

# Starting the Young Double Reed Player

Richard Rath

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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



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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.

*Richard Rath teaches oboe and saxophone at Oral Roberts University, and performs on both instruments with the Tulsa Philharmonic. He was on the Founding Committee of the International Double Reed Society and is a frequent performer at their annual conventions. Richard Rath is the manufacturer of Richards Double Reeds which are distributed exclusively through Yamaha Corporation of America. Mr. Rath is a Yamaha Performing Artist/Clinician and plays a YOB-841.*

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