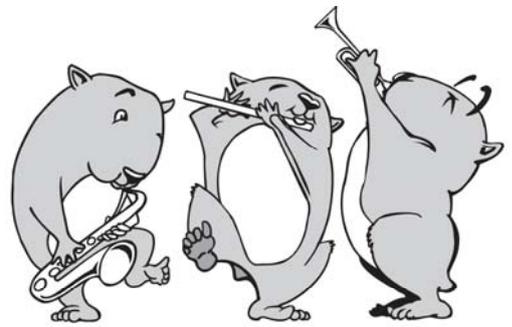


# WOMBAT WOODWIND & BRASS



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## PREVENTATIVE OBOE MAINTENANCE

(For plastic body instruments)

**Martin Lukas**

### **A guide to maximising the life of your oboe and extending the time between services.**

#### **THE GOLDEN RULES**

The best maintenance is preventative maintenance. It costs nothing, makes the instrument more pleasant to play and avoids unnecessary trips to the repairer. The following golden rules serve as a guide to maximising the life of your clarinet and extending the time between services.

#### **Rule 1 : No food or drink (apart from water) when playing.**

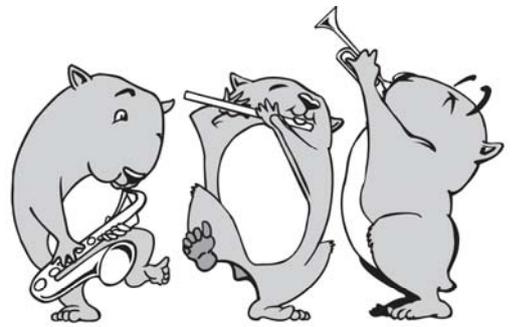
Every time you eat or drink when playing, you shorten the life of oboe pads. Food particles, particularly sugars are an oboe's worst enemies. Every time an oboe is played, the pads absorb and then release moisture. Anything suspended or dissolved in the moisture also contacts the pads. Food particles will stick to the surface of a pad, especially where the pad seats against the tone hole, prematurely forming "dirty rings" that shorten pad life. Sugars are particularly bad as they are absorbed into the pad for the life of the pad, forming a sticky toffee that will eventually break the skin of the pad where it touches the tone hole.

Food and drink can also be a cause of noisy/sticky pads that can be both annoying to the player and difficult to remedy. Often the only solution is for a repairer to remove and replace the affected pads.

Food particles also collect on the inside of the reed, becoming smelly and unhygienic. In an ideal world, a player would brush their teeth every time before they played their instrument or at least first rinse their mouth with water.

Players' fingers coated with food oils and fats will also coat the body and key work with oils and fats, making the oboe attract even more dirt and grime. Ideally, players should wash their hands before playing. Once a lot of dirt and grime has accumulated on the keywork and body, only a repairer can properly clean the instrument properly by servicing it with a "disassembly and clean". There is no need to prompt such services before they are due.

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## **Rule 2 : Do not sandpaper bladder pads**

Most student level oboes have pads that are called “bladder” pads. Bladder pads have three layers—a cardboard backing, a felt disk and a bladder skin. Some oboes may also have a number of brown cork pads.

Some players hold the mistaken belief that bladder pads need cleaning by pulling cigarette papers, paper money or other forms of paper between a closed pad and a tone hole. These players are wrong! Pulling any sort of paper between a closed oboe bladder pad and tone hole (or even just pressing) has the same effect as using fine sandpaper! Instead of cleaning the pad, this “roughs up” the pad’s surface by pulling skin fibres loose, providing a greater surface area for grime. This supposed pad cleaning only provides temporary relief from sticky pads, whilst at the same time dramatically reducing pad life and pad seal.

