

# Express-Speed Reed Balancing

Michele Gingras

There are numerous methods to fix reeds. Some techniques require the use of several tools and demand a lot of time and practice. A number of clarinetists go a step further and make their own reeds from scratch. At the advanced stage of reed making, one typically will look at the cane's condition through a light source and even measure its thickness with a dial micrometer to insure proper balance. I believe it is indeed necessary for clarinetists to know all the steps of reed making in detail as well as the many different adjustment techniques.

Once an advanced clarinetist has had some experience in reed making, it is important to be able to quickly adjust reeds in time-pressing situations. The *Express-Speed Reed Balancing* technique is intended for such moments, and is meant to enhance the entire spectrum of reed fixing techniques. The only tool needed is reed rush.

Rather than *looking* at each side of the reed through a light source to see if it is balanced, this technique involves *listening* to the reed's sides (or "wings") instead. The following picture shows a reed that has been divided into three important parts: left side (indicated by "L"), right side ("R"), and heart ("H"):

Play left and right sides separately to verify reed balance and use reed rush accordingly:



The most important aspect of reed fixing is to balance the sides so they will both respond evenly. Before playing, soak reeds in water for 3-5 minutes to help unwarp dry cane. You can also use a reed case that uses humidification like Rico's Reed Vitalizer. This helps keep reeds stored at a constant humidity level and prevents them from warping. To check the reed's balance, play an open G and, *without modifying your embouchure position* whatsoever, rotate the instrument on the left side, therefore blocking the left side's reed vibration. You are now playing and listening to the right side of the reed *only*.

Follow by turning the instrument to the right side (blocking the right side reed

vibration) and listen to the left side. Play each side separately, and compare both sides' sound and response. Any imbalance will become very clear once you evaluate both sides with your ears instead of your eyes. One side might feel much more resistant than the other.

Once you determine which side needs adjustment, take a piece of reed rush and place it flat against the reed surface as illustrated below.

The left thumb stabilizes the right hand by supporting the right thumb at its base:



Gently and evenly scrape the surface marked "L" or "R" until reed dust starts to appear. Play the reed once again and see if there are any changes in the response of the corrected side. Do not scrape too much cane off as this becomes irreparable. Instead, make slight

## Express-Speed Reed Balancing

changes and repeat the steps of playing and scraping several times until both sides are almost even. If you balance both sides 100% equally, the reed will become too soft almost right away. Time will correct slight imperfections, so it is best not to overdo it. Stop immediately before both sides become perfectly balanced. Never touch the heart of the reed.

Repeat the above steps the next day. Additional adjustments may be needed on the second and third days. With a pencil, write a descriptive mark on the bottom part of the face of the reed to avoid having to turn it over to read. Marking reeds helps to develop a sense of “statistics” to show how each reed reacts to various adjustments. Balancing reeds this way saves time because there is no need to remove the reed from the mouthpiece during any stage of the technique. Moisture residue and skin particles form a hard crust and clog reed pores when drying, so it is a good idea to gently wash each reed with clean water after playing for an extended period of time.

## Options for Humidity Control

There are a few new options to humidify reeds to avoid warping and cracking during the drying process. I suggest using Rico’s Reed Vitalizer system. This uses a “Two-Way Humidity Control System (HCS)” that offers an ideal way to maintain the reeds that you have carefully spent time breaking in and preparing for use. It’s available in a few formats including a simple zip pouch for your own reed case, the Reed Vault which is great for storing bulk reeds, and the Rico Reed Case that is small enough to take on stage.

Selecting the right level of humidity control depends on what type of player you are and how you manage your reeds. They offer Reed Vitalizer in three different RH levels: 58%, 73% and 84%. However my experience is that 73% works fine for most players and can be used for general storage and day-to-day playing situations. The 84% is suited for those who like their reeds to be wet out of the bag and ready to play. This level requires you to monitor your reeds very closely to avoid mold growth though.

*Michele Gingras is Professor of Clarinet at Miami University (Ohio) since 1986. She was named Crossan Hays Curry Distinguished Educator in 2002 and Distinguished Scholar of the Graduate Faculty in 2006. Her book Clarinet Secrets-52 Performance Strategies for the Advanced Clarinetist was published in 2004 by Scarecrow Press (Revised Edition 2006). Michele plays Rico reeds. Visit Michele’s web site: <http://www.fna.muohio.edu/faculty/gingram>. She may be contacted at: [gingram@muohio.edu](mailto:gingram@muohio.edu).*

*This article is taken from Michele Gingras’ book Clarinet Secrets, Revised Edition, Scarecrow Press 2006. [www.scarecrowpress.com](http://www.scarecrowpress.com).*