

Metronome for Beginners

By Michael Kotch

So you purchased a metronome or an app for a metronome because someone told you to get one. Great! You have completed step one to becoming a better all-around musician. There is one problem that seems to be bothering you though...how do you use it?

This great question has baffled bagpipers since the beginning of the metronome's conception and although we have come a long way over the last few decades, I still run into a great deal of folks that have had no training on how to use this great tool.

I intend to provide you with a few basic exercises to help you get started so that you may develop an understanding of what it is you are trying to accomplish with this multifaceted tool.

So why use one?

Simply put, it provides you with a beat...a perfect beat. We need a beat to build our music around. A jig, for example, has 6 beats per measure. A metronome can provide us with those 6 beats and many more so that we can start to build and control our jig around it, or more precisely, with it.

The metronome also provides us with an opportunity to learn how to listen. When we start playing our chanters and bagpipes for those first few years, many of us are in what I like to call the "doing" phase. We are using all our might to move those fingers, squeeze the bag, blow, and maybe tap our foot so that we can "do" the music. Once this starts to become second nature to us, we wind up "listening" to what it is that is coming out of our instrument. This listening phase is musical application. So the big question is, can you hear a beat and put a grace note on that beat and hear when you are off? Many of us don't even realize that when we are out pounding the pavement in a parade with the bass drummer wailing away, we are playing to a beat. A metronome is the same thing, just more precise.

With that being said, try the following exercise:

Turn your metronome on to 60 BPM. Let it click for a minute or two. Lay your chanter on the table; you don't need it right now. Now take your feet and tap them to the metronome beat. First the left then right then left again. Continue this for a few minutes until you feel like your feet are tapping along with the metronome clicks.

Now, forget about your feet for a while and put your hands on the table. Do the same thing with your hands that you were previously doing with your feet. Tap the table one beat at a time. Try to notice if you are tapping with the click, ahead of the click or behind the click. Correct for the beat. Continue to do this until you get into the swing of things. Once you are tired of this, try using your index fingers on the table and tap out each beat with your fingers instead of your entire hand.

Got the hang of it? If not, repeat the previous steps. If so, pick up your chanter. Now play low A for a few seconds. Try playing a G gracenote along with the metronome. Just like you tapped your fingers on the table, execute the gracenote as close to or on the beat as possible. You may find yourself wandering around the gracenote for a while and that's ok. Remember, you have graduated from "doing" to "listening". You are now trying to hear, and anticipate the click, execute the gracenote, and evaluate where your gracenote came in relation to the click, all in a split second.

Work on this for a week. Evaluate how you are progressing. Ask a fellow bandmate or instructor to have a listen to your progress. Once you feel comfortable with this, try G,D,E gracenotes at 70 BPM. This should at least get you started on the very basics of utilizing your metronome and learning how to listen to yourself compared to a downbeat.

If you have any questions or comments on this short article, please feel free to drop me an email at mikekotch@gmail.com.

Mike