Clarinet & Saxophone

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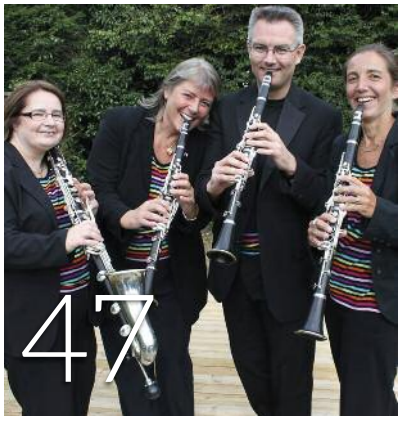

Cover: Five Sax - their latest CD is Ken's favourite this issue

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William Upton Goes Down The Wonderful World

The best camera, so the saying goes, is the one that's in your pocket when you need it. For musicians, the same might be said for metronomes and tuners, which along with the time-honoured pencil, your instrument and a good reed, constitute the indispensable tools of the trade. One way of making sure you're never caught short is to scrap the hardware and replace your ancillary devices with smartphone apps.

Unfortunately, key 'metronome app' into iTunes and you get 504 results, ranging in price from 'free' to upwards of £10. Some of these barely fulfil the basic needs of the beginner, while many of them have functions for things you never knew you needed, providing solutions for problems you didn't know you had. In this article we review the apps we've found most useful. Almost all were tested on an iPhone 5s, but many are also available for both iPad and Android phones and tablets.

One word of caution: many of these apps are ideal for working with and inspiring children, gamifying lessons and practice sessions. But be aware of the implications of using a device in lessons that has the capacity to take pictures and record videos. Many schools and music services won't allow you to use a smartphone or tablet in lessons.

Tuners

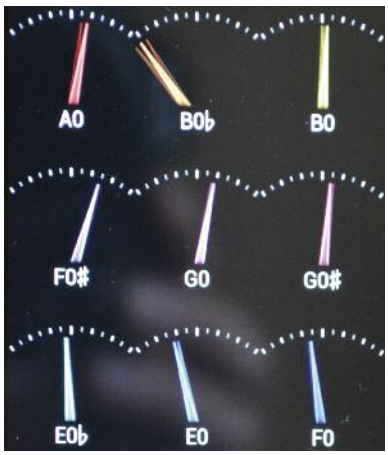
Cleartune – Chromatic Tuner

iOS (iPhone and iPad), £2.99; Android, £2.39
Cleartune is the gold standard, no-thrills tuning app. The interface is simple but elegant, with a chromatic tuning wheel and a needle display, the latter for precision playing within the 25 cents either side of 'in tune'. The needle display doesn't take any prisoners - small fluctuations in pitch will send it flying - and really forces you to focus on consistency of sound.

Despite the app's simplicity, it does come with plenty of extra features. There are 24 tuning systems to choose from, and you can select the key within any early music temperament. You can save presets, which makes jumping between systems in rehearsal less of a hassle, and you can even programme in your own temperaments, although you are limited to 12 notes. It has a pitch generator that functions across 10 octaves, and if your students are having trouble understanding why an F# on an alto saxophone is actually an A, it also works in transposition. If you're working with pitched percussion tuned to something other than 440, you can calibrate it with a reference note.

Tunable

iOS (iPhone and iPad), £2.29; Android, £0.61
Tunable is another intuitive app, with a stylish graphical interface displaying pitch through time. This is perfect for analysing the shape of your vibrato, and the screen gradually turns green when you're 'in tune'. You can change the parameters of 'in tune' from within 10 to two cents of the defined value, and programme it to account for the width of your vibrato. The app includes 21 different temperaments, and again, you can set the key of each temperament, and set the transposition. Another great feature is the nicely laid out tone generator, which can play sustained chords. It also comes with a simple metronome.



Pitchlab guitar tuner

Pitchlab Guitar Tuner

iOS (iPhone and iPad), free (full version £2.29); Android, free (full version £2.29)
Don't be put off by the name – this is a sophisticated chromatic tuner. The free version comes with an excellent strobe interface. For those of you who haven't come across a strobe tuner before, this is a way of visualising pitch. It looks and behaves a bit like when in an old film the spokes of a spinning wheel gradually appear to stand still, when the frame rate equals the speed of rotation. Similarly, with a strobe tuner, horizontal bars flash across the screen when you're out of tune, and gradually slow down as the pitch improves. Children will love this compelling visual metaphor, and it will really encourage them to produce a stable sound. The free version also comes with 47 temperaments, instrument transposition, and the ability to programme reference notes.

