

## TAKING CARE OF THAT AMAZING WOOD

Preface: My lifetime love affair with the clarinet, started when I was 9 years old. I had a metal clarinet that had belonged to my cousin, and I remember the day my first teacher opened up his case and I saw, lying in regal splendor inside their velvet covered compartments, these pieces of this amazing dark brown wood, the color of coffee, decked out in silver keywork! I knew at that moment that someday I had to have a set of clarinets like those! I had no idea at the time that this wood was African Blackwood, or Mpingo as the natives call it, "The tree of music" But I was hooked for life!

Introduction: My goal is to do two things. To try to dispel some of the myths and wives tales that have been around for a long time concerning the care of our instruments, and secondly lay out a clear cut plan of action that anyone can take, to keep your instrument in great shape ,for a lifetime! I say a lifetime because I truly believe that this is possible. Over the past forty plus years I have carefully observed the results of this course of action and am convinced by my own experience that this is possible. I reject the view held by many, that our instruments get "blown out." Rather I am convinced that the changes that many experience in the playing characteristics of their instruments are the result of the effects of three major enemies that are warring against this wonderful wood!

They are: HUMIDITY Abuse, TEMPERATURE Abuse, and CHEMICAL Abuse.

From the time we first bring our new clarinet home these enemies, begin their relentless attack! Observing this attack over many years, and seeing its effect on our instruments, was the motivation that led me to seek to find ways to prevent the damage from happening, or to reverse the damage that has taken place. And the good news is that much of the damage can be reversed, because WOOD HAS A MEMORY! It can and will return to its original shape if certain actions are taken. So, let's take a closer look at these enemies, and see what the means are to defeat them.

1. HUMIDITY ABUSE: Created by the act of playing, and having the instrument in a non safe environment such as humidity levels either below 45% or above 68% . Blowing moisture laden air through the bore of the instrument, creates STRESS! Moisture swells the bore,

and the density of the wood, prevents the moisture from evenly distributing throughout the body of the instrument.

Result? Critical bore dimensions change, tone holes change, and if allowed to continue, eventually, even with a good piece of wood, and sooner, if the wood has weak areas or flaws, the wood can crack. Most clarinets crack in the top half of the top joint because the stress is greater, as well as the closer relationship of the tone holes to each other.

**SOLUTION:** Providing an environment that will allow the moisture content of the wood to be as equal as possible. A humidity controlled case is the solution. There is one on the market, and you can also create your own if you cannot afford one of our cases, by keeping one of the Humidipaks we use in our case in your case. This will not be ideal for several reasons. First, the Humidipak will have to be replaced much more often because your case is not airtight, and secondly, your case will not allow the even distribution of the moisture around the instrument like our case does, but this is **STILL FAR BETTER THAN DOING NOTHING**, and leaving your instrument in this dangerous situation!

**2. TEMPERATURE ABUSE:** This enemy rears its ugly head whenever the temperature differential within the body of the instrument is greater than approximately 20 degrees. For example, playing your instrument when the wood is at a temperature near or below 70 degrees F, or 20 degrees C. This creates stress on the wood because the outside of the instrument is not able to expand at the same rate of speed as the bore is. This creates a situation similar to pouring hot tea into a glass filled with ice cubes.

**SOLUTION:** the outside of the instrument must be warmed to a temperature that is within the safe zone of less than 20 degrees below the temperature of the air moving through the instrument.

The outside of the instrument must be warmed before playing, to prevent the danger of cracking. Historically, done by putting our hands around the barrel and upper joint, or putting it under your arm, and or blowing on the outside of the wood. You can keep on using these methods or you can check out a 21<sup>st</sup> century alternative, the HUMIDIPRO "Ultra" Case Cover, available for all of our cases.

**3. Chemical Abuse:** The harmful effect of our breath within the bore of our clarinets! God created our saliva to digest food. Unfortunately, it

also tries to digest ANY ORGANIC material including African Blackwood, or Rosewood, or Coco Bolo wood!

SOLUTION: Create a barrier within the bore of the clarinet that can prevent or lessen the harmful effects of our saliva on the wood.

Larry Naylor deserves most of the credit for the research on this subject. He found that if ORGANIC oil, that is similar to the oil that was in the wood when the tree was growing, is applied to the bore of the instrument, it provides protection against many if not most of the harmful chemicals found in our saliva. And, it also allows the “good moisture” to enter into the wood to help keep it hydrated. HOWEVER, the oil MUST BE ORGANIC, such as Sweet Almond Oil, or Olive Oil, or African Blackwood Oil.

A once every two month oiling of the bore and a complete oil bath when the instrument is being overhauled will protect and keep the fibers of the wood healthy and stable. NOTE: This schedule is for those musicians who are using their instruments on a regular daily basis such as professionals and students. Those who only play their instrument a few times a month can oil their instrument’s bore with organic oil at least twice a year.

Conclusion: If you will provide your clarinet with the care I have outlined today, it can provide you with a lifetime of wonderful service. This amazing wood is truly a wonderful gift from our Creator, and really asks very little from us in return. I truly believe if your clarinets could talk, they would say, “please just give us the care we deserve!”

Musically Yours,  
Michael A. Lomax