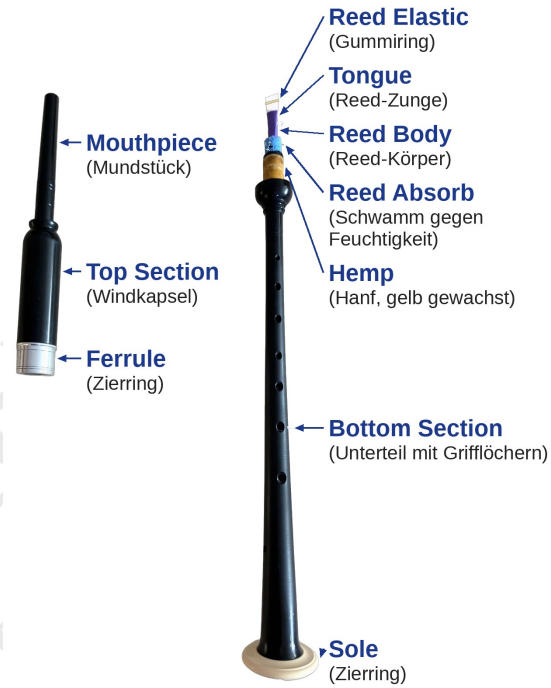
Which practice chanter for beginners?

Udo Zahlauer · Dudelsack Regensburg · www.dudelsack-regensburg.de

Every piper starts the same way: not on the full pipes, but on the practice chanter, PC for short. Before you buy one, it is worth looking at the differences. The right PC makes the start easier and the later move to the Great Highland Bagpipe simpler.

What is a practice chanter?

The practice chanter consists of two parts. At the top is the top section with the mouthpiece you blow into. Below it sits the bottom section with the finger holes; the reed sits at its upper end, and at the bottom it is finished off by the sole. The picture shows what the individual parts are called.



The PC is fingered exactly like the chanter of the full pipes. But it is much quieter, so you can practise at home.

On the PC you learn fingering, embellishments and your first tunes. And it stays with you for a whole piping life: even experienced pipers practise new tunes on the PC first.

Long or standard?

The PC comes in two sizes. For adults and teenagers I recommend the **long practice chanter** (sold as “long length”). Its fingering and hole spacing match the chanter of the Great Highland Bagpipe. What you learn on it is already right in your fingers when you move to the full pipes.

The **standard practice chanter** (sold as “standard length”) is shorter and has closer hole spacing. It is meant for children whose fingers cannot yet cover the holes of the long chanter. This way even young beginners can start before their hands are big enough for the full pipes.

There is no fixed minimum age. What matters is that a child enjoys learning and can already concentrate for a while. Even though children learn a lot through play, music and fingering are part of it from the very start. I adapt the way I teach to the child. Whether your child is ready, we will best find out together when we first meet.

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The material: Polypenco or Delrin

For the start, a PC made of plastic is the right choice, more precisely of **Polypenco** or **Delrin**. Both are robust, dimensionally stable plastics that have proven themselves in bagpipe making for decades. They are not affected by moisture or changes in temperature, and their sound comes closest to the chanter of the full pipes.

PCs made of wood (blackwood) are also available. For the start, however, you do not need one. The only real difference is the sound: a blackwood practice chanter sounds a little warmer and rounder, a PC made of Polypenco or Delrin a little brighter.

Good to know: wood is more delicate. A blackwood PC breaks more easily if handled carelessly, above all at its narrowest point at the top. As long as you are not yet completely sure in handling the instrument, a plastic PC is therefore the better choice.

The reed – the most delicate part

A PC usually contains a plastic reed. It consists of the reed body and the tongue, which vibrates when you play. It is robust and lasts a long time. I myself have been playing plastic reeds in my PC for more than 14 years and am very happy with them, currently a practice chanter reed by John Walsh from Canada. It is available directly from the maker or from specialist dealers such as Kilts & More.

There are also cane reeds for the PC instead of plastic ones. They have to be played moist, need more care and can go mouldy. Above all, they are delicate: if you knock them against something, they are usually broken and no longer sound. I therefore advise beginners against them.

Three things you should know about the reed:

- The **height at which the reed sits in the PC** changes the pitch.
- With the **reed elastic** (rubber ring) on the tongue you adjust the reed: the higher the rubber ring sits, the less air you need – but the quieter the reed becomes, until it finally stops sounding.
- The **reed absorb**, a small sponge on the reed, takes up the moisture of your breath and a little spit. It is reusable and is changed from time to time.

Hemp

Traditionally the parts are held firm and airtight with a wrapping of hemp. Use **yellow, waxed hemp** for this, not black. Black waxed hemp is waxed more heavily, stiffer and sticky. That is good for joints that are meant to stay fixed. On the PC, however, the parts must come apart and slide, so black hemp has no place there.

Care

A plastic PC is cared for like any other chanter:

- **Clean the finger holes now and then.** Over time, your fingers carry skin residue and dirt into the holes, and that changes the sound. A cotton bud is enough. Do not use anything that could scratch or damage the chanter.

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- **Protect the reed after playing.** Take the PC apart and fit a reed protector. Ideally use one with small holes of about 6 mm: this lets air circulate around the reed, the moisture escapes and no mould forms.
- **Do not dry it on the radiator.** Let the PC air-dry at room temperature.

What to look for when buying

- Buy from a recognised maker or a specialist dealer for pipers, not some cheap set of unclear origin. Quality varies a lot there, and a badly made PC makes learning unnecessarily hard.
- Make sure the reed matches the size of the PC: long and standard need different reeds.
- Ask your teacher before buying. If you would like to learn with me, we are happy to go through this together.

Where to get a good PC and reeds can be found on my page Bezugsquellen (Suppliers). Music and practice material you will get from me in the lessons.

And then?

How my lessons work and what else you need can be found on the page Unterricht (Lessons). I am happy to answer your questions – write to me or give me a call: Kontakt (Contact).

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