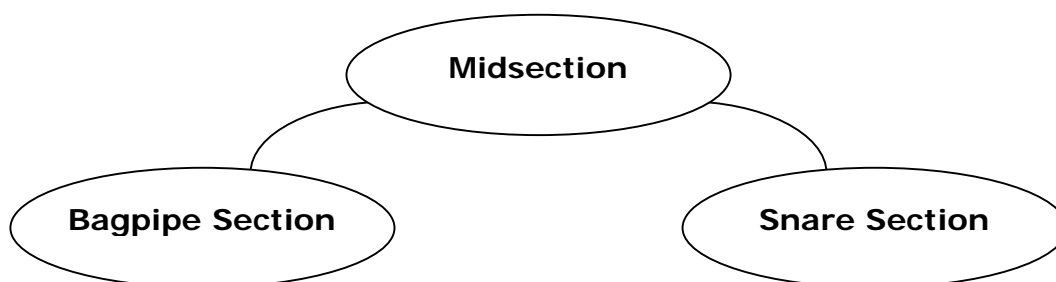
I would like to begin by thanking the BC Pipers' Association and the Western United States Pipe Band Association for the honor of being asked to contribute the following segment to both of your publications. Interest in this issue is long overdue – with the function of the midsection rapidly expanding today, it is important for both players and judges alike to recognize the increasing importance and ability of the midsection to contribute to the integration of sections in today's pipe band.

The following article will outline my vision of the fundamental functions of the midsection towards 'integrating' the musical space between sections in hopes of providing a blueprint for section leader's using the midsection functionally to their musical advantage. In other words, using the midsection as a means of 'bridging the gap' between sections that much closer together, therefore bringing the band ensemble to another level.

We can easily summarize the roles of today's midsection under three fundamental points:

- It provides a foundation of time within the pipe band ensemble – providing a rhythmic reference and foundation for the melody and complex rhythmic structures of snare drumming.
- It rhythmically highlights or enhances key areas within the melody and the snare section – possibly through the use of various voices (or pitches).
- It visually interprets the pitches and rhythms of the melody and the snare drum accompaniment – possibly through the use of various arm movement and/or stick flourish combinations.

In the 78th Frasers, we view the midsection as devoted neither entirely towards the melody nor towards the snare section, but rather a complete intermediary between the two (see figure 1.1). This may at first seem like an abstract concept, since historically the midsection has largely weighted its functionality towards the snare section. I am only touching the surface on the latter topics; however, I hope by the end of this article you too agree that the midsection is in fact the 'bridge' that unifies the two sections to its periphery.



Unifying structure #1: Time as the Foundation for Integration

Time is the foundation for the rhythmic structures of the melody and the snare drum accompaniment. Time defines what the time signature of a tune is; everything that the bagpipe and snare drums play is simply a subdivision of that reference. Historically, the function of the midsection was devoted solely towards providing a foundation of time or in layman's terms 'keeping the beat'. The value and importance of time has recently been placed on 'standby' as the functions of the midsection have evolved to what they are today. I personally believe that the importance of time should not be underestimated; the harmonics and release created by the midsection playing time together as a whole is one of the most beautiful things that can happen in a pipe band. More importantly, the playing of time provides a reference towards the 'center' – it gives us a listener or judge, a reference in which we are able to make sense of what is being played, and where it is being played in relation to that 'center'. Is it on the front end or on the back end of the beat? Is the pipe corps playing ahead of that 'center'? Are the snare drums playing behind it? But are they consistently behind? The playing of time is therefore an easy and natural means of creating integration between the pipe and snare corps by providing a rhythmic support to the varying rhythmic structures that are developed from it. It also provides a reference for the listener or judge to access to what degree the sections are rhythmically integrating.

Unifying Structure #2: Functional Rhythmic Accentuation and Syncopation

Once time is established, then it is appropriate for the midsection to construct rhythmic structures from that foundation. I view the function of rhythmic accentuation and syncopation by the midsection as a means of highlighting and adding color to important areas in both the melody and snare drum accompaniment – not just the snare drumming! I would argue that today, many snare sections do not focus their compositional efforts on writing directly to the melody but rather create a rhythmic accompaniment over top of it. In a perfect world, the midsection should be capable of highlighting a rhythmic structure of the snare drumming and naturally have it blend with a rhythmic structure in the melody – this is unfortunately not always the case. In our midsection, we focus our compositional efforts on creating rhythmic structures that highlight not only what is happening in the snare drumming, but also what is happening in the melody as well. Or, if rhythmic structures in the snare drumming are used as a reference for accentuation, we will voice the rhythm using various pitches of tenor drums to either ascend or descend with the melody line or even at times create harmonics within it (depending on the key of the tune and the chosen pitch of drums ... we won't go there ... we could devote an entire article to this concept alone). I have learned that the midsection has the ability to make the snare drumming relate to the melody – regardless of whether it is solely being written as a form of accompaniment over the top of it! Therefore, when rhythmic accentuation and syncopation is used, it should serve the same function as a means of integration between sections as time, bringing the gap that much closer together.

Unifying Structure #3: Functional Stick Flourishing

Today's pipe band has resurrected the visual element of the midsection. We now view the art of tenor drumming as an integrated art within itself, and therefore an important aspect of today's pipe band. Very often I see flourishing integrated within a tenor drum score to paradoxically serve as a 'function of little function' – being simply incorporated for the sake of filling space on a rest or tacet. What do I mean when I refer to functional stick flourishing? I believe that the midsection (particularly the tenor drummers) has the ability to create a form of visual integration between the melody and snare drum accompaniment by providing a visual representation of the rhythmic structures between sections. I believe that the same attempt to bridge the gap between sections should be done visually as it is done audibly. In a sense, I see the function of flourishing as almost a type of visual harmonic, or perhaps visual rhythms that 'jive' with both sections to the midsections' periphery. Perhaps 'visual integration' is another fundamental component of ensemble that should be more considered in the future under our association's ensemble criteria?

I have only been able to touch the surface on the contribution of the midsection towards achieving integration between sections. It should therefore become obvious that function behind a process is the key. As a member of a midsection, my mandate is devoted entirely towards the process of 'blending', 'integration', and 'unity' – the 'togetherness' we feel when we listen to our favorite rock band on the radio or favorite pipe band at the World Championships. Building a bridge is easy – once you know what type of stone to use. The midsection as far as I am concerned is that 'bridge'.

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