

Developing and rehearsing your band

This article was originally presented as a review of one band, to aid their ongoing development. I have expanded it a little and made it more general.

Things to watch out for:

- Plan and specifically rehearse tune changes. There are lots of ways you can change from one tune to another, you could explore them as a band and find what feels comfortable for you all. The main thing is that everyone (who is playing the next tune) performs the change rather than leaving it for someone else.
- Specifically rehearse the final chord. It can be ragged, particularly when everyone is getting tired. Rehearse the last 4/8 bars and have everyone looking up for the chord. You might take turns in rehearsals, leading the chord.
- Jig rhythms need particular attention to make them swing. Nobody ever believes they are getting it wrong – use a recorder!
- Ensure that the first couple of sets for the evening are really easy and fun. This settles everyone down, and it's a lot better for the dancers if the band sounds confident. Personally, I don't hesitate to suggest to the MC that their chosen first dance isn't good for the band. How else will they learn?
- The last few sets also need to be easy to play, as everyone will be getting tired.
- Air-type strathspeys are really hard to maintain speed and pulse. Practise with a LOUD metronome sound (eg from the internet, or a lead into a hi-fi). Everyone will be surprised at the feeling of rushing (because they've been used to playing slowly).
- Be careful that you don't slow down at the end of strathspeys, trad or otherwise.
- Really nasty tunes can be played only once, or replaced entirely. I've only ever once had someone refuse my suggestion that a tune be replaced (and it wasn't because the tune was hard to play, it was just a horrible tune. Personal opinion!) MCs are usually grateful to get feedback, they are just usually completely unaware of the difficulty levels. It's always better to play a simpler tune really well than a tricky one badly.

Additional ideas

- Plan the occasional harmony passage. Adds variety, and sounds especially good in an 8-bar repeat.

- If you have a flute, use it to add harmony and beauty to your tone – really lovely in strathspeys! It should sound above the melody – notes below about E at the top of the treble staff have a softer quality and will not be heard.
- Use other, less usual instruments to add variety to the timbre, and when it's playing try dropping other instruments out/back so it's more easily heard. Recorders are great for hornpipes and pipe tunes! But if played continuously through a set, the impact is lost. Listen to Reel of Seven for ideas.
- Occasionally use the accordion to vamp rather than play the melody; or alternatively, try accordion on melody only, which lightens the sound and allows other sounds to poke through.
- Use a recording device occasionally in rehearsals. It's a quick way of spotting where improvements are needed (but can be discouraging, so don't over-use it!)
- Have you thought about giving your "resting" musicians a subtle percussion instrument?
- If you have more than one instrument playing the melody, try to keep slurs to a minimum. It's much harder to play a phrase absolutely together when there are slurs. Especially in jig time!