

Tuning a Bodhran that Does Not Have Mechanical Tuners

These notes apply to natural-hide heads. Synthetic heads like fiber-skin are usually very stable and need little tuning attention.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZTbIZAOkbI>

<http://tinyurl.com/bodhranCGOTHtune>

Playing a lot or playing hard and loud will usually cause the pitch of a drum to decrease. Playing in humid conditions, like at an outdoor festival in the humidity of summer, will quickly drop the skin tension and pitch of a drum. Playing in cold, dry conditions will usually cause the head to shrink and the pitch to rise. Here are several techniques for tuning drums without tuners.

To Rise the Pitch

1. Warm the drum head: Moving your hand in small circles all over the skin, rub the drumhead hard and fast. Don't be gentle. Use plenty of pressure and vigor. For this to work you must physically warm the drumhead. It's all about friction, speed and pressure.

The heat will cause the skin to relax, at first, and the pitch will drop. As the drum cools, the head will tighten and the pitch will increase and stabilize at a higher tone.

2. Use a hair dryer to warm the drum. Heat the skin evenly and heat it only a little. Don't over-warm the drum head. It is possible to over-heat the head and even cause it to tear. Go SLOWLY with a hair dryer.

3. Hold the drum over a heat source. A light bulb or a candle will sometimes do the job. This is tricky and the least good approach. Don't keep the drum over a heat source for very long.

To Lower the Pitch

It's much more common to have to increase the pitch of a drum than it is to lower the pitch. Pitch needs to be lowered when the drum head has increased tension due to a lot of playing in dry conditions or cool ambient temperatures in low humidity.

1. Spritz the head. Sprinkle a few drops of water on the drum head. No Guinness please! A tiny bit of water is all that is required. Some players use a garden mister bottle filled with water. Some players don't like to use water on the drum head. They believe that, over time, water evaporates and thus dries out the skin. This causes a permanent increase in pitch.

2. Mop the head. Gently rub a slightly damp cloth or paper towel on the head. The key is a damp cloth not a sopping-wet cloth! If your drum seems to gain pitch regularly, keep a damp cloth in a sealed baggie in your drum case.

3. Rub skin lotion into your drum head for a longer term solution. This will lower the pitch for anywhere from weeks to months. Keep adding lotion a little bit at a time until you are happy with the tuning or until the skin won't absorb any more. Shea butter and lanolin are the best products for this. Do not use cheap, watery skin moisturizers.

More details about the bodhran at this link: www.billtroxler.com