

Looking after the Clarinet (Nov 2020)

Cleaning the instrument

- Once a month leave the mouthpiece standing upside-down in mouthwash (or white vinegar) for 30 seconds and then wash out with soapy water - this will clear away any calcium deposits that have built up (take care to avoid wetting the cork on the tenon too much).
- If dust or fluff does gather on the instrument then gently brush it away with an (unused) shaving brush or small (10-20 mm) width unused paint brush.
- Occasionally polish the keys to prolong the life of the plating. Use a silver cleaning cloth (for silver plated keys) or a brass cleaning cloth (for nickel plated keys).
- Once a month use a precision screwdriver (if you feel competent) to gently check none of the screws are working loose.
- If the pads become sticky use (Yamaha) pad cleaning papers to clean the pads: - dab a little Methylated spirits onto the paper with a cotton bud, place the paper under the key pad, hold the key lightly closed and pull the paper through; once that the pad is clean place a sheet of (Yamaha) powder paper under the pad, hold the key lightly closed, and pull the paper through.

Some players find that their instrument tarnishes quickly – this can sometimes be the result of leaving the instrument out of its case for long periods of time (particularly if it is left in direct sunlight) but sometimes it seems to be caused by the breath or sweat of the player (in the same way some people have problems wearing certain jewellery). Tarnishing does prevent the instrument playing properly – a player will be able to remove tarnish from most of the clarinet with a silver cloth (for silver plating) or brass cloth (for nickel plating); inaccessible areas can only be cleaned by a repairer when the instrument is serviced.

Cases and case covers

Clarinets are easily damaged and an instrument case that holds the Clarinet securely is essential. The keys will be bent if the instrument can move in the case while being carried. Nothing else should be kept in the case unless there is a specific compartment for it (or it can fit in the bell). Clarinet case covers are useful if you need to carry a stand or sheet music.

Clarinet stands

Some players find the chore of assembling and dis-assembling the Clarinet can prevent them practicing. If the Clarinet is placed on a stand after playing it can be left assembled and it will drain properly (although it is vulnerable to being knocked over). If the stand is to be kept at home, buy the largest possible because this will be the most stable; if the stand needs to be used at performances as well as at home, then a smaller stand that fits inside the case, case cover, or perhaps the bell, might be better. Children might be better off placing the instrument under their bed (remove the bell and rest the instrument with the holes pointing upwards), the instrument won't drain effectively but it might be played more often and it won't get knocked over.

In performances it is best for the player to keep hold of their Clarinet (rather than place it on a stand) with the holes facing upwards and the instrument tilted down, doing this will help the instrument drain and also keep it warm so it stays in tune.

Servicing the instrument

The instrument should be serviced regularly to ensure it is operating correctly. The pads, corks, and felts on the instrument (and also the adhesives which keeps these items in place) deteriorate over time. On older or poorer quality instruments the mechanism itself starts to wear and keys can become loose or jammed. Usually such deterioration is gradual and the player subconsciously compensates by blowing harder and pressing harder on the keys. Without servicing the deterioration continues - the quality of tone diminishes, the instrument becomes less responsive, and the tuning becomes unreliable; the deterioration continues until something major goes wrong and the instrument becomes unplayable and in need of considerable repair.

As a general guide to the frequency of servicing - if you have one main woodwind instrument and you are under grade 5 (or have been playing less than 5 years) you should have the instrument serviced approximately every two years, if you are above grade 5 (or have been playing more than 5 years) then you should have the instrument serviced approximately once a year. If you have more than one main woodwind instrument then each instrument probably gets used less often so you can go longer between services. If you are doing exams on the instrument it is best to at least have the instrument checked a couple of months before the exams so that you know it is working reliably when you go into the exam; players often blame themselves for the poor sound they produce when actually the instrument is at fault. The first indication that a Clarinet needs servicing is usually when the player starts having problems playing across the break (from throat Bb to B or C).

Adjusting to your instrument if it has just been serviced:

When an instrument is overdue a service you (the player) must compensate for the instrument's various problems. You have probably developed habits of pressing harder on the keys, blowing harder, and manipulating your embouchure as necessary to help tune the notes. You may not even have been aware that you were doing these things. Once the instrument has been serviced you need to stop compensating for the problems you were having with the instrument - therefore you need to break the habits you have developed.

The easiest way to do this is to spend the first 10 minutes of your next two or three practices working on (easy) scales and arpeggios only; use a light finger pressure and a light breath pressure and try to play softly. If you do not practice scales and arpeggios then practice some easy pieces of music so you can concentrate on your fingers and breath pressure rather than the notes.

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