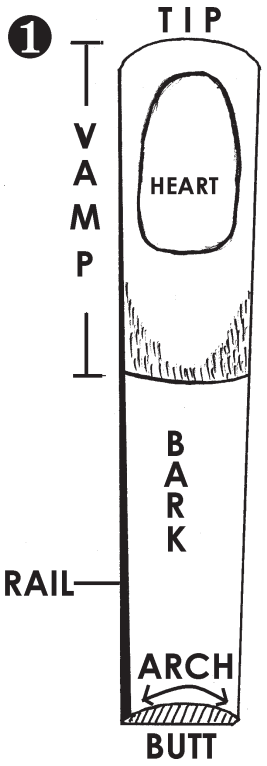
A Reed Buyer's Guide

– Brian Catchlove

Acquiring reeds that are consistent, reliable, of good quality and will definitely work when taken home and played is a common desire for all reed players. The average music store often contains a bewildering variety of reeds, all with different shapes, sizes, strengths and styles of cut. To consider the different characteristics of the diverse styles of reed available commercially is a Herculean task, especially when the choice of reed brand is really one of personal taste and is best decided by trial and error. However, all reeds do require certain universal attributes and it is these that will be reviewed so that purchasing good reeds becomes more likely.

When shopping at a green grocer it is quite normal and acceptable to inspect the produce. Fruit is usually checked for ripeness, firmness, colour, bruises and marks, shape and even smell to try and ensure that only good quality fruit is purchased. The only thing that is usually not acceptable to check is the taste. As it is for apples, so it is for reeds. A detailed inspection can reveal many aspects of a reed and most stores will allow customers purchasing small numbers of reeds to individually select them even if they are from different boxes. Unfortunately, just as it is unacceptable to taste fruit prior to purchase, I know of no music store that will allow play-testing of reeds prior to purchase.

Economically it also makes sense to carefully check reeds before parting with enough money to fund a serious night out. For double reed players it is definitely not economically viable to simply throw away reeds just because they are poorly made or the cane is of poor quality and so many players make their own reeds from scratch and thus counteract the problems of low quality workmanship and inferior raw materials. For most single reed players, while commercial reeds are not cheap, the economic imperative to hand-make reeds from scratch is not as compelling as it is for



double reed players. By understanding a little about reed cane and what constitutes a good reed it is possible to increase the likelihood of purchasing good reeds by making a careful selection at the music shop.

At this point it is necessary to mention a few salient points. Even though a reed may, upon close visual inspection, appear to be the perfect reed this is by no means guaranteed and the only true test of a reed is to play it. It might help to think of the perfect looking reed that plays poorly when taken home as being like an apple that is shiny red and sweet smelling but with a hidden rotten core. Also, it's good to remember that commercially manufactured reeds are still only a raw product that requires breaking-in, some adjustment and generally being taken care of. The article *Reeds – How to Care for them and How to Improve their Response* by Floyd Williams in this issue of *The Australian Clarinet and Saxophone Magazine* discusses this in greater detail.

Reed Terms

Some terms used to describe various parts of a reed can be a little confusing. I hope that the diagram (ex.1[1]) will make the terms used in this article clear and understandable.

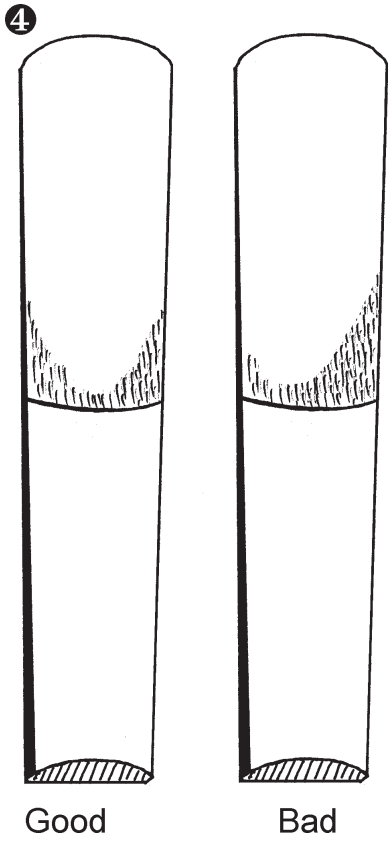
Cane

Reeds are made from a cane called *Arundo donax* which is now grown in many different parts of the world. The quality of cane used for commercial reeds can vary greatly from year to year depending on the laws of supply and demand and whether any natural disasters have affected a cane growing region. Typically, cane is harvested after a growing period of two to three years and is then seasoned for a further period of up to three years. This leads to the first step in choosing reeds at the retail outlet.

