

REED GADGETS

To get the most out of your reeds, subtle adjustment and correct storage can make all the difference. Canadian clarinetist and saxophonist **Chuck Currie** road tests a selection of gadgets on the market to help get your reeds in tip-top shape

After the sound we hear in our imagination, the reed and mouthpiece have the most significant impact on our tonal palette. For those of us who adjust and care for our reeds diligently, the different gadgets we choose can affect the results dramatically. For information on how to use many of these products, refer to my article *Reed Seasoning and Adjusting* in the Autumn 2018 issue of *Clarinet & Saxophone* (a PDF of the article is available on request from the membership secretary – email membership@cassgb.org)

This article is divided into four sections: reed knives, scrapers and products with grit; reed trimmers; reed storage; and other 'wild card' options to consider. Please note, prices given are an approximate average cost calculated from a selection of retailers. All prices in British pound sterling (GBP).

Reed knives, scrapers and products with grit

ANDO REED KNIFE £135



For reed knives, one would be remiss not to consult double-reed players. I estimate only 20% of single-reed players seriously study reed adjustments and apply themselves to it, but when it comes to double-reed players it is more like 110%! It was my oboe and bassoon colleagues who helped me choose this ultimate reed knife years ago.

This heavyweight, single-bevelled knife is the right-handed version made by Ando in Shinjuku, Japan. It is made of laminated steel, which allows an extremely high carbon content in the steel alloy at the edge (high carbon steel takes and holds an edge far better than other alloys). In the words of fellow players who have tried my knife, it's 'wicked sharp'.

NANIWA SUPER STONE £50

Your reed knife will only stay sharp if you use a water stone to hone it, and the Naniwa 5,000 grit Super Stone is the ultimate option.

Japanese water stones are known for their superior sharpening performance. The loosely bonded abrasive grit washes out very quickly, as it blunts during the sharpening process. This exposes new, sharp particles that can get to work on the blade. Water stones are lubricated only with water – never use oil!

I always kept my water stones soaking in water as was then the norm, but Naniwa's 'splash and go' technology changes that. The stone's resin bonding creates a more abrasive surface, which allows you to sharpen quickly. It also frees us from the burden of having to soak the stone in water before using it. Instead, you only need a modest splash, and then you're all set to hone.



REEDGEEK BULLET £80

This incredible product is a work of sheer genius from Mauro Di Gioia. I have owned every iteration of this marvellous product, and this latest one is the most amazing. Not only does it have double the density of the previous models, thus maintaining an incredibly sharp and sure 90 degree scraping edge, the handle also has little grooves that replicate the incredibly fine sanding ability of 6,000 grade Micro-Mesh. If you can have only one tool for all your reed work, this is the one.

I hasten to add I keep most of my reed scrapers and sanding tools in my studio and in my gig bag (which is a medium-sized suitcase on wheels), but this ReedGeek is the only one that I keep in my little on-stage bag.

It's the only tool I know that scrapes the table of the reed perfectly flat and it is fantastic for all adjustments to the face of the reed. One can also make all face adjustments with the reed still on the mouthpiece.



VANDOREN GLASS REED RESURFACER AND REED STICK £55

Both these items are sold as a set or you can buy the Reed Stick separately. They're excellent. However, the Reed Resurfacer is only large enough for clarinet reeds. Vandoren claims that it is very hard to wear out these products, but as someone who maintains 72 reeds for 12 different setups (as well as adjusting reeds for dozens of students as their skills develop) I do wear these out. A Reed Stick lasts me six months before it is too smooth. When you get good at adjusting with the Reed Stick, it's also possible to adjust the face of the reed without removing it from the mouthpiece.



MICRO-MESH SHEETS

£3 per sheet (multipacks available)



One of Micro-Mesh's incredible products was developed for polishing commercial aircraft windows for optical clarity. These Micro-Mesh Regular Sheets (silicon-carbide grit with standard backing) are for use on wood, plastics, paints, and most metals and polymers. They are used to produce a uniformly smooth surface and bring it to a high gloss finish, which is just what we want for the reed table to enhance its response, especially to play light, staccato tonguing.

