How long does it take to learn the bagpipes?

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From the first note on the practice chanter to the first tunes on the Great Highland Bagpipe

This is the question I hear most often from my students – right after “Am I still able to learn this at my age?”. The honest answer: it takes longer than with many other instruments, and above all it depends on how regularly you practise. Here you can read what you can realistically expect.

Is it hard to learn the bagpipes?

The bagpipes are not easy, but with patience you will get there. Three things in particular are difficult: the embellishments, building up enough air, and – on the full pipes – blowing, squeezing the bag and fingering all at the same time. You do not have to master any of this at once. You learn it step by step, first on the practice chanter and only then on the pipes.

Why the bagpipes need embellishments

A trumpet or flute player can briefly stop the breath or tongue a note, and so separate notes from each other or play rests. On the bagpipes this is not possible: the reeds sit inside the instrument, the bag pushes the air through without a break, and the sound continues as long as you play. Two identical notes in a row would simply merge into one long note. That is what embellishments are for: very short notes that the piper places between the melody notes. They separate the notes, accent the beat and give the tune its rhythm. Because the piper can hardly change the sound in any other way, the expression of the music lives almost entirely from them.

The time on the practice chanter

Every piper starts on the practice chanter, PC for short. Among pipers it is almost always just called the PC. On it you learn the fingering, how to read music, the embellishments – gracenotes, doublings, grips and throws – and your first tunes. The full pipes only come in once all of this is secure.

Teachers around the world agree remarkably well on how long this takes: usually six months to a year, sometimes longer. Anyone who moves on faster than their fingers allow takes mistakes onto the pipes that are very hard to get rid of later.

I, too, practised for several months on the PC only: the scale, all embellishments and clean fingering, above all the change between the upper and the lower hand. That is exactly where crossing noises easily creep in (short, unwanted notes that overlap when changing between two notes, because one finger already comes down on its hole before another has been lifted). On the pipes you do not want to hear them.

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This phase calls for patience and perseverance, and it also shows whether you have both. Nothing comes from nothing: only those who practise diligently see their progress and move ahead quickly.

On the PC you also train your lungs along the way. The full pipes need strong lungs and a lot of air, and that grows with every practice session. And there is something else I know from my own experience: after two or three months of regular practice, many learners suddenly start to “overblow” their PC. You blow into it, but the PC no longer makes a sound. The reason: the tongue of the reed can only vibrate as long as the air pressure suits it. If the pressure is too strong, it presses the tongue firmly against the reed body, the tongue can no longer swing back and forth, and the sound stops. Because your lungs have become stronger, you have increased the pressure without noticing. Nothing is changed on the reed. Instead you learn to take your breath back and to blow the reed more gently, so that it sounds steady and clean again.

This is a good sign: your lungs have become stronger, and as far as air pressure is concerned, the move to the full pipes is getting closer.

You are ready for the pipes when you play the basic embellishments cleanly and know a few tunes by heart. In Scotland people often speak of half a dozen or more. Here it is usually three to four, perhaps five tunes. When you are ready, I will tell you in our lessons.

Moving on to the Great Highland Bagpipe

With the full pipes something completely new comes in: you blow, squeeze the bag with your arm and finger the chanter all at the same time – and you have to keep the pressure so steady that chanter and drones sound clean. Pipers call this “steady blowing”.

That is why on the pipes you do not practise any tunes at first, but exactly that: steady blowing. You learn to keep an even pressure on the bag with breath and arm, so that the drones run calm and stable without wavering or cutting out. Only when that is secure do the tunes you already know from the PC come in.

At first this is physically demanding. Lips, arm and breathing have to get used to it, and after a few minutes you are out of breath. That passes with regular practice. In the beginning you therefore play the pipes only for a short time and keep practising the tunes on the PC.

It usually takes another few months before the first tunes sound secure and clean on the pipes. This also includes tuning the instrument yourself – how that works is explained in my guide Tuning the Great Highland Bagpipe.

By the way: you will never put the practice chanter away again. Every piper learns new tunes on it first, for a lifetime.

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What is realistic – with a job and a family

For adults with a job and a family, this rule of thumb is honest: about a year on the practice chanter, then another few months until the first tunes sound secure on the pipes. Nobody can give you a firm promise – it is different for everyone.

Practise 15 to 30 minutes every day. At the very beginning 15 minutes are enough, because there is not much to play yet, and at some point you will be sick of the scale.

The biggest difference is not made by talent, but by regularity. So do not practise today and skip tomorrow because you do not feel like it. Every day you miss shows immediately and very clearly.

The practice chanter is quiet, about as loud as a recorder. So you can also practise at home in the evening. With the full pipes it is different – they are an instrument for outdoors.

At what age you can learn the bagpipes

There is no fixed minimum age. Two things matter: the child must be able to take in what it is taught, and it must be able to finger the PC. If the hands are still too small to cover the holes, there is no point. For smaller hands there is the standard practice chanter with closer hole spacing – more about this in the guide Which practice chanter for beginners?.

If both fit and the child also enjoys the work, then it is time. That is my view; other teachers set fixed age limits. Whether your child is ready, we will find out together when we first meet.

I adapt the way I teach to the child. What it learns is the same as for adults.

There is no upper limit. Those who start at fifty, sixty or later may learn a little more slowly than a child, but they bring patience, discipline and a clear goal. You do not need any previous knowledge, and on the bagpipes you learn to read music along the way.

How my lessons work and what you need to get started can be found on the page Unterricht (Lessons) on my website.

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