



AN INTRODUCTION TO

UNDERSTANDING & SELECTING REEDS

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Table of Contents

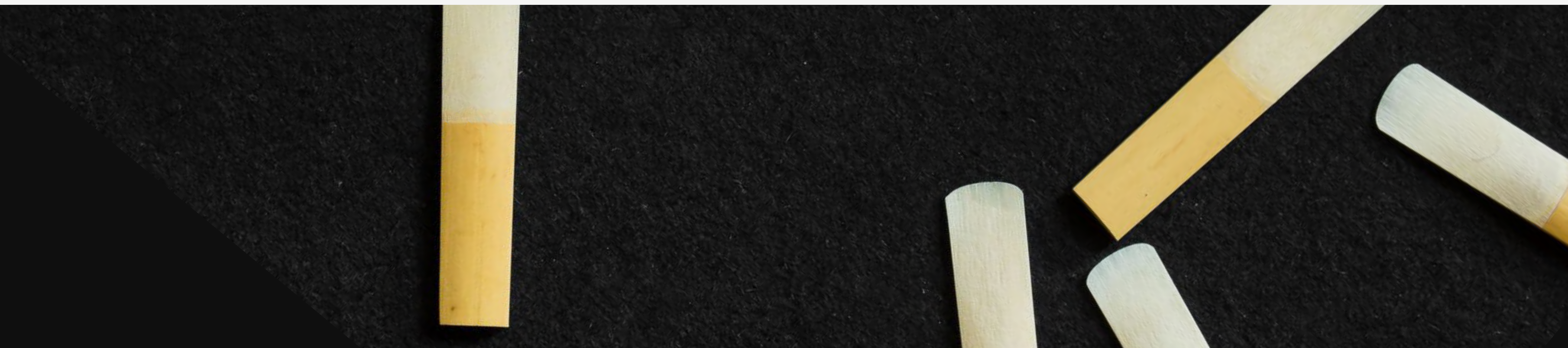
I. Introduction 01

II. The Reed 02

III. Initial Concepts 05

IV. Process for Testing & Selecting Reeds 07

V. Conclusion 11



I. Introduction

Would you like to find the perfect reed for your concert, competition, or audition?

Admitting the absence of a magical formula or secret might be disappointing, but it's the reality we face. Just like most readers, we all know that in music we learn a lot through experiences, mistakes, failures, and also successes. Discovering systems that promote stability and balance while choosing reeds is very important, as it is an essential element in achieving peak performance and having a positive experience.

Preparing for a significant occasion by making sure we have a good reed is as crucial as practicing because such a small element, like a reed, has a really significant impact. In this article you will be able to find some tips I've crafted over the years.



II. The Reed

a. Basic Knowledge

Let's start with some fundamental concepts. The conventional reeds we use are crafted from a type of cane known as *Arundo donax*, primarily cultivated in France, Spain, and Argentina.

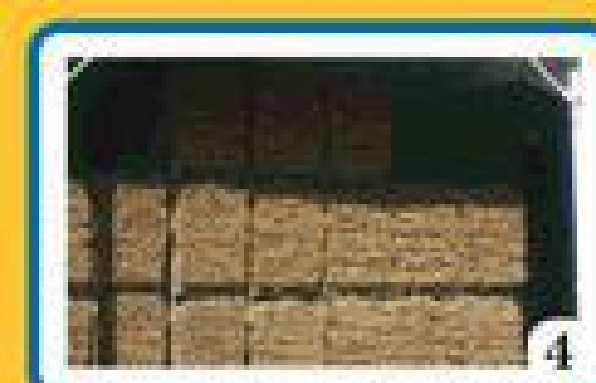
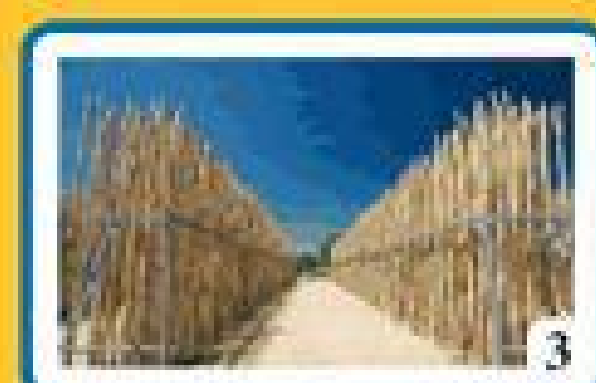


