

How to Strike in a Bagpipe

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Striking in a Bagpipe in a band situation is something we often see very poorly executed. It is a simple procedure that needs a little practice and from then on should be second nature. There can be some several issues with a bagpipe that stop it from being struck and “coming in” correctly, but most of these are easily overcome. There are also a lot of valves, “enhancers” and other gadgets on the market that are supposed to assist with starts and stops, but in our experience many of these can make it more difficult by reducing the airflow to the drone reeds.

Some time ago we published an article on correcting a double toning bass drone. This can be seen on the School of Piping articles page at our website. Starts are a lot easier if your pipes are well maintained and your bass drone well set. Your bag should be airtight, your joints well maintained, your drone reeds firmly seated and well set up and balanced. These small maintenance issues will all make starts more reliable. Most important is the fact that a long top slide on your bass drone, tuning up on or just above the hemp line and a lower bottom slide (often two fingers above the projecting mount) will make your bass more reliable and less prone to double toning during starts. Advice on correctly setting up a bagpipe to work at its best can be found in “The Complete Pipers Handbook”. <http://www.schoolofpiping.com/handbook.html>

Starts are a drill. They are set procedures that should be practiced to become second nature and you should ensure that you are performing them consistently and your bagpipe is reliable.



Striking, pressing with elbow and blowing at the same time.

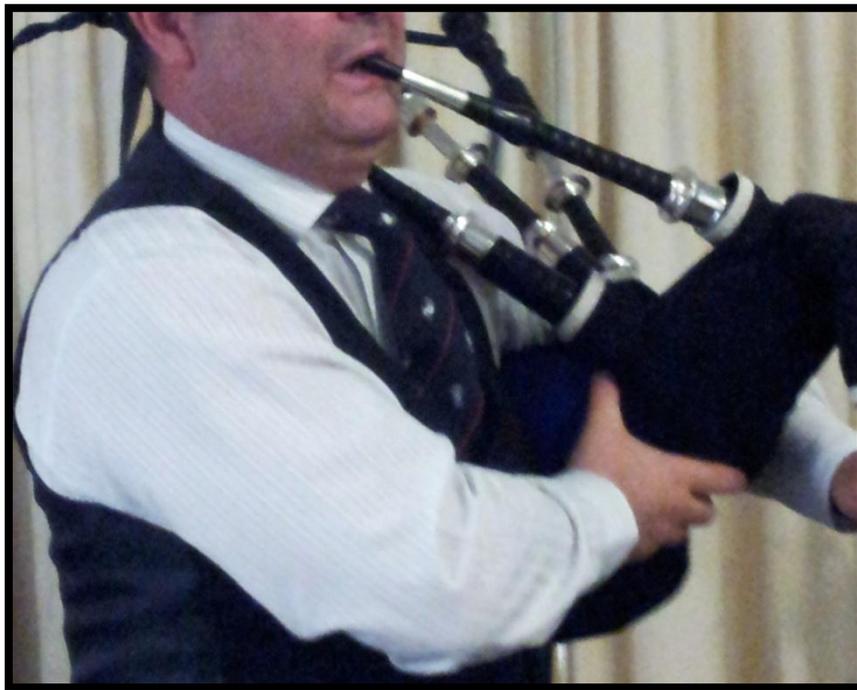
STEP 1. Fully inflate your bag and to the point where you can feel resistance from your drone reeds. Do not sound the reeds to make a squawking sound; just feel the resistance against your inflation of the bag. Your bag should be suspended at your side pressing against the elbow/forearm of your bag

arm. That hand should be on the top hand of your chanter with the E finger lifted. Your opposite hand should be ready to press against the bag.

There will be a “sweet spot” where striking the bag is most reliable. This is usually just under the bass drone stock and can be missed when pipers are nervous and tend to crouch forward a little. You will need to experiment a little to find the right spot to strike the bag.

STEP 2. The bag is struck to start the drones. If the reeds and bag combination are well set up, the bag should not need to be struck hard. It is important to get a sudden rush of air to the drones. The bag is pressed against the forearm, which is also pressed against the bag whilst simultaneously blowing into the bag. So there are three things being done *at exactly the same time*. The free arm presses on the bag, the bag arm presses on the opposing side of the bag and you are blowing into the bag. *When you blow then press, or press then blow, the risk of double toning increases.* Listen to ensure that the drones have been struck in without double toning.

STEP 3. The bag is placed under the arm in one simple movement. With practice you will easily get the bag in the appropriate and most comfortable position. The free hand is then placed on the chanter with the low A finger lifted so *both hand are in the position to play the note E*. Wait for the appropriate beat before sounding the chanter.



Pushing the bag up under the arm.

Step 4. Blow into the bag and firmly squeeze with the bag arm at the same time to bring in the note E on the appropriate beat. Continue blowing and squeezing for the full duration of the note to ensure that the pitch does not drop. Also listen to the pitch of the note to ensure that it does not

rise in pitch. It should be one long sustained note of constant pitch. A short breath should be taken for the pitch to be maintained once the tune is started and after that a regular breathing pattern maintained.

When playing as a solo piper, the E note can be brought in at any time. There is no need for a structured series of beats as a band would insist upon, however it is always important to bring in an E that is pleasant sounding and in pitch.



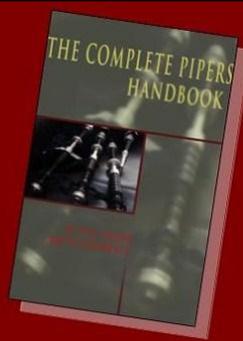
Holding the drones and taking a breath in preparation to bring in the intro E

If double toning of the bass drone occurs and difficulty starting is experienced a finger can be placed in the bottom hole of the bass drone stock (using the bag to block the hole) and the bag struck. The finger is then released and it is very rare that the drone will not strike in correctly. This is a very effective emergency measure, but cannot be used if a hose, valve or “enhancer” is installed in the bottom of the stock. At the first possible opportunity the slide positions and the reed should be examined and modified to prevent the risk of future double toning.

With practice you should be able to experience a failed strike in, but still be able to re-strike the bag and get the instrument up before the introductory note is required. When re-striking ensure that the bag is full, all sound from the reeds has ceased and then re-start the procedure. If the reeds are still sounding or the bag is only partially inflated the risk of another failed strike in is increased. If you miss the introductory E, it is best not to come in part way through that note as it will be obvious to

the listener. It is best to hold the drones sounding through the bands introductory E and bring the chanter in on the very first note of the tune being played.

Signs of a badly set up bagpipe when striking in include whistling tenor drones, tenors that do not resolve their double tone before the chanter is brought in, a roaring or double toning bass or an introductory E that cannot be controlled due to an overly easy reed. Resolving these issues is easy to do and a guide like "The Complete Pipers Handbook" will be of invaluable assistance.



The Complete Pipers Handbook

Is a must for every serious piper. Never before has a more comprehensive guide been published. Maintenance, set up, refinement, tuning, setting up bands, performance psychology and much more!

Available from: www.schoolofpiping.com selected stockists.