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An Oboe Reed a Day

by Whitney Tustin

ONE OF my early oboe teachers gave me some excellent advice which today, after many years, I find more valuable than ever. He said: "If you want to be a good oboist, you must spend an hour every day on reeds." What he meant was that the actual working with reeds every day was as necessary as the regular practicing of scales, attack, sight-reading, etc.

Too often we oboists are tempted, when we have several good reeds (or even one!) on hand, to forget all about our reed needs for the future. Then, at some future date, we find ourselves with an important concert, with no good reeds ready, and the panic is on! The solution, I believe, is to work constantly and regularly on our reeds, and thereby to insure ourselves against any eventualities.

It is, for most of us, a difficult thing to sit down and make a good reed if we haven't touched our tools for some length of time. In other words, it is very easy to get out of practice. But if we would do our reed work daily, whether or not we needed to, we would never be caught in an embarrassing or surprising situation. Of course, this takes extra time from our busy schedules, but isn't the resulting peace of mind worth the additional effort?

All too often we are frustrated in our search for THE PERFECT REED. This is generally because we have been playing for too long a period of time on some old favorite, and then we try to match both the sound and the "feel" of our new reeds to the old one. To avoid this, simply try to get the very best out of each new piece of cane, then adjust your embouchure and style of playing to the result, and try to avoid making comparisons with that favorite old reed.

Reeds are as different from each other as are people. We don't expect all of our friends to act or to react in the same manner, even from one day to the next. Why, then, should we expect our reeds to be any more constant? Or faithful! We must continually adjust ourselves to reeds, the same as we do to friends, for

best results. And, in both cases, we should not expect too much in constancy or fidelity. It is wise self-protection (speaking of reeds and/or friends) to have new and fresh ones handy, in case the old ones disappoint.

Professor Pierre Bajeux of the Conservatoire National de Musique in Paris, and also 1st oboist of the Paris Opera, gave me some interesting advice which I should like to pass along. He told me: "Don't commence your daily practicing by working on reeds—otherwise you will never get to the practicing itself." This is a good point, and most important. But somewhere in our daily schedules we must allow ample time for scraping, experimenting, and self-adjustment. This should be in addition to our regular practicing, and not in place of it.

Every oboist eventually finds, through the trial-and-error method, the type of reed which satisfies all of his demands. This might not be the reed which would satisfy his colleague; in fact, a reed which one oboist rejects might seem perfect to someone else, and vice versa. Therefore it is not the purpose of this article to say which type of reed is superior, or to go into the technical details of dimensions, quality, or any of the endless arguments which go on whenever oboists meet. Each of us is convinced that HIS is the ideal reed producing the ideal sound, so that's that!

But there are some general remarks which can be made, and which can apply to all reeds, because basically they are all built upon the same principles. Just what is the ideal reed? Simply one which (1) has a good, even quality from the lowest notes to the highest; (2) has just the right resistance to breath pressure: that is, it doesn't blow too hard or too easily; (3) has a well-balanced intonation; and (4) feels comfortable to the player.

In making reeds, we should always have the above four points as a goal. When a reed is finally finished, it must satisfy *all* of these demands, and must not be deficient in any one of them. If

it is, then quickly break it up, and have no regrets. One of the worst things we can do is to "nurse" along a reed which isn't quite right. It is an economy to throw away a reed which doesn't completely satisfy, and to use our time and energy to start all over again with a fresh piece of cane.

Personally, I like to use a lot of time when breaking in a new reed, the same as I would do with new shoes. (That's a good comparison, between breaking in new reeds and breaking in new shoes.) Usually, I put several pieces of cane to soak, and then the following day I wind them on the tubes. After this, I scrape them until they respond readily and "crow" freely. Then I put them away until the next day, so that they will become completely dried out. The following day, after being soaked, they will blow rather hard, and will hardly "crow" at all, compared to the previous day. So I scrape and whittle until they again respond readily and "crow" freely. This process I repeat for the next few days, until I finally find that they haven't changed a bit from the day before.

Only now are the reeds ready to try in the oboe, for tuning and for the final fine points of shading. If these reeds are now played for a few minutes each day, then within several days they will be completely broken in, you will know that they are reliable, and you will be able to use them with complete confidence. If, after all this, one of them shows some weakness in any one of the four points mentioned several paragraphs ago, then discard it immediately before you become too attached to it.

The above method, if followed carefully, leisurely, and thoughtfully, would eliminate most of the reed troubles which plague us. I am 100% against the practice of frantically trying to finish a reed just before a concert or a rehearsal, except in cases of extreme emergency. Well, if we followed all the logical steps which I have outlined, there never would be any emergency, would there? Hmm???