

What Are You Doing to That Reed?!

Forget those whacky reed handling tips.

by *Chris Apps*



AS A REED MAKER, I ENCOUNTER PIPERS of all levels and many are more than eager to share their particular “method” for handling and manipulating chanter reeds. Each time it’s the same. It always starts out: “You know what works for me....” Most of the time I manage to be polite. Well, I’ve heard some doozies in my time, but I about fell off my chair when one customer suggested I soak my reed in vinegar to “break it in.” Vinegar? What is that supposed to do? This piper didn’t know what it did to the reed either. It’s just what he’d been taught and it had seemed to work for him so far. Yah, well, thanks for the advice, but no thanks.

Over the years, I have been simply aghast by some of the reed fixes I’ve been given. These include (I kid you not, I’ve really heard these), but are not limited to, the following:

- Put the reed in the freezer overnight.
- Soak the reed in vinegar.
- Dip the reed in water for thirty minutes.
- Bake the reed in the oven.
- Dry the reed in the sun.
- Put a light coating of cooking oil on the reed.
- Coat the reed with nail polish.
- (And last but not least, the most common of all) Chew it.

Apparently all of these tips were handed down teacher to student with the best of intentions. However well intentioned they may have been though, they are all wrong. Some of them are more wrong than others.

“Breaking in” a good reed and keeping it in good working order is not rocket science and is easily achieved without all the quirky “fixes” you may have learned. By following a few simple rules, you can have stable, reliable chanter reeds that will always serve you well.

GOOD REEDS ARE NOT HARD

There is a philosophy that states that harder reeds produce a more stable sound. Actually, a good reed, blown well and at not too high a pressure, is your best bet. Buying a reed that you are unable to blow right out of the box will only cause stress and discomfort. The reed will not sound good until you soften it to your comfort level. If you are experienced

in softening reeds, it will probably work. If you’re not, the manipulation may ruin the whole process and you will have wasted time and money. If you can comfortably blow a hard reed, then buy one. If not, don’t.

TAKE CARE OF THE CANE

Chanter reeds are made of cane, a very porous material. They react rapidly to moisture levels in the environment, whether inside the pipes or not. Storing a reed near a heat source will suck the moisture right out of it and cause it to become brittle. Storing it in a freezer will destroy cells in the cane. Instead, find a cool, dry place to store your reeds, like a closet or dresser drawer. Warm a reed up slowly by placing it in your mouth and blowing through the reed for thirty seconds or so. Make sure your tongue does not touch the reed making it wet. After you finish playing, let it air dry for a few minutes before you cap it.

ALTERING THE REED

When manipulation is necessary (and it will be necessary sometimes), the only good solution is to use the proper tools. A mandrel, a piece of sandpaper, a razor blade, a chisel, some pliers, and some care are all the tools you’ll need. The

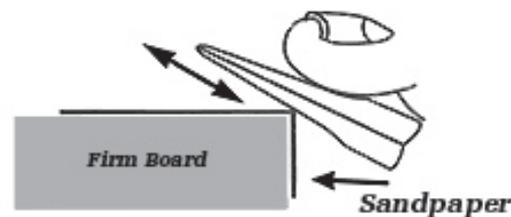


Figure 1. Sanding the reed.

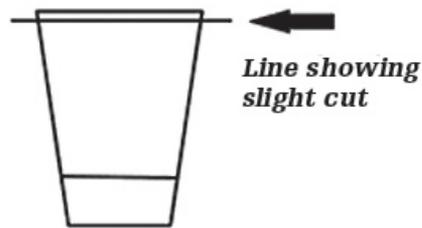


Figure 2. Cutting the reed with a chisel.

SPECIAL

mandrel and pliers will help to open and close the staple to adjust the pitch and strength. The razor blade and sandpaper will help thin the cane for fine adjustments in strength, to control a croaky high A, to correct a sharp high G, or flatten the top hand. The chisel can be used to cut a sliver off the top of the reed to correct a flat F. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

FOLLOW THE RULES

Finding the right reed and keeping it in good working order is not as difficult as some would have you believe. Be careful about taking advice. If a “tip” sounds a little far-fetched, it probably is and won’t work. Following the above rules should ensure you have a supply of well performing reeds, but the most important rule of all is: Use common sense. Common sense will help you avoid the wrath of a 230-pound reed-making immigrant recently arrived from England.

THE RULES IN SHORT

Follow these simple rules for keeping your reeds in good working order.

- Buy a reed that suites you. Don't get a harder reed than you can't comfortably blow right out of the box and then spend hours blowing it in. Softer reeds can be just as stable as harder reeds.
- Store the reeds in an airtight container in a cool dry place. Not next to the radiator and definitely not in the freezer.
- Allow the reed to lose some moisture before capping it.
- Try to avoid substantial changes in reed moisture levels.
- Use a suitable moisture control system in your pipes to ensure the chanter reed doesn't get too wet.
- Use the proper tools—such as a mandrel, sandpaper, chisel, razor blade, and pliers—to make adjustments as necessary.

Chris Apps has been making chanter reeds for many years. He currently sits as a piping adjudicator on Scotland's judges panel. Originally based in the south of England, he has recently moved to Missouri.