



RNZPBA
EDUCATION
GROUP

BAND PRACTICES

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Band Practices

Introduction

Ahhhh, it's band practice night! Deep joy. Here goes another 3-4 hour marathon slogging through the tunes!

Or, at least that's how it used to be, and possibly still is for some of us. Band practice, or more correctly, Band *rehearsal* (it's the individuals that do the practice in order to attend the rehearsal) can be a monumental waste of time if not planned and executed well. We all have limited time to spend on activities outside of our work and family life, and we need to make sure that this time is well spent. Too often, there is little forethought from the band leadership as to how that rehearsal time is going to be spent, resulting in a disjointed session with little musical gain. As with anything we do, time spent planning the approach is time well invested.

More practice and collective rehearsal does not necessarily result in a higher level of performance. If we are not practicing and rehearsing the right elements in the proper fashion, we can be perfecting our errors and cementing these into our performances! It really all comes back to each individual and then to the leaders of the band to put

the whole performance together. This tutorial aims to highlight some areas of individual responsibility and additionally what the band leadership should be doing to ensure our practices are well thought-out and coherent from one week to the next.

The National Contest Aftermath

The National Contest is over for another year, and we are on the way back to our home towns, thoughts firmly focussed on what happened over the weekend, where we did well and where we did not do so well. This is a starting point (for most of us) for the ensuing yearly plan for the band. But we actually need to look a little deeper straight way:

- *What is the membership looking like for the next season? Are we going to have enough/too many players?*
- *Where are the band members at? Are they ready to launch into the new season with fresh enthusiasm or do they need a break to recharge (and how long should this be)?*
- *What are the major areas of weakness identified (by the adjudication panel and ourselves)?*
- *What things do we do well?*
- *How are the bands' finances looking? What further revenue sources should we be looking at?*
- *Are we utilising the skills sets of the band membership to best effect?*

And the list could go on. The RNZPBA Leaders Seminar road-show (30 Sep – 4 Oct 07) will be looking at some higher level planning for success so I encourage you to get along to the seminar and drain the presenters dry for information and strategies.



My main point here is that the pipe major and leading drummer need to be well ahead of the game in order to provide the best chance for the band to develop to its potential in any given year. The time between contesting seasons is short and can disappear before any real progress has been made. To be really successful in achieving the bands' potential, there needs to be a five-year plan, supplemented with an annual plan that provides detail on exactly how the band is going to achieve the goals and outcomes desired and within definitive timeframes. The five-year plan needs to be reviewed annually and updated, so that the band always has a five-year plan and is continually making measurable progress towards the set goals within it.

A five-year plan is important, and the annual plan for the year needs to fit within it. I am not going to go into a lot of detail here about what should be in the five-year plan, but some objectives/goals could include:

- ◆ *Grow the membership of the band*
- ◆ *Have a teaching system that provides a constant stream of potential band members*
- ◆ *Develop the musical standards so that progress can be made through the current grade and towards promotion to the next grade (if there is one!)*
- ◆ *Update the pipe chanters*
- ◆ *Update the drums*
- ◆ *Update the band uniform*

Again, goals within the five-year plan could include a lot more than this. It is important to note here that not all pipe bands' plans will be the same. It will depend on where the leadership and membership see the band going in the mid- to long-term and how they go about getting there. Not every pipe band wants to move to a higher grade. Not every band wants to be a competitive band. No problem. But, whatever the bands' overall aim or mission, it must be a credible advertisement for pipe banding in New Zealand. It must look and sound the part if it is to have a positive impression on the public. Don't take this responsibility lightly.