Oboe players who pull these various types of paper across bladder pads often do so as a result of seeing professional oboe players do the same thing; thinking that if this works for them, it will work for them too! However, nearly all professional oboe pads are made of cork. These cork pads are virtually indestructible, unlike the extremely delicate skins on student oboes. Also, rather than cleaning the pads, professional oboe players are actually using the paper to dry up “dribbles” in the very small tone holes of the instrument, to avoid gurgles whilst they play.

So, for student oboes, avoid rubbing or inserting anything between the bladder pad and the tone hole. If a note “gurgles”, swab the instrument and then place your mouth next to the offending tone hole. and then blow any remaining water. The bladder pads will be benefit from not being roughed-up and prematurely worn. Also, roughed-up pads grab moisture more than pads with a smooth surface.

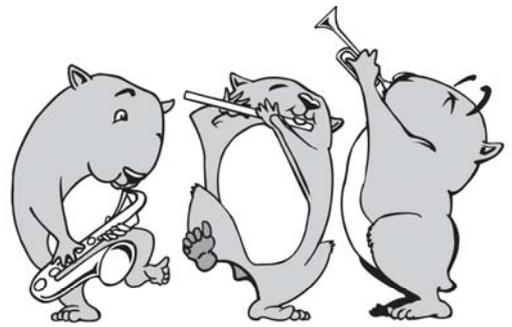
## **Rule 3 : Don't use bare fingers to grease tenon joints**

The cork on tenon joints (also called “joint corks”) need occasional greasing to fit smoothly. A simple way to avoid spreading the grease onto the instrument is to wrap some writing paper or plastic wrap around the finger that will be used to apply the cork grease. Once the grease has been applied, then the paper or plastic wrap can be removed and discarded with no grease residue left on your hands.

Otherwise, greasy fingers will transfer cork grease residue to keywork, tone hole chimneys and eventually the whole body of the oboe. This grease will make the instrument slippery to hold and attract dust. The only way to properly remove grease residue is a total disassembly by a professional repairer to wash the instrument body and wipe all the keys and posts with solvent. This is a substantial service that can be easily avoided.

For young, inexperienced players, it may be easiest to simply remove the cork grease form the instrument case and leave it up to the players' teacher to grease the corks when required.

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## **Rule 4 : Clean the outside of your oboe after every time you play**

Perspiration from a player's fingers is surprisingly corrosive to the point where a build-up of perspiration can etch silver and even nickel-plated keywork! So, the best thing to do is to clean your oboe after each time it is played. Use a cloth or clean handkerchief to lightly wipe all keys and body surfaces. Do not rub vigorously because the cloth can catch on springs and pull them off their cradles. If your oboe has silver plated keys, you may wish to occasionally use a commercial silver cleaning cloth that will bring up the lustre on the keys.

Do not use any sort of cleaning liquid, cream, polish or spray on your oboe. These cleaners will clean exposed surfaces but residue will also be left in between the keywork and smudge onto the pads, reducing their effectiveness. An oboe can only be cleaned properly by first totally disassembling it. This is best done by a qualified and experienced repairer who will disassemble, clean and correctly reassemble the instrument.

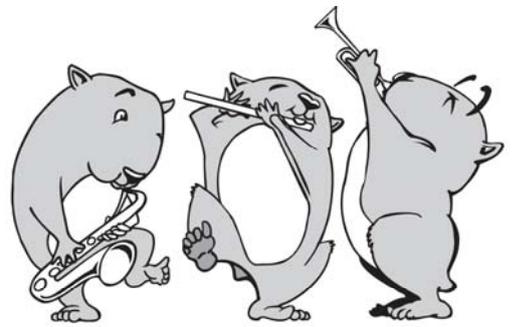
## **Rule 5 : Clean the inside of your oboe after every time you play**

Each time you play, moisture builds up inside your oboe. Bladder pads can absorb moisture very quickly as they are made of cardboard, felt and skin. If a pad absorbs enough moisture to swell, then it may not properly cover the tone hole causing it to leak air and cause poor sound quality. Avoid this problem by removing the moisture from the instrument after each time it is played. The moisture can be removed from each section of the oboe separately, by using a pull-through cloth. Separate the oboe into its sections, so that each section can be cleaned separately. The moist cleaning cloth should not be stored inside the oboe case. Leaving the cloth in the case is bad for two reasons. Firstly; moisture will be retained in the case causing ferrous metal parts of the oboe such as the pivot screws, adjusting screws and rods to rust. Secondly, the moisture can cause the case to smell musty and also discolour keys.

