How to Write Harmonies for 'Pipers

A very simple approach, by Lindsay Davidson

Harmonies are about adding one or more melody lines to an existing tune.

It can be a theoretical subject, but ears are the ultimate measure of how well the harmony has been written, so ears should provide the guiding principles. If it sounds good, it is.

This very brief guide is intended to make it easier for 'pipers writing their first harmonies to get started. It is supposed to provide a scaffold for you to experiment with.

There are simple and free notation programs[1] for the computer that will allow you to write down and playback what you have written so you have an idea of what it sounds like before putting your ideas in front of someone else, if you want that[2].

Bagpipe music doesn't work like Beethoven's or Mozart's music. Whilst some things here are similar, there is one hugely important difference. This is not the place to discuss the difference.

Some may tell you the drones are of importance in bagpipe harmony. There are of importance as a feature of the bagpipe, not as some extra layer of complication with harmony. You have them turned on if you like, and playing the notes that you like, or you turn them off, as you like. Just focus on the melody and the chords, and trust your ears.

The chords

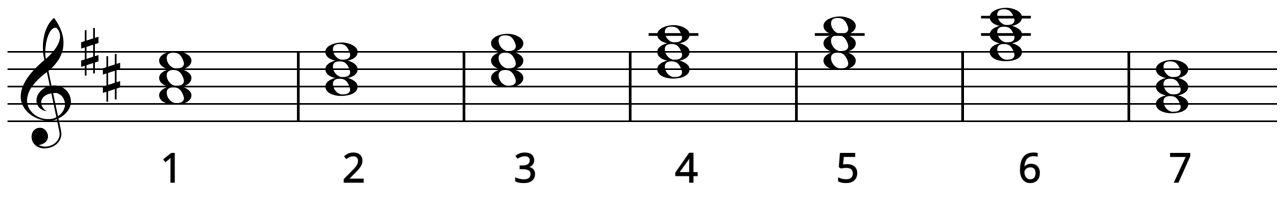
Harmonisation is made up chords. This means two or three notes that will sound good with the notes you are trying to harmonise.

We give chords numbers to make it easier to choose which ones to use in a tune. Which chord we call number 1 depends on the note we start and finish a tune on.

As pipes have a limited number of notes, the chords are given first showing how they are made up, and then with the notes shown only within the bagpipe scale.

Tunes starting and ending in A

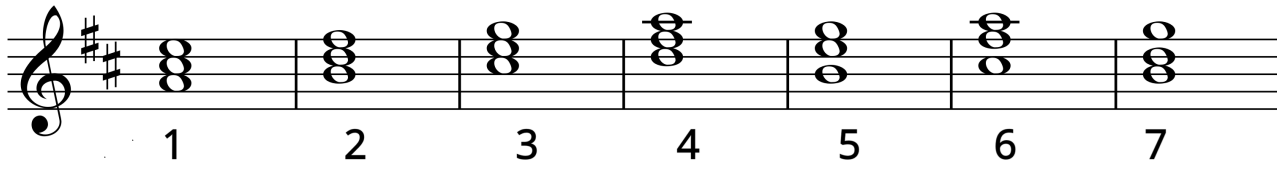
For tunes starting and ending on A it is:



As we only use one octave here are the chords and their numbers arranged purely within the pipe scale.

1 Sibelius is one.

2 If use a typesetting program, make sure to add two sharps to the key signature for normal pipe music, or choose 'D major' if asked for a 'key'.



Order of Civilisation
Some chords are better to use than others - we have an 'order of civilisation', which chords to choose to fit what we want to harmonise. Please be very very aware that the bagpipe order of civilisation is different to that for Bach and Beethoven and Mozart, et al.

In tunes starting and finishing on A, the 'order of civilisation' for us is:
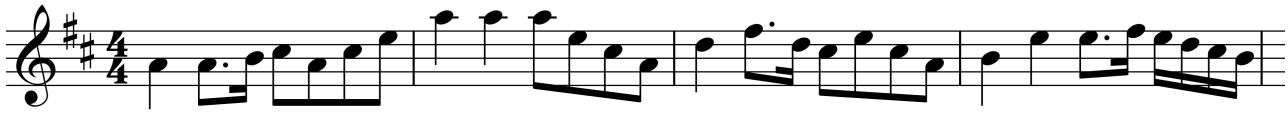
1 – 5 – 7 – 4 – 6 – 2 – 3

What this means is that when we look at the note/beat/half bar/bar that we want to select a chord for, we choose in this order first, and if something sounds dull or unsatisfying, go to the next suitable choice along the order of civilisation.
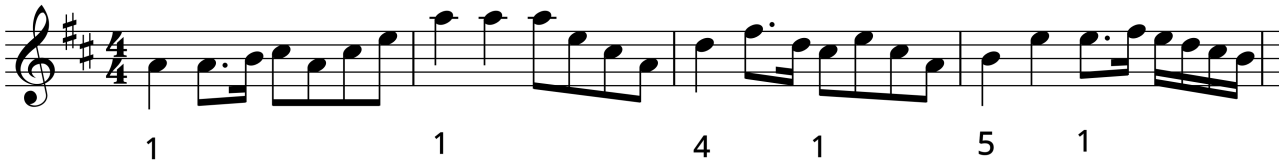
In the old days....pipers used to write note for note harmony, meaning the rhythm of the main tune and harmony were the same. This is easier, but isn't necessary.

