

# Reed making is just the start

RORY GROSSART

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**I**T was a set of Pakistani-made Highland pipes which first set Rory Grossart on his path as a reed maker. He was playing with the Milngavie Juvenile Band when he bought them for £18 and as he admits himself, “it was not the best of instruments”.

He had to paint them black so they looked like all the other pipes in the band, and he pulled the drones through with oil once a month to keep the wood fibres from closing in. The main problem he had was getting them to sound like the other pipes, so he quickly had to learn how to doctor the cane drone reeds just so that they would tune with the rest of the band.

His reed-craft was largely self taught but he must have been getting things right, as he played these pipes right up until he joined his first grade one band, Babcock Renfrew. Rory eventually became pipe sergeant of the band and Babcock Renfrew changed their name to Black Bottle. Since then he spent a few years as pipe sergeant with ScottishPower, and he competed with Strathclyde Police for the past few

seasons, leaving at the end of the 2008 season due to family and work commitments.

He had often thought about setting up business as a reed maker, so when Stuart McCallum and Kenny MacLeod of McCallum Bagpipes were looking for a reed maker they decided to combine their efforts and set up MG Reeds in April 2007. Rory had spent almost three years developing reeds to give him a sound that he was looking for.

“Sound is a personal thing,” said Rory. “It is very hard to describe, and it comes down to each individual’s preference. It is not just all about creating a reed, the sound comes from the instrument as a whole. You need to get the balance in volume between chanter and drones, and you need to get the balance in volume between tenor drones. I’m a great believer in having a slightly different sound coming out each tenor to create a broader overall sound. That is how I was taught to set up the cane drone reeds, with the middle tenor slightly different from the outside tenor, sounding slightly duller and quieter. That is

why I offer an inverted tenor reed option for the synthetic drone reeds, in an attempt to get the same range of harmonics. It is not all about volume, it is about breadth of sound — volume is over-rated. Lots of people, in my opinion, want a big, loud, harsh sound from drones and chanter, and I can see why bands would want it — I’m just trying to create something that sounds pleasant to the ear.

“I have access to all the pipes made by McCallum so obviously my reeds go very well in them, but they will go just as well in any pipes, and I have tested them in a variety of drones and chanters. Each bagpipe maker has slight differences on individual notes on the chanter that can either be accommodated when making the reeds or afterwards with bits of tape over the holes.”

Rory started out making synthetic drone reeds and quickly added the option of an inverted bass and tenor reed, and also 440Hz adapters which screw on to the end of his synthetic reeds to allow them to be tuned to concert pitch. He then moved on to making

cane drone reeds, chanter reeds and now also makes chanter reeds for the Fred Morrison small pipes and reeds for the reel pipes are being developed. “I would need to say that my synthetic drone reeds sound very close to cane, but then every synthetic reed maker out there will say the same thing. I think that if you want the sound of cane reeds, you simply need to play cane. There’s a misconception that cane is difficult to work with and to keep steady, but that is not the case. There may be one or two things needed to get them going and a bit of patience required but once they are set up and played every couple of days there are no great secrets required to keep them going well. I’ve found no better substitute than a couple of hairs under the tongue and a well-tied bridle, although some people use elastic bands and paper clips, but I don’t get the results I want with them. We all occasionally need to put our pipes down for a couple of weeks, but when you’re ready to play again, put your reeds in a jam jar with a piece of raw potato and seal it. Leave them like that for a couple of hours till they absorb the moisture again, put them back in your pipes and they will be fine.

“The synthetic drone reeds, compared to cane, are easier to set up initially and they give a steady sound right from the word go. You will also be able to play your pipes for longer with an increased steady window before your drones drift out of tune. With cane you may not get so long in terms of steadiness, but I believe there is an aspect of knowing your pipes which is dying out. When I used to compete I knew my bagpipe really well, and I would look at the climatic conditions and know that I could blow my pipes for a certain amount of time so that for the next 15 to 30 minutes I would have a good steady window. I think people playing synthetic reeds don’t take that into consideration so much now, but they have made life easier for people who are still learning or don’t have the time to play regularly.”