Credit: [Wikipedia](#)

After the cane is harvested, it undergoes a drying process before being moved to a factory for cutting and shaping. The production stages are outlined in the following graphic by Vandoren, offering a broad view of the entire process.



Table of reed production



HUMIDITY CONTROLLED MANUFACTURING



Authentication of reeds and boxes

1. One of our cane fields in Le Lavandou (South of France).

2. Winter harvesting: two year old cane is selected and hand cut.

3. Sunning process: poles are put out in the sun for one month to get their golden color.

4. Drying process: poles are then naturally dried for two full years.

All the manufacturing is done in a humidity controlled environment.

5. Selected cane is cut into smaller tube lengths.

6. Cane tube is then divided into four pieces.

7. The quarters are cut to standard lengths.

8. The reed is sanded to produce a perfectly flat table.

9. The reed is cut to a conical shape.

10. A rough cut is performed to begin the cutting process.

11. The bark of the whole tip is removed. The cutting process ends with final shaping.

12. The tip is cut to exacting standards.

13. The Vandoren signature and authentication code are stamped on the reed. After strength testing and final checks, the strength is stamped.

14. Each reed is packaged in its own plastic reed protector.

15. To protect the reed against humidity variations, it is individually wrapped in a factory fresh Flow Pack packaging.

16. Flow packs are then packed in boxes of 5 or 10, each of them bearing an authentication code, and in boxes of 50 for individual sale.

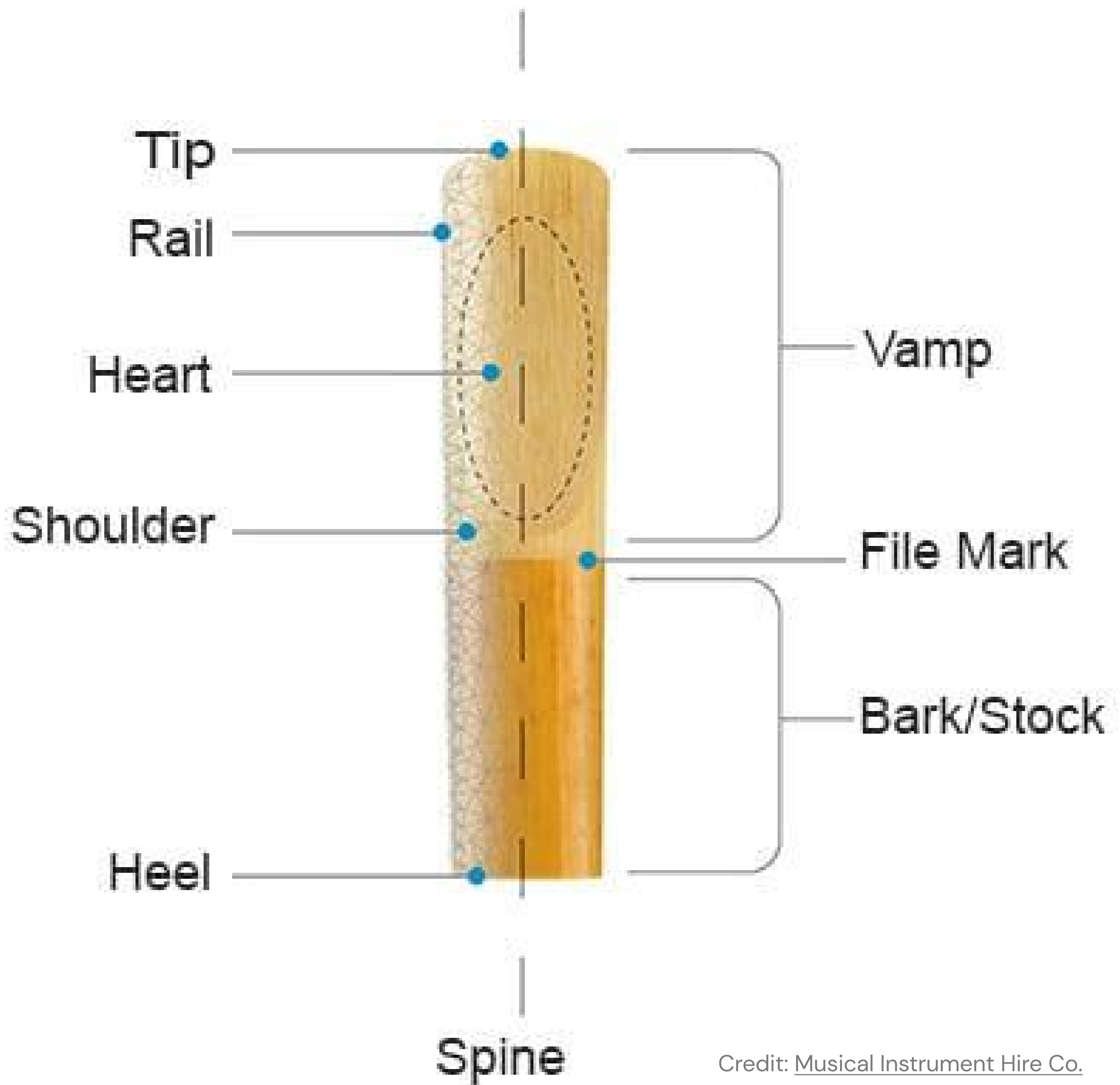
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b. Parts of the Reed