The colour of the vamp or cut section of the reed should be cream or white with no discolorations (ex.2a,b & 3a) while the bark on the uncut section needs to be golden yellow and shiny. Usually the bark also has some darker coloured markings (ex.2b,c,d). If there is any hint of green in either the vamp or the bark then the cane has either been harvested too soon or has not been seasoned correctly and should be avoided.

Some reeds also have a rusty brown colour either in the vamp or on the flat underside of the reed, usually running parallel with the reed fibres. Sometimes this rusty brown colour is only a thin streak and other times it can cover almost the entire width of the reed (ex.3b,c). I have seen entire boxes of reeds affected by this problem. This discoloration is caused by remnants of sap and any reed with this type of discoloration should be avoided.

The markings on the bark are less significant. Reeds with no markings or those with solid brown or grey areas are of no concern (ex.2a,b). However, reeds with a mottled or spotty bark may not give the best results (ex.2c,d). I have not seen any article that mentions this style of marking on the bark and this idea comes from my own reed-making experience where I noticed that I regularly had problems making good reeds if the bark had a mottled appearance.

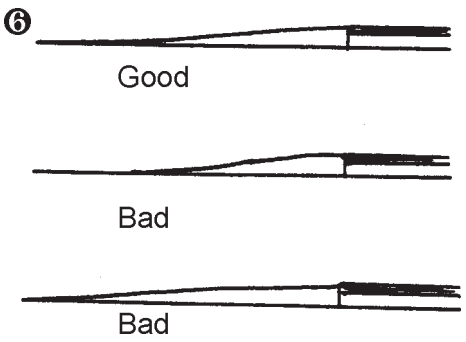


Manufacture

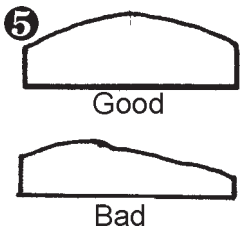
After discarding all the reeds with the wrong colour cane the next step is to check how well the reeds have been manufactured.

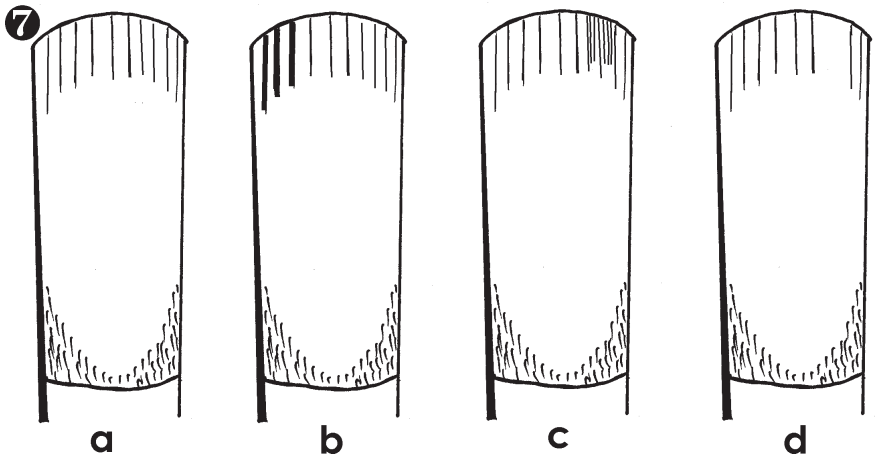
The style of reed being inspected needs to be the right size and shape for your mouthpiece. It may help to have either your mouthpiece handy or an old reed that you know has the correct dimensions. The tip should correspond as closely as possible to the width and shape of your mouthpiece and the length of the vamp should be equal to the length of the opening of your mouthpiece. The width of reeds is usually quite consistent within the same brand. The length of the vamp can vary depending on the thickness of the reed, with thinner reeds having a shorter vamp and thicker reeds a longer vamp.

The cut of the vamp needs to be even and the reed must be symmetrical along a central axis running from the tip to the butt of the reed. With reeds that are cut so that bark extends down both sides of the vamp near the cut like Mitchell Lurie, Rico Evolution or Zonda (ex.2a) it is relatively easy to see if the reed has been cut evenly by checking that the bark extends down the vamp equally on both sides. When the bark is removed in a straight line across the reed like with Vandoren, Daniels, Rico Grand Concert or Steuer French Cut (ex.2b,c,d)) the cut at the top of the vamp should create an even 'U' shape (ex.4). Another easy way to see if the reed is symmetrical is to check the butt end of the reed. The arch of the bark should be regular with the high point in the centre of the reed and the height of both rails should also be equal (ex.5).



