

# COMMON OBOE PROBLEMS

## (THE ILL WIND THAT BLOWS NO GOOD)

by Steve Dingedine

NOTE: The problems and suggestions are the result of 42 years of playing and teaching.  
These are some of the techniques that worked for me. I hope that they work for you also!

### I. PLAYER PLAYS SHARP (common problem)

- A. Player is "biting" the reed
  - 1. Drop the jaw to relax the embouchure
  - 2. Point the chin to the base of throat
- B. Uneven pressure on the top or bottom of the reed may be caused by
  - 1. The angle of the head (too high or too low) (angle of the oboe in the mouth –bring it down)
  - 2. By pushing the reed up against the top teeth
- C. Corners of the mouth are turned up (in a smile)
  - 1. Turn corners of mouth down
  - 2. Flatten chin and point it down
- D. Reed Problem:
  - 1. Reed too closed
    - a. With needle nose pliers apply pressure to the tube just below the start of the winding

### II. PLAYER PLAYS FLAT (common problem)

- A. Not enough diaphragm support
  - 1. Encourage student to relax throat (ask student to expand the throat a little)
  - 2. After throat is relaxed then "push" the air with the diaphragm
- B. Lips not in mouth enough
  - 1. Review embouchure formation
    - a. Place reed on bottom lip
    - b. Push reed in mouth as all of the "red" part of the lip is rolled into the mouth
- C. Turn corners of mouth down
- D. Gently push corners in to center (this should make the lips a "cushion")
- E. Keep mouth slightly open (don't bite) - remember to keep the lips in mouth as the student pushes air
- F. Reed too open (this is real common on cheap reeds)
  - 1. With long nose pliers apply gentle pressure just below the start of the winding - at the side of the reed. This will close the tube - be careful – a little can go a long way (make small adjustments several times)

### III. "BRIGHT" TONE (NASAL-DUCK)

- A. Reed problems
  - 1. Tip too long
  - 2. Reed too soft or thin
    - a. Real problem here with a fibercane reed
    - b. Search for a reed source that you can trust and have a variety of reeds available to the student
  - 3. Reed old or split
    - a. Reeds don't last long if soaked too long or put away wet
    - b. Make sure the reed case or storage box has air vents - reeds will last 2-3 times longer when aired well after playing
- B. Embouchure too tight (pinching)
  - 1. Relax embouchure
- C. Throat closed (restricting air)
  - 1. Open throat - think "awww"
- D. Too much or not enough reed in mouth
  - 1. Adjust the amount of reed in the mouth

### IV. LOW REGISTER DOES NOT SPEAK

- A. Most common problem is embouchure is too tight
  - 1. This doesn't allow reed to vibrate freely
  - 2. Have student drop jaw and take pressure away from the top lip (this lets the reed "float" between the lips)
- B. Stiff reed
  - 1. Scrape cane from the tip of the reed
- C. Oboe adjustment
  - 1. Oboes get out of adjustment very easily - often one of the set screws is out. Don't try to fix it yourself - get it to a repair person
  - 2. If you must ..... the set screws on the low E and low D are often the problem
- D. Dirty or old reed
  - 1. A dirty reed can be cleaned in water or a mild solution of hydrogen peroxide

# Important things to remember about playing the Oboe

(Important at all levels - these are things you can say to your oboist in class)

## EMBOUCHURE

1. Roll lips in mouth
2. Corners of your mouth down
3. Push corners of mouth toward center (this creates a “cushion” for the reed)
4. Expand throat
5. Keep your mouth open
6. Don't bite the reed – instead - drop or “flatten” jaw

## AIR

1. Support and move air (don't say "blow more air")
2. Practice long tones (30 seconds or more) – Do this every day.
3. Keep air moving all the time
4. Move the air through the oboe at a faster speed - this will really improve sound

## TONGUE

1. Tip of tongue on tip of reed (think small)
2. Pull tongue back faster to increase speed - don't hit reed harder
3. Keep tongue closer to the reed (short distance)

