



MAKER'S BENCH

To Dampit Or Not To Dampit

by John Waddle

Who needs a Dampit?

You need a Dampit if your instrument is made of wood, and you live in a climate that changes. You need a Dampit if you live in a house that is heated in the winter. You need a Dampit if you don't want your instrument to crack. You need a Dampit if you don't want the hair in your bow to shrink in the winter.

What is a Dampit?

The purpose of the Dampit is to add some humidity to your instrument when it would otherwise be too dry.

A Dampit is a tube made of rubbery material with an absorbent material inside, with holes that allow moisture to evaporate. There is a rubber washer on one end to stop the Dampit from falling into the instrument when placed through the f-hole. Dampits come in several sizes to fit smaller to larger instruments, from children's violins to large basses.

When do you use a Dampit?

You use the Dampit when the air changes from humid to dry. Wood swells with more humidity, and shrinks when it is more dry. In Minnesota, we go from extremes of humidity (summer) to dryness (winter). With more humidity, the instrument may swell up, the bridge may seem to be holding the strings too high off the fingerboard, and seams may open. With less humidity, the instrument may start to dry out and shrink, possibly causing the top to sink down and give you the feeling that the strings are too close to the fingerboard. Since the instrument is glued at the edges to the ribs, the wood may not have enough room to shrink and a seam may open, or a crack may form. Bridges can be adjusted or replaced, and an open seam can be re-glued, and a crack may be repairable, but it's better to avoid these problems by using the Dampit.

Where does the Dampit work the best?

Most people put the Dampit in through the larger hole of one of the f-holes in the top. I usually see them in the f-hole on the bass side. I put the Dampits in the treble side f-hole because the label is usually on the bass side, and if any water does drip into the instrument, I don't want it to drip onto the label, which is paper.

One Dampit in any instrument should be enough if it is kept moist. Excessive moisture in a Dampit can cause water to drip into the instrument, which can damage the instrument. A dry Dampit in an instrument is the same as no Dampit. The Dampit will hold moisture for a few days at the most, and then will need more water put in it. I usually dip them in distilled water, and then squeeze any excess water out into a towel before putting it in the instrument.

Why do some instruments seem to do fine without Dampits and some instruments have more problems? Some people never use Dampits and don't seem to have problems, and some people come in with instruments with cracks over and over. Some relatively new

instruments develop cracks, and some very old instruments have few, or even no cracks. Most very old instruments have some cracks. Some instrument owners take very good care of their instruments. Some are less responsible.

How do you use a Dampit?

It is a good idea to have a reliable hygrometer in the room where the instrument is kept. Many modern cases now have built in hygrometers, though they are often not calibrated. Hardware stores now sell digital hygrometers that are battery operated and not too expensive. Some research can tell you which are the best brands.

A hygrometer tells you the relative humidity in the air. It's best to keep the humidity between 40% and 60% if you can. In summer, when there is more humidity in the air most of the time, the Dampit isn't what you need—though there are sometimes dry days in summer too, depending on where you live.

You need the Dampit the most in winter when the air is the most dry. If you become aware that the humidity has gone below 40%, it's time to use the Dampit. Dip it in water. I use distilled water because there is less in distilled water to eventually harden the absorbent material in the Dampit. It will last longer. In a dry towel, squeeze excess water out of the Dampit and dry the exterior surface. Check to make sure there is no water dripping. Then put the Dampit in the larger of the two holes in the treble side f-hole. Check it daily by squeezing it in your hand. If it feels dry, add more water. If the Dampit won't go in the hole because the hole is too small, get a smaller Dampit.

If you don't want to put a Dampit inside your instrument, you can put it in the case with the instrument. It will still be effective, as long as the case is closed. Some people use humidifiers of various sorts, in cases. This can help, but if the case is open, the moisture is just going into the air, not the instrument.

A good restorer/repairer can repair a crack so well that it is almost impossible to see, but once an instrument cracks, the crack will always be there, no matter how well it was repaired. If your instrument cracks, you may be without it for days or weeks while it is being repaired, and it will cost you money. Cracks in an instrument will also cause a depreciation of the value of the instrument.

Dampits are not expensive, especially compared to the cost of repairing damaged instruments. Think of them as cheap insurance. Dampit anyway.

John R. Waddle is a violin maker, dealer, and restorer whose shop is in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is a 1981 graduate of The Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City, Utah, and has had his own shop in St. Paul since 1986. John is a member of both The American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers, and the Violin Society of America. †