

Life's Little Hints

by Edward Palanker

A short time ago, I fixed a key for a student with a broken spring using a rubber band so he could play his clarinet until he got to his repairman. Later he said to me, "You ought to do a master class on the little things you learned over the years, that we just don't think of." I did, and I'm going to share them with you. Most professionals will already know most or all of these, but for the student, novice or teacher/player who just never learned it, here goes.

First there is the broken spring. When I was in school playing an opera in the pit, I suddenly heard a "ping" sound and noticed that my clarinet would not play. I soon discovered that the spring on my "A" throat tone key had broken and, of course, would not stay closed. After a brief panic, someone handed me a rubber band and said, "Put this around the key so it holds it down." Wow, it saved me that night. You have to manipulate the band around the instrument in such a way that it pulls down the proper key without getting in the way of another pad or key, but with a little patience you can do it. You can do this on almost any key with the only concern being how much pressure it places on the key. This depends on the thickness of the band and how many times you have to wrap it around the instrument.

Another life saver when you don't have a rubber band, or if a pad falls out or is leaking badly, is to place a piece of tape over the leaking hole so it doesn't leak. Of course you can't do this on every hole. You may lose the ability to use that key but you will be able to play everything else, depending on which hole you covered up. It works best on the side keys or "fork" keys. It's a little like a string player losing a string and having to refinger the part on the fly. It's better than nothing, and it's only temporary.

Another fix-it hint concerns a joint cork that is too loose or is beginning to peel off. You know the feeling—the clarinet joints or mouthpiece are wobbling. Try wrapping dental floss around it until you get it thick enough. Wrap it tightly so it digs into the loss cork. The only problem is what to do with the end piece of the floss. Try to tuck it under the wrapping or just press it tight, grease it, and place it on the opposite joint. If you can't get it thick enough, place a layer or two of Scotch tape (the cloudy kind) or masking tape over the floss. Another thing that works is plumber's tape, the white tape that they use before connecting one joint to another. In any case make sure the cork is grease free before applying any of the above or they will just slip off the cork. Make sure you grease it before putting it together. Any of these ways should give a good seal and secure feeling. You could leave it

like this until you need to replace the tape or floss or get it re-corked when you have the time.

Oiling your keys once or twice a year with a light oil such as *3 in 1* oil or key oil will help prevent wear and tear and rust. Jeweler's oil is too light and will just run down, but car oil is too thick and will hamper the movement. Just place a drop on every point where a screw meets a rod. It's best to use an oil applicator so you don't get oil over the wood, but if you do get some on it, don't panic. Just wipe it off. It's a good idea to remove the dust from the keys first. Use a small, clean paintbrush or compressed air like the type you use to clean your computer keyboard. it works great. Oiling the bore is a matter of opinion. Some repairman say do, some say don't. If you do, make sure you cover the pads with thick paper so that they don't get covered with bore oil.

When you need to replace a thin layer of cork to quiet a key click or replace a piece that broke off I find using one or two pieces of masking tape a life saver every time. You can build up as many layers as necessary either as a temporary measure or in some case permanently.

Make sure you dry your pads after you play and swab out often. I suggest a silk swab. They're absorbent, soft and slide easily. Be sure to open the swab fully before swabbing to prevent the swab from getting caught in the upper joint. I've spent many an hour getting them out for students who swabbed in a hurry. If it happens, try to back it out using a small clarinet screwdriver or other small instrument to slowly edge it out via the tone holes in the direction it was placed in the clarinet. Be careful not to scratch the bore or tone holes. Don't, I repeat, don't just try to force it through if it's caught as you might just take the register tube with the swab. I've seen some people play an entire recital without swabbing and never get water in their pads. I play for 10 minutes and it floods, so I swab at every opportunity. If you get water in the holes and the pads get wet, first swab to get the water out of the bore. Blowing into the hole from the outside is a quick way to get the water out of the holes, but you're blowing the water from one hole to possibly another. The water is probably being sprayed on the springs and keys as well. A far better way, if time permits or after you stop playing, is to blow through the upper joint covering all the holes including the bottom of the upper joint. Then open the key that has water in it, for example the side Eb key, and the air will push the water out of the clarinet. Then dry the pad thoroughly with a thin absorbent paper. Pad paper or cigarette paper is best but a silk swab works too since it's very thin. Make sure you fold the glue side of the cigarette paper over if it has glue on it. Keep moving the paper around the pad and press gently until the pad is completely dry. Leaving the

