

## Getting more from the Clarinet (Sept 2022)

### The mouthpiece

The mouthpiece is the critical component of the instrument and is largely responsible for the tone, tuning, response, and dynamic range. Usually a Clarinet is supplied with a suitable mouthpiece that matches the instrument but often this can be improved upon to some extent depending on what sound the player is trying to achieve. There are many makes of mouthpiece designed to produce different quality sounds to suit different types of music and styles of playing - particularly Jazz. For classical players it is best to stick to the manufacturer's own range of mouthpieces or try a Vandoran mouthpiece.

Only try mouthpieces after the instrument has been fully serviced (within the last year) otherwise you will not be accurately assessing the qualities of a particular mouthpiece - instead you will be assessing how different mouthpieces respond to problems with the instrument. When trying different mouthpieces it is important to make sure the bore of the mouthpiece matches the bore of your Clarinet barrel. Also bear in mind that you may have to try different strength reeds if the tip opening or lay of the mouthpiece is different to your current mouthpiece. Refer to my information sheet: Info - the Clarinet 09 - How to select and test mouthpieces.

### A good ligature

On a student mouthpiece the ligature is usually made of metal and has two screws. The ligature should fit onto the mouthpiece without twisting or bending, and the two screws should be parallel. With the reed off the mouthpiece the 'bands' (sides) of the ligature should nearly meet when the screws are tightened; with the reed on, the space between the bands should be less than 1.6 mm (1/16").

If the ligature does not fit properly or if the metal has become distorted then the reed will not sit on the mouthpiece correctly - the instrument will not play as easily and as well as it should. You should consider buying a new ligature. There are many good makes and models of ligature - if the mouthpiece manufacturer makes a matching ligature, or recommends a particular make, then buy that one, otherwise try Rovner or BG. The design of the ligature will affect the sound - particularly the tone and so I would recommend trying the different Rovner and BG designs (note that to fairly assess a ligature your Clarinet must be in good condition).

### The thumbrest

Some players find the location of the thumbrest does not suit their right hand and so operating the keys is uncomfortable and interferes with the free movement of their fingers. Sometimes this can be alleviated by simply fitting a thumb cushion onto the existing thumbrest, but if this is not the case then replacing the existing static thumbrest with an adjustable one which can be set to exactly the right place is the best option. Refer to my information sheet: Info - the Clarinet 07 - Adjustable thumb-rests for Clarinets.

### An adjustable barrel

Although all modern woodwinds should be normally in tune at A=440 there are times when a clarinet player would like their instrument to play a bit sharper or a bit flatter, this is usually to match another instrument that is not playing in tune at A=440 (such as older Saxophones) or to deal with playing in a cold environment (such as a church) where the player struggles to keep their instrument warm enough to play in tune and so often plays flat.

In these instances the player has to swap barrels (to a shorter one to play sharper or a longer one to play flatter) or alternatively to pull the barrel out slightly (to play flatter). Pulling the barrel out is rarely satisfactory because it introduces a gap in the bore which has negative effects on the tuning, and swapping barrels can be awkward during a performance.

An adjustable barrel is very useful in these circumstances. I recommend the Paulus and Schuler 'Zoom' barrel which is very well designed; it comes in a variety of sizes to match the existing barrel length of various brands of clarinet and can be adjusted in 0.5 mm steps to shorten or lengthen the barrel.

When playing in a cold environment the barrel can be shortened to sharpen the instrument and very easily lengthened again as the instrument warms up – this is particularly useful if the player is only playing occasionally during a performance and so the clarinet keeps cooling down in between plays.

Another use for the Zoom barrel is to eliminate the need for an 'A' natural barrel – the player can leave their mouthpiece on the Zoom barrel and use the barrel for both the Bb and A clarinets – lengthening the barrel for use on the A clarinet and shortening it again for use on the Bb clarinet.

## **Servicing the instrument**

Make sure your Clarinet is regularly serviced so that you can get the most from it. I recommend graduate and professional Clarinets have a **custom service** or **custom overhaul** (depending on the amount of work required) to make the instrument play as well as possible. The Clarinet is stripped down and cleaned throughout; the wood is oiled - including the tone-hole chimneys (but not the bores of the top-joint and bottom-joint, unless required, because this will interfere with established drainage path). The mechanism of the instrument is made to operate as quietly as possible and to feel as balanced as possible; this is done by removing play or binding from the mechanism, balancing the spring action, and using felt instead of cork on articulated keys and some specific key heels. All pads are made to seat as well as possible – this may involve re-aligning keys (particularly the ring keys) and sealing the grain on the tone-hole rims.

Players often blame themselves for the quality of the sound they produce when really it is the condition of the instrument that is causing problems. On Clarinets the first indication that an instrument needs servicing is usually when the player starts having problems playing across the break (from throat Bb to B or C).

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