

Clarinet Basics, Foundations for Clarinet Players

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Embouchure

The clarinet embouchure can be formed through a combination of saying the letter “Q” and creating the mouth formation when one whistles. (reword first sentence) When saying this letter, the chin becomes flat and the corners of the mouth are pulled downward. The inner part of the lower lip should slightly cover the bottom front teeth. Whistling brings the lips muscles forward rather than being pulled back. Though the lips should not completely forward, the combination of saying Q and whistling helps to provide the basic foundation to a clarinet embouchure.

To gauge how much lower lip to place over the lower teeth, place the index finger flat against the chin, pointing up to the ceiling, as if pointing to the bottom of the nose. The finger should extend slightly above the lower lip, slightly touching the top lip. Press the finger firmly against the chin and lower lip. The pressure of the finger will push a small portion of the lower lip over the bottom teeth, into the mouth. Next, roll the tip of the finger slightly into the mouth, so the finger is now at an angle with the lower portion of the finger farther away from the chin. Say the letter Q with the finger in this position,

while closing the corners of the mouth around the finger. The chin should be flat. Try this next with the clarinet.

The lower lip of the clarinet embouchure should only be firm enough to prevent air leakage. The player should avoid playing with a “smile” embouchure. Smiling pulls the corners of the embouchure back towards the ears and creates a firm lower lip that pinches the reed and causes a tight, pinched sound. The player should also avoid playing with a “raspberry” chin (little bumps on the chin). Saying the letter Q should help correct this. Another little technique is to stand in front of a mirror, say the letter Q, place the clarinet in the mouth, while keeping the embouchure formation from saying Q, then placing the index finger horizontally across the chin to reemphasize the flat chin concept.

Once the outside of the embouchure is formed correctly, the oral cavity should be considered. Whispering the sound “HHHHEEEEE” helps create good tongue placement and a compact oral cavity. The “HHHHHEEEEE” sound also keeps the tongue high in the mouth, touching the top back molars. When saying this sound, remember to whisper the “HHHHEEEEE” sound and to not speak it with the vocal cords. The tongue should remain in this position most of the time when playing the clarinet. The player will find that though the tongue moves to a slightly lower position occasionally, keeping it high most of the time will help the player to produce a focused tone. When the player has a low tongue position, the oral cavity is very open and the result is a more diffuse expulsion of the air stream. The low tongue position produces a spread and unfocused sounding tone. When the tongue is kept high and touching the top back molars, the air

can flow over the top of the tongue through a narrower space between the tongue and the roof of the mouth. The air stream then moves at a faster rate through a smaller area, producing a more focused tone quality.

Harmonics

Playing overtones can help a player learn to focus the air stream and develop an aural and muscular familiarity (in the lower lip of the embouchure) with the effect the air stream has when producing notes in various registers. The following exercise can be used as a warm-up and should be done for only one or two minutes. Play a G on the top line of the staff with the regular G fingering, at a mezzo forte dynamic level. Begin the note with no tongue. Next, with the exact same G fingering and no tongue, blow a firm amount of air into the instrument and try to play a high E, three ledger lines above the staff. If you are uncertain what the E sounds like, play a high E with the regular fingering so your ears hear the pitch. When you can produce the high E with the G fingering, play the G again. One complete cycle of this exercise consists of playing the G, playing the high E with the G fingering, then playing the G again. All three of these pitches should be played at a mezzo forte dynamic level, with no tongue to begin each note, and with enough space between each note to allow the embouchure to reset. Continue this exercise on every note chromatically up to high C, two ledger lines above the staff.

Hand Position

The position of the hands and fingers, when playing the clarinet, should be similar to the relaxed position of the hands when the arms are dropped to one's side. To find the proper

hand position, drop one hand to the side so it rests with the fingers pointing downward towards the floor. Do not extend the fingers, but rather, let them simply fall into their natural position, which is slightly curved. Next, bend the arm up at the elbow until the forearm is parallel with the floor, leaving the hand, wrist, and fingers in exactly the same position as when they were pointing down towards the floor. Now place the clarinet in the hand that was brought up from its resting position, adapting the finger position only enough so that the fingers can cover the rings and holes of the instrument. Strive to keep the fingers as close to the relaxed position that they are in when they are pointing towards the floor in a resting position. It is helpful to occasionally drop the hands to one's side while practicing to remind the hand muscles what a relaxed hand position should feel like.

