

Hints on Care of the Pipes

More particularly in the East and sub-tropical climates, cocus wood and African blackwood are somewhat oily in nature, but ebony is more brittle fibre and apt to crack, though its tone may be softer and more mellow in nature than the former harder and denser woods, which yield a harder and sharper tone.

I have known pipes place sweet oil in their drone parts, and tilting them up run the oil from end to end. Usually expert players take great care of their favourite instruments, as do all flautists. It is a good plan to have a piece of fine linen, say four inches square, tied to a rifle bullet and use this as a “pull through.” The first piece of linen should be smeared with sweet oil and drawn through all the parts, followed by a second quite dry one, leaving the drone as clean as a rifle barrel. A large feather dipped in a little oil may also be used, followed by a dry pull-through. The writer uses coconut oil. The neck of the chanter is often found very dirty I school bands, and may be cleaned with a small feather, or a small brush as in use among tobacco pipe smokers and old-fashioned infants’ feeding bottles, gently pushed through the throat of the chanter. A small feather with its mid-rib cut flat may be sued for cleaning a chanter reed. Place the stem of the feather in the copper staple and push it into the tube and pull it out very gently through between the blades of the reed, handling it withall very gently.

Dried up Pipe Parts A sign of neglect. The tuning parts should never be allowed to become dried-in, or they may be very difficult to move and to take apart. The best article to separate them is a table knife blade. To remove the chanter from its stock, encircle the nut at the top of the chanter wit the forefinger and thumb and loosen the part by a gentle circular movement and screw fashion.

If desired, a piece of soft wood may be shaped into a tapering rod, this may be covered or twisted over with a soft piece of linen bandage, spiral fashion, and be found useful for cleaning the inside of the chanter. Never catch hold of the sole of the chanter and use same as a handle for removing chanter; the writer has seen one split form end to end by such misuse. If the wapping upon tuning parts become uneven and ragged, it is well to have at hand some soft thread of cotton, such as the frayed ends of cotton sheets or cotton towels, these should be twisted round the worn and rough places of the wapping and made even and smoothly movable by adding vaseline, solid coconut oil or cold cream.

Drone reeds Drone reeds have been found by the writer to last longer if an oily feather has been passed once (but only once) into them (a tip learnt from a Turkish piper). If the tongue of the reed is very stiff, in an emergency the grain in its tongue may be weakened by incising it cross-ways to the grain in several places, and if the tongue is too weak, also in an emergency, it may be “weighted” with a pellet or two of sealing wax or pitch.

If drone reeds become wet when used in the cold, they may be wiped with a handkerchief very carefully and blown through, especially if a drop of water should condense and settle upon the beating tongue but should be left in position in the pipes.

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If an obstinate drone reed refuses to play, raise the tongue of the reed and slip under it a human hair off one's head, drawing same up to the top near the hinge of the tongue – there is no objection to a young lady's hair.

When the pipes are nicely tuned and going well (like a clock or watch in good order, as it were), they should after the conclusion of being played upon and placed aside, remain again even some days afterwards in perfect tune.

An expert can choose reeds and often time tune them before placing in position into the drones. The player's ear is quite oftenest in its best and pleasant condition in the morning of the day.

While cleaning the pipes after use, the reeds are best put safely aside in a bottle. If one lends one's pipes, or even allows other piers to play upon them, it is better to let the lender use a separate set of reeds kept for that purpose. Men's wind-power and habits vary so much that while some like all their reeds "going" at a nice and pleasing condition, others may blow very strongly, and do not enjoy a blow on pipes unless they blow like a horse or a rhinoceros, and enjoy a good sweat! And once the lender has graciously allowed this, he will never do it again, for the reeds may be over-blown and never be the same again for a very long time, and will need a rest. It is better to keep a separate set of "lending reeds." In an emergency, a bamboo (abroad) can be used instead of a cane one.

