

Common problems and emergency Woodwind repairs (Mar 2024)

If an instrument *suddenly* stops playing or will not play below a certain note then check the screws at the *ends* of the key barrels are not loose. If the key jams when these screws are fully tightened then loosen one or both of the screws slowly until the key operates - the instrument should be repaired as soon as possible because the screws are likely to fall out and get lost. If only one key on the instrument does not play, or it plays a semitone flat, then check the springs on the adjacent keys are hooked on.

Clarinets: if the instrument just squeaks or will not play, then check that there is a slight gap between the 'A' and 'Ab' key so when the 'A' touch-piece is pressed the 'A' key moves slightly before engaging with the 'Ab' key. If there is an adjusting screw on the 'Ab' key then back it off (loosen it) if necessary.

Flutes: if the instrument stops playing at 'G' firstly check whether the 'G#' touch-piece is bent and obstructing one of the 'G' keys - bend it back if necessary. If the 'G#' touch-piece is not obstructing the 'G' keys and if an adjustment screw is fitted between the two 'G' key cups, then try tightening or loosening the adjusting screw to see if that corrects the problem. If the Flute will not play 'F' but will play 'E' then check the adjustment screw on the 'F' key - tighten it until 'F' sounds (and check 'E' still works).

Bassoons: if the 'E pancake' key does not close the crook vent pad - try bending down the bridge arm (that links the mechanism from the wing-joint to the boot-joint); if the crook vent pad closes, but the 'pancake' key does not, then bend the bridge arm up.

Saxophones: If either the lower or upper register will not sound then check the octave keys: when the octave thumb key is used - up to and including 'G' - the lower octave key should be open and the upper octave key shut; from 'A' upwards - the upper octave key should be open and the lower octave key shut. If the upper octave key will not close when playing 'G', hold down the upper octave key cup and bend the bridge bar slightly up with your thumb; if the upper octave key will not open when playing 'A' then bend the bridge bar slightly down.

Checking that an instrument is operating correctly

The tenons on the instrument should not wobble in their sockets, the keys should operate quietly without wobbling or sticking, and all corks/felts should be in place. Generally you should be able to play the lowest note on the instrument easily (for beginners on Sax, Flute, and Oboe the instrument only needs to play down to D). Test particular instruments with the exercises below - you should be able to play the notes without squeezing the keys hard or blowing hard.

Flute: C to Bb with thumb key; B to A; A to G; G to F#; G to F; F to E; E to D Low D to C. Check air tightness of head-joint and head-cork position.

Clarinet: Throat A to Bb to middle B using LH side lever; throat A to Bb to middle B using RH key; middle D to C using LH lever; LH finger 1 E/B to Eb/Bb using long Eb/Bb.

Sax: (Middle) C to B; B to Bb via long Bb; B to A; G# to cross fingered F#; G to F; D to Low C; Low C to Low Bb; Also high G to A.

Oboe: G# to F#; holding LH little finger Eb open - play Low C; Low C to B; Low C to Bb.

Bassoon: Low D to C; Low D to B. Check the E pancake key closes the crook vent pad.

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