

## Director's Guide: The First Bassoon Lesson

*by Dr. David Rachor, Northern Iowa University*

This article born out of a desire to aid junior and senior high school directors in getting students started on bassoon. In my travels across the state, I have met several directors whose schools own bassoons, but who have no students playing them. However, as a bassoonist who understands and appreciates the potential of the instrument, I would encourage directors who find themselves in this position to consider putting their bassoons to good use. I believe you will be pleased with the timbre and richness the bassoon will add to your ensemble. It is assumed for the purposes of this article that the student has a bassoon that is in good working order and a reed that is free-blowing enough to allow the student to easily produce a sound. The subjects of bassoon maintenance and reeds will be taken up in future articles. In the following paragraphs, I will outline the basic steps one should follow when starting a student on the bassoon.

**Step One: Choosing a Method Book;** The student must be provided with a beginning bassoon method book. Two good methods are the Rubank Elem-entary Method and the Weissenborn Method for Bassoon. I use and recommend the Weissenborn for four reasons:

1. It remains at an easy level long enough to familiarize the student with the fingerings before pro-gressing.
2. The exercises themselves are well-written and fun to play.
3. Many excerpts from the State Try-out Lists are taken from this method, thus eliminating the need to buy another book.
4. It contains many duets with an easy line for the student and a more difficult line for the teacher. (The teacher's line can be easily transposed to be played on other instruments.)

**Step Two: Assembling the Bassoon;** It is very important that you assemble the bassoon properly and in the correct order. Before starting to assemble the bassoon, be sure that the tenons are lubricated with cork grease. The bassoon is assembled one joint at a time in the following order:

1. Connect the wing joint (the joint with the flared section on it) to the boot joint.
2. Connect the long joint to the boot joint.
3. Attach the bell to the boot joint.

**Step Three: Preparing the Reed;** The next step that must be accomplished is to prepare the reed for playing. This is done by soaking the reed in clean water for approximately 3-5 minutes. Be sure that the entire reed is immersed in the water. A small pill bottle or Tupperware container works well for this purpose. After the reed has been soaked in clean water, it can be kept in the mouth to prevent drying out.

### **Step Four: Preparing to Play;**

The following procedure should be followed in preparing to play the bassoon:

1. Place the seat strap across the front of your chair and sit far back in the chair. A beginning bassoonist should not use a neck strap, as it sometimes causes poor playing position.
2. Hold the bassoon firmly with the thumb keys toward you, and attach the strap to the boot cap by hooking it through the hole nearest you.
3. Grasp the bocal just above the octave vent, and insert it with either hand by pushing down while twisting slightly.
4. Hold the bassoon firmly with the right hand and lean forward slightly from the back of the chair. Adjust the strap until the bocal touches the center of the embouchure.
5. Place the prepared reed on the bocal (using the right thumb and forefinger) until tight and horizontal.
6. Incline the bassoon to the left and adjust the music stand until you can see the music by looking straight ahead.

**Step Five: Forming the Embouchure;** Forming the em-bouchure is a critical process which should be approached carefully.

1. Slightly draw the lips toward the center of the mouth as if you are about to whistle. This will roll some of the red of the lips over the top and bottom teeth. Be careful not to roll too much of the lips over the teeth, as this results in a hard, jaw supported embouchure. Practice this process a few times before going on to the next step.
2. Place the reed in the mouth far enough so that the first wire is about 1/8 of an inch from the top lip. (Repeat 1)
3. Place the lips on the reed so that there is a slight -but equal-amount of pressure from all directions, much like a drawstring closing a cloth bag. The bassoon embouchure is a soft, lip supported embouchure, which requires very little pressure.

**Step Six: Producing the First Tones;** You are now ready to produce a sound.

1. Place the reed in the mouth and form the embouchure using the method described above.
2. Finger a second space C (all three fingers of the left hand plus the whisper key) and blow the pitch with a soft embouchure. With a correct, lip supported embouchure, the result should be a very raucous sounding B natural (a half step flat).
3. After a B natural has been produced several times, drive the sound with additional breath support until the pitch center rises a half step to C. Do not accomplish this pitch change by biting with the embouchure. It is very important to realize that the pitch level on the bassoon is primarily maintained by breath support, and not by embouchure pressure.
4. After the C is produced using a soft embouchure and the breath support necessary to bring it up to pitch, produce the tones D, E, and F. Refer to the fingering chart in the beginning of the bassoon method book.

At this point, the student should be able to start with the first lesson in the bassoon method book chosen. However, it is essential to again go through each of the six steps outlined above during the next four or five lessons to ensure that the student has a firm grasp of the fundamentals of playing the bassoon. Once these fundamentals have been acquired, the beginning bassoonist may be taught in the same manner as any other beginning instrumentalist. (Reprinted from an article originality published in the Tennessee Musician)

*Dr. David Rachor, associate professor of bassoon at Northern Iowa, holds the Bachelor of Music and Bachelor of Music Education degrees from Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee and the Masters and Doctor of Music degrees from Indiana University. He has authored numerous articles on bassoon pedagogy which have appeared in Bandworld, BD Guide, The Double Reed and other publications. Dr. Rachor has given workshops and master classes throughout this country and in Europe including the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, the American Band College and at conservatories in Budapest, Hungary; Geneva, Switzerland; Brussels, Belgium; Iasi, Romania; Stuttgart, Germany; and Angouleme, France. In addition to his university teaching, he performs as principal bassoon of the Des Moines Symphony Orchestra. His Principal teachers have been Leonard Sharrow, Sidney Rosenberg and Mordechai Rechtman.*