

Playing and maintaining bellows-blown smallpipes

Putting on the Bellows

Fasten the belt above the waist so that the bellows are just above your right elbow.

Close the rucksack-style buckle on the arm-strap, and open the strap fully.

Put your arm through the strap from above and tighten the strap until it grips your arm firmly but comfortably.

To release your arm, open the buckle by squeezing the sides.

The bellows are supplied with a long belt, please cut to shorten if required. By loosening the screws where the belt is fitted to the bellows wood, it is also possible to make some adjustment to the position.

Connecting the Pipes

Hold the drones and chanter in one hand, in front of your body.

Use your other hand to connect the inlet tube to the bellows.

Put some air into the bag before putting it under your left arm.

Using the Bellows

If you are used to playing the Highland pipes, please note that the pressure used for smallpipes is a lot lower.

Try to avoid using frequent short strokes of the bellows.

Do not operate the bellows in time to the music!

Do not use the bellows to control the playing pressure; use your left arm on the bag for that.

Adjusting the length of the Bellows Tube

You may find that the bellows outlet rubber tube is too long. We suggest you play the pipes for some time before coming to this conclusion. To shorten it, make a lengthwise cut about 15mm long, through the wall of the tube just behind the outlet bush (the part the blowpipe fits into). This will allow you to pull the tube off the bush. Cut off whatever is needed, probably no more than 15mm at one time. To refit the tube, soften the end by dipping it in a mug of boiling water for a few minutes, and then push it on the outlet bush.

Looking after your bellows pipes

Bellows-blown bagpipes generally require less maintenance than mouth-blown types.

Check thread wrappings regularly as they may slacken. For joints, add a few turns of sewing cotton rubbed lightly through beeswax. If the sliding wrappings become slack, put a few turns of sewing thread, unwaxed, on top of the existing wrapping. The thread may be left dry or lubricated with petroleum jelly (eg. Vaseline) if necessary.

The bag and bellows should not need frequent attention, and the bags have none of the problems associated with the Highland and other wet-blown pipes.

Reeds

The chanter reed is seated in a tapered socket in the top of the chanter, fitting into the chanter stock in the neck of the bag. A good chanter reed can last for years, and ideally should be left untouched. If it becomes necessary to remove the chanter, or the reed requires attention and you are new to the instrument, seek advice first. Pulling the chanter straight out of the chanter stock can result in the reed jerking back up and being damaged.

A plug-in, or 'split' stock is recommended for those wishing to exchange chanters regularly, for instance in combination sets with the choice of two chanters in different keys. This type of stock means the chanter reed is always covered by an extra stock which in turn plugs into a socket in the bag.

The drone reeds are generally brass bodied with a vibrating plastic tongue, and again should require very little attention. Trying to play with excessive pressure can cause them to stop sounding temporarily.

Tuning

The chanter is set up and tuned by the makers, and you should contact us if any problems arise.

Drones are tuned by sliding the top part up and down to the optimum position. Some of the more complex drones have a rotary valve (tuning bead), which extends the range of notes.

Northumbrian and some Scottish Smallpipe drones are fitted with a plunger system for turning the sound on and off. Plainer drones are sometimes fitted with removable stoppers.

Oiling and Polishing

Modern machining methods resulting in a smooth internal finish, and the use of foam as an alternative to leather for key pads means that very little, if any, oiling is required. At most, a few drops now and then if the chanter looks very dry. We use baby oil (Liquid Paraffin). Please ask for further advice.

Plated metalwork will stay bright and can be cleaned with a soft cloth. Plain brass will tarnish quite quickly and can be left this way. If required, a soft cloth and a proprietary metal polish, or wadding, will brighten it up again.

Chanter bore cleaning and reed adjustment

Please contact us for help and advice on this and other maintenance issues.

Unless you feel confident with anything but routine maintenance, always seek advice, preferably from the makers where possible.

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