Broad Plan for the Year

There is a lot more besides musical elements to make sure the bands' objectives are achieved (recruitment and retention, finances, etc), but in this section, I will focus on the musical elements that need to be in place. The first real aspect that needs to be cemented in place is the aim or mission for the next competing season, and what the measurable goals/outputs are in order to achieve the aim. Some examples of goals might be:

- ◆ *All music memorised by (specific timeframe)*
- ◆ *Full attendances at band practices*
- ◆ *No mistakes during performances*
- ◆ *Clean attacks and finishes during performances*
- ◆ *Improve the overall sound*
- ◆ *Improve integration within each corps*
- ◆ *Improve the integration between the pipe and drum corps*

Again, this list could go on for quite a bit, but we do not want to make the mistake of making a long list which will be next to impossible to achieve or that will spread our focus too wide meaning we do not meet any of our goals. The outputs should be attainable, measurable, and have the full support of the membership.

We need to establish reference points during the year to establish or measure what progress has been made towards each of the outputs/goals agreed. In order to do this, we need to have a plan for the year. Whilst no one plan will satisfy every band or one band for successive years, the outline on the next page may serve as a starting point.

Remember, this is a 'top of my head' plan for some aspects of the musical element only. It is not exhaustive nor is it necessarily appropriate for any particular band. You will have many more musical elements to include here as well that are appropriate for your band. An annual plan (or at least summary like that above) should be prepared for each of the aspects you have identified that are vital to achieving the bands' mission (finances, membership, sound, etc).



Month	Output/Activity - Membership	Output/Activity - Leadership
March – April	- Rest, recover from Nationals and work up enthusiasm for the coming year. - Ensure instrument is in a well-maintained condition.	- Ensure recruiting/retention initiatives are in place. - Look at music for the next competing season. Ask for suggestions from the membership.
May	- Turn up to band practice with well-maintained instrument - Commence learning tunes - Be part of the tuition programme (either as a student or a teacher)	- Issue new music and establish outputs/goals for the season - Make and issue CD/tape of music/scores to each member - Commence the tuition programme for learners - Communicate with leading drummer - Order reeds/heads etc required for the season (may be split into 3 separate orders to arrive at specific times during the year)
June	- Continue learning tunes - Develop instrument so that the best and most reliable sound is be consistently achieved - Turn up to band practice - Continue involvement in tuition programme	- monitor tuition programme to ensure it is functioning properly and quality tuition is being delivered - Discuss with leading drummer how the new tunes are developing. Do we need to change anything? Finalise tunes/scores - Develop the bands' sound - Ensure the basics (especially starts and stops) are addressed
July	- Tunes memorised - Continue involvement in tuition programme - Turn up to band practice	- Monitor tuition programme - Ensure all music is properly memorised by the end of June - Communicate with leading drummer 1st instalment of reeds/drum heads etc received
August-early November	- Continue involvement in tuition programme - Turn up to band practice - Attend Band parades - Ensure instrument is well maintained	- Monitor tuition programme - Develop pipers and drummers basic musicianship and technical skills (starts, stops, blowing, technique, intro rolls, dynamics etc) - Ensure the band practice regime includes 'dummy' contest runs where everything from tune-up to performance is rehearsed 2nd instalment of reeds etc received in September
Mid November - December	- Continue involvement in tuition programme - Turn up to band practice - Attend band parades - Play at competitions - Ensure instrument is well maintained	- Continue rehearsing the competition day routine - Monitor tuition programme - Communicate with leading drummer - Get independent opinion on the bands' performance level
January - February	- Continue involvement in tuition programme - Turn up to band practice - Attend band parades - Play at competitions - Ensure instrument is well maintained	- Final instalment of reeds etc received - Monitor tuition programme - Communicate with leading drummer - Continue competition day rehearsal
March	- Perform to potential at National Pipe Band Championship - Enjoy the day!	- Ensure the bands' competition day routine is well executed at the National Pipe Band Championship - Enjoy the day!

Band Rehearsals

Once the leadership has a broad plan of action for the year, broken down by month, they can get down to the detail of deciding what is to be achieved at each band practice. This cannot be done in too much detail too early, as it will depend largely on how the individual corps are developing during the course of the year. The pipe major and leading drummer must continue to communicate so that coherent development between corps is achieved.

