

# Little Steps to the Big Break

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When clarinet students first join band, they enter a whole new world, one that is fresh, novel and fun. As the year progresses, certain aspects of the clarinet can become quite challenging. One of the more difficult areas is conquering the technique required to go over the break. Without proper guidance, many students become frustrated, dejected and may even quit. The following article will concentrate on this issue and suggest a systematic approach to introducing and mastering the break.

A couple of items must be addressed prior to introducing break exercises. First, students must have good hand position in order to create fluid technique. This implies relaxed hands with naturally curved fingers. Unfortunately, beginning students often play with caved-in knuckles.

If this is the case, check placement of the weight on finger pads. When a finger covers a hole, the weight should be located at the front of the pad, closest to the tip of the finger. If the weight is transferred to the back of the finger pad, the likelihood of a caved-in knuckle is much greater. Encourage your students to focus on weight placement which will in turn keep their first knuckles curved.

Also be sure your student's middle knuckles of both hands gently point up toward their face, keeping palms parallel to the instrument.

This should place hands in the proper position. The left hand index finger will wrap around the clarinet with the side of the finger making contact with both the G# and the A key. Hopefully, this position will reduce the tendency to "hop" on and off the A key. The middle knuckle of the right hand index finger will be very close to the lowest side key on the

upper joint. This placement will allow the student to lean into the side key rather than changing the hand position to reach keys. If the student's knuckles are low and the hands are perpendicular to the clarinet, they will constantly move their hands in order to access certain keys. It is the job

of the fingers to close holes and depress keys, not the hands.

Encourage your students to practice simple exercises slowly while maintaining good hand position. Practicing in front of a mirror will help achieve correct placement of the finger weight and proper position of the knuckles.

Secondly, students must be able to play register slurs and clarion notes prior to working on break exercises. If students are unfamiliar with high notes, register slurs are a wonderful

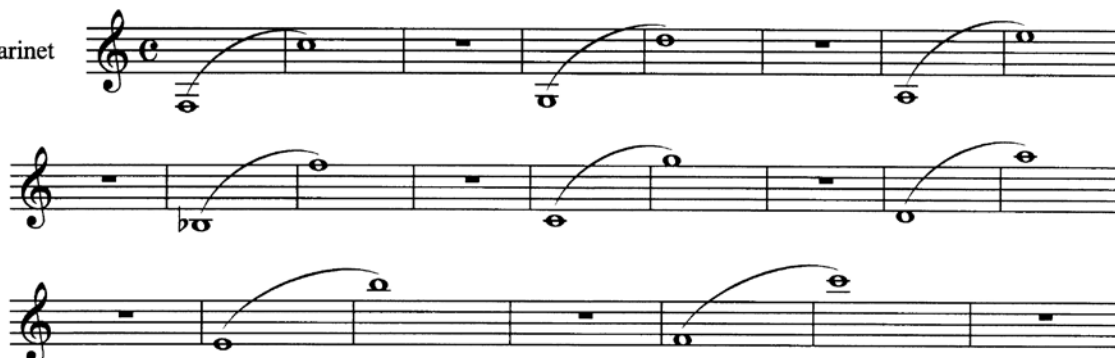
introduction. Unlike the other woodwind instruments, the clarinet is built in 12<sup>ths</sup>. It is imperative for students to recognize and hear this interval since it is the natural over-blowing tendency of the instrument. Register slurs also help students see and understand the relationship between the notes and the fingerings. (See diagram next page.)

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REGISTER SLURS:

B $\flat$  Clarinet



Begin with the following three register slurs: A to E, B $\flat$  to F and C to G. Since many students have difficulty producing the lowest and highest notes on the clarinet, these three mid-range register slurs are excellent starting points. Use a good strong air stream and visualize blowing through the low note to the top note. As students become more comfortable with these three slurs, systematically add the lower and higher slurs to their daily routine. If squeaking occurs on the lowest chalumeau notes, check that the right hand is completely covering the holes on the lower joint. If the student has trouble with upper note response, be sure the air stream is fast and the tongue position is high.

