Chapter 34

Pedagogies for Teaching Clarinet

**Supplemental Materials: Clarinet Resonant Fingerings**

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Because clarinets are generally sharp in the throat tones, having the RH fingers down can fix the pitch problem. Rarely, some clarinets are not sharp in the throat tones and laying all the fingers down will make the pitch too low. Your good ears in rehearsal will catch this. Overall, I encourage the use of fingers down ONLY after a student has mastered play without laying the fingers down."

For more advanced students, adding RH fingers makes the throat tones more resonant (in certain combinations). Since throat tone notes can be thin sounding, we start to use more resonating fingerings to improve the tone quality of those notes. And depending on what kind of horn and other variables like pitch, there are different combinations of fingers possible for use. Most of the time, the combination is NOT all the fingers." The following are the combinations that work best for me. If these don’t work for you, experiment in front of a tuning device to make sure pitch is good:

G3: LH, nothing down/RH, index finger, ring finger, and low F key

Ab3: LH, middle finger and ring finger/RH, middle finger and ring finger, and low F key

A3: (Same as Ab3)

Bb3: LH, nothing down/RH, all fingers and the low F key

**Troubleshooting the throat tones on clarinet**

When a flute maker added a register key to an instrument called the chalumeau (basically a clarinet with a range from F2 to G3) over 300 years ago, he invented the clarinet. His first basic problem was that there was a gap from G3 to B3. To adjust for this gap, he basically drilled new holes to add the notes we know today as the throat tones. As a result of this, those notes have a distinct color and resistance. They also are more likely to produce squeaks.

Students who have never studied privately before their college experiences have already developed bad habits for making the throat tones acceptable. Generally, students “protect the throat tones” by drastically reducing air flow when they play the throat tones. Reduced air flow causes other performance problems. Moving from throat tones, which are not as resistant, to the clarion register, which is more resistant becomes nearly impossible. The focus and center of the throat tone notes disappear when the sound is not supported properly with air.

To be successful, students should play with the same air flow over the throat tones if they keep the tongue high and the air flowing fast. Their fear is rational: “If I blow the same quality air over the throat tones, I might squeak, or the notes will stick out.” But a proper embouchure and good voicing will unify the throat tones to notes in the registers around it. Encourage students to maintain proper air pressure across all ranges of clarinet, so they can develop a characteristic clarinet sound and a facile technique.

**Other basic pitch tendencies and trouble-shooting**

1. If the student is playing flat in the clarion (middle) and the altissimo registers but sharp in the throat tones and chalumeau (low) register, work on proper breath support.
2. A reed that is too soft for a students will be flat in pitch. A reed that is too hard for a student will be sharp in pitch. Adjustments may be made to the reed but check for reed wear and appropriate reed strength for the student.
3. Beginners struggle with pitch when applying dynamics. When they try to play louder, they are flat, and when they try to play soft, they play sharp. Control of air and embouchure strength and voicing are key to developing appropriate dynamic ranges.
4. A clarinet in hot temperatures plays sharp and one in cold temperatures it will trend flat!
5. Key height can impact pitch as well. If they are displaced and closer to instrument, the pitch of THOSE notes will be flat; if they are too far away, they will be shape. Have an instrument repair person demonstrate where and how to recognize and make minor adjustments.
6. Leaky pads and or key issues will create weak and out-of-tune or instability across the range of the instrument. It may even result in the inability to sound any clarion or altissimo register notes. Check the instrument for these two issues.