

Funerary Bagpiping: a Guide for Ceremonial Bagpipers

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Funerals are often highly emotionally charged events. Especially when children, friends, or family are involved, you must to be able to maintain sufficient clinical detachment to get the job done, or else get someone else to pipe for you. Always remember that you are actively engaged in one of the most solemn events in a family's life the final farewell to someone's beloved child, parent, sister or brother. Whatever you do in the next fifteen or twenty minutes those family members will remember for years to come you've got just one chance to get it right. Respect, courtesy, and consideration must be reflected in every aspect of your speech, demeanor, and deportment from the very first moment you sight the funeral cortege entering the cemetery until you're in your alone in car and well past its gates on your journey home, or you simply don't belong there.

Content:

Funerals are often highly emotionally charged events. Especially when children, friends, or family are involved, you must be able to maintain sufficient clinical detachment to get the job done, or else get someone else to pipe for you. I always try to have the first couple of bars of the next tune running through my mind before my cue to strike in. Find a spot in the distance to visually focus on, concentrate on your tune, and focus on steady, rhythmic timing, to the exclusion of all other sights and sounds. More than any other, you should know your funeral repertoire so well that you can play them in your sleep.

Make absolutely sure of your location. Don't blithely trust the funeral home, and don't trust driving-direction map web sites. I've looked up an obscure cemetery on the Internet, knew the directions given were incorrect, and did some more checking. At the appointed time I was at graveside the hearse and limousine ended up in front of an antique store downtown. Make sure that you allow yourself plenty of time to negotiate traffic, road construction, lane closures, accidents, detours, etc., and still arrive with plenty of time to tune up and get ready. Most cemeteries will have a marquee at the main entrance and signposts with the decedent's name directing you to the gravesite. I know of one that's color-coded (Smith: blue, with blue arrows for the Smith funeral). Some municipal cemeteries might not have anything at all. If there's no signage and no office or caretaker, look for the guys with a backhoe they'll know who's being interred where today.

If you're piping at a National cemetery, they are often very busy and working on strict timelines. You may be restricted to one or possibly two tunes no twenty minute piobaireachds. Check in at the main gate they can tell you where your funeral cortege will form up. You can ask to be allowed to precede the cortege to join the honor guard at the site maybe they'll let you, maybe they won't. Tune up as best as you can at the main entrance, because you'll have no chance to do so on site. Tune to a cold reed so that when you first strike in you're in tune with no warm-up. Clear the area as soon as possible afterwards, as there's usually another funeral cortege lined up ready and waiting to go right behind yours.

Dress like you're going to a funeral. Brush your coat, shine your shoes, and polish your brass. The funeral director and their associates will all be in coats and ties, the officiant will be in a coat and tie (or collar), most if not all of the male mourners will be in coats and ties. Shirtsleeves will be interpreted by many (quite possibly including the family) as indicative of a lack of respect. The funeral director will most certainly see it this way, and when it comes to opportunities for repeat business, you can bet that they will take that into account. If it's a long drive to the cemetery or church, consider wearing a pair of shorts and put on your kilt upon arrival your pleats will be much more presentable. Don't wear a Prince Charlie & bow tie unless the rest of the funeral party is in tuxedos and evening gowns.

Remember absolutely nobody in the funeral party wants to hear you tune you must be as fully tuned up as you ever will be well before the flower car arrives. Tune up in the environment where you will be playing, after your pipes have had a chance to acclimate. Here in Florida, the heat and humidity outdoors will sharpen the heck out of my chanter, so there's no sense even trying to tune until it's reached ambient temperature. Obviously, you need to get to the gravesite with plenty enough time for this to occur driving to the cemetery with the A/C off and the windows down helps speed this process. Tune quickly to a cold reed essentially mimicking the conditions under which you will play. If you warm up with a few sets first before tuning and then set your pipes aside to await your cue, your drones will be very sharp to your chanter when you strike in to perform before your audience. Try to avoid playing inside an air-conditioned church and then again outside at the gravesite the radical change in temperature and humidity will positively wreck your tuning. When I play a Catholic church service where I won't be invited to pipe during mass, I pipe the casket in from the hearse, then my pipes and I sit outside on a bench until mass is over, when I pipe the casket back out again. Yes, it's hot, but at least my pipes are still relatively in tune.

If I'm contracted to pipe, I pipe rain or shine. If it was considered important enough by the family to arrange for a piper at the graveside, it should damn well be important enough to me to ensure that their loved one is properly memorialized in accordance to their wishes to the best of my ability, regardless of weather. I oil my drones twice a year and use only waxed hemp my tuning slides have a layer of Teflon tape over the hemp as well. I play them almost every day (if nothing else it keeps the moisture content of the wood stable) and I've never had a joint swell or lock up on me. I use a polypenco chanter on rainy days cane chanter reeds can go quite flat in a heavy rain, so you may have to screw it in accordingly. If I lived in an area where playing in the rain was more frequently an issue, I'd consider a plastic Clanrye chanter reed for my wet weather chanter what they lack in tone would be more than compensated for in this situation by stable tuning. You may also need to open up your drone reeds a bit, as they may tend to shut off in the rain, especially inverted bass reeds. A good Inverness coat is an absolute necessity for standing in the mud I wear a pair of cheap (but well polished) second-hand thrift-store wingtips instead of my expensive bulled-up ghillies, and rather than risk one of my expensive tailor-made wool kilts I've a cheap EBay "foul weather" kilt to wear on nasty days outdoors (they can only see a flash of the apron when wearing a greatcoat anyway). Towel off your drones once you're back in the car, and thoroughly swab out and dry off everything when you get home, then leave everything disassembled to air-dry. If you've a zipper bag, open it up, and remove any water trap or moisture control gear. Do not under any circumstances use a hair dryer or heater to quickly dry your pipes the rapid change in moisture content and temperature will result in uneven forces of expansion and contraction that can split your drones into kindling! Hang up your kilt & jacket to air-dry thoroughly before putting them away putting them in a dark closet even slightly damp is a sure-fire recipe for mold.

