

## When you first get your Pipes

Okay, you've unpacked everything and you just want to strap them on and get going. Take a deep breath and do a couple things first. The pipes have had a harrowing adventure of a time in the mail. They've been cold and dry, or hot and humid (or more likely both) and they might need some attention from you before they're back in the tip-top shape they were in when they left the shop.

### First, the joints.

Make sure that the bottom sections of the drones are not too loose in the drone stock. If they are too loose they may be losing air, or might pull out of the stock when you try to tune the drones. If they are loose, add hemp or thread. I now prefer prewaxed silk thread on almost all the joints. I get mine from here:

[www.uticathread.com](http://www.uticathread.com). It comes in three different thicknesses. I like the middle thickness. But as long as the thread isn't too thick, you can also use the waxed hemp sold at highland pipe supply shops. You want to be able to get those drones back out; so don't use too much hemp. But remember to add the hemp evenly over the surface of the tenon, or the drone can be tight in the drone stock, but still wobble.

The joints that slide to tune the drones don't need to be as tight. They need to be just tight enough to prevent the drone slides from moving while playing. The waxed silk thread allows the slides to move smoothly, but if you want a slicker slide, add cork grease (available at all music shops).

Also make sure that the chanter top is securely on the chanter. If it pops off while playing, your reed could get damaged. And make sure that the top is nice and tight inside the metal stock that is tied into the bag. Check that the bellows connections all have enough hemp, and that the bellows blowpipe's inlaid dot is facing up.

If you have an A or an A/D smallpipe set, please note that the bass A and the bass D (also known as the baritone) bottom sections are very similar in length. If you take them apart and forget which is which, **the baritone bottom is the longer of the two. And remember that the Baritone top is the longest top, not the bass A.**

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Lastly, if the set was ordered **with integral drone shut-off ends (or “Stop Tops”)** check to see they slide easily. They need to be properly lubricated to work. If they are sticky, loosen the set screw (you don’t need to remove it entirely) with the allen wrench provided. Carefully pull off the stop top, and apply a small amount of **Vaseline** into the hole where the plunger goes into the drone. Replace the end, moving it up and down the spread the Vaseline, then make sure the set screw lines up with it’s channel. **Carefully** tighten the set screw. As soon as you feel the screw touch the bottom of it’s channel, stop (going too far could crack the drone). You may need to back off the screw slightly to allow the shut-off end to slide freely. Now move the drone end up and down again to further work the lubricant around. Later, if a Stop Top starts leaking air, add Vaseline, this will solve the problem.

### Now the Chanter Reed(s)

The drone reeds are shipped in the pipes, but the chanter reeds, which are much more fragile, are shipped in a small box, or in the chanter tops. Pull them out carefully! Take the chanter (or chanters if you have an A/D set) and remove the chanter top. Pull out the chanter reed from its box and seat it in the chanter. Make sure the reed is seated in the chanter straight up and down to

prevent it from hitting the inside edge of the chanter top. Now very carefully replace the top making sure not to catch the corners of the reed.

Plug the chanter top into the metal chanter stock that is tied into the bag. Now the pipes are almost assembled.

Set the pipes on your lap. Now strap on the Bellows. The rule of thumb is to play the bellows as high up on your waist as they'll go comfortably. Which can be anywhere from almost in your armpit, to way down on your hip. Also, it need not be super tight. Slide your right arm (if the set is for righties) into the arm strap and tighten. It must be above your elbow. Now attach the bellows to the bag with the blowpipe.

If this is your first bellows experience, make sure all the drones are switched (or corked) off. You may now start pumping away.

### Bellows

Proper bellows technique allows for maximum comfort and ease of play. Remember the principles of what you are trying to accomplish. The reeds play at a certain pressure. That pressure is maintained by pressure from your arm on the bag. The bellows is there only to refill the bag as it is depleted. When you are pumping with the bellows, you must allow for the extra pressure from the bellows by squeezing less hard with your bag arm. Allow the air from the bellows to enter the bag and cause your bag arm to rise with the bag.

The advice that sticks with people best is to remember to make sure you are completely filling the bellows on the upstroke before starting the down stroke. Start the upstroke as soon as you are done with the down stroke, but do this in a fluid, non-jerking way. It all should be happening slowly. Slowly down to fill the bag and

not quite as slowly back up and then down again, a fluid rocking motion.

Start by playing and holding the tonic note (low A or D) of your chanter while practicing your bellows technique. It helps to do this in front of a mirror. After you can hold it steady (not wavering in pitch) you may want to add one drone to see if you can hold them in tune together. If you can do this, shut off the drone and try a simple tune. Get comfortable with your bellows before adding more than one drone. And remember that only perfect practice makes perfect.

### Tuning Drones

Okay, you've got everything hemped properly, and adjusted any reeds that were misbehaving. Now you're ready for drones. If you're playing an A chanter, start with a tenor A drone, and a D tenor if playing the D chanter. If this is your first drone experience, try tuning your drone with an electronic tuner first (I squeeze the neck of the bag to shut-off the chanter to make this easier). Now try playing the chanter. You may need to adjust your pressure to come into tune with the drone. If, when you play your bottom A (or D) with the drone and it is in tune, but the top A (or D) is not in tune, adjust the reed accordingly (see Maintenance Section).

If you have progressed past the one drone at a time level, here are some drone options to try. This will mostly apply for the A/D combo sets, which have a great many drone tuning options.

Ninety percent of my playing is done with tenor and bass only. This allows almost all key signatures to sound great and the ability to switch key signatures as you play.

The next most common thing to do is play with a baritone (fifth) drone. (For A smallpipes tuning the second longest drone up to an E. This sounds great with tunes in A or A minor.)

Similarly, you can play an alto drone. This is standard on border pipes (smallest drone) or it would be the smallest drone on an A/D set of smallpipes. (not available on single key smallpipes)

And then you can play the baritone or alto down a full step. (For A Smallpipes this would be to D. The A tenor drone will also tune to G so this option is available to the D chanter as well) I find only some tunes work well with this set up. Experiment.

You can also play the A chanter with the A tenor drone tuned to G for tunes in G.

As stated, there are a great many options available with the A/D combo set. Try them all. And send me mp3s of what you like!