AT THE moment Rory only makes the tapered shape of chanter reed but he is currently developing a ridge-cut reed as he finds there is a demand for both. “Tapered reeds are my favourite for working with after the reed has been made, as I find more can be done with them if required to refine the sound. But the ridge-cut is very popular as there is more of an instant sound and greater initial volume. I don’t think the ridge-cut has the same quality



Photo: John Slavin @ deignfolk.com

of sound, but as I said before sound is a very personal thing, and you would be hard-pushed to tell whether someone was playing a tapered or ridge-cut reed. I just find more can be done with a tapered reed.

“There is a combination of things that determine the strength of a reed: selection of cane, how the cane is gouged, and how it is tied in — but once it is made there are things that can be done to make it easier to play. When the reed leaves the bench it will dry out and shrink, so the best thing that can be done initially is to put it in your pipes and just to blow the reed for a couple of weeks. Choose a reed which is harder than what you would normally play and let it absorb moisture naturally so that the cane starts to swell. If you are storing reeds you are better to keep them in the fridge to help stop them drying out, but if they have dried out anyway you will need to get moisture back into the cane. You could also put the reed in a jar with a piece of raw potato, as suggested earlier, and leave it for 30 minutes to an hour. During the process of blowing-in a reed you can give it a gentle squeeze midway up the blade to help the process, but many a reed has been ruined by this. You just want to squeeze it hard enough for the lips to close and no more. After a cou-

ple of weeks, when it has the natural moisture content back into the cane, you can free it up a wee bit if you think it is still not vibrating as it should,” said Rory.

“What you would do is scrape cane off the second quarter, counting down from the tip of the reed, with a sharp knife and do this on both faces of the reed, evenly across the width of the blades. Only do a little bit at a time and try blowing the reed to see what difference it has made. Be careful you don’t do too much at one time, and play it in between scrapes to allow the cane to settle back down. When you alter a reed you will find that it has a knock-on effect on other notes. For example you will find that scraping the reed, as mentioned above, flatten-off the notes on the top hand slightly, the high A, high G and F, so you then might need to sink it into the chanter a wee bit to get the balance between low A and high A again.

“Once you have a balance between low A and high A any other problems with sharp notes can be cured with bits of tape — I’m a great fan of having a bit of tape on every hole, you can adjust every note like that. Be careful, however, not to cover too much of the hole as it can diminish the volume of that note, it can also have an effect on other notes on the chanter,

for example, tape on the sound holes to flatten the low G will also flatten the low A slightly. If you have a chanter that is consistently flat on a note, you may want to consider undercutting the hole, but get someone who knows what they are doing to fix that as a chanter can be easily ruined.

“Another thing that will free-up a reed is to take a bit of wood off the sound box: by cutting very thin slithers of about five or six millimetres from the very bottom of a reed. You need to be careful you don’t take too much off as it may leave it too weak and it may collapse if you squeeze it. One thing you need to bear in mind when you go down this road is that you are going to waste a lot of reeds. It may be that a reed

spanning 10 years from the late 80s to 90s, competing in the major competitions. His tutors were Angus J. Maclellan and the late Ronald Morrison, from whom Rory also learned some reed craft. He still has a reed that he used at that time and he explained how he is still able to maintain it. “I’ve still got a cracking old McAlister reed, which all the solo players used, and it is probably in excess of 15 years old now. I’ve not played it for a while, as I play my own reeds now, but periodically I would strip it, carefully clean and then retie it. The cane has hardened nicely over the years but it’s a bit dried out now, so if I was to play it again I would put it into my wee jam jar with bit of potato till it was back in shape. Then if it needed it, I would

best for a player to come and pick a reed that they are looking for.