Fuzzies (commercially available fuzzy cleaning sticks) can also be used to clean the insides of oboes. However, they need to be used with care. If you choose to use a fuzzy to clean your instrument, do not leave the fuzzy inside the instrument or the instrument case. In both situations, the moisture remains in or near the instrument. Also, the drying fibres will adhere to pad surfaces, reducing a pad's ability to seal. Repairers regularly see pads with multi-coloured fibres stuck to them. Removing the fibres is a delicate process and an unnecessary repair.

Usually once in an oboe player's life a cleaning pull through cloth will get stuck. If so, take it to a repairer immediately. They will have the correct tools to remove the cleaning cloth safely. Do not attempt to remove the cloth with knitting needles, music stand shafts, knives etc. This will only make the problem worse and quite likely scratch the bore or cause other problems such as bent keys.

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## **Rule 6 : Do not use the oboe case as a music satchel**

Oboe cases are made to carry an oboe and a small number of accessories. Few cases include special compartments for the storage of sheet music. If an oboe case does not include a sheet music compartment, then these papers should not be squeezed into the case because there is a great likelihood that the added pressure of the papers will bend delicate keywork.

An instrument can be scratched or even seriously damaged by sharing space inside the case with music, medals, pencils, pencil sharpeners, coins and lollies. For convenience and safety, store and carry these accessories in a separate bag.

## **Rule 7 : Avoid sunlight, dust and extremes of temperature**

To keep instrument keywork shiny, avoid placing the instrument in sunny or dusty places. Sunlight causes silver plated and even nickel plated keys to tarnish. Minimise contact with sunlight and dust by placing the instrument in its case when it's not being played. The keywork on student oboes may have 40 spots that need to be oiled. If these spots become dusty, the oil and dust mixture will gradually slow down the key action even to the point of a key becoming seized.

Avoid extremes of temperature, hot and cold; such as experienced in a car during a hot day or cold night. In hot conditions, the glue holding pads in place is weakened causing pads to move or even fall out, the same can happen to oboes manufactured with synthetic peel-and-stick keycorks. Cold weather can cause shellac based glues used on some oboes to become very brittle causing pads to fall out.

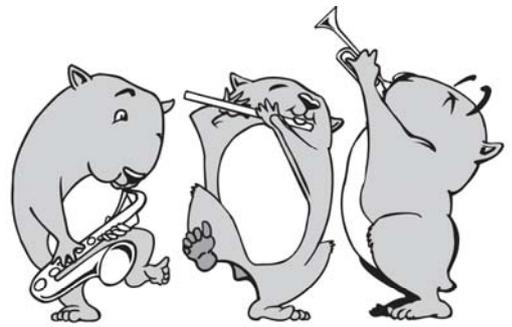
## **Rule 8 : Leave oiling of keywork to the professionals**

Student oboes may have 40 spots that need to be oiled once a year. Each of these spots requires the precise application of a tiny drop of oil applied exactly, using a special purpose pinpoint oiler. Professional oilers have a pin point the diameter of a hypodermic needle. However, common keywork oiler bottles have points that squirt out far too much oil. Each time too much oil is dropped onto the keywork it will smear the instrument and attract more grime. Excess oil will also loosen the glue that holds corks, adjusting screws and silencer materials in place. So, the oiling of oboe keywork is best left to a person experienced in handling a professional pinpoint oiler; either a skilled teacher or qualified repairer.