## FINGERS

1. Arch your fingers - angle hands slightly (set 4<sup>th</sup> fingers on proper keys to determine hand position)
2. Very little finger pressure
3. Roll the half hole finger - don't slide it
4. Keep fingers close to keys
5. Don't angle hands any more than the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger will allow

## PLAYING POSITION

1. Head normal - not looking down or up
2. Oboe bell should be down just above knees
3. Bring the reed to your mouth - not your mouth to the reed

## REED

1. Don't pull the reed out more than 1/8 of an inch when you tune  
(this is a sign that the student is pinching the reed sharp with a tight embouchure)

## SIMPLE REED CARE TECHNIQUES

1. Keep reed clean
  - a. Look into reed to see dirt or problems
  - b. Wet reed use a small piece of paper to slide between blades to remove debris
2. For old reeds - try soaking in warm water or hydrogen peroxide to revive them
3. Dry reeds after use - an open reed case is important - cut “vents” into a reed case to let them dry

# BEGINNING OBOE PROCEDURE

(Getting the right start)

## POSTURE

1. Sit straight
2. Back away from chair
3. Feet on floor
4. Arms at side
5. Head straight
6. Bring the oboe to the student – don't let the student change the posture to play

## EMBOUCHURE

1. Place reed on bottom lip
2. Push lips in mouth with reed
3. Roll lips in (hide all of the red)
4. Corners of mouth turned down & push corners toward center
5. Flatten chin

## THROAT

1. Open throat

## SUPPORT & AIR

1. The air must keep moving - never stop
2. Push air from diaphragm
3. Practice long tones (30 seconds or more)

## TONGUE

1. Tip of the tongue on the tip of the reed (think small)
2. Keep tongue close to the reed
3. Pull tongue **back** from reed - don't hit reed with tongue

## FINGERS

1. Very little finger pressure
2. Make 4<sup>th</sup> finger of each hand reach it's keys easily. Base the other fingers of the hand on this finger
3. Arch fingers very slightly
4. Roll "half hole" finger - don't slide it (first finger of L. hand)
5. Keep fingers close to instrument
6. Don't angle the hand any more than the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger will allow.

# COMMON REED PROBLEMS

Here is a list of common reed problems. You may wish to begin to adjust the reeds yourself or ask your teacher to do it for you. Below are some common problems and adjustments

## PROBLEMS

1. Reed too stiff - won't blow or hard to blow
2. Reed too soft - too easy to play (pitch will often be a problem)
3. Low register doesn't respond (other registers ok)
4. Air leak in side of reed - often the problem in custom or hand made reeds

## QUICK ADJUSTMENTS

1. Scrape cane from both the tip and back of reed or close the reed if it is too open
2. Cut the tip off some or open the tip of the reed - this is a difficult problem to overcome
3. Close reed or take some cane off the tip
4. Stretch wrap some Teflon tape around the base of the reed to seal it. (white - the kind plumbers use)

# BEGINNING METHOD BOOKS FOR THE FIRST 6 WEEKS

1. Rubank Elementary Method – Hovey (still **the best** after all these years)
2. Standard of Excellence – Kjos (green pages)
3. Essential Elements 2000 – Hal Leonard (oboe pages)

# CHOOSING AN OBOE

When you choose an oboe for a beginner, your criteria should be what keys the instrument has rather than the brand name. Those keys are:

- Side F key (very important in band literature)
- Low Bb key on bell
- F resonance key (opens when “forked F” is played - helps bring F in tune)
- Ab trill (for hand)
- Split ring on Right hand 3rd finger for Eb – Db movement (important in band literature)
- Ab – Bb trill mechanism

Note that when an instrument has these keys, it is usually an instrument of better quality. I don't want to recommend any certain brand of oboe.

