That Elusive High A

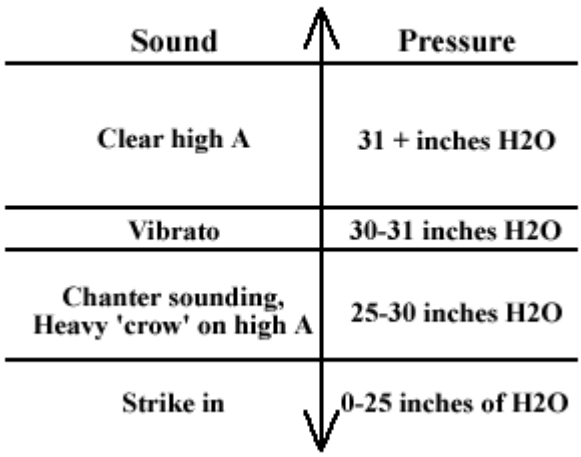
By Chris Apps

There are lots of trends and preferences concerning the high A sound produced from the Highland bagpipe. Preferences range from totally clear, almost ethereal in sound, to something that resembles a Harley Davison gunning down a gravel road with flat tires and no exhaust. I am often confronted by other non-piping musicians who, when they find out that I play the Bagpipes, proceed to sing me the scale thus; do re mi fa so la ti SCREEEEECH! After they stop coughing they pull a face as if to say 'what's all that about'? I have to admit that at times I ask myself the same question.

The high A preference is a personal choice and is to an extent dependent on the reed being played. Sometimes the scale sounds great but the reed just doesn't give the desired high A. Conventional wisdom says 'don't mess with it' or words to that effect. There are, however, some adjustments that can be made to improve the sound of this elusive note. Whether you have a high A that is too rough or one that is too smooth there are some adjustment techniques that can make a big difference.

Some players produce a beautiful vibrato. This is achieved with a high A that would be otherwise described as rough but is played in the pressure window just above the croak and just below the clear high A. Producing this sound calls for some very steady blowing at the exact pressure. Diagram 1 outlines this pressure window.

Diagram 1



At times the high A is just too rough sounding for proper control to be exerted on the reed and a clear high A is the preferred sound. In this instance the crow must be reduced or completely removed to make it more manageable and easier on the ear. There are a couple of techniques for doing this.

1/ Take the reed and sand just the very tips on a flat surface with very fine sandpaper, 320 grit or above will work. Hold the reed at an angle of around 30 degrees and wipe each side of the reed once. Re-test in the pipes and repeat if necessary taking care not to sand through the tips. See diagram 2.

Diagram 2

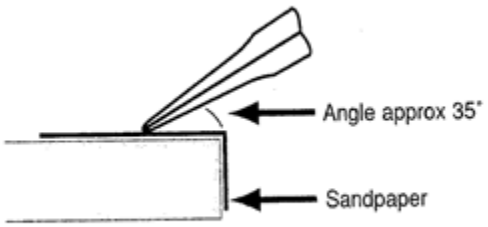


Image from Chris Apps Reeds Adjustment Booklet

2/ Drag your thumbnail across the tip of the reed at an angle to avoid chipping the edge. This will scuff up the edge producing the same result. Ensure that you scrape in one direction only. Do this to both blades once and check in the pipes. Repeat as often as necessary until the desired sound is reached. See diagram 3.

Diagram 3

If the high A is considered to be a little too thin then another approach is needed. First check the reed to ensure the gap between the blades is sufficient. This isn't an exact science but a thin sharp top hand, especially the high G, is an indicator that the mouth is too closed. An overall sharpness to the sound and lack of volume is also an indication. If this is the case, open the mouth of the reed a little with a mandrel. Using a mandrel may make the reed a wee bit harder. If this happens follow the sanding technique outlined in the next paragraph. The sanding will not only ease the reed strength but encourage the high A to produce a fuller sound. It's important to mention here that the following sanding techniques are not recommended for a ridge cut reed but work well only with a molded reed.

Once the mouth is set to the correct size the tips of the blades will need to be thinned a little to encourage the top hand to project a bit more. When thinning the blades, carefully sand the top 1/8th to 3/16th inch down from the tips. This must be done with great care on a flat surface with fine sandpaper. Make sure that the reed isn't angled as the tips will very quickly sand through. This will make the reed easier and give the top hand a fuller sound. See diagram 4.

Diagram 4

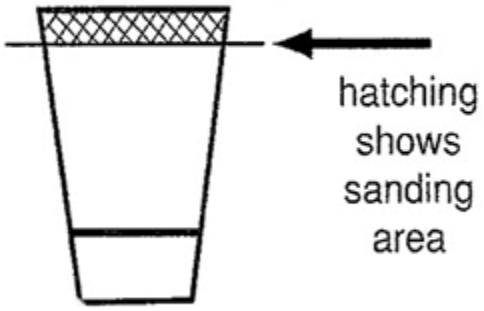


Image from Chris Apps Reed Adjustment Booklet

Once adjustments have been made, test the reed in the pipes. If the reed is still a little thin on top and doesn't yet vibrate efficiently, repeat until the reed improves. It's a matter of checks and balances. Open up here and take away there.

Remember all is not lost if your reed doesn't produce your preferred top hand sound right away. Try some of these techniques. You might be surprised at the difference a few small changes will make.