

A Note on the Maintenance of My Pipes (and good advice for most)

Most maintenance is similar to that of Highland pipes. You should keep all the joints well hemped. My personal preference is to use prewaxed silk thread from www.uticathread.com for all joints. I would recommend only using plumber's tape to add to the ends of the drone reed's adjustment screws. It's fun and easy to add to the rest of the joints, but proper pipe maintenance involves adding AND removing hemp from the joints as need be. And it's easy to add Teflon, but really hard to remove it.

The bags I use are made by Michael MacHarg, to my specifications, out of leather that is naturally airtight. And since there are no moisture problems from blowing into the bag, the bag should remain airtight for a very long time. A friend of mine, and well known Smallpiper, has been playing a MacHarg bag on a set of Smallpipes for almost twenty years, with no problems, never having seasoned it. The bellows leather should also be maintenance free for many years.

The chanter reed has the potential to last just as long. The real difference between a Smallpipe or Border Pipe reed and a Highland Pipe reed, in terms of maintenance, is that the Smallpipe and Border reeds have a "bridle" on them. The bridle allows the player to adjust the opening of the reed. When it's humid outside, the reed tends to open up (though sometimes it can do the opposite) and when it's dry, it tends to close down (though, again, some reeds do the opposite). Basically you want the reed to always have about the same opening, no matter the humidity. Bassoon and oboe players adjust the aperture of the reed with their mouths. We don't have that luxury. We use the bridle. Small changes in pitch should, like with highland pipes, be handled by pushing the reed in or out of the reed seat a hair, but large swings in pitch, caused by the reed becoming too open or closed, will need to be handled with the bridle.

Many makers of many bagpipes say not to touch the reeds at all. And for good reasons. Bagpipe makers (of the sort we play) have traditionally been from the British Isles and fluctuations in humidity are much smaller there, so less futzing is necessary. And also, because reeds take a long time to make, and customers have a tendency to be very good at destroying them, they recommend just waiting a bit and hoping that things will return to normal. And in Europe, that is often what happens.

I recommend the wait and see approach as the first course of action in all cases. But in the US, I don't think we have the luxury to hope that a reed that leaves the shop will arrive in close to the same condition as when it left. And with the

winters that many of us go through, we need to know how to adjust the reeds. Just please be careful! These reeds can last a long time if you care for them.

Smallpipe reeds have a bit larger of a "sweet spot" when it comes to the opening compared to Border Pipe reeds. But if the reed sounds very harsh and is too flat, the reed needs to be closed down. I do this with a pair of needle nose pliers I keep in my case. It is possible to do this with your hands, but I find it easier to make small adjustments using the pliers. I especially recommend pliers for the border pipe reeds. They are very small and fragile, and the bridle is a tiny thing. I squeeze the bridle on one side of the twisted bit and then again on the other side to even things up. A little squeeze goes a long way. Squeeze a little and test in the chanter. Look at the opening of the lips of the reed. Is the opening equal across the lips? This is especially important for the border reed, which has a very narrow opening, so small adjustments go a long way.

If the reed is very easy to play, closing and not playing, and/or way too sharp, or muted, it needs to be opened up. Now squeeze with pliers on the edges of the bridle. Take note, it is easier to open the reed than it is to close it down.

Again, my Border pipe reeds, like most I've seen, play with a very small opening. And a small change in that opening can make a big difference. Make adjustments like with the smallpipes, but in even smaller doses.

Remember that adjusting the reed will affect the top notes more than the bottom notes. So if the High A is flatter than the bottom A, pushing the reed in (or closing the reed down) will bring the High A into tune with the bottom.

The drone reeds are either miniature versions of the popular Highland Pipe synthetic reeds made by me, or they are all natural cane. For the synthetic reeds, if a drone won't play sharp or flat enough, the reed will need adjusting. This happens most often with the smallpipe drones that are required to play more than one note (such as the D bass/E baritone drone). Their ability to play two different notes makes the extra length for tuning much shorter than normal. So they must be very precisely adjusted.

There are three ways to adjust the drone reeds. The first is to slide the reed in or out of the drone. This is the simplest method and does not require actually changing the reed itself. There will hopefully be a bit of leeway to slide the reed into (to make the drone sharper) or out of (to flatten) its seat.

Secondly, you can adjust the screw on the end of the reed. Screwing it out will make the drone flatter; screwing it in will sharpen it.

Your last way of adjusting the reed (and should be used lastly) is to move the rubber bridle on the drone tongue itself. Move it tiny amounts only, smaller than you can see. This will adjust the effective length of the reed tongue. **The longer the tongue, the heavier and therefore flatter** it will be, conversely for shorter. But if it is too long, it will be too open and be too hard to play. And if it is too short, it will close down too much and not play at all.

For cane reeds, the advice is mostly the same as with the synthetic reeds, except there's no adjusting screw. Sliding the bridle (waxed hemp) toward the end of the tongue will sharpen it and away will flatten it (done in small amounts!). With the cane reeds, you can also add a bit of beeswax to the end of the tongue if you need to flatten it more. Also, because these are natural cane, they will change with the weather. If the reed shuts off too easily, the tongue may need to be "flicked" once in a while. This means pulling the tongue up to flex it and letting it snap back. This brings back the proper amount of "openness" to the tongue (and flicking the tongue usually flattens the reed as well).

I am always willing to discuss the care of Smallpipes or Border Pipes. I want your pipes to sound their best. That's how I sell more pipes. So, please don't hesitate to contact me.