

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOLO PIPING:

A Report to the P.P.B.S.O. Executive

by the Solo Piping Committee

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The Need for Changes in Solo Piping

The Solo Piping Committee was formed in response to the apparent decline in the quality of solo piping in Ontario, despite burgeoning interest in the instrument. While entries are up substantially from 20 years ago, Ontario's threat to the world competitive stage has not kept pace.

Particularly alarming is the continued gap between the top amateur grades and the median professional standard. This bodes poorly for the future competitiveness of our solo pipers. It can be assumed that this reduction in quality will soon be reflected in our pipe bands, since, historically, a high level of solo achievement has led to a high level of band achievement.

At present, our system appears to be producing *more* pipers, but not *better* ones. This Committee feels it is time that we as a Society take a close look at the way we administer solo piping, particularly our goals, structure and decision-making process in order to restart development of our solo players and to assure a healthy future for soloists and bands.

While acknowledging great progress by the Society in the administration of piping contests, this report outlines a new direction for solo piping. As such, it recommends changes to the structure of the Society and its approach to solo piping, including:

- formation of a Music Board
- Constitution amendments
- competitions
- adjudication
- grading
- scoring
- teaching
- publicity & promotion

These may appear to be diverse and far-reaching topics. However, we believe that they are all inter-related and important to solo piping as a whole.

For example, the Society's efforts in recent decades have placed great weight on competition but very little on teaching. We feel that the former without the latter is a hollow system that is prone to eventual collapse.

Promotion of solo piping and the quality of our presentation at Highland Games have also been neglected. Year after year we send our Executive to Games Committees for more solo piping prizes, events and judges. Yet our morning competitions attract fewer and fewer spectators. This Committee believes that with carefully considered publicity and more regard to the 'show' we present to the public on Games mornings, solo piping could generate modest interest and a devoted following, and that Games Committees would notice and respect this. More support — and longevity — for our music would surely follow.

All recommendations in this report serve important roles. However, of greatest importance are the recommendations for structural changes. *These are the foundation for all other recommendations.* The Committee hopes that you will look at all of these proposals as a package, as we believe that adopting them piecemeal would undermine the effectiveness of all changes.

By adopting all recommendations, the Executive will lay the groundwork to move solo piping forward through a unified and progressive program of development. We believe the results will once again bring Ontario piping to the front of the world stage and give it a more prominent and respected place on the local Games circuit than ever before.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Music Board

One of the major problems regarding solo piping, as we see it, is a lack of cohesive, long-term planning. This is through no fault of current or past Executives. Incremental changes to our solo competition system at AGMs over the years have resulted in fundamental changes that were never intended. To avoid this in future, we believe that a task-oriented group is needed to oversee all elements of solo piping. Called the *Music Board*, its responsibilities would include:

- teaching
- grading and scoring
- competitions
- adjudication
- promotion

The Music Board would be a guiding group of committed and qualified individuals appointed by, and reporting to, the Executive. To ensure continuity, appointments would be made for a minimum three-year term. To encourage firm and lasting commitments from the relatively small pool of people qualified to serve on such a committee, appointees would be offered a modest per-meeting honourarium.

The Music Board would divide itself into sub-committees as required to address the above areas. Each subcommittee would be chaired by a member of the Music Board, but would include participation by other P.P.B.S.O. members, based on expertise in the subcommittee's particular area.

Before adopting this recommendation, the Executive should come to a clear understanding of the Music Board's constitutional place, and how its recommendations are to be accepted. This issue is discussed in the next section.

***Recommendation 1:** It is the recommendation of this Committee that the Executive create a Music Board. This Board shall be appointed by and shall report to the Executive, and shall oversee all elements of the Society related to solo piping. It shall also implement the recommendations listed in this report. Appointments would be made for a minimum three-year term, with at least one-third of the members to be reappointed at the end of each term. Appointees would be offered a modest per-meeting honourarium.*

The Constitution

At present, the general membership of the Society can change any aspect of competitive solo piping in Ontario simply by gaining enough support to pass a motion at an AGM. The Committee believes that this disrupts the Society's ability to deliver visionary and cohesive leadership in the area of solo piping.

