

SELECTION, REPAIR, AND CARE OF SINGLE REEDS

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I. Selection of Reeds:

A. Visible Characteristics:

1. Good reed cane comes from Southern France (Provence and especially the town of Frejus) near the Mediterranean Sea and Argentina.
2. Recommended brands are: Gonzales, Rico Reserve “Classic” (only for alto sax,) Van Doren (*regular* for “classical” playing and *Java or ZZ* for jazz), Hemke, Marca, La Voz, and Rico Royal.
3. A good reed has fine, straight, even fibers that extend to the tip of the reed.
4. A good reed has a golden wheat color rather than a green or dead brown color.
5. A good reed is clear and smooth rather than rough.
6. The heart of a good reed is even, with the apex of the heart in the middle of the reed.



7. Reeds should be evenly balanced on both the left and the right sides at equivalent places, however the reed should be a little stronger on the left side, especially around the lower part, in order to compensate for the pressure of the right hand.
8. The tip of a good reed is even.
9. The corners and the tip of a good reed match the curve and rounded corners of the mouthpiece with which it is to be used.
10. A good reed is not wider than the rails of the mouthpiece with which it is to be used.
11. There are no nicks, mars, cracks, or splits on the surface of a good reed.
12. Always check reeds for balance and uniformity by holding them up to a good source of light.
13. The underside of a good reed is not warped.
14. The manufacturers' numbered grades may be misleading due to the various ways in which reeds respond to different mouthpieces.
15. Visible characteristics of a reed only approximate its playing ability.

B. Audible Characteristics:

1. Reeds must be tested by playing.
2. Before trying a reed, moisten it well with water or saliva, press it firmly on a piece of glass and strongly rub it up and down with the forefinger of the other hand in order to close the pores of the reed.
3. Before playing on the reed, the vibrating end of the reed should be held firmly to a table or counter with the thick end extending out over the edge of the table or counter. The thick end of the reed should then *be gently* vibrated with the forefinger of the other hand.
4. When placing the reed on the mouthpiece, put the ligature on the mouthpiece first and then slip the butt end of the reed under the ligature.
5. Tighten the ligature screws just enough to hold the reed. The top screw should not be quite as tight as the bottom screw.
6. A new reed should be played for only ten minutes or so and then should be left to dry clamped on a flat surface (ie. a Vandoren reed case or piece of glass with rubber bands.)
7. Reeds often require hours of breaking in before they can accurately be classified as good or bad.
8. Give most reeds two or three trials' before discarding them.
9. Mark reeds with a system to classify how they play. I use numbers— 1=great, -1=might be great, +2=has potential, but needs to be tryed several times with possible work on reed (see section III.) Also use “H” for hard and “S” for soft.

II. Equipment:

1. Appropriate reeds
2. Appropriate reed clipper
3. Dutch or reed rush
5. Wet or dry sand paper (No. 320, 400 & 600)
6. Ground glass plate
7. Reed file
8. Toothbrush
9. Castile soap
10. Water

III. Repairs:

1. Haste makes waste! Clip, scrape, or sand only a little bit at a time.
2. As in any other art-practice makes perfect.

A. Stiff Reeds:

1. A reed is usually too stiff when it requires an excessive amount of embouchure tension to produce and maintain notes.
2. When a reed whistles or squeaks, try scraping it a bit at the middle near the center of the reed.
3. When a reed plays satisfactorily when played forte, but sounds a bit heavy when played piano, try scraping a bit off the upper left side or the tip of the reed.
4. When a reed performs satisfactorily but sounds a little heavy at all dynamic levels, try scraping a bit off the lower edge of the right side of the reed.
5. A dense spot on the reed, should be scraped a bit to match the equivalent place on the opposite side of the reed.
6. Always thoroughly moisten Dutch rush before using it.
7. Use Dutch rush on wet reeds.
8. Use fine sandpaper on dry reeds.
9. Dutch or reed rush should be used as a file.
10. Always apply even pressure when scraping or sanding a reed.
11. Great pressure may be applied when scraping or sanding a reed.
12. Some pressure may be applied when scraping the sides of a reed
13. One must scrape the tip of a reed very carefully and gently.
14. RARELY, IF EVER, SCRAPE THE CENTER OR THE HEART OF A REED.

B. Soft Reeds:

1. A reed is usually too soft when it has any of the following characteristics: a thin reedy tone quality, flatness in the upper register, a tendency to close when playing above the staff.
2. When a reed is too soft it should be clipped.

IV. Daily Care:

A good reed is a natural product. It should be treated like a vintage wine. Who stores vintage Burgundy on a radiator?

1. It is advisable to maintain a minimum of two good reeds and use them alternately from day to day - they will last longer.
2. Always remove the reed from the mouthpiece after playing and carefully wipe off the excess moisture before putting it away.
3. Do not store a reed on a mouthpiece.

4. If a reed should develop a welt, sand it a few strokes on a piece of fine sandpaper.
5. Store reeds in a container that will protect them from light or air and allow them to lie flat.
6. To clean reeds, use Hydrogen Peroxide, available from your pharmacy. Soak the reeds in the peroxide solution for 20-30 minutes, then “gently” brush the “gunk” from the reed under running water with a toothbrush.
7. Maintain a supply of reeds. I’ve found allowing them to age for an additional 2-3 years improves their life and tone. The best place to store them is in a cigar-box, with a humidifier, Rico or the new Vandoren Hygrocase.

V. Resources

1. Reeds

Vandoren - <http://www.vandoren.com>

Gonzales - <http://www.argendonax.com.ar/>