

# Getting Back to the Concert Band Clarinet Section Sound Following Marching Season

**Dr. James Gai, Central Missouri State University**

---

As marching band season ends and concert band begins each year, the clarinets are often the one section of the band furthest from producing that “ideal” sound. Here are a few reminders and suggestions that will help that section again contribute to a balanced concert band sound. We’ll look at some equipment issues first, since even our most talented students can’t produce good results using inferior or faulty equipment. “Fix the horn or fix the kid?” is often the question in the director’s mind. These first two suggestions will help fix the horn.

## **Reeds**

Have each clarinet player obtain new reeds. Discard the thin, flabby and fatigued reeds from marching season (as well as the plastic ones) that can only produce open, unfocused tone and poor intonation. The strength of the reed should be matched to the mouthpiece facing. Generally, the closer the facing, the harder the reed should be. I recommend Rico Royal #3 to 3-1/2 or Vandoren #2-1/2 to 3 for many mouthpieces, though a few premium hard

rubber mouthpieces will require #4 reeds for best tone and pitch. It might be time to replace that lost reed holder, too.

## **Pads**

Next, check the instrument for leaks. Bad pads or bent keys can cause a number of playing problems including overall flatness, squeaks, pinched embouchure, and bad finger habits. A simple test for leaks is to take each joint of the clarinet, cover the finger holes with one hand, use the heel of the other to seal the bottom of the joint, and try to suck the air out of the joint. Don’t blow into it, but rather try to create a vacuum in the joint. If the joint tests correctly you will feel the vacuum and get a “pop” when lifting a finger; if not, you will be able to inhale a slow, steady stream of air which indicates that one or more pads should be replaced.

Serious problems with all aspects of playing can develop during marching season. Here are some suggestions for students:

## **Embouchure**

When marching, the need to

grip the beak of the mouthpiece with the teeth can become an alarmingly normal part of playing due to excessive upper body movement, uneven marching surfaces, and the weight of the flip folder. To undo this habit, begin by placing enough mouthpiece in the mouth. Slide a piece of paper between the reed and the mouthpiece facing to give the student a visual example of where the bottom lip should contact the reed. In reality, the lip should be just slightly closer to the tip from the point where the paper catches, but the goal is to get more of the reed vibrating freely, producing a resonant, darker sound. Pitch will come down slightly and students will discover that very little pressure from the jaw is required to produce a good sound. Intonation will improve remarkably!

A mouthpiece patch (thin, self-adhesive plastic applied to the beak of the mouthpiece) will also help students hold more mouthpiece in the mouth. Both Yamaha and Vandoren market these patches and are well-worth trying.

## Getting Back to the Concert Band Clarinet Section Sound Following Marching Season

### Holding Position

Related to embouchure, some marching bands encourage a holding angle for the clarinet that tends to be 45 degrees or more from the body. This makes for a good look and body carriage on the field, but the classical clarinet angle should be between 30 and 40 degrees for more focused sound, tongue placement, and disciplined hand position.

### Articulation

Many of the traditional “thud” sounds can be eliminated by placing more mouthpiece in the mouth (see Embouchure section) to expose more reed. The tongue should contact the reed slightly below the tip to stop vibration without closing the tip. Too often players hit the reed and bottom lip at the same time, closing off the tip of the reed and producing the common “explosive” attack. Simply point out to students that the tongue should not bump the bottom lip for the best results. Suggest the student’s tongue motion emulate the syllables “dew” for legato and “det” for staccato as a foundation for a complex subject.

### Breath Support

Re-establishing a tonal concept and utilizing good breath support go together. Sitting or standing should make no difference in breath support as the hip joint is a long way from the diaphragm and abdominal muscles. Good posture is essential to the rudimentary “draw the air in with the diaphragm— push it out with the abdominal muscles” approach. Better muscle control results in better tone, but a directed, flexible airstream yields improved dynamic contrasts and variations in tone color.

### Finger Position

This area is probably the least of our worries, but I see many students using their right index finger in a way that will inhibit playing fast passages. Students tend to use this finger to help hold the instrument during long outdoor rehearsals, placing it under the Eb/Bb key of the upper joint. This inhibits smooth scale work because the fingertip cannot be placed directly on the hole and must first “rock” on the hinge tube. After a few minutes of playing indoors, check for a red spot or small dent on the index finger and remind the student to relax, arch the fingers, and rest the instrument on their lap when it gets heavy. A clarinet neckstrap works well for many students with chronic hand problems.

### Step-Up Mouthpieces and Ligatures

A replacement mouthpiece or ligature is often a shortcut to success in that will make the student more aware of their sound and develop in them a new sense of aesthetic values. There are many fine hard rubber mouthpieces on the market listed under the signatures of great players, as well as the numbered series by Vandoren and the sometimes overlooked Custom series by Yamaha. Improved ligatures tend to be “low pressure” in design and may require players to sand the backs of their reeds to insure an airtight seal on the mouthpiece. Whatever the equipment, the student will care more about their sound.

While these brief suggestions can’t solve all the issues caused by moving from marching to concert band, they may give some insight into refining that “concert band sound.”

*A Yamaha artist/clinician since 1981, James Gai has performed and presented clinics throughout the United States and Canada. A former high school band director, he is presently Professor of Clarinet at Central Missouri State University. He holds two degrees from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale and the doctorate from the University of Northern Colorado where he was a student of William Jamison.*