Chapter 34

Pedagogies for Teaching Clarinet

**Supplemental Materials: Beginning Clarinet Exercises**

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*Call and response exercises* are great for fast checks to gauge where your students are in being able to create an embouchure, tone, articulation, rhythms, melodies, and the like. Use it often for improvisatory moments with the students.

*Modeling* for your students often. A picture is worth a thousand words. The goal of your methods classes should be to create a good solid tone on as many instruments as you can so you can play along with your students and help them develop strong habits.

*Practice long tones.* The beauty of long tones is that you can start without notation and focus on the sound and tone students are making. However, long tones work to develop breath control, embouchure, pitch, tone, and endurance and should continue to be a part of the development of the young musician.

*Developing each register.* To develop proper tone on the lower register (Chalumeau) with correct finger placement early on will help ensure fluid transition across the break to the clarion register of the Clarinet. With the good tone and air usage in the chalumeau register, crossing the break to manage the register key will be much easier for young musicians.

**Exercise Examples**

**Clarinet Tone Builders *–* Exercise and perform with the repeat**

Example #1: Written pitches E3, F#3, G3, A3 & B3

* Long Tones Exercise on Lower Register
  + Student plays each note for 8 counts each (more counts can be added)
    - Tempo 65 ***(Adagietto)***
    - Start playing each note with the (TOO) sound/articulation.
      * Reinforcement and ensure correct articulation
    - Good Tone production
    - Steadiness of the note/tone is extremely important.
  + Repeat

Example #2: Written pitches: C4, D4, E4, F4 & G4

* Long Tone Exercise/Legato Tongue
  + Student plays each note for 8 counts (more counts can be added)
    - Tempo of 65 ***(Adagietto)***
    - Start playing each note with the (TOO) sound/articulation.
      * Reinforcement and ensure correct articulation
    - Good Tone production
    - Steadiness of the note/tone is extremely important.
  + Repeat

Example #3: Written pitches: C4, D4, E4, adding Bb3, A3, G3 (moving down to chalumeau), repeating long tones above.

**Working the break exercise and adding resonant fingerings**

This is a seemingly simple exercise but shows teachers and students how easily a student plays over the break. The goal is to match the tones from each register by using the same quality of air on each. When the student blows air, they should have their tongue in the same position as if they were vocalizing the sound “EEE.”

There are two two-note patterns for this exercise with no speed. The first goes from A3-B3 and the second goes from Bb3-C4 repeating the respective interval without break several times. The object is to transition smoothly between the notes without any extraneous noise. This is an excellent focus exercise for the student who is first learning to “go over” the break.

An excellent aid to this exercise is to hold down all the right-hand fingers while playing the A3 in the first exercise and the Bb3 in the second exercise. (Though this may bring the two throat downs lower in pitch, those notes are typically sharp to begin with.) This makes it easier to bridge the gap between each interval because it takes finger motions in the right hand completely out of the equation, leaving the work in the embouchure and air to succeed. Once the student can do this cleanly, they can do the exercise without holding the right-hand keys down.

**Additional Pedagogical Tips**

1. **Use a mirror.** I find that the use of a mirror is excellent for students of all ages to monitor, among other things, their embouchure, and fingers. Beginning students don’t need to use it much, just enough to see that they are exercising their embouchure correctly or moving their fingers properly.
2. **Use of the “French” Or “Double-Lip” Embouchure.** Students learn in the first few times playing the clarinet that they must have some pressure on the reed from the jaw/lower teeth or else the sound will be weak and flabby. I call this aspect “hug”. Hug is healthy and helps create a beautiful sound.

However, like in all things, there are diminishing returns. If we apply too much pressure, it is no longer “hug”, but “bite.” Bite is one of the major enemies to developing a beautiful clarinet sound. The reed must vibrate many times per second against the mouthpiece. Biting presses the reed closer to the mouthpiece so that the reed cannot vibrate its potential distance toward the mouthpiece.

“French” or “Double-lip” embouchure requires the player to put the top lip over the top teeth like with the bottom teeth. It is very difficult to bite too hard with double-lip embouchure because it hurts inside the lip if we apply too much pressure.

When a student of any level demonstrates overbiting, have them play short exercises using double-lip. Then have them play single-lip again but allow the single lip embouchure to change its pressure to equal that of the double-lip pressure. The student doesn’t need to play many of these to see what is necessary to do to adjust the single-lip embouchure.

