

# Get to Grips

with the **Highland Bagpipes**





## Foreword

The North Channel that separates Ulster from Scotland is just over 10 miles wide at its narrowest point and there has been constant movement between Scotland and Ulster for centuries. This has resulted in close links of language and culture, contributing to the cultural identity of the 'Ulster-Scot'.

One music tradition shared between Ulster and Scotland is Piping and Drumming and it is a very important aspect of Ulster-Scots culture, heritage and identity.

Learning a musical instrument requires dedication and determination and is a commitment over time. However, the learning experience is rewarding and opens up many opportunities for developing personal skills and playing with others. At the same time it provides opportunities to celebrate our Ulster-Scots cultural identity.

This book is one of a series that supports the Ulster-Scots music tuition programmes. There are opportunities for the young and not so young to enjoy the experience of learning new piping and drumming skills and I trust that this book will help you on that journey, supported by expert tutors and tuition programmes provided by the Ulster-Scots Agency.

**Richard Hanna**

Director of Education and Language

### Acknowledgements:

Thanks to Ian Burrows, Alec Brown and Grahame Harris

Cover Image: Paula Sierra / Shutterstock.com

## Introduction

One of the most significant decisions of my life was made when I was just 8 years old and my father decided that I would take up the Great Highland bagpipes. This most majestic of instruments has moulded my life for almost 40 years and has seen me travel to many countries including Russia, the USA and Dubai. During this period, I have met many friends and musicians, which has encouraged me to learn other types of bagpipes and whistles.

Get to Grips is a tutor-led introductory guide to take the student through the scale and basic gracenotes and then starts them on their journey of learning the Highland bagpipes. The text is simple to read and as the student works through Get to Grips, they will discover the basic signs and symbols that they need to begin to read music.

Also included throughout the book are hints and tips that are extremely important to perfecting technique and therefore give the student a strong foundation. The Highland bagpipes is not a simple instrument and will take time and commitment to master, but it is worth the effort.

I would now like to welcome you to the world of piping and the opportunities that lie ahead.

**Andy McGregor**

Head Tutor for Music Service for Pipes and Drums

## Before we Begin



When you see this symbol in a lesson, please refer to the accompanying tutorial video at [www.discoverulsterscots.com/bagpipes](http://www.discoverulsterscots.com/bagpipes). The number corresponds to the video on the playlist.

Sound is represented on paper by signs and symbols. Here are the first few that you need to understand.

### Clef Sign

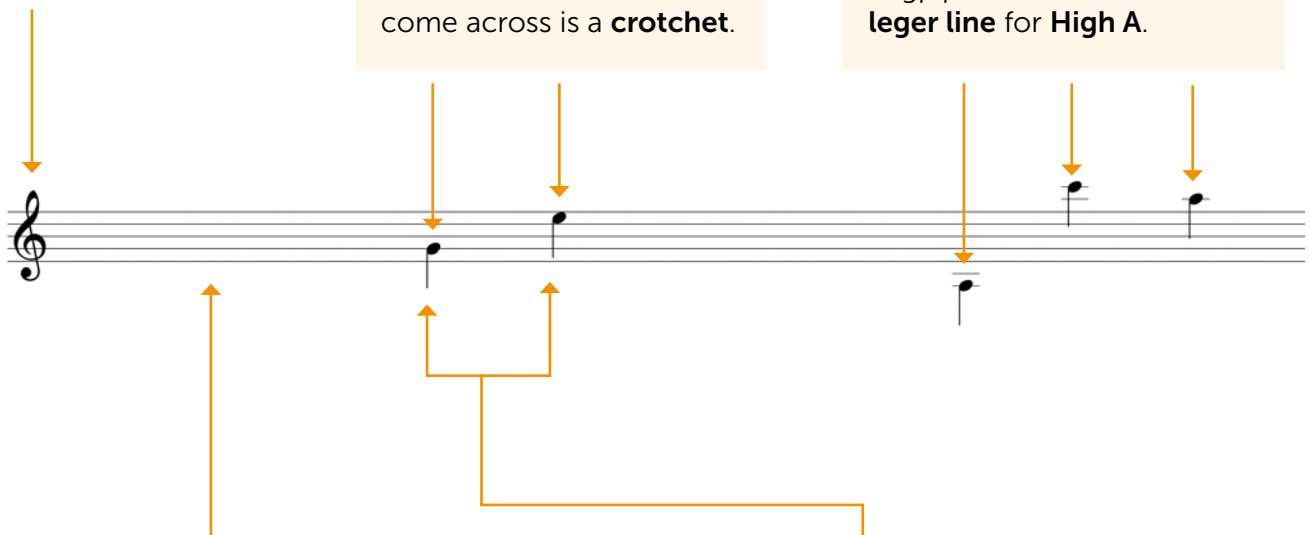
The clef used in bagpipe music is the **G clef**.

