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Woodwind Instrument Maintenance

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Gary Sperl

Proper care and a regular maintenance schedule for woodwind instruments will result in fewer trips to the repair shop and less frustration for the player. An instrument repairer often spends a lot of time on problems that could have been prevented with a little forethought by the player. The suggestions listed below can help the woodwind player keep his or her instrument in good playing condition.

Tendon corks

The most common problems that occur with tendon corks (found on saxophone necks, bassoon bocals, and clarinet joints) are cracking, peeling, breaking, and shrinking, but cork life can be extended virtually indefinitely with proper care. These problems are usually caused by an accumulation of old cork grease, but they can be overcome easily with an occasional cleaning. Over a period of time, the cork layers dry out, harden, and ultimately crack. Before applying new cork grease on a cork, remove the old grease by coating it with lighter fluid and wiping it clean with a cloth. Lighter fluid is a type of kerosene containing an element that breaks down oils. If corks have never been cleaned, this process may need to be repeated to ensure a thoroughly clean cork.

Oiling keys

Every time a key is depressed on any woodwind instrument, the impact of the metal against the in-

strument creates friction. Over the course of time, the metal begins to wear, which results in play between keys and can cause considerable key noise that distracts from the music. More significant damage occurs when pads inserted in keys with an excessive amount of play will not center over the tone hole consistently, which creates leaks that can impair the performer's playing technique. A regular oiling of the friction points will greatly lessen this wearing process. Friction points can be found by depressing each key separately and oiling the points at which metal rubs against metal. One drop of a good grade of thirty-weight motor oil will sufficiently lubricate the friction points. Oilers with needle applicators such as "Hypo-25" (manufactured by Gaunt Industries) are helpful for reaching tight, small, interior key arrangements. Commercially available key oil is often so thin that it drips onto the body of the instrument, and the nozzle of the container is often too large to reach certain keys. Periodic oiling will reduce key noise, prolong the wear of the metal, and help in preventing leaks.

Crack prevention

Wooden instruments expand and contract in various degrees, especially in northern climates where extremes in temperature and humidity are commonplace. As the wood changes on a clarinet or oboe, any structurally weak or flawed area may crack. The seriousness of the cracks depends on where they occur and how deep they are, but in general, several things can be done to lessen the chance of cracking due to temperature or humidity change.

- Never play a cold instrument. Always allow the instrument to reach room temperature first by gradually blowing warm air through it.

- Avoid storing or exposing an instrument to extreme temperatures for any length of time.

- Do not put a cold instrument near a heat source. A sudden change in temperature will crack an instrument.

- The absence of humidity, especially common in winter months, causes wood to shrink and places stress on the instrument. As a prevention for wood shrinkage, commercially available humidifiers for the instrument case keep the humidity factor relatively constant, thus reducing unnecessary and potentially damaging expansion and contraction.

- The regular use of bore oil is helpful in preventing wooden instruments from drying out, shrinking, and cracking. The use of bore oil is a controversial topic among woodwind players. Many performers feel that after using bore oil on their instruments, the quality of sound is less resonant than it was prior to the application of the oil. However, within one or two days, the sound returns with as much life and flexibility as ever. I feel that the advantage in reducing the possibility for cracking outweighs the inconvenience of a temporary, slight change in sound quality.

By adhering to this simple maintenance program, woodwind instrumentalists can increase their knowledge of the construction and acoustic qualities of their instruments and guarantee good intonation and characteristic timbre. ▢

The author is instructor of music and multiple woodwinds at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Illustration for this series on instrument maintenance by Steve Pederson