

Theoretically Speaking: *Learning Tunes By Ear (Part 1)*

Timothy Cummings for Piping Today magazine

Part 1

Since starting piano lessons at the age of six (now 38 years ago), I have enjoyed and been challenged by a decades-long stretch of both learning and teaching music in one-on-one, small-group workshop, and classroom settings. Most of this music has been learned and taught on various Scottish-style bagpipes (including the practice chanter) and whistle, but an awful lot of music in my life has also been shared via other folk and orchestral instruments, and even singing. All of this music has variously been transmitted both aurally and with aid of written sheet music — sometimes a combination of the two. No small amount of effort has been spent trying to become equally skilled at playing from written music and playing by ear; and because both approaches have been so fruitful in my career, I am increasingly encouraging a similar balance among my students.

Thus, many of the piping workshops I've taught have been more focused on teaching pipes tunes by ear, with sheet music provided at the end of the workshop or after the event is finished. These gatherings have included Càirdeas (The Vermont Bellowspipe School), the Upper Potomac Piper's Weekend, The Pipers' Gathering, PEI Fiddle Camp, Maine Pipes & Fiddle, and the Spanish Peaks Piping Retreat, among others.

At any of these events there will often be at least one piper present who is brand new to learning tunes by ear, and who may be visibly intimidated by the mere thought of it. I also know of a number of pipers who have opted out of these workshops altogether due to their discomfort with learning tunes by ear. Some have said outright that if the sheet music isn't available at the beginning of the workshop, or even a few weeks ahead of time, they will not attend. This type of ultimatum is unnecessary and puts instructors in a bind, for even if they prefer teaching with the aid of sheet music, what happens if the tunes they have photocopied in advance are already known by one or several of the workshop attendees? In such a scenario it is rarely possible to find a new-to-everybody tune and make photocopies in an instant. This is but one reason many instructors are preferring to teach music by ear, at least at the beginning of a teaching session.

You can imagine, then, the debate: which is preferable, learning a tune from sheet music or learning it by ear? On the one hand, sheet music provides a heap of crucial information almost instantly: the metre (or time signature), the specific melodic notes to be played, the specific grace-notes to be played, the basic rhythm all of those notes require, important beat groupings, visually obvious melodic patterns (e.g. scale runs and arpeggios), articulation, phrasing, whether or not to repeat certain sections, whether or not there are second endings, and if you have some music theory background, what key the tune is in. All of that information is effectively available at once to the holder of 'the dots'. From that foundation, it is largely a matter of how experienced you are at reading music in determining how quickly and accurately you absorb the new tune. It's easy to make the assumption, then, that when compared to learning by ear, more tunes can be 'learned' in a limited amount of time.

Conversely, proponents of learning by ear have some very strong arguments on their side. The first is that written music doesn't ever really tell the whole story. In our current system of musical notation, there are many subtleties that can't be easily conveyed, if at all. For example, when has any written piobaireachd conveyed exactly what is to be played in terms of note duration, grace-note

rhythm, and phrasing? When have you ever seen notation that includes precise symbology for giving a dance tune the essential 'lift' or 'swing'? When have you seen notation that instructs how best to tune your chanter in a given key, or what harmonics your drones should be emphasising? Does anyone reading this believe that they play every note in a taorluath with the precise rhythm that's notated in standard bagpipe music notation? Learning a tune by ear, then, forces the musician to listen carefully and repeatedly to the new music, which can often lead to quicker memorisation and less mechanical, more musical playing. It also provides a skill that enables a player to quickly hear and adapt to new versions and variations in rehearsal or in the setting of a pub session, for example.

Another compelling argument from the by-ear proponents is that it is in our very nature to learn music—a 'language'—by ear, as evidenced by the fact that every human not born deaf has learned their native tongue and their first songs by ear long before learning the written versions. (In many cases, historically at least, written versions may not have ever existed.)

When asked whether I think it's better to learn from sheet music or by ear—an occasion which, admittedly, is not often—I have borrowed from a quote by C. S. Lewis: "[It's like] asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary." I've been mostly satisfied with that answer, believing that both options have their merits and disadvantages, and that a 'complete' musician should be equally proficient at both. But most recently my thinking on this topic has become less settled, as I've been flirting with the position that when any of us plays an unfamiliar tune from sheet music, or even if we 'hear' the tune in our head simply by just looking at the music, we might in fact also be learning by ear. The sheet music is just a different vehicle for getting the melody into our heads. But then there are still the problems of only hearing yourself play the tune, of not hearing someone better than you play it, and of not hearing all the nuances that can't be notated—those almost imperceptible details which can really bring the tune to life. This is of greatest concern in regards to novice and intermediate players.

Perhaps the best scenario for learning new music is in a lesson or workshop setting, with an instructor playing and teaching you the tune by ear. In this case you will also be able to see which precise notes and grace-notes are being played, simply by watching your instructor's fingers. In that way, it is not so different from learning from sheet music, except you are hearing an expert version as you are seeing it, too.

I could go at length on the sheet music vs. ear debate, but will instead offer this summary: reading sheet music and learning by ear are both valuable skills, both are skills that anyone with functioning eyes and ears can acquire, and both are skills that need regular practice in order to be useful. In the next issue of *Piping Today*, we'll look at a number of tips and suggestions for learning by ear. In the meantime, I encourage you to listen to pipers whose playing you most admire. Spend some time listening 'deeply' and analysing what's most compelling about their playing.