

Some Typical Bassoon Problems, Their Possible Explanations and Solutions

by Dr. Michael Burns, University of North Carolina

Response Problems: These can especially happen in a performance situation where the player is usually somewhat nervous and tension leads to a tightening up of the throat, jaw and lips.

Low Notes: A lack of response in the low register is most often caused by not having the lower jaw lowered enough. Other possible causes are: a reed that is too closed or too resistant, leaks in the instrument the player not totally covering the tone holes, or the keys not being sufficiently depressed.

High Notes: A lack of response in the high register can be caused by the player pinching too much. Often in the effort to squeeze the high notes out the player puts so much pressure on the reed that the tip closes altogether allowing no sound through. Other potential causes are: incorrect fingerings such as leaving the half-holes off of high G and high Ab, or not knowing which keys the left thumb uses for which notes, and of course lack of support.

Cracking: This tends to happen most in the middle register from Fa at the top of the staff up to the D above the staff. This is the bassoon's break and the solution is to use the two most infamous bassoon techniques: half-holing for the F#, G, Ab and flicking for the A, Bb, B, C and D. These techniques are both somewhat involved, but here are some basic tips:

Each of the three half-hole notes requires a different size hole opening: F# requires the largest opening with approximately two-thirds of the hole being open. G is probably a true half-hole. Ab is the fussiest of these notes. It requires approximately one quarter of the hole to be open. If the opening is too small the lower octave will come out (as is the case with all half-holes.) but also with the Ab if the opening is too large a multiphonic squawk results! Two rules that should be observed are: 1. The left index finger should roll down (not slide) to uncover the necessary hole opening. 2. The whisper key should be on whenever there is a half-hole.

Flicking involves the venting of specific wing-joint keys to aid the response of certain notes above the break. There are various means of achieving the technique but it gets its name from a motion which touches and then releases the appropriate 'flick-key' at the beginning of the note. The flicking register is immediately above the half-hole register described above. Many bassoon teachers have their students hold down the correct flick key for the duration of the note. If it is taught as being just part of the fingering then the students do not usually have any difficulty with the technique. However, it most often is added on after the player has already established the fingering and then it can be difficult for the student to assimilate.

Questionable Intonation: There are many possible causes of questionable intonation. The first two are lack of support and biting. Another common mistake is for students to neglect the top left-hand pinkie key (Eb or "resonance" key) from some critical notes such as the G at the top of the bass clef staff (the half-hole G mentioned above). This tends towards being a sharp note even at the best of times, but if the student leaves off the Eb key it will be even higher in pitch with a nasal strident quality. Notes that should have this key on in order from low to high are: the Eb below the staff, the Eb in the staff, the G, and then EVERY note above E-natural above the staff (but NOT the Eb above the staff). Again, if the Eb key is left off of these higher notes the intonation and quality of the sound is affected as well as response in some instances.

If there are just isolated intonation problems on some notes, it is possible that it is related to the specific reed, bocal, or instrument. The students' reeds should be checked periodically to see if they are split or cracked (cracked reeds often produce VERY low pitches, as much as a half-step low, but the reed may still play so the student doesn't replace it) or if the tip opening is too closed. Over time the pressure from the embouchure tends to close the tips of reeds. This can be another possible cause of small thin sound, lack of low note response, and sharp intonation.

Probably the best advice that I could give regarding the bassoon (and any other instrument for that matter) is that if you are not an expert, try to gain the advice and assistance of someone who is. Seek out players and teachers from local fine schools of music and orchestras. These professionals are usually happy to give advice, lessons, help with reeds (including often selling reeds that are vastly superior to the average store-bought ones). There are also teachers of private lessons available in many areas. With these resources available, you shouldn't feel that you ever need to face the difficulties of this unusual instrument alone. Good luck. and Happy Bassooning!

Dr. Burns teaches Bassoon at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and is the Bassoonist in the Eastwind Ensemble. As a performer, he appears frequently at International Double Reed Society conferences and has played bassoon in numerous orchestras including the Cincinnati, and New Zealand Symphony Orchestras. Burns was Principal Bassoon in the Midland/Odessa Symphony Orchestra in Texas, the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra and numerous groups in his native New Zealand. Michael Burns plays the YFG-812 bassoon.

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