A good rule is to never let novices touch or handle one's pipes, and teach them to examine everything firstly with the eye alone (we are reminded of the notices in museums and picture galleries, "Do not touch."). After an ocular examination, then the second stage of handling and touching things may be indulged in. Once, years ago, I saw a young piper pick up a set of pipes, pull out the big drone and flick the tongue up and let it fall with a snap, like a mouse trap. On asking him why he did this and for what reason, he was speechless, but the reed was ruined, and would never play at all in consequence. Therefore, when one requires to handle a thing, one's brain must have been used to first seek the reason why one is about to handle any article, and provide a remedy or cure if one is needed; if not, or for idle curiosity, "let well alone," is the best motto. The best way to keep pipes in tune, as someone has said, is to "leave them alone." The magic of the pipes is in the reed itself, and the magic of the fiddle is in the little bit of wood, or sound post, perhaps,

Novices should always enquire of their elders and experts, and never be afraid to ask questions, for there is a well of knowledge among old pipers and a kind freemasonry in their art which quickly warms to the willing pupil, and the lad that desires to learn "will learn," and often learns best under great difficulty. The way may be hard and the journey long, but an artist is always learning, and when one reaches the top of the hill and pauses and looks back to admire the view, the thought occurs, the joy has been in traveling; but art is long and life is short.

Broken Chanter Reed A reed may crack if it falls on the floor, but the writer has found a cracked blade may be mended with a piece of court plaster and so last a long time, or even a piece of post stamp edging. Crack blades may be taken apart and saved until another one has two of the same, and then they may be put together and used as a new reed (if the blades are exactly similar); the same may be done with practice

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chanter reeds, even when made of black vulcanite, the latter often need a lot of coaxing to get into good trim, but even the hardest will in time become quite good, and will last as long as five years with careful use.

Holes in Pipe Bags It is a good plan to keep in one's pipe box a quantity of little wooden plugs of soft wood, cut and shaped somewhat stud-shape, i.e., larger at the bottom than at the top, and groove in like manner to the butt-end of the drone stocks. This groove is necessary for ligaturing the plug in position. Sometimes holes are difficult to find, but if the bag is filled with tobacco smoke, the hole is easily found. Bagpipes should be carefully placed in safety at banquets and other places, and not left unprotected, as mischievous persons have at times damaged the instrument in some way, or put a knife through the bags.

The most difficult hole that the writer ever had to find was a hole in a carelessly turned ebony chanter stock (not of Scottish origin), wherein a very deep combing had been splintered by the corner of a chisel, and was only found by a smoke test. The writer, having as one of his hobbies, learnt wood turning, once made a small set of pipes and big drones, and many practice chanters.

Something now and then has appeared in popular magazines about pipe playing being of a harmful nature. True, pipes need to be blown by healthy, lusty boys, but most boys vastly improve in health and lung who play this instrument, and this includes girls, too. Most boys improve in stamina as much as under a course of military drill. It has been given out that "the moment folks start playing pipes, the users thereof proceed to hurt themselves more than the listeners thereto." One has noticed the long-haired ones at stringed instruments, etc. one has notice the bald-headed cornet players and trumpet players, but the pipe is above them all, it has them all beat. For, wonderful to say, and convenient to play is the pipe. Why? Because of the wonderful little valve in the blow-stick. There is no back-pressure, and no harm can be done with proper use and proper training. If there is harm done, it is done in some cases by improper use of the practice chanter. This in some cases is used like an oboe, which the writer considers the most harmful instrument a man can play, and bands men have been at times taken from this instrument and placed upon other instruments, or given a long rest, as, partly from blowing and partly from vibration a condition called by bandsmen "distemper of the ears" has arisen.

Continuous Blowing Harmful There are some pipes who can play and blow continuously page after page of pipe music on the practice chanter, and so virtually use it as an oboe, and endanger their ears by doing so. This need not be done at all, as learners should use a 'goose' for this purpose, obtainable at all the pipe shops the world over. It consists of chanter, bag, and blow-stick. Pipers who have pipes in their house may use their sets of pipe and plug or cork up all the drones and practice upon their bag and chanter alone, and instruct their pupils to do so.

