

## CHOOSING THE BEST REED

by Dr. Denise Gainey

Experienced reed players know that they are only as good as their weakest reed. We spend countless hours in search of the best reeds, and each of us has our own reed “voodoo” that we do to break in our reeds and cycle them in and out of our reed boxes so that we are always prepared and they sound their best. Cane is a product of nature, though, and it is not always consistent—not to mention that we also deal with the effects of barometric pressure, weather, and usage on our reed collection. What’s a woodwind player to do? Here are some tips to help choose the best of the bunch when going through boxes of reeds.

**Look at the color of the reed.** It should be a beautiful golden yellow color, with no green tinges and little if any brown markings. Reeds with a green tinge to them tend to sound “raw” when played, as the cane may have been harvested too soon. Too many dark spots on the bark of the reed can be indicators of a reed that will play with a harsher tone quality. The reed should also have a smooth surface and a bell-shaped heart to it that evenly thins out to the tip of the reed. However, these are just general tips—we’ve all played reeds that have had these variations in characteristics and still played beautifully. Play the strength of reed that gives you a clear, full tone, with good response in all registers of the instrument. Remember that reed strengths will vary between reed brands.

**The most important tip?** Find a reed brand of good quality cane with consistent profiling that works well with your mouthpiece, and have a lot of them on hand. Buy reeds by the box, and buy multiple boxes if at all possible. The more reeds you have on hand, the better your odds of always having reeds that will work well for you when you need them in performance. Young players should keep at least six to eight reeds broken in and rotating in their reed case at all times, while professionals will typically keep several reed cases going, often organizing their reeds by date first played, tendency to play softer or harder, or some other differentiating factor.

**Breaking reeds in slowly and carefully** has a huge impact on their ultimate sound and longevity. Make time in your practice routine to work on reeds daily, playing new reeds for only about ten minutes a day for the first week or so, gradually increasing the time. Doing this will build strength and consistency of response in the cane. On top of breaking in reeds and rotating them throughout your playing time, learn to adjust your reeds, sanding the back of the reed to remove warping issues, and using tools such as a traditional reed knife and 400 grain wet or dry sandpaper, a Reed Geek, or one of the other myriad of reed tools out there to balance the reed so that it responds best for your mouthpiece and embouchure.

DENISE A. GAINNEY is Professor of Clarinet and Instrumental Music Education at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She serves as Secretary of the Board of the International Clarinet Association, Alabama State Chair of the ICA, and is an Artist for Backun Musical Services, D'Addario Woodwinds, and Silverstein Works.

## HEAR A GREAT SOUND, CREATE A GREAT SOUND

by James Campbell

Composers and arrangers don't often give percussionists the same amount of information that they give to other musicians. They direct percussionists—when to start the sound, but not when to stop it. They offer ambiguous instruments like “cymbal” or “triangle” or “woodblock”—which one to pick? Personally, I have dozens of these instruments in my collection, and each one offers a different timbre, pitch, and duration.

This situation is true with every percussion instrument, implement, and technique. There are few standards in the world of percussion with new products being created every day. It is quite an intimidating task for the music educator, student, and even the professional performer to keep up-to-date with all the musical tools that are available to them. Percussionists are unique in this respect, as other wind and string instrumentalists play instruments of standard design and range with an accepted music notation.

Percussionists have to imagine the desired sound in their head (HEAR it) before they play (CREATE it); conceiving an aural image that they translate into a physical sound. Of course, they can also be directed by their conductor to create a specific sound that he is looking for as well.

It helps to deconstruct each musical passage by breaking it down into its components or musical elements. **Ask these questions about the music as it unfolds:**

- What is my function here?
- Does it reinforce the melody, color, accompany, or is it soloistic?
- Who else do I share this function with?
- Am I playing with woodwinds, brass, strings, or the full ensemble?
- Are these instruments in the high, medium, low, or all registers?
- Is the timbre bright or dark?
- Am I blending or contrasting?
- Do I want to be part of the overall sonority or stick out of the texture?
- Should my part be sustained or dry?