### Crotchet

There are many different note shapes that show the **duration/length** of a sound. The first note we come across is a **crotchet**.

### Leger Line

This is a small **horizontal line** placed above or below the stave to **extend its range**. In bagpipe music, we use **one leger line** for **High A**.



### The Stave

This is a series of **5 lines and 4 spaces** placed in a ladder-like arrangement to show the **height** or **depth** of a sound.

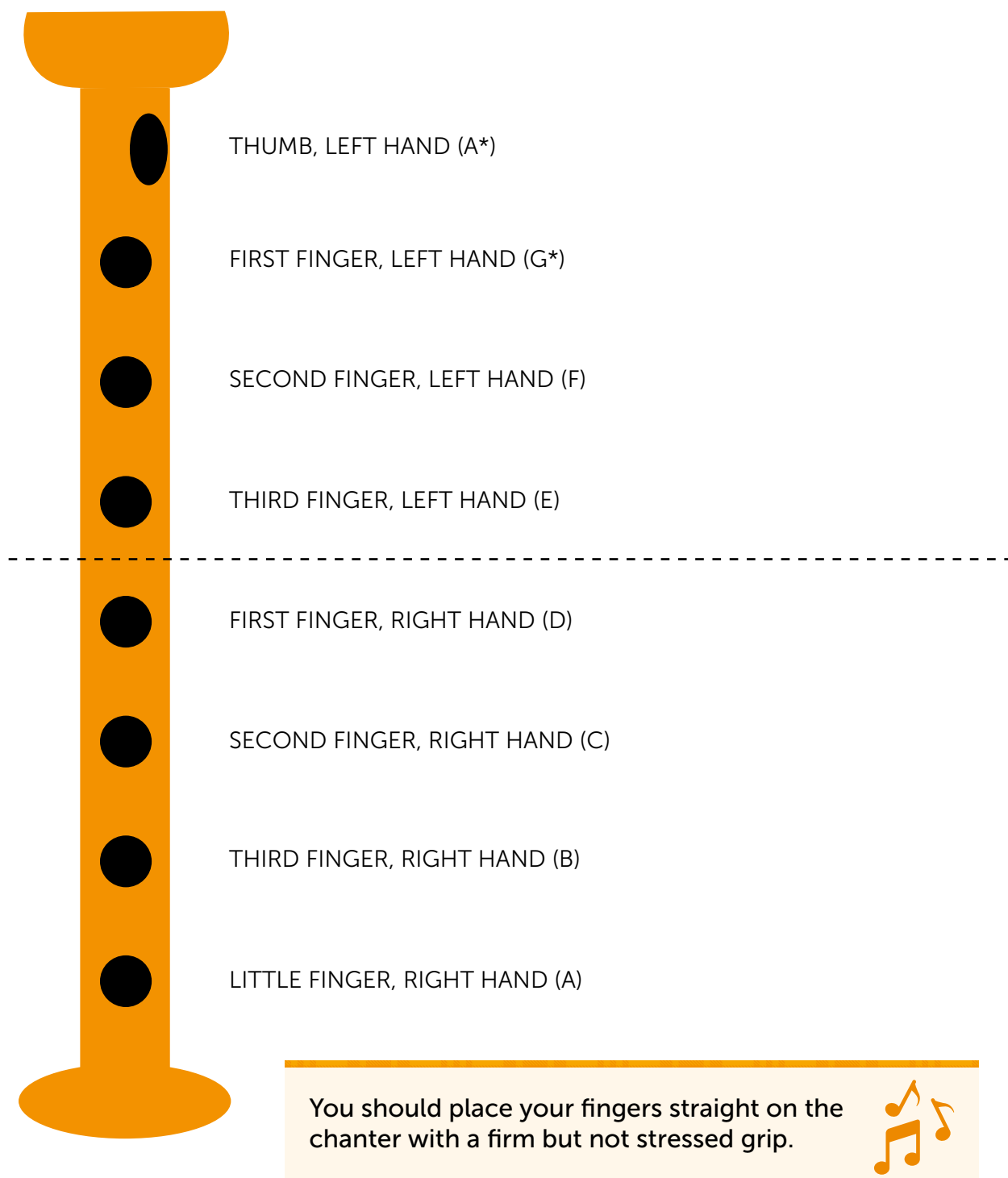
### Pitch

The **higher** up the **stave** a **note** is positioned, the **higher** the **pitch**. Likewise, the **lower** a **note** is placed on the **stave**, the **lower** the **pitch**.

## Finger Placement

On the Highland bagpipes, there are two **A**s and two **G**s. These are known as **Low G** and **High G**, and **Low A** and **High A**.

