

The Annual General Meeting which followed produced no great changes in the running of the Society, probably showing that everybody is perfectly happy the way things are going at present. The finances were reported to be in good heart, the secretarial business continued as usual, all officials were re-elected to their positions and the vacancies due to retiral on the General Committee were filled by the election of James Burnet, Andrew Wright and Robert Wallace. A vacancy had occurred on the Music Committee due to the retiral of Charles MacTaggart, after many years of service, and this the Music Committee had filled by appointing Neill Mulvie.

A new look is to be taken at Book 6 of the Collection, which is due to be reprinted soon. The business of having three or five lectures at future Conferences was remitted to the General Committee, and it was decided that, in future, dress would be optional rather than formal at the Annual Dinner.

After lunch there was the usual spate of farewells and good wishes as everyone departed to normal activities.

basically too soft or the lips are too open. Try closing the lips of the reed. With an old reed, it's a good bet that the reed has been softened by hours of playing. Not much can be done to remedy the situation. It's quite likely, too, that the F has fallen flat. My recommendation is to discard the old reed.

Problem: Scale OK but flat F. Frequently this is not a reed problem but a chanter one. Modern chanters of some makers tend to have a flat F, irrespective of the reeds tried in them. If you are sure that it is indeed the chanter, then a bit of minor surgery on the F hold may help to lift that note. This is done by very accurately and gradually undercutting the top of the F hole. BUT be absolutely certain that no good reed will suit the chanter before performing cutting operations on it.

Possible remedies apart from surgery: If the reed is a strong one, try closing the lips. If that doesn't work, try cutting the tip off. Obviously when a tip is cut off you will have to resite the chanter reed in its recess.

One way to close the lips of a reed is to use the shaping mandrel (which is different from a holding mandrel). The shaping mandrel has the exact shape of the staple. To close the reed a trifle, take it and insert the mandrel. Look down at the lips and at the same time, using non-serrated needle-nosed pliers, squeeze the staple at its top, bindings and all. Because you will be squeezing on to the mandrel, you will not distort the shape of the staple. Watch to see that the lips close. Then try the reed. If you have gone too far with the closure, open the staple again with an old-fashioned ice-pick. It's not a good idea to do this total procedure too often because eventually the bindings may get loosened up.

Problem: Reed has brassy tone and gurgles on top A and G', and probably has flat B also. This is usually due to a strong reed. First effort to cure the malady is to scrape some cane off; and if that doesn't work go through the other procedures mentioned in previous paragraphs.

Problem: Reed is thin and squeaky on top hand. Usually this is because of too little cane in either the sound-box or the top of reed or both. If the reed continues to be squeaky even when wet then try to open it up a bit. Sometimes when an easy reed has not been played for a while and has dried out, it will be thin and squeaky, but after it has regained some moisture by being played for a while, it may of its own accord open up and the squeakiness will disappear.

Chanter Reed Basics — Part 4

by David V. Kennedy

Particular problems in establishing the modal scale

Problem: top A flat, top G flat (hereafter referred to as G') **F flat and maybe C flat.**

Possible explanation: reed too long for chanter. Cut tip off ½mm at a time until top A and G' come in correctly. Generally this will also take care of the F and C.

A word here about cutting the tip off. This is done with a very sharp reedknife against a very hard cutting block. The reed is lined up on the block, one or ½mm down from the tip. A swift blow from a hammer against the back of the reedknife, and the tip should come off cleanly. I do not recommend the technique used by bassoonists and oboe players, which is to just bear down heavily against the reed to cut off the tip. One is too apt to be cut that way if the knife slips.

Problem: Scale OK except the flat C.

Possible explanation: With a new reed probably the cane is

Problem: Reed does not respond on all or some of the notes. In other words it “sticks”. A good reed, incidentally, should respond to the slightest puff of air.

