

photo courtesy of Kirby Fong



Teaching Clarinet Fundamentals

By Carola K. Winkle

Three words summarize the basic fundamentals of clarinet playing: tone, technique, and tongue. If any portion of these skills is lacking, students are incomplete as players.

Basics for a Good Tone

Although all three are critical to successful playing, tone is the most important; no one wants to hear a player who sounds terrible. As with all wind instruments, the key to good tone is breath support. When breathing incorrectly, the shoulders will rise. This shows that a student failed to take a full breath; the result of this is a thin and generally unfocused sound. With a deep, full breath, the chest expands while the shoulders remain in the same position. A deep breath helps produce a rich, centered, focused tone.

Another important consideration for tone is posture. Clarinetists should sit up straight in the chair. If specifically designed performance chairs are available then many posture concerns are automatically eliminated, but if students are required to use other types of chairs then directors should be vigilant about posture. Slouching in chairs restricts the lungs.

The clarinet is always held in the center of the body, no matter whether the player is sitting or standing. This position enables the player to have the embouchure also in the center of the mouth. Directors should keep an eye on female students, who may switch to holding the instrument to the side of the body when wearing a skirt or dress. Playing the clarinet on the side is never acceptable because it changes the embouchure, air stream, hand positions, and ease of playing adversely. Students wearing a skirt or dress should sit on the edge of the chair, keeping knees down more and the clarinet in the center of the body. The only clarinet for which it is sometimes acceptable to play to the right side of the body are the bass, contralto, and contrabass, but even these sound better when played in the center of the body.

Students should play soprano clarinets (in E^b, B^b, and A) with the head back so that the ligature almost touches the chin. When the head is back the sound immediately improves. The easiest way to attain this is to have students raise their music stands slightly, forcing them to also keep their heads tilted back rather than having the heads tilted downward. This one change can quickly improve the tone quality of a clarinet section. Students will be surprised to learn that it makes tonguing easier, too. While the head is raised, the chin should be pointed downward and in a flat position.

The angle of the clarinet greatly affects the quality of the tone. The instrument should be as close to the body as is comfortable with the arms in a relaxed position to hold the instrument. The arms should not be set rigidly against the rib cage as this leads to strain in the playing. Having the clarinet at a 45-degree angle from the body works well; the farther the clarinet is away from the body, the worse the sound becomes. Have students experiment to find the position at which the tone reaches maximum focus and centeredness.

Embouchure

For the majority of clarinet players, the embouchure is a single embouchure rather than a double embouchure.

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chure. The single embouchure is produced by covering the bottom teeth with the bottom lip while the top teeth touch the mouthpiece gently. The word *bite* is unacceptable for the clarinet embouchure as it implies undesirable force and pressure; the top teeth simply rest on the mouthpiece about $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{8}$ inch from the tip of the mouthpiece. The corners of the mouth are firm and drawn back only slightly. The correct clarinet embouchure does not allow the instrument to 'wobble' and, of course, the cheeks are not puffed.

The clarinet embouchure differs from the more rounded, drawstring-like embouchure used for saxophone playing. If the clarinet was taken out of the mouth and the embouchure was retained, the air would feel cool because it is moving faster. The more rounded, drawstring-like air column promotes slower air, which feels warmer. The concept of cool and warm air is emphasized in the teaching of saxophonist Eugene Rousseau. He advocates using a mirror as the rounded, drawstring embouchure used in saxophone playing produces condensation on the mirror whereas the clarinet embouchure does not due to the slightly drawn back corners and flat, pointed chin.

The double embouchure mentioned above has both the bottom and the top teeth covered by the lips. There are players who advocate the double embouchure playing for clarinet, but the majority of the clarinet players prefer the single embouchure with the bottom teeth covered by the lip and the top teeth gently touching the mouthpiece.

Studies

After focusing on breathing, posture, angle, and embouchure, students then should begin tone development studies. Playing long tones is an excellent way to begin the day of practice as these allow the player to warm up, work on breath control, and develop tone quality. Start long-tone studies by playing a single note one at a time beginning with E3, going up stepwise to E4 and holding each note for eight slow counts. While doing this, remember to keep the tone full, steady, and even; clarinetists should not use vibrato.