# THE OBOE WARM - UP EXPLAINED

By Steve Dingedine

## I. The oboe warm-up should cover the following areas

### A. Air

1. During the warm-up don't hold back on your air
2. Play the entire warm-up at the forte level
3. Fill the diaphragm with air - don't raise shoulders or upper chest
4. The posture should be straight to permit proper breath control

### B. Embouchure

1. Round embouchure - corners down – push corners in to center - try to "set" embouchure
2. Not too much reed in mouth - cushion "like a pillow"
3. Open throat during the warm-up - continue to "open" your throat as you play - think of stretching your throat
4. Keep your embouchure "flexible"

### C. Fingers

1. Curved - use the little fingers as your guide (make sure the little fingers fit easily on the keys first)
2. Make a "C" with each hand to "arch" your fingers
3. Don't angle the hands any more that the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger allows
4. Avoid heavy finger pressure - lighten up on finger pressure

### D. Reed

1. Soak several reeds for a few minutes before your warm-up
2. Make sure the opening is correct
3. "Crow" each reed several times before using it

### E. Articulation

1. Play (blow) through all tongued passages
2. Place the tip of the tongue on the tip of the reed
3. During the warm-up use a "light" tongue (always concentrating on your air and tone)

## II. During your warm-up, you should try to be alone and undisturbed

## III. A good warm-up should be at least 5 - 10 minutes

## IV. Most of the warm-up should be played without music. This will force you to listen to yourself

# THE “WARM-UP” PROCEDURE

## *Step 1*

### **LONG TONES**

Try this sequence of notes: (one breath for each note – about 30 seconds each)

A(440) D(half hole) E(low) A(440) E(up one octave) A(440) D(low) A(440) (do this series several times)

NOTE:

There should be no break between notes (slur)

During the series - listen for the harmonics

Try to make your throat "expand" to enhance your sound

## *Step 2*

### **MAJOR SCALES**

At first play the scales in order starting on the Low Bb moving chromatically up to the G  
(or at the end of your range)

Scales should be played two octaves when possible

Not too slow not too fast (the scales should have an eighth note feel)

One breath up and down each scale

You may use music or play by ear

## *Step 3*

### **CHROMATIC SCALE**

Start the scale from a comfortable low pitch (Low C or D)

Play with one breath up (two octaves) and down

Start with the tempo of a quarter note equal to 60 (play eighth notes)

Increase the tempo (72, 80, 92, 112, 120)

Make the air "push" the notes

Always expand the throat and relax your fingers as you play faster

## *Step 4*

### **TECHNIQUE EXERCISE**

The exercise (or 20-30 seconds of an exercise) should be something you have played before

In one breath play the exercise (pick an exercise of your choice)

# IN SEARCH OF A BETTER TONE

by Steve Dingledine

## NOTE:

The following are exercises I have used to help students improve their tones. Use them regularly to improve your tone and to expand your knowledge and understanding of the instrument.

## I. THE "SIGH TRICK"

One problem many oboe players face is "dying" in the middle of a long phrase. The problem often is that the player doesn't always push the diaphragm as well when the lungs are empty as when they are full. The sigh" trick can help the player focus on the diaphragm with the lungs empty.

- A. First, prepare to play a long tone or extended phrase. Put the reed in the mouth and form an embouchure
- B. With the reed in the mouth, take a deep breath and let the air out of the lungs (like in a heavy sigh)
- C. Without taking **any** more air in - start the long tone or extended phrase
- D. Immediately you will feel the need to take a breath - IGNORE IT!
- E. Concentrate on keeping the embouchure formed, the throat open, and the diaphragm "pushing the air" through the instrument
- F. Play the phrase as long as you possibly can
- G. Relax, catch your breath and try it again after a few minutes - **Time yourself**

## II. THE LONG TONE

Many oboe players limit themselves when it comes to the long tone. During the long tone attempt, the player will feel "pressure" or a "panic" feeling. This causes the student to stop the attempt. Try to ignore that feeling. There is a direct correlation between a long tone and the quality of your tone.

Here are some things to think about while attempting a long tone of 45 seconds or more

- A. Breathe out & in several times before starting - this rids the lungs of any carbon dioxide
- B. Relax any non-necessary muscles while holding the long tone
- C. Focus your tone across the room as if it were a projected beam
- D. Try to ignore all of the feelings of "panic" - your body won't let you hurt yourself

## III. THE VIBRATO

Try to use the vibrato when working on your long tones. Diaphragm vibrato practice will help develop the very muscle that can improve your tone.

