

# Taking Care of Your Bassoon

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Bassoons enjoy one of the longest usable life spans of any modern woodwind instrument. The life expectancy of a bassoon is comparable to the life expectancy of a human. Just as a human must take regular care of his body, so also must a bassoon receive regular care.

## Daily Care

The care a bassoon receives on an daily basis is the most important type of care it will receive. Nothing else has as profound an influence on the life span of a bassoon.

Daily care centers on keeping your bassoon clean, inside and out. Moisture must be removed from the inside of the instrument and dirt and oils must be removed from the outside.

## Swabbing the bores

Moisture is the single most damaging enemy of a bassoon. If left in the bore of a bassoon it can eventually cause serious damage. In addition, moisture will shorten the life of the leather pads.

Your bassoon's wing and boot joints must be properly swabbed out after every use. This requires a pull through swab that can be introduced at one end of a bore segment and pulled through from the other end. It should never be necessary to swab the bassoon's bell or bass joints.

It is especially important to use a pull through swab in the boot joint. The old style push swabs are not capable of effectively removing moisture from the most important areas of the boot joint. They do a poor job in the bores near the u-tube and are incapable of cleaning the u-tube at all. Only a pull through swab will effectively clean the moisture from this area of the boot joint.

Because of the difference in the sizes of the bores of the wing and boot joints it is often best to use different swabs for the two joints.

## Cleaning the outside of your bassoon

Dust from the environment, skin oils and excess lubricating oil from the hinges all conspire to degrade the appearance of the outside of your bassoon. Regular cleaning is required to keep everything looking good.

Dust is fairly easy to keep under control. A small brush such as a one inch wide paint brush can do a

good job of dusting under the keys. Use a brush with natural bristles; synthetic bristles sometimes will scratch finishes and do not absorb oils well.

Every time you touch your bassoon you leave skin oils behind. It is desirable to wipe these oils off with a clean soft cloth when putting your bassoon back in its case. Oils can come from other sources as well, possibly including vapors from the oils used in treating the wood. If left on the plating these oils can cause some platings to become cloudy and dull. Regular cleaning of the plating will go a long way toward keeping the plating clean and shiny.

## Tenons

Tenons should be lubricated occasionally. Simply rub a cake of paraffin canning wax onto the tenon wrappings or cork. Paraffin does a good job and is clean and neat. Cork grease is appropriate for corked tenons but don't use it on thread wrapped tenons. Never use Vaseline for tenons; the only thing Vaseline does well on a bassoon is to make a mess!

Maintaining the tenons of your bassoon will make playing your bassoon more enjoyable. While many tenon adjustments require the services of a qualified bassoon repair technician, there are some things you can do to fix minor problems.

Loose tenons will allow the joints of the bassoon to move about while you play. In addition, loose tenons may leak air and compromise your bassoons performance. The addition of some cotton thread to the existing tenon wrappings can help this problem.

Tenons that are too tight will make proper assembly and disassembly of your bassoon difficult. Tight tenons are not as easy to fix as loose tenons and a visit to a repair technician is recommended.

## Periodic Care

Many types of regular care are not needed daily. There are several tasks that should be done only a few times each year.

## Lubricating the keys

The hinges of the keys need to be lubricated periodically. The frequency of oiling depends to some extent on the type of key oil you use. Synthetic oils tend to last longer than petroleum lubricants. Every month or so listen to the keys of your bassoon. If they are noisy, it is time to lubricate them.

The purpose of the oil is to keep the metal parts from contacting each other. When this is effective the mechanism is quiet and does not wear out.

Use a fairly heavy oil. Fine light weight oils do not do the job. The oil must be heavy enough to keep the metal parts away from each other.

The best way is to oil your bassoon's mechanisms is to remove the keys and apply the oil directly into the hinges. An alternative for players unwilling to remove keys is to use a needle to apply a drop of oil at the ends of each key. Be sure to work the keys for a few minutes to help get the oil inside the keys where it is needed.

It is important to use a pipe cleaner or similar tool to remove all of the excess oil from the posts and body of the instrument. In time the excess oil will cover the posts with a thick dirty coating which is difficult to remove.

Don't forget to oil the rollers. For many bassoons the noisiest part of the mechanism is the rollers.

### **Oiling the body**

This can be a controversial topic. There are many different oils that can be used as well as different techniques for applying the oil. The following is intended to be simplified.

Bassoons require oil in the wood to perform properly. The wood is oiled as part of the process of making a bassoon. They also need to be oiled throughout their life.