Tonguing/Articulation

- Four steps to clarinet articulation
- Tip to tip
- Where the *tongue* touches the reed
- What *Part* of the tongue touches the reed
- Pressure of tongue on the reed
- Angle of the mouthpiece
- Constant Air Support
- Exercises
- Articulation resources

Articulation is a very important aspect of clarinet playing. Good articulation habits can help improve problems with a clarinet player's sightreading, phrasing, rhythm, and sense of pulse. Speed is the usually the first element that people think of when discussing articulation on the clarinet. Though this is important, it is only one aspect of the process of articulation. Before speed, a player should understand what portion of the

tongue makes contact with the reed and where on the reed the tongue makes contact.

When these fundamentals are in place, articulation is a combination of constant air support, light contact with the reed, and focused attention on rhythm and pulse—practice with a metronome is imperative.

Four Steps to Articulate a Note

- (1) Place the tongue on the reed and close off the air from the reed.
- (2) Blow air against the reed, though no sound is produced because the reed is closed off.
- (3) Release the tongue and a sound is produced.
- (4) Return the tongue to close off the reed/mouthpiece opening and the sound is stopped again.

Through the entire process there should be a constant pressure of air with the tongue acting as a valve. The valve stops the air from vibrating the reed and producing a sound, but is continually pushing against the reed and mouthpiece opening.

What Part of the *Tongue* Touches the Reed

The tip of the tongue is the portion of the tongue that generally gives the most articulation flexibility. The tip can be anywhere from the exact tip, where the taste buds begin, to slightly above the tip (up to about 1/8 of an inch).

What Part of the *Reed* the Tongue Touches

The tongue can make contact the reed anywhere from the exact the tip, or edge of the reed, to slightly back from the tip (up to about 1/8 of an inch). The farther back on the reed the player tongues, the less control there is of squeaks. Many accomplished clarinetists tongue slightly back from the tip. The tongue naturally makes contact with this part of the reed because of the 30 to 45 degree angle of the mouthpiece in the mouth. Tonguing at the tip is acceptable though, as long as the tongue is kept relaxed and kept relatively high in the mouth.

Pressure of the Tongue on the Reed

The tongue pressure on the reed should be very light. The tickle exercise (developed by Kelly Burke–The University of North Carolina at Greensboro) is a helpful way to develop a feel for tongue pressure against the reed. Play an open G. While playing the G, slowly introduce the tongue to the reed, gradually increasing the pressure, while not stopping the tone. The tongue should muffle the tone. Continue slowly increasing the pressure against the reed then gradually decrease the pressure of the tongue and slowly remove the tongue from the reed.

When done correctly, the tip of the tongue will tickle upon initial contact with the reed. Once the player can muffle the tone easily, the speed of the tongue against the reed can gradually increase until a bouncing staccato is developed. The tongue should remain relaxed throughout this exercise. The tongue will be relaxed if one thinks of the tongue muscle flapping loosely like a flag in the wind. The most important element of bounce staccato is a constant air stream. Another analogy is to think of a rubber ball bouncing.

The longer the ball bounces, the closer to the ground it gets, and the faster it gets. The tongue should react the same way. A steady stream of air should allow the tongue to gently bounce without any tightening or strain on the tongue muscle.

Angle of the Mouthpiece

The angle of the mouthpiece in the mouth can affect where the tongue makes contact with the reed. Since a clarinet mouthpiece is at a 30-40 degree angle, the tongue will naturally make contact with the area just below the tip of the reed. It is also acceptable for the tongue to make contact with the reed directly on the tip of the reed. This happens when the player holds the angle of the clarinet mouthpiece out more, thus making the tip of the mouthpiece closer to where the tongue naturally goes when it moves to articulate a note. Saying TEE TEE will simulate the proper placement of the tongue.

The angle of the saxophone mouthpiece, as a matter of comparison, is essentially straight out, rather than angled down out of the mouth. This mouthpiece position makes contact with the actual tip of the reed more natural. Developing good articulation habits on the clarinet will help with saxophone articulation.

Constant Air Support

By maintaining a steady flow of air, as if you are trying to blow against the tip of the reed, the tongue can remain relaxed and act as a valve starting and stopping a

constant pressure of air. Exercise #1 focuses on the constant flow of air and a relaxed tongue.