As students advance, the length of each tone can be increased. Students should alternate octaves daily. A student playing from E3 to E4 should start with E4 the next day and play long tones up stepwise to E5. The day after that the player would play from E5 to

E6, or as high as possible if students have not learned altissimo fingerings. By playing long tones in the various registers of the clarinet, students develop a consistent and good quality to the sound throughout the entire range of the instrument. Five minutes a day is sufficient time to work on this exercise.

Technique and Hand Position

Technique development includes hand positions, finger preparations, alternate fingerings, intonation and technical developmental studies. Correct hand positions are essential to being able to develop agility and speed in technical passages. The joint nearest the nail of the right thumb should be under the thumb rest. From this point the right hand should be curved into a U shape. Because the right thumb bears the weight of the clarinet, young players often slide the thumb farther under the thumb rest down to the knuckle or even beyond. This causes the hand position to become more V shaped than U shaped. Students who have the right thumb placed incorrectly also tend to rest the right index finger on the side keys. This will open the side keys slightly and cause squeaks. More seriously, this substantially hinders the ability of the right hand to play quickly. Observe beginning clarinetists from the back to check the right thumb position. This is a bad habit that is easy to stop in the beginning and difficult to change once acquired.

The left hand position also forms a U shape. The left thumb should be placed on the tone hole at a 45-degree angle so clarinetists can also depress the register key as needed. Have students practice rolling the left index finger from F#4 to A4. When students play these two notes in succession it is easy to lift the left index finger rather than rolling it, but this causes the open G4 to sound and will make the technique slower. Many elementary band method books address the issue of rolling in exercises designed specifically for clarinetists.

Clarinetists play with the pads of the fingers on both hands. This is contrary to the young pianists who are encouraged to play on the tips of their fingers. It is possible to see the indentations from the rings on the pads of the fingers to check to see whether students are placing their fingers in the correct position.

Fingers should be kept close to the keys when playing. The closer the fingers are to the instrument, the quicker students will be able to play. Fingers

that are more than an inch from the keys slow technique because of how much time it takes students to move fingers. Watch young players for such bad habits as stacking fingers atop each other; this slows technique. Beginning students also sometimes curl the little fingers on each hand under the clarinet to help stabilize the instrument. This bad habit only forces the student to allow additional time to retrieve the finger from under the clarinet and place it in proper playing position.

Fingering

Technical development is greatly aided with good finger preparation. Students should practice technical passages slowly with deliberate finger placement. Gradually increase the speed with frequent returns to the slow, deliberate pace.

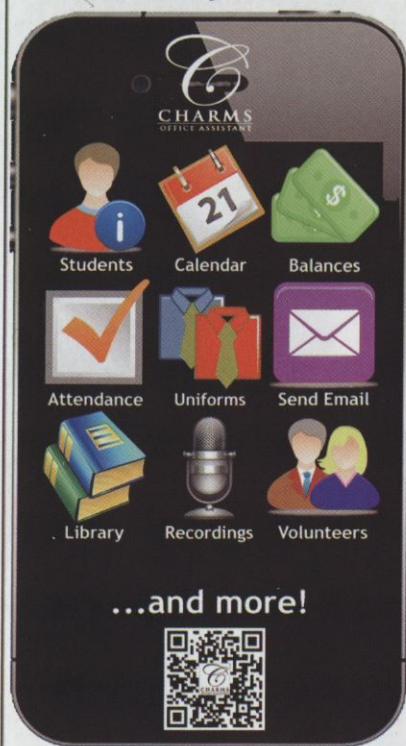
When the pinky keys are used, students should always alternate between the right little finger and the left little finger; it is incorrect to slide a little finger from one note to another, although in some advanced studies, there is no other way possible. E3, F3, and F#3, which become B4, C5, and C#5 when the register key is added, are all duplicated on both sides. Several manufacturers of professional model clarinets have added a left-hand A \flat 3/E \flat 5 key, making all little finger notes playable with alternating fingers.

