

# Clarinet *Saxophone*

Winter 2015 Volume 40, No 4

BY HEART  
Memorising  
Music

New Year Quiz  
And So The  
Curtain Falls  
Ben Castle





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John Robert Brown talks to

# BEN CASTLE

I met Ben Castle in a coffee bar next door to the BBC Radio studios in Leeds. Ben was on his way to record an interview; he took time to meet me for a chat. Over a cup of green tea Ben began by telling me about how he started playing the clarinet and saxophone.

"When I was seven, and starting a new school, the pupils could have instrumental lessons. My dad (Roy Castle, OBE, 1932 - 1994 English dancer, singer, comedian, actor, television presenter and musician) played a lot of instruments. One that he'd never got round to learning was the clarinet. He'd bought one years and years before, for £25, with every good intention of learning it, but he never got round to it. So he sent me off to school with it. My brother plays trombone, and one of my sisters plays the trumpet, so my dad thought we'd have a front line! I was sent to school with a clarinet under my arm. I didn't have a clue what it was. I'd never knowingly seen one before.

"It was just a thing that you did at school. Already I loved music. There was music around the house. But I'd not put two and two together about how music was made. To begin with I was quite excited that I had an instrument in my hand, and it made a sound. But I soon became very bored when I had to practise pieces of music with which I had no connection. Those beginner books, such as *A Tune a Day* are brilliant, but they are limited. There'd be the odd Christmas carol that I'd recognise. But I actually pleaded with my dad to let me give up, because I wasn't enjoying it. Practice was one extra thing to do on top of school homework. My dad said: 'If you really don't want to do this, I'll let you give up - but you'll thank me in later life if you continue.'

"And so I continued. I'd started on the clarinet when I was seven, then the saxophone when I was nine."

Ben learned the piano as a child. "I was never particularly good at it," he says. "I still use the piano for arranging and writing, and I love it for exploring harmony. I have played the piano on gigs with bands, but I'm always very embarrassed if there's a piano player in the audience, or in another band, playing on the same bill. And when I'm doing harmony, I visualise it on the piano. I

always used to see piano keys, to make sure it would all work."

#### JRB: And how far did you take the clarinet and the flute?

"I really worked hard at the clarinet, and got grade eight when I was 13. It's funny with grades, because I don't think I was a grade eight player, but I really worked on these pieces and managed to get a distinction. In recent years clarinet has crept back in, and I get quite a few gigs just because I play the clarinet."

#### JRB: And the flute?

"I tell people that I play the clarinet and the saxophone, and I own a flute! I'm okay on the flute when I can choose my own notes! When other people choose them for me it's hit and miss. It's the easy bits I can't do on the flute - such as holding long notes.



Father and son, Roy and Ben Castle

"My first saxophone was an alto. I've always been quite little; I don't think I'd have been able to hold a tenor. When dad wrote out the *Pink Panther* theme tune for me, I connected with what music was. I connected the dots. 'Okay, so I play those notes, and it sounds like the tune I heard on the cartoon, that I loved.' I connected something I was able to do with something I loved on the TV. Then I became obsessed. I realised the point of learning scales. That's how I got started. And then I got completely obsessed, and they couldn't stop me practising! And as a result, my school work suffered, because I was only ever interested in playing music.

"Between the ages of 13 and 17 I went to boarding school. They had rehearsal rooms there, where I could go to practise. The reason I went to the school was because it was quite strong for music. It was obvious to me, and to my family, that this was what my passion was. So even during school time I used to try and do five hours practice a day. That was when I was 15.

"When I was 13 my dad took me to Ronnie Scott's to see the Buddy Rich big band. He was quite good friends with Buddy. Sadly, I didn't get to meet Buddy. It was 1986, about a year before Buddy died. But seeing Steve Marcus up there, playing those long, stretched-out solos so amazingly, I thought: 'That's what I'm going to do. I have to do that'.

"I used to play drums as well. I was more of a rock drummer. My brother was listening to rock music, so I was also listening to that, and my dad was a huge fan of the swing singers, like Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole. He also had a great collection of Clifford Brown records. That was a huge thing for me, as well.

"I tried to take down some of the solos of Steve Marcus, but I'd never write down the rhythms. I'd only write out the notes, and remember the rhythms in my head! Then I became completely obsessed with Clifford Brown's lyricism. It was fantastic to have those records lying around the house. Dad was very keen on music; he was very excited when I started listening to the Clifford Brown records, and Oscar Peterson. He was very happy for me to be obsessed with Deep Purple. But he was even happier when I began to be obsessed with the music that he was passionate about.



