

To Flourish or Not to Flourish

© by Tyler Fry, 78th Fraser Highlanders Pipe Band

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This question raises a valid point that from a competitive mind set, that flourishing may at first seem like a wasted effort or something that does not contribute musically to the depth of ensemble in the band. It is obvious that tenor drummers, according to current ideologies, are in fact "drummers" and "carry a drum" therefore should "play it" as any drummer should. The problem arises when players enter a competitive mind-set that actually detracts from what we are actually here to accomplish in the first place - music. If we are here to create music, then who are we trying to please? We are all involved in this art form to accomplish a goal - unfortunately we all don't focus on the same desired outcome in the end.

When pipe bands originally entered this "game" called competition, the mid-section under the Scottish Pipe Band Association (at the time) was judged by the March, Dress and Department judge, and they were judged on the intricacy and uniformity of the flourishes and movements the section performed together within the band. As tenor drummers began contributing rhythmically within the ensemble, the role of mid-section judge was then passed on to the band drumming judge in the late 1950's, where the role still exists within the RSPBA today. The visual element of the mid-section probably went on a strong decline ever since this time. Why did it go? Because apparently it no longer mattered - the players were caught in a mind-set that involved doing what it takes "to win" a competition under a judge that paid very little attention to the visual element (how could he when he was also judging the entire snare corps?). There was probably more "visual music" being created then, than there is even in some of the top bands today. I would personally have a problem conforming to ignorance. I think it's a shame both then and today that what was artistically done within the section was not considered "music" - arguably I have seen some bands with better music in the air than others will ever hope to accomplish on their instrument. It was throughout the 30 years that followed this change, that in North America a strong divide began to occur between a "flourishing tenor" and a "rhythm tenor". Are we all not just "tenor drummers"?

90% of the time, at this stage in history, what your midsection does visually will not matter to the one guy standing with the clipboard behind your corps. Does this really matter? How about putting the 20,000 people sitting in the seats behind the corps? Adds a new perspective to the whole "game" doesn't it? Are we there to please 1 person or 20,000 people? I personally know of no better feeling than playing music in the groove, on brilliant sounding instruments that harmoniously match and blend with the rest of the ensemble, while creating the same harmonious visual show with the same energy, drive, and space as everything else occurring all around me. And finally, the power of taking the involvement of those 20,000 people and applying their energy within you - there is no other feeling like it the world - not even 1 person with a clipboard telling you that you have won a World Championship. Until you experience that feeling - it is impossible to understand what this "game" is really all about. But, it is a lifelong goal that I hope everyone strives for - the visual element is what can fully "encompass" those 20,000 people into your music. It is a shame

that the few individuals with the clipboard are often the ones ignorant to this power - they are too busy looking for what they know and understand, rather than what musically works. To a score sheet reading "tenor drummers not contributing enough rhythmically" - my response to that would be "really?" Perhaps it was easier to understand the rhythms on the instrument than the space between them? Or perhaps the rhythmic accentuation on the instrument was easier to write about than the rhythmic accentuation in the air?

What it comes down to is this: As tenor drummers we should be striving to highlight and accompany the important rhythmic variations in the melody (and naturally the snare drumming as well - dependent upon the depth and composition of course). We should not be limited to this however. Since we are only highlighting these key areas, hopefully we fill the space between each of the notes played with some form of tacet. It is in these spaces between the notes played that provide adequate room for the visual component. However, too often the same respect towards the melody that was created with the notes played is not taken into account in the visual component; therefore the entire goal of the visual aspect of the art is lost entirely - what was done in the air is not sympathetic to the rest of the ensemble and we are back to stage 1, where the flourishing bears no musical context whatsoever. This is an obvious misconception - even at the grade 1 level. What you do play is not as important as what you don't play, but what you don't play should bear the same relationship to the melody as what you do play.

I think that you will find that as more judges become educated on the importance of maintaining this visual "tradition" and it's relationship to the entire ensemble, you can expect to see some great changes occurring. In the PPBSO we have an ensemble seminar for all judges coming up. One topic of discussion will be: "To what degree does the mid-section contribute visually to the integration amongst sections and how well does it create a visual representation of this integration?" and also "To what degree does the mid-section integrate the two sections together - both rhythmically and visually?" I think that we can expect great things to come from tenor drumming and mid-sections as a whole. We have the support of many key players in the pipe band world amongst associations - it is now simply a matter of making it happen. It is an important aspect of the pipe band tradition, and it can still be done without the elimination of the rhythmic component - very much like the rhythmic component can still be done without the elimination of the visual component. You will see over the next ten years, the tenor drum become an instrument of great importance and value - an art form that is arguably more complex than any other form of percussion in the pipe band idiom.

Wait, watch and listen to what you see but don't hear.

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