This information can be particularly valuable when considering adjustments or modifications to reeds.

These are the different parts of a reed:



Credit: [Musical Instrument Hire Co.](#)

III. Initial Concepts

a. Selection of Reed Strength

Every player is unique, but typically, the selection of reed strength is heavily influenced by the pairing with the mouthpiece and the result we want to achieve. Generally, closed mouthpieces work better with harder reeds, while open mouthpieces require softer reeds.

Some manufacturers suggest various models and strengths of reeds for their different mouthpieces. However, I suggest experimenting to discover the specific sound you desire.

Usually, a harder reed will create a deeper sound and, based on the mouthpiece, can lead to a bigger tone, albeit potentially reducing flexibility to a certain degree. The attack will normally be more robust and less immediate. On the other hand, a softer reed will respond quicker and offer greater flexibility. However, this may result in a less warm sound, making it generally lighter and clearer.

Discovering the perfect balance, the ideal strength for you, is a highly individualized process, influenced by the genre of music you engage with, the performance venue, and various other elements.

b. Placement of the Reed in the Mouthpiece

In the reed strength we use, each reed will vary, yet adjusting the reed's placement in the mouthpiece can help counterbalance or modify this sensation to some degree.

This is the standard position in which we should normally place the reed.



If we raise the reed, the resistance will be harder, and if we lower it, it will feel lighter.



Since reeds may not always be perfectly balanced on both sides, we also have the flexibility to adjust the reed position based on its individual characteristics, moving it slightly to one side or the other.

We can also move the ligature up or down. This, while it may not have as noticeable an impact as reed positioning, it still influences the vibration of the reed, assisting us in achieving the desired sound or sensation.

IV. Process for Testing and Selecting Reeds

a. Getting Started

Let's start from the very beginning: We open a new box of reeds. We start testing the reeds and the vast majority are not of the quality we expected – surely most of you will recognize that frustrating feeling.

During this phase, patience is crucial. Avoid making decisions solely based on initial impressions. I suggest testing each reed for a maximum of 5 minutes, without venturing into extreme dynamics or registers.

