

Looking after the Saxophone (Nov 17)

Routine care and maintenance

After playing:

There are two approaches to care of the instrument depending on how much time and effort is available to the player.

For players with plenty of time:

- Remove the crook (with the mouthpiece still attached) from the body of the instrument; then remove the mouthpiece from the crook and the reed from the mouthpiece. Place a mouthpiece mop in the mouthpiece to soak up any moisture; put the ligature back onto the mouthpiece and then fit the mouthpiece cap on; put the reed in its holder - this routine will prolong the life of the reed and help prevent deposits forming in the mouthpiece.
- Use a 'crook cleaner' or 'pull-through' to clean out the crook - this will prevent deposits building up.
- Swab out the body of the Saxophone with a 'pull-through' and leave it to 'air' on a stand for 5-10 minutes before packing it away in its case - this will remove moisture from the instrument and prevent deposits building up in the bore as well as prolonging the life of the pads.

For busy players with little time (or inclination):

- At home leave the instrument assembled on a stand so no time is lost when grabbing 10 or 15 minutes practice time
- When transporting the instrument (to a lesson or performance etc) remove the mouthpiece from the crook and insert a mouthpiece mop (carefully so as not to damage the reed if left in place), place a 'crook-saver' in the crook, and place a 'pad-saver' in the body of the instrument.

The above approach is not the absolute best because the instrument is not swabbed out after use when at home and the life of the reed will be shortened and over time deposits will build up in the bore (from the mouthpiece to the Bell) but the bore will get regularly cleaned to some extent by the use of the mop, crook-saver, and pad-saver when transporting the instrument.

Cleaning the instrument:

- Once a month leave the mouthpiece standing in mouthwash or clear vinegar for 5 minutes (use a timer! - if left too long the mouthpiece will be damaged) and then wash it out with soapy water (this will clear away any calcium deposits that have built up).
- Once a month use a precision screwdriver to check (gently) that the screws at each end of the key barrels and the screws securing the key guards are tight. Do not adjust any other screws!
- If dust or fluff does gather on the instrument then gently brush it away with an (unused) shaving brush or a small (10-20 mm) width (unused) paint brush.
- Use a lacquer cleaning cloth to polish the instrument occasionally - if the keys are nickel-plated then use a brass cleaning cloth to clean them - to prolong the life of the plating

Cleaning sticky pads

The G# and Low C# are particularly prone to sticking - this is a design problem of Saxophones and you have to learn to manage it. Before playing check that both pads do open - if they do not then carefully but sharply 'flick' the key open and operate it a few times.

To clean sticky pads you will need Methylated spirits, some cotton buds and some pad cleaning papers:

-Dab a cotton bud in some Methylated spirits and clean the pad and the rim of the tone hole carefully and as far as is possible without jamming the cotton bud at the back of the pad.

-Dab some Methylated spirits on a sheet of (Yamaha) cleaning paper and drag it through underneath the pad with the pad held lightly closed so as not to tear the paper, then allow the pad to dry for about a minute.

-Take another sheet of (Yamaha) cleaning paper and use a 4B (or softer) pencil, cover both sides of the paper with pencil lead, then put this paper underneath the pad and drag it through a few times. The graphite in the pencil lead acts as a lubricant and should prevent the pad from sticking for a while.

Adjusting the octave mechanism

Saxophones commonly have problems with the octave mechanism; this is because the mechanism crosses from the body of the instrument to the crook and often gets bent during assembly or just drifts out of alignment over time. When the octave thumb key is used then one Octave pad should be open and the other Octave pad should be shut: up to and including G - lower pad open; from A upwards - upper pad open. If the upper pad will not close when playing G then hold down the upper pad cup and bend the other end of the key (the bridge bar) slightly up. If the upper pad will not open when playing A then hold down the upper pad cup and bend the bridge bar slightly down. Do these adjustments with the instrument assembled – the bridge bar is designed to be adjusted like this so it is unlikely you will damage the instrument.

Instrument stands

Instrument stands have two functions - firstly to support the instrument safely when it is not being played and secondly to help the instrument drain properly (the condensation from the players breath will drain into the palm key tone holes and onto the pads if a Saxophone is left lying horizontally). Only pack the instrument into its case if there is some good reason why the instrument cannot be left on a stand (such as it possibly being knocked over). Children might be better off leaving the whole instrument assembled (but with a mouthpiece cap on to protect the reed) and placing the instrument under their bed when not in use, the instrument won't drain effectively but it might be played more often and it won't get knocked over.

If the stand is to be kept at home, buy stand with the largest possible base because this will be the most stable; if the stand needs to be used at performances as well as at home, then a smaller folding stand might be better. During performances it is best for the player to keep hold of their Saxophone (rather than place it on a stand) so it stays warm and in tune.

Saxophone cases

Saxophones are easily damaged and a strong instrument case that holds the instrument 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). While the instrument is in the case it must have its 'end plug' (usually supplied with the instrument) inserted into the top socket to prevent the instrument moving about in the case - if a pad saver is used then the end plug is not required because the pad saver will have a built in end plug. It is always best to use a case with rigid sides; soft padded 'gig bags' really are worse than useless - the player thinks the instrument is protected when it is not.

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 particularly difficult to play quietly, 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.

Adjusting to your instrument if it has just been serviced:

When an instrument is overdue a service the player has to compensate for the instrument's various problems. You probably developed habits of pressing harder on the keys, and blowing harder, and manipulating your embouchure as necessary to help tune the notes. You may not even been aware that you were doing these things. You now 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 your next two or three practices working on scales and arpeggios only; use a light finger pressure and a light breath pressure and try to play quietly. If you do not practice scales and arpeggios then practice some easy pieces of music so you can concentrate on your finger and breath pressure rather than the notes.

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