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## Blowing the Pipe & Reed Manipulation

By Mark Wygent © 2000

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### Blowing the Pipe

Blowing a bagpipe should not require the application of a huge increase of volume of air. Proper blowing technique is really nothing more than an exaggerated, controlled (albeit slightly accelerated) form of natural breathing, where our exhalations are about twice as long as our inhalations. Since the pressure on the bag is more easily controlled through the application of blowing, and not through the pressure of your arm on the bag, appropriate technique will almost always result in a longer time doing the former, and a shorter time doing the latter, in an approximate ratio of 2:1. This conforms (not coincidentally) to the normal and average way of breathing. In other words, most people spend twice the amount of time exhaling as inhaling.

Good method also precludes a death squeeze on the bag. Only gentle, constant pressure from your arm should be applied in between breaths, as this will result in a smoother transition between mouth and arm. (The arm will fall naturally inward to the body when taking a breath, thus eliminating an abrupt, and audibly noticeable change in pressure, marked by a subsequent alteration of pitch.)

If playing a synthetic bag, prior to strike-in the bag needs to be inflated to about 4/5 of its capacity. If using a hide bag, prior to strike-in the bag needs to be inflated to nearly full. Then a sudden (not violent) and coordinated movement which combines

- a) Pressing - the bag between arm and hand (with your hand positioned just under and slightly behind the bottom of the bass drone stock), and
- b) Blowing - is begun, maintaining a steady pressure until the bag is under your arm and both hands are on the chanter.

This will eliminate the high-pitched and undesirable squeal which can occur as a direct result of lazily and gradually filling the bag with air, instead of employing the technique above.

If the reeds are shutting off when you finally sound the chanter, there can be two causes. Either the tongues have been adjusted so that they are floating too close to the bodies of the reeds, or you are squeezing the bag too hard when bringing in the chanter sound. The latter explanation is usually the appropriate one, as a common mistake when at the early stages of transition to the big pipe from the practice chanter, is to apply much too great a pressure (and in a jerky way) to the bag when sounding the chanter. Once the bag is under your arm, and all the drones are going, try increasing the pressure of your blowing (NOT the pressure from your arm) gradually until the chanter reed begins to sound. This should eliminate the drones stopping. Often times, and especially if the chanter reed is too hard for the beginning student, the technique of blowing will be very

unsteady and jerky, with almost no balance or flow between the pressure from the arm and the blowing.

Piping is hard enough without huffing and puffing away, in a vain attempt to produce a better tone through suffering. When you pick a chanter reed, it should be ideally just slightly harder for you to blow than you prefer. This allows for a relatively short break-in period, as the reed will conform to your own preferred playing pressure rather more quickly than not. This will allow you to concentrate on your musical expression and technique, while maintaining a steady pressure on the bag. If you are unable to play for 30-45 minutes without great strain, then your instrument has been set-up to give pain, as opposed to pleasure.

When you have accomplished the above so that it becomes nearly an unconscious method, you will immediately notice that your reeds seem to be much better-behaved. In fact, the piper has become a better citizen.

*Good luck to you. -Mark*

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## Pipe Chanter Reed Manipulation

Whether you have been piping for many years or only for a few weeks, it is certain that you will have discovered at least one thing: bagpipe reeds seem difficult to control. It is important to remember that the piper plays his reeds, not vice versa. Instantly playable reeds do not exist, although we all keep hoping fervently that some day they will be invented. Until they are, we must content ourselves with manipulation as the only practical method for compelling our reeds to do as we wish. The following is offered as a guide toward accomplishing that objective.

Chanter Reeds - Many theories abound concerning the "best" overall design for chanter reeds. But there are so many variables, including staple size, cane variety, and chanter, that each reedmaker arrives at his own solution. Today's bagpipe offers new challenges to an old tradition in that the pitch is considerably higher than what was commonplace in years past. As a result, it is more difficult technically to obtain a balanced top and bottom hand, married to a respectable volume and a rich tone. No matter what anybody says, NO ONE wants to struggle to play the bagpipe with a relatively hard set of reeds. Finger technique, expression, and blowing are demanding enough. In order to achieve the desired effects more easily, the following suggestions address some problems common to chanter reeds.

1. It plays exactly the way you want. - Touch it not, and pray it lasts forever.
2. It is too weak. - First moisten the blades and gently squeeze the sides of the reed just above the tone box so that the blades will open up. If not overdone, repeated use of this method as and when necessary will work quite nicely.
3. It is too strong. - First moisten the blades. Hold the staple end of the reed between the thumb and forefinger. With the other hand, place the thumb underneath the reed and your forefinger on the top. Now drag your forefinger down and across the blade, using your thumb as a platform. Turn the reed over

and repeat for the other side. It is very important that this be done in a uniform manner, so that both sides receive equal treatment. Even a very strong reed will respond to this method readily, although it may take several repetitions prior to each practice session in order to train it properly.

4. It pitches too sharp. - See #2; employ moderately. Or add some hemp to the base of the reed so that it sits a bit higher in the seat.
5. It pitches too flat. - See #3; employ moderately. Or remove some hemp from the base of the reed so that it sits lower in the seat. If this absolutely fails to work, a razor blade scraping tool can be used to trim off about 1/64" - 1/32" from the very tip of the reed. This will tend (in most cases) to make the reed a bit stronger to blow as well. The trimming of an old (favorite) reed that is beginning to fade can sometimes restore it to nearly new playing condition.
6. Some particular note(s) pitch sharp. - Adding a bit of tape across the top of the correspondingly offensive hole(s) of the chanter will usually suffice. (Low G can be lowered in pitch by adding tape across the top of one of the holes at either side of the bottom of the chanter.)
7. Some particular note(s) pitch flat. - If you've already tried sinking the reed more deeply into the seat, there is very little that can be done, short of physically altering the chanter. This should NEVER be attempted unless A) you know what you are doing, and B) you are unquestionably certain that the chanter is at fault.
8. It rasps or "crows" too much on the top hand. - Blow past this feature to the true note. Or if the reed is too strong, see #3.
9. The reed is quickly becoming harder to blow. - This phenomenon will tend to occur with reeds that A) were quite difficult to begin with, B) were gouged with an excessive internal radius during manufacture, or C) were made with cane that is too soft. See #3 above for the first and second situation. The final possibility is a bit harder to diagnose. One symptom may be that after playing, which tends in most cases to close the reed blades in, this reed behaves in an opposite manner. With a stubborn reed that tends to open up excessively shortly after playing, always close the reed blades inward as soon as you have finished.
10. The reed is quickly becoming easier to blow. - Reverse the explanation and remedies outlined in #9 above. As soon as you have completed playing, open up the blades before putting your pipes away.

Use common sense when physically manipulating your reeds. If the reed was made properly and with care to begin with, the blades will form an even, elliptical shape at the mouth; and it is this balanced shape that should be maintained after each practice, before putting the pipe away. Cane used in the manufacture of bagpipe reeds is a remarkably resilient and naturally malleable substance. Train the reed to conform to your strength of blowing. Once you have done so and are able to maintain a fairly steady pressure, your chanter reeds should play properly for a considerable length of time.

**MAKE THE REED PLAY FOR YOU.**

*Keep at it. -Mark*

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