If the student wishes to hear the chanter notes particularly distinct, the pipes should be played facing a wall, holding the chanter about a foot therefrom. Inside a room the practice chanter will give a much louder effect if played right up close to the wall, in a corner of the room, this is useful to a person a little dull of hearing, or the chanter may be held over a folded newspaper placed upon the performer's lap.

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It must be remembered, the practice chanter is a musical instrument in itself; some folk play on it alone.

The writer having as a lad served his time in the dentists' workshop, soldered gold plates, etc., melted gold with the mouth-blowpipe and coal gas, sometimes with paraffin and spirit lamp, never had trouble in continuously blowing, and many chemists can do the same but for pipe pupils this is quite unnecessary. So that the only harm pipe-playing can possibly cause is by not using a goose, and perhaps faulty instruction, or, more still, over-use of a chanter without any proper guidance at all.

The biggest and most useful invention, and the oldest of all was made by that early piper who inserted the chanter into the bag and so united them; and the second was the inventor of the valuable valve itself. If the old pipers of long ago could become alive again, what a surprise they would have in the modern pipe makers' shops, and quantity of specialists and experts in reed-making, pipe bag making, etc. all waiting upon their wants and requirements.

Bag Treatment In hot countries, and especially sub-tropical, when the bag becomes unduly wet, it should be now and then placed in the sun until the bag dries as required, but should never be left long at a time. The drones should be kept covered (or in the shade). The writer has found it a good plan at time to dust the inside of the bag with confections icing sugar now and then. The best bag softener is moist demerara sugar, melted to a syrup. Sometimes the writer has used syrup, and honey, too. Some men have been annoyed with ant and gnat nuisance in some places. A good plan to get rid of them is to use powdered borax, which quickly drives away Argentine ants and cockroaches.

It is also a good plan to cork up one's drone tops, and place a plug of cotton wool in one's mouthpiece. One evening the writer played half-way down the main street and got a dose of Argentine ants into his mouth when opposite the town hall, having forgotten to plug his blow-stick mouthpiece.

The following seasoning or bag dressing is a proven recipe against ants, which are occasionally troublesome in the tropics, particularly the little Argentine variety:-

Take 2 cupfuls of demerara sugar,
1 Tablespoon of flour,
1 Tablespoon of boric acid.

Mix and add water to make, when boiled up, a brandy bottle full.

In playing long tunes, it is as well to start with the reed slightly sharp, for it tends to become flatter by being long played upon.

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Tying the Neck of Bag to Chanter Stock It is as well that pipers should study the various ways of “biding and sewing” the edges of pipes bags (never use a three-cornered pricker) in case they are so situated as to have bags made when living in distant parts. Also be sure when tying in a chanter stock to preserve the two little folded pads of skin which lie on each side of the “bound edge” of the neck of the bag, where they lie next to the groove in the stock, as the old pads are quicker and handier to use than sometimes making new ones.

Drones Joints, etc. Always keeping the wrapping piece nice and even, and smeared every now and then with vaselene or lanoline; these are nowadays obtainable in tubes (like toothpaste) and made antiseptic, too. A nice pleasant paste is cold cream ointment, which has the virtue of being very refreshing at the same time.

Spital Cup A spital cup may be formed by inserting a bored cork and small piece of tube (say a piece of an old ink pen) into the blow-stick stock and waxing it into position. Many pipes have these nowadays, all made into one; in turning the stock itself.

Valve of Blow Stick Most pipers swear by the old idea of a leather valve, but the writer has used a valve consisting of a pin disc, and bridle strap of metal, very similar to an anaesthetic chloroform administration mask valve, and it is quite indestructible, never dries up, and is always ready for use. Many of the writer’s friends use this in hot countries.

A small pocket may be sewn upon the outer cover of the pipe-bag; to contain hempen thread, often wanted in an emergency.