1. **Leg Lift.** When my students don’t use enough quality air (high-pressure and fast), I have them play segments of music with their legs up in the air and their backs away from the chair. Immediately, this causes them to engage their core (abdominal muscles) providing quality air to create a quality sound. In ensembles, this can even cause a very noticeable improvement in intonation.

When a student does this, I always tell them that when they put their legs back down, they must engage the core as if the legs were out. Students must understand that when they play, they can’t aim for comfort; the abs must constantly work to support the sound.

1. **Syllables to help find proper tongue position (voicing).** Though this concept is not a beginning concept, it should be introduced before the first year playing clarinet ends. Each instrument has a specific position for the tongue inside the mouth to create the proper airflow to make their instrument sound the best. This is called “voicing.” For clarinetists, the tongue must be raised in the back of the throat which narrows the airstream causing the air to move faster. There are many other nuances for the aspiring professional to consider years down the road, but the beginning student has the best chance at creating a characteristic sound if they raise the tongue.

Have your students vocalize the sound “AHH” and then without stopping the vocalization, move to the sound “EEE.” Have them repeat it back and forth as many times as necessary and ask them what the difference is between the two sounds in regard to the position of the tongue in the mouth. The “EEE” position is the proper voicing for clarinet. Some students make me laugh when they try to apply it because they begin singing “EEE” into the clarinet. It’s important for them to understand that we blow fast air through the “EEE” position.

1. **Reed care and selection.** Reed care should become a part of learning to practice. First, students at any level to have at least four good reeds at any given time whether they are a beginner or a college student. Rotating reeds make them last much longer provided they are stored properly.

The most efficient way to store reeds if you want them to last is to use a reed case. The case protects the reed while it is not in use. It protects the reed against breaking or chipping and stores the reed in a flat place that won’t bend. Storing a reed in anything bendable encourages the cane to warp. If the reed warps, it will not play well.

You can teach older students to break in a reed gradually. Over the course of about six days, I have my students gradually play the reed more and more by following this basic plan:

DAY 1: Play no more than 15 seconds

DAY 2: Play no more than 2 minutes

DAY 3: Play no more than 5 minutes

DAY 4: Play no more than 10 minutes

DAY 5: Play no more than 20 minutes

AFTER THIS, PLAY AS LONG AS YOU WISH

When players get into late middle school or high school, begin introducing them to the concepts involved in adjusting reeds (techniques like taking material off the cut to make it softer or shortening the tip to make it harder). This is a phase that they can look forward to as they progress as players. If you do not know how to adjust reeds, find a clarinet teacher who can teach you so you can share that knowledge with your students.

1. **Common finger placement problems.** The posture of the hands while holding/playing the clarinet should resemble holding a tennis ball or softball; the fingers are curved and relaxed. The fingers should never flex straight out, as this is always an indication of tension in the hands, wrists, and/or arms.

Sometimes students try to place the very tips of their fingers on the clarinet’s tone-holes. This also creates tension. The fleshy part of the finger, directly on the other side of the finger from the nail, is the part of the finger that covers the clarinet’s tone-holes.

Each individual student has a different physiology. Adjusting hand position will be based on the student’s ability to get the fleshy part of their finger on tone-holes while maintaining the curvy, relaxed fingers and should checked individually, often, and early in learning to place the fingers on the keys. The teacher can have the student raise or lower (most likely lower) the wrists to get the hand in the correct position and achieve to two goals above with the fingers.

There are two extremely common finger problems we see with students that have to do with learning instrument carriage (the holding of the instrument). If a clarinet has a neck strap ring available, a neck strap may be used. However, please watch for these two issues.

* The weight of the clarinet should be held only by the right thumb against the thumb rest. You could argue that the mouth also holds the clarinet. I see many students who also hold the lowest RH side key (the key that controls Eb3 and Bb4) with their RH index finger.
* When not engaging the left thumb on its tone-hole, register key, or both, I’ve seen many students that will hold the body of the clarinet (a few inches below the thumb tone-hole) with the LH thumb. It is an attempt to help the other arm support the weight of the clarinet.

Both issues above are extremely problematic when it comes time to play fast technical music in more advanced music. When the fingers are anchored incorrectly to support the weight of the instrument, fast technical passages don’t work very well.