

Playing in the Rain

Sooner or later, you will experience playing the pipes in the rain. Andrew Lenz offers the following suggestions for playing in the rain:

The first thing to keep in mind is that Scotland is not exactly a desert wasteland and, traditionally, rain is no stranger to bagpipes. They've survived hundreds of years in that very moist environment, which includes rain. Your pipes aren't going to explode in a million pieces as soon as it starts to drizzle, particularly with modern bagpipes made of oily African Blackwood. That said, most of us have seen the undesirable swollen rings left on varnished tabletops from cold moist glasses or cans. There are steps to take to help prevent something bad from really happening.

If you do a lot of playing in the rain, you might consider a few investments. One, a set of poly (plastic) bagpipes. Two, an Inverness cape. Three, an extra set of cheaper shoes (wingtips) for muddy performance spots (e.g., graveside). Four, maybe an extra cheap kilt (of which only a portion would show anyway under a cape). Five, a pipe bag which has easy internal access.

For the following discussion, we're going to assume that you have a set of wood bagpipes. Just know that if you are playing a set of poly bagpipes, standing water isn't going to hurt any plastic parts.

Preparation for Your Performance

While it's good practice to play your pipes often anyway, if there's a likelihood of rain for your performance, playing your pipes every day to build up the moisture content will help your pipes cope with a sudden influx of water. Absorbing a lot of water quickly can split the pipes.

If the outside of your pipes are not varnished, then treating the outside of your pipes could be helpful. Waxing or oiling them will help repel rain. Lightly oiling the inside of your bores may also be a good idea. Oil is much more stable than water, and therefore your pipes will expand and contract less having absorbed oil rather than water. There is a lot of controversy about oiling bagpipes, so if you are concerned, talk with more experienced pipers in your area about their approach to maintaining their pipes in that particular climate.

If you play cane reeds, you might consider using a synthetic set for a rainy performance since synthetics will be much easier to dry. Otherwise, just be aware that the reeds will absorb a lot of water and could fail. Plus they will require a longer recovery time to return to nominal moisture content.

Tuning pins can be a problematic area when it comes to rain. If you use plain unwaxed hemp, it will swell significantly in the rain and may bind. Waxed hemp, while it doesn't eliminate absorption completely, does reduce the speed and extent of absorption. Teflon tape or cork grease can be helpful as a barrier to rain. If you are inclined to go traditional and have your pins redone with cork, cork stands up very well to rain.

On the day of the performance, if it's wet *and* very cold, consider acclimating the pipes to the playing conditions. If they are stored in a warm house, place them in a location where they can slowly cool to something closer to the outside temperatures. The shock of an extreme temperature change can crack wood pipes.

Put a few towels, swabs and pull-throughs in your car for quick access after the performance. And extra pair of socks and shoes wouldn't hurt either. Also handy may be a large plastic garbage bag to throw wet clothing into.

During Your Performance

If you have a cape, use it to cover up your pipes while you are not playing. Be most protective of your wood chanter since it has the thinnest—and most fragile—walls. Also while not playing, keep your drones pointed toward the ground so the rain won't get in.

If you get any opportunity to dry your pipes do so. If you don't have enough time to rustle up a towel and dry the pipes, try to at least remove and blow out your drone reeds from the seat end of the reeds to keep them operational. A dollar bill (durable paper) slipped under the tongue will absorb trapped condensation.

After Your Performance

Use the towels in your car to remove standing liquid from the instrument as soon as possible after the performance, starting with your chanter if it's wood.

Completely disassemble your pipes and use swabs and pull-throughs to dry the inside of the bores. Try to dry your hemping as well by pressing on them with a towel. Let your pipes dry disassembled.

Dry your drone reeds. In the unlikely event that any residual moisture is colored, rinse them out with fresh water.

Remove the cover from your bag. If your bag has zipper or clamp access to the inside of the bag, wipe out it out. If it doesn't, hang it chanter stock down for a while. If nothing drips out, but the bag is saturated, plug the stocks of the bag then fill the bag with air and hang it to dry fully inflated—while it takes longer to dry, this will help prevent the bag from wrinkling. Once it's dry on the outside, it should be good to go after some seasoning (if that is recommended by the bag maker).

While you may be in the routine of capping your chanter after playing, you might consider airing out your reed to alleviate the excess moisture trapped in the reed. Sealing up a very wet reed may provide you with a black and fuzzy reed next time you open it up. If you have chanter cap with holes drilled in it, you might get by just capping the reed. Even if you have a Piper's Pal (moisture control) cap, it would be a good idea to air out the reed.

Whatever you do, don't stick your pipes on a heater, next to a fire, or over a heater vent—unless you like the sickening popping sound of splitting wood. Let the pipes dry at their own pace at normal room temperature.