Where Do I Start?

by Dr. Roger Garrett, Illinois Wesleyan University

Every fall, right before the Illinois District/All-State Auditions, high school students from around the area and beyond call me to set up lessons. Usually, the student arrives in my office on time at the first lesson with a beautiful clarinet, a terrible mouthpiece, average to poor reeds, a photocopy of two etudes from the 32 Etudes by Rose (Carl Fischer), and a scale sheet. They have four weeks until the audition for the district band, and they are willing to do anything to get into the ensemble. When I have the student play for me, the internal reaction is almost always the same: I think to myself, they haven't got a chance. Then, I dust off my best positive smile, tell them they'll be fine, and we attack…their sound production.

Much to the student's surprise, we don't even look at the scales or the etudes for the first two weeks. Usually, following four weeks, the student makes it into the district band, sometimes within the top 6 chairs or better thus giving that person a shot at the All-State and Honor Bands held later in the year. The student usually stays on in lessons following their audition experience.

Where should a student start when beginning a serious study on the instrument? The age old answer has never changed - sound production. The first order of business is to play with a beautiful tone. Without a great sound, all the notes will be uninteresting to the listener - regardless of who is listening. Thousands of clarinetists play with average or uninteresting tones, but the fact is that, with a daily approach and not much difference in time commitment, most of those students could develop a truly superb and wonderfully controlled tone. Why then don't they? No one has ever expected them to. As a former public school teacher, I am well aware of the band director's need to put together a program appropriate for the annual contest. I am very much aware of the band director's self-imposed need to have his band attend not one, two, three but four-plus marching band contests in the fall. The importance of producing technically proficient performances with the high school band is, in the mind of most high school band teachers, a first priority, and there is often political pressure for them to do so. Notes, rhythms, and short barrels solve most of the problems in the short run. Sadly, the clarinetists sacrifice that which would allow them to play everything else well for that short term goal. They don't work on their sound production, and every concert becomes a chore.

Contrary to what most students might think, sound production positively (or negatively) affects literally every other dimension of a clarinetist's performance. Without a properly executed tone, it becomes quite impossible to produce a clear articulation. It becomes equally difficult to play in tune, and control of the instrument dynamically is nearly hopeless. Why? The factors that allow a person to produce a characteristic, correct tone on the clarinet are the same factors that allow the other techniques to work. Without the basic sound production, everything else is offset by the problems associated with producing a fine tone.

Let's liken the preparation of the body of a car for painting to the production of the tone on the clarinet. If one were to paint a car for show, the proper technique involves preparation of the metal prior to the paint. Of course it is important to understand spray painting techniques as well as have the proper paint gun, hose, and compressor to paint with (good finger technique and a good horn), but the most flawless technique in applying paint becomes moot if the body of the car is not prepared properly. In the same way, the embouchure must be prepared, the understanding and implementation of the use of air must be developed, and habits for how to use the back of the tongue in register changes must be formed prior to learning advanced concepts in finger technique and articulation concepts.

How long does this take? Most high school students can eliminate bad habits and relearn good embouchure and air techniques within two weeks time. Maintaining those habits while adding new techniques requires additional time and energy. With the proper attitude, concentration and priorities in practicing, a student can get rid of bad habits and replace them with a great tone within 3 months or less. This is why I can produce good results with students in such a short amount of time. They are motivated to do whatever it will take to get into the district band. They already have the necessary finger technique and rhythmic concepts to play the etudes and scales. They simply lack a terrific tone. Once we get that going, the rest falls into place - excepting articulation - but that's another problem to tackle after the audition!

Here is a suggested lesson plan for developing good tone:

1.Develop a Concept of Tone Production. Listen to several professional clarinet recordings and decide which performer has the kind of tone you want to play with. Keep in mind that every player is unique and

that mimicking that tone, while appropriate, will still result in your own unique sound. Plan to imitate what you hear in terms of sound, "bright" and "dark" qualities, and projection qualities.

