

Some Thoughts on Reeds & Break-In Procedures...

An article by Phil Shapiro

Everybody has his own routine for dealing with reeds. If you disagree with anything here, that's just fine. But if what you're doing isn't working for you, then maybe this will help.

First of all, stop adjusting reeds that aren't broken in yet! Any adjustments you make on a reed before it's broken in you'll come to regret later. That means no sanding, scraping or clipping anywhere. Not even the back. Sanding the back is still removing wood, even if it's only a tiny bit. And a tiny bit can make a huge difference! How do you keep the back flat? Try using a non-abrasive surface like the back of your sandpaper instead. In my opinion, removing wood from a reed should be considered repair work, not normal preparation.

Second, don't over soak new reeds. Just wet them enough to play. There are loads of scientific papers on the structure of a reed. You can look them up if you want specific details, but suffice it to say that during the break in period the fibers can be damaged by over soaking, ruining a potentially great reed. (Water or saliva? I don't think it matters at all. They won't last forever no matter what you do).

Breaking in a reed should be simple, or you won't want to do it all the time. So, here's what I suggest.

First Day...

wet the reed well, play on it for 5 minutes, rub the back (see above!) and the vamp. Rubbing the vamp helps seal the pores and slows moisture absorption. Put the reed on a flat, hard surface and use your finger to rub for 10 to 20 seconds. Set the reed to dry with the bark side down, and then put it away.

Second Day...

do exactly what you did the first day, but play the reed for 10 minutes.

Third Day...

do exactly the same stuff and play the reed for 15 minutes.

Fourth Day...

do exactly the same stuff and play the reed for 20 minutes. Keep this up for a week, increasing the playing time each day. The reeds will stiffen and relax. Be patient, let them settle. You'll most likely discard a reed or two from the box during this period.

Seventh Day?

you're done! You can now balance and flatten where necessary. But, if you've made 3 or 4 adjustments to a reed and still aren't happy, dump the reed and move on. Don't waste your time. You should spend your practice time practicing!

A few closing thoughts... 1) Rotate your reeds. Try not to play the same reed all the time. Your best reed won't be the best every day or everywhere. 2) Rub the back and vamp after every time you play a reed. They'll last much longer. 3) Remember it's a reed, not a baby. If you don't like it, throw it out. 4) Don't obsess over reed work. If you start talking to yourself, making diagrams or freaking out that the left side is 1 micron higher than the right, it might be time to put the reeds away go take in a movie or something.

Phil Shapiro currently serves as Principal Clarinet of The Miami Symphony and owner of Davie Cane, US distributor of Gonzalez Reeds.