The slope of the vamp from the tip back to the beginning of the cut should also be regular and even on both sides (ex.6[2]). This is sometimes more difficult to ascertain. When looking at the side of the reed with the flat back of the reed facing the floor the background often distracts the eyes, especially if the background contains no straight lines. By placing the vamp between your thumb and forefinger the slope of the reed becomes more evident and the background distractions are removed. To





check the opposite side of the reed just spin the reed around and change hands.

Close Inspection

By now the number of suitable reeds has been whittled down. Time now for a closer look. Hold the reed up to a light source and look for the fibres in the vamp. They should be straight and parallel and running directly between the tip and the butt. It's also ideal to have the fibres evenly spaced and of equal thickness (ex.7a). Being that reeds are made from an organic material grown naturally, the fibres will naturally have some variation in spacing and thickness. Reeds to avoid are those with some fibres that are clearly darker and/or thicker than the rest of the reed (ex.7b). Also avoid reeds with either a tight grouping of fibres (ex.7c) or an area with no discernible fibres, especially near the tip (ex7d). The ideal reed is well balanced and larger fibres, close groupings or see through areas will most likely mean an unbalanced reed.

The final thing to check for is the heart shadow. The shadow of the reed when looking at it through a light source should gradually and evenly lighten towards the tip. I find that this works better with natural light. With the tip pointing towards the ceiling an inverted 'U' shape should be evident with the top of the curve of the 'U' being close to the tip.

Buying Broken Reeds

Please take care when handling the reeds in the store so that you don't end up paying for broken reeds. In particular:

- Do not bend the tip of the reed. It may break.
- Do not run your fingers along the tip of a dry reed as it will probably break.
- Take extra care when removing and replacing reeds in their packaging.

The Perfect Reeds Purchase

Knowing what a good reed looks like will help in choosing more good reeds. If you have or have had a very good reed (firstly, congratulations!) then a close inspection of all aspects of this reed and any other good reeds should give you an idea of what to look for when buying new reeds. Conversely, knowing what really bad reeds look like up close can also be useful so that a similar choice is not made again.

This entire inspection process takes only a few minutes when purchasing reeds and while there are no guarantees of choosing the perfect reed it should help to increase the percentage of reeds that will play well for you.

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[1] Adapted from George T.Kirck, *The Reed-Mate Reed Guide. A Comprehensive Handbook of Modern Reed Working for all Single-Reed Woodwind Instruments*, 2nd ed. (Maine: Reed-Mate Company, 1989).

[2] Charles Stier with Charles Mansfield, *Clarinet Reeds – Definitive Instruction in an Elusive Art*. (Olney: Halcyon Productions, 1991).

Sources of Reed Information

This is by no means a definitive list of available literature. Search any of the State and University Libraries. Most local State and University libraries can facilitate inter-library loans so you are not necessarily restricted to your own local library.

Australian Libraries

- Find, search and contact over 5400 Australian libraries from the Australian Libraries Gateway site at http://www.nla.gov.au/libraries/
- Australian University Library Web Sites. http://www.caul.edu.au/uni-libs.htm

Books

- *A Book for the Clarinet Reed-Maker - An Illustrated Single Reed-making Method.* Vasquez, Ronald. Annapolis, MD USA 1993.
- *Handbook for Making and Adjusting Single Reeds*. Opperman, Kalmen. Chappell Co. Available in the State Library of Queensland. Available to purchase at http://www.vcisinc.com/clarinet.htm
- *Reed Mastery* by K.S. Jaffrey. Available at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University library

All available for purchase from the Gary Van Cott website http://www.vcisinc.com/clarinet.htm:

- *Clarinet and Saxophone Reed Adjustments* by Vito Platamone Jr. SS
- *Making Clarinet Reeds* by Hand by Walter Grabner.
- *Perfect A Reed . . . and Beyond* by Ben Armato.
- *Selection, Adjustment, and Care of Single Reeds* by Larry Guy. Rivernote

On the WWW

- http://www.woodwind.org/clarinet/Equipment/Reeds/index.html. This site has a few useful articles about reeds.
- http://www.vandoren.com/ Follow the links via products to reeds.
- http://www.ocr.woodwind.org/articles/index.html

  Articles on reeds and other aspects of the clarinet.
- 'The Clarinet' Master index http://www.clarinet.org/TheClarinet/MasterIndex.htm Search for articles in 'The Clarinet' magazine
- Online Clarinet Resource

  http://www.ocr.woodwind.org/
- The Clarinet Pages

  http://www.woodwind.org/clarinet/

Other places to look

- Woodwind research guide: a selective bibliography of materials pertaining to the literature, development, and acoustics of woodwind instruments / by Lyle C. Merriman. Available in the State Library of Queensland