

High Altitude Oboe Reeds

When traveling from a lower altitude to a higher one, generally two things happen to oboe reeds:

1. The opening becomes more closed which tends to cause sharpness
2. The reed tends to not vibrate as much as it did at lower altitudes.

If you try to scrape your sea-level reed at a high altitude in order to make it vibrate more (solving problem #2 above), it tends to weaken the cane thus exacerbating the reed opening issue. (Increasing problem #1 above) Most people that try this find their tone is thinner and buzzy than normal.

The only real solution is to start with a piece of cane from a smaller diameter tube. At sea level I usually use cane at 10-10.5mm in diameter but in Colorado I use 9.5-10mm. This might sound extreme, but really it just makes the reed openings more similar to sea level reeds.

It is also extremely important to use strong cane at higher altitudes. Because one must scrape more to get it vibrating, the cane must have inherent strength to be able to take the scraping and still produce a reed with substance. Soft cane doesn't work well at high altitudes.

Try not to have too thick a gouge. Again, because of the reluctance of the reed to vibrate, if the gouge is too thick, it requires even more scraping to get it to play. I recommend .57-.59mm in the center of the cane.

When I travel to different altitudes, I get the reeds (from appropriately sized tubes) tied and just beginning to crow. I leave them a little long so I have room to finish and clip them in my performance altitude. If they are starting to crow before I leave, it usually takes just one session to get them so I can practice on them. It is best to have a few days to finish your reeds before you need to play in public.

If you really have no time to make a new reed at the higher altitude, look for a reed that is flat and rattles at sea level. Since a good high altitude reed becomes flat and rattles when you bring it down to sea level, it stands to reason that it might work the other way. No guarantees, of course, but at least you stand a fighting chance. Be prepared to adjust the reed when you reach your destination. Always travel with knife, plaques, cutting block, razor blade (or whatever you use to clip reeds) and sharpening equipment. Don't forget to pack these in your checked baggage!

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