

Learning to play the pipe band snare drum

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Our thoughts on learning to play the pipe band snare drum.

It could be said that almost anyone can learn to play the pipe band snare drum, however this is a broad statement so maybe some qualification is in order. There is no doubt that Scottish pipe music is a specialized form, so a feel or affinity for the music at the outset is a great help. This article will start with a few **Q** and **A** statements that may provide you with a useful overview.

- **Q.** Do you have to be Scottish to learn this stuff?
- **A.** Absolutely not.
- **Q.** Is it easy to learn the pipe band snare?
- **A.** It depends on you, people with natural talent find it easier than others.
- **Q.** Is it expensive?
- **A.** No, all you need to start is a pair of pipe band style sticks and a practice pad.
- **Q.** Do I have to read music?
- **A.** Initially no, but it would be advisable to learn once you have made some progress.
- **Q.** How often must I practice?
- **A.** Ideally half an hour a day, every day. Short sessions often, is the key to success.
- **Q.** What will I get out of it?
- **A.** Pleasure, self-satisfaction and the camaraderie that comes from being in a band.
- **Q.** Must I take part in competitions?
- **A.** Not if you don't want to. Not all bands play in contests, but most players seem to enjoy the friendly rivalry of competition.
- **Q.** Is it necessary to join a band?
- **A.** Not necessary, but advisable. A lot of good bands will take beginners and give them free instruction.
- **Q.** Are there solo competitions for pipe band drummers?
- **A.** Yes, right up to World class level.
- **Q.** What's the most important attribute I need?
- **A.** That's easy - desire. You must *want* to do this, only then will you achieve success.
- **Q.** How long will it take for me to become a good player?
- **A.** It depends on you. The willingness to practice diligently is essential. Some people can become "good" within 3 or 4 years, others spend all their lives.
- **Q.** I've noticed that most snare drummers seem to be men/boys, is there a reason for this?

- **A.** No reason that should get in your way! While it's true that historically men have predominated, in recent years women/girls have shown considerable talent and ability.

The above questions and answers are a fair representation of things I've been asked (especially since living in the USA). There seems to be a growing interest here in pipe music generally, this is what prompted me to write this page. Other sites on the Web do a good job of the explaining the basics such as gripping the sticks correctly and learning the rudiments, so I won't repeat them here. I will emphasize however that there is no substitute for learning your rudiments properly, even players who have reached a high standard often practice rudiments. There is a trap you must try to avoid, (I have fallen into it more than once). When a certain degree of proficiency is attained, the desire to produce scores and invent new rhythms to complement tunes can be very strong, the trap is that it becomes easy to neglect your rudiments. Don't do it. Write scores of course, but don't neglect the basics.

Apart from having the desire to succeed, the next most important thing you should do is to seek help. It may be possible for a determined individual to become proficient alone but it will be much easier with the assistance of a good teacher. I'm not going to recommend specific teachers, but here is a short list of general teaching aids you may want to get your hands on.

- "The Essential Rudiments" a VHS video by Jim Kilpatrick - a top class player and several times World Solo Champion. Many pipe band dealers have this video.
- The RSPBA (Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association) has a multiple volume set of structured learning books for pipes and drums. Visit their site at www.rspb.co.uk The North American or Canadian Associations may have similar publications but at the time of writing I'm not sure of this.
- Tom and Gordon Brown (father and son) are two well known figures in the drumming world. They will shortly be releasing a book on drumming. You can contact them at www.bassandtenor.com or via e-mail to tgdrummer@aol.com

If you're not getting instruction within a band you may want to consider a private teacher. Look for a teacher that is a reasonable player and has a good grasp of the rudiments, a mentor like this will start you off down the right road. Be wary of any teacher who says he/she can show you a "shortcut" method, there aren't any shortcuts. Don't be afraid to ask teachers to demonstrate their ability, not all good players are good teachers but most good teachers can play reasonably well. The reason I don't mention specific teachers is because it sometimes can do them more harm than good. I have heard a student talking badly of a person who I know to be a good player *and* teacher, I was more inclined to blame the student. You must bear in mind that the world's best teachers can't *make* you a good player, they can show you *how* to do things and the best way to achieve results but *you* must make yourself a good player by practicing correctly.

Resign yourself to the fact that it's going to take some time. Euclid, the ancient Greek mathematician, once said to his King: "Sire, there is no royal road to geometry". Likewise, there is "no royal road" to drumming. The snare drum is an intractable instrument that can and will frustrate you at times no matter who you are, persevere, it will eventually give in!

Incidentally, when you first start, don't worry about getting a snare drum or even playing one, you can become a good player by using a practice pad. Even though a drum feels

different from a pad, moving from pad to drum is no big deal once you can play. Nowadays there is a tendency for impatience to take over - people want to play a drum and learn scores from the start, I may be a little old fashioned but I don't think this is the way to go. My father started teaching me when I was eight years old and I played everything I could get a sound out of *except* a drum, I was eleven before he let me touch one!

A good positive approach is this: even persons who have played for the greater part of their lives have only *really* been playing a few months! Most drummers could not honestly say they have practiced half an hour a day every day of their lives but even if they *have*, they *still* only have a few months of actual playing experience! Work out the arithmetic, you'll see what I mean. Players with 5 or 6 years experience have only been playing a matter of weeks! So there you are, it doesn't really take long at all - does it?

Finally, don't make the mistake of blaming your equipment for your own shortcomings. A good player will be noticeable even with the world's crappiest sticks and a bad drum. I like the golfer Lee Trevino's phrase, I quote: "The skill isn't in the arrow, it's in the Indian!"

If you've had the patience to read all of this I congratulate you! It means you probably have the patience to become an ace pipe band drummer also!

Keep practicing!

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