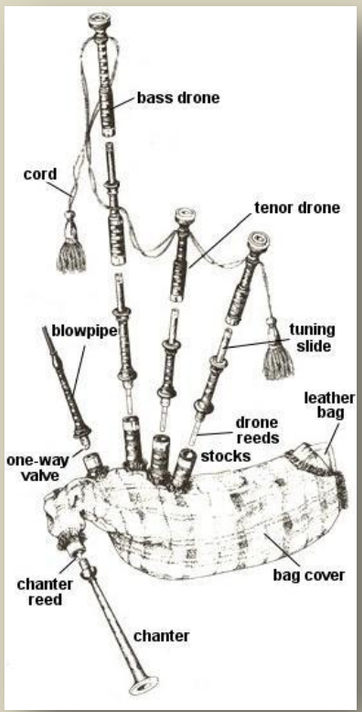
The **Omaha Pipes and Drums**
www.omahapipesanddrums.com

History of the Pipes

A great deal of uncertainty, conflict and controversy surrounds the questions of the origins of bagpipes. The earliest possible reference to a bagpipe occurs around 400 BC, when Aristophones, the Athenian poet jibed that the pipers of Thebes (an enemy of Athens) blew pipes made of dogskin with chanters made of bone. Several hundred years later, Suetonius described the Roman Emperor Nero as a player of the tibia utricularis in Lives of the Twelve Caesars. Nero is reported to have said he would play the bagpipe in public as a penance for not winning a poetry contest. Dio Chrysostom who also flourished in the first century, wrote in Orationes about a contemporary sovereign, probably Nero, who could play a pipe ("aulein") with his mouth as well as with his "arm pit". From this account, it has been deduced that a true bagpipe was used - having a blowpipe, bag and a chanter (probably a double chanter since double pipes were used at this time). A coin of Nero depicts a bagpipe, according to the 1927 edition of Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

How Bagpipes Work

Bagpipes are a class of musical instrument, *aerophones*, using enclosed reeds fed from a constant reservoir of air in the form of a bag. The Great Highland Bagpipes (GHB) consists of a bag, three drones, a blowpipe, and a chanter.



In essence, a piper blows through the blowpipe into the bag. The blowpipe is fitted with a one-way valve that prevents the air from coming back out the blowpipe when the piper takes a breath. From the bag, the air passes out through the drones and the chanter, each making a sound.

The three drones are composed of two (shorter) tenor drones which are one octave (eight notes) lower than the fundamental pitch of the chanter (called "Low A") and one (long) bass drone, one additional octave lower than the tenors. The drones each have a single reed which sounds a pitch (like humming a single note) hence the term "drones."

Drone reeds can be made of natural cane, synthetic materials, or a combination of both.

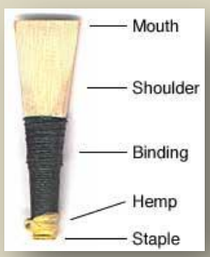

Natural Cane


Synthetic


Synthetic/Cane

Moving the bridle on the drone reeds allow the piper to adjust the pitch. Additional tuning of the drones is accomplished by sliding the drones up and down on their tuning slide/pin (down for sharper, up for flatter). The air pressure moving across the blade of the drone causes the reed to vibrate and produce sound.

The chanter has a double reed; two matched pieces of (almost universally) Spanish Cane wrapped around a metal tube called a "staple".



The reeds come in various strengths requiring different amounts of pressure for the blades to vibrate and produce sound. The pitch of the chanter is changed by pushing the reed further in or out of the top of the chanter – in for sharper, out for flatter.

The note sounded by the chanter is determined by which of its holes are covered (or not) by the piper's fingers.

Individual notes of the chanter are tuned by taping the top of the finger hole to flatten the pitch. A chanter reed requires precise positioning into the chanter and the chanter holes usually require precise positioning of tape to sound musical. To complicate the tuning process, the pitch of the chanter reed will shift as the instrument warms up, requiring the piper to retune frequently until the instrument has been stabilized. Moisture (or lack thereof) also affects the tuning.

When a piper takes a breath, the piper's arm applies more pressure to the bag to maintain a steady pressure and even tone. A bagpipe played by an inexperienced or "unsteady blower" will waver in pitch and sound out of tune.

Bagpipes require a lot of stamina to play for any length of time. Pipers spend their careers learning to maintain steady pressure and mastering tuning, but the results are a truly wonderful experience.

Until next month…

Sláinte