

Tips on Tuning a Band

By Chris Apps © 2000

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When tuning my band I seem to be changing tape all the time. What is the best way to set the pitch and have it stay for a longer time?

The chanter reed of a bagpipe is subject to a microclimate in the pipe bag. It changes according to the weather, the length of time it is being played and the blowing style of the piper. Each player in a band has a slightly different reed and blows different amount of moisture into the bag. A reed that becomes wet will tend to flatten and a reed that dries out will sharpen. So it is important to regulate the amount of moisture so that the pitch will always change at the same time.

There are various ways in which the moisture problem can be alleviated. The most common is a good spit trap. This can be made at home using a length of tube that will extend from the base of the blowpipe stock to the top of the back corner of the bag. The corner end of the tube is corked off and a couple of holes are placed just below the cork pointing toward the front of the bag. This will collect saliva and allow the moist air to condense as it travels through the tube. This method can be used with sheepskin/hide bags as well as synthetic bags.

There is also a more sophisticated version of the synthetic bag available which incorporates an air filtration system containing a desiccant which controls the amount of moisture reaching all four reeds in the bagpipe individually. This system is very efficient but it must be remembered that a chanter reed does need some moisture reaching it when playing. A piper who blows little moisture into the bag and is playing in a hot dry climate would probably need to remove all the desiccant from the chanter chamber in order to get enough moisture through to the reed.

Once the moisture level is controlled it will be easier to set the chanters and have them stay in set for longer.

Before tuning a band the pipes must all be played for about ten to fifteen minutes to get some moisture on the reeds. When tuning the chanters together it is important to use, as a foundation, one piper who plays at a constant pressure or is good at "blowing tone". All the other chanters will be tuned to this foundation player (piper A). Tune the drones and chanter for piper A. Try the chanter against piper B. It is important that piper B does not try to 'find' the pitch of piper A. By that I mean that if a note is out of tune piper B does not try to correct the imbalance by increasing or decreasing pressure. The reed must be pitched correctly to the natural blowing strength by altering the reed depth in it's seat or by moving tape. On the day of a competition it is better to move tape than to move reeds up and down in the reed seat.

The first note to tune is the low A. If a discrepancy in pitch is detected the person tuning can slide a finger over the low A hole making it slightly smaller. This will make the note flatter. If this is an improvement the low A is sharp and some tape will have to be placed

over the top of the hole. The two chanters can be tried again and the tape moved until the correct pitch is reached. Piper B can now tune their drones to low A and ensure that the rest of the notes on the chanter are also in tune with the low A. It will save time if piper B does this by himself/herself. If pipers cannot tune the chanter themselves the same routine can be carried out on all notes of the scale. The process is then repeated with piper C & D. The whole band should now play together in order to maintain moisture levels. The next group of three should now be tuned and the whole process repeated until all pipes are tuned. If necessary piper A can go around again checking for unison but this time it should take a lot less time. Drones can then either be tuned individually to piper A or all together using a meter. If a meter is used the whole band should be playing during the tuning process. A reading is taken from the drones of piper A and all other drones tuned to the same level. The meter method is the best way to tune the drones as it ensures they blend well together. Do remember that if the weather is cold the drones are more likely to get water running down them so less time should be spent tuning. If the weather is hot and dry the pipes may climb in pitch and drones will lose moisture and stop. Striking the correct balance will take practice and experience.

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