

The Practice Chanter: Maintenance

By Oliver Seeler

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Above, the Dunbar "Extra-Long Millennium 2000" practice chanter is shown separated into its two major parts

Following are some very basic tips and comments for those who already have a practice chanter (in particular, the Dunbar Millennium 2000 Practice Chanter).

Disassembly/Reassembly

It is most important to learn how to take the practice chanter apart properly. Later on, when dealing with a full set of pipes, the technique will be needed to remove the chanter and drones from the "stocks" - the final socket-like pieces between the bag and the various pipes - without damaging the reeds or even the pipes themselves. With the Dunbar practice chanter there is little chance of damaging the instrument itself, because it's so tough, but it is easy to wipe out a reed. This would be no great tragedy, as practice chanter reeds are easily and cheaply replaced; however with a full set of pipes, accidental loss of a reed - a reed that has perhaps had many, many hours of often frustrating fine-tuning - can bring a strong man to tears. Needless to say, splitting a pipe chanter because of careless disassembly will ruin more than just a day. So, here's what to do:

All woodwind joints, including the one between the practice chanter body and the reed-cap/blowpipe, are more or less tight-fitting and are fitted with some sort of packing material - cork, thread, or in the case of the Dunbar practice chanter, O-rings. To disassemble such a joint, a simultaneous twisting and pulling force must be applied. Just pulling without simultaneously twisting usually won't even get the instrument apart - and if it does come apart, it will likely do so abruptly, with possible damage to the reed.



To maintain control of the disassembly, grasp the chanter on either side of the joint and apply a gentle steady pull while simultaneously twisting, as shown in the above series of photos. The trick is to maintain the alignment of the two parts AFTER the joint separates - this to keep the fragile blades of the reed, as the two parts move away from one another, from touching the inside walls of the left, reed-cap/blowpipe section. In the series above, the left hand is positioned palm-up, with the thumb towards the blowpipe. Some prefer to position the left hand the opposite way, with the thumb pointing towards the chanter body - the choice is a matter of what's comfortable. In either case, the most control is maintained if the left hand is kept in one position, while the right does the twisting & pulling. (Left-handed persons can switch all of this around.)

Practice this maneuver without a reed in the practice chanter until you are confident that you can take it apart without losing alignment. Always keep your hands as close as possible to either side of the joint. While you won't harm a Dunbar practice chanter by twisting with your hands at the ends of the instrument, if you do this with a wooden instrument you may end up with a pile of splinters.

Care must also be taken when re-assembling the chanter. There's not a lot of space for the reed in the bore of the reed-cap and, obvious as it may be, one must be cautious not to "stub" the lips of the reed against the bottom edge of the cap. Again, a twisting motion is applied as the two parts are pushed together.

Care of the Joint

All woodwind joints, which are almost always in the form of a tenon and socket, incorporate some sort of packing material, which performs two functions: it seals the joint, making it airtight, and it holds the parts together. Long ago, most woodwinds used wrappings of waxed thread around the male part of the joint to serve this function. Today, waxed thread is seen mainly on bagpipes, while the majority of other woodwinds use cork. Thread has the advantage of being adjustable (by adding or removing layers) and renewable without special tools or high skills. It is beyond the scope of this commentary to go into the details of these materials, except to say that they can be a source of problems as they wear, shrink or swell. Without regular attention, joints using organic packing materials are subject to seizing up tight, falling apart and leaking air.



The tenon and O-rings of a Dunbar Practice Chanter

O-rings, such as found on the Dunbar practice chanter, present no such problems. While it is not really necessary to lubricate an O-ring joint, a very light application of any oily substance can help make disassembly/reassembly very smooth. Should the O-rings ever need replacement they can be found in any auto-parts store and installing them takes about ten seconds.

A Bit About the Reed and Tuning

A beginning piper, still working only with a practice chanter, has a lot to do without worrying about the performance of the chanter reed. Later on, when playing a full pipe, dealing with all of the subtleties (and cruelties) of reeds and their adjustments will become a major issue. For the time being, though, only a few things need be kept in mind:

1. Reeds, even with plastic blades, are fragile. When installing or removing a reed, do not grasp it by the blade tips, but rather down toward the bottom, as low as possible.
2. Just as with the practice chanter joint, turn and pull, or turn and push, when removing or installing a reed.
3. The depth of the reed in the reed socket affects the overall tuning of the chanter (The reed socket is visible in the above photo of the chanter tenon). The socket is tapered; thus the reed depth can be adjusted by changing the amount of wrapping of thread at the bottom of the reed. The reed should be seated firmly but without undue force in the socket. Small adjustments can be made without doing this, but if you feel it needs to be quite a bit more or less deep, adjust the amount of wrapping, rather than either forcing the reed deeper or having a loose fit.



*The heart of the matter:
a practice chanter reed; note correct grip.*

4. Reeds will not work underwater. When playing the practice chanter, after a time condensed moisture from your breath will collect within and around the reed and it may be necessary to remove the reed-cap/blowpipe to get rid of it. (The chanter bore may also get excessively wet, interfering with performance).
5. Weather, temperature, altitude, the mood of the gods and so on may cause a reed, even a plastic one, to perform oddly at times. One thing that can sometimes happen is that the highest and lowest notes of the chanter will sound in tune, but one or more of the intermediate notes will be flat or sharp. When this sort of thing happens, and if manipulating the reed itself doesn't help, most of the world's bagpipes are adjusted by sticking a bit of

beeswax into the edge of one or more fingerholes, thus effectively changing the location of the hole along the axis of the chanter bore. Most Highland pipers, however, use bits of tape overlapping the edges of the fingerholes instead of wax.

6. Very gently squeezing the blades of a reed, either on their flat sides or their edges, can alter its performance. This should be done only if whatever problem exists can't be solved another way.
7. If it is necessary to transport the chanter disassembled, for example to fit it into a briefcase, remove the reed and place it into the reed-cap, followed by a wad of paper to keep it from falling out.

Source: <http://www.mcn.org/2/oseeler/bagpipes/pract2.html>

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