

Proper Care for Bassoon Reeds

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A bassoonist's reeds are a huge investment. Taking proper care of your reeds can save you both time and money. How you soak, store, and rotate your reeds can make a significant difference in how long they last and how well they perform.

Soaking Reeds

One of the most important steps to a well functioning reed is soaking it properly. Do not wet reeds in your mouth. By wetting reeds with your mouth only the outside of the reed gets wet and not the inside. This causes the reed to vibrate inconsistently and forces the reed tip to become very open.

Carry a container that is watertight and is large enough to completely submerge the reed in water. Items that work are film canisters, waterproof match vials, prescription pill containers and various Rubbermaid containers (make sure you thoroughly clean any container prior to using it). For contrabassoon, the best is a large pill container from a pharmacy. You can keep water in this, just make sure that you change it regularly.

To soak the reed, completely submerge in water, before you take your bassoon or contrabassoon out. By the time the instrument is assembled the reed should be properly soaked. This time varies due to the reed's age and humidity levels. Also, if you haven't used your reed in a while (like an occasionally used contrabassoon reed), it is good to soak it in water for a minute or two, take it out and let it sit for anywhere from 5-30 minutes to soak up the water. Then re-soak it again like you normally would right before you play it.

Keep the water container in an outside pocket of your bassoon case. This way if it leaks, it won't hurt your bassoon or cause dampness inside the case.

Reed Storage

Where you store your reed can affect how long it will last. All reeds need to be stored in a container that protects the reed from being damaged between uses and that allows proper ventilation, allowing the reed to fully dry out between uses.

The best reed cases for storing both bassoon and contrabassoon reeds are wooden ones where holes are drilled into the case for ventilation and where the reed rests in between foam or ribbon and not on pegs. As these are not a small investment (they usually start around \$45), the cheaper option is a tin case, like the one strong mints are found in. If you put cotton or paper towel to pad the tin case it provides good protection and ventilation.

Beware of the plastic "vials" that some bassoon and contrabassoon reeds are sold in. Once the reeds have been soaked they should not be returned to this container, as it is airtight. In a pinch holes can be punched into these, allowing some ventilation, but even this can reduce the life of the reed.

Keep Reeds Clean

Though there are ways to clean your reed if it gets dirty, cleaning it can shorten the reed's life. The following preventative measures will help keep your reeds clean.

Exterior

Reed blades can turn grey or black with mildew if not stored properly. As mentioned above, keeping them in a well-ventilated case is a good place to start. Also keep in mind where the reed case is stored. If you keep your reed case in a musty, old, dark bassoon case that might cause mildew to appear on a still drying bassoon reed. Try keeping it in a pocket outside the case or in a separate bag. Also, If you keep a new reed with an old reed that has mildew on it, then the new reed can start to mildew. If you keep a new reed in a case that was used to store mildewy reeds they can also start to mildew. The best bet if any reed starts to change color, never use that reed case to store any new reeds until you can clean it. To clean a reed case, wipe it down with a damp cloth and then dry in direct sunlight.

Lipstick, lipgloss and chapstick can also hurt the exterior of your reed. Make sure your lips are clean before playing.

Interior

The best way to protect the inside of your reed is done in two steps. First, always soak your reed in clean, fresh water and *never* in your mouth. Second, brush your teeth or gargle with mouthwash before playing. Residue from food particles or bacteria from food and beverages can cause buildup between your reeds blades (to check for buildup, pinch the blades of the reed together gently, and look to see if buildup appears on the inside of your reed). If this buildup gets to be too much it can stop your reed from vibrating properly and change the internal shape of the reed.

Rotating Reeds

Reed rotation is a method that can increase the overall life of your reed. Instead of using one reed at a time until it finally dies and then switching to a new reed, try using two reeds (or more) and rotate them: use one reed one day and then give it the "day off" and use the other reed the next day. By allowing the reeds this extra rest you will find that both reeds will last much longer than if you had used two reeds consecutively.