The \* symbol shows High G and High A.



## Scale

1

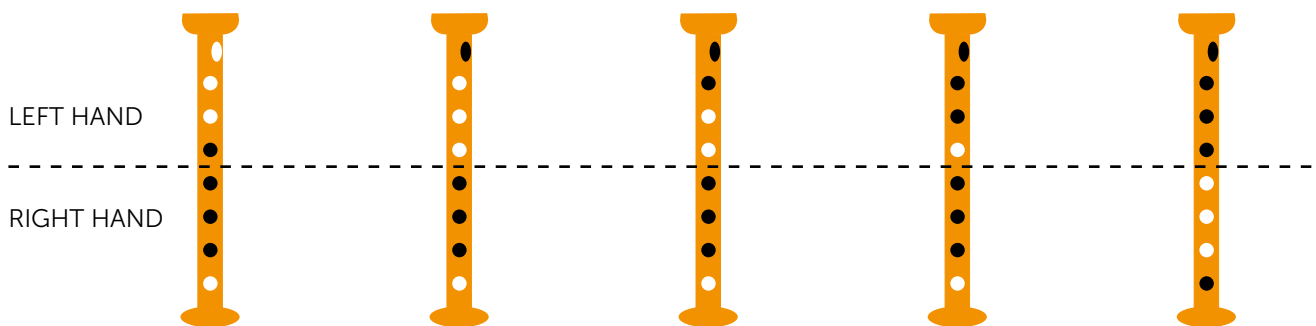
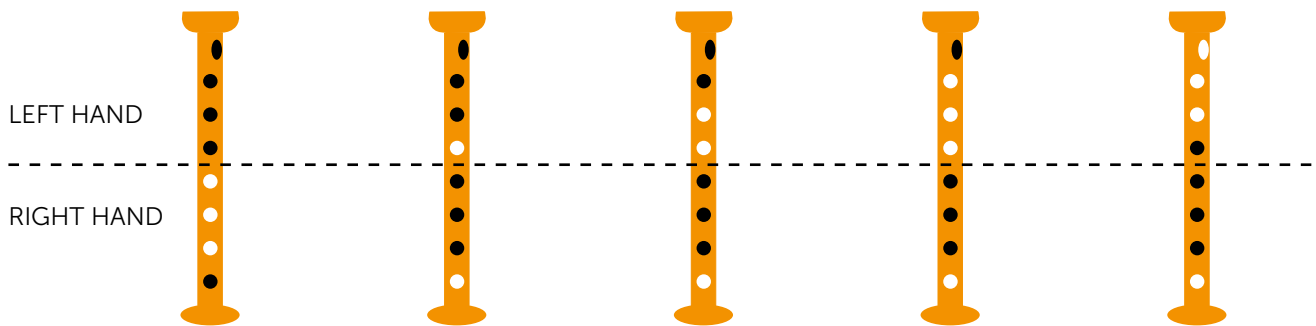


### Top Half

Scale from **D** to **High A** using the left/top hand.

● = Finger on/down

○ = Finger off/up



## Bottom Half

2 

**Scale** from **Low G** to **D** using the right/bottom hand.

The diagram illustrates a five-note scale on a piano keyboard. At the top, a musical staff with a treble clef shows the notes G, A, B, C, and D. Below the staff, a piano keyboard is shown with a dashed line separating the left and right hands. The notes G, A, B, C, and D are marked on the keyboard, with black dots indicating the left hand and white dots indicating the right hand. The notes G, A, and B are played by the left hand, while C and D are played by the right hand.