Some of the motions presented at Branch meetings and forwarded to the AGM are constructive. However, many are reactionary, steeped in self-interest, and not reflective of the best long-term interests of piping.

The present process is extremely vulnerable to influence by a small number of people with radical or self-interested views. We feel that this is a detriment to the delicate balance of solo piping.

In short, the principle of allowing the membership to pass virtually any issue at an AGM is constitutionally and democratically sound.

Unfortunately, in reality it often fails the best interests of piping, undermines the efforts of our Executive and Advisory Council and hinders a unified program of development.

To overcome this problem, we believe it is essential that the Music Board be given authority to decide upon all AGM motions dealing with the solo piping system. All motions so accepted, as well as all other Music Board recommendations, would be forwarded to the Executive for final approval or deferral back to the Board.

Although the Committee discussed the idea of motions being referred to the Music Board for its recommendation and then returned to the AGM for general-membership voting, we believe that this would undermine the Music Board's ability to implement a carefully considered, cohesive program. However, it is important that recommendations from the Board go to the Executive for approval. This ensures continued input into Music Board recommendations from the branch level through branch executive members.

Recommendation 2A: It is the recommendation of this Committee that:

- *the Music Board be given autonomy to implement changes to solo piping, pending the approval of the Executive.*
- *general membership motions about solo piping, made through the branches for submission to the AGM, shall be referred directly to the Music Board. The Music Board shall be the final arbiter of such motions, pending Executive approval.*
- *the Music Board will consider all such motions with reference to the Society's goals and objectives regarding solo piping in Ontario.*

Alternative Recommendation 2B: In the alternative to Recommendation 2A above, it is the recommendation of this Committee that:

- *the Music Board be given autonomy to implement changes to solo piping, pending the approval of the Executive. The Executive will be the final arbiter of which Music Board directives should be voted on by the general membership at the AGM.*

- *General membership motions about solo piping, made through the branches for submission to the AGM, shall be reviewed by the Executive, which will be the final arbiter of which motions should go to the AGM and which should be referred directly to the Music Board.*
- *Motions about solo piping that are to go to the AGM shall be reviewed by the Music Board and classified as "Supported by the Music Board" or "Not Supported by the Music Board", with representatives of the Music Board defending the Board's position at the A.G.M.*
- *The Music Board will consider all such motions with reference to the Society's goals and objectives regarding solo piping in Ontario.*

Teaching

While the number of pipers involved in the Ontario piping scene has suggested a solid wave of support, there remains a perception that the quality of musicianship has not kept pace with traditionally accepted standards. The performance and study of piobaireachd, particularly, has suffered over the last ten years. Where Ontario once produced a top, professional-ready amateur on a regular biannual basis, this occurrence has decreased dramatically. Teaching is one element of our art that we can improve in order to proactively remedy this situation.

Recommendations:

- *The establishment of regular seminars/teaching sessions, seminars to be focused (i.e. Silver Medal tunes, competitive light music, piobaireachd, the bagpipe) and presented by a recognized expert. These sessions should be staged in the major population centres, with expenses and fees covered by the PPBSO and a nominal participation fee by the student. Teaching seminars should never be organized with profit-making as the fundamental objective.*
- *A Teaching Directory of approved teachers should be published annually in the Piper & Drummer magazine.*
- *A Teaching Certification program should be a future project and long-term objective.*
- *Occasional "share-shops," should be administered by the P.P.B.S.O. to encourage on-going teaching quality. These sessions would promote healthy exchanges of methods, successes and failures among piping tutors.*

Grading and Scoring

The Society must consider encouragement as an over-riding factor in the push to nurture solo piping in Ontario. To this end, the means of assessment of an individual's grade of competition, and subsequent scoring, should be addressed. Grading must at all times be thoughtful and considered, and must always be done with international standards in mind. Possible feelings of discouragement and dejection experienced by a budding competitor due to misdirected grading should be at the forefront of any assessment of competitive ability. The intrinsic difficulty of establishing a uniform system of awarding scores to competitors must be recognized, understanding at the same time that too often an individual competitor places undue stock in the percentage awarded out of 100. Due to disparate tune requirements between the grades, all assessments must be completed on a timely and fair basis.

