

Clarinet Concerns and Solutions: Beyond the First Year

Presented by

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So the first year is over. Your beginning clarinet students left school in the spring with good fundamentals and good basic characteristic sounds. You're feeling pretty good about this year's clarinet section. BUT... don't forget that your 7th graders are just a few months removed from beginner status. Continued attention to fundamentals (and a lot of it) is a must. The new demands of performing as a band can be the demise of fundamentals and individual progress unless there is a deliberate plan to continue to make fundamentals a priority.

The following topics deal with the some of the biggest areas of concern and offer some solutions and resources that can hopefully help your clarinet section continue forward progress.

1. Tone Development
2. Hand Position and Technique Development
3. Improving Articulation
4. Alternate Fingerings
5. Matching the correct reed to the mouthpiece

Clarinet Concerns and Solutions: Beyond the First Year

I. Tone Development - Make this a part of your daily band warm up and weekly clarinet sectionals.

Long tones - Play scales in whole notes @ 60 bpm. Practice low octave and upper octaves. FOCUS on correct embouchure characteristics at this time. There are also many good long tone exercises in methods books. Some of my favorites are listed on the resources page at the end of the handout.

Register slurs - Use register slurs to diagnose and improve embouchure issues. The embouchure necessary for the high C and above IS THE clarinet embouchure. For those having trouble producing the top notes up to the high C and above, check for one or more of these problems to improve embouchure issues.

1. *Slow air speed* - Speed it up!

2. *Corners are too loose*. Firm the corners in toward the center of the embouchure. Occasionally a student will need to be told to pull the corners SLIGHTLY back in order to achieve the correct firmness.

3. *Too much bottom lip over the teeth*. The bottom lip must simply form a cushion for the reed. Buzz a D (concert C) to get a feel for how much lip should go over the teeth.



4. *Too little mouthpiece in the mouth (or sometimes too much)*. The portion of the reed that does not touch the mouthpiece should be in the mouth. This will vary with different mouthpieces. Use the "paper trick" to determine how much reed should go past the bottom lip.



5. *Back teeth that are too far apart* can cause too little pressure on the reed from the bottom lip, and the player will be flat or have a "spread" sound. Bring the back teeth closer together. This brings the jaw up and will put more pressure on the reed. The pressure should be sufficient to produce the higher notes without producing a thin, constricted sound. (Biting)

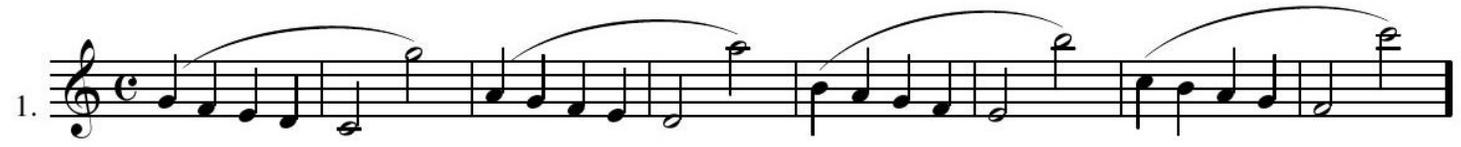
6. *Tongue is too low in the mouth*. Use an EEE tongue rather than an AAHH tongue. This gets the tongue higher in the mouth.

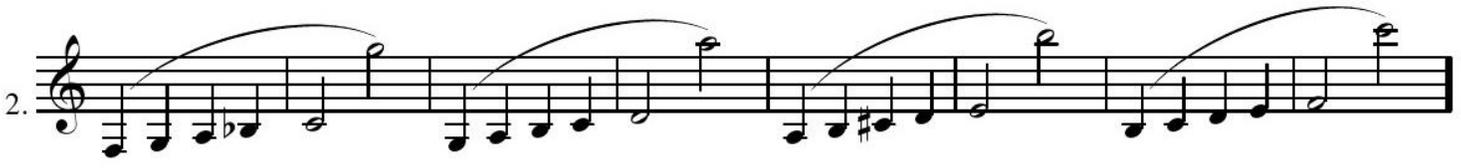
7. *The bottom teeth are too far back*. Push the teeth forward slightly. This puts more reed in the mouth.

