

Brass Instrument Care

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1. Maintaining (or improving) the appearance of the instruments

Almost all brass instruments are coated with either gold coloured lacquer or silver plating. This is because brass, whilst good for its acoustic properties and malleability, has a dull appearance which would need polishing a lot to make it shine and look attractive.

Gold lacquer can get chipped, marked or even dissolved and shouldn't be left wet. So after playing a lacquered instrument you should dry the lacquered surfaces and also rub off any marks, especially sweat. It is a good idea to keep a clean duster in your case for this purpose.

Silver plating will tarnish over time, and will also be damaged by anything wet, greasy or acidic. So dry the silver plated surfaces after playing, and rub off marks with a clean duster. If the plating starts to look dull or tarnished, rub it very gently with an anti-tarnish cloth or use anti-tarnish silver foam. (We have had great results with Hagerty Silver Foam - [see links at the bottom](#)). It's best to protect your hands with gloves when doing these jobs. Always bear in mind that plating is thin and it's possible to rub it away completely! Remember that most mouthpieces are silver plated too and should be looked after in the same way, as well as kept clean inside (as described in the Mouthpiece section [below](#)).

And finally, although Brasso sounds like the right thing to use, it isn't, because you aren't cleaning brass, and the same applies to any chemical metal polishes - please don't use them.

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2. Giving your instrument a bath

The insides of brass instruments gradually accumulate all sorts of deposits, including acids, (especially if players haven't been observing the "drink only water" rule before and during playing), and gunky oil. So the best thing to do is to give the instrument a bath every few months.

It's a good idea to have some paper ready to place the removable pieces on, and to write down what they are. So numbers 1, 2 and 3 for the valves and their bottom caps (and their springs if separate), and similar numbers or descriptions for the slides. The layout can vary, but the biggest slide is usually the main tuning slide, and then each valve will have its own slide. If you can't get the slides out, the bath is still possible but it will be harder to get the water out of the instrument afterwards so speak to us about releasing the slides first. Trombonists should carefully remove the main slide and also the tuning slide, and for more complicated models, include any other parts which can be removed and replaced easily.

The water should be warm and have some washing up liquid (no bleach) in to help disperse the grease. Put an old towel under the water for the instrument to rest on. If the instrument isn't too big it

can be fully submerged; for larger instruments you will need to reposition it a few times so that all the tubing gets well soaked. Leave it for at least 30 minutes to soak, during which time some of the gunk will come out quite readily and you will see it. To be sure that everything is as clean as possible, use a flexible (snake) brush to get round the insides of the bends. You will need to clean the valves and slides too. Do them one by one so that they don't get mixed up.

When you have finished, lift the instrument out of the water, hold it over the bath, and tip it in all directions to get as much water out as you can. Rinse off any soap and deposits left on the outside.

Then gently dry the outsides and the parts you have removed. Leave the inside to dry then grease the slides, oil the valves and replace.

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3. Trombone slides

Trombone slides have to move very fast and therefore need to run completely smoothly for the instrument to play as it should. If you release the slide lock and hold the trombone with the bell pointing straight down, the slide should run downwards completely freely - be ready to catch it so that it doesn't fall off or hit the ground! If your slide doesn't do this check the following:

- lubrication - wipe off any old gunky deposits from the inner slide (handling it very carefully) using a soft damp cloth. Either follow the instructions with the care kit provided by MYBB with the trombone, or apply a small amount of slide cream to the top of the slide and work it around by putting the outer slide back on and moving it up and down. (If you don't have either a care kit or slide cream, ask at the desk.)
- surface wear and tear - if lubrication helps but doesn't make the slide run completely smoothly, inspect the inner slide. If you can see any areas which are less shiny or even discoloured, the surface may have worn a little. Try applying a very small amount of extra cream to those areas and working it round with the slide.
- misalignment - the more bendy inner tubes have to slide inside the more rigid outer ones whilst fitting very closely, and as there are effectively two sets of tubes, they can become misaligned. This will generally arise through damage caused by the trombone being dropped, or the inner tubing being inadequately protected or handled roughly when taken apart. If you think that misalignment may be the problem with your slide please tell us so that we can check and, if necessary, get it repaired.

Routine maintenance - clean off the slide and relubricate it every month or so - more frequently if there is wear to the surface. If your slide starts to move less freely between times it may be possible to improve it by spraying it with water and working it up and down.

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4. The mouthpiece

Insert your mouthpiece with a gentle twist, and it should then be easily removed with a gentle twist. Banging it in will not hold it any more securely; it will make it more likely to get stuck! If this happens don't be tempted to use tools to pull it out, we can release it with a special gadget - please ask at the desk.

Your mouthpiece should be cleaned with a gentle liquid soap and a mouthpiece brush about every month and preferably every time you play. Simply put a drop of soap in the cup of the mouthpiece, get the brush wet, and scrub the shank (tube part), inside the cup, and the rim (where your mouth meets the metal). Rinse and dry.

You can also sterilize your mouthpiece after you have cleaned it by immersing it in boiling water, or steaming it using a pan steamer.