Exercises:

Preliminary Exercises

- Legato tongue and constant air flow
- Short notes and constant air flow
- Bounce tongue
- Double tongue

Etudes and Daily Studies

- Langenus
- Trevor Wye exercises (dominant seventh and tonic arpeggios)
- Opperman 5 note chromatic scale
- Schirmer Flute Articulation Book
- Reginald Kell Staccato Studies

Orchestral Studies

- Mendelsohn-Midsummer Night's Dream
- Smetana-Bartered Bride

EXERCISE #1, Legato Tongue and Constant Air Flow



Tongue every note lightly-even the notes that are slurred. Each bar should be thought of as a whole note with the tongue simply acting as a valve, gently interrupting a constant air flow. Strive for a light and gentle contact with the reed. Each note should be long and legato tongued, NOT short and clipped. Use the syllable, "Daaa-Daaa" or "Thaaa Thaaa" to articulate each note. This helps to make each note connect smoothly from one to the next.

EXERCISE #2, Short Notes and Constant Air Flow



1. Play each note short, but keep the air pressure moving against the reed (think of playing a whole note but the tongue acts as a valve and stops the note).
2. Make sure the sound and any air sound is completely stopped during the rests. Though the air pressure is continually pressing against the reed, there should be complete silence between each note.
3. Play exercise at quarter note equals 60 on the metronome
4. When this exercise is mastered, with no sound in between the notes and a relaxed tongue, continue with other notes moving up and down chromatically

EXERCISE #3-Bounce Tongue

Play this exercise with a metronome on quarter note equals 50.



Example A: Play the whole note and be aware of the steady flow of air you are blowing against the tip of the reed.

Example B: Play the dotted eighth, 2 sixteenth pattern, letting the tongue act as a valve, and continuing to think of playing a whole note with your air stream. The slur is there to remind you that these notes are all one unit. The dotted eighth should be played short but not staccatissimo and not with a hard tongue stroke. Be gentle with the tongue pressure and think of the tongue bouncing on the steady air stream.

Example C: This is just another way to think of example B, by remembering that the 32nd notes are pick ups into the next downbeat.

Example D: When B and C are mastered, move on to Example D. When doing this exercise, make sure the tongue stays relaxed. If it becomes tense or you find yourself "puffing" the air instead of keeping a steady stream of air, stop and restart the exercise. Remember to think of the 32 notes as pick-ups.

EXERCISE #4, Triplets

Keep steady air, think of the triplets as pick-ups to each next downbeat, and keep the tongue relaxed.



EXERCISE #5, 32nd Notes

Keep steady air, think of the 16ths as pick-ups to each next downbeat, and keep the tongue relaxed.



Developing the Bounce Tongue to Maintain a Steady Airstream

Once control is developed with tongue pressure on the reed, one can work towards developing a “bounce” tongue. The tongue should remain relaxed and bounce while the air is pushed through the mouthpiece.

Some players have developed the habit of anchoring the tip of the tongue behind the bottom teeth and making contact with the reed more towards the center of the tongue. There is really nothing inherently wrong with this approach if the result is a controlled and flexible ability to articulate. This is often not the case though, and primarily because of the popping sound that this type of articulation usually produces, it is typically not recommended.

The bounce tongue brings together the ideas of making a light and gentle contact with the reed as well as keeping a constant flow of air pressure as if playing a whole note. The tongue shouldn't be thought of as a muscle that needs to be strengthened as a weight lifter might train his or her muscles. It should rather be thought of as a muscle that requires precision, flexibility, and relaxation. Speed will come as the precision, proper stroke, and flexibility develops.

Articulation Resources

I strongly encourage players to focus on articulation as a primary part of the development as a clarinetist. Practice articulation EVERY DAY. Learn to single tongue lightly and rapidly. Learn to double tongue, then practice combining the two, as Clark Fobes does in his article on articulation. Practice articulation both with and without the instrument.

Orchestral Studies

Mendelsohn-Midsummer Night's Dream

Smetena-Bartered Bride

Schirmer Flute Articulation Book

Trevor Wye-Flute Articulation

Langenus Method for Clarinet, Book III, Pg 122

Reginald Kell Staccato Studies

Robert Spring Article

Clark Fobes Article

Scales and Chord Progressions

As many teachers have struggled to get their students to practice their scales, I too continue to try to inspire my students with creative, fun, and productive approaches to practicing scales and arpeggios. These really are the “A, B, C’s” of music and the more the player practices them, the more technical flexibility a player will have to sight-read and learn most music relatively quickly. Rather than learning to play scales by rote, a player is a more complete musician if they understand how scales are used to construct music in different keys and how they often imply certain harmonies. A player can then make informed choices about phrase interpretation, dynamics, and breathing, justifying their choices with concrete theoretical knowledge.