Bassoons do not require oil frequently. For most players it is sufficient to have a repair technician oil the body as part of a regular servicing.

The frequency of oiling is determined by the instrument's need for oil. If oil is absorbed rapidly into the wood the instrument needed to be oiled; if the oil remains unabsorbed it didn't to be oiled.

Improper oiling can cause serious problems. Some oils can leave thick gummy deposits on the bore surfaces if left too long; it is very important to always remove unabsorbed oil from the surface of the wood before the oil begins to dry. Too much oil will make a mess; it is better to use less oil more often than to use too much oil at one time.

It is preferable to remove the keywork from a bassoon before oiling it. This will make any needed cleanup easier and will prevent oil from getting on the pads and ruining them. A very conservative oiling can be done with the keys in place. If oil gets on the pads they should be replaced.

The safest oil to use is light mineral oil. Note that this is *light* mineral oil, not heavy mineral oil or mineral spirits. It can be obtained from most pharmacies. This is a thin non-drying oil that penetrates deeply into the wood. This oil will not damage finishes and can also be used safely to clean the outside of the bassoon. The only problems that this oil will cause

would be if too much is used at one time or it if gets on the pads.

Sweet almond oil is a traditional oil that can work well. This is a slow drying oil that has good lasting qualities. It is usually too thick and needs to be thinned with an equal volume of paraffin oil.

Linseed has been used for generations, but it can be difficult to use. It is a fast drying oil with poor penetrating qualities and can cause problems. It is best used by someone familiar with its potential problems.

It is difficult to recommend bore oils sold by many shops. The term "bore oil" does not identify the actual type of oil in the bottle. In addition, it was probably formulated for grenadilla wood used in clarinets and oboes rather than the maple used in bassoons.

The old style wooly swabs that are no good for swabbing moisture from a bassoon are excellent for oiling the bore. A small quantity of light mineral oil or thinned almond oil can be applied to the swab which is then worked through the bell and bass joints and the unlined side of the boot joint. Don't use too much oil; too little is better than too much. Be sure to remove the u-tube as the unlined boot bore near the u-tube is the most important area of the entire bassoon to oil.

Be sure to wipe the excess oil out of the bassoon after a while. Linseed oil should be cleaned out in less than an hour. Slow drying oils allow more time but should still be wiped out after a few hours.

### **Bocals**

Bocals need to be cleaned periodically. If left uncleaned they can accumulate a considerable degree of filth in their bores. Every month they should be cleaned with a bocal brush and running water.

The cork should be lubricated with paraffin or cork grease. A loose cork should be replaced as it may be leaking air and can be uncomfortable to play on. If the cork is too tight it could cause the bocal to twist and split when you take it in or out of your bassoon.

### **Cleaning the plating**

Many products are available for cleaning and polishing plated surfaces. Take care before using any of them.

Some cleaners use chemicals which can cause damage to the steel screws that hold the keys in place. Most polishes use abrasives that can cause unneces-

sary wear in the hinges. These cleaners or polishes are usually intended for use on articles than can be washed afterwards. Since washing would create a new set of problems for bassoon keywork these products are usually not recommended.

An easier way to clean the plating is to use a polishing cloth. These cloths are usually impregnated with fine abrasives that leave a nice shine on the keys. Regular use of such a cloth will keep all of the plated surfaces looking good.

### **Annual Care**

An annual visit to a qualified bassoon repair technician is an important part of your bassoon's maintenance.

### **Servicing your bassoon**

A complete service should be performed on your bassoon every year. A thorough servicing will keep your bassoon working at its best.

This service should include removing all of the keys. Work on the body will include adjusting the tenons, oiling the bore and cleaning the body. Any body damage should be attended to and the seal of the u-tube system checked. Work on the keys will include cleaning the keys (but not necessarily buffing the plating), replacing any missing or loose corking, replacing any pads which won't last through the next year, lubricating and adjusting.

Many repair shops offer "playing condition" repairs, or "pc's." A pc job does not provide adequate service and should be avoided. It is intended to do only the most obvious and minimal repair work possible. Insist on a complete service for your bassoon.

### **Repair technicians**

Bassoons are the most unique of all wind instruments. Repair technicians who do excellent work on other woodwinds often do not understand the idiosyncrasies of bassoons. Be sure to use the services of a repair technician who has an understanding of the unique qualities of bassoons.

Locating a qualified bassoon repair technician can be difficult. If you are having a difficult time locating one contact the bassoonists in a professional orchestra near you and ask for recommendations.

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