# Setting Up A Pipe Corps

by PM Brett Tidswell
APBA Piping Principal

## Introduction

The intention of this article is to present a formula that can help to get a good sound from a pipe corps. It is not to look in detail at the set up or maintenance of instruments, which is of course vital to the quality of sound a pipe corps will produce. Although it touches on the necessity of some basic individual skills and maintenance, it concentrates primarily on the overall methodology of setting up a pipe corps. As with all music, rules are made to be bent or broken, but these are some basics that I tend to adhere to and hope they will also be a guide to you, regardless of standard.

## Getting Started

It is important that all Pipers in the band are using the same set up ( bag, moisture control system etc.). This will help to overcome the problems that occur with the variety of products on the market at the moment that change differently under similar playing conditions. I would not for example suggest mixing a Ross canister bag with leather bags, or Canmore bags for example as they react very differently to various weather conditions.

Select a bag that suites the environment in which you usually play. This is one of the most vital pieces of equipment as it is the primary source of moisture control. I recommend some type of moisture trap in your pipes, be it a canister or just a hose from your blowstick to the back of the bag to stop moisture going straight down your chanter stock.

Select a drone reed that gives you a pleasant and stable sound, rather than one that just "goes". All pipers should use the same type of reeds ( regarding design principal and material). They do not have to be the same brand, but again reeds also react differently to changing conditions. Do not expect a cane drone reed to respond the same as an Eezedrone or Ross reed for example.

Chanters should preferably be a set, and taped with a product that will not slip or split (standard Scotch tape is unacceptable). Again there is a lot of variability in how chanters react. A timber chanter will give you a better tone, but will change quicker than a plastic chanter under the same conditions and therefore be harder to set up as a corps. They will also take about 6 months of playing before they settle down to their full stability.

## Maintenance

An instrument, like anything will not work well if it is poorly maintained. A pipe corps is a huge instrument in itself that the person setting up is "playing". Any maintenance problems effect the overall sound and steadiness, and this is magnified by the number of poorly maintained sets in the band. Very small things make a huge difference. I have found for example that pipes hemped with Teflon tape are not as steady and do not sound as good as those hemped with waxed hemp. If I had not tried the different products on the same instrument I would not have believed the difference. Leaking bags, loose (rocking) joints, reeds using too much air and slipping chanter tape will have a huge effect on your end result. Ensure that after a decent practice on a damp day that reeds are not getting too wet, if they are you need to look at modifying your moisture control set up.

## Blowing & Intonation

Bad blowing will drastically affect the ability

to get a good sound. Each piper should be taught to blow steady and have the strength and stamina to maintain it. Pipers who blow harder when tuning, or drop pitch significantly when playing in the band should be identified and all steps taken to remedy what is an enormous problem as they will sabotage any effort to get a true harmonious sound.

The term blowing relates not only to putting air into the bag, but maintaining that supply with arm pressure placed upon the bag. The arm is the tool for controlling the air supply to the reeds in a continuous, steady manner.

Pipers who play in a band with a good sound will develop an ear for that sound. The better you prepare the band at practice, the better you train your pipers in the sound you want them to produce.

## Rules

You will need to establish a set of tune up rules. It is imperative that all pipers adhere to them 100%. Examples are:

- All chanters capped after playing.
- Blow some air through the chanter reed before playing.
- Do not lick, suck or moisten your chanter reed before starting.
- All pipes start at the same time.
- All pipers play in the shade, or the sun.
- All pipers play on the same surface, ie: grass or bitumen.
- All pipers playing for the same amount of time, not standing around talking.

It is impossible to get a good sound if pipes are changing differently. A licked chanter reed will be a lot flatter than a drier one, therefore you will sharpen (sink) a reed that will later become too sharp as it dries.

A set of pipes played on wet grass will be a lot flatter than one played on bitumen or beside a hot brick wall. A capped chanter reed will react a lot differently in the opening stages of tuning compared to one left in a moist pipe bag. Instruments played for differing times will also make the task of tuning more difficult.

## Procedures

You will need to establish a procedure to tune up the band which is efficient and familiar to all members. The quicker you can tune, the better the result. Practice fine tuning at every opportunity, so that you become fast and efficient yourself. Try not to leave pipers standing around cooling off.