Micro-Mesh sheets costs more than ordinary sandpaper but produce a finish 10 to 20 times finer. They also last much longer. The 3" x 6" sheets are perfect for reed purposes. I use the 1,500, 3,200 and 12,000 grades which correspond

to 600, 1,200 and 4,800 grades of standard sandpaper. The 12,000 grade is totally smooth to the touch; I use it for the final polish when refacing mouthpieces. The other grades are used for smoothing the table of reeds, placing them on a 3.5" x 7" x 3/8th" glass plate as in the image above

REED RUSH OR DUTCH RUSH

£6 per box

Frankly, the majority of tools and devices in this section obviate the need for this product. Canada's largest wind instrument and accessories dealer sells only one box every two months.

It is cumbersome and ineffective. An article by an expert in Dutch Rush also agrees: 'Music dealers sell Dutch Rush with the understanding that it is a reed fixing tool, having no idea how it should be aged and cured for it to be useable...students are told beforehand that this weed must be wet to be used to scrape a clarinet reed...to their chagrin and total amazement, the whole thing collapses into an ugly pulpy mess.'



SMERF EEZEE REED FIX

£45

This compact gem is stuffed with great stuff. The system includes:



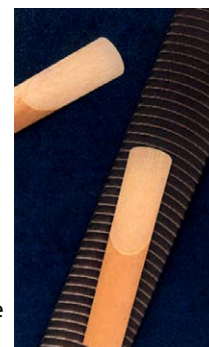
- an innovative sanding block holding two grits of sandpaper between two gently curved halves fitting together magnetically
- plenty of perfectly cut sandpaper sheets in two grits
- a quality piece of glass with little cushions on the bottom so it will not slide around a worktable
- a little plaque to place between your mouthpiece and reed with a little sponge-backed sanding tool for working on your reed tip while on the mouthpiece
- an inexpensive reed trimmer to get a student started
- a couple of fine Marca reeds
- best of all, well-written and incredibly concise reed adjustment instructions, backed up by videos on the designer's website

This is one of the finest gifts that British clarinetist Leslie Craven could have given single-reed newcomers and experienced pros alike, aside from his long playing, teaching and recording career of course! This product requires a little more 'touch' than the Ridenour ATG System, but one can make finer adjustments and it is easy to develop your skills. It fits nicely in your gig bag too.

ULTIMATE REED FILE

MARK II

£25

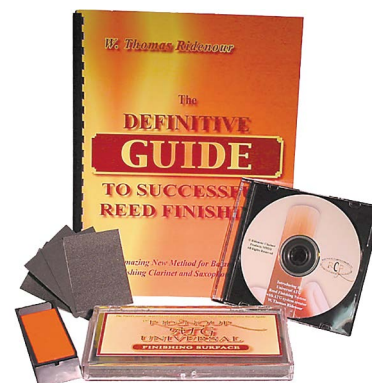


I'm afraid this tool is totally useless. It's not flat and it rusts easily. The file is marketed to fulfill all reed adjusting needs just by filing the table of the reed, which is arrant nonsense. We do want our reed table perfectly flat and smooth, which this file will *not* do. Then we perform adjustments on the front of the reed. The ReedGeek does all of that better than anything else.

This Ultimate Reed File simply ruins reed tables, and the manufacturer provides incorrect information on balancing. Please, Elk Industries, don't waste any time on a Mark III.

RIDENOUR ATG UNIVERSAL REED FINISHING SYSTEM

£60



This is excellent. It is marketed as the easiest reed adjusting learning system in the world and having started very young students with it, I firmly believe this to be true. In fact, it was critical in my studies of reed adjusting as a result of Tom Ridenour's demonstration of testing the side-to-side balance of reeds, which are included on the DVD. I still use it for reeds that need major adjustments because you can really 'go for it' without any danger of damaging your reed.

However, the book itself is long and somewhat overwritten. You have to read very carefully to distinguish the wheat from the chaff, but the germ of the wheat is very fine indeed!