It will be relatively common for bands' to rehearse once each week during the winter months and build up to more rehearsals as the competition season starts in earnest. How many rehearsals is not as important as the content of each rehearsal. Most bands' will have a 2 hour band rehearsal most weeks. Utilised wisely, this is ample. I would even argue that 1 ½ hours is sufficient. To make the most of the bands' rehearsal time, there are a number of vital factors that must be consistently achieved:

- The membership must turn up to rehearsal on time (preferably 10 mins early)
- All instruments must be in an excellent state of repair and be sounding well. Any maintenance or sound issues with individual instruments need to be rectified before the rehearsal (i.e. sometime during the week preceding)
- All tunes/score memory targets set by the pipe major and leading drummer must be met

For me, these requirements are a basic starting point to achieving a good rehearsal. There are few more frustrating things than waiting for band members to turn up to rehearsal, and for them to turn up late with a poor instrument and without the tunes/scores properly memorised. It drags the whole team down.

The actual band rehearsal regime will be different in the winter months than it is when the spring arrives and the contesting season is just around the corner. A winter rehearsal programme may look something like this:

Winter Rehearsal Version 1

Time	Activity
7.00pm – 7.25pm	● Pipe Major and Leading Drummer meet if required to confirm any tune/score arrangements and to confirm the nights rehearsal activity
7.30pm – 8.30pm	● Chanter/Pad Practice – tunes should be fluent (with music at this stage) ● MSR and medley systematically played. P/M & L/D to ensure there are no errors (in the music and the players!), and ensure that the expression and tempos of each tune are well communicated to each corps. Note that pipers and drummers are rehearsing independently at this point.
8.30pm – 9.00pm	● Pipe and Drum Corps get together and play MSR and Medley on chanters and pads with musical aspects relevant to the whole band being highlighted by the P/M (tempos, expression, breaks/transitions etc)
9.00pm	● End of rehearsal

Winter Rehearsal Version 2

Time	Activity
7.00pm – 7.25pm	● Pipe Major and Leading Drummer meet if required to confirm any tune/score arrangements and to confirm the nights rehearsal activity
7.30pm – 8.30pm	● Chanter/Pad Practice – tunes should be fluent (with music at this stage) ● MSR and medley systematically played. P/M & L/D to ensure there are no errors (in the music and the players!), and ensure that the expression and tempos of each tune are well communicated to each corps. Note that pipers and drummers are rehearsing independently at this point.
8.30pm – 8.50pm	● Pipe Corps warm up pipes and tune ● Drum corps conduct warm-up routine
8.50pm – 9.30pm	● Full band plays together (Street March tunes, MSR(s) and Medley)
9.30pm	● End of rehearsal

Summer Rehearsal

Time	Activity
6.30pm – 7.00pm	Pipe Major and Leading Drummer meet if required to confirm any tune/score arrangements and to confirm the nights rehearsal activity
7.00pm – 7.20pm	Pipe Corps warm up pipes and tune
7.20pm – 8.30pm	- Pipe and Drum Corps rehearse MSR and Medley (and street march) - musical aspects relevant to the whole band highlighted by the P/M (tempos, expression, breaks/transitions etc) - This time period should include a couple of breaks, and also a ‘dummy’ run of the competition day routine
8.30pm	End of rehearsal

The possibilities for variations on these basic rehearsal routines are just about limitless. At the very least, I hope to have stirred the planning genes within each of you so that you can develop a plan that will be appropriate to achieving your bands’ goals and overall mission.

Practice/Rehearsal Techniques

Individual practice and band rehearsals should be enjoyable. That is not to say that there will be no hard work involved; to get to any decent sort of playing standard, the hard yards must be put in on a regular basis. But hard yards can be enjoyable as well!

A great way of maximising the full band rehearsal is to split the band up into mixed ability groups with a senior piper/drummer leading each group. These groups can then meet outside of band rehearsal night and go thorough in-depth development of the tunes, technique, maintenance etc. The pipe major/leading drummer can guide the leaders of these groups so that they are confident that the right messages are getting through consistently. A CD of the tunes and scores issued to all band members will help no end as well.

