

*How to
Work
on
Clarinet
Reeds*

by

MICHAEL DRAPKIN

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FOREWORD

When I grew up in my filial Los Angeles home, I had the great fortune to study with Gary Gray. Gary was on the UCLA and Aspen Music Festival faculties, he was a former major symphony orchestra clarinetist and a premier L.A. studio musician. After one made the trek up the steep roads of the Encino Hills, he always had a bowl filled with reeds to accommodate his wayward clarinet students.

“Have you prayed to the Reed God?” he would say with a twinkle in his eyes.

I left L.A. to study clarinet with Stanley Hasty at the Eastman School of Music. We were required to go to “reed class” in his studio at the school every Saturday morning at 9AM until we showed “proficiency.” Being college students, we were usually out carousing and blowing off steam until late Friday night, so it was a challenge to drag ourselves into Mr. Hasty’s office early Saturday morning, usually with bleary eyes. He didn’t just show us how to work on reeds; he made us learn how to work on them *from blanks!* We had to learn how to work down the face of a reed until it had the proper slope and balance – all by hand using a reed knife.



FIGURE 1 - A REED BLANK

My father was a master surgeon, mechanic, farmer and inventor, and fortunately he passed his technical skills on to me in my DNA chains, especially when it came to working on reeds.

The first reed that I made from a blank came out great, and Mr. Hasty was impressed. I then accidentally ruined it when my hand slipped when I was making some touch-ups using some sandpaper. My first reed knife was an expensive folding knife which I abused by using it to cut a carpet to shape in my dorm room, and then proceeded to lose it. It was so sharp that I could cut myself just by having it open!

But inexorably I learned how to work on reeds, and did not realize until much later what a rare and valuable skill it was in the clarinet world. Most clarinet players are slaves to whatever comes in the box, not realizing that just a few minutes of touch ups can make all of the difference. I was once chatting with a group of clarinetists and one of them exclaimed about how her teacher's reeds only lasted a few days as though it was some sign of clarinet machismo. I responded, "Clearly he doesn't know how to work on reeds, because in a couple days of playing the reed hasn't even broken in yet."¹

I lived in New York City back in the days before my dear friend Mitchell Estrin² became a distinguished and dedicated clarinet professor. He was the first call clarinet sub with the New York Philharmonic and played and toured with them regularly. He used to get to play next to his Juilliard clarinet teacher Stanley Drucker! In the days before Mitch became a reed expert, he used to call me when he was having difficulties with reeds. I would take the subway down to his apartment and help him with reeds. This led to the reed deal of a lifetime.

Mitch used to buy a ton of boxes of Vandoren reeds, and used very few reeds out of a box, so we made a deal where I would buy his old reeds at a discount rate.



FIGURE 2 – A "PURPLE" VANDOREN BOX OF THE MITCHELL ESTRIN ("ME") VARIETY, ACQUIRED 3/10/82, PURCHASED BY "ME" ON 1/78

I ended up with a shoebox full of great aged reeds, and I will never need to buy reeds again!

Much later on, I stole a floral knife³ from my wife Suzy, and it made the perfect reed knife. It has a straight blade that tapers on either side, folds, sharpens nicely and fits well in my hand.

¹ She was furious with me! How dare I criticize her teacher! I shrugged.

² Mitchell Estrin, Professor of Clarinet at the University of Florida and President of the International Clarinet Association. <https://arts.ufl.edu/directory/profile/1567> He was also an usher at my wedding.

³ Floral knife – a very sharp flat bladed knife used in flower arranging for cutting flowers.

Whenever I go to a swap meet, I usually look for the knife table and they often have them for sale very inexpensively - \$5.



FIGURE 3 - SUZY'S FLORAL KNIFE. THANKS, SWEE!



FIGURE 4 - MY TREASURE TROVE OF AGED CANE, COURTESY OF MITCH. NO, YOU CAN'T HAVE ANY OF THEM, SORRY.