The little finishing block is a work of genius. The very firm sponges on each side have just enough 'give' to easily slide the sandpaper over the reed on the glass finishing surface, but still feel the effect on the reed vamp and tip. However, the glass is quite thin and can break easily – I prefer the 3/8th" thick glass I pick up from the local hardware store. ➡

Reed trimmers

Before looking at reed trimmers (also called clippers or cutters) I must admit I vastly prefer buying thick-blank reeds and adjusting them down to my taste. It's like making one's own reeds without having to deal with splitting cane, scraping bark and shaping the blank. In my opinion, the D'Addario Evolution Classic and Vandoren V21 reeds are the most high-quality, common thick-blank reeds available and respond beautifully to this philosophy. The odd soft reed is just fine when clipped and adjusted – it can also save a reed that has been 'over adjusted' or give an older reed an extra week of life – but for me such reeds are for practice only.

MARCA CORDIER REED TRIMMER £50

Simple and available everywhere, the Marca Le Cordier is by far the best-known reed clipper of its design. It is available for all sizes of clarinet except contrabass, and all saxophones except for soprano, bass, and contrabass. It cuts fine wet or dry.

However, the quality control could be improved. Purchase in person only and always take reeds to test for symmetrical cutting and to check there are no 'notches' in the tip. The trimmer can also be damaged if you press too hard, which causes the mechanism pressing the reed to be pushed to the other side.



VANDOREN REED TRIMMER £100



Vandoren does it again! Adjustable and precise, this clipper utilises the same blades that Vandoren employs in its factory to create a consistent, clean cut every time. It's unbelievably good, but also expensive. Different models are available for B flat clarinet and alto saxophone based on the different shapes and thicknesses of Vandoren reeds – there's nothing generic about these babies!

The only issue is the mechanism is so thick it is tricky to see the reed positioning in the little window on the bottom where the clipped material comes out – it's somewhat 'shaded', even under direct light. However, I keep a tiny flashlight in my studio beside my music stand that does the trick. You could also use a phone flashlight if you had to use it in a rehearsal, but anyone who needs to clip a reed in a rehearsal (or even worse in a performance) deserves what might happen to them!

For the few times that I trim my reeds these fantastic trimmers are worth every penny, and also the care it takes to line them up.

Reed storage

RICO REED GUARD IV £7

Nothing wrong with these, especially if you get the model that holds four reeds. That's the minimum number I ask students to have prepared – two in use, and two seasoned and adjusted as backups. I know great players who carry around dozens of reeds, especially on the road, but I believe this is totally unnecessary if one knows how to season and adjust reeds correctly. I prefer this model to the rebranded D'Addario versions with coloured elastomer covers, as these inhibit air movement over the tips of reeds.



KENKASE REED CASES £40-70

There are many standard reed cases of this design that a music store could fill every shelf and have no space left for anything else. The merits of different cases vary, but these from KenKase are my favourite.

The daughter of designer Dave Kennedy is a saxophone player and he started by making her a reed case. He will make you a personalised custom case of any size to hold as many reeds as you want, with a huge variety of gorgeous woods and stone inlays. I once had a case stolen and Dave made my next case with my full name on the outside and my website address under the glass on the inside.

The cases usually take four weeks to make, and he has trouble shipping them because he falls in love with each and every one! You wouldn't believe how many of these I have in my studio. I should hang them on the walls – they're fine art!



REED-WELL £22

The Reed-Well by Hagen is a tool for soaking and maintaining reeds. The reeds cling to the flat numbered segments inside the glass, and you can empty the water and add a moist sponge to hold the reeds in place. There's also a lid, so you can leave the water in the glass if you like.

The numbered sections on the glass, enabling you 'to organise and rate your reeds,' is a solution for a problem that does not exist. I use a pen and write letters on my classical reeds and numbers on jazz reeds. I place a 'T' before the number or letter on my tenor reeds to distinguish them from my bass clarinet reeds, and a 'CL' on my alto clarinet reeds to distinguish them from my alto sax reeds.

The product does work, but it sure is clunky to take out of the studio. Imagine playing multiple instruments in a musical theatre gig and having to take five of these with you in your gig bag!



D'ADDARIO MULTI-REED STORAGE CASE WITH REED STORAGE HUMIDIFICATION SYSTEM

£40

I used these cases for a couple of years and was very happy indeed. One size fits all reeds up to baritone sax. Sadly, I stopped using them because the little silicone bands holding the reeds in place can break under the pressure from baritone sax reeds, and replacement bands are currently unavailable.

