

Memorising tunes

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Introduction

I have had to separately identify and organize my recommendations on memorization (which are otherwise intimately entangled with my philosophy and approach to practicing playing the pipes) and will post them in a couple of parts.

My entire set of tips and hints runs many pages (actually one entire chapter of the draft of a book)...and, with your forbearance, I will present it in several installments. I will try to make each part stand on it's own...but all of the methods form an integrated whole.

This first installment is the biggest ... it comes in two parts ...
An analytical framework and my first recommendations.

Framework

Where in your mind and body does your bagpipe playing come from?

I base my advice on the premise that you play your bagpipes most successfully when you play from the same "place" as you drive your car.

That is, your conscious mind acts as a navigator, setting your destination, deciding where to turn, deciding on how fast to get there...but it is the subconscious mind that is actually driving the car, using hands to steer the car, using feet to step on the gas and the brakes, using your body's eyes to look out for stop signs, traffic lights turning red, pedestrians, and other hazards. Your conscious mind has complete confidence in your subconscious mind's ability to drive the car...to the point of actually carrying on a conversation with the passenger in the next seat while the subconscious mind "drives" the car. When your brain has complete confidence in your fingers, you will be playing "out of your mind," you will be playing "in the zone."

Another way to think about it, your brain sets the goals but your fingers do the playing. (You may recognize concepts similar to "left brain-right brain" of Betty Edwards, "self one and self two" of Tim Gallwey. I am drawing from all of these and choosing the terms "conscious mind" or "brain" and "subconscious mind" or "fingers.")

What, then, is the process of learning. How do you, learn/memorize under this viewpoint? The conscious mind's role is to show the subconscious mind how to play a tune and then the conscious mind gets out of the way.

First, we must recognize that either the conscious mind or the subconscious mind can control and manipulate your fingers. I visualize the memorization process this way:

At first, the conscious mind uses your eyes to read the music and move the fingers according to the pattern of notes. The conscious mind is "showing" the subconscious mind how this tune goes.

Then comes repetition of the musical phrase (in this context, a phrase is a chunk of music that the piper is comfortable with memorizing, e.g. a four-note musical word, a two-bar phrase, an eight-bar part—all based on the piper's current musical memorization capability). The conscious mind makes the fingers play the phrase over and over (this might take 3-5 minutes...I'll articulate this in a future post about the Peking Piper's five-minute challenge) ...eventually the conscious mind gets familiar with the tune and its attention wanders. The subconscious mind reaches out under the conscious mind's finger control and starts manipulating the fingers.

The conscious mind at first resists this takeover and the fingers fumble, the fingers can lock up....the conscious mind has not developed confidence that the subconscious mind can do the job. (Imagine a father hanging on to the seat of a bicycle, running along side while his child pedals the wheels. The kid shouts, "let go, let go" and sooner or later the parent has to let go...the kid might wobble, but will straighten out and peddle on its own....that's successful learning and letting go.)

Now ... For the First Installment of Advice, "The Law of Big Finishes"

I agree with all the advice that says break the music into phrases and memorize a phrase at a time....but no one has recommended the order in which I think you should learn a tune.

The Peking Piper's Law of Big Finishes ... Audiences love big finishes.

Have you ever heard a performer get off to a shaky start, gain confidence, play well and end up with a grand flourish? It is easy to applaud for that performance, isn't it. But what about a performer who starts out well, but starts to forget and stumbles and/or peters out at the end? You are left with a disappointed feeling and can give only polite applause at best.

Is it self-evident that a performer performs best what he or she knows the best and has practiced the most? This leads to The Peking Piper's Corollary of Learning.....You should learn and memorize your tunes backwards!!, i.e. learn, practice, and memorize the last phrase first. (Isn't his just like a Chinese piper, to learn tunes backwards?)

For example: Scotland the Brave....learn the last two bars first. Be able to perform it with your eyes closed. Then learn, practice, repeat, memorize the first two bars of the last line. Play them with your eyes open...when you reach the memorized part...close your eyes and perform your big finish. (I will label the four two-bar phrases of the second half of Scotland the Brave, phrase E, phrase F, phrase C, phrase D. The two bar phrases in the first part will be A, B, C, D)

If you follow my advice you will be playing memorizing ...