Stanley Hasty used to say that “the hardest thing about practicing is taking it out of the case.” For me, even with everything I know about working on reeds, the hardest thing for me - still - is getting myself to sit down and create a new reed. I am *always* so relieved when I do, because being a serial reed user⁴ I usually let my reeds go too long before replacing them.

⁴ Clarinet reed users all fall into two categories: *Serial reed users*, who only play one reed at a time, and *parallel reed users*, who always have a variety of reeds in play. Stanley Hasty was a serial reed user, and my pal and Eastman classmate Andy Stevens of the Colorado Symphony is a parallel reed user. Parallel reed users usually can't believe that serial users can only have one reed going at a time. What if there is an accident? Serial reed

I have had the pleasure of giving reed lectures and lessons around the world – most of them as favors, and some of them even via the Internet. I have even had people’s teachers come to me for advice on how to work on reeds. I have also made great sounding reeds from any number of sources – from major market reeds like Vandoren (which I prefer) to test reeds that people have given me to try. The only criteria I have are whether I can get a reed to balance and vibrate evenly and produce the tone I want. If not, I discard it.

I’ve put my knowledge and experience into this book so that you can gain control over your reeds. Welcome to your *reed emancipation!*

Thanks go out to my teacher Stanley Hasty (of blessed memory) for teaching me how to work on reeds, my wife Suzy for never demanding her floral knife back and helping me take the photos in the book as well as proofreading, Mitchell Estrin for providing me with a lifetime supply of *great seasoned* cane, the support of my lifelong friend John Bruce Yeh, Vandoren for creating those great reeds in the first place, the various friends and colleagues that volunteered to proofread and review this book, and my Los Angeles mentor Gary Gray for introducing me to the possibility that there are deities controlling the quality of our reeds.

Regards,

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users can’t believe how much time the parallel folks waste on multiple reeds when you only need *the one*. This is purely a matter of personal taste – there is no right or wrong here. Just an interesting quirk amongst clarinetists.

REED MAKING MATERIALS AND THEIR USE

Here are the materials you need to work on clarinet reeds (if you only bought this book). They are available in the Clarinet Reed Making Starter Kit:

THIS BOOK

If you are reading this, then you obviously have it! If not, you can order it online from the Bassclarinet.net website at <https://www.bassclarinet.net>

REED KNIFE



FIGURE 5 – FOLDING KNIFE USED FOR REED WORK. VERY SHARP; HANDLE WITH CARE.

You need a knife to be able to remove cane from very specific places on a reed. If you don't have the kit and just this book, you can obtain these from a variety of music stores or on the Internet. You can get advice on which knife to buy from clarinetists, oboists or bassoonists – we all work with cane, but the inexpensive knives included in the kit work just fine. You can spend as much money as you want on reed knives, but spending a lot of money on a knife doesn't make you better at working on reeds. Remember, handle sharp knives with care!

You can ascertain the sharpness of a knife blade, or more specifically, *where* the blade is sharp using a simple technique. To do this hold the knife in one hand and very lightly brush the blade upward on your thumbnail (see photo below). Do not “dig in” or torque your wrist.

If you do it right you will feel the blade gently tug or scrape upwards on your nail. If it does, it is sharp. If it feels slicker and does more of a slide, it is dull. Try it across the width of the blade and see how the sharpness varies. It may be dull near the tip and sharp closer to the middle and other end; probably because it doesn't get used as much there. The sharpness can and usually does vary across the blade edge.

With this technique, the mystery of blade sharpness is suddenly revealed. You can use this to examine *any* blade and test its sharpness – kitchen blade, Bowie knife, whatever. They all reveal their sharpness and where they are sharp. Try it.⁵

This is important. You want to gently scrape cane off, and you don't want your blade to dig into your reed and create a divot or indentation. You need a sharp blade. Learn how to sharpen your blade or bring it to a pro. Don't use one of those kitchen knife sharpening gadgets, like the ones on can openers, or you may ruin your blade.