From my experience, the 72% humidity pack is too high for reeds and can lower their lifespan and lead to mould. The 58% pack is ideal – keeping reeds at this humidity will give you a reed that will stabilise after just 15 minutes of playing after months of storage. If you are just playing every week or so, take the reeds out of the case and they will be perfect after a couple of minutes soaking in water. Never use saliva – its purpose is to break down organic material, which is exactly what cane is!

To save money, you can purchase 10 x 8g 58% Boveda humidity packs from Amazon that slot perfectly in the case. Each pack lasts about three months and the remainder will hold for two years in the resealable bag.

Also, the 70g 49% humidity packs are perfect to put in your clarinet case. It's a two-way humidity control system, either providing or absorbing excess humidity.



REEDJUVINATE

£23



Unique and feels a little weird at first, the ReedJuvinate system includes:

- one water and air-tight antiseptic holder
- a 'fits all sizes' reed clip holder for three reeds – stores any three reeds for soprano, alto, tenor, baritone sax; B flat soprano, alto, bass clarinet
- two 'ClarinetClips' to store an additional two soprano sax or B flat clarinet reeds
- one humidity stabiliser sponge
- one internal stand magnet (friction fits inside the case) in a plastic zip bag
- and a lanyard

By lightly soaking the humidity stabiliser sponge in 'original' Listerine, which contains ethyl alcohol, this prevents reeds developing mould and microbial growth when sealed in the holder. Make sure you squeeze out any excess Listerine that would 'drip' from the sponge.

Overall, it works! If you only play B flat/A clarinet or soprano sax it will hold five reeds. However, if I'm playing a Mahler symphony or a musical theatre gig, I might be playing up to five instruments, which means I'll have 30 reeds seasoned and prepared – and it's simply impractical to carry eight or 10 of these around.

VANDOREN HYGRO CASE

£30

This case holds your reeds at 40% humidity, enhancing their playability if you've not played them for a while but without retaining so much moisture that they quickly deteriorate. Also, the small air holes allow a little movement of air that inhibits the growth of mould – these are the *only* reed cases I have owned in which not a hint of mould shows up on the reeds. It's a winning formula: better response, longer life, no mould!



The simple, high-quality construction comes apart easily for cleaning, which is very seldom necessary. Whenever the little indicator turns pale blue instead of pale pink (which it does at exactly 39% humidity) simply soak the little sponge in water and wring out the excess. Replacement sponges and indicators are readily available.

VANDOREN HYGRO CASE WITH A CIGAR HUMIDOR – THE ULTIMATE SETUP?

During a prolonged cold spell last winter, my studio was at 15% humidity for weeks due to the central heating blasting away. I found that if I didn't play reeds at least a couple of times per week they were sluggish and unresponsive.



I happened to have a portable cigar humidor that I'd used with standard wooden reed cases with no humidity control. I had an idea to put one of the 49% Boveda humidity packs for my clarinet cases in the humidor with my 12 Vandoren Hygro cases. The reeds stabilised well within a day but they were still a little tubby and resistant. I ordered some 58% humidity packs and now it's an amazing system. I don't have to wet the sponges at all, except when I go on the road.

The next time I opened a box of Vandoren V21 reeds I happened to notice something on the literature inside. There was a little picture of a hygrometer on the left saying, 'Factory Fresh', showing 58% humidity. I guess I'm luckier than I am smart. I just took a stab in the dark purchasing the 58% humidity packs without ever reading the Vandoren leaflet. The joke about Vandoren's individually sealed reed packaging proving that French air is better for cane is still pretty funny, but that 58% is really important!

When I'm on the road, I also seal the little holes in the top of the Hygro Case lids with 'scotch tape' and soak the little sponge in Listerine. I'm not too proud to steal that idea from the ReedJuvinate. ➡

Wild cards

PERFECTAREED REED MEASURE £230



The PerfectaReed is a precision instrument designed to measure the entire reed surface at over a hundred points. It does this very well indeed and the manufacturer provides a terrific worksheet to record the measurements.

