

# Clarinet Mouthpiece, Ligature, and Reed

*by Dr. Christopher Ayer, Stephen F. Austin State University*

**Mouthpieces:** There are several commercial mouthpieces on the market which produce decent sounds. Vandoren mouthpieces are generally good. For novice players, the B45 will work, but more advanced students may prefer something along the lines of a 5RV lyre or M13 lyre. There are many other kinds of “custom” mouthpieces that can be bought through mail order. Since any mouthpiece should be tried out before purchase (if possible), it is very important to consult the private teacher before buying one. Generally the mouthpieces that come with clarinets from the instrument manufacturer are not very good. Even the best quality clarinets do not have good quality mouthpieces with them at the time of purchase. Whatever mouthpiece is used, it should be free of scratches, nicks, and gouges, especially at the tip. The table (where the reed goes) should also be perfectly flat and free from scratches or gouges. One excellent, low cost (under \$50) beginner mouthpiece is the “Debut” model made by Clark Fobes in San Francisco.

**Ligatures:** Ligatures are a subject of much debate among clarinetists. Although there are many different kinds of ligatures on the market, many players swear by a certain brand or design and refuse to play with anything else. The choice is almost overwhelming, and all claim to improve your sound in some way. The price range also differs considerably from a regular “Bonade” ligature around \$11-\$15, to ligatures that can cost \$40 or more. Again, the best choice is to consult with the private teacher before buying a ligature. Ligatures do not affect the sound nearly as much as the mouthpiece does. There are, however, small changes in tone color and reed response with different ligatures. Generally, a regular Bonade ligature is very effective and serves most students well.

**Reeds:** Reeds are another matter of contention. There are many brands available, with Rico and Vandoren two of the most popular. Zonda reeds from Argentina are also becoming popular, and they seem to be quite consistent in strength throughout the box. With reeds, many players subscribe to the belief “use whatever works.” One frequently asked question is “What strength reeds should I play on?” The strength of the reed used is another matter that should be decided on with the advice of the private teacher. Reed strength selection is dependent upon the tip opening and facing of the mouthpiece being used. A stronger reed is not necessarily better for everyone. If the tip opening of the mouthpiece is quite open, a more flexible (softer) reed should be used. If the tip opening is closed, a stronger (harder) reed is needed. There is no “hero badge” for playing a #5 reed and it will not necessarily improve the sound.

The reed must be treated very carefully. Always watch for cracks or nicks in the reed that will affect its performance. The reed and mouthpiece combination is the sound producing part of the clarinet. If you start with a poor mouthpiece and cracked reed, you are already putting yourself at a disadvantage. Therefore there are two essentials for reed storage: Keeping the reed flat and protecting the tip.

There are several commercial reed cases available. One of the cheapest and what should be considered a “minimum requirement” for all students is something along the lines of the LaVoz ReedGuard. This is a very simple and low-cost holder carried by most music stores. It keeps the reed flat and protects the tip. They generally hold two to four reeds.

A good habit to get into is the practice of “rotating” your reeds. Never play on the same reed all the time. Have at least four reeds that work, and rotate them regularly. If one of them is particularly good, just play it every now and then and save it for public performances. Use other reeds during practice sessions and rehearsals. It is vital when using reeds that are broken in and working, however, to open up some new boxes and start the breaking-in process with new reeds. Although there are many different methods and ideas for breaking in the reeds, don’t play on new reeds for a long period of time. The reed has been sitting in a box for a while, and needs to be carefully handled at first. Play on new reeds just a few minutes each day, slightly increasing the time daily for a week or two. To an extent, more time spent breaking in the reeds will result in longer reed life.

Some people like to polish their reeds on the top and bottom. This can be done by simply rubbing the bottom of the reed on some high quality letterhead paper that has a rougher texture to it. The top of the reed can be polished by placing the reed on a flat surface and using the same paper on the fingertip to rub the reed. Any polishing should be done with the direction of the grain, not against it. There are many ways to adjust

reeds by means of sandpaper, reed rush, or a reed knife. All of these things are difficult to describe, and there is no “formula” for adjusting all reeds. The private teacher can help with reed adjustment, and there are several books on the subject.

Here are some things to remember about the mouthpiece, ligature, and reed: Always put the ligature on first. Then slip the reed into the ligature. Make sure the reed is “squarely” on the table of the mouthpiece. Leave a thin crescent of “black” (the mouthpiece) showing behind the reed when putting it on the mouthpiece (i.e., the tip of the reed should be slightly lower than the tip of the mouthpiece). Always tighten the ligature on the “butt” part of the reed, never the “blade” part. Don’t screw down the reed too tightly. This keeps it from vibrating and keeps you from getting a bigger and better sound. The reed is the last thing to put on the clarinet when assembling and the first thing to take off when packing up.

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