5. Valves

The valves are moving parts and so need maintenance to keep them working smoothly. Older or poorer quality instruments will need extra maintenance to counter the effects of wear or deterioration of the surfaces inside the valve. It's best to oil your valves lightly once a week so that the cylindrical part of the valve always has a thin film of oil on it. Once a month wash each valve in warm soapy water and give the internal casing a wipe down with a soft cloth and a cleaning brush, to avoid an accumulation of gunky oil, and start again with a light oiling. If you would like a demonstration of valve oiling please ask. Points to note are

- you should be able to open all three top valve caps - if you can't please tell us
- deal with one valve at a time so they don't get mixed up
- if your instrument has loose springs under the valves remember to take them out if you're going to tip it upside down
- oil may drip so put something like an old towel underneath whilst you're doing the oiling
- we issue all instruments with a bottle of valve oil - please ask if you need some
- some valves have to be twisted once the valve cap has been tightened, others engage with a groove down the side of the casing - ask if you're not sure or your instrument won't play when you put the valves back
- when replacing valve caps make sure they are straight so that you don't get a crossed thread
- if the valves on your instrument stick despite regular oiling please tell us.

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6. Water keys (also known as spit valves)

When you play a brass instrument, it is inevitable that condensation and saliva (referred to as "water") will get inside the instrument and will collect at its lowest points. Eventually the air won't be able to get past the water and the instrument will make a glugging sound rather than a pure note. To allow the water to drain from the instrument a drain hole is built into the tubing and a special valve called a water key is fitted. It's effectively a spring loaded stopper and players are taught how to help the water out by sending air down the tube whilst holding the valve open. Occasionally water collects in places where there is no drain hole and the water has to be emptied by removing and tipping out a tuning slide. To ensure that the water key fits the hole and doesn't allow air or water to escape, it is cushioned with a soft material that makes a good seal. Traditionally cork is used but synthetics are also available these days, and the cushion is known as a water key cork.

There are a number of things which can go wrong with water keys, and if your instrument has started playing with a weak or breathy sound it's the first place to check. Here's list of the problems we meet most often:

- the cork is disintegrating, loose or has disappeared - ask at the desk because we keep a stock of spares
- the water key assembly is loose or has fallen apart - this can be the result of a knock or a screw working loose, so if there looks to be something missing check your case and look around the area where you were last playing and you may find the screw which can be replaced with care (or brought to the desk for attention)
- the spring isn't working so the key won't close - this can be a broken spring (please tell us so that we can get it replaced) or a misalignment (see next point)
- the lever which you press to open the valve has bent and isn't working properly - this can be as a result of a knock or repeated pressure and we'll need to see the instrument to get it fixed.

You can minimise problems by checking the key and making sure that nothing is loose, and also taking care with your instrument so that it doesn't get dropped or knocked. Trombonists should make sure that the water key is kept on top when putting the slide into the case, rather than being pushed repeatedly into a tight space.

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7. List of care & maintenance items

The links below are just suggestions of where you can buy these items.

Online retailers www.norman.co.uk and www.dawkes.co.uk are usually reliable, but there are others too, and you may find items on Amazon or eBay.

Mouthpiece brush

<https://www.normans.co.uk/product/superslick-mouthpiece-brush-for-all-instruments>
https://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref=sr_nr_n_1?fst=as%3Aoff&rh=n%3A407882031%2Ck%3Amouthpiece+brush&keywords=mouthpiece+brush&ie=UTF8&qid=1539530395&rnid=1642204031

Valve brush

<https://www.normans.co.uk/product/superslick-valve-cleaning-brush-for-all-instruments>

Snake brush

<https://www.dawkes.co.uk/trumpet-cleaning-snake-brush-vinyl-maintenance.dm?catno=acm283>
<https://www.dawkes.co.uk/trombone-cleaning-snake-brush-vinyl-maintenance.dm?catno=acm284>

Valve oil

The band can provide bottles of valve oil free of charge on request, but if you wish to buy it yourself:

<http://amzn.eu/9a3Nx1K>
<https://www.dawkes.co.uk/search?query=valve+oil>
<https://www.normans.co.uk/product/rocket-professional-valve-oil>

Trombone slide treatment

The band provide these free of charge, but if you wish to buy it yourself:

<https://www.normans.co.uk/product/superslick-slickit-3-in-1-complete-trombone-slide-kit>

Tuning slide grease

To keep the tuning slides of valved instruments and trombones moving.

<https://www.normans.co.uk/product/superslick-sstsg-tuning-slide-grease>
<https://www.normans.co.uk/product/vincent-bach-tuning-slide-grease>
<https://www.dawkes.co.uk/ultra-qlide-tuning-slide-grease-maintenance.dm?catno=ca0144>

Hagerty Silver Foam

This product is amazing and will make even the largest silver instruments shine in no time. For silver instruments only. Do not use this or any other chemical products on gold coloured instruments as it will permanently damage the lacquer.

<http://amzn.eu/9dR90G0> or <https://www.hagertyshop.uk/product/silver-foam-hag45/>

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