8. *There must also be sufficient pressure from the top lip*. It's difficult to tell if a student is using sufficient pressure from the top lip. Have the student put their finger against the top teeth and the push the finger down with the top lip. This will give a feel for the needed pressure.

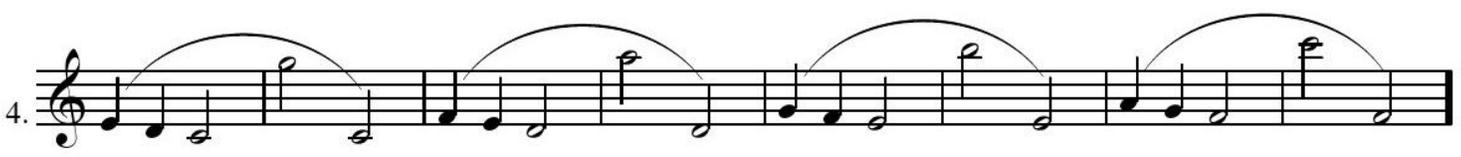


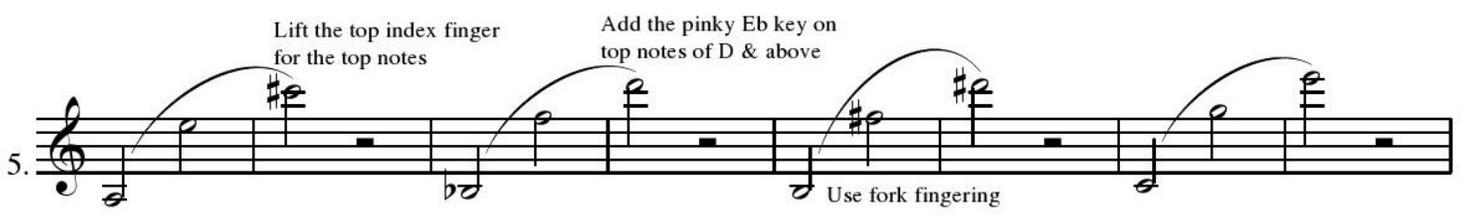
Register Slurs

1. 

2. 

3. 

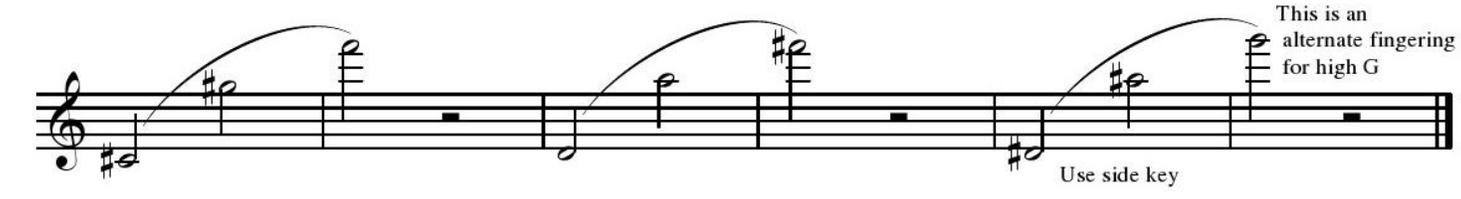
4. 

5. 

Lift the top index finger for the top notes

Add the pinky Eb key on top notes of D & above

Use fork fingering



Use side key

This is an alternate fingering for high G

Hand position and technique development

Mechanism drills need to be a part of continued clarinet development. These should isolate and repeat fingering combinations. Practice them slowly at first and work toward gradually faster tempos and more repetitions. Thirds exercises provide great mechanism drills for young students. These can be isolated into smaller segments.

See the “Resources” page at the end of the hand out for some useful mechanism drills.

Hopefully good hand position habits were developed during the first year, but here are the most common problems that continue to plague young players. Watch for these while practicing the mechanism drill. Some are easier to spot than others, and correcting most of them is aided by the use of a neck strap. All of these issues create problems with technical facility.

1. Excessive Finger Height – Fingers must hover over the keys when not in use. No curling, no stacking, no waving. The left hand is particularly prone to fingers popping up too high, and fingers tend to stack when playing 2nd space A.

This →



Not This →



2. Right thumb too far under the thumb rest.

This →
(small hand)



(Larger hand)

Not This →



Smaller hands can benefit from putting the thumb on top of the thumb rest.