# Expert advice from Eddie Ashton – repairs specialist and inventor of REPAIRER'S PERSPE

After nearly 50 years in this business of woodwind instrument repair and maintenance I've come to the conclusion that I have been, and for that matter still am, earning money under false pretences. Well not exactly cheating you understand, because hopefully most of the instruments I've dealt with were better when they went than when they arrived. But no, it just strikes me that I charge good money for doing a very simple thing.

You see, as a player, you spend years and years, with varying degrees of success, in learning to play your chosen instrument which involves three main things: -

Blowing. That is trying to produce a sound which replicates the sound you hear in your head.

Trying to physically work the mechanics of the machine which allows you to change the pitch of that sound.

Learning to interpret, with the use of a fairly limited vocabulary, what the composer/writer actually meant.

Now that's tough!

On the other hand have a much easier task which is in no way subjective in the manner of numbers one to three above. All I do is to take a tube with a few holes cut in its side and simply make sure that when those holes are shut, they're airtight. Those holes effectively shorten or lengthen the tube so if one of them leaks, i.e. doesn't shut properly above the position where you've decided the tube length should be, then the tube will think you're asking for a sound wave produced by a length of tube which terminates at the leak and not at the place where you're fingering.

A simple example of this would be an octave key which when opened produces a small leak at the top of the tube which precludes playing in the bottom octave (for clarinet read 'speaker key' instead of octave key and 12<sup>th</sup> instead of octave). In this case the overt leakage from a particular place alters the sound wave or oscillation within the tube. This also applies to fork fingerings etc. Note the words 'particular place' as this, along with amount, is all important in deciding what size and pitch the sound wave will be.

However, instruments in poor condition, instead of leaking from specific

places are in fact leaking a bit all over, i.e. the shut keys may look shut but are not airtight. So now there's a random leakage from the tube in addition to the one specified by the player. The poor old tube doesn't now know what length it's supposed to be and therefore what wave form to produce, so it will either sound none at all, or have a guess and set up a wave that squeaks or produce a very watered down version of the note that you were really asking for. It will also affect different instruments differently dependent on size and type.

What do I mean by this? Well, if we take size first, and I don't know this to be scientifically true as it's a theory borne out by many years of observation, but the size and volume of the bore seems to have a great effect in the following way.

All instruments of whatever size suffer a similar amount of leakage and for the same reasons. So for instruments having a relatively small column of enclosed air, for example oboe or piccolo, the leakage represents an enormous percentage of that volume, whereas if it's a tuba or a large saxophone a bit of a leak is fairly insignificant by comparison.

Also how the result of unintentional leakage affects different instruments differently is down to a bit of physics. Here's a rough generalisation – very rough!

A conical tube having a stopped end i.e. saxophone, oboe, bassoon, will overblow an octave. A cylindrical tube having an open end, e.g. flute and piccolo, will also overblow an octave. A cylindrical tube with a stopped end, clarinet, will overblow a 12<sup>th</sup>. That's not the only way this pesky clarinet is different from all the rest.

All the woodwind instruments talk to you, they let you know in no uncertain

terms, how they're feeling, except for the clarinet! The clarinet's much more subdued and you have to prise the information from it.

Imagine you go into a shop to buy, let's say, a saxophone. At some point when you're trying it, you'll play down to the bottom. If it gets harder to play as you play past say E, you hand it back to the shop assistant and say "can I have one that works please, this one's faulty". Without knowing it, you've carried out a test on the instrument or, put another way the instrument has told you "there's something wrong with me". So this applies to all the instruments – except the clarinet!

The clarinet will continue to blow to the bottom even in the most appalling condition. You could nearly throw all the keys away and it would still play to the bottom. Well OK, I exaggerate a bit. But because of that physics thing I mentioned, as the leakage becomes worse then the clarinet gradually gets harder and harder to play over the break and above. And because you're only a learner (everybody is) you probably blame yourself not this shiny new instrument.

The end result of this is that through a combination of these factors, each of the woodwind instruments reacts in a different way to unintended leakage. The appended chart is an attempt to show the relative differences between various instruments. It's only a guide and not definitive by any means but may help in the understanding of why different instruments do what they do.

This writing comes about as a result of being asked to speak to the bass clarinetists at the Royal Northern College of Music about maintenance and care of the college basses which seemed to be going wrong far too frequently. It became quickly apparent that the words maintenance and repair were being thought of as interchangeable. But obviously it wouldn't be possible to distil the repair side into an hour or so and equally, there's not a great deal in the way of maintenance that the player can do and so to try to fill an hour with that, one would have to extemporise quite a bit!

