

Coaching the Clarinet Section: Part IV

Developing Good Hand Position in the Young Clarinetist

by Michael Moors

Good hand position, if emphasized and reinforced from the first lesson, can be a habit and problems can be avoided. Many difficulties the young player has in playing the break, throat tones and chalemaw register can be traced to poor hand position.

One difficulty in working with beginners of all ages is that there are many concepts to be considered. Articulation, rhythm, embouchure and breathing concepts are hard to concentrate on all at once. I have found that by minimizing the number of concepts initially introduced, one can achieve a greater overall success rate.

Many method books start by using only the notes fingered by the left hand, but when the right hand is not used right away, students begin to “park” fingers in wrong places. Many students begin to use the keys to help support the weight of the instrument, leading to problems when trying to learn the chalemaw register. Having the student hold the instrument with the thumb on top of the thumb rest and first finger below it puts the right hand under the lower joint and provides adequate support. This lets the student concentrate on proper position of the left hand with no worry about the right hand for a few weeks. Later, when changing to the proper position of the right hand, the new, correct position is so radically different that the students have no previous habits to inhibit their eventual success.

Left Hand Positions

1. The left thumb covers the “F” hole and also operates the register key. It is placed at a 45 degree angle across the instrument so that the ball of the finger (the fleshy part) is closing the hole and the side of the tip is just touching, but not pressing the register key.
2. The register key is controlled by pivoting the thumb upward.
3. The index finger is almost pushing the G#/Ab key.
4. The wrist is flat and dropped so you form a “v” between your thumb and index finger.
5. Use the left little finger as a “guide” finger. It stays over the E/B key in the lower joint and remains curved.
6. The tips of the fingers overlap the rings slightly so that the “fat” part of the fingers is covering the tone holes. Make sure students have the proper size fingers to play clarinet.
7. Move the fingers from the back knuckle, keeping the fingers curved. Avoid too much pressure. Strive to keep your fingers no more than 1/2” over the holes.

Right Hand Position

1. The thumb is applied below the thumb rest between the nail and knuckle. The ball of the thumb is against the body of the clarinet.
2. Shape your hand like a “C”. Visualize your hand holding a baseball, allowing for a natural curve.
3. Your first finger of your right hand (index finger) is the first “guide” finger. Maintain the “C” with the fat part of your finger staying directly over the Bb hole.
4. The second “guide” finger is your little finger.
5. The little finger lightly touches the F/C key.
6. Again, maintain the 1/2” finger lift, moving only from the back knuckle.

With the proper hand position, unnecessary problems are avoided and maximum efficiency is the result. Remember to always keep the fingers moving light and sneaky!

I hope the above ideas are useful.

Mr. Michael Moors teaches elementary instrumental music in the Alpena Public Schools. In addition to teaching and adjudication, he has a sizable clarinet studio and is a guest soloist. He has a B.M.E. from Northern Michigan University and a M.A. from Central Michigan University. He is also a school clinician, specializing in woodwinds and young bands. mdmoors@northland.lib.mi.us