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February 1959

Playing Essentials for Clarinet – Suggestions for the Post-Beginner Stage By George E. Waln

In the September issue of *The Instrumentalist* there appeared an article in Woodwind Clinic titled "First Clarinet Lesson." With it was a request that, if readers wished, there would follow an article dealing with problems, which occur beyond the beginning stage in clarinet playing. The cards and letters have encouraged me to try my hand with a few of these guiding factors.

Affecting Intonation Teachers on clarinet usually stress tone quality as the first essential to good playing. Important as this may be, I have come to the conclusion that good intonation is even more important. If a choice must be made, mediocre tone quality is less objectionable than to hear two or more players perform badly off pitch. This line of reasoning leads us to a few points about intonation. It has been very -helpful to me in my work to use open G4 as a basic tuning note for placing the tuning barrel where it should be (usually pulled). When the temperature is settled and the open G4s match we find that octave Gs and other notes in the range will come nearest to being in tune. Obviously, the throat tones and notes that lie close to the tuning barrel are most affected by the pulling, and it is essential that the barrel

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control this area. The regular third-space C5 (concert Bb) is not affected nearly so much by this barrel pulling as the throat tones; hence the note C is secondary to G for accurate tuning.

Players are slow to realize how much liping and favoring must be done to play the clarinet in tune. Playing *pp* will appreciably sharpen the pitch, especially in the area of low B3, C4, C#4, and D4, and playing *ff* will flatten it. A good test of this is to play before the Stroboconn a tone in various registers starting pianissimo and building it to a solid fortissimo, and then back to the pianissimo again. I think you might be a bit shocked at the pitch deviation. Without the Stroboconn one can try it with another instrument as a guide. This instrument should maintain the same dynamic and pitch level while the instrument being tested makes the extreme intensity variation.

A chord sounded on the piano while the clarinet note is being played is a helpful device. This means that the experienced player is ever on his guard to lip down on *pp* notes and raise the pitch to the maximum on the *ff*. An erroneous approach to the problem of liping down is to ease the breath support. The opposite must be done even on the softest *pp*. The breath support must be full and constant so that when the lip pressure is lessened around the reed the breath support will keep the reed vibrating, not allowing the tone to stop. To ease up on the support will tend to make the note go even sharper.

One more thing about intonation should be mentioned. The untrained ear is fooled by the pitch of high notes. One likes to hear the high register played sharp when he plays alone only to find that he clashes badly when he hears the accurate pitch of another instrument—in a unison, octave, or chord. Careful choice of fingerings and careful listening in the high register are absolute essentials. Whether to use the right hand D# key on high D6 and on all notes above is determined by the specific clarinet, reed, mouthpiece, and player. There are many high register special fingerings, too, which should be tried. The use of the Stroboconn is a great aid in helping the player train his ear.

Another device is to play octaves and other intervals and unisons with the teacher to gain a true situation for listening. I like slurred half note octaves covering two octaves, such as C4 slurred to C5 to C6 back to C5 to C4. Use a slow tempo and play about *mezzo forte*. Above all, keep a good slur and a good resonance between tones whether slurring upward or downward. One may be surprised at the faulty pitch, which may come, particularly on the highest ones and the lowest.

Resonance on Weak Tones

One of the attributes of good playing is evenness of intensity from tone to tone. Some notes are much more brilliant and shrill than others and must be evened by the player. High register tones tend to be shrill and strident, while throat tones tend to be buzzy and weak. Only today in my teaching I found one of my students in gross violation of this principle of even intensity. As he descended a chromatic scale the volume level changed drastically when he moved from third space B4, to Bb4. B4 is a resonant tone, having the advantage of the whole length of the clarinet for resonance, whereas Bb4 is a quiet "wheezy" sound as the result of coming from only the portion of the clarinet at the mouthpiece about eight inches long.

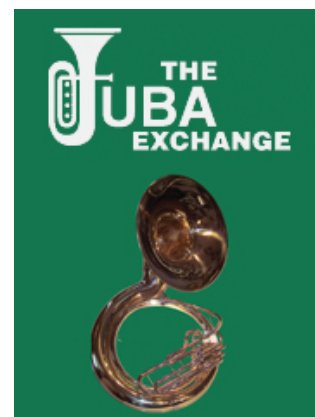
The notes downward from the Bb must have more breath support if they are to match the intensity volume of the beautiful middle or "Clarion" register. For better resonance on the regular fingering of Bb add the third and sixth holes and the (3rd space) C key.

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Guard Against Pitfalls

After that first lesson which we talked about in the September issue there are several guards or helps, which could be stressed in the lessons to follow. Here are a few:

During the lessons prior to the ascent into the middle register the left thumb should be trained to lie across the hole, not into it, in close communication with the register key. Silent finger practice to train the fingers to cover the holes is especially helpful at this stage.

Before the embouchure is permanently established the student may erroneously allow his upper lip to cover his teeth without realizing it. During the early lessons check that upper teeth are contacting the mouthpiece.

Is the right hand thumb exerting enough pressure or lift to wedge the tapered mouthpiece in the mouth with sufficient firmness to control a solid tone?

The student must blow a full tone with proper diaphragm support. He should take in a full breath in the same manner with which he breathes while resting.

Do not use surface chest breathing but instead use deep diaphragm breathing!

Little should be said at first about tonguing except to say that the tongue touches the reed when the tone is started. After a few lessons it is probably the time to explain the proper function of the tongue – that of lightly touching the reed at its tip and then quickly withdrawing it to allow the sound to come. As a tone is sustained ask the student to "dent the air" or "dent the sound." Avoid the terminology of hitting the reed with the tongue. The light quick getting-away from the reed is important. Staccato tonguing should not be encouraged at this early stage. Staccato development requires other factors, which need maturity before attempting it. There are several types of tonguing but suffice it to say in this early stage that the legato style of "denting the sound" will teach the correct procedure. I personally tongue "tip to tip"—tip of tongue to the tip of the reed.

A good hand position will expedite later smooth playing and should be stressed by the teacher. An oblique angle of each hand to the clarinet is important. The pictures in a few available clarinet instruction books should serve as helpful guides. Hand position is difficult to describe in writing. Small hands sometimes limit the young student's hand position but no hand is too small to be taught the correct basic principles.

Very important to smooth register change and facility is the following rule: In playing any of the throat tones (G4 to B flat 4) upward to any of the middle register tones from B4 to F5 allow one or more fingers of the right hand to remain on the holes while the throat tones are being played. The purpose is to have the right hand in position for the quick smooth execution from the throat tone to any of the upper tones.

The use of the foot tap in its downward and upward motions is important as an aid in feeling rhythm and steadiness of tempo. Perhaps the most difficult to execute properly is the, dotted eighth followed by a sixteenth. Have you tried the syllables DAY-TO-DAY TO-DAY, and for the triplet have you tried TRIP-O-LET, TRIP-O-LET?

The angle of holding the clarinet has much to do with acquiring refined tone quality and flexibility of embouchure. An angle close to the body furnishes the proper embouchure position for most players. Keep the head up, shoulders back,



elbows dropped in a relaxed position at one's sides, and hold the clarinet at a 30° to 40° angle.

As was carefully outlined in the September article herein referred to, I believe in using the mouthpiece and reed alone in the production of the first tone. The tone that is produced should match high C6 on the piano. It requires a firmness of embouchure, which practically insures good tone quality and pitch for all notes.

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