## IV. THE FLATTER THE BETTER

One of the enemies of a good tone is a tight embouchure. While working on long tones or an extended phrase, drop the jaw and lower the pitch. Use a meter to tell how much you have lowered the pitch. Keep it lower for the full duration of the long tone or phrase. After you feel comfortable lowering the pitch, use your air flow and diaphragm to raise the pitch to a proper level.

# VIBRATO ON THE OBOE

## IMPORTANT POINTS:

1. Vibrato should change the pitch - both higher and lower
2. The vibrato should be used as an expressive musical tool
3. The oboe vibrato should originate in the diaphragm
4. The vibrato is part of a total tone production

## HOW TO START:

1. Put your hand on your stomach and SAY: "HO, HO, HO" (this is the muscle coordination that vibrato uses)
2. On the oboe reed, play a sustained pitch using the HO, HO, HO feeling from the diaphragm. Go back to the spoken sound if the pitch doesn't change on the reed - relax the throat and embouchure.
3. Put the reed in the oboe and play an "A" using the same HO, HO, HO method. The pitch should change up and down. Use a tuner. First stabilize the pitch at 440 and then use the diaphragm to change the pitch. Watch the needle and make it move evenly from sharp to flat. Try not to change the embouchure.
4. Learn to "turn on" and "turn off" the vibrato at will while sustaining a pitch. Keep the speed of the vibrato very slow. Remember to keep the throat and embouchure relaxed.

Repeat these steps as many times as necessary

## DEVELOPING THE VIBRATO:

1. Play a simple scale in whole notes at a moderate tempo, 60. Use the vibrato at the eighth note speed while playing the scale.
2. Sustain a tone using the vibrato and get louder (8 counts) and softer (8 counts) as you use the vibrato. Lengthen this as you improve your coordination.
3. Repeat step #1 and use a metronome to help you speed up the eighth note pulse. ( 60, 68, 72, 76, etc) When you can't make the vibrato go faster, start over at the slowest tempo once again. (quarter note = 60)  
Make a conscious effort to speed up the vibrato pulse.
4. Find an exercise that uses many half and whole notes. Practice it at a slow tempo using the vibrato pulse on the eighth note.
5. Try to use vibrato as much as you can when you play. This will help you develop this new technique faster.

# OBOE REEDS

by Steve Dingledine

## ADJUSTMENTS

Before you can **make** a reed, you should be very familiar with the **adjustments** of the oboe reed

Before you do anything to your reed make sure you do the following

1. Listen to & feel the reed so that you know what the problem is
2. Try to verbalize the problem or symptom
3. Decide on a correction

## NEVER

NEVER TRY TO ADJUST A DRY REED - always soak it first (2-5 minutes)

NEVER USE A DULL KNIFE - sharpen the knife every time you work on reeds

NEVER ADJUST REEDS WITHOUT PROPER TOOLS - invest in the proper tools

The following are some simple adjustments (corrections) you may want to try

## DIRTY REED

A reed that has been used for several weeks and is not playing too well, may need to have the inside cleaned out

1. Use a small pipe cleaner that is soaking wet
2. Insert it in the tube end of the reed with a twisting motion - push it almost all the way to the tip. Retract it slowly. Use much care in this process - wash reed well
3. Soak reed in 1/2 inch of hydrogen peroxide (rinse reed with water)

## REED PLAYS FLAT

1. If the reed is too open, it will be hard to blow and possibly too flat. First, gently squeeze the blades closed. If this doesn't work, use a small pair of long nose pliers to close the reed. Push on the side of the reed just below the thread. Use a fair amount of pressure - a little will go a long way. Both of these procedures should close the reed and raise the pitch a small amount.
2. Crow the reed - it should crow at C or C# (one octave above middle C.) If a reed doesn't crow properly, it will be difficult to raise the pitch.
3. Some reeds will respond to cutting a small amount off the tip. Make sure you use a cutting block. Cut off about the width of a hair each time.- try the reed after each attempt.