pad wet will deteriorate it very quickly. Another way would be to roll the paper up in the form of a small stick and put it into the wet hole. That will absorb and disperse the water without making the famous, blowing noise we clarinet players are so famous for but this does not dry the pad, it only removes the excess water. As a side note, I got the biggest laugh at a chamber music rehearsal years ago when a viola player made a mistake and “blew” the water out of his strings.

Clean out your register key tube once or twice a year. You will be amazed at how much dust or “whatever” gets into that tube. This can make your throat Bb play stuffy or flat and your upper register more resistant. Simply take off the thumb register key with a little screwdriver and push the screwdriver into the tube gently. Don’t rub the sides of the tube, you don’t want to scratch it. Look through your clarinet now and you will probably see a small ball of “fuzz.” Now use a pipe cleaner and push that through. You may want to wet it a bit in your mouth or fold it in half to make sure you push everything out of the tube. Replace the key putting a drop of oil on the rod before you insert it.

I find, as many pros do, that having cork pads in the upper joint of the instrument helps it seal better, and they last a long time—even longer if you make sure to dry them when you finish playing. Everyone has his or her own idea of how many pads should be corked. I prefer to cork all of them in the upper joint and none in the lower, but you can’t get two clarinet players to agree on that. I’ve seen some of the smaller pads corked on the lower joint and I’ve seen the top trill keys on the upper joint not corked when the rest are. I know some players who don’t like cork pads because they claim they’re noisy, but they do last a long time and I don’t notice the noise.

It’s probably a good idea to keep a Dampit in your case if you live in a dry climate. If the humidity is low in the winter because of the indoor heating or outdoor climate, your instrument and reeds will dry out and may be more susceptible to cracking, even if you oil the bore. If you have a good repairman and get your instrument checked annually; you could avoid having your clarinet overhauled for some time. Make sure there is no “play” in the rods. Also make sure you get any pads that are sagging, cracked or peeling replaced each year and have the spring action adjusted to your likeness if necessary each year. If the repairman is really good, you won’t have to have this done yearly because the springs will hold. It’s so easy to adapt to weakening or heavy spring action that sometimes you have to “feel” the instrument for the first time to make sure it’s the way you really want it. Also, look over your clarinet often for loose screws. It’s a shame if a screw falls out and you don’t notice it until it’s too late. If that does happen

you can use a paper clip to temporarily hold the key or rod on but you have to configure it to work. Better to look over your clarinet often and check. You know, an ounce of prevention is better than a loose screw, or something like that.

I'd like to think that the following is obvious, even to the novice, but don't keep your instrument near a radiator or heater. Also, don't play an instrument right away if it's cold because you left it in the trunk of your car—which was not smart to do in the first place! Open the case and let it set for a while, and then *don't do that again!* The cold probably won't hurt anything, but blowing warm air into a very cold clarinet is not too smart. Get the clarinet close to room temperature before you play it.

What to use to clean you mouthpiece? Glad you asked. It's probably a good idea to wash it with warm soap and water every once in a while but if you want to get the built up calcium off the mouthpiece soak it in a vinegar and water solution. Either half and half or one third vinegar, two-thirds water. After soaking it for several minutes you should be able to simply scrape the calcium off with you fingernails. Make sure you clean it off after each use. If you pull your swab through it, I only suggest this with a silk swab, don't pull it against the facing of the mouthpiece, pull it through the back of the mouthpiece towards the flat table, not the tip.

In an unrelated matter I recommend floral tape for a lip saver. White looks better than green or red in your mouth. You can make it as many layers thick as you need. It sticks to itself without glue and it's inexpensive. Anyplace that sells floral design materials will sell it. I understand surgical tape works well, too. Take care of your instrument and it will take care of you, but you still have to practice, sorry.