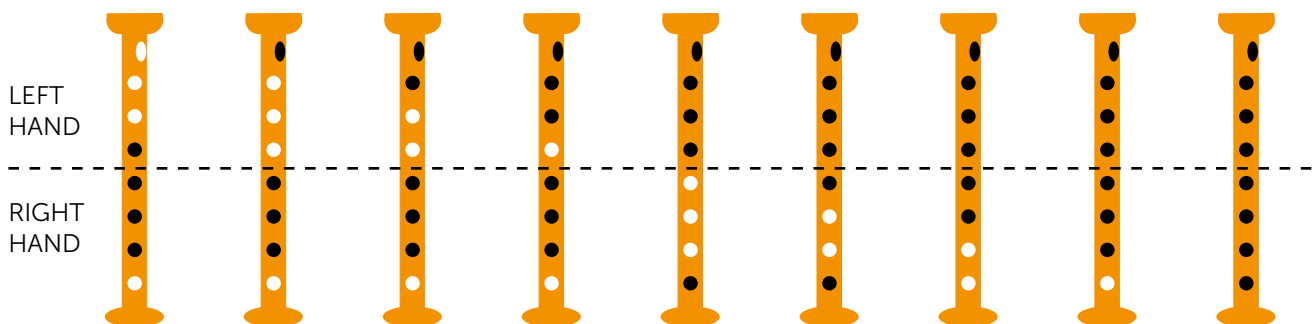
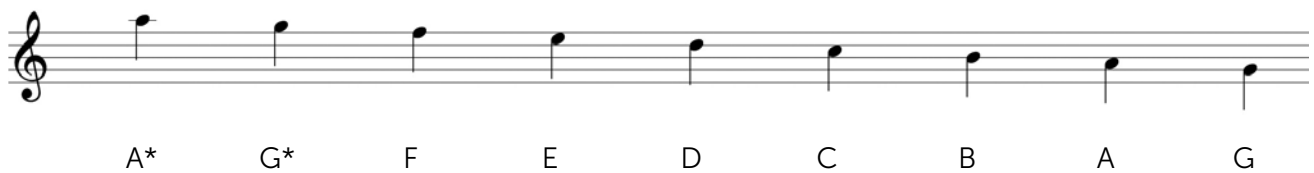
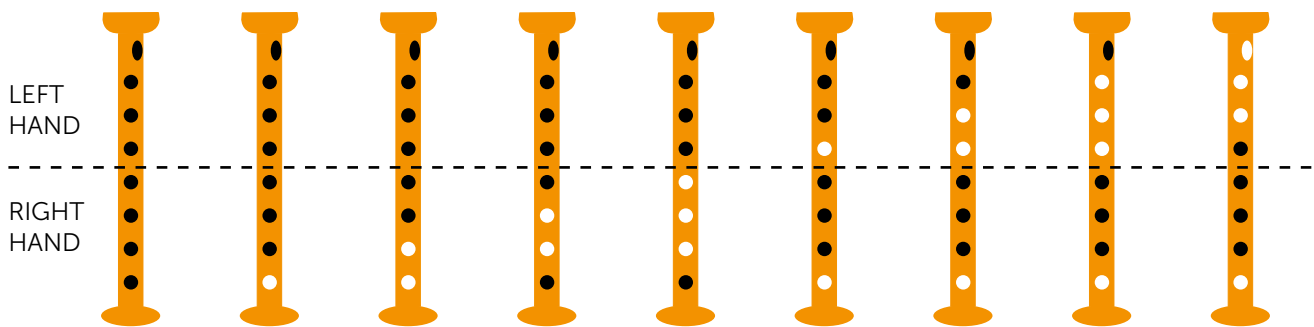
A pipe band is louder than a pneumatic drill.



## Full Scale



The **full scale** of the Highland bagpipes has **nine notes**.



Make sure there are no crossing noises/catching notes between D and E.



## Gracenotes

One of the properties of bagpipe music that makes it unique, is the amount of **embellishments** or **ornamentation** used to make the **music** sound **better**.