## **Rule 9 : Loose body rings are an emergency**

Most oboes have 2 metal body rings to strengthen the thin walls of sockets. One is on the longer lower joint and the other is on the bell. Do not play an oboe if these rings are loose or have fallen off, take the oboe to a repairer immediately. Without the support provided by body rings, a socket can easily crack or snap off. This simple repair can avoid a major expense.

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## **Rule 10 : Assemble and disassemble the instrument carefully.**

Take the upper joint (the shorter joint with keys) with the left hand and the lower joint (the longer joint with keys) with the right hand. Gently and very carefully twist the joints together with a back and forth rotation. Do not try a 360 turn as keys will bind. Do not “wobble” the joints together. Be very careful to gently align the keys (usually 3) that link with each other between the joints. Then add the bell (which may or may not have a key).

If the joints are uncomfortably tight for small hands to assemble easily, use cork grease (see rule 3). If after applying the grease the fit is still uncomfortably tight, you will need to have a repairer remove excess cork. Uncomfortably tight fitting joints can cause assembly and disassembly to be difficult for young players, and the excessive grip is used can result in bent keys.

## **Rule 11 : Use a good quality, snug fitting case**

An oboe must fit securely into a case with good hinges, secure latches/zips and handle. If it is faulty, treat this as an emergency and seek case repairs immediately. Or, just purchase a new case. Good quality replacement cases are not expensive compared to the cost of repairs if an instrument falls out onto concrete. If your instrument shakes like a maraca in its case, use some foam rubber or bubble wrap to take up the free space.

Also, when carrying a case, face the lid towards your body. This way if the case accidentally opens, the lid will hit your body first, reducing the chance of your oboe falling onto the ground.

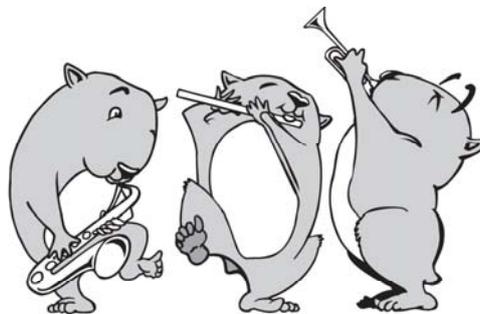
## **AUTHOR DETAILS**

This article has been written by Martin Lukas, the proprietor of Wombat Woodwind and Brass. Wombat Woodwind and Brass provides a full range of woodwind and brass instrument sales and repair services to customers throughout Australia.

Martin holds formal qualifications in band instrument repair from WITCC Iowa USA, music performance and music education from Melbourne University and has twenty years experience as an instrumental music teacher and high school band director. He also has many years of experience repairing instruments in both the USA and Australia.

This article reflects on Martin's accumulated experience as a qualified, experienced repairer and music teacher.

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## TEN COMMANDMENTS OF OBOE PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE

1. NO FOOD OR DRINK WHILE PLAYING,  
APART FROM WATER.
2. DO NOT SANDPAPER BLADDER PADS
3. DO NOT USE BARE FINGERS TO GREASE  
TENON JOINTS
4. CLEAN THE OUTSIDE OF YOUR OBOE  
AFTER EVERY TIME YOU PLAY
5. CLEAN THE INSIDE OF YOUR OBOE AFTER  
EVERY TIME YOU PLAY
6. USE A GOOD OBOE CASE BUT NOT AS A  
CARRY BAG FOR ALL ODDS & ENDS
7. AVOID, SUNLIGHT, DUST AND EXTREMES  
OF TEMPERATURE
8. LEAVE OILING OF THE KEYWORK TO THE  
PROFESSIONALS
9. ASSEMBLE & DISASSEMBLE YOUR OBOE  
SLOWLY & CAREFULLY
10. NO FOOD OR DRINK WHILE PLAYING,  
APART FROM WATER.