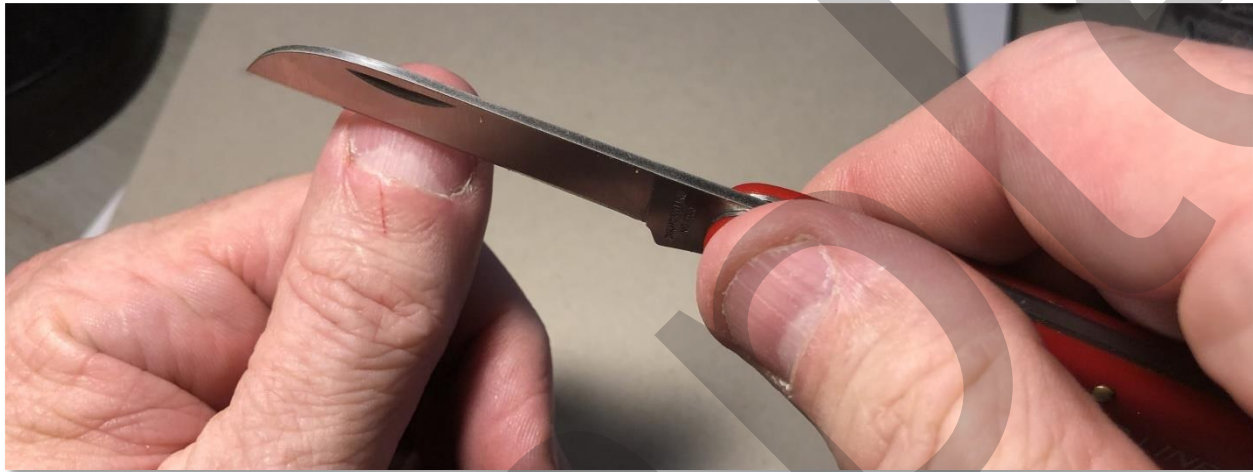


FIGURE 6 - TESTING A KNIFE FOR SHARPNESS. NO, THAT CUT ON MY LEFT THUMB ISN'T FROM THE KNIFE.

ACRYLIC PLAQUE PLATFORM FOR WORKING ON REEDS



FIGURE 7 - ACRYLIC PLAQUE FOR USE AS A PLATFORM FOR WORKING ON REEDS. COMES WITH PROTECTIVE PAPER, WHICH IS REMOVED.

⁵ When I go to swap meets or other multi-vendor shows, I usually stop by the booth selling all of the knives and test his/her knives on exhibit for sharpness. What you learn is often interesting and it always sparks a fun conversation with the vendor, since you are usually the only person that day who knows how to test knife blades.

In order to work on reeds, you need a stable surface with which to work on reeds, and an acrylic plaque is perfect.

You can sometimes pick up scrap acrylic that you can use for working on reeds at craft shops. That is where I got my first one – there was a craft shop on the walk between the Eastman University Avenue dorms and the school downtown, and I still use it. They last forever and they keep your knife from being damaged because the material is softer than glass, for example, so don't use a glass plaque. You can also sand on it.



FIGURE 8 - MY FIRST PLAQUE. SHOWN HERE HOLDING A REED ON IT THAT IS READY TO BE WORKED ON.

While you will notice that the acrylic surface gets marred from sanding and using a knife, you will likely never see any acrylic debris – I never have – plus it is plastic and inert. Also, if you hold your reed in the same place on the plaque, it will create an outline over time which tells you where to place the reed.