The first **embellishment** we will look at is the **gracenote**. There are **three** main gracenotes: **D**, **E** and **G**. The **G gracenote** is the most commonly used, but we will look at the **E gracenote** first, as it is the easiest to master.

**Embellishments** are written as **small notes** placed before the note with the **stem pointing upwards**.



In the exercises that follow, you will now notice that a **vertical line** appears across the staff. This is called a **barline**. Barlines are used to **separate** the music into **equal portions**.

### E Gracenotes



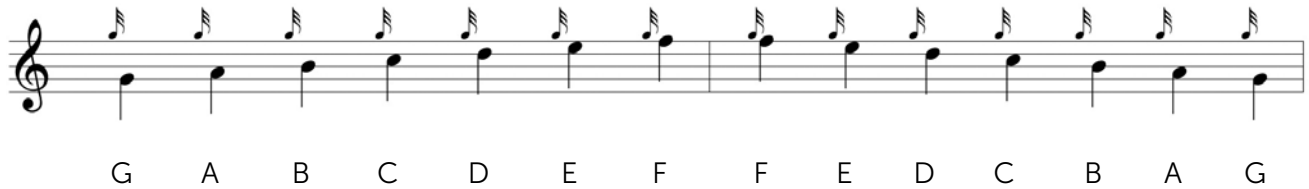
A **gracenote** is played by raising and lowering a finger quickly. An **E gracenote** is played by raising and lowering the **E/third finger** on the **left** hand.



## G Gracenotes

5 

A **G gracenote** is played with the **G/first finger** on the **left** hand.



Make sure there are no crossing noises/catching notes between D and E.



## D Gracenotes

6 

A **D gracenote** is played with the **D/first finger** on the **right** hand. The D gracenote is only played up to C.



We are unsure where the first bagpipes originated. Some historians say the oldest set was found in a pyramid.

## G Gracenotes from Low A



You will now notice **two numbers** appear at the **beginning** of the **stave**. This is known as the **time signature**. The **top figure** tells us **how many crotchets** are **in a bar**, and the **bottom figure** tells us that each **beat** is **one crotchet** note in **length**. We will cover this in more detail later.



The next sign we will see is the **double barline**. This is used to show the **end** of a **section** of music.



This gracenote is called the **thumb/back gracenote**. It is played when **going to/from High G**.



In the beginning, gracenotes should be played slowly, lifting the gracenote finger high off the chanter.



## GDEs

8



When all **three gracenotes** are **played** one after the other on the **same note**, we call it a **GDE**.

In the exercise below, the time signature is **3/4**. This means there are **three beats** in a **bar** and each **beat** is equal to one **crotchet**.

G G G A A A B B B C C C

C C C B B B A A A G G G

The speed of music is called **tempo**. This is measured in beats per minute (BPM). Play the GDE exercise where the BPM is 60. This means that each crotchet note will be 1 second long.



















































There are 110 different types of bagpipes listed on Wikipedia, with the majority being from Europe.

## Duration Table

The length of sounds is shown on paper by using different shapes of note. The **semi-breve** is the longest note, and each note is **half** the length of the note **above**.

For example, if a semi-breve is 4 seconds long, a minim will only be 2 seconds long.

Semi-breve																	Whole note																		
Minum																	1/2 note																		
Crotchet																	1/4 note																		
Quaver																	1/8 note																		
Semi-quaver																																	1/16 note		
Demi-semi-quaver																																			1/32 note

