

Instrument Care
Daily Care Prevents Costly Fixes

With the proper care and regular maintenance of an instrument, the instrument will maintain its value for years to come. Instruments should be serviced regularly (at least every 18 months) to keep them in playing condition and prevent small problems from snowballing into large, expensive repairs. It is recommended that the instruments be serviced at the end of every school year.

Instrument Maintenance Checklist

- Assess your instrument each time you play for changes in its appearance. It may indicate a repair that needs to be done.
- Avoid extremes in temperature and humidity. In climates where this is unavoidable, allow the instrument to warm up to room temperature before you play it.
 - Have small repairs done often. Neglected repairs become large, expensive repairs.
- Wash mouthpieces once a week at minimum and always wipe fingerprints from the instrument surface to avoid tarnishing the finish.
- Loosen bows after playing to avoid warping. Be sure to lubricate the instruments with cork grease, oil, cream and rosin where appropriate.

Woodwinds

The small mechanisms and features of woodwinds can make them temperamental at times and sensitive to aggressive hands. Students should avoid touching the keys while putting the instrument together and taking it apart, where possible. Use ample cork grease of a decent quality and the corks will last for years. A small paintbrush will help you get around the small keys to dust, and a soft lint-free cloth is recommended to remove fingerprints that tarnish the keys over time.

Pads and bent keys are responsible for the bulk of all repairs. Ensure proper set-up and swabbing of the instruments to reduce the maintenance costs. The best way to avoid bent keys is to break down the instrument without putting pressure on the keys. The small mechanisms are not meant to bear the pressure of aggressive hands, which may twist the keys or simple knock them out of alignment. A lacquer cloth should be used to eliminate fingerprints after use. Over time, these fingerprints can tarnish the keys and in extreme cases erode the keys. Hand cream is a big culprit in this situation and should be avoided before one plays.

Each time after playing, the instruments should be swabbed thoroughly to keep the pads in good condition and prolong their life. The pads should fit snugly against the tone holes and be thick and puffy in their appearance. Cork grease should be applied liberally on the saxophone gooseneck as this prevents the cork from ripping and needing a crucial repair. It is worth the extra money to buy good quality cork grease.

Occasionally, keys will get stuck from the saliva sugars solidifying in the body of the instrument. Do not force the key open; gently lift the key from the tone hole and use either tissue paper or a dollar bill to clean the underside of the key. This is done by placing the paper under the key between the tone hole and the pad, closing the key and applying very slight pressure to the top of the key while dragging the paper across the underside of the key.

Reeds

Good-quality reeds are necessary for all single and double reed instruments. The reeds should be symmetrical in their cut, beige in color with little to no discoloration and free of chips and cracks. Always protect reeds with a reed holder that can be purchased at your local music store or even made at home with two pieces of Plexiglas and an elastic band. These holders will keep the reeds flat and chip-free while not in use. It is advisable to have more than one reed working at a time and in a rotation; this way no one reed becomes a favorite. Reeds should be soaked from tip to butt for two to three minutes before they are played. (Some reeds may require additional time.) To soak them, you can use an empty spice bottle or similar small container (absolutely no film canisters or medicine bottles as the product leaches into the plastic.) Working reeds require care and planning to ensure they are in good physical shape for playing at any time.

Brass

Maintaining brass instruments will prolong the use of the instruments and their quality for years to come. The brass should be flushed once a month with warm water, rinsed with clean cold water and then dried thoroughly. The proper brushes particularly a flexible brush and a valve brush will help you get to the hard-to-reach places. Use the flexible brush to clean the tubing and slides. The valve casings will be cleaned using a valve brush. Remove the valves one by one and replace them after a lint-free cloth has dried them and moisture is no longer present.

It is worth the extra investment to buy good-quality oil for lubrication. Three drops in the casing should keep valves moving, as they should. Players should loosen the valve caps a half-turn once they are done playing to allow the moisture to dissipate. Trombones should get a "bath" every month by filling the slide with warm, soapy water and moving it up and down. It should be rinsed clean and cold water and repeated as necessary. Disassemble the instrument and clean inside and out with a flexible cleaner. Spray the stocking with water and applying tuning slide grease before reassembling the instrument.

All mouthpieces should be cleaned a minimum of once a week with warm water and a mild soap. A soft cloth can always be used to clean up fingerprints and avoid tarnishing over time. It is advisable to keep instruments out of direct sunlight and to avoid extremes in temperature and humidity. By flushing the instruments monthly and lubricating them with good-quality oil, the instruments should be in working order for the year.