Doing it

Let's take *Scotland the Brave* as an example.



We can see the first two bars both all fit in chord 1, the first two beats of bar 3 can be either chord 4 or chord 2, followed by chord 1 again. Bar 4, first two beats fit chord 5 and then the rest fits chord 1 again[3].

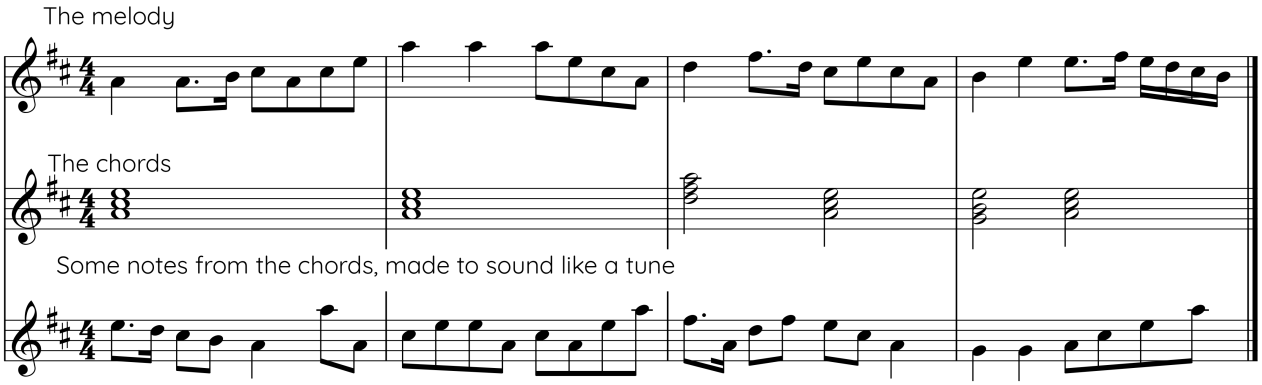


So, we choose notes that are from the chosen chords and arrange them in a nice melodic rhythm, and we have a harmony.

Below we can see this worked out – firstly the tune, then the notes we should broadly choose our melody from, and then a melody. The odd note here and there that doesn't

3If we were just to look at the first low A...we could choose chord 1,4 or 6. But as 1 is first in the order of civilisation, we go with that. Beat 2 would give us 1, 4 or 6 as well, and if we were to choose not 1, in fact we would set out on a particular pathway of harmony and that would define all kinds of things, such as rhythm.

belong in the chords is perfectly fine if it makes the new, harmony, melody more attractive and memorable.



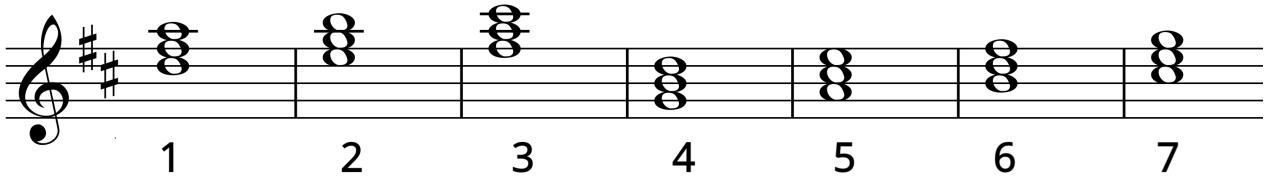
If it sounds dull, or odd, try different notes from the chords.

Trial and error based on these principles is the way to go and to learn how to do this.

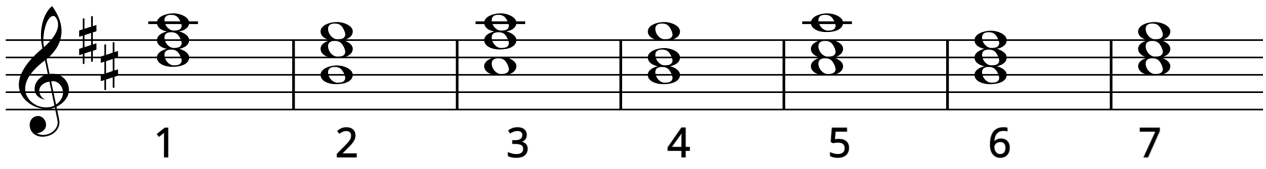
Other types of tunes, not starting and finishing on A

Tunes often start and end on D, B or even E. When you have this situation you need to use different numbers of the chords and in the case of 'D' tunes, a different order of civilisation.