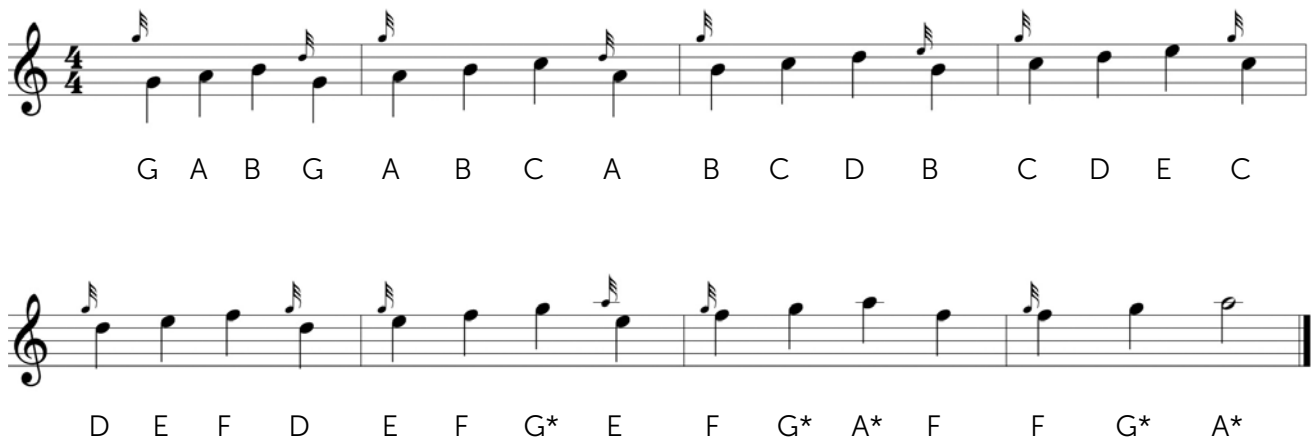


The first mention of bagpipes in Scotland was in 1547. The first mention of bagpipes in Ireland was in 1544. We are unsure who had them first.

## Gracenote Exercise

9 

As you can see, the **time signature** is **4/4**. This means there are **four beats** in each **bar** and each **beat** is equal to one **crotchet**.



G A B G A B C A B C D B C D E C

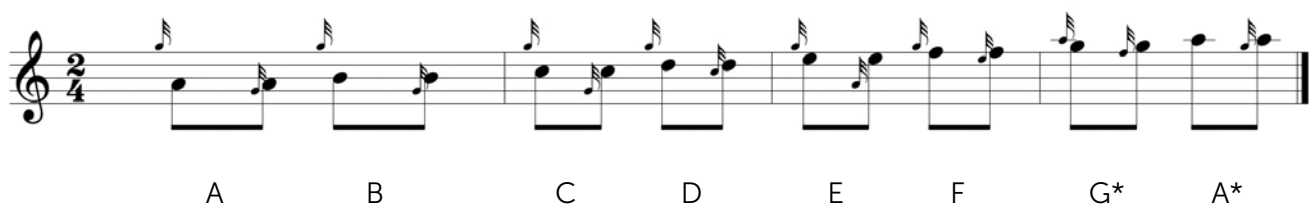
D E F D E F G\* E F G\* A\* F F G\* A\*

## Strikes

10 

Strikes are played by **tapping/striking** the chanter with one or more raised fingers.

You will now notice the notes we are using are quavers. A quaver is worth half a crotchet, which means **two quavers** equal **one beat**.



A B C D E F G\* A\*

## Green Glens of Antrim

11



Now let's look at your first tune.



E F F E D D C B D B A F G\* A\* A\* G\* F E D D C D E A D



F F E D D C B D B A F G\* A\* A\* G\* F A D C D E D

Play your tune slowly and deliberately. Build up the tempo gradually.



There are nine Glens of Antrim: Glenarm, Glencoy, Glenariff, Glenballyemon, Glencop, Glenaar, Glendun, Glenshesk and Glentaisie. They are located in north-east Antrim.



## Doublings

12



Now that you have mastered a simple tune and have started to read music, it is time to look at the remaining embellishments.

The next embellishment we will cover is the **doubling**. Doublings are when **two gracenotes** are played **one after the other** on the **same note**.



## Doublings from Low A

13



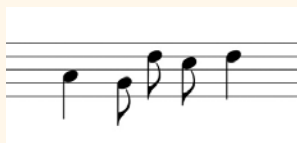
Pipe bags were traditionally made from animals that were commonly farmed. In the British Isles, sheep or goat skin is commonly used. In Egypt, camel is used and in Australia, kangaroo.

## Throw on D

14



Make sure the Low G, D and C are played evenly within the throw on D embellishment.



## Grips/Leumluath

15



When playing the grips, make sure there are two Low Gs separated by a D gracenote before moving to the E.

Also, if you look closely, you will notice that when playing a grip from D, the B finger is used instead of the D finger.



## Taorluath

16



Again, you will notice that when playing a taorluath from D, the B finger replaces the D finger.



African blackwood is the most common wood used to make the bagpipes, but cocuswood, ebony and rosewood are also used.

## Tachums

17 



You will now notice a dot and cut placed on the notes. **Dots lengthen a note** and **cuts shorten it**.