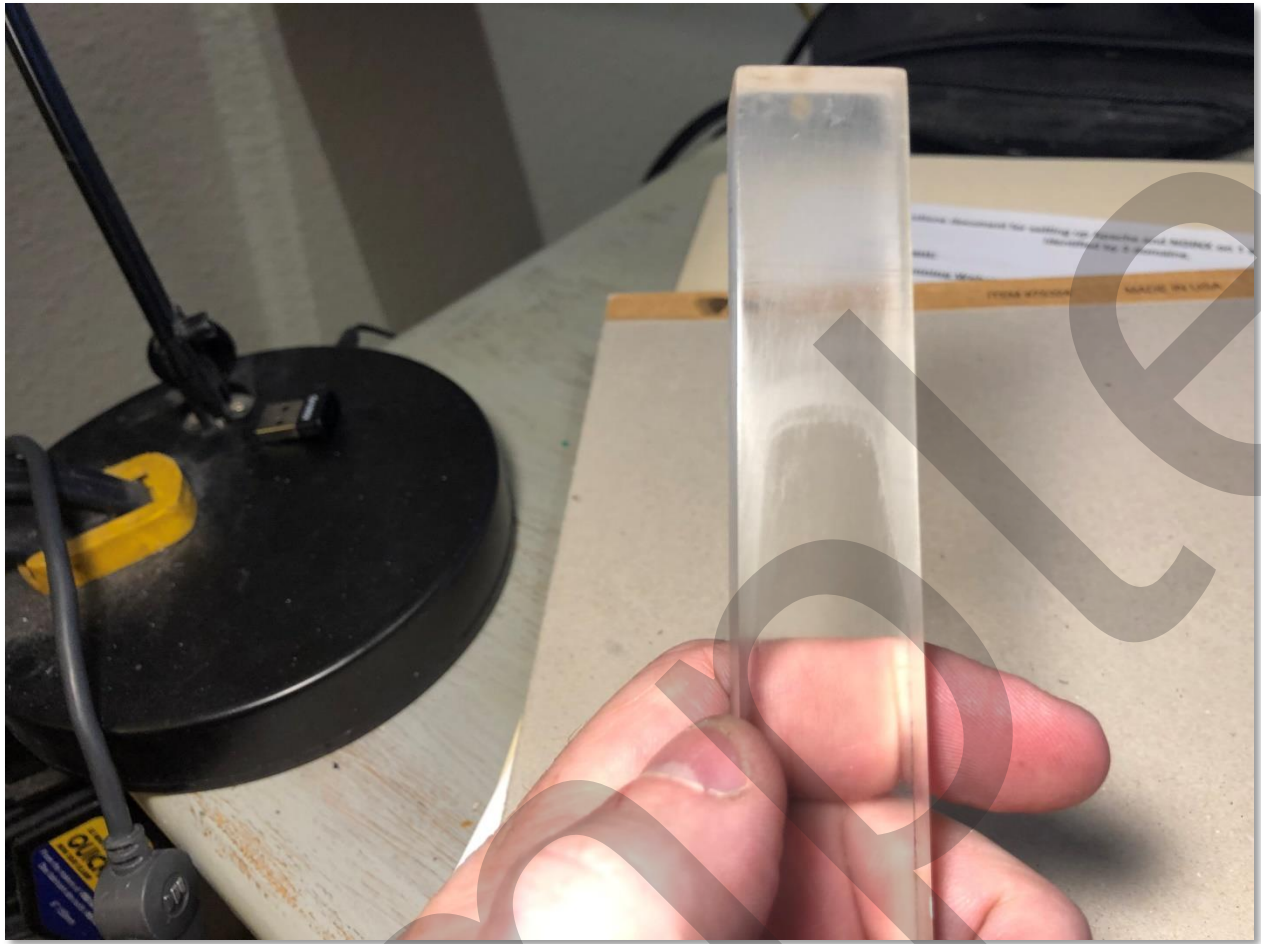


FIGURE 9 - PLAQUE SHOWING REED OUTLINE FROM YEARS OF USE.