Finally, practice starting a clarion note. Play the register slur, add a rest and then restart the higher pitch. Work to produce a quick response and centered tone on the upper note. Be sure to maintain that strong air and proper tongue position.

Once the student can successfully produce pitches in the upper register, you are ready to connect the chalumeau through the throat tones to the clarion or go over the break!

It is important to break down the process and concentrate on one item at a time. First, develop the habit of leaving the fingers down in the right hand when possible. Throat tones (G, G $\sharp$ /A $\flat$ , A and A $\sharp$ /B $\flat$ ) are the weakest on the clarinet and are typically

sharp. Both of these issues can be improved however by placing fingers down in the right hand when playing throat tones. If a student is aware of this concept, their quest to play smoothly over the break will be easier. First step, teach students to leave the right hand down on throat tones. Demonstrate with a slur from C to G. (See diagram below.)



Since C is a long-fingered note, it is fairly easy to slur down to the G without moving the right hand. By leaving the right hand in place, the student is moving only four fingers instead of eight. Once this feels secure, the student is ready to attempt to go back up to C. Most likely there will be a bump or a hesitation when playing the second C. This will improve as the student repeats the exercise and learns to move the four left hand fingers as a unit.

When the student is proficient at producing this leap over the break, it is time to concentrate on a different element: the left hand index finger. Since leaving the right hand down is now comfortable, the focus is placed on how the left hand index finger opens the A key. The new exercise will begin on C and go through throat tone A. (See diagram on next page.)

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Be sure the side of the middle knuckle of the left hand index finger *leans* into the A key. Hopping will occur if the student tries to use the pad rather than the side of the finger. After playing this downward leap several times, the student is ready to go over the break back up to C. Be sure that the index finger leans off the A key down to the first hole and lands on the pad. The shape of the index finger should not change.

Since this is a tricky movement, it will require repetition and lots of encouragement.

When this leap becomes manageable, it is time for a new focus: the left hand thumb. Double check that the left hand thumb is positioned at approximately a 40 degree angle or the 2:00 position on a clock. The final exercise will begin on C and go through throat tone Bb, similar to the other music examples. To play C, the pad of the thumb covers the hole while the tip presses open the register key. As the exercise moves to Bb, the tip of the thumb retains its position while the pad lifts off the hole. Make sure the student leads the lift with the large knuckle at the base of the hand; do not lead the lift with the thumb knuckle.

When a student is able to successfully play the exercises with little to no hesitation, it is time to incorporate these ideas into context. Provide simple exercises and melodies that allow students to work on the above concepts.

Once these technical elements are habit, introduce the concept of right hand preparation; placing the right down prior to going over the break. Scales are perfect exercises to demonstrate this idea. For example, the middle octave of the F major scale (concert Eb) has three throat tones prior to going over the break. The student places the right hand down while playing the throat tones in anticipation of moving over the break. When the student reaches C, only the left hand will need to move. (See diagram below.)



It is essential to decide when to place the right hand down and when to pick it up. Many clarinetists move the hand down on G, the first throat tone. In some instances, hand coordination may be problematic since the hands move in opposite directions. If so, try placing the right hand down on A; this allows both hands to move in a downward motion. Either is acceptable. Be sure to apply the same decision to the descending form of the scale as well.

Creating smooth technique over the break is one of the largest obstacles for beginning and advanced clarinetists. Help younger students break down the concept into small bites of information. A methodical approach will help establish good habits and the result will be even technique through register changes on the clarinet. Best of luck and may all your reeds be good!

*Patricia Pierce Card, Associate Professor of Clarinet and Assistant Chair, joined the Sam Houston State University faculty in 2001. Dr. Card has performed at the International Clarinet Association's ClarinetFest in 2008 (Kansas City) and 2004 (Washington D.C.) and has been a featured guest artist at several conventions including National Association of Teachers of Singing (Dallas), National Flute Association (San Diego), and Texas Music Educators Association (San Antonio). Prior to her appointment at SHSU, she was the Assistant Professor of Clarinet at Oklahoma City University and principal clarinet of the Oklahoma City Philharmonic Orchestra (1997 to 2001). She was an active musician and private teacher in her hometown of Richardson, Texas preceding the move to Oklahoma City.*