

Getting more from Saxophone reeds (Jun 2022)

Buying reeds

There are many different makes of reed but initially you are only concerned about the strength of the reed. The strength of reed should be selected to match your embouchure and mouthpiece - you may need to change strength as your embouchure develops or if you change your mouthpiece. A reed that is too soft will close up and stop sounding. A reed that is too hard will be difficult to sound. Bear in mind that different makes of reed have different classifications of strength e.g. a Rico number 2 reed is softer than a Vandoren number 2 reed. So stick to one make of reed to avoid confusion.

Most of the reeds that are available are made from reed cane but plastic alternatives are available – some of these are completely plastic and some are 'plasticized' with a small film of plastic covering the cane. Most people prefer traditional cane reeds believing them to sound better however, this is subjective and plastic or plasticized reeds are significantly more robust than cane reeds so they can be useful for both beginners (who tend to easily break reeds) and professionals (who do so much playing that they wear out their reeds very quickly). Once you know what strength of reed you need it could be worth experimenting with a plastic reed.

Selecting a new (cane) reed

When you buy a new box of reeds (they are usually cheaper by the box) some of the reeds will initially be better than the others. Select the 3 best by the following criteria:

- A clear white or creamy coloured shaved section.
- A golden wheat coloured bark.
- Close straight running fibres that run to the tip.
- An even taper graduated to the tip.
- The reed should also be 'balanced' - hold it up to the light - it should not be darker on one side to the other.

Place the reeds you have selected in a glass of water for several minutes. Then lay them out on a flat surface (flat side down) hold each reed in place with one hand and use the middle finger of the other hand to rub down the surface of the vamp (shaved section of the reed) to the tip. The remaining reeds that you have not selected can improve with age so keep all reeds (as long as they are not split or broken) for potential future selection.

After a long time a cane reed will become calcified from saliva deposits and will sound more and more metallic - so occasionally compare the three reeds you have selected with those remaining in the box and discard a reed if it is worn out.

Looking after reeds

Develop the following good habits:

- When using the reed occasionally suck hard on the reed to remove excess saliva from the reed.
- When you have finished playing leave the reed to air.
- When the reed is dry put it into its holder (if the reeds you usually buy do not come with individual holders then buy a reed case).
- Always throw away a chipped or split reed.

Different makes of reed

There are many different makes of reed, some of which are designed for particular types of mouthpieces and styles of music. You can try the various makes of reed but I would only recommend this if you have a reasonable mouthpiece and ligature, and the instrument is in good working order.

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