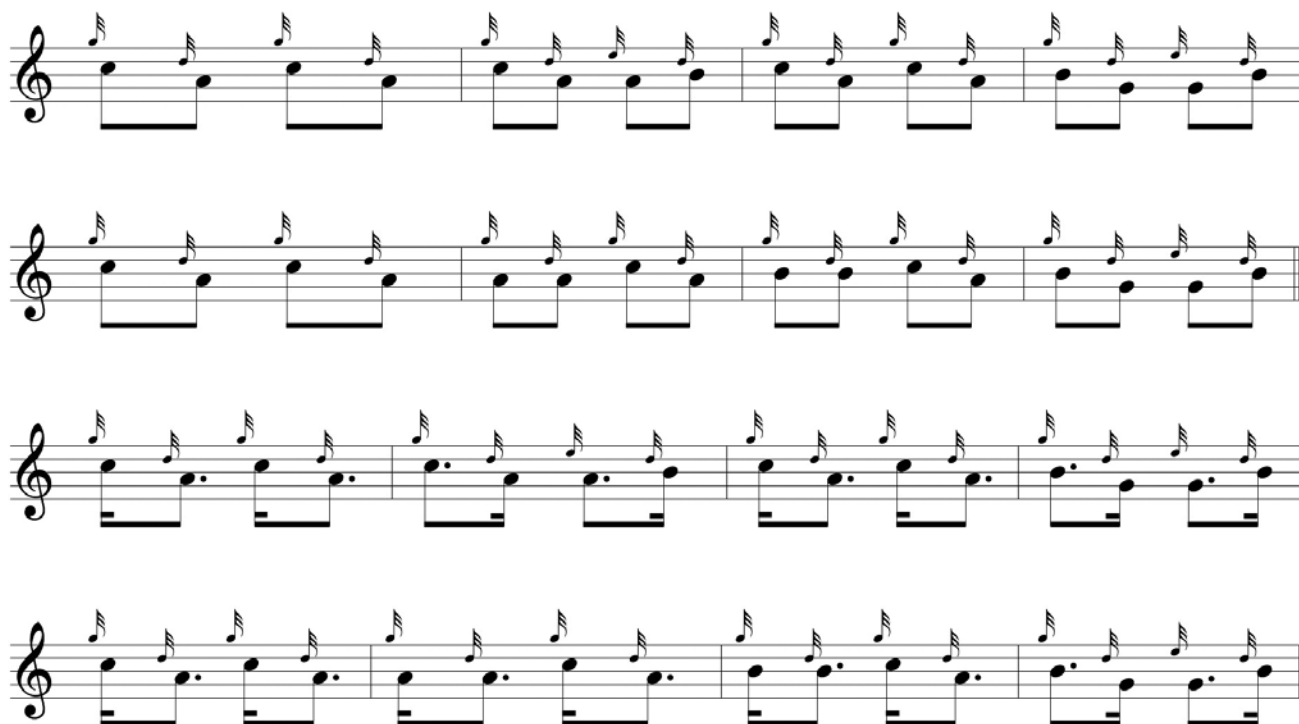


18 



## Tachum Exercise

19 



To get you started on tunes, here are a few that are suitable for beginners.

## I See Mull

20



Now you will see the **repeat sign**. When this appears at the end of a section/part, you must **play** that section/part **twice**.



When you are learning a tune, learn one bar at a time, and then try playing them as a group of two. Once you feel ready, play the full line.

Two bars are known as a phrase.



## Colin's Cattle

21



Pipers were used in the military to lead soldiers into battle. During World War I, it is estimated that over 1,000 pipers were killed in battle.

## Minstrel Boy

22



Practise a few times each day for a short period of time, rather than a long time all at once.



## Blue Bells of Scotland

23



In the next tune, Blue Bells of Scotland you will notice a **Birl** embellishment. This is played by covering the **bottom hole** with the **little finger** of your **right hand twice**. There are a few different methods of playing this embellishment and it will take some time to master. Your tutor will demonstrate these.



Wikipedia lists 14 different types of bagpipes in the British Isles.



## I Love a Lassie

24 



If played outside, the sound of the Highland bagpipes can travel over 3 miles.

## Castle Dangerous

25 



As you increase the tempo of your tunes, make sure your embellishments remain clear.



