

True Practice

MacPherson Practice Chanter—MacPherson Bagpipes

Reviewed by Vince Janoski

THE OLD MAKERS USED TO MAKE SOME FORMIDABLE INSTRUMENTS. You can recognize them on sight: big chunky mounts and ferrules; thick walled drones with big bells; deep beading with wide stocks. Grainger & Campbell, Sinclair, Robertson, these were instruments with a lot of heft. The practice chanters these makers produced had the same characteristics as the big instruments. My own starter chanter, a Grainger, was a tree limb with holes, but even that eventually suffered from too much horseplay. The replacements along the way were thin things with tiny bores and countersunk pinholes and the heft of a dry twig. Whether plastic or wood, practice chanters today can seem more like toys than instruments. Sitting around the practice table full of newer practice chanters at a band rehearsal can be painful on the ears.

Finally fed up with my current "toy" (a long PC from one of the more popular makers), I decided to gamble and purchase a long PC from new maker Douglas MacPherson at MacPherson bagpipes. Douglas MacPherson spent much of his years learning the pipe-making trade in the Gillanders & MacLeod shop, learning from a pipemaking lineage that extends back to Thow Bros. and MacDougal of Aberfeldy. The PC I received shows every sign of the craft found on those older instruments: heavy walls with big bores; a large taper on the body that ends with a thick and wide discus of a sole with two fully drilled sound holes (not the pinholes one finds in many modern PCs). The chanter has the feel of playing a full sized pipe chanter with the weight and circumference to match. I am usually pretty brutal when it comes to practice chanters. They've kicked around my house, fallen off tables, been wielded by toddlers, you name it. The MacPherson chanter is a hardy thing that seems like it will stand up to years of my abuse. The sole and ferrule on the top are made of "palm nut" ivory, an attractive, and more "realistic" substitute to the more common plastic "imitation" ivory. MacPherson will also mount the chanter with purple heart, or sandalwood, or common imitation ivory.

This is the first practice chanter I've played that feels like one is playing a real instrument. The workmanship is refined and shows a great amount of care and attention to detail. This chanter was made by someone who doesn't consider a PC a toy, but the true practice instrument it was meant to be. The fingering needed to get a good clear sound and clean execution is akin to that needed on a real pipe chanter. With some tweaking of my existing reed, I was getting a warm and resonant sound that was not thin and grating, as so many PCs can be. Because the bores are large and full, one must blow in earnest to get the full projection on this chanter. I am even able to get a decent piobaireachd Hi G—on a practice chanter no less!

MacPherson supplied a delrin top prototype that contains a water trap for those spittle-filled playing sessions. This is a good and unexpected bonus and seems to work well so far. The plastic is a good option, as there is probably not wooden topped PC out there that doesn't have a crack from the wear of playing. Considering the craft behind this chanter, you'll want to take excellent care of all its parts.

Overall this chanter bodes well for the workmanship one will find on MacPherson pipes. From the pictures on his website (www.macphersonbagpipes.co.uk), it looks as if MacPherson is taking the chance on some original and striking designs too. It was worth taking the gamble.