**At each rehearsal, the percussionist should go through this sequence:**

**TEST** – Try out a variety of instruments and mallets for each passage that matches your initial interpretation.

**EVALUATE** – Did you feel that the choices you made were working to create the desired sound?

**ADJUST** – If it didn't work, ask yourself what change in instruments, mallet choices, playing areas, or dampening techniques might give you the desired sound.

As a percussionist, you need to be aware of the context of your part and how to blend and balance with an ensemble. It's also the job of a percussionist to figure out what sound they want to make and then how to do it consistently.

JAMES CAMPBELL has received worldwide recognition as a performer, pedagogue and author, and is a respected figure in the development of the contemporary percussion ensemble. Currently Provost's Distinguished Service Professor of Music and Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, he also holds the positions of Principal Percussionist with the Lexington Philharmonic, drummer with the Kentucky Jazz Repertory Orchestra, and Past-President of the Percussive Arts Society. He is a member of the Drum Corps International Hall of Fame and the Bands of America Hall of Fame.

## TAMING PITCH IN THE SAXOPHONE'S UPPER REGISTER

by Neal Postma

“The saxophone is the easiest instrument to learn.” I have heard this a thousand times, but I prefer, “The saxophone is the easiest instrument to play poorly.” Pitch in the high register of the instrument has a lot to do with this—these notes are not particularly difficult to squeeze out, but they are incredibly out of tune until tamed. Here are some tips to help you tackle this problem with your students.

**First, you must understand the problem.** For an octave key to function perfectly, it must be half the distance up the instrument from the lowest tone hole closed. So for all notes using an octave key to play perfectly in tune, we would need a separate octave vent for each note! Our compromise is having two vents that help the most notes. If an octave key is not in the right place, the note being played will be sharp. So naturally, the upper register of the instrument tends to play sharp. But this only applies if the saxophone is being played properly...

**When I say properly, I mean using a developed embouchure** with the correct reed strength (this correlates with the mouthpiece tip, but that is for another post!) A student playing on a stock mouthpiece with a 2 or 2 ½ reed will have a hard time taking on the upper register because the reeds are too soft to play above a B. The result will be a flat pitch. As the student develops their embouchure and moves up to a 3 reed, they will find the high range much easier to control, but sharp. In theory, there should be a time when their combination of reed strength and embouchure development will be in perfect balance to play these high notes in tune without having to think about it...but I have never seen it.

**For younger students** trying to take on this upper range with softer reeds, and an embouchure being developed in the process, have them attempt to play “high in the sound.” I never say bite, but rather, keep a very firm embouchure and a high tongue position. Unfortunately, if the reeds are too soft and their embouchure too weak, the student will likely never play these notes in tune. If the music is calling for a lot of upper notes, the students should be in a place where they are ready to move up in reed strength.

**For students who are in a good place** with their embouchure and reeds, have them first understand how much flexibility is in the upper notes. Have them work on bending the pitches as high and low as they can, utilizing both embouchure and tongue manipulation. Most high school students have the tendency to clamp down on these upper notes—work with them to make sure that they can still produce a good sound when playing deeper in the sound. They should spend some time with a tuner to see just how far down they need to pull each pitch. Then, of course, move them onto a tuning drone so they can train their ears. They will likely need some guidance when they first start working with these drones, a little assistance can go a long way!

*Saxophonist and pedagogue NEAL POSTMA holds degrees from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (MM) and the University of Colorado (BM) and is currently a DMA Candidate at the University of South Carolina where he serves as an Instructor of Music Appreciation. He is also on the faculty of Claflin University teaching applied lessons on saxophone. As a concert saxophonist Neal has performed across the United States, Europe and Asia. He has given recitals at universities and various regional, national and international conferences.*

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