Recommendations:

- *Grading must be completed as soon as possible following the highland games season. Teachers should be involved, wherever possible, in this assessment process.*
- *Percentage scoring should be eliminated in favour of a "top-six" system on the adjudication sheet.*
- *An additional option should be added to score sheets where the adjudicator can indicate whether a competitor is performing above, at, or below the grade entered.*

Competitions

Our current system of organizing outdoor piping competitions is respected world-wide. At best it shows efficiency and clock-work scheduling; at worst, the system promotes assembly-line piping mediocrity. Too often we encourage large numbers of events to the detriment of quality, prestige and listening potential. A performance setting that is appropriate to the world standard of Ontario performers must be nurtured and developed. Our younger, impressionable pipers can be better encouraged by offering the best players a performing area that is to be aspired to and is consistent with high levels of play. Trophy presentations and the current Champion Supreme award system can be streamlined to better support the notion that superior performance gains supreme rewards. Professional piping currently has some of the lowest prize monies offered in the piping world.

Recommendations:

- *A framework or guideline is to be developed and furnished to games committees with a clear formula for carrying out successful and worthwhile solo piping events. This consulting*

package will also make a solo piping representative available to P.P.B.S.O./Highland Games negotiating committees.

- The high quality of our adjudicators will be reinforced to games committees by offering photographs and profiles for publication in their programs/brochures.*
- At selected competitions, a display board (dry marker/wipe) will be included at the site of the premier events to denote competitor, tune and adjudicator's name.*
- In line with promotion, a wire rack will be put in place near the Society's tent to display brochures describing our art forms, and membership information relevant to the Society and the public.*
- Platforms must be put into place at our premier events to demonstrate our art to its best advantage.*
- Examine the feasibility of nurturing piobaireachd playing by instituting a grade 3 event at select competitions (Urlar and first variation).*
- The Executive, if necessary, will supplement the funding of prize monies at the major events to counter poorly funded events.*
- The method of recognizing successful competitors must be examined. Perfunctory, rapid-fire name-announcing at the end of a day's competitions provides little incentive for achievement. Mid-day massed bands may be an alternative, with well-voiced adjudicators of the morning's events taking on the task of prize-giving.*
- The Championship supreme reward concept must be reassessed. Our current arrangement is unsuccessful in rewarding in kind the season's winning pipers; both via the poorly supported Ball and the ordinary nature of tangible rewards.*

Adjudication

The Society has made significant and laudable advances in this area in recent years. It is generally believed that Ontario has some of the best solo piping adjudicators in the world. At the same time, the Society must be diligent when assigning judging duties: the pipe band expert/specialist, for example, must not be confused with the levels of experience and expertise required of the solo piping authority. Our judges should be developed and nurtured on an ongoing basis. The highest standards of fair, even-handed principles are to be adhered to and enforced. The perception of fairness is as important as its practice.

Recommendations:

- The Music Board is to develop an Adjudicator's Code of Ethics.*

- *All judges, including the most seasoned and experienced, are to participate in on-going professional development via Fall/Winter seminar-forums.*
- *Encouragement should be given our current judging panel to offer fresh guidance and a wide variety of input in all forms of professional development.*

Promotion

Ours is a noble pursuit. Keeping in mind the growing popularity of roots/traditional music in this country it is noteworthy that we, as a Society representing a group of celtic musicians, promote so ineffectively. The Solo Piping Committee recognizes that up to this point in our history we have governed this aspect of our organization along traditional, tried-and-true lines and to the best of our administrators' abilities. However, the time has come where we must streamline and modernize this aspect of our organization with a view to enhancing the position of solo piping as a worthwhile attraction. There is a real sense that investment in time and financial resources now will pay significant dividends for our Society in the future.

Recommendations:

- *The appointment of a Public-Relations talented person to head a promotion-oriented sub-committee of the Music Board.*
- *Whenever possible and/or feasible, hire a professional suited to address specific public relations concerns or needs faced by the Society. (The successful use of outside consulting for our recent constitution difficulties is an excellent example of this recommendation in action.)*
- *A series of professionally written promotional pieces must be developed and prominently displayed at Games to educate and inform the public of both our art and activities.*
- *Press releases to the general media regarding major events or achievements by Society members should be normal practice.*