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CHOOSING THE BEST REED

by Dr. Denise Gainey

Experienced reed players know that they are only as good as their weakest reed. We spend countless hours in search of the best reeds, and each of us has our own reed “voodoo” that we do to break in our reeds and cycle them in and out of our reed boxes so that we are always prepared and they sound their best. Cane is a product of nature, though, and it is not always consistent—not to mention that we also deal with the effects of barometric pressure, weather, and usage on our reed collection. What’s a woodwind player to do? Here are some tips to help choose the best of the bunch when going through boxes of reeds.

Look at the color of the reed. It should be a beautiful golden yellow color, with no green tinges and little if any brown markings. Reeds with a green tinge to them tend to sound “raw” when played, as the cane may have been harvested too soon. Too many dark spots on the bark of the reed can be indicators of a reed that will play with a harsher tone quality. The reed should also have a smooth surface and a bell-shaped heart to it that evenly thins out to the tip of the reed. However, these are just general tips—we’ve all played reeds that have had these variations in characteristics and still played beautifully. Play the strength of reed that gives you a clear, full tone, with good response in all registers of the instrument. Remember that reed strengths will vary between reed brands.

The most important tip? Find a reed brand of good quality cane with consistent profiling that works well with your mouthpiece, and have a lot of them on hand. Buy reeds by the box, and buy multiple boxes if at all possible. The more reeds you have on hand, the better your odds of always having reeds that will work well for you when you need them in performance. Young players should keep at least six to eight reeds broken in and rotating in their reed case at all times, while professionals will typically keep several reed cases going, often organizing their reeds by date first played, tendency to play softer or harder, or some other differentiating factor.

Breaking reeds in slowly and carefully has a huge impact on their ultimate sound and longevity. Make time in your practice routine to work on reeds daily, playing new reeds for only about ten minutes a day for the first week or so, gradually increasing the time. Doing this will build strength and consistency of response in the cane. On top of breaking in reeds and rotating them throughout your playing time, learn to adjust your reeds, sanding the back of the reed to remove warping issues, and using tools such as a traditional reed knife and 400 grain wet or dry sandpaper, a Reed Geek, or one of the other myriad of reed tools out there to balance the reed so that it responds best for your mouthpiece and embouchure.

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