By doing this consistently for several days, you will be able to observe the evolution of the various reeds, allowing you to categorize them into different "teams."

It's important to play with all of them (unless the reed is so poor this is physically impossible) as this practice will enhance your adaptability to perform well with all sorts of reeds. From my perspective, this method is very important.

It might appear simple, but mastering this skill requires time and dedication. Enhancing this ability will not only make you a more versatile clarinet player but also more adaptable, ultimately leading to a smoother journey in the long term.

b. Adjusting and Modifying

There are different tools that we can use to modify and adjust reeds (sandpaper, files, knives, and more specific tools like the ReedGeek).



During this phase, we can carefully and patiently tweak the reeds that don't meet our expectations. While it's challenging to make a reed harder, we can certainly remove wood to soften it.

One could potentially write several articles on this highly complex topic. For now, I'll stick to offering some fundamental tips on what to avoid when adjusting reeds:

- Be cautious when making quick adjustments to reeds as removing too much wood can be irreversible and have a larger impact than expected.
- Avoid filing or scraping the core of the reed as it can affect its performance more than we think.
- Avoid adjusting reeds for them to sound good in a small room if they will be used in a large auditorium, as they may sound too soft when played in a bigger space.

c. Next Steps

As time passes, you can gradually rotate between different reeds and play them for longer periods of time, always maintaining a balanced approach. While we all enjoy playing with high-quality reeds, it's best to avoid overusing them if you want them to have a longer lifespan. Sometimes, we reach the day of a performance or audition only to find that our favorite reeds have become too worn out from excessive use.

My personal rule is to open a new box (sometimes several boxes) approximately 7–10 days before any important event. This allows me time to break them in gently while ensuring they still remain responsive and fresh for the day of the performance.

d. Reed Storage

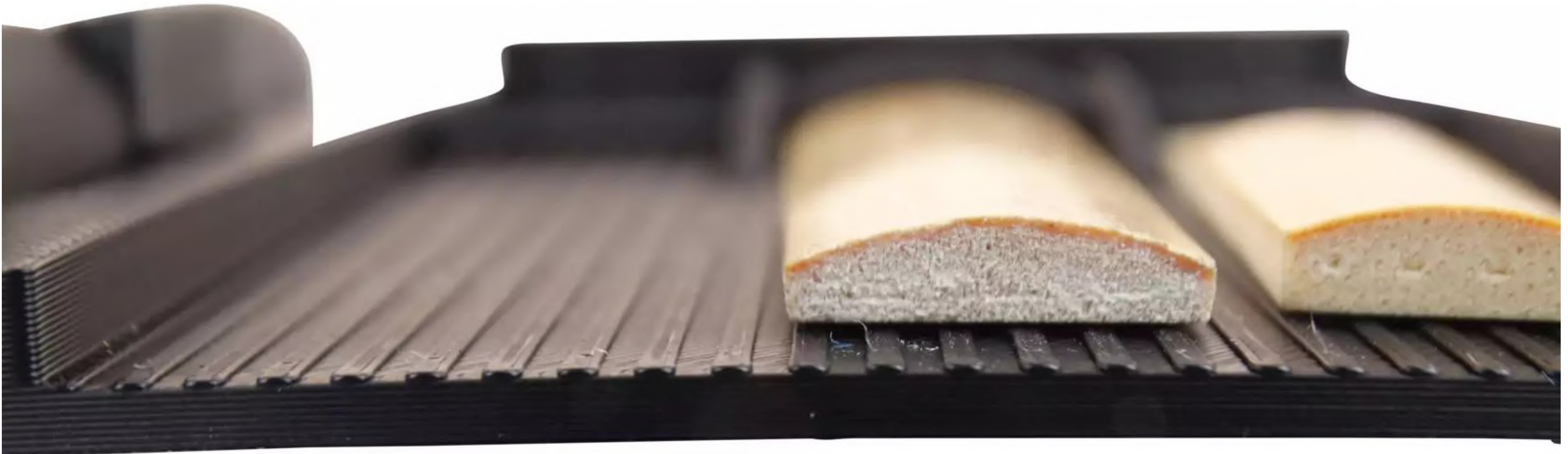
Another crucial aspect to consider is where to store the reeds when they are not in use.

