

The Saxophone – looking after the instrument

Routine care and maintenance

Before playing:

- Warm the crook by holding it in your hands for 2 or 3 minutes, **do not warm the crook by blowing into it**, because this will just cause condensation problems and initially distort the tuning (if possible hold the body of the instrument over a radiator for 2 or 3 minutes to warm it up as well).

After playing:

- Remove the crook (with the mouthpiece still attached) from the body of the instrument; then remove the mouthpiece from the crook and the reed from the mouthpiece. Place a mouthpiece mop in the mouthpiece to soak up any moisture; put the ligature back onto the mouthpiece and then fit the mouthpiece cap on; put the reed in its holder (this routine will prolong the life of the reed and help prevent deposits forming in the crook, however if this "chore" prevents the player practicing then leave the reed on the mouthpiece and the mouthpiece on the crook).
- Use a "crook cleaner" to clean out the crook (to prevent deposits building up).
- Leave the body of the Saxophone to "air" on a stand for 5-10 minutes after playing if possible to prolong the life of the pads.
- If the instrument has to be packed away often without being left to air then a "pad saver" will help by soaking up the moisture left in the instrument.

Cleaning the instrument:

-Once a month leave the mouthpiece standing upside-down in mouthwash for 30 seconds and then wash out with soapy water (this will clear away any calcium deposits that have built up).
-If dust or fluff does gather on the instrument then gently brush it away with a shaving brush.
-Use a lacquer cleaning cloth to polish the instrument - if the keys are nickel-plated then use a brass cleaning cloth to clean them (to prolong the life of the plating)
-Once a month use a precision screwdriver to check (gently) that the screws at each end of the key barrels and the screws securing the key guards are tight. Do not adjust any other screws!

A safe method of assembly

Use this method to assemble an Alto or Tenor Saxophone to avoid damaging it.

1. Fit the mouthpiece onto the crook (locating it at its usual position) and then fit the reed onto the mouthpiece; make sure the reed is on evenly so that the arc of the reed tip matches the mouthpiece tip
2. Loosen the nut on the socket at the top of the body.
3. Carefully fit the warmed crook (see above) into the socket at the top of the body with a twisting motion.
4. Fit the sling and hold the instrument in the playing position (use a good quality sling that can be easily adjusted and has a hook with a spring clip so that it cannot slip off the instrument).
5. Adjust the position of the crook and mouthpiece if required and then tighten the nut on the socket to secure the crook in position.

Cleaning sticky pads

The G# and Low C# are particularly prone to sticking - this is a design problem of Saxophones and you have to learn to manage it. Before playing check both pads do open - if they do not then carefully but sharply push the key open and operate it a few times.

To clean sticky pads you will need Methylated spirits, some cotton buds and some pad cleaning papers:

-Dab a cotton bud in some Methylated spirits and clean the pad and the rim of the tone hole carefully and as far as is possible without jamming the cotton bud at the back of the pad.

-Dab some Methylated spirits on a sheet of cleaning paper and drag it through underneath the pad with the pad held lightly closed so as not to tear the paper, then allow the pad about a minute to dry.

-Take another sheet of cleaning paper and use a 4B (or softer) pencil to cover both sides of the paper with pencil lead, then put this paper underneath the pad and drag it through a few times. The graphite in the pencil lead acts as a lubricant and should prevent the pad from sticking for a while.

Adjusting the octave mechanism

Saxophones commonly have problems with the octave mechanism; this is because the mechanism crosses from the body of the instrument to the crook and often gets bent during assembly. When the octave thumb key is used then one Octave pad should be open and the other Octave pad should be shut: up to and including G - lower pad open; from A upwards - upper pad open. If the upper pad will not close when playing G then hold down the upper pad cup and bend the other end of the key (the bridge bar) slightly up. If the upper pad will not open when playing A then hold down the upper pad cup and bend the bridge bar slightly down

Instrument stands

Instrument stands have two functions - firstly to support the instrument safely when it is not being played and secondly to help the instrument drain properly (the condensation from the players breath will drain into the palm key tone holes and onto the pads if a Saxophone is left lying horizontally). Only pack the instrument into its case if there is some good reason why the instrument cannot be left on a stand (such as it possibly being knocked over). Children might be better off leaving the whole instrument assembled (but with a mouthpiece cap on to protect the reed) and placing the instrument under their bed when not in use, the instrument won't drain effectively but it might be played more often and it won't get knocked over.

If the stand is to be kept at home, buy the largest possible because this will be the most stable; if the stand needs to be used at performances as well as at home, then a smaller folding stand might be better. During performances it is best for the player to keep hold of their Saxophone (rather than place it on a stand) so it stays warm and in tune.

Saxophone cases

Saxophones are easily damaged and a strong instrument case that holds the instrument snugly is essential. The keys will be bent if the instrument can move in the case while being carried. Nothing else should be kept in the case unless there is a specific compartment for it (or it can fit in the bell). While the instrument is in the case it must have its "end plug" (usually supplied with the instrument) inserted into the top socket to prevent the instrument moving about in the case, if a pad saver is used then the end plug is not required. It is always best to use a case with rigid sides; soft padded "gig bags" are worse than useless - the player thinks the instrument is protected when it is not.

Servicing the instrument

The instrument should be serviced once a year to ensure it is operating correctly. The pads, corks, and felts on the instrument (and also the adhesives which keeps these items in place) deteriorate over time. On older or poorer quality instruments the mechanism itself starts to wear and keys can become loose or jammed. Usually such deterioration is gradual and the player subconsciously compensates by blowing harder and pressing harder on the keys. Without servicing the deterioration continues: the quality of tone diminishes; the instrument becomes less responsive; the tuning becomes unreliable. Eventually something major goes wrong and the instrument becomes unplayable and in need of considerable repair. Players often blame themselves for the poor sound they produce when really it is the condition of the instrument that is causing problems.