

# WOODWIND NOTES

## HINTS ON SELECTING A DOUBLE REED PLAYER

By MICHAEL BURNS

As a bassoonist, I have often been asked how to choose students suitable for switching-to or starting-on the double reed instruments. Below I will outline some of the criteria I feel can help make that choice:

1. A good ear for pitch
2. Above average finger dexterity
3. Happy to be different (*individualistic*)
4. For the bassoon - big enough to handle the size/weight of the instrument and to reach the tone-holes.

They will definitely need to have a good ear for pitch, and good finger dexterity. Remember, the oboe and the bassoon are notorious for their variability of pitch (on some notes you can vary the pitch by as much as a minor third without altering the fingering!) and for the complicated fingerings (including such techniques as fork-fingerings, half-holes, and flicking, two octave keys on the oboe and multiple thumb keys on the bassoon). Choose someone who is a good musician. Some directors decide that they need a double reed player in their band and the natural place to look seems to be at the back of one of their larger woodwind sections (i.e. flutes, clarinets, and saxophones). If the student is struggling with one of these instruments then I suggest that things will probably only get worse on the bassoon or oboe! A possibility is to try someone who is perhaps second or third chair but probably will not become first chair in one of these larger sections. Choose someone who prefers to be a 'loner' rather than part of a crowd. In most bands you are unlikely to have more than a single bassoonist or oboist. Some people thrive on being 'alone' in the band, while others prefer the security of a larger section. Not only this, but when a young double-reed player is starting out some rather unusual and sometimes embarrassing sounds can happen and the player has to be able to handle possible ridicule from their colleagues. Often the person attracted to the oboe or bassoon is somewhat individualistic in nature anyway and likes the distinct character associated with these instruments.

Most double reed players switch from another wind instrument rather than starting out on the bassoon or oboe.



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Below is a brief summary of some of the pros and cons of each other woodwind instruments in term of the ease of switching:

*Flute to bassoon.* The resistance level is higher on the bassoon, embouchure is totally different, feels funny to have a reed in their mouth, fingerings are not very similar, have to learn bass clef.

*Flute to oboe.* The resistance level is MUCH higher on the oboe, embouchure is totally different, feels funny to have a reed in their mouth, fingerings are somewhat similar. If you have a flute student who plays and breathes well but runs out of air too easily because of the low resistance of the flute then it may help to switch them to the higher resistance of an oboe.

*Oboe to bassoon.* Not a common switch (who has too many oboes in their band?) can work okay, fingerings are different, embouchure is similar but bigger.

*Clarinet to bassoon.* Resistance is somewhat similar, embouchure is different - bassoon is "double-lip" and jaw position changes with different registers (Many clarinetists who switch to bassoon have a hard time relaxing the lower jaw enough to get the low register to work well). The tongue position is quite different (high position for clarinet, low for bassoon) which can also lead to problems with voicing on the bassoon for the former-clarinetist. Fingerings are very similar to clarinet beneath the break.

*Clarinet to oboe.* Resistance is higher on the oboe, embouchure is different - oboe is "double-lip" and jaw position changes with different registers. (Many clarinetists who switch to oboe have a hard time relaxing the lower jaw enough to get the low register to work

well.) The tongue position is quite different (high position for clarinet, low for oboe) which can also lead to problems with voicings on the oboe for the former-clarinetist. Fingerings are similar to clarinet above the break.

*Bassoon to oboe.* Not a common switch (who has too many bassoons in their band?) can work okay, fingerings are different, embouchure is similar but smaller.

*Saxophone to bassoon.* This is often one of the better switches. Embouchure size is similar, but bassoon is "double-lip" and jaw position changes with different registers. There tends to be less problem with the low register because of the larger, more relaxed embouchure from the sax. Size and weight issues have already been dealt with to an extent on the sax and are often less problematic. Fingerings are different but related at the 5th, i.e. G=C.

*Saxophone to oboe.* This is often one of the better switches. Embouchure size is similar, but oboe is "double-lip" and jaw position changes with different registers. There tends to be less problem with the low register because of the larger, more relaxed embouchure from the sax. Fingerings and range are very similar, in fact many saxophone teachers use oboe method books with their students.

As you can see there are some trends to notice: Going from a single to a double-reed the player needs to be aware that instead of keeping the lower jaw position constant as on the single-reeds, they must raise and lower it for different registers on the double-reeds. Also, the higher tongue position of the single reeds will not work well on the double-reeds. There are fingering differences between all of the woodwinds, but the oboe is somewhat similar to the flute, saxophone, and clarinet above the break, while the bassoon is similar to the clarinet below the break and the other instruments related at the 5th. Physical size is an issue with the bassoon. It is a big and heavy instrument with a wide spread between fingers. The player also needs to be able to learn bass clef, and later tenor clef for the bassoon.

I have also had some very successful switches from brass instruments, from recorder, from string instruments, and even from piano. Generally, the successful double reed players chose to play the bassoon or oboe because of its character and were not daunted by its idiosyncrasies and the difficulties. Rather, they often seem to want the challenge these instruments present and enjoy their individuality.