Let's establish that the cane is a living, sensitive material, with fibers that are highly responsive to fluctuations in temperature and humidity. It is very important to establish a system that maintains stability for the reeds. Various humidity control systems, such as Boveda pouches or humidity control bags, are available to help regulate the environment in which we store our reeds.

These can be super useful for some situations, for instance when you're flying (as humidity tends to drop rapidly). Of course, for this to be effective you need to place it together with the reeds in an airtight box, or any storage system you consider – even a tupperware or airtight bag will do the job.

Everyone's circumstances are different, and it also depends on where the musician lives, if they travel a lot, etc., but in my experience, keeping the reeds at around 50% humidity makes the reeds' performance more stable and also prolongs their useful life.

Another aspect to consider is the cases or boxes we use to store the reeds. It is crucial to ensure that the reeds can breathe adequately while maintaining a relatively humid environment. This is why I opt for reed cases with rails that facilitate airflow from the top and bottom, preventing mold growth. While some individuals may prefer flat crystal surfaces, I recommend using cases with rails, based on my personal experience.



e. Synthetic Reeds

The synthetic reeds market is evolving quickly, and I personally have used synthetic reeds for different concerts. It's important for each individual to discover what suits them best, and the realm of this alternative to traditional reeds is no different.

One thing for sure is that the outcome heavily relies on the combination of the reed and mouthpiece we select. If you have the opportunity to try different options at a store, I recommend experimenting with them. Results may vary for each person, but personally, I haven't achieved the excellence of a top-notch traditional reed (although I have encountered some that rival an average yet professionally functional one).



Who knows, perhaps with the ongoing advancements in synthetic reed production, we might not be pondering these questions in the future. However, new concerns are likely to emerge. For now, we can at least have something to point fingers at!

Conclusion

While these suggestions may not suit everyone, each person needs to discover what works best for them. Drawing from my experience as an orchestral musician also involved in freelance work, tours, travel, and numerous auditions (some not as successful!), I have learned valuable lessons over the years. The way we handle reeds – from selection to breaking them in and caring for them – can greatly influence our performance. It's crucial not to underestimate the importance of organization in this aspect.

We have the power to take action, and while many aspects of our work may be beyond our control, it is essential to focus on what falls within our responsibility and influence. I hope that some of these tips will be useful for some of you.

– Ausiàs Garrigós Morant



About the Author

Ausiàs Garrigós Morant was born in Potries, a small village in Valencia, Spain where he started playing clarinet thanks to the wind band culture of the area.

Ausiàs studied at Conservatorio Superior de Castellón, continuing his training at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama of London, where he gained a master's in clarinet and bass clarinet. His main teachers have been Andrew Marriner, Julian Farrell, Lorenzo Losco, Andrew Webster, Juan Esteban Romero and Javier Ros.

Ausiàs has been the Principal Bass Clarinet of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra since 2018, but also plays regularly with orchestras like the London Symphony Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Orquestra del Gran Teatre del Liceu de Barcelona, among others.



He is the Bass Clarinet Professor at the Royal Northern College of Music and Guildhall School, a tutor in the Festival Internacional de Valencia, and does masterclasses in bass clarinet and contemporary music at the Royal College of Music.