So apart from things like keeping the joints correctly lubricated and holding it correctly during the putting together and



Tracy Heavner

# REED PREPARATION, STORAGE AND STRATEGIES FOR THE SAXOPHONIST

A properly functioning saxophone reed is essential for a successful performance. In addition, possessing several good reeds can boost confidence and motivate saxophonists to perform at their highest level. Likewise, not having an assortment of playable reeds can cause performers much anxiety, a loss of concentration and preoccupy their thoughts, preventing them from focusing on other important musical aspects of performance. To ensure that good reeds are always available for a performance, it is suggested that saxophonists become aware of and practise reed preparation, storage and longevity strategies that will assist them in producing a storehouse of playable reeds ready for use.

## Reed Preparation Strategies

Reed preparation is a process that transforms newly purchased reeds into reeds that are ready for performance. Since reeds are mass-produced in factories by machines that cut the cane very quickly, there can be much disparity in the playability of individual reeds. The reed preparation process addresses this problem and several other issues saxophonists may encounter when performing on new reeds. Three reed preparation strategies that consistently produce playable reeds are (1) the reed breaking in process, (2) the reed adjustment process and (3) the reed sealing test.

## Breaking in Reeds

After new reeds have been purchased, the first step in preparing them for performance is the breaking in process. This procedure is very important to the consistency, playability and longevity of the reed. Breaking in a reed refers to the process of playing a new reed for short periods of time each day, gradually allowing the cane to acclimatise to temperature, humidity and to the routine of getting wet and drying out. By completing the breaking in process, the cane of the reed will not be damaged in the initial stages of playing allowing the

reed to perform better, play more consistently and last longer.

The initial step in the breaking in process is to place the reeds in a bowl of lukewarm water for around four minutes to allow them time to absorb some water. Saxophonists should make sure the entire reed is submerged in water, not just the tip.

Next the reed is removed from the water and placed on the mouthpiece. During this stage of reed preparation, the reed should only be played for around three minutes at a medium soft dynamic level. Saxophonists should avoid playing in the extreme registers of the instrument or using any hard articulations at this time.

After completing this step, the reed should be removed from the mouthpiece and placed in a reed case that contains a hard, flat surface for the reed to dry on. It is also recommended that the reed case contain some type of humidity control system so the reed does not completely dry out.

Saxophonists should perform this entire process for an additional four days gradually increasing the amount of playing time each day by one minute. The dynamic level up can also be increased up to a *forte* level while working towards the extreme ranges of the instrument, both low and high. After playing each day, the reed should be placed back into the reed storage case allowing it to dry until the next day. After five days, the reed should be broken in and can be played normally.

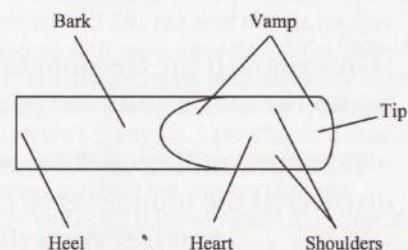
## Adjusting Reeds

After completing the breaking in process, there may be some reeds that do not play correctly. One might expect that a brand new reed would play perfectly but this is usually not the case. In fact, out of a box of 10 reeds, only a few reeds may play flawlessly, with no work needed. The other reeds, which could be too hard, too soft, not balanced properly or swollen, may have the potential to become good reeds with some adjustment. At this point, some saxophonists, who do not wish to work with reeds, may throw them away.

However with a little work, most reeds can be adjusted allowing them to be used for practice sessions, rehearsals and even performances. Since reeds are somewhat expensive, it is well worth a saxophonist's time and effort to learn how to adjust them.

## Parts of the Reed

In order to properly adjust a reed, saxophonists must first learn the parts of a reed, which are illustrated in the diagram below. The tip of a reed is the thinnest part and comes into direct contact with the saxophonist's tongue when articulating. The tip is very delicate and should never be touched by the performer as it can be easily damaged. The vamp is the shaved portion of the reed that stretches from the tip to approximately halfway through the reed. The heart is located in the centre of the vamp and is surrounded on both sides by the shoulders of the reed. The area below the vamp is not shaven and is covered with cane bark. The heel of the reed is the end opposite to the tip and is where the saxophonist can safely hold the reed without damaging it.