When it's not raining it's very hot here uncover, leave your coat off until the last minute, stay in the shade as much as possible, and keep well hydrated. I look for a spot about 20-30 paces away from the gravesite at about a 45o angle from the mourners where I can be plainly seen, preferably to the opposite side of the lectern (if any), and preferably under the shade of a tree. Don't stand behind the mourners, or on the far side of the casket. Always play facing the casket and funeral party.

Once you've scouted your position, wait where you can see the entrance and keep a sharp eye out around here the first vehicle you see will usually be a flower car/service car/van carrying the flowers, usually preceding the funeral cortège by (hopefully) at least 5-10 minutes. Now it's the time to put on your coat, straighten your tie, and get in position. From this moment onward, you are actively engaged in one of the most solemn events in a family's life the final farewell to someone's beloved child, parent, sister or brother. Whatever you do in the next fifteen or twenty minutes those family members will remember for years to come you've got just one chance to get it right. Respect, courtesy, and consideration must be reflected in every aspect of your speech, demeanor, and deportment from the very first moment you sight the funeral cortège entering the cemetery until you're in your alone in car and well past it's gates on your journey home, or you simply don't belong there.

In this part of the country, the first car to pull in is almost always the "lead car" a sedan with an amber light bar on top, carrying the funeral director and possibly the clergy. When there's no lead car, the first one in the procession will be the hearse. I stand by the roadside at attention, a couple of yards towards the entrance to the cemetery from the cemetery truck (the cart for the casket, where the back of the hearse will stop), and lower my drones as the hearse passes (keep an eye out for the cortège taking a route through the cemetery you didn't expect, and adapt accordingly. An American hearse is about 21 feet long, and they'll avoid making sharp turns). If the hearse is flying American flags and/or the casket is draped in an American flag, place your hand over your heart as it passes. The immediate family will be directly behind the hearse in the limousine and will plainly see whether or not you render proper respect.

Immediately go over and briefly coordinate with the officiant. All they want to know is what you're going to play and when. Whenever possible, I use liturgical names for

tunes for instance, "Go Silent Friend" instead of "Danny Boy". Semantics, I know, but it makes ministers and particularly priests happy people with whom I'd like to foster a good working relationship again, it's a matter of respect. On some occasions, it may help to ensure that the family's wishes are carried out without some ecclesiastic debate over what constitutes "proper" liturgical music. I ask the officiant, when they have completed their committal service, to please turn and nod to me when they're ready for the hymn (like it or not, usually "Amazing Grace"). Remember you're probably out of earshot and won't be able to hear when the benediction's over, so you'll need a visual cue of some sort. I ask the funeral director to do precisely the same thing, just in case. Funeral or wedding, playing solo is different than playing in a band. Always start off on the first note of the tune do not sound an E "pick-up" note like you do in a band setting. Also, funerary marches are played much slower than normal, about 60 beats per minute, so take care not to rush and run away with it.

My typical funeral service starts immediately as the funeral party exits their vehicles with a procession to the gravesite, usually a lament. If the gravesite is any distance from the hearse, I'll usually lead the casket and pallbearers, detouring off to my pre-selected site once I reach the graveside. The casket will be rolled or carried feet first, and set with the feet towards the east. On a mechanical lowering device, you'll see a stop at one end of the rollers that's where the foot goes, and the casket will be loaded from the other end. Once reaching the gravesite, try to keep watch out of the corner of your eye, and plan your route to stay out of the way of the casket team. Practice slow marching to tunes like "Going Home" or "Foggy Dew" ("I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say") not only does it add an air of formality and ceremony it'll help you maintain the proper tempo. However, if it's raining or they're carrying a particularly heavy casket, walk, or you're likely to be bypassed or run over. Similar to weddings, practice cutting a procession short with a proper *déroulement* so the officiant can get on with the service once everyone's seated. I usually remain at pipes up, watching the officiant carefully for signs that they're about to conclude their service. Pay attention do not under any circumstances miss your cue!

If the casket is flag draped and they haven't an honor guard, I offer beforehand to pipe "Taps" for them. I ask the funeral director to have their attendants raise the flag over the casket, at attention with eyes front. When the flag comes taut, that's my visual cue to pipe "Taps". This is almost invariably the very last part of the committal ceremony, after the service and hymn (if any). I personally think "Taps" sounds best piped very simply with a minimum of embellishment no need to guild the lily. Also, the way you may of heard it in the movies isn't the way it's played in the military practice matching the timing of a recording of a military bugler. If I've not been asked to pipe a retreat or recessional, I come to pipes down and parade rest, and remain until the funeral party has begun to disperse do not race off and jump in your car. If the family and not the funeral home contracted me, I do my best not to let the funeral director get away without some of my business cards in their pocket.

tampabaypiper.com

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