It is vital that all members of the band conform to the way the tunes/scores are being played. There is no room for individual flair within a pipe or drum corps. If our preferred style of playing is not what the pipe major or leading drummer is after, then we need to conform – or walk out the door!

Chanter/Pad Practice. This is an area where the rehearsal may get a bit tedious and boring if enough variety is not employed. Imagine the whole winter whacking thorough the tunes/scores with no variety or focus from week to week! There are a number of ways to achieve this variety:

Going around the table, an individual starts a particular tune with the rest of the corps joining in for the repeat of that part. Then the next individual along

plays the first time through the next part with the corps joining in for the repeat. This will allow the pipe major/leading drummer to get a fairly good impression of how the members are coping with the tunes/scores and where there are specific weaknesses. This method also prevents the membership getting bored or switching off while one person is being instructed.

Another version of what we have just covered above is going around the table, individuals play one part each of the tune in turn. The pipe major/leading drummer can then focus in on an individuals technique, style, expression and errors. Playing on your own in front of your band peers usually concentrates the mind somewhat!

The whole group can play a tune in phrases with a beat gap between each phrase. This is particularly useful for a 2/4 March where we are trying to play in two-bar phrases.

‘Difficult’ areas of tunes can be repeated over and over as individuals and as a group. This would be used where there is perhaps a good deal of tricky technique and/or timing. It could be an area of a tune/score where adjudicators know there is particularly technical/timing difficulty and will be listening for how well the band executes it.

Attacks/Finishes. This is another vital area where a lot of bands' lose valuable points and do not create and maintain a good impression. The band can be split into ranks to do the attack into the circle on the march in front of the rest of the band. This is good for the confidence of the members if they are consistently getting it right and exposes any individual weakness in the attack. If need be, players can be dropped out of the rank in order to identify who is having problems with the attack. Remember, this should not be an accusatory or unpleasant experience for anyone. It is merely a method to developing a good attack. If an individual is hiding a weakness in any area, then they are doing the whole group a disservice because that weakness(es) will be detracting from the overall group performance.

A similar approach can be taken with finishes. Each rank can play the last part of the final tune and then execute the finish. It will be easily apparent who cannot stop their drones at the right point, who cannot keep the chanter going up to pitch right to the end, who is cutting their chanter out too early, who is racing ahead of the beat to complete the tune. A really good performance can be mortally wounded with a weak ending and poor finish.

You will be able to think up many more activities that will vary the content of the band rehearsal time whilst serving the purpose of identifying and fixing any faults that manifest themselves. Band leaders need to be inventive and creative in order to maintain the membership interest for the duration of the rehearsal and from one rehearsal to the next. They should leave the rehearsal on a high, hardly able to wait for the next band rehearsal!

Summary

If there was one word I could use to sum up what I have been trying get across in this tutorial, it would be “planning”. If we do not plan, then we plan to fail. Each aspect of our band operation must be examined, all the moving parts that go into each aspect identified, and strategies developed which will address each of these moving parts to ensure they function correctly on the day. If we miss something out or fail to address an aspect fully, then we are leaving things to chance. We may still succeed on the day, but this will be governed by luck rather than good management.

Band leaders need to understand that whilst they may or may not be the best piper/drummer in the band, they do need to be the best leader. It is their responsibility to equip themselves as fully as possible with the knowledge and skills needed to improve the

bands' performance standard. This involves utilising skills that other members of the band may have. Band leaders need to employ the top 2 inches of their heads more. Leading a band requires significant mental effort. Band rehearsals need to be coherent, structured and part of a larger plan. They also need to be enjoyable. That way, the band stands the best chance of preserving and growing its membership with quality players, and therefore improving its performing standard.

The success of the band belongs to all of its members, not just the leadership. All members need to play their part to contribute to that success – reliance on the leadership alone is a recipe for certain eventual failure. We all have a role to perform within the band. So let's step up to the plate and perform it to the best of our ability and within the overall plan for the band.

- Greg Wilson

Notes: