
Cane Drone Reed Manipulation

By Mark Wygent © August 2000

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NOTE: The following pertains to *cane* drone reeds, not SYNTHÉ-DRONE™, SYNTHÉ-DRONE2™, or DUATONE™.

Drone Reeds - Although drone reeds incorporate an essentially primitive design, they are capable of producing a very sophisticated, dependable sound if a few simple rules are followed carefully. Because modern bagpipes are being pitched and tuned sharper, thinner diameter tenor drone reeds complement that pitch more readily, as the tenor drone top sections should tune somewhere out on the hemp for the best overall tone. The following suggestions address some problems common to drone reeds.

General Rules

Make sure all drone reeds are hemped, and fit snugly in their seats. Check that the ends are sealed. If you reverse the reed, blowing from the open end while gently squeezing the tongue closed, little to no air should escape. After moving the adjusting bridle toward the hemped end of the reed, blow from the open end hard, while gently pushing the tongue downward in a pulsing rhythm. This can help to dislodge small "hairs" along the outside edges of the tongue, which can cause the reed to malfunction or shut-off during performance. When done properly, this will produce a high-pitched, staccato screech. Bridles must be tight. Cracked reeds are of no use to anyone, and should be discarded.

1. They all work, right away. - Count thyself amongst the blessed, and tamper not.
2. Bass drone roars. - The tongue is probably sprung too far open. This can be remedied by A) moving the bridle down so as to shorten the tongue, or B) inserting a small pen knife blade under the tongue at about the half-way point and GENTLY pushing the end of the tongue downward over it. Or a small bit of wax may be melted onto the very end of the topside of the tongue.
3. Bass drone shuts off. - The tongue probably needs to be sprung open a bit more. This can be done by moving the bridle toward the hemped end, lengthening the tongue. Or, hold the open end of the reed in one hand, with your thumb squeezing the reed at the bridle on top. With your other hand, lift the end of the tongue upward. While holding it above the bed of the reed, GENTLY push your forefinger downward in a sliding movement from the end of the tongue to the middle. This done a few times should spring the tongue open.
4. Tenor drones tuning flat (i.e., no hemp showing beneath the top sections of the drones). - See #2. Also, the reeds may be too long. If the problem is severe, trim 1/4" from the open end and see where they pitch. If you are closer now, but still too low, try again. When they begin to tune out on the hemp or are approaching

it, you can still make them shorter, but NOT in 1/4" increments. If the problem is slight, effectively shorten the reeds by pushing them more deeply in their seats.

5. Tenor drones tuning sharp (i.e., top sections of drones nearly falling off). - See #3. Or add more hemp, effectively lengthening the reeds by causing them to sit farther out of their seats.
6. Nothing seems to keep the reed open. - As a last resort, A) a hair or two can be slid underneath the tongue and upward toward the bridle, or B) in extreme cases, MINUTE amounts of cane may be removed from the top and along the length of the tongue. Exercise caution and common sense if you choose to employ the latter technique. After removing cane in this manner, and depending upon the amount removed, sealing the scraped surface of the tongue with a light coating of clear nail polish, or a water-based polyurethane (probably better) is advisable.
7. Reeds taking too much air. - See General Rules. Also, #2.

SUGGESTION:

Two bridles may always be employed with great success for quick adjustments and/or minor problems. One bridle is permanent (usually a tightly-tied, black-waxed hemped-type affair, which prevents the tongue from splitting any further along the body of the reed) and is never moved. The other bridle (which can be a dental rubber band, O-ring, a very short piece of surgical tubing, etc.) rides beneath the permanent one, and can be moved upward or downward as the situation dictates, and which effectively governs resistance to airflow (the relative strength of the reed), and pitch.

MAKE THE REED PLAY FOR YOU.

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