The full version comes with a whole range of extra functionality, but two features in particular stand out. Firstly, like Tunable, Pitchlab visualises your pitch in time, but the interface – with 12 individual 'ribbons' – makes it easier to see how quickly your pitch settles when you change note. Secondly, Pitchlab has a display for tuning multiple notes simultaneously, although the necessarily small size of the 12 dials, all crammed onto one screen, does make this rather inexact.

La Coreeda del Arundo donax! *aka*

The Clarinettist Pitte

With apologies to all aficionados of the Corrida and Flanders and Swann, Leslie Craven, Principal Clarinet Welsh National Opera, takes a look at of some of the most useful techniques and gadgets for reed refacing/re-profiling

Joking aside – reeds are often the nightmare of the long suffering clarinettist.

I have been adjusting reeds ever since my teacher gave me a razor blade and a halfpenny (old currency) and a box of matches. When I was seven years old and having clarinet lessons at school, I was taught to burn the tip of the reed using the edge of the coin as a profile for the tip of the reed. This was a routine method (in those days) of trimming the tip of a reed if one did not have a reed tip trimmer. One had to be careful to do it quickly or it resulted in blisters on the fingers. Actually I am convinced it produced excellent results as the burnt end of the reed was hardened by the burning process and made the tip more resilient and less prone to becoming waterlogged. To scrape the reed thinner I was handed an open (cut throat) razor and shown where to scrape the reed. Today I would doubt a 17 year old, let alone a seven year old, would be happy handling such a lethal blade. Those were the days! There are now, happily, many other less painful and safer methods of finishing and balancing reeds. Those described in this article are some of the most popular and efficient.

To be able to make commercially manufactured reeds (straight from the box) play responsively on a consistent basis is the dream of most clarinettists. It is unlikely that every reed in the box will play perfectly straight from the packaging and in my experience despite great leaps and bounds in computer operated cutting machinery which makes the profile perfectly symmetrical, there is still much inconsistency in the blowing resistance from reed to reed in many commercial packs of reeds.

One of the problems is that the reed itself is a complex shape that is machined from heel to tip and generally gets thicker from the heel to the middle of the reed (where the blade of the reed begins) then tapers from there outwards to either edge and towards the tip getting ever thinner. To be able to machine such a shape with accuracy has always been a problem, especially before computer technology. Cutting tools are now often diamond tipped and hence do not wear as much as conventional blades so this has improved consistency somewhat.

Arundo donax (the grass reeds are made from) is in fact a very resilient form of bamboo cane and this cane grows in many regions on the planet. It is often grown in gardens in UK to create windbreaks and architectural ornamental planting.

The ideal climate for musical instrument reed cane is difficult to find. It must neither grow too fast nor too slowly and the soil must not be waterlogged yet have sufficient moisture and sunlight to allow the cane to grow to four or five metres in height. Some of the best cane still traditionally comes from the Southern French region called Var in the Côte D'Azur, French Riviera area. Other places where reed cane can grow and is successfully manufactured include Spain, Australia, Argentina, China and other parts of the Far East.

If we look very carefully at a reed we see that the cane is structured in a very grainy system of parallel lines (which are in fact tiny tubes and not discernible to the naked eye but can be seen under a microscope, as illustrated below. If one puts the heel of a reed into one's mouth and sucks, air will sometimes be drawn through the cane if it is very porous. The internal structure of *Arundo donax* is a fibrous sponge-like form. It is the excess absorbency of some cane that is one of the main problems for clarinettists as this can cause reeds to warp, (the back of the reed in contact with the mouthpiece table can warp in several ways – concave, convex and irregularly on one side or the other) and become so saturated that the reed becomes too resistant to play, refusing to vibrate.

Excessive dryness can also cause reeds to warp and this must also be guarded against.

Here it is clear to see that the tiny fibres within the reed (rather like tiny drinking straws) are bunched together densely but not necessarily evenly.

This inconsistency in cane density means that no matter how accurately a machine cuts the shape of the reed to be perfectly symmetrical – it does not necessarily guarantee a free blowing reed unless the density of the fibres is evenly dispersed throughout the cane.

REEDS & RHYTHM **ROUND RONDO**