



by Mark Nuccio

Mark Nuccio joined the New York Philharmonic in 1999 and is currently the acting Principal Clarinetist in addition to being adjunct Professor of Clarinet at the Manhattan School of Music. Most recently, he assisted the Rico Corporation in developing a new line of clarinet reeds, the Rico Reserve Classics. Having made his own reeds for much of his career, he has a wealth of knowledge on reed maintenance and care.

# CHOOSING & BREAKING IN YOUR REEDS

**G**etting your equipment to work to your advantage is essential for every player. It is imperative to have a high-quality instrument with a mouthpiece that suits your desired sound, as well as a reed that vibrates with as little effort possible in achieving a professional quality sound. It is essential to find the proper reed strength, break-in process, and the best-sounding reed for each performance. This will allow you to sound beautiful and expressive while offering greater tonal clarity.

When choosing your reed strength, you should know that there are no heroics in playing a hard reed, such as 4.5 or 5 strength. It is no testament to how strong you are or how much you practice; rather, the strength is directly related to the facing on your mouthpiece and the sound you desire.

A reed should be allowed to vibrate freely while using a proper embouchure and an appropriate amount of pressure. Choose the reed strength that seems to have a beautiful sound using as little effort as needed. This will allow you to make artistic choices in your performance, rather than focusing all your efforts on trying to get the sound to come out. I suggest trying out two or three strengths in order to make sure you have the most comfortable resistance.

There is also more tonal clarity when playing a strength that is more comfortable for you. Tonal clarity does not mean a bright tone, but rather clear tone. A reed should function like a good stereo system – offering a balanced compliment of treble, bass, and mid-range in the sound.

It is also beneficial to have someone you trust or admire – a teacher, colleague, or peer – listen to you. Have that person tell you what sounds best. What you think is bright may just be clear to the listener. For example, my reed of choice feels brighter from behind the clarinet, but that sensation does not extend into the audience. This is why having a respected colleague listen in the audience can give one the reassurance that the reed has allowed you to maintain, if not improve your existing sound.

After 23 years of making my own reeds, I've recently made the switch over to Rico Reserve Classic soprano clarinet reeds, which I helped to develop with the company. While they are playable with very little break-in time, I still do take time to break in my reeds.

Breaking in your reeds properly is another way to sound your best at all times. Over the years, I've developed a system for breaking in reeds. Here's how it works:

It's best to gradually reintroduce moisture to the reed.

1. Take the reed out of the box.
2. Date the back of the reed with a pencil or waterproof pen.
3. Dip the reed in water.
4. Rub the vamp of the reed 10-15 times in order to make it as smooth as possible and to seal the pores so that it takes longer for saliva to penetrate the reed.
5. Put the reed on the mouthpiece and play for a short time (30 seconds) – not too long.
6. Place the reed back in a suitable reed case, and don't play it again until the following day.
7. The next day, take the reed out of the reed case and play it again for another short period of time (30-45 seconds).
8. Do this each day, marking the bottom of the reed to indicate how many times you have tested the reed.
9. When there are 4-5 marks on the reed, the reed is ready for rehearsal/performance.

This process will allow you to create a running break-in cycle so you'll always have reeds ready for performance. This process is clearly explained in a video on YouTube.com (search "Mark Nuccio reed").

This break-in process will also allow you to use as few reeds as possible when playing a run of concerts. I feel it is important to use one reed for the run of a performance when possible. The tone and pitch are oftentimes different for each reed, so use your rehearsals to find the best reed. For example, I would perform Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony on the same reed for all four of our performances during the given week if at all possible.

Sometimes a player has to change a reed if it becomes too light; however, do everything possible not to change. Not only will your sound and pitch be more consistent to your colleagues, but you will also know how that reed responds for the articulation as well as moving between registers.

Keep a record of the reed that you use for each piece either by noting it directly on the reed or by keeping a log. Find a system that works for you. The more organized you are, the more success you will find, and your colleagues should find you to be more consistent and reliable.

There are a lot of things to think about when approaching a piece of music, but don't forget about your set-up. Work with your accessories so they can work for you.