## REED PLAYS SHARP

1. Don't pull the reed out more than 1/16 of an inch. The instrument will be out of tune with itself.
2. Scrape the reed in the back (lay) of the reed. Only a small amount - keep it even on both sides.
3. The reed may be too closed. Press on the sides with your fingers to open the reed. If this does not help, use the small pliers and push on the front of the reed just below the start of the string - a little goes a long way.

## REED TOO STIFF

1. Scrape some cane both from tip and back.

### **REED TOO SOFT**

1. Tip may be too long - cut off tip.
2. It may need some off the back also.

### **LOW REGISTER DOES NOT RESPOND**

1. Tip is too thick - scrape cane off the tip - redefine the tip.
2. Tip is too short - make tip longer.

### **NASAL OR "BRIGHT" TONE**

1. The tip may be too long for the back
2. The back may need to be lengthened to compensate for the long tip.
3. The tip may need to be shortened to make up for the back

Here is a list of basic tools needed to adjust oboe reeds.  
These are available from most any double reed supply company.

REED KNIFE --- beveled or hollow ground - will scrape the cane

MANDREL ----- holds the reed so that you can work on it

PLAQUES ----- small thin metal blades that allow you to work on the reed

CUTTING BLOCK - round wooden block for cutting off tip



STONE ----- for sharpening the reed knife. A sharp knife works better. Diamond stones are the best

### **BOOKS ABOUT OBOE REEDS**

"The Art of Oboe Playing" by Robert Sprenkle (pub. Summy Birchard)  
(dist. by Warner Brothers)  
Excellent pictures on reed making (good first book)

"Oboe Reed Styles" by David Ledet (pub. Indiana University Press)  
Good book showing different reed styles

There are many internet sites on the oboe and reed making available. Search for "oboe" or "oboe reeds."

# OBOE QUOTES - by Steve Dingledine

Repeat these often while working with oboe students. They reinforce good playing. Conductors can use them from the podium.

## AIR

1. It is the "speed" of the air that makes the music or the phrase
2. The air must always keep moving
3. Expand the diaphragm to pull air into the lungs
4. The way to get air into the oboe is to push the diaphragm up
5. Think of the diaphragm as the handle of a BELLOW (source of the power)
6. Think of your lungs as only a "tank" that holds air
7. Think of inflicting the Heimlich maneuver on yourself when you play
8. Put the air under pressure as you push it toward the reed
9. Support your tone at all times
10. Relax and let the air go

## PHRASING

1. The "movement" of the air makes the music or the phrase
2. The third measure is the most important in a four bar phrase
3. Organize a phrase from weak to strong
4. The "line" is the most important part of a phrase
5. Never play the same music twice the same way
6. Good phrasing takes much physical involvement
7. Follow through as you finish a phrase

## TONGUE

1. Tongue with your tongue not the jaw or throat
2. Pull the tongue back as you tongue
3. Start the vibration of the reed with the "tip" of your tongue
4. Always blow as if you are slurring, then bounce the tongue off the reed
5. Think of your tongue as a feather
6. Never stop a note with your tongue - use your air (pull air back)
7. Shorten the stroke of the tongue
8. The difference between staccato and legato is releasing the air
9. Place the tip of the tongue on the tip of the reed

(oboe quotes continued)

## **EMBOUCHURE**

1. Roll your lips in so that no red is showing
2. Corners of the mouth are turned down and pushed in to center
3. Flatten the chin
4. Open the throat like there is an egg in it

## **HANDS & FINGERS**

1. Roll the half-hole finger, don't slide it
2. Let the length of the little fingers and it's place on the keys determine the hand position
3. The hands should never change position as you play
4. Lighten the finger pressure on the keys
5. An arched finger moves faster than a flat one
6. Relax your fingers
7. Each finger hovers over each key like a helicopter
8. Keep fingers close to the keys
9. Roll the 1/2 hole finger, don't slide it

## **POSTURE & REED POSITION**

1. Sit up straight and keep your back away from the chair
2. Bring the reed to you -- don't go to the reed.
3. Put the reed into the mouth at a slight angle - head up
4. When breathing let the reed rest on the bottom lip