

Tuning cheat sheet

Tuning the Great Highland Bagpipe

The key points at a glance – with the pipes in your hands.

Before you start

- Bag airtight, joints humped, blow steadily.
- Play the pipes for a few minutes to warm up.

Chanter reed (cane)

- Handle by the staple only, never by the blades.
- Keep evenly moist, do not lick.
- Crow test: buzz first, then a clear tone = good.
- Too hard: elastic band low on the reed (max. one third up).
- Too easy: open carefully from inside with a reed mandrel.
- Sanding: from the tip towards the middle, centre not too thin.
- Sand only with the utmost care – what is gone is gone. Have a teacher show you first.

Chanter

- Always start with Low A.
- High A flat → push reed deeper. High A sharp → pull reed out.
- Then check Low G / High G.
- Play the scale slowly against the drones. Sharp note → tape the top of its hole a little (often D and F).

Drones

- Top section up = flatter, down = sharper.
- Listen for the beating: slows down, then disappears.
- Order: outside tenor → bass → middle tenor.
- With chanter: Low A for the tenor, High A for bass and middle tenor.
- Sounds better blowing harder → drone up. Better blowing softer → drone down.
- Tenor top section in tune: hemp line to approx. 9 mm above. Bass: about at the hemp line.

Drone reeds – both types

- Firm and airtight in the seat (waxed hemp, a little wax).
- Check each drone on its own, cork the others.
- Should shut off only just before your strongest pressure.

Synthetic drone reeds

- Double-toning / too hard → rubber bridle towards the free end of the tongue.
- Shuts off too early / squeals → rubber bridle towards the fixed end.
- Steps of approx. 0.5–1 mm.
- Tuning screw: in = sharper, out = flatter.
- Keep dry.

Drone reeds (cane)

- Bridle of waxed hemp, not too tight, not too slack.
- Sharper: set reed deeper or bridle towards the waxed end.
- Flatter: pull reed out, bridle towards the drone or weight the tongue.
- Like some moisture, need time to blow in.