For tunes starting and ending on D the chord numbers are as follows:



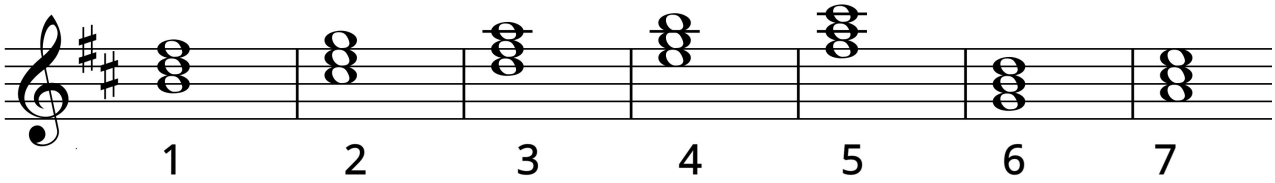
As pipes have a limited number of notes, the chords are rearranged with the notes shown only within the bagpipe scale:



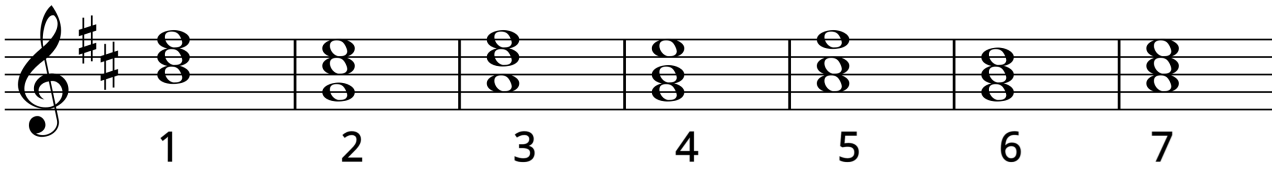
The order of civilisation for tunes starting and finishing on D is:

1 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 2 – 3 – 7

For tunes starting and ending on B the chord numbers are as follows:



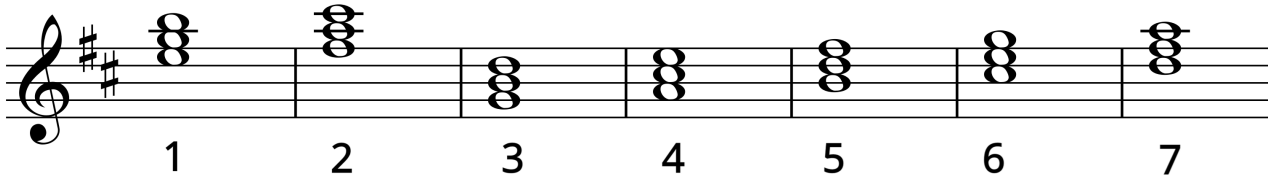
As pipes have a limited number of notes, the chords are rearranged with the notes shown only within the bagpipe scale:



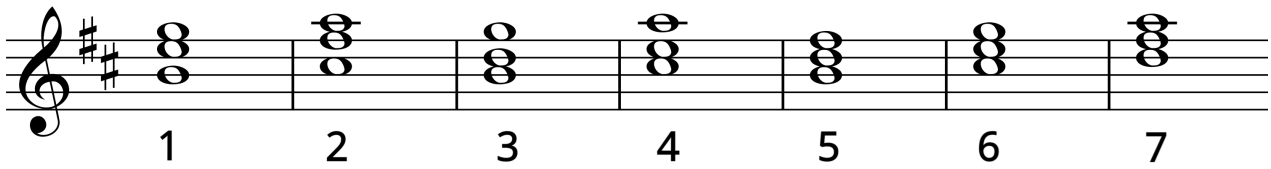
The order of civilisation for tunes starting and ending on B is as follows:

1 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 2 – 3 – 7

For tunes starting and ending on E the chord numbers are as follows:



As pipes have a limited number of notes, the chords are rearranged with the notes shown only within the bagpipe scale:



The order of civilisation for tunes starting and ending on E is as follows:

1 – 4 – 5 – 7 – 6 – 2 – 3

This guide is intended to help you find a way to start experimenting. It is not a complete guide to the grand theory of harmony and is not intended to explain how to write or analyse a classical symphony. Symphonies work a different way.

Harmonic rhythm

This describes how often you change the chord the tune is working in. Sometimes the chord will change every beat, sometimes more often and sometimes less. Often it will be irregular. This is making music in practice, and experimenting with this will help you develop a style.

