

Judging Piobaireachd

The Piobaireachd Society Judges Seminar

The seminar for piobaireachd judges in March looked at judging quality. These seminars are run by the Piobaireachd Society twice a year. Normally set tunes are discussed but as the Gold and Silver Medal competitions this year are own choice there was room for another topic. On this occasion a small number of senior competing pipers also attended. Piobaireachd Society President Jack Taylor talks here about the seminar and the thinking behind it.

The purpose of this seminar was to have a look at judging quality, but it is not that there have been any serious concerns about decisions. It is more that there is a general climate now of performers looking for justification and comments about decisions from judges. Twenty years ago it was the exception for a player to ask the judge for comments. This is much less the case now.

Alistair Aitken talked at the seminar about the system of training for pipe band judges. He spoke of how the current RSPBA system had developed in the 1980s because of concerns in the ever expanding and international pipe band world. It could be argued that the solo world has expanded in a similar way, and therefore

that judges should be not only well informed but also able to give constructive information about their results. There are no plans however for solo judges to have a training programme along the RSPBA lines — the system for solo judge selection and training in Scotland will remain much the same as at present.

This is that any judge wishing to be considered for the judges' list puts his or her name forward with relevant information and the names of two referees. This is considered by a panel of three senior judges, currently John Wilson, Tom Speirs and myself, and applicants are either refused, or put on the approved, accredited or senior list. Training and development is through attendance at our seminars, active judging and mentoring by experienced

judges. Judges can also be removed from the list if there are any concerns about bias or poor results.

Outwith Scotland there are different approaches to appointing judges, with Canada and America in particular having more exam-based systems. The seminar saw a critique sheet which is used in Ontario (abbreviated copy at fig 1), and this stimulated some interest. I plan to talk to Bob Worrall over the summer to learn more from him about the system there.

There are arguments for and against critique sheets and both sides were discussed at the seminar. John Wilson made the point that: "Judging is not just to sort out the prize winners. We need to have an appraisal of the performance with the aim of improving the musical standard."

THE PIPERS' & PIPE BAND SOCIETY OF ONTARIO			PIOBAIREACHD																
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COMPETITOR'S PERFORMANCE LEVEL <i>Adjudicator will check one of the following for each competitor</i>																			
_____ Level 4: The competitor has demonstrated a high level of musical, technical, and tonal mastery for this grade	_____ Level 2: The competitor has demonstrated a basic competence in the musical, technical, and tonal expectations for this grade																		
_____ Level 3: The competitor has demonstrated a high level of mastery in two of the following performance components: musicality; technique; and tone.	_____ Level 1: The competitor has demonstrated a need to focus on more than one of the following performance components: musicality; technique; and tone.																		

Figure 1

John gave his own checklist (fig 2) which helps to disassemble tone, technique and musicianship. After the seminar Alistair Aitken sent me the Piobaireachd Assessment Framework developed by the Piping and Drumming Qualifications Board (fig 3) and I think that this is helpful too.

Some reservations about critique sheets were expressed at the seminar — for example the difficulty of listening and writing, and of quantifying that very subjective element, musicality. There were worries too that the integrity of the “bench” could be compromised if different opinions were expressed, but the

players present at the seminar didn't have a problem with that.

Two brave players, John Mulhearn and Alasdair Henderson, each played a piobaireachd at the seminar and were given comments by three senior judges. Both played well and we are grateful to them for “putting their heads on the block”.

The purpose of this was to give the judges at the seminar a chance to make judgement and comments having heard the ideas put forward by Alistair Aitken and John Wilson.

It might be that more judges will now be

willing to give written comments to players. The Northern Meeting and the Argyllshire Gathering already insist that sheets are written for the Silver Medal Competitions. One is given from the bench already, and I think that could become one from each judge. I wouldn't be surprised if in future they ask that sheets are written for Gold Medal, or even for the Clasp and Senior competitions. The Piobaireachd Society would be keen to see a debate in the piping press about all these matters. ●

A full note of the seminar is on the Piobaireachd Society Website at www.piobaireachd.co.uk.

Figure 2
PERFORMANCE COMPONENTS
by John Wilson

SOUND QUALITY

- Accuracy and clarity of note interval
- Intonation – sound quality being sustained throughout performance
- Drone harmony with chanter being produced
- Drone balance as in bass v tenor
- Overall tonal balance of instrument – drones against chanter

EXECUTION

- Embellishments – accurate and precise delivery in terms of rhythmical flow (embellishments essential in articulating pipe tune and add character to a piece of music)

MUSICAL INTERPRETATION

- The “stamp” a piper puts on his chosen piece
- The “heart and soul” of the competition presentation
- Why is it so important? – it involves the composer, the performer and ultimately the listener (judge)

MOOD

- Emotive theme – how does the performance reflect this as in sadness, excitement etc.

TEMPO/RHYTHM

- Use of pulsing and appropriate speed in presentation

EXPRESSION

- Within the rhythmical context is the performance producing a level of musical sensitivity colour and subtlety whereby the piper is creating his/her “stamp” on the performance?

PHRASING

- This is what gives the tune its contours and shape. Is there order and balance to the presentation? Is it highlighting the “question and answer” aspect of the composition?

Figure 3 **PIOBAIREACHD ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK**

1. Rhythm and Phrasing	Poorly developed sense of rhythm and phrasing but inconsistently applied	Some evidence of an attempt at phrasing and rhythm, the greater part of the performance	Fair sense of rhythm and phrasing applied for	Excellent sense of rhythm
2. Tempo inappropriate tempo	Inconsistent and inappropriate tempos	Some inconsistent and tempo applied for the greater part of the performance	Consistent and appropriate tempo with excellent fluency	Consistent and appropriate
3. Technique predominant	Incorrect technique require correction and/or improvement	Some areas of technique for the greater part of the performance	Correct technique applied	Excellent technique
4. Tone unbalanced and not in tune with each other. Poor tonal quality achieved.	Drones and chanter balanced and in tune with each other. Satisfactory tonal quality achieved.	Drones and chanter adequately	Drones and chanter well balanced and in tune with each other. Good tonal quality achieved.	Drones and chanter finely balanced and in tune with each other throughout. Superior tonal quality achieved.
5. Melody/ Musical Expression	No sense of melody	Some unbalanced phrases character of the piece quite well	Some inconsistencies in expressing melody, but generally portraying of melodies well	Flowing and well balanced portraying the character
6. Mistakes/ faults stumbling and damaging musical effect	Frequent faltering or not so frequent as to	Faltering or stumbling destroy overall effect	Only minor faults/stumbles	No faults/stumbles



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