

## SO YOU WANT TO LEARN THE BAGPIPES! PM Brett Tidswell

For those who have an interest and want to learn the bagpipes, there are a few things that you should know. The first is that is a difficult instrument to play and you should not proceed without a good teacher. On average a student will receive one half hour lesson a week, which may increase to a full hour after some time.

### **What will I need?**

You will need a practice chanter and a tutor book to start. This is not overly expensive, probably around \$100- \$150 for a suitable instrument for a beginner. Your teacher can probably advise you where to purchase a reasonable instrument at a good price. The practice chanter is a quiet instrument similar to a recorder on which pipers learn new material.



### **What is the process?**

The learning process usually starts with a series of musical exercises. The scale, moving on to various embellishments and then, probably some small tunes thrown in along the way.

Initially you will run out of material after a few minutes practice, but you should play the routine you are taught several times. Put the chanter down and pick it up and go over it again at a later time. As you progress your practice schedule will increase. Probably 30-45 minutes a day for a learner on some tunes is adequate. You should not worry if you miss a day's practice, but ensure that you do not do it frequently. The purpose of practice is to develop

muscle memory, correct technique and to memorise and remember the material. Later, on the bagpipe you will need to work on blowing technique and stamina as well. As with any musical instrument, practice and playing the instrument regularly are a part of life.

### **When do I play a bagpipe?**

After playing several tunes at a reasonable standard it will be time to progress to the bagpipe. The time this takes will vary from person to person. Some organisations provide a bagpipe for learner pipers; others ask that you purchase your own. A suitable learner's instrument can range from about \$1,500 second hand upwards. There will be maintenance items and other small expenses along the way. Ask your tutor about the requirements for a bagpipe. Do not just go and buy something, there are some traps for the unwary. Lots of Pakistani made instruments are misrepresented on the internet and many people sell second hand instruments they know little about.



### **How important are lessons?**

Regular lessons are very important. To miss a couple of weeks dramatically sets back the progress of a learner piper. To miss lessons frequently is very disruptive and can significantly impede progress. This is a musical instrument. To learn is sometimes a chore, but to play is fun and that should be the goal. Some parents seem to look at piping lessons like school and think students should have a break for school holidays. This is not the case. Piping should be looked at as one of the fun/physical activities that is used as a break from school work etc.



### **How do I join a band?**

Some bands run classes for learners and there will be a direct path to follow to become a band member. There will be specific tunes to learn so that you know the band repertoire and some bands have a juvenile band or a development group that feeds into a higher level band. Some students learn from a private tutor and they will be able to give advice on joining a band. It should be remembered that when you join a band, it is as much your band as anyone else's. You should therefore help to assist the band in fundraising, group activities etc. This ensures the future of the band and helps to repay the more senior members for the time they put in to assist you or your child that is learning.

### **What about solo competitions, certificates and seminars?**

Once proficient with a few tunes on the bagpipe, you will have the possibility of entering competitions as a soloist. Competition forms a significant part of the piping lifestyle. It is a good way to monitor your own standard and to gain some feedback. Another useful tool is to complete examinations through the local Associations. Seminars are often run by the local Associations and are a great way to gain additional knowledge, alternate view points and meet some of the local identities.

### **What is so good about learning to play the bagpipe?**

Aside from the pleasure of performing and enjoying music, the opportunities open to pipers are numerous. There are a number of organisations that offer full-time employment to pipers. There are numerous opportunities to compete locally, interstate and overseas. Festivals are run in most countries around the world as well as tattoos and other events of significance. The friendships made last a lifetime.

The discipline, teamwork and skills learnt will flow on to all parts of the student's life. What is most important however are the challenges and enjoyment obtained and sometimes the privilege to be a part of something very special.



There is more information to be seen at the school of piping website and “The Complete Pipers Handbook” is the ultimate guide for getting started on the bagpipe and as a useful resource for teachers. It is available here: <http://www.schoolofpiping.com/handbook.htm>

[www.schoolofpiping.com](http://www.schoolofpiping.com)