The melodies...
Obviously you don't want to be bored or think what you are playing goes nowhere and does nothing as a piece of music. Try to make the melody you come up with interesting; you can use little phrases or motifs from the tune, vary the rhythm, respect repeating patterns so that it is easy to remember (and sometimes don't respect them so there is variety..), you can even be quite daring and irregular in what you do in the harmony to really decorate the original.

Note on language...
The words 'key' and 'mode' have been avoided for a reason. If you ask, you can hear lots about these things. The long discussion around this involves understanding why 'keys' came into being and what was before and after them, and why...

If you want to write nice harmonies for pleasure, the above information will hopefully help, whilst getting up tight about names and labels and rules certainly won't.

Whilst only one short example has been given, the best thing to do is sit down and try 100s of different examples and see what happens.

Making music with others is about doing, not theorising.

There is a simple example below.

Scotland the Brave

example of possible harmonies
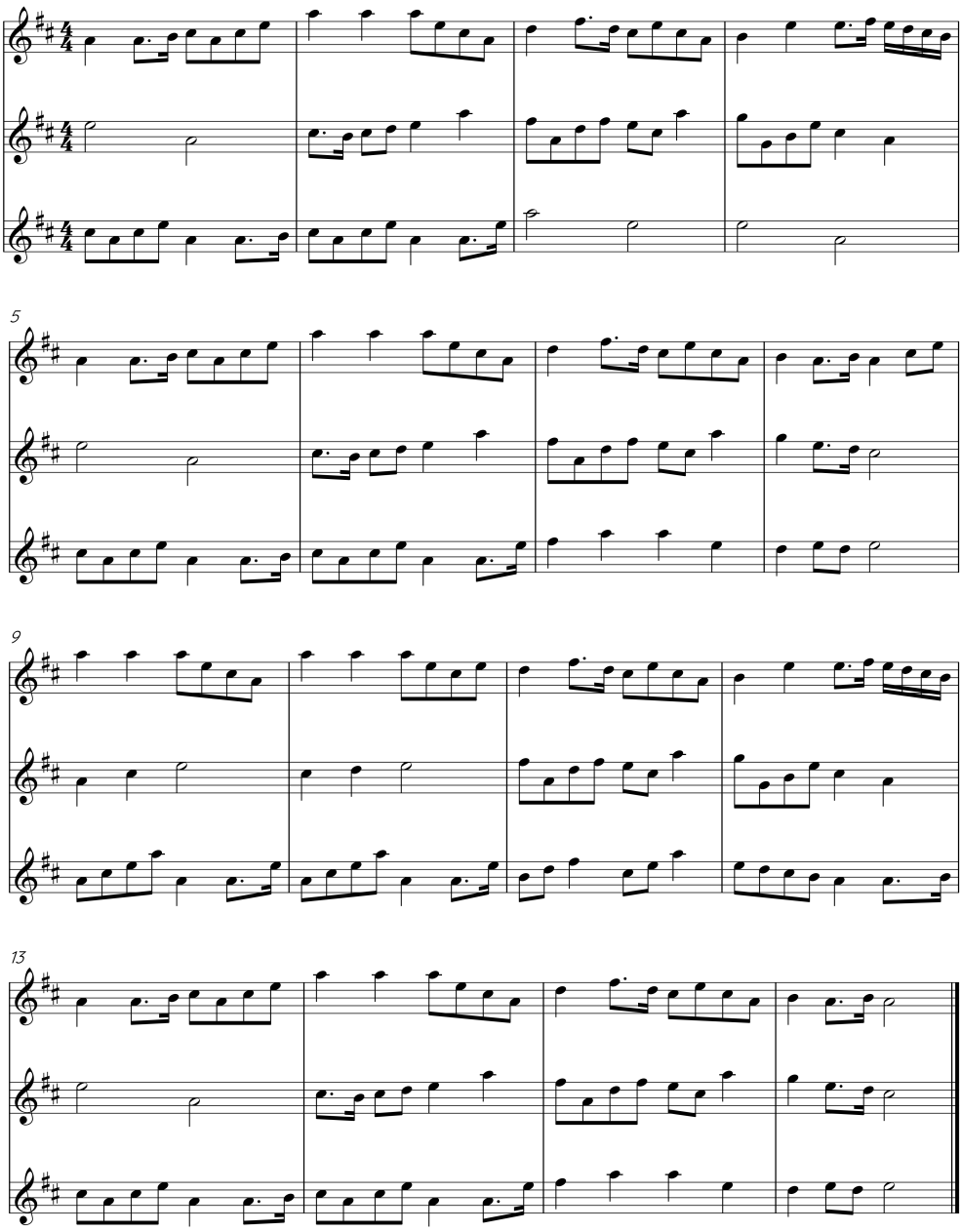
Top line is the tune, and you can play either of the other lines as harmony, but not both at the same time

