Fixing a Hole

Instruments have a way of breaking. So what can teachers do about it? Four veterans offer tips for the wary and the budget-conscious.

BY MAC RANDALL

Just about every music teacher has an entertaining—or horrifying—story to tell about student instruments in an extreme state of disrepair. When Corey Ames, band director at Loyola Academy in Wilmette, Illinois, first started his teaching career, for example, he says he "walked into an instrument battleground. Large instruments were set on top of timpani heads, woodwinds were missing keys due to a lack of maintenance, and brass instruments slightly resembled sheets of metal after being flattened, perhaps accidentally driven over by a car."

Of course, most instrument problems aren't nearly so severe; loose screws, leaky pads, stuck mouthpieces, and wobbly bridges are far more the norm. Still, each little imperfection can have an impact on a student musician's performance, and they all have to be dealt with eventually. The question is, who does the dealing? In many cases, it's the teacher, for reasons both of convenience (sending the instrument to a repair shop could mean the student won't be able to play it for days or weeks) and budget (because most shops charge a minimum rate for bench time, even small repairs can have a significant price tag).

However, this doesn't necessarily mean that music teachers have the best handle on what it takes to put instruments back in working order. David Bailey, principal repair technician for the Nashua, New Hampshire, public schools, says, "Initially when I started repairing instruments 32 years ago, I was quite surprised at how little many teachers knew about the mechanics of the instruments they teach. I got over that surprise a long time ago, after I saw how widespread that lack of knowledge was."

But what exactly should teachers be expected to know, and do, when it comes to instrument repair and maintenance? For a start, Bailey recommends that all music teachers take the time to acquire a basic understanding of how all their students' instruments work: "They don't need to take the instruments apart, but they should sit down for a half-hour or so with each instrument—especially woodwinds—and simply see what happens when each key is pressed, which other keys move at the same time, which other keys shouldn't move when any particular key is pressed, and so on."

Once that basic understanding is achieved, it's time to acquire the necessary tools of the trade. Ames says, "The essential items that every band director should have for repair and maintenance are a screwdriver, extra pads, glue, fire, a mouthpiece puller, and extra drumheads. Most commonly in my experience, students that play woodwind instruments aren't properly taught how to watch for loose screws; their instrument could fall apart if this simple mechanical issue is not looked at. Having a small set of screwdrivers on hand is a necessary tool in the classroom and has probably saved me hundreds of dollars in repair. During weather changes it's common for pads to swell and contract, causing small leaks in woodwind instruments. Having the ability to make fire in the classroom and heat up a pad is also a major money-saver."

Susan Bechler, retired orchestra director of Victor Central School in Victor, New York, lays down the essentials for string teachers: "Everyone should know how to wrap strings correct-
ly, reset pegs seasonally in areas where humidity varies significantly, and angle a bridge correctly. It's certainly helpful to be able to recognize badly shaped bridges, poorly installed soundposts, pegs that don't fit, and grooves being worn in a nut or bridge. Simple things go a long ways with stringed instruments. I never tune a student's instrument without glancing over string condition, dirt and rosin buildup, and bridge placement and angle. If there's time to effect a remedy immediately, I do so. Otherwise I typically ask the student to remind me to take care of it at some specified time.

Making matters more difficult for teachers are the extremely variable quality of students' instruments—some are second-hand, perhaps found at a yard sale or bequeathed by an elderly relative, while others are new but cheaply made — and the common complicating factor of parents getting involved in "fixing" those instruments. The father of one of Ames' clarinet students once mistakenly sat on the student's clarinet, breaking it into several pieces, and then stuck it back together with superglue; as you might guess, this is not a recommended repair procedure.

"When a parent or student comes in with a low-quality or poorly adjusted instrument," Bechler says, "a thing to avoid doing is to try to show how bad it is is by playing on it. The teacher will understand how inferior the tone is or how bad the adjustment, but the parent without experience shouldn't be expected to get that, and the student may be crushed by your disapproval." All the same, for your own peace of mind, you need to be able to determine where you must draw the line on in-class repairs and to tell parents and students when a problem warrants the attention of a trained professional—or when the item's simply irreparable.

For some teachers, that line barely exists. Richard Petroske, band director at Cambridge-South Dorchester High School in Cambridge, Maryland, says "I'll repair an instrument 5,000 times if it keeps a student in band." These days, Petroske really knows his way around his students' instruments, and that's because he decided to take matters into his own hands and work as an apprentice at a local repair shop one summer. "I learned there's a tool for everything, and that instrument repair is a lot of common sense," he says. "If you know how they work, you can find the problem. I would highly recommend people try [apprenticing]. It's been an invaluable resource—and it was estimated that I saved $1,100 one year by fixing instruments myself. Amazing what you can do with a leak light and some time."

Not all teachers may feel they have such time—or the inclination to do so much extra work—in which case it's worth seeking out qualified repair people and cultivating relationships with them. For schools with large music programs, it's advisable to have an agreement with a local shop to handle repairs for school-owned instruments. Rented instruments may also have a similar repair agreement with the shop. But be sure to investigate all available options before making such an agreement. One good place to look for qualified technicians is on the National Association of Professional Band Instrument Repair Technicians (NAPBIRT)’s Web site, napbirt.org.

Music teachers can and should let parents know what purchase, rental, and repair facilities are available; however, it may be against local laws or regulations for them to recommend a specific shop or instrument brand. Instead, they should make general suggestions and give parents key questions to ask when purchasing an instrument, the two most important being 1) If the teacher doesn't think the instrument is of good enough quality, can I return it? and 2) Where can I get it repaired? Teachers should also give students and their parents detailed information on proper instrument care and maintenance.

In addition, everyone interviewed for this story recommends that basic instrument repair should be part of every undergraduate music curriculum. Ames, who studied the subject at VanderCook College of Music, admits, "Since I've had the requirement, I may be a little biased, but it has helped me tremendously in my work. There are so many repairs nowadays that cost way too much money, and especially in this time of economic hardship, it may help us to find ways in which we can cut our music budgets."