Experiment with differing conditions and note how long it takes you to get a decent sound. It takes bands different lengths of time to get a decent sound in different conditions. On a hot day for example it might take 1 hour, but on a wet morning, you would be too wet by the end of the performance, so it might only be best to give the band a quick 20 minute tune up, (this can't be done if struggling with poorly maintained pipes). You may also find that stamina of players becomes an issue. There is no point in planning a 2 hour tune up if the pipers are half dead after 15 minutes.

Give the pipers 5 minutes to play by themselves, all starting at the same time. They should then all come together and listen to the sound. Set up a master instrument and tune all chanters to that instrument as quickly as possible. Preferably playing a tune that the pipers are very familiar with and encompasses all notes of the scale. This is a lot more effective than just playing a tuning scale as most pipers

change blowing pressure from the scale to a tune, or even on various notes.

If the sound is reasonable after the first few minutes of playing, the instruments might just need a few touch ups.

When using a tuner, take a reading from the drones of the master set. Go around the corps, holding the tuner in the same spot each time ( I suggest a centimetre or so off the drone hole , to one side, not directly over the hole). Listen to each set carefully, as the tuner is just a guide, your ears have the final say.

Do not attempt to tune pipes without the drones going as the variation in pressure caused by stopping the drones will create a false impression of the sound achieved and will change drastically when the drones are restarted.

If a piper arrives late, blow through the chanter reed to moisten it a little, **do not lick it**, rub your fingers together to warm them and then press **gently** on the blades of the reed. This will bring the chanter up in pitch very quickly.

## Weather Conditions/ Environment

I have several rules that I adhere to, but these are variable depending on what the instruments are doing when I start to set the band up. It is rare however that I vary from them. They are as follows:

- HOT & SUNNY, introduce the instruments to the sun occasionally to get them used to it, but conclude tuning in the shade to stabilise the sound.
- CLOUDY, play in shade, try to offset the sun coming in and out.
- COOL BUT SUNNY, warm pipes in the sun well before playing, then tune in the sun as cold drones create condensation.
- RAINING, try to play for the shortest time possible, under cover.
- COLD NIGHTS, try to play inside with heating if possible. If required to perform outside, try setting up inside.
- COOL NIGHTS, set up inside, but play last final tune outside.
- INDOORS BUT TUNE UP OUTDOORS, play for same length of time as the performance and set drones slightly sharp.

Listen to what the instruments are doing and modify accordingly. I do not set reeds differently to play on a cold night or a sunny day, unless something is going drastically wrong and the balance has been affected.

## Pitch, Balance & Quality Of Sound

Your instruments pitch is dictated by three things, your chanter, the reed and temperature. A chanter should be set up so that top and bottom hands are balanced in pitch and every note is tuned harmonically to your drones. There will be a pitch range that the chanter and reed will accept. The chanter and reed combination will sound at its best at a certain pitch, you need to find that balance by setting your own instrument carefully. The pitch will change as the temperature changes, but let this happen. Do not reset the entire band just because you are a little lower in pitch on a cold night, or higher on a hot day. It might be advisable to make some changes only if the balance is becoming affected, eg: top hand screaming on a hot day. This can often be overcome however by moving the band into

the shade.

It should be noted that the walls of a chanter are a lot thinner on the bottom hand. The bottom register will therefore flatten a lot quicker than the top in the cold. It will usually take the bottom hand a lot longer to come up to pitch on a cold night, so give the pipes a lengthy playing session, say 15 minutes, before any changes are made. The bottom hand of the chanters can be held by the pipers when not playing, to keep them warm on a cold night.

When listening to the balance of a band the volume and quality of sound being produced by the drones should be considered. They are a harmonic accompaniment that should not overpower the band, but should be distinct with a smooth pleasant quality providing an umbrella of sound.

## Conclusion

There are many small things which spoil a good sound. Attention to these can create a significant improvement in a bands overall sound with little effort required, despite the level of individual players abilities. The principals above are tried and proven and can contribute toward a vast improvement your bands overall performance. Combined with some practice in actually achieving the sound you want in various conditions and shortening the tuning time required, the suggested points should act as a guide to your bands improved sound and performance.