## Reed Adjustment

If a reed is too soft or too hard, adjustments may be made through either clipping or sanding the cane. Reeds that are too soft may be clipped using a reed trimmer to make them harder. Reed trimmers, which can be purchased at many music stores, work by removing the softer, thinner cane at the reed tip by



# ACCESSORY REVIEWS

After a near fatal encounter with pneumonia  
Leslie Craven asks:

## HAVE YOU SEEN THE LIGHT?

Having almost died from pneumonia in the summer of last year I have begun a new regime of thoroughly disinfecting my mouthpieces, reeds and all other equipment that could be contaminated with potentially life threatening germs. This is of course time consuming and inconvenient and requires me to have the appropriate kind of germ eliminating anti-bacterial product to hand.

Clearly we all need to build some resistance to germs to have a healthy immune system but at the age of 62 and having played clarinet for 55 years without major injury or playing related illness, I thought mine was in good shape! I suppose it is testament to the human design that our immune systems can counter many threats but it is not always the visible grime and build up of detritus that causes serious illness. Even reeds and mouthpieces that look scrupulously clean can harbour bacteria that can be potentially fatal. Many of us get colds and 'flu but how many players after getting a 'bug' thoroughly sanitise instruments, reeds and mouthpieces? For that matter how many shops sanitise each and every mouthpiece after prospective buyers have tried them?

I know when clients visit my studio to select my mouthpieces (Craven model made by Bradford Behn) after each and every visit I spend time washing the mouthpieces in sterilising solution. I hope the shops are doing the same! The Silverstein Light should not replace normal cleaning and hygiene practice but is designed to complement cleaning via the thorough control of bacteria. It is not wise to allow a build up of detritus in the mouthpiece or instrument so regular gentle and careful swabbing with kitchen paper or a cloth paper soaked in an anti bacterial cleaner (available from all the main retailers) is a good idea. The mouthpiece is a delicate piece of equipment so great care must be taken not to damage the rails or chamber.



*The light with CRYO 4 ligature*

I have seen some alarming cultures growing in pupils'/students' mouthpieces and on reeds during my teaching (and playing) career. I never allow a build up of detritus in my mouthpieces and quite frequently treat them by soaking in sterilising solution and using anti bacterial agents but clearly these

were not sufficient to stop me getting pneumonia last year.

It was for that reason a product by Silverstein caught my eye and I decided to evaluate it. It claims to kill 99.9% of most bacteria and is laboratory tested to be effective against: E-coli, Staphylococcus aureus (can cause skin infections, respiratory disease and food poisoning, Klebsiella pneumoniae (can cause lung problems including pneumonia, bronchitis and other respiratory disease), MRSA which can be resistant to conventional antibiotics.

Not only does the Light sanitise instruments such as clarinets and other woodwinds and brass instruments, it is highly effective on mouthpieces and reeds. Some 'Light' models – (there are different models and levels of pricing) have built in grooves into which to insert reeds to be sanitised. Some players even claim that the Light gives their reeds more longevity, but to be absolutely honest whilst it may be true, it would be very difficult to prove such a claim but I would not refute it.

I was sent the model that can sanitise reeds as well as other instruments and mouthpieces so this would be very useful for me. This product will give me much more confidence that players will not be picking up bacteria from trying my mouthpieces or reeds.



(The laboratory testing was carried out by KCL a medical research lab in Korea – for more information visit [www.silversteinworks.com](http://www.silversteinworks.com))

Having taken a keen interest in Silverstein products especially their ligatures, which I use, this product made absolute sense to me. It uses ultraviolet light and ozone technology to kill bacteria and microbes. The Light is supplied with a concise operating leaflet and the device is easy to use once one has understood the simple operating instructions and charged the device which uses a USB/mobile phone type charger via USB port of a computer or USB adapter to mains. To sanitise reeds it takes 15 minutes, 30 minutes for a standard Bb clarinet or soprano sax mouthpiece and for larger instruments such as bass clarinet or tenor/baritone saxophones about 60 minutes.

The model I have takes four reeds at a time and can also take a mouthpiece mounted on top of the Light. It is supplied with a removable perforated (holes all the way around and through it to let the light out) cap for the sanitising of instruments with bells but the cap of the device should be removed for cleaning narrower diameter tubes such as the upper joint, barrel and mouthpieces. A plastic screw on cap is then placed on the entire unit (minus the perforated metal cap) and the process of sanitisation can begin.

To sanitise an entire clarinet (or larger instrument including bass clarinet) the Light with perforated metal cover needs to be inserted into the bell of the clarinet (or sax) and this would sanitise the lower joint (with a sax the crook should be sanitised separately along with the