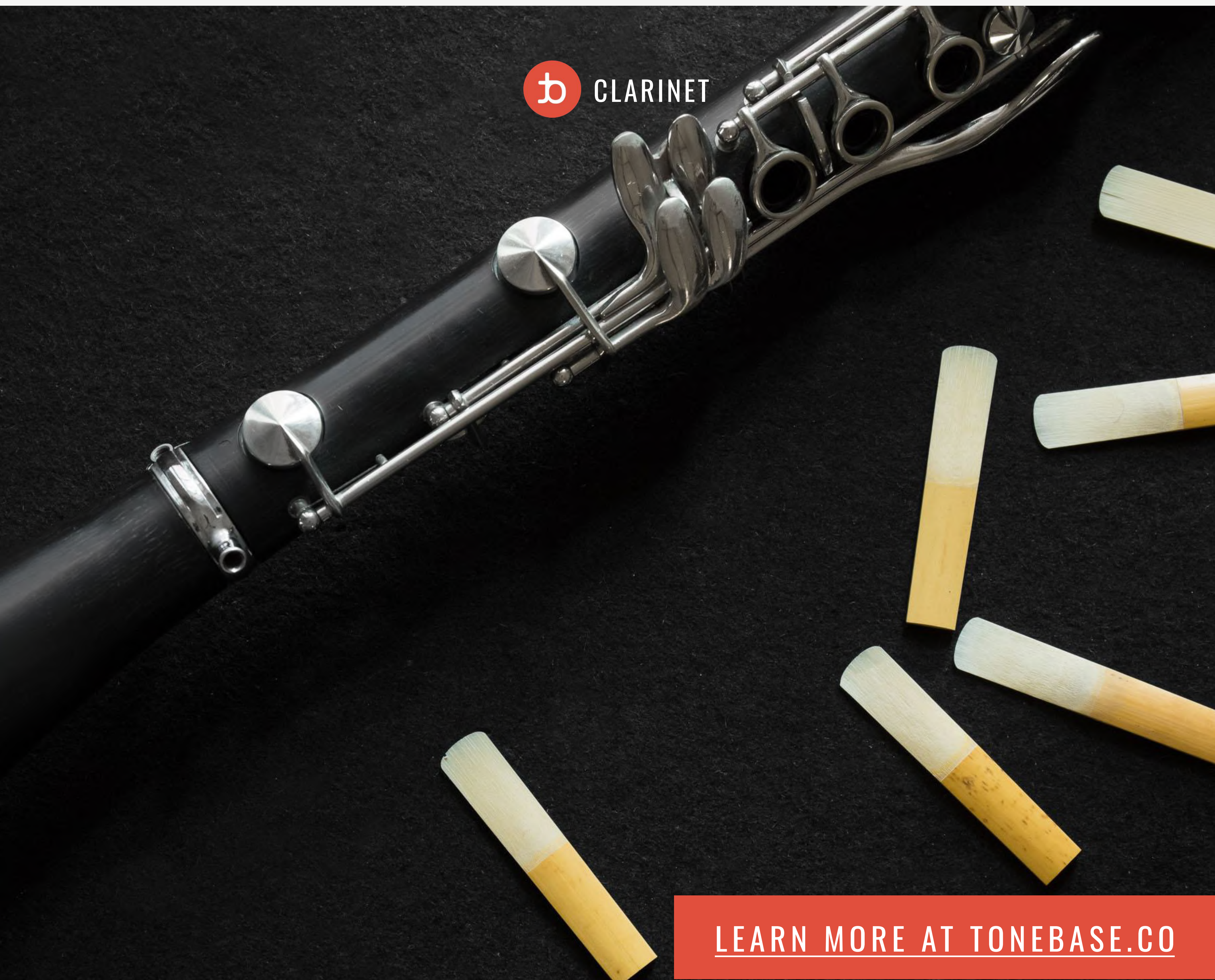
Ausiàs is also very interested in contemporary music and is a founder member of the Riot Ensemble.

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We hope you have enjoyed this guide on reeds! Ready for more helpful clarinet resources?

Stay tuned for the release of tonebase Clarinet! Over the next few months, we'll be sharing updates ahead of the launch including new artists added our roster, courses we're filming, and more. Whether you play professionally or just for your own enjoyment, there's going to be something for you on tonebase!

Feel free to write to team@tonebase.co with questions, comments, or corrections. We can't wait to share with you all what we've been working on!



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