

BLOWING A BAGPIPE

By Pipe Major Brett Tidswell

Having assisted several pipers lately it appears to be a common thread that poorly controlled blowing technique is severely hampering the production of tone produced by many pipers. There are several issues to look at when attempting to produce a good, steady, tuned sound from a bagpipe.

1. An airtight instrument. Both bag and ALL joints.
2. Well set up reeds that do not use too much air.
3. Correct blowing and arm co-ordination.
4. Blowing correct tone.

Check Instrument

The bagpipe should be airtight. Cork all stocks, insert a blow stick and blow up the bag. The valve should be working correctly and the bag should stay up very tight. Try to twist the stocks in the bag. They should be tied in firmly. This applies to all types of bags.

Next step is to check that all joints are tight and none leak. This will affect steadiness if they leak at the stocks, but will also affect the instrument if the drone slides are loose and wobble.

Lately I have been seeing all sorts of gadgets and gizmos in the bags. Moisture control systems and drones valves are fine, but I fail to see how they can be left in an instrument if they affect steady blowing, or tone. I have seen a few instruments with all the gadgets lately that were simply unplayable.

Check the reeds

Reeds should all be efficient, meaning they should not use too much air. Drones should be set so that they cut out if overblown, but produce a free pleasant tone. Double toning at the strike in should cease before the chanter sounds. When testing drone reeds they should be under blown to ensure a double tone does not come back easily whilst playing.

Chanter reeds should be free and as easy to blow as stability will allow. It should not be a huge physical effort to blow a bagpipe. A well rehearsed piper should find their instrument refined and reasonable easy to blow. As a rule, it should be no effort to play for an hour or so.

Blowing a chanter

The next stage is to insert a chanter with the drones in the stocks but corked. The chanter should be blown so that with even pressure up the scale all notes sound true. Blow high A. Now think pressure. There should always be pressure from your arm on the bag and never any wild variations.

Fully inflate the bag until it can take no more air, too many pipers play with a semi filled bag which allows for a lot of arm movement. The pressure of the air now within the bag must now be maintained. Very gently squeeze with your left arm SLIGHTLY BEFORE taking a breath. The pressure in the bag should remain constant. Blow more air into the bag but DO NOT slacken off your arm. Allow the air you blow in to push your arm. Once again when the bag is fully inflated gently squeeze with your left arm and repeat the process. Too many pipers pump their bag. Blowing into the bag does not equal the same pressure from start to finish. Whilst taking a breath the amount of pressure on the bag increases until you start blowing again. The pressure applied by your arm should then decrease evenly until your breath reaches its maximum pressure.

High A should produce an even tuneful sounding note that does not vary. When you get proficient at this, other notes and then a tune can follow. Slow tunes with long sustained notes are best for this purpose.

Blowing drones

Another exercise is to cork your chanter stock and tune your drones together. Listen to them as you blow and practise the same technique. They should feel nice to blow, sound steady and even and produce a pleasant full tone. If they vary a lot, you should go back to the previous steps.

Blowing the entire instrument

The next step is to add a chanter. If an experienced piper, you can play all drones. If not add them one at a time. The same technique should now be practised with the entire instrument to consider. Listen to the tone the chanter produces against the drones. Every note should sound true and steady.

1. Do not get into the habit of blowing harder for top and notes and the easing off for the bottom hand notes.
2. Do not take too long a breath.
3. Do not blow harder for difficult or fast tunes and softer for slow or easy tunes.
4. Do not under blow your chanter so that high A is indistinguishable as a note, or your pipes choke.
5. Do not over blow so that high A screams and your chanter squeals.
6. Play long slow tunes and listen to the drones against your chanter and practice holding long stable notes.
7. Piobaireachd is excellent for this.
8. A water meter or tuner can help when trying to visualise what is at fault when steadiness cannot be achieved.

Always aim to blow correct tone

This starts on the practice chanter long before you pick up a set of pipes. Low A and High A should be an octave apart. After a short time you should begin to realise whether the notes on your practice chanter are in tune or not. Learning to tune your practice chanter and blow that tone consistently at an early stage will help you when moving up to the pipes. Every time you play your pipes you should attempt to tune them to the best of your ability. Test your blowing technique during the tuning procedure, and then listen to your sound 100% of the time when playing. Listen for steadiness of drone sound, the sound of the chanter against the drones and eventually the sound of your chanter against those of the rest of the band.

Ensure that you are match fit and able to perform on the full instrument with comfort for the required time frames.

Many pipers blow differently when tuning to one note as compared to playing a tune. Many also blow differently for various tune types. It is important to be able to separate blowing pressure and technique from actually playing. Listen to your instrument at all times, and with practice your ability to produce a steady and pleasant tone will increase and in turn so will your enjoyment and that of your listening audience.

There is a lot more of this type of information to be found in "The Complete Pipers Handbook" which funds the freely available School of Piping website and is available here:

<http://www.schoolofpiping.com/handbook.html>

www.schoolofpiping.com