

Venting Bassoon Notes

By Shannon Lowe

Bassoon students sometimes struggle with getting the notes A3 through D4 to speak clearly and cleanly when articulated. Even with the appropriate amount of air pressure and a correct embouchure, the sound preceding the note can be rough and uneven.

Bassoon instructors often prescribe a traditional technique called flicking to cure notes that crack when articulated. Flicking involves the simultaneous pressing and releasing of a left hand thumb key when one of these troublesome notes is articulated. Synchronization of tongue, air pressure, and thumb key flick must occur for the note to speak cleanly, and in technically difficult passages, flicking is almost impossible for developing students to master. In many cases, a student may give up on

flicking altogether, settling for the rough sound that occurs when these notes are articulated.

There is an alternative to flicking called venting, for which bassoonists depress one of the left-hand thumb keys for the duration of the note. When I start a beginning student on bassoon or encounter a student who struggles with flicking, I teach the fingerings for A3-C4 to include the thumb keys. Usually, the most troublesome notes are A3 and B♭3, so I especially enforce venting with these notes. Venting is especially helpful when a student has a fast tongued passage in this range. Instead of flicking each time a note is articulated, the student can hold a single thumb key while tonguing these notes. Immed-



ately, the sound is much cleaner, but beware that this may not work for instruments in poor condition or for older, obscure models of bassoon.

Counterclockwise from the whisper key, the left thumb bassoon keys are whisper, C♯, high A, high C, high D (not all bassoons have this key), low B♭, low B, low C, low D. For A3 and B♭3, vent the high A key. Use the high C key for B3 and C4 and as a universal vent key in fast technical passages. If

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the instrument has a high D key, use it to vent D4.

I also introduce using a vent fingering for D4 if a student has problems with the note speaking cleanly. However, some bassoons are not equipped with a high D key. If this causes a problem, have students use more air pressure, employ a firmer embouchure (round tension, as opposed to biting tension), and move the reed farther into the mouth to improve the D's response. Also, make sure the bocal's vent hole is clean.

For most bassoons, thumb keys will alter the pitch of A3 through D4, and a tiny pitch fluctuation from flicking can become a drastic tuning change when venting. This is most noticeable in long notes. Students who encounter tuning problems should adjust by changing the tongue's height or the amount of space in the back of the mouth. Additionally, students should play these notes as long tones with a tuner to practice stabilizing and sustaining them while holding down the thumb keys. With practice, students can improve the altered pitch of vented notes.

Students who practice venting will be able to play these usually troublesome notes cleanly when articulated. If they already know how to flick, this will give them another tool to fix their sound and avoid rough, barky-sounding notes. □



Shannon Lowe is assistant professor of bassoon at Valdosta State University as well as adjunct assistant professor of bassoon at the University of Florida. She received a doctoral degree in bassoon performance at SUNY-Stony Brook and bachelor of music education with a performance certificate and master of music in bassoon performance from the University of Florida. Currently, Lowe is the principal bassoonist of the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra and Albany (Georgia) Symphony Orchestra as well as a founder and member of The Scirocco Quartet.

Filling Halls, cont. from page 18

but I don't want to cause an administrator to get angry emails. There is usually a way to get the idea across without resorting to graphic pictures. For concert programs where the images might cause concern, I usually include a statement like the following: "While the images are selected carefully, parental guidance is suggested."

Creating Collaborative Concerts

Many high school ensemble directors have found that there is great recruiting value to be gained from inviting their local middle school bands to participate in a joint effort. Whether this is done during marching or concert season, the positive publicity generated from involving the lower school bands can be a great way to win community support.

Another great way to win support is to reach out to other parts of the academic community by programming a concert that highlights a particular school discipline, such as American history, biology, or visual art. This inter-disciplinary approach worked well for our concert this past November, which consisted of two parts. The first part featured the artwork of local elementary school students, and the second part was designed to honor the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's death.

For the first part of the concert, I worked collaboratively with the elementary school art teacher. We decided to use Music from Abroad as our theme, so I presented the art teacher with the three works that my ensemble would play: *Africa: Ceremony, Song, and Ritual* (Smith), *Variations on a Korean Folk Song* (Chance), and

Armenian Dances (Reed). The art teacher researched each of these areas with her students in order to identify themes and icons that would help support the music through drawn images. To support Chance's *Variations on a Korean Folk Song*, for example, the art teacher and her students created art to portray birds, street festivals, and dancing. I scanned in each student's art to convert it to a digital image. This took quite a bit of time, since there were over 300 students in art class and each student created multiple images depicting different themes. Once a digital image was created for each piece of art, all that was left to do was to put a credit at the bottom of each slide with each student's name. With so much art created by so many students, the enthusiasm generated for this project was tremendous, and it created a very positive feeling both within and outside of our music program.

Programming concerts that connect with your audience can be a challenge, and trying to become a part of the local culture is never easy when you are new to it. Meaningful connections with the community can be made when you understand the people, speak the language, and give recognition to others. I have found that identifying the right literature is critical. You may want to perform a concert of familiar works that inspires your audience to sing or hum afterwards, or you may want to find literature that encapsulates the sense of the community at large. When the community feels engaged by the concerts you program and when you as a director become an accepted member of the community, the support that is given to the school, the music program, and the students can be tremendous. □

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