Unfortunately, it is yet another solution to a problem that does not exist. It is marketed to 'quickly and easily pinpoint the exact area that needs to be corrected to allow the reed to perform at its maximum...taking the guesswork out of reed adjustments. It enables both skilled and unskilled players to adjust reeds to respond, vibrate, and play freely. Eliminating unreliable human feel the user can reproduce reeds having the proper parabolic design or redesign any reed to new specifications. Using the PerfectaReed, the user knows exactly where and how much mass to remove from the reeds surface to match and balance the transverse side.'

Despite it seeming like the marketer was paid by the word, it sounds great, right? Sadly, I think it's complete gobbledegook.

Any good reed manufacturer makes its models to exactly the same dimensions for every reed, which are then strength tested and sorted into the correct packaging. The strength is determined by the reed design and density of the cane, not by varying thicknesses. Good reed manufacturers do not have 'imbalances' from the shape of the reed; they use high-density, lower-internode cane, as well as precision natural diamond cutters!

There is no 'guesswork' in reed adjusting, and 'human feel' is a highly reliable skill that can be easily developed. The most valuable use I found for the PerfectaReed was to assess the manufacturing consistency of student reeds for an article on my website called *An appraisal of student reeds* (available on the Educational Resources page of my website: www.saxnoir.com). The PerfectaReed was also great for confirming the very consistent profiles of professional reeds, but sadly useless in helping one adjust reeds.

CLIP-ON OR MAGNETICALLY ATTACHED REED SOAKERS £10

These can be handy, especially in cold weather creating very low humidity. As long as you season your reeds properly they won't get waterlogged. If you have long rests or a talkative conductor in a rehearsal you will never be without a moist reed. Bear in mind the larger the reed, the more quickly it will dry out from low humidity.

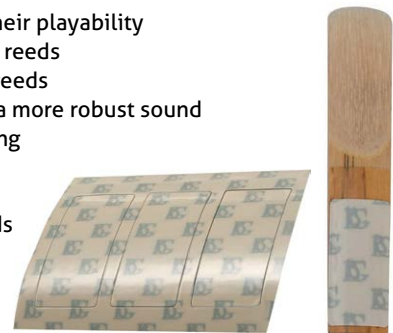
My sax quartet frequently played at the opening VIP party at the Vancouver Wine Festival. The humidity was so low one year my baritone sax reed was drying out while being played continuously! Whichever soaker you go for, make sure it has a very secure lid and fill it at home so you don't have to find a water source at a gig.



BG FRANCK BICHON REED PERFORMER £5.50 (pack of three), £45 (pack of 30)

Firstly, here are some of BG's claims about this product:

- saves bad reeds by improving their playability
- removes fuzzy sounds from bad reeds
- gives warmest tone from weak reeds
- stabilises thin cane thus giving a more robust sound
- increase reed life by twice as long
- particularly recommended on good dying reeds
- helps also to ensure saving reeds for concert
- helps give a better grip to the ligature



I'm open-minded, I test every product that I hear about and use other people's ears – the ears of really great musicians who I trust. They never know what I'm testing, it's entirely 'blind'.

So, although I was tempted to laugh at this product, I accepted a few samples and really tested them. A minority of players said it gave them a 'darker tone', but nothing else on the list above was confirmed by anyone. I guess it does 'give a better grip to the ligature,' but this is yet another solution to a problem that doesn't exist with any half-decent ligature.

I found these do have one real effect: they dampen the resonance of the bottom quarter of the range of any single-reed instrument dramatically. This 'darker tone' a few players reported is actually a horrible dull tone, at least in my opinion. ■

Clarinetist and saxophonist Chuck Currie performs with the Vancouver Island Symphony, the Pacific Symphonic Wind Ensemble, Amici Musica, Sax Noir sax quartet and Pacific Blackwood bass clarinet quartet. He has performed at Canadian Music Educator Association conventions, World Association of Bands and Ensembles conferences, North American Saxophone Alliance conferences and at International Clarinet Association ClarinetFests. He teaches at St. George's School and his own Sax Noir Studio and conducts clinics throughout British Columbia. www.saxnoir.com