2.Produce a "correct" embou-chure. Be sure to understand the concept of the muscles in the face surrounding the nose, lips and jaw as paramount to producing a well-formed support system for controlling the reed/mouthpiece setup. A flat, pointed chin is important, but not to the extent that the jaw opens up too much (or too little). Don't forget that the upper lip and corner muscles work equally hard in providing a support system for the reed/mouthpiece setup. There must be pressure from the right hand thumb to allow the mouthpiece to be securely anchored against the upper teeth (single lip embouchures).

3.Use air properly. Most students use very little air. They take too little in and blow very little out. I believe this is because they don't like the way they sound when using air correctly! Why? The mouthpiece, reed, and embouchure combination (not to mention too high a tongue position) often result in squeaks, undertones, and flat pitch. Students then take less mouthpiece into the mouth, play on harder reeds (because they only use the tip of the reed to produce the sound), and let the chin bunch up against and muffle the reed to keep it from squeaking and/or playing thinly. The results of this approach produce an average clarinet tone in the middle register, but anything below a low C or above a top space G on the staff sounds uncontrolled and out of tune. Sound familiar? Time to fix number two above and learn to use the air correctly! This means taking a deep breath (fill the stomach up) and learning to blow fast and slow (cold and warm) air without negatively affecting the embouchure.

4. Take more mouthpiece. It's a fact. The more reed that vibrates, the bigger the sound will be. Bigger isn't always better, but it sure helps to have enough sound to learn to control it! Experiment with the amount of mouthpiece that goes into the mouth. Constantly refer to that favorite recording and see if taking more mouthpiece into the mouth gets you one step closer to your "dream" tone!

5. Learn to fix the squeak by figuring out how the opening in the back of the throat (affected by the position of the back of the tongue) causes or eliminates squeaks. Thinking syllables such as "Eeee", "Ah", "Euw", "oh", and "aye" and evaluating those tongue positions as you play in different registers can really be enlightening! Keep in mind that each register involves very discreet, minor adjustments in embouchure, air use, and tongue position.

6. Play long tones and flexibility studies FIRST every day. Review sound production prior to learning technique. Occasionally play these exercises in front of a mirror evaluate the embouchure. Expect to produce every shade of gray in the tone - from white (no sound) to black (as loudly as you can play). Anything less is a cop out!

7. Listen to yourself when you play! Many students play what they see and react to what they feel in terms of pressure and/or resistance. If it feels right, it doesn't mean that it sounds right. Don't practice anything technical without a good tone - make it your biggest rule, and follow that rule. The results will be very rewarding.

8. Be sure you play on a good mouthpiece, reed, and ligature combination. Students can play on student grade plastic instruments and, with the right mouthpiece/reed/ligature setup, can sound every bit as good as the seasoned professional in terms of sound production. Seek out professional advice for this aspect of your playing.

9.Play with good sound production habits even when you are playing in band - either on the marching field or the concert stage. It does you no good to practice one way at home and "un-practice" those habits at school.

10.Strive for the best tone possible - ALWAYS. It will separate you from the rest of the crowd, and it will impress those who hear you play. Even better, it will make playing the clarinet more fun and enjoyable for you!

Since the fall of 1988 Roger Garrett has been the full time clarinet professor at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Illinois where his duties include teaching the Clarinet Studio, conducting the Symphonic Winds, and teaching the fundamental conducting classes. He is currently the Principal Clarinetist with the Peoria Symphony Orchestra in Peoria, Illinois. Mr. Garrett is recognized by Buffet Corporation as a Buffet Performing Artist, and he performs exclusively on Buffet clarinets. Mr. Garrett graduated with Distinction from the University of Michigan with a Bachelor of Music Education Degree. He subsequently taught in the public school music programs in Longview, WA and Bozeman, MT before returning to earn his Masters Degree in Music Education at the University of Michigan. He completed the majority of his course work toward his Ph.D. (cognates in music education and conducting) at the same institution before accepting his position at Illinois Wesleyan University in 1988.