Teaching the student learn a melody, by ear, with no written music, seems to be the approach that seems to have the quickest results in helping the student remember major and minor keys and scale finger pattern. I usually select tunes from the Dixieland or traditional jazz repertoire because of the relatively simple song forms, melodies, and chords. Once I started doing this I became a bit overwhelmed by the vast number of tunes there are to choose from, feeling that I was not doing the student justice if I only introduce them to a few tunes, not the majority of the repertoire. I now realize though that once the student learns this approach, they can explore the repertoire themselves, learning tunes that interest them specifically.

I begin by teaching the student the melody of the song first. I simply play the melody bar by bar, telling them what key the melody is in and what scale corresponds to that key. As they gradually learn the melody, we reinforce it by playing it in unison together. If I hear a song that I like but do not know it, I spend a little time and learn the melody and chords. I am continually being introduced to new repertoire, which is one of the privileges of teaching.

In learning to play a wind instrument, we often focus on the melody and not the harmony of the music, because we can only play one note at a time. Learning the harmony behind the melody helps to give the melody more significance. By comparing the melody notes to the underlying harmony, we can understand the important structural notes in the melody.

Once the melody is learned, I teach the student the chords of the song. The chords are usually quite simple, often consisting of I, IV, and V chords. I have them arpeggiate the chords—in time—with a metronome. This exercise teaches the student the difference

between major, minor, and dominant seventh arpeggios. I try not to include 7th chords other than a dominant seventh chord so as to keep things simple.

Once they are comfortable with the melody and chords, I play a walking bass line while they play the melody. I play the bass line in quarter notes on my clarinet or saxophone, emphasizing the underlying chords of the song.(example of bass lines with arpeggiation and then with scales) with a combination of arpeggios and fragments of scales.

At this point, the student begins to hear the sound of the chords beneath the melody they are playing. I then teach them the chords of the song in groups of two or four bars, so they can play the bass line while I play the melody. Once they are able to play the melody and walking bass line, I alternate having the student play the melody, while I play the bass line, then the student playing the bass line while I play the melody. The chords in Dixieland tunes usually change every two or four bars, so there are not very many chords to remember at a time. Also, it is quite amazing what the ear and fingers can remember with a little repetition. It is also helpful to note that learning chords are kind of like learning melodies. With a few tries, many players can figure out a simple melody by ear on their instrument. The ear works the same for chords with enough repetition. Frequent playing by ear helps to develop this skill.

When the student can play through the song easily, both melody and bass line, we then learn the song in another key. I help the student along by telling them what note of the scale the melody starts on and then encourage the student to think of the intervals between melody notes. Many students respond quickly to playing and repeating and not thinking intervals at all, letting the ear be the guide. I try to encourage students to learn

the melodies through a combination of thinking what scale degree each melody note is on and just letting the ear be the guide. Both approaches are important in the development of a comprehensively trained musician.

I try to choose melodies that the student can learn in one or two lessons so they feel an immediate sense of accomplishment. I often use songs that Sidney Bechet wrote or played. He was a New Orleans jazz musician who played music completely by ear. For the more advanced students, I teach them Charlie Parker melodies and solos by ear, using the piano to teach the lines, so that the student can hear how the chords and melody lines correspond. The piano is also helpful as a visual tool. Because the phrasing, rhythms, and harmonies of Charlie Parker's music is quite advanced, I reserve this material for students that are specifically interested in developing their improvisation skills.

Minor Scales and the Keyboard

Teaching minor scales at a keyboard is an excellent visual tool to aid in understanding how minor scales are constructed. If a piano is not available, I keep a portable keyboard available in my studio. It does not have to be anything elaborate. I bought my keyboard at Wal-Mart for \$9.99 in the children's section.

At Piano

- Play one octave major scale up and down (one hand)
- Count down three half steps from root of major scale, play a scale starting on this new note, using the same notes as the first major scale. This is the natural minor scale. It is also the "relative" minor of the major key.
- Play the natural minor scale again while counting out loud. Give each note a number (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 1 (because you're back at the octave again)).

- Play the minor scale again, this time raise the 7th note one half step both ascending and descending. This is harmonic minor scale.
- Next, play a the natural minor scale again, while raising the 6th and 7th notes one half step ascending, then lower them back to their original notes when descending. This is the melodic minor scale.

At Piano and Clarinet

- Next, do all of these steps again. This time though, after each time you play a scale on the piano, immediately play it on your clarinet. Note that since the clarinet is a transposing instrument, you will be a whole step lower than the piano. Just ignore this for now. The point of the exercise is to immediately relate the visual element of learning the notes and intervals of a scale on the keyboard to your clarinet.