

# Producing Great Tone

*by Jack Lee*

## *Chanter*

Great tone all begins with the chanter reed selection and development. You want a chanter tone that is bright, harmonic, has an appropriate volume and notes that are in tune. The elusive goal is a bottom hand that is not too flat, a top hand that is not too sharp and a full rich tone throughout the scale. This is achieved through careful reed selection and periodic adjustments during the life of the reed.

- Use a solo chanter for the best results, not a band chanter. There are several good ones on the market. Wood is preferable for solos, especially piobaireachd, as it gives a smoother tone. Select a reed that works well in the chanter. Many reeds are poor for solos. Common pitfalls are dullness, flatness of pitch, poor piobaireachd High “G”s, etc.
- Test the chanter reed on its own for efficiency and brightness by blowing and hearing the schreck (crow). All reeds will schreck when blown on their own. The good ones will lose the tone and produce a clear tone when blown harder. These are the most efficient vibrant reeds.
- Mount the reed appropriately with waxed hemp. Don’t shove it too deeply in the reed seat as it can produce instability and shrill characteristics.
- Get the foundation right first and tune any specific notes later. Don’t worry about slightly sharp or flat notes until the reed has been properly selected and developed. Poke, lick and shave the reed as appropriate to develop its vibrancy.
- Check the notes. Make sure the top hand is sweet, not sharp; the bottom hand is sweet, not flat. Don’t overlook low “G”, “B”, “C”, and “E”.
- Above all, the chanter must produce a balanced sound. The top hand should not be noticeably less than the bottom hand.

## *Drones*

Good drone tone is much easier to achieve now than ever before due to synthetic reeds. There are many good cane and non-cane reeds on the market but select reeds that produce rich harmonic, cane-like tone.

- The reeds should start easily – no irritating squealing.
- The balance with the chanter is important – ensure the drones don’t overpower the chanter. Have someone else blow your pipes so you can stand back and listen.
- Balance and stability within the three drones is a must. A common problem is an unsteady bass. Consider using a cane bass with a wire insert. Ensure the bass tone has adequate depth.

## Putting it All Together

### *Blowing Steady*

Blowing steady is an art that can take years to master. We all blow somewhat unsteadily but the trick is to recognize it and guard against it.

- Listen intently while playing for fluctuations on the top hand notes – they vary easily with changes in blowing pressure. A periodically occurring High “A” crow is a sure sign of unsteady blowing.
- A common pitfall is too much elbow movement. The elbow should always put some pressure on the bag – even when blowing. Don’t release the elbow too far from your body.
- Most pipers squeeze too softly. That causes a drop in pressure when switching from blowing to squeezing. Be sure to squeeze aggressively.

### *Finding the Perfect Blowing Pressure*

Each reed has a sweet spot or blowing pressure that produces the most ideal tone. The way you find this is to blow the High “A” just hard enough so that the crow barely disappears. At that pressure, the High “A” can give a slight buzz. There is a little body or substance to its tone rather than a pure whistle. This is the sweet spot.

- As you are playing, set your blowing pressure by the High “A”.
- Blow just enough so that the High “A” produces a slight buzz and hold that pressure during your performance. Each time you come to High “A” you should hear the buzz. If you do this you will be blowing past the choke line.

### *Measuring Changes in the Tone*

Listen carefully to your tone while playing. This is hard to do since most of us are concentrating on technique while playing, rather than tone. Get the tunes off well enough that they don’t require all your concentration while playing.

- As you play, your pipes gather moisture. That can lead to wandering drones and flat chanter tone. If you hear flatness in your chanter, blow it out. If time permits, give the reed a small squeeze to return it to sweetness.
- Be prepared to blow slightly more firmly on the bottom hand notes. Also, be willing to ease off slightly on High “A” and High “G”.