“I have used elastic bands on reeds while blowing them in. Placed just above the staple line they can take the edge off a reed that’s very hard, but if used incorrectly or unnecessarily can cause stability problems particularly with the F note and high G. They will make the reed easier and bring the pitch up a bit as a result of being easier to blow, but it’s not just a case of ‘this reed is hard and flat, I think I’ll put a band on it’. As I said earlier, there are many knock-on effects when manipulating a reed and individual notes will sharpen at greater rates than others, so final adjustments will need to be carried out with tape. An elastic band may not necessarily be the answer, it all depends on how the reed feels when played in the first place, it’s a feel that you get as you gain more experience. I’m not a fan of elastic bands but I have used them. However, they should not be used just to make a reed easier to blow and to take all the effort out of blowing.”

*‘I have never seen the advantage of blowing a gut-buster of a reed, I can only see the disadvantages. At the same time, a reed that is too weak makes it harder to control the pitch, as the pitch is very much pressure-dependent’*

does not need to be scraped, it may just need a gentle squeeze or some moisture applied to the very tips of the reed. It is also worth feeling the cane with your finger to look for any high spots and even them out with a sanding stick, and this may help free-up the reed, as you are generally looking for an even amount of wood on both sides.

“You can also change the shape of the staple, but I would generally not advise it. I have made special tools to do the job, and there are certain areas that can be squeezed to flatten-off the top hand, or I could open up the area just behind the eye to sharpen up the high A and high G. The eye shape of the staple is very important, especially to the sound of the high G.

“Flat Fs and double toning Fs can be cured by clipping a very minute amount off the tip of the blade with a sharp chisel. This will also raise the overall pitch slightly and the C will raise a greater amount compared to the other notes. Be careful though, as a flat F note can often be cured by simply giving the blades a gentle squeeze. Another method of sharpening up an F is to flare the open end of the staple but it depends on the throat size of the chanter as to whether or not this will work.”

Rory also had a successful solo career

strip, clean and retie it — I could use it again in an emergency, but I’m more than happy with the reeds I’m playing now.

“I mainly cleaned out this reed to avoid the pain of blowing in a new one, and I did it when ever I thought it was necessary. Various things would lead me to do it, maybe a high A that was becoming too raspy and couldn’t be cured by rubbing the blade tips across your thumb nail, or an E that was unstable, but more often than not, a big clump of seasoning ending up impaled on the reed because I hadn’t cleaned my bag properly. Cleaning the reed was not part of a routine and will not always work.”

He then produced the reed, wrapped in cotton-wool, from a wee sealed canister and with his mouth to a chanter gave me a 10 second blast of it ...

“That reed has had prizes at the gold medal in Oban and at the Dunvegan medal in Skye — and it is still an absolute belter!” said Rory.

“I have never seen the advantage of blowing a gut-buster of a reed, I can only see the disadvantages. At the same time, a reed that is too weak makes it harder to control the pitch, as the pitch is very much pressure-dependent.

“Everybody is different, and a reed that is hard to one player will be easy to another. It is

RORY favours the traditional methods of setting up bagpipes and he is a big fan of sheepskin bags. Over the years he has searched for a bag seasoning which works ‘the way it used to work’, and he eventually discovered it. Now that he has the reed-making side of the business going he has decided to add sheepskin pipe bag seasoning to his range of products. “I can’t get the sound I’m looking for from a synthetic bag,” said Rory. “I have experimented with synthetic and sheepskin bags, and I can only get the sound I want by using sheepskin. Even a tube water trap in a sheepskin bag makes a difference to the sound, especially the top hand notes — who knows why? I guess the bag is a resonance chamber and the more stuff you put in it the less you get out. I never used a water trap when I competed, and I sometimes found that I had to add some water to my bag.

“Back in my early days of piping there were always a couple of types of seasoning on the market, but for the way I worked there was only one I would buy. What I would do was rub the seasoning well into the skin, blow it up to force the seasoning into the welt, and then hang it up to let the excess seasoning drip out. When I went back to it again half an hour later the drips would have solidified. So I now have a seasoning that works in this traditional manner, and does exactly what it used to: keeps the bag airtight, supple and helps to control moisture.” ●