

Failure to Prepare

As we start the preseason prep work for 2025 competition season, the first for the band since the Worlds in 2023. I put together this blog on the importance of instrument maintenance and it's my hope that it inspires you to make the relevant changes to your instruments and do the jobs you have been putting off for months.

Have you struggled in the past with your preparation/instrument maintenance? Now is the perfect time over the long dark winter evenings to get focused and get things fixed once and for all. Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying *"Failing to prepare is preparing for fail"*, this couldn't ring more true in the circle. Don't let down your band mates, come to band practice fully prepared and ready to work!

A crucial and often underappreciated part of playing your musical instrument is keeping it properly maintained. The care with which you treat your instrument is correspondent to the care with which you play the instrument, because if it is not well-maintained, each note will likewise suffer.

Let's explore six reasons why maintenance of your musical instrument is so important that it should be regarded as nearly inseparable from your playing itself.

Sound

Simple fact that a clean, well maintained instrument sounds better. Music is vibration; a musical instrument is precisely built to emanate sound waves. Any lessening of an instrument's ability to vibrate is a lessening of its sound. Even very slight changes in sound quality impacts how you, as the player of the instrument, hear and are able to respond to your music within a piece.

Think of a person wearing glasses that have slowly become dirty during the day. When the glass is cleaned, suddenly everything sparkles and you wonder how you could ever have withstood that lack of clarity.

So it is with sound, its deterioration is often deceptively incremental and in this way we allow ourselves to accept a slight muffle or rasp or scrape in our sound. Let your instrument sing as clearly as possible and the clarity of your playing will follow.

Function

Every instrument functions best when clean and well-maintained, which goes beyond sound and into playability. A poorly set-up string instrument, for example, usually results in high action, making fretting more difficult and hence playing with fluidity either much harder or outright impossible.

Similarly, a soiled or dirty chanter with lots of gum residue to tape can result in stickiness under your fingers which will impact its playability. Human beings are nothing if not adaptable, and sometimes a player will adapt by acquiring bad habits, changing his or her playing style without even knowing it in trying to overcome an instrument's mechanical issues. But a simple fix which is very effective, clean off any gum left on your chanter and you'll notice the difference right away!

Durability

Age can be an instrument's friend, particularly those which use tonewoods to produce sound and acquire more ability to vibrate with time. The famed old Stradivarius violins, however, are as less about the wood than their masterful construction by Antonio Stradivari.

Such mastery has only been retained through proper maintenance. This holds true for all musical instruments: the closer any instrument is to its original condition, the better, and this only happens with proactive maintenance.

Value

Few true musicians buy an instrument with an eye towards one day selling or trading it. We acquire, foremost, to play. But the reality is we often end up later selling an instrument, whether to upgrade or because another instrument has captured our musical heart.

Instruments only retain value (or in some cases increase in value) if they have been properly maintained. There's an almost poetic beauty in all this: the unending circle of musicians past, present, and future, joined by instruments that pass through hands and time, all made possible by proper care.

Inspiration

A clean and well-maintained instrument sounds better and plays better. As a result, you sound and play better, so quite naturally you are inspired to play more. It's natural to buy a good instrument to begin with. A cheap, poorly constructed instrument makes playing music harder and so does a poorly maintained instrument.

There are enough obstacles to playing music, like conquering our difficult instrument, or finding a quiet place to practise without disturbing the neighbours among many others. Maintaining your instrument is a simple way to make playing easier and to actually enjoy playing your instrument.

Maintenance vs. Repair

There's kind of a universal law of maintenance vs. repair that applies equally to automobiles or musical instruments. Consider a car and a saxophone: just as the oil in your car builds up particulates and eventually becomes more an abrasive and less a lubricant, the oil inside a saxophone's key rods eventually dirties to the point of hurting the instrument.

You can't just keep adding oil; you need to change it. If you keep playing with old oil, you'll damage the instrument, and the repair will cost much, much more than fresh oil would have.

The same goes with brake pads on a car and tonehole pads — let those brake pads go bad, and soon you'll have a major brake cylinder repair job, just like a faulty pad can make you bend your key levers by applying too much force. Keep your instrument functioning as it was intended to, and you'll avoid big fixes later.

So to sum up, if you maintain your instrument, you'll sound better, play more and better. You will be more inspired, and keep both more value and more of your hard-earned money to buy more instruments, or beer after we compete! Not only that, but let's face it, nicer looking and sounding instruments are cooler. So just be cool: maintain your instrument.