

The Clarinet – getting more from the instrument

The mouthpiece

The mouthpiece is the critical component of the instrument and is largely responsible for the tone, tuning, response, and dynamic range. Usually a Clarinet is supplied with a suitable mouthpiece that matches the instrument but often this can be improved upon to some extent depending on what sound the player is trying to achieve. There are many makes of mouthpiece designed to produce different quality sounds to suit different types of music and styles of playing - particularly Jazz. For classical players it is best to stick to the manufacturer's own range of mouthpieces or try a Vandoran mouthpiece.

Only try mouthpieces after the instrument has been fully serviced (within the last year) otherwise you will not be accurately assessing the qualities of a particular mouthpiece – instead you will be assessing how different mouthpieces respond to problems with the instrument. When trying different mouthpieces it is important to make sure the bore of the mouthpiece matches the bore of your Clarinet barrel. Also bear in mind that you may have to try different strength reeds if the tip opening or lay of the mouthpiece is different to your current mouthpiece.

A good ligature

On a student mouthpiece the ligature is usually made of metal and has two screws. The ligature should fit onto the mouthpiece without twisting or bending, and the two screws should be parallel. With the reed off the mouthpiece the "bands" (sides) of the ligature should nearly meet when the screws are tightened; with the reed on, the space between the bands should be less than 1.6 mm (1/16").

If the ligature does not fit properly or if the metal has become distorted then the reed will not sit on the mouthpiece correctly - the instrument will not play as easily and as well as it should. You should consider buying a new ligature. There are many good makes and models of ligature - if the mouthpiece manufacturer makes a matching ligature or recommends a particular make then buy that one, otherwise try Rovner or BG. To fairly assess a ligature your Clarinet must be in good condition.

Servicing the instrument

Make sure your Clarinet is regularly serviced so that you can get the most from it. I recommend graduate and professional Clarinets have a **custom service** to make them play as well as possible. The instrument is stripped down and cleaned throughout; the wood is oiled - including the tone-hole chimneys (but not the bores of the top-joint and bottom-joint, unless required, because this will interfere with established drainage patterns). The mechanism of the instrument is made to operate as quietly as possible and to feel as balanced as possible; this is done by removing all play or binding from the mechanism, balancing the spring action, and using felt instead of cork on all articulated keys and some specific key heels. All pads are made to seat as well as possible – this may involve re-aligning keys (particularly the ring keys) and sealing the grain on the tone hole rims.

Players often blame themselves for the quality of the sound they produce when really it is the condition of the instrument that is causing problems. On Clarinets the first indication that an instrument needs servicing is usually when the player starts having problems playing across the break (from throat Bb to B or C).