Phrase D

Phrase C, Phrase D

Phrase F, Phrase C, Phrase D

Phrase E, F, C, D (the whole second part)

Phrase C & D (which you have already memorized), and the whole second part

Phrase B, C & D, then the whole second part

Phrase A, B, C & D (the whole first part), and then the whole second part..

I'm not asking you to play each new phrase just once...but to repeat it over and over until it's memorized "finger tight"then play it and then close your eyes and complete the tune.

(I follow this procedure on a four-parted competition tunes also, but substitute Part 4, then 3&4, etc. for phrases in your thinking)

I know this is contrary to your instinct...but give it a try...doesn't it make sense that you will get stronger as you play to the end?

More to come... The Carpet Stain Method, The One-Two Punch: Memorization and Recall, Physical Training tips, and more.

Good Luck

Practice not your art and it will soon depart.

....German Proverb

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People have different methods of memorizing tunes. I can tell you how I do it, and tell you that in three years I have memorized 150 tunes, which I can play on request, but this method may not work for you.

First, there are four levels: muscle memory, hearing memory, sight memory, and musical memory. Without a long discussion, I'll just say that you DO NOT want to memorize by muscle, by hearing, or by sight. Those will all fail you. When you memorize a tune, memorize it analytically, by breaking it down into its various components, rhythm, key, harmonic progression, melodic elements, etc.

Second, the first thing you want to do after deciding that you want to play a tune is memorize it. Do this immediately, before you can play it. Do this first thing. Always do this without fail. This is more important even than correct finger work at this stage. If you don't have the tune, you will not get the finger work or the rhythmic sense of the tune.

Now to memorize:

First analyze the tune. For example, say it has two parts, part one and part two. The first part has four phrases, 1, 2, 3, and 4. Each phrase has two bars, 1 and 2. Note which phrases are identical, and which phrases are almost identical.

Second, learn the first bar. Don't worry about anything else. Learning one bar is easy. Play it with the music, and play it without. Alternate like this until you have it down. In much march music, this will be bar 1 and bar 5.

Then, learn the first phrase. Alternate it with and without the music until you can play it in your sleep. This usually gets you half the first part.

Then, learn the first three bars. Including the two you have already learned. Alternate playing it with and without the music.

Then, learn the first two phrases.

Keep on going like this bar by bar until you learn the entire tune.

Don't skip bars, but always learn it from the top. Always relearn the preceding bars with each new bar. This will keep the tune together as a unit and you will reduce the chances of mixing up the tunes.

When you learn a tune, play it four times a day the first month, two times a day the second month, once a day the third month, and several times weekly thereafter, and you will never forget it.

By Don

I play them with the music in front of me over and over, like was already said. Then I memorize each part. One of the members of our band who is a professional, and amazing, musician learns the parts from the last to the first. Also, your not trying to memorize the tune like, E A torluah A etc. like trying to memorize a poem. Although I would imagine some do. Your best thing is to memorize the "movements" of your fingers as well as "sing" the tune as you play.

In order to not mess up the ending or confuse it with another tune you need two things. PRACTICE and MORE PRACTICE, and a super human brain. Everyone has done it at one time or another.

By Dave Beyea

The thing helped me memorize songs in my marching band days in High School was to listen to the tune long enough so you can sing it to yourself. Don't just try to memorize the fingerings. If you know where the songs going it's easy to follow it. Hope this helps.

By Casey

All of this is very good advice, now for my 2 cents worth. I find listening to it greatly helps. When I get the music to tunes that I have heard on a cd and am very familiar with, I can usually memorize it after looking at the music just two or three times. If you have to memorize something quick, you could try taping yourself playing it with the music then listen to your tape as much as possible. Once you can sing along with it and anticipate what the next note is going to be, you've pretty much got it memorized. Now just look at the music a few times to make the connection between your fingers and what's in your head and you should have it memorized in no time.

By Chris Eyre

I always keep the music in front of me during the learning stage. Play it through several times until your fingers are happy with it, and then take it two bars at a time - 1. look at it and play - 2. look away from it and play it. Just keep alternating like that until you're sure of it. Then move on the the next two bars. Doing it that way, I can then usually "see" the sheet music in my head every time I want to play it, because the sheet music was closely associated right through the learning process.

I find learning in groups of 2 bars at a time usually works the fastest because the structure of most tunes are built in 2 bar phrases.