SANDPAPER

- 220 grit wet/dry sandpaper
- 400 grit wet/dry sandpaper
- 400 grit wet/dry sandpaper (for use on tip only)
- 600 grit wet/dry sandpaper

Sandpaper is another important part of your reed adjustment arsenal. The kit contains a starter set of four pieces: one piece of 220 very fine grit, two pieces of 400 super fine grit - one for general use and the other reserved for use on the tip only - and one piece of 600 ultra fine grit. These are all “wet-dry” sandpaper and are identified by their black color. You want wet-dry or waterproof grit sandpaper for two very good reasons: 1) Your reeds are wet or damp when you work on them, and you need grit that is appropriate to that wet environment. 2) The wet-dry paper doesn’t crumble or shed grit like regular sandpaper does.

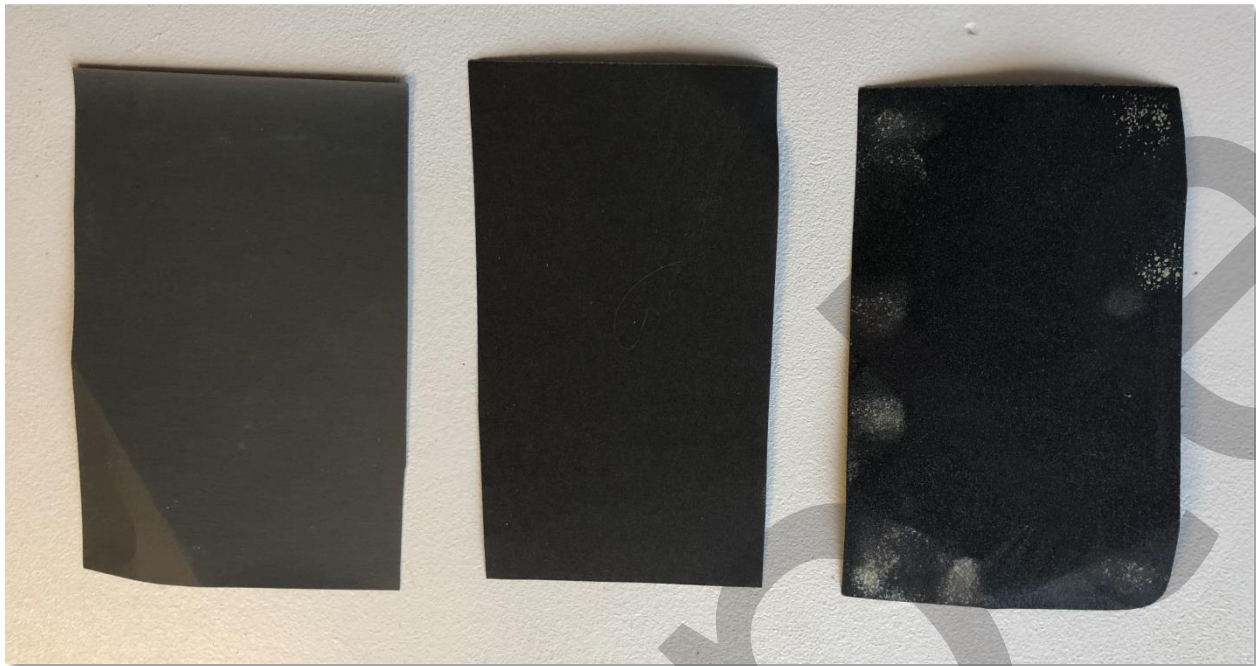


FIGURE 10 - 600, 400, 220 GRIT WET/DRY SANDPAPER. NOTE THE REED DEBRIS ON THE 220.

The four pieces in the kit are there just to get you started. Go to any hardware store and pick up packs of each grit: 600, 400, and 220 (see below); they are very inexpensive and will last you a very long time. I cut them up with scissors into manageable rectangles that are roughly 2 ½” by 4 ½”.



FIGURE 11 - SANDPAPER ON THE SHELVES AT ACE HARDWARE