

Learning Bagpipes or Drums FAQ

Q: What age do you have to be to begin lessons and join the band?

A: As it is with any instrument, the younger you begin the better. We teach students as young as seven or eight years old. Older students, however, are just as valuable, and we work with many adults as well. The most important determinant of success in learning pipes and drums is effort, not age. Our band members range in age from thirteen to seventy.

Q: What level of musical training or background does a new student need to begin lessons?

A: No prior musical experience is required in order to begin lessons, just an interest in the music and the dedication to practice. We also teach music theory and performance skills as part of our piping and drumming instruction, so there isn't any prerequisite knowledge you must have to begin lessons.

Q: Are the bagpipes harder to learn than other musical instruments?

A: Some of the challenges of learning the pipes are common to other instruments. Like many other instruments, there's finger work to learn that requires repetitive practice to develop proficiency. At the same time, there are some issues that are unique to learning the pipes; it takes time to gain the physical coordination and breath control required to produce a steady tone on the instrument. You may have noticed, too, that pipers don't carry music stands. While we learn the music using a printed score, all our tunes are committed to memory for performance.

Q: Do you have to buy your own bagpipes or drums?

A: New students, both pipers and drummers, begin on a practice instrument, so you needn't purchase a set of pipes or a drum to get started. Fledgling pipers begin by learning on a recorder-like instrument called a practice chanter. Drummers learn the basic rudiments on a practice pad. After learning the basics on the practice chanter, pipers make the transition to the full bagpipes, although pipers never stop using their practice chanters. Pipers do eventually purchase their own bagpipes. It is less common for pipe band drummers to purchase their own drums; pipe bands usually purchase drums as a band expense and drummers do not own the drum they play in the band.

Q: How long does it take to learn the pipes or the drums?

A: This is a tricky question because learning to play pipes or drums well is ultimately a lifelong pursuit. We try to encourage the mindset that you're never finished with learning and trying to improve. Having said that, usually when people ask how long it takes to learn, they're asking how long it takes to be able to play a few tunes on the pipes or to play the drum scores that the drummers play in a pipe band. Good instruction and concerted practice are a must if you expect to make progress toward playing either instrument. It generally takes two to three years to become proficient at the pipes. The time frame is somewhat less to learn drums.

Q: Are lessons expensive?

A: Lessons are reasonably priced and very affordable for families. Instruction is arranged through the band's teaching program. Some of our members elect to get supplemental instruction from outside the band.

Q: What skill level do I have to reach in order to perform with the band?

A: Prospective band members go through several stages of membership as they progress toward full membership status, at which point they can participate in all performances. Aspiring band members begin to attend band practices when they have learned enough of the band's repertoire to participate meaningfully at practice. When aspirants begin attending practices they should already be competent players with solid fundamentals. Aspirants continue to learn the band repertoire as they develop other pipe band skills such as marching drill and ensemble playing. Once aspirants master the band's repertoire and demonstrate that they can perform properly with the band at rehearsals, they are appointed as probationary members. Probationers are issued a uniform and begin to perform with the band. The probationary term gives the prospective member a chance to get a feel for the level of commitment required to play in a pipe band. After the probationary period, the prospective member is considered for full band membership. The process may sound a bit daunting, but it's actually designed to help new players get involved in the band as soon as possible and then allow them learn the ropes gradually.

Q: Are there a lot of performances?

A: The band plays around twenty to twenty five performances per year, including parades, graduations, festivals and other community events. During the summer, we also compete in pipe band competitions at various Scottish games across the Northeast and Canada.

DONATE TO THE SCHOLARSHIP FUND:

The Schenectady Pipe Band's Scholarship Fund enables local piping and drumming students to take advantage of educational opportunities such as individual instruction and attending workshops and summer schools. Won't you please donate to help further our musical traditions? Your contributions are tax deductible under the Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(3).