

SINGLE REED

Our guest single reed doctors answer questions sent in by readers.

Please send your questions – or responses to advice given – to editor@cassgb.org

Q: Why do my reeds feel different in hot or cold environments? Is there anything I can do to prevent this?

Chuck Currie: There is a lot of misinformation about reeds in general, and specifically about travelling with reeds to different climates and elevations. If you would like to be thoroughly confused, check out a selection of single-reed bulletin boards online and prepare for as many contradictory opinions as there are postings! It's understandable; reeds are complicated.

Arundo donax or 'giant cane' is a living product that we plant, grow, harvest, dry, work, package and send all over the world (ideally packaged individually in sealed plastic) to be played on all sorts of mouthpieces by all sorts of players. It's no wonder there are so many tough questions.

Some of the questions and responses are fun. For example, on a thread about travelling with reeds on aircrafts, someone was worried if they would pass security! That shouldn't be a problem, but putting a reed in an unpressurized, freezing, very low-humidity baggage compartment certainly is.

Other questions recur frequently: what about playing on top of a mountain? Playing in the middle of a desert? Travelling to a tropical island? Travelling to a very hot or cold climate?

The only environments I haven't found questioned on the bulletin boards are steam rooms and saunas. I suppose no one is crazy enough to practise in these, but they are just extreme versions of all the above – because at the end of the day, it is all about humidity.

Relative humidity changes depending on the temperature and altitude of a particular region. As altitude increases, the air gets thin and the moisture-holding capacity of the air decreases (low atmospheric pressure), which results in reduced humidity. As the temperature gets lower, humidity decreases.

Before we examine these environments and their impact, we must come back to the fundamentals. If you are not an experienced and dedicated adjuster and seasoner of reed or instead use high-quality synthetic reeds, you will have trouble playing in any climate on earth.

I always remember a fine baritone saxophonist who brought two or three boxes of 20 reeds to rehearsals, and went through dozens of reeds in the warm-up and first 15 minutes of the rehearsal to find one good reed for those few hours. Another highly respected Canadian clarinetist, principal of a major orchestra, showed up for a masterclass at the University of British Columbia, staying for just two days, and with 40 reeds. He complained he couldn't find any that

worked, and a student performing that day had 20 reeds with her and said she also couldn't find a good one!

How can they live and play like this? Reed adjustment takes just five minutes when you get good at it and the seasoning process takes just 30 seconds a day for a seven-day break-in period.

All my students, of any age, who have been learning for two years are proficient at reed adjusting. When purchasing reed-adjusting equipment locally, my pre-teen advanced students are frequently told, 'You must be studying with Chuck!' Jump in, folks – the water is fine!

One of the things we are doing when we season our reeds is to ensure that they can maintain a more consistent humidity. Proper reed storage is also critical.

Let's examine these environments: tropics vs deserts vs cold climates vs high elevation. It all comes down to humidity. Tropics are humid; deserts are dry. Cold climates can also be humid. Vancouver can be humid in December if it rains and the temperature stays above zero degrees Celsius, but the humidity plummets when the temperature goes below freezing.

In addition to seasoning cane reeds, the other way to eradicate any travel, climate or air conditioning issues is to store them at exactly 58% humidity

However, unless you are playing outside, climate does not directly affect your reeds; the air conditioning in your environment affects them much more. In cold weather, when your heating source does not have a humidifier, the humidity can be very low indeed, as low as 15%.

I was once recording in Las Vegas in February. It was fairly cold and it's a very dry environment in the first place. None of my reeds worked. They were all dry as a bone. We could have been just as badly off in the summer with air conditioning, which can also create a low-humidity environment. Many air-conditioning systems are built with a dehumidifying function, hence they tend to remove moisture in the air.

Luckily on my trip, one of our group members had just come back from the NAMM trade show with a pile of Légère synthetic reeds, and I was saved. When I returned to Vancouver, I ordered 120 Légère reeds to try out on my entire mouthpiece collection, and I've stocked them in the studio ever since.

Légère reeds are a viable, premium option that many fine artists worldwide use exclusively. They obviate any travel problems whatsoever and give you more time for practising.

DOCTOR



D'Addario Multi-Reed Storage Case



Vandoren Hygro Reed Case



Chuck's 'ultimate' travel set-up

However, I personally still mainly use the thickest blank cane reeds, Vandoren V21s, as when you adjust cane reeds which are slightly too hard for you, it feels like you're making your own reeds from scratch. Remember, it only takes five minutes per reed!

In addition to seasoning cane reeds, the other way to eradicate any travel, climate or air conditioning issues is to store them at exactly 58% humidity. Period. There are numerous storage cases and devices on the market to serve this purpose, but the main contenders are the D'Addario Multi-Reed storage case and the Vandoren Hygro Reed Case.

The D'Addario Multi-Reed Storage Case holds eight reeds of any size from soprano sax or E flat clarinet to bass clarinet or baritone sax, and comes with a D'Addario Reed Vitalizer two-way humidity control pack. It is an excellent product, but the only issue is that D'Addario supply a 72% control pack, which, in my opinion and that of many others, is much too high a humidity for reeds, making them a little muddy in sound and encouraging the growth of mould. We want 58%.

Fortunately, these humidity control packs are actually made by Boveda, for cigar humidors and wooden musical instruments, which you can buy directly from Boveda or Amazon in packs of 10. Purchase the eight-gram size. The benefit of this amazing product is that it will bring too high a humidity down to 58% while bringing low-humidity environments up to 58%. A single pack should last around three months in your reed case before hardening slightly, at which point you need to put in a fresh pack.

The Vandoren Hygro reed case is another option and comes in two sizes: one for smaller reeds up to alto sax and

clarinet, and a larger size for tenor sax, bass clarinet and baritone sax. It comes with a little sponge in the base that you can moisten to keep the reeds at exactly 40% humidity. This works like a charm if you are playing the reeds daily, but in very low-humidity environments (any room with a heater in cold weather or air conditioning in hot weather) or if you're a doubler carrying multiple cases of reeds, you are in trouble. In this case, there is one more thing you can do to achieve what I feel is the ultimate reed environment.

Place a large Boveda 58% Humidipack in a portable plastic cigar humidor that will hold as many Hygro reed cases as you use. Even reeds that you have not played for years will play perfectly with a brief moistening. There are lots of sizes of humidors readily available that will fit from three up to 12 Hygro reed cases.

Plus, to protect your wooden instruments from extreme humidity in storage, use large 49% Boveda Humidipacks – one for smaller instruments and two in the case for alto clarinets and larger. These also come in 10 packs at great prices and will last two years in their individual packets, and three months once removed and placed in a case.

And finally, let's not forget temperature as well as humidity to protect our reeds and our instruments. Neither should be placed in airline baggage compartments or the boot of your vehicle on hot or cold days. This also includes saxophones, as leather pads are affected drastically by humidity and temperature.

Treat reeds and instruments exactly like yourself. If you wouldn't feel comfortable in a certain environment, neither will they. ■

You can read more of Chuck's tips about reed adjustment and seasoning in the autumn 2018 issue and his review of adjustment tools and storage devices in the spring 2021 issue.

Chuck Currie performs with the Pacific Symphonic Wind Ensemble, the Vancouver Philharmonic, Sax Noir Quartet, Pacific Blackwood Bass Clarinet Quartet and Amici Musica. He is a Backun Canada, Selmer, Yanagisawa, Vandoren, Chedeville, JodyJazz and Rousseau Mouthpiece Artist-Clinician, and proprietor of Sax Noir Studio in Vancouver, British Columbia. www.saxnoir.com