

# Helping Your Clarinet Survive Marching Band

## An Interview with Phillip Muncy

Many students across the country are getting ready for fall marching band, which may mean extremes in outdoor temperatures and other atmospheric elements. Phillip Muncy gives us his suggestions for keeping clarinets, particularly wooden ones, in good shape during outdoor performances.



**Insight:** Temperature – What is too hot or too cold?

**Phillip Muncy:** The ideal temperature for wooden clarinets is about 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Any temperature above or below this becomes increasingly problematic. If the instrument is cool to the touch (due to air conditioning) hold the instrument close to your body to warm it up gradually.

Do not blow warm air into a cool instrument!

Avoid rapid changes in temperature. If you are outdoors in very hot weather, make certain the instrument goes back into the case before returning to an air conditioned building. Likewise, avoid rapid exposure to high temperatures if you are coming from a cool room to the hot outdoors.

Don't leave a clarinet in a car no matter what the temperature. Keep the instrument in as comfortable a climate as possible. If you are not comfortable then the clarinet is probably not doing very well either! If the instrument does get too hot or too cold, don't panic. Problems usually occur with rapid changes. Don't overreact and try to quickly raise or lower the temperature of the instrument.

When indoors, keep the instrument away from vents that blow heated and air-conditioned air. There is always a spike in temperature change when the heat or air conditioning is running. Keep the instrument in its case when not in use - even for short periods.

**I:** What about humidity levels?

**PM:** Appropriate and consistent humidity is probably more important than the temperature. Humidity is affected by temperature. Heat and air conditioning remove moisture from the air. The 70/70 rule is a good starting point. Try to keep the instrument in your case at 70 degrees and 70% humidity if you can when not playing. Again, it is important not to expose the wooden clarinet to rapid changes in humidity or temperature.

**I:** Sweat is always a problem in the heat. Can this damage the instrument?

**PM:** Sweat has harmful acids and salts that can damage the keys, wood, and also cause the springs to rust and break prematurely. Keep the instrument wiped clean with a soft cloth as you perspire. Silver polishing cloths do a great job removing tarnish and other contaminants on keys but are not as good as a plain, non-abrasive cloth for removing perspiration. It is best to have both.

**I:** What's the safest way to remove dust and grime?

**PM:** Silver polishing cloths have a compound impregnated into the fabric that improves the removal of tarnish, contaminants, and other grime. The silver polish compound can mix with the perspiration if it is heavy, causing problems with sticky pads and gumming keys. Use the silver polishing cloth only on dry keys to remove tarnish, grime and any other contaminants.

**I:** Anything else we should know?

**PM:** It is best not to use your best wooden clarinet when playing outside. If you can afford it, have a secondary instrument for these performances. Harold Wright, former Principal clarinetist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra had an old instrument he used for outdoor performances that he nicknamed his “one eyed dog”.

**I:** If you were to get caught in a rain shower with your wooden instrument, what would be the first thing you should do?

**PM:** Run for cover, wipe the instrument down with a non abrasive cloth removing all the moisture from the instrument, and put it away in its case.

**I:** There seems to be a ‘mixed bag’ of opinions when it comes to bore oil. What do you think...to use or not to use?

**PM:** I prefer not to oil as most people get carried away. If you feel you must oil, then use a natural oil that has elasticity - such as the bore oil that we use in our shop. I suggest oiling only the tenons and sockets of the clarinet. This is where the moisture enters the wood, in the open grain. One or two drops on your fingers should do your entire clarinet.

**I:** What are some suggestions for keeping bass clarinets in good working order?

**PM:** Most bass clarinets are damaged during assembly. Make certain the tenons fit easily into the sockets for proper assembly. You should not struggle and run the risk of bending keys. It is best to put the bell on first, followed by the middle joint. Next put your reed on your mouthpiece and the mouthpiece on the neck and then the neck on the bass clarinet. This may sound simple, but far too many players are trying to put the bell on last. Assembling the bell of on long bass clarinet can be challenging even for a strong, muscular person.

**I:** What about transporting clarinets? Are there things we can do to minimize damage from bumpy school buses and equipment trucks?

**PM:** It is always best if you are able to carry your instrument in its case with you. This is the best way to avoid damage caused by falling, dropping or bouncing around. Treat your instrument like a baby. You wouldn't lock a baby in the trunk of your car or leave it unattended on a bus!



Philip Muncy is president of Muncy Winds, Inc, located in Boone, NC. Phil studied clarinet with Robert Listokin, receiving degrees from the North Carolina School of the Arts. Phil also studied Musical Instrument Technology at the State University of New York, Morrisville and began repairing wind instruments in 1977. In 1987, he founded Muncy Winds. Phil also makes custom clarinet barrels made from Rosewood, Grenadilla, and Delrin and is currently producing a barrel with the Buffet Crampon company in Paris, France. Visit Phil and his lovely wife Pam at: [www.muncywinds.com](http://www.muncywinds.com)