This is a difficult problem to solve, and may have to do with how the blades were tied on to the staple. If all other efforts fail (such as scraping, opening or closing staple) then I advise re-tying the reed onto the same staple or another one if necessary. If that fails, then it's not worthwhile messing around with that reed. Use another reed.

Problem: Reed “double-tones” on F in some chanter i.e. if you let off on the blowing pressure a trifle the reed will go to another note. This is essentially a chanter problem and has to do with the shape and I.D. of the throat. It seems to happen more with older chanters whose throats have been opened up with a reamer. Not all reeds will give the double-tone; so one solution is to select a reed which suits that chanter. Such reeds are usually not weak or very easy to blow; but, on the other hand, are not insurmountably strong either.

Problem: With fairly strong reed, scale is OK but F either won't sound or if it sounds, is very flat. Try closing reed-blades onto the shaping or profiling mandrel. This will probably lift the whole scale to B flat and the F should come in.

Problem: Scale is OK but basic note is close to A 440 cps, with all notes true. But you want to raise the scale with all notes true because you have a modern chanter and modern drones!

The most likely reason for the low tonic A is that the effective blade length of the reed is long. By effective length I mean the length measured from the first bindings to the tip of the reed. I have just made such a reed, and its length is 21.5mm. Two other reeds just made and finished are right on B flat, one measures 18.8mm and other 20.0mm. The shorter reed is really too short for my 1982 Hardie chanter and my 1984 Gibson chanter, and, of course, far too short for my older Robertson chanter or my pre World War One Peter Henderson chanter. But by setting it out in the recess in the more recent chanters I can bring the scale to correct pitch.

Now, the low pitched reed has plenty of resonance and is not what I'd call an easy blowing reed; so the point I make here is that while a low pitch sometimes is due to soft cane in a reed, this is not the case here. A reed whose basic note or which gives a basic or tonic note of A 440 cps to say 450 cps on a chanter can be either a reed whose effective length is around 19mm or so, or can be (as above) a resonant reed whose length exceeds 21.0mm. The piper must be the judges of what he has, and what he wants.

Therefore to bring my low pitched reed up to what is close to B flat I must cut the tip off.

I want to emphasise, however, that both kinds of reeds will play accurately in the older Robertson chanter but not necessarily will the longer one do so in a modern Kintail or Gibson (or presumably other modern makes) chanter. In the modern chanter the C will tend to be too flat with the longer reed.

And it is important to re-emphasise that when you are “pitching” a chanter reed, you cannot overlook what will be the correct spacing or opening between the lips of the reed. At all times we like to see a curvature, Cupid's Bow so to speak, in the lips but not all reeds take a standard curvature. Too “open” a reed may play havoc with its response; and too close an opening will do the same thing and even stifle the response. Every reed has to be judged on its own merits. This is why it is so important for a piper to have some of the finishing tools for chanter reeds and know how to use them.

Miscellaneous problems

Reed has a wee nick on the edge of one of the tips. If the reed is playing OK, don't worry about the wee nick.

Reed has split on one blade starting at the tip. This is more serious than a nick because if the split has gone all the way through the cane the curvature of that blade will collapse and the pitch will eventually be difficult to maintain. Also the reed may start to sound queer on certain notes and will “stick” on blowing. Discard the reed.

Reed-blades begin to get misaligned. If that is a large slippage I would re-tie reed rather than sand edges to equal them.

Reed-blades begin to look black and mildewy. Keep playing the reed as long as it has life, but periodically wipe it down with an anti-fungal solution. If the reed is still strong, use the reedknife to very lightly scrape off the gunk.

Conclusion

I have undoubtedly overlooked some aspects of the chanter reed in this series; but I maintain that there is nothing mystical about chanter reeds. Like many products of Nature, they can be complex. If the articles can help pipers handle their piob mhor better and produce a nice, accurate scale and tone from the instrument, I shall feel gratified that my slim knowledge and experience of our reeds has been of some little assistance to some pipers.