

Clarinet Reed Adjustment and Care

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There are many significant benefits to being able to adjust and maintain clarinet reeds.

Fundamentals of playing the clarinet, tone quality, intonation, response, articulation, and technical facility are all affected by the quality of the reed.

A well-known saying goes: "if a good player has a good reed, it will be easy to sound good." If using a mediocre to poor reed, it may still sound good, but the player will work much harder.

Choosing Reeds

When choosing potential reeds, hold up to the light and look for an even V or U cut in the vamp (cut part) of reed. A creamy color, perhaps with a few dark spots indicates better cane. Look for even, smooth fibers running the length of the reed, and check for bottom end to be symmetrical.

Breaking-In Process

A gradual breaking in process helps reeds play their best and provides more longevity. Clarinet reeds change significantly the first few times they are played, and not much work needs to be done at this time. Through playing, pick the best six to eight reeds out of a box, reeds that are close to being playable. Soak the reeds for a couple of minutes, and place flat side down on a piece of glass to dry.

The next few sessions soak reeds, and play each for 10 minutes (day one), 20 (day two), and 30 minutes (day three). Allow reeds to completely dry on a flat surface between playing. By the fourth playing, 40 minutes, reeds are more stable, absorb less moisture, and may require sanding the bottom of the reed (flat side) to remove a warp. This may be removed by lightly sanding the flat side of the reed on fine, 600-grade sandpaper. Be careful to keep the tip off sandpaper as much as possible to avoid softening the tip of the reed. To be able to check the amount of wood being removed, lightly draw lines on tip, middle, and bottom of reed (flat side). The lines will show what part of the reed is being removed, and how much. Many times, this is all that needs to be done.

Balancing a Reed

A reed may need to be balanced after removing the warp. Check both sides, near the tip, for equal resistance. A heavier corner is more resistant and wood needs to be removed. Scrape or cut across the grain for the best results. In removing cane, always work away from the very tip and center (heart) of the reed. The tip provides support for the entire reed, and "the heart" affects tone quality. In general, the resistance of a reed is located mostly in the light areas cut on both sides, near tip of the reed (running from middle to near tip).

1. Soak the reed a few minutes, and take the left-hand index finger and gently flex the tip of the reed. If one side is harder to bend, it is heavier. Wood needs to be taken off the heavier side.

Wood may be removed with:

- Dutch rush • 400 grade sandpaper
- Small knife • Safety edge razor blade

2. Always "scrape" wood off —never cut into the reed, scrape across the grain. Balancing the reed will often be the solution for a stuffy reed. If a reed is a little soft, clipping the tip will increase its strength and resistance.

Reeds that are Too Soft

Using a reed clipper, take a small bit of cane off tip. Even a small amount will significantly change a reed. You can always take off more, if needed. Clippers usually do not clip a reed to the exact shape of the mouthpiece. Using fine 600 grade sandpaper, shape the tip to the mouthpiece. Hold one end of the sandpaper, and lightly move across the tip of reed. Sanding in one direction produces a smoother tip.

Using a Reed Clipper

1. Carefully line up the tip with the reed clipper.
2. Only clip a small amount of wood (you can take more, but it's not possible to add the wood back).
3. Make a clean fast clip or the edges will be ragged (edges can be evened up using 600 grade sandpaper).
4. Holding a long piece of sandpaper by one corner, let the weight of the paper even up the edges.
5. Sand in one direction except for adjusting the left corner.

6. Sometimes reed only needs clipping, but at times may also need to be balanced (making both sides bend and respond evenly). For the best results, do a little work at a time.

Reeds that are Too Hard

1. Wood needs to be removed from the vamp of the reed.
2. Always work in the shaded area.
3. Be careful to avoid taking wood from "heart" or middle of the reed, affecting tone quality (a very hard reed may require work in this area).
4. Remove an even amount of wood in the shaded area.
5. Always work sparingly at the tip of the reed.

To Rejuvenate an Old Reed

If a reed that is broken in plays well, and one day doesn't play at all, then the back of the reed has probably warped.

1. Use 600 grade sandpaper to sand the back side of the reed.
2. Be careful not to press reed against the sandpaper, gently place three fingers on the top side of the reed — sand back and forth with the grain.
3. Mark three light pencil lines on the back of the reed to see the amount of wood being removed.
4. The reed responds better, but may be soft. Clip a small amount of wood off the tip.

Keeping Reeds in Good Playing Condition

1. Soak reeds thoroughly (in the mouth or water) allowing the crinkles on tip of the reed to straighten naturally.
2. Playing a reed for too long will waterlog the reed. Try to alternate between three and four reeds.
3. Work to use exceptional reeds sparingly; save for a performance. Play the reed some or it may lose quality from disuse. Always dry reeds between fingertips after playing.
4. Remove reed from the mouthpiece, and place in a protective case. A small piece of glass with rubber bands also works. The flat surface helps keep reeds from warping.

Alternating Reeds

Alternating three to four reeds that have been broken in, increases their longevity, and provides more stable reeds for rehearsals and concerts. Protective reed cases that allow

reeds to dry out gradually and hold reeds flat increase the life and quality of clarinet reeds. With practice, it will become easy to hear and see what is not working with a reed. Some reeds may be ruined in the process, but learning to adjust and improve clarinet reeds provides significant benefits. Most importantly, an old reed that does not play well is simply old (a month or more) and needs to be thrown away.

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