3. Right index finger hooks under the Eb key. (Usually accompanied by the thumb too far under the thumb rest)

This →



Not This →



4. Left thumb angle is incorrect.

Anything else will create problem with the left hand .

This →



5. Left thumb moves to the body of the clarinet for G/A/F# - Try a piece of Velcro to prevent this.

6. Pinkies curl away from or tuck under pinky keys

Improving articulation

Developing a faster and cleaner tonguing style requires deliberate attention. It doesn't just "happen."

Play the following exercises or similar ones at increasingly faster tempos. Notice that we start with just a few repeated sixteenth notes and add more as we go. Almost all young players will tend to stop the air when they tongue faster passages, and it tends to get worse when they move fingers as they tonguing. I like to use a connected (legato) style on these exercises. They should 'make the notes touch." This requires continuous air pressure and hopefully prevents the air from stopping as the notes are tongued and fingered.

Sample Articulation Exercises

Repeat each exercise for the full scale. Use a variety of scales and ranges and practice at gradually increased tempos.

Example 1 Example 2 Example 3 Example 4

The image shows four musical examples on a single staff in 4/4 time. Example 1 consists of a quarter note followed by two groups of four sixteenth notes. Example 2 consists of a quarter note followed by four groups of four sixteenth notes. Example 3 consists of a quarter note followed by eight groups of four sixteenth notes. Example 4 consists of a quarter note followed by sixteen groups of four sixteenth notes. Each example ends with a quarter rest.

To improve articulation style and speed, check the position of the tongue.

1. Tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed, or TOP of the tip of the tongue to the top of the tip of the reed. If using the tip of the tongue creates slow tonguing, try using the top of the tip of the tongue.
2. Tonguing too low on the reed will create a sluggish, Thooo sound. Move the tongue to the top of the reed.
3. Students also sometimes have to be told to use a firmer tongue if the tongue is touching the reed too lightly.
4. Keep the tip of the tongue forward, toward the reed. Moving the tongue too much creates a slow tongue.

The following is part of an articulation exercise to further develop coordinating fingers with the tongue. The entire exercise in the key of C is included on the next page. Feel free to copy and transpose!

Remember the goal...continuous air pressure and connected style to prevent the air from stopping while tonguing.

Articulation Studies

- 1) Play the scale rhythm on each note of the scale.
- 2) Play the exercise slurred
- 3) Play the exercise as written. Try to increase your tempo a little bit each day.

C Major Scale (Bb concert)

The image shows two staves of musical notation for a C Major Scale articulation exercise in Bb concert. The first staff contains the ascending scale: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The second staff contains the descending scale: C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. Each note is followed by a rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes, with the number of groups increasing from 2 to 16 across the scale.

5. About teaching staccato.... This is a very debatable point, but I find it works. I teach my young students to NEVER stop the air with the tongue for a staccato...until I say they can! We focus on continuous air speed and air pressure and making the notes "touch." I start teaching staccato by using a piece like the 3rd movement of the Stamitz Concerto No. 3 (first 8 measures) or Haydn Theme and Variations (Theme and variation 1.)

HAYDN
Arranged by D. Kaplan

Allegretto Moderato (♩ = 72)

III

Rondo

I teach a LIFTED style. The notes are released by just stopping the air rather than stopping them with the tongue. But even when the air is stopped, the air PRESSURE remains ready for the next note. This helps to develop the light, detached, tonguing style which is so necessary for this style of music. It also prevents EVERYTHING from being played too choppy in an attempt to play staccato by using the tongue to stop the notes. This can result in a "tut-ie" style of tonguing.

Here's a good visual that comes from [Foundations for Superior Performance](#) that helps students "get it" about the difference in a lifted note and one stopped with the tongue.

"A lifted note looks like this  A note stopped with the tongue looks like this "

6. At some point, stopping the note with the tongue is definitely required, and it seems to come rather easily if the lifted style has been taught first. The concept of constant air pressure is already developed. Learning the "lifted" style first, then progressing to a staccato that is stopped by the tongue has proven for me to develop a better overall staccato style and avoids a choppy style of tonguing which is created when the air pressure is stopped. It also teaches students to use which ever staccato is appropriate for the style being played.