Students should learn all the clarinet's alternate fingerings. The best fingerings for one passage may be impossibly difficult in another passage. When executing trills it is ideal to move as few fingers as possible. If many fingers are involved in playing a trill then it will lack cleanness. Oftentimes



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students can vent only one finger rather than two, three, or even four thus making the trill much easier to execute.

Intonation

The clarinet is often quite sharp in the throat tones (F4 through B \flat 4). When tuning the open G4, if it is sharp then the barrel can be pulled out slightly to compensate. For the throat tones it is possible to put down one to three fingers on the right hand. Each right-hand tone hole closed will lower the pitch slightly. The chalumeau register (E4 down to E3) is generally sharp. Players need to listen carefully and work to adjust. Manufacturers of the professional clarinets are now adding an intonation key to compensate for the sharpness of the low E3 and F3.

When using written B4 or C5 (concert A and B \flat) for a tuning note, may clarinetists pull the mouthpiece out slightly. Some players advocate pulling the middle joint slightly as well, but pulling the middle joint too far can adversely affect the intonation of the entire scale. If students with a good embouchure who are breathing correctly have to pull out extensively to tune the instrument then it is likely that their instrument's barrel is too short.

Scales

For technical development, students should learn all the major scales, the minor scales in three forms, and the chromatic scale for the full range of the instrument. If beginning students learn one scale per week with a one octave range for each, then they can increase the range to two octaves in the second year of playing and begin to add the more difficult scales as more notes are learned. The chromatic scale is helpful for students to learn in the first year of playing; this is the easiest way to teach enharmonic note names and fingerings. As students learn scales, they will figure out that E, B, and F \sharp major require alternate fingerings, but the other majors do not. When students reach a level where they might see these key signatures, they will be prepared to alternate pinky keys.

Tonguing

Tongue work should include staccato and legato tonguing, mixed articulations, and tonguing developmental studies. Clarinetist Daniel Bonade viewed tonguing as an interruption of the tone. A player takes a breath,

places the tongue on the reed with the tip of the tongue as close to the tip of the reed as possible, and then releases the tongue. Staccato is produced by a release of the tongue, allowing air through the mouthpiece, rather than by an attack of the tongue. Have students work for lightness; a heavy tongue placed too far back in the mouth makes it extremely difficult to play staccato passages. Students might be tempted to tongue harder in loud passages, but this gives the tongue less flexibility and should be avoided. The majority of clarinetists do not double tongue, so a fast, light, and controlled staccato tongue is essential. Legato tonguing is similar, only students should use the syllable *loo* rather than the *tu* syllable of staccato tonguing.

Use scales to develop staccato, legato, and slurring. Playing the chromatic scale with six or eight interruptions on each note is an excellent way to practice tonguing, although students should eventually switch to etudes.

Students should avoid moving the jaw; this slows tonguing down. Have students keep a mirror on the music stand to check whether the jaw is moving. I remind students to think, "tip of the tongue to tip of the reed." This is a helpful phrase for students trying to visualize the correct placement of the tongue within the mouth. This key phrase works for the majority of students and the simplicity of it also calms any fears about tonguing. When the tongue is not in use it should be placed at the bottom of the mouth.

Attention to tone, technique, and tonguing is vital for young students and professional players alike. Focus on these will enable students to become skilled players with the necessary artistry and fluency required by the instrument. □

Carola K. Winkle earned a master's degree from Chadron State College in Nebraska, where she retired in 2007 after 20 years teaching music education and woodwinds. She has performed with symphonies in Wyoming, Nebraska, South Dakota, Idaho, and Oregon. A Yamaha Performing Artist since 1984, she has frequently been a clinician and adjudicator and presented a clarinet clinic at the Midwest Clinic in Chicago in 1999. Winkle has taught at the International Music Camp, where she is now U.S. corporation president, for 33 years and is currently is an adjunct professor in music education and applied clarinet at Boise State University in Idaho.