

Bass Clarinet Basics
by Master Sergeant Susan Kelley

HISTORY

The bass clarinet was invented in the second half of the Eighteenth Century, and was originally used only in orchestras. By the 1920s, the bass clarinet was being used in bands, but usually doubled other parts or substituted when other bass-voiced instruments were unavailable. Since the 1950s, the bass clarinet has been treated more as a solo instrument, and in today's band literature often has a prominent role.

THE INSTRUMENT

Using proper equipment is very important when playing any musical instrument. Selmer and Yamaha are probably the most common brands of bass clarinet. It is imperative that the instrument be given proper care. It should be swabbed out after each use and cork grease should be applied to the joints regularly. Whenever the instrument is not being used, it should be stored in its case.

MOUTHPIECES

The bass clarinet mouthpiece plays an important role in the production of sound. The mouthpiece should fit securely in the neck of the instrument and should not be used if chipped, warped, or cracked. About once a week the mouthpiece should be cleaned in warm, soapy water. Never swab a mouthpiece or put anything with a sharp edge inside. Some brands of mouthpieces that are good choices for high school musicians include Selmer, Vandoren, and Bay.

REEDS

Players should use the type of reed best suited to their playing levels. When not being used, reeds should be stored in a reed guard or secured on a piece of plexiglass with rubber bands. Reeds should not be stored on the mouthpiece. Beginning students should use a softer reed (strength 2 to 3), which will allow easy sound production in the lower register; however, these are not stiff enough to be consistent in the upper register. One should consider a strength of 3 1/2 to 4 for this purpose. Brands of reeds that are good choices for the developing bass clarinetist include Rico Royal, La Voz, Olivieri, and Vandoren. If bass clarinet reeds are not available, tenor sax reeds will fit the mouthpiece. However, they do not function as well as reeds made specifically for the bass clarinet.

WARM-UP AND PRACTICE

Warming up properly is one of the most important aspects of a daily practice routine. Since instrumental music is composed along scale and chord lines, it makes sense to use scales and chords as an integral part of one's warm-up. Major and melodic minor scales are a good place to start (see Example 1). Scales should be practiced slowly at first, using different articulations to develop legato and staccato tonguing. Broken chords (see Example 2) may also be practiced using different articulations as well.

Example 1

The image shows two musical staves in treble clef. The first staff is labeled "G major" and contains a scale starting on G4. The notes are G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G. The second staff is labeled "E minor (melodic)" and contains a scale starting on E4. The notes are E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E. Both scales are written in a single line of music.

Example 2



Standard study books for the Bb soprano clarinet may also be used for the bass clarinet. Some recommended titles include Rose 30 Etudes, Rose 40 Studies, and any of the etude books by Klose or Baermann.

Long tones (see Example 3) are also effective as they help the player develop good control of each note throughout the entire dynamic spectrum. Playing each note of a scale as a long tone is another way to improve the sound (see Example 4).

Example 3

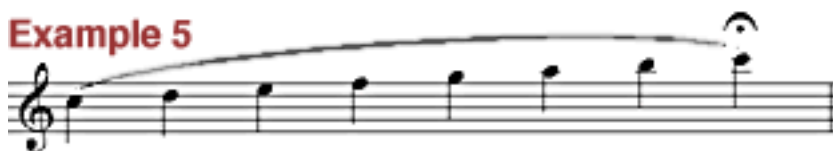


Example 4



Producing an acceptable sound in the low register is usually achieved in a short time by most people who play the bass clarinet. However, because of the physics of the instrument, producing an appropriate sound in the upper register is more challenging. The purpose of the following exercise is to teach the player to keep a constant stream of air entering the horn by supporting the air with the abdominal muscles. The notes should all sound the same; no one note should sound louder than any other. Start in the second octave of any scale with the tonic note and ascend for one octave. Remember to keep the lower jaw relaxed and the throat open (see Example 5).

Example 5



This article is provided courtesy of the United States Army Field Band in Washington, DC.