Each wind instrument is unique, requiring specific physical and mental traits to reach optimum playing ability. Double reed instruments are no exception, having very specific needs to ensure success. To ensure the best possible chance of success, the teacher should, whenever possible, help students play instruments they are best suited to play. This article will address the traits, of both people and instruments, which will ensure success for the beginning double reed player.

Selection: The Person

**Personality Traits** - The student should have a positive, outgoing attitude with the self-direction to spend the time practicing and making reeds. Many times they will be the only one in their section, so a high degree of self-sufficiency will be an asset.

**Physical Traits** - Embouchure is the primary area of concern for both the oboe and bassoon. The oboist should have a slight overbite with the ability to place the upper lip sufficiently under the upper teeth. This is important to produce a proper tone and pitch and critical for endurance. A student with a short (thin) upper lip or protruding upper teeth will be doomed to frustration. Small hands and/or short fingers can be a problem for the oboist in reaching the alternate keys or covering the split ring on the right hand. Occasional problems have been noted with double jointed students covering the holes in the keys especially when playing the left hand F and Eb keys, and the right hand Eb key.

The bassoonist should also have an overbite (an underbite should be avoided) and although not as critical to endurance, both lips should be able to cover the teeth adequately. Hand size is of particular importance due to the stretch of the tone holes on the bassoon and the number of thumb keys.

With only the reed to set pitch, and the oboe and bassoon’s use as a solo instrument, it is very important to make sure the student has a good ear.

**Experience** - It is preferable to start the oboist and bassoonist after they have had a year or two of wind experience. On occasion a teacher may be successful starting a student with piano/string background. The reed and the physical difficulties of embouchure, added to learning to read music, measure time, and develop ear training can slow down and frustrate the student. Observing a student for a year, and looking for the traits mentioned, allow for a good start/transfer. We find that
within a few weeks the student has progressed to
the level of the other students.

**Beginning** - If a double reed teacher is available,
private lessons are suggested to speed up learning
and thus avoiding many of the mechanical and reed
problems. Virtually all combinations of transferring
between instruments work, but the clarinet to
bassoon and the flute/saxophone to oboe have
the closest fingering combinations.

**Selection: The Instruments**

Fortunately, instrument quality and selection have
improved greatly over the last few years, especially
at the “student” level. Wood instruments are still
superior for the most part, but in school situations
plastic is a viable alternative. Some instruments have
superior key design. Students often have been
observed having difficulties reaching the left hand
F and Eb, and right hand Eb keys. Although my new
instrument (oboe) is a professional model, these
same students had no problem reaching these keys.
This leads me to observe the very design of some
recognized manufacturers literally creates more
difficulties for the student. When purchasing new
instruments take this into account.

Budgets often are not adequate, and it is a
temptation to get an instrument of lesser quality
or get one with fewer keys. If an instrument were
used exclusively for beginners this might be okay.
However, too often these beginner instruments
do end up in the upper grades and the student is
asked to perform at a level not possible on these
instruments.

**Selection: The Reed**

The oboe and bassoon are the only instruments
that actually make their own tone generator. This can
be a big advantage if one knows how to make reeds,
but a nightmare if not. The best solution is for a
student to take lessons and get reeds from their
teacher. This is not always possible, so commercial
reeds are often the only alternative.

The long “American” scrape, sometimes referred
to as a “W”, is preferred. Both oboe and bassoon
have a variety of shapes. The trend today is toward a
narrower style reed, which helps pitch and centers
tone. On the oboe it particularly allows for a much
better control of pitch and tone in the upper register.

Most commercially made reeds are machine
manufactured and do not take into account the
many different variables of the cane itself. It is
suggested that you find a reed that is hand scraped.
The recommendations of teachers and performers
will be your best source of information.

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