

Coaching the Clarinet Section Part III: Basic Articulation Concepts

by Michael Moors

The techniques in this article are by no means the only approach to teaching articulation. However, it is the approach that I have used in the classroom and studio for many years with good success. My goal is to provide some input for the non-clarinetist band director, or for a student that doesn't study privately.

Articulation Fundamentals

To establish the feel of a good attack, place the tongue on the reed 1/4 inch back from the tip of the reed. To start the tone, build up wind pressure against the tongue and say the syllable "tee". Saying the syllable "tee" when starting the tone keeps the tongue arched. The consonant "t" starts the attack. The vowel sound "ee" maintains the arch and minimizes the distance for the tongue to move. Only the tip of the tongue actually moves. The tongue should be released from the reed precisely with the start of the air. Compare the sensation to the water in a garden hose being released. The water pressure doesn't stop when you release the nozzle trigger; thus, your wind doesn't stop when you start your attack. The attack is only established when there is continual pressure of air against the mouthpiece with abdominal support. The tongue acts as a valve, releasing and stopping the flow of air through the instrument with the pressure remaining constant (like the garden hose).

Below is a good approach to use in initially developing the tongue action. It is an exercise by Janis A. Brown, Clarinet Instructor at Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas. I use it with minor modifications to match my teaching style. This exercise is excellent for producing a good attack and also for assuring a proper tongue arch. Carefully follow the instructions below:

1. Have the student whisper: "he, he, he, he" repeatedly on quarter notes.
2. Change the syllable "he, he, he, he" to "tee, tee, tee, tee."

Your tongue should be near the roof of your mouth and the tip of your tongue near the tip of the reed. Work with only the mouthpiece and barrel; try to achieve a crispness in each attack. Concentrate on moving only the tip of the tongue, tonguing 1/4 inch back from the reed tip.

Common Articulation Problems

The list of problems below (1-5) are the list of problems described in the Westphal's Guide to Teaching Woodwinds, William C Brown, publisher. They deal with the most common problems of young clarinetists; again I have adapted them to my teaching style.

1. Movement of the jaw in tonguing. Caused by too large or too violent movements from the tongue. Care should be taken to keep the base of the tongue motionless.

Solution: Practice basic principles of articulation in the mirror. Carefully observe the jaw for any unnecessary motion.

2. Sluggish tongue. Caused by improper tongue placement onto the reed.

Solution: Work on tongue placement. Practice slowly with a rhythmic approach exercises that let you think about the tongue placement and position. Try practicing quarter notes, eighths, triplets, sixteenths and then thirty second notes on a variety of ranges.

3. Hard attack. Caused by too much tongue pressure against the reed/or too much tongue is in contact with the reed.

Solution: Work for lighter attacks and getting the tongue 1/4" back from the tip of the reed.

4. Poor staccato. Caused by lack of breath support (assuming the tongue placement is correct).

Solution: Sustained, continuous breath support is needed. The support should be relaxed between

staccato notes, then tightened simultaneously with the beginning of the note. Review the tonguing concepts at the top of the page so you can properly analyze your approach. In order to analyze your tonguing motion, staccato should be practiced slowly at first. Strive for the same arc on each attack, with the same amount of impact of the tongue on the reed. The Klose 25 Daily Exercises (New York: Carl Fisher) is excellent for staccato practice. Another valuable book for both staccato and legato playing is the Rose 40 Studies for Clarinet (New York: Carl Fisher) number 5, 6, 8, 11, 16, 17 and 19 are great staccato exercises.

5. Lack of coordination between the tongue and fingers. This is the result of practicing and playing too fast without the essential slow working out process. Foundation is built from slow repetition. Usually it is the fingers that are too slow.

Solution: Practice at slow, manageable tempos at first. Practice “driving” your fingers ahead when you are aware they are late. Avoid the temptation to “slam” the fingers down as it cause unevenness and tension in playing. Fingers must move the same distance, slightly above the keys.

Other problems to be on the lookout for are the following:

- relaxing the air at the end of a note;
- “gushing” air at the start of each note;
- undefined (or fuzzy) attacks due to using an improper syllable starting the note.

Care should be taken on entrances to make sure the tongue and air start simultaneously. A big, full sound is more conducive to good articulation than an unsupported tone. No noticeable throat motion should be evident. If the throat is moving it usually means you are using too much tongue for each attack.

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