

Clarinet Sound Projection

Dr. Michael Dean, Southeast Missouri State University

“Andy! Pretend I’m on the back row of the hall and I’m half-deaf from going to a loud concert. I want to hear your clarinet solo. So play that solo straight to me.”

We’ve all heard and said similar things about sound projection to our students. We realize the importance of getting the sound out to the audience. Unfortunately, in the mad dash of preparing our students to perform we often neglect or under-emphasize this important concept.

Many of the important things I work on with my students (such as relaxation, articulation, etc.) can be tricky to explain and take a long time to achieve significant results. However, sound projection is much easier to teach and gets results much more quickly.

The following is a look at some ideas on sound projection and some suggestions on teaching them to clarinetists as a section and/or soloist. Most of these ideas will be useful to other instruments as well.

Know Your Place (Solo vs. Ensemble Sound)

We have all been to a junior high band festival and heard the 1st chair clarinet (or trumpet, etc.) play a solo that didn’t get off the stage—it had that “young band solo sound.” The main problem (other than possibly performance anxiety—a topic for another day) is that the student has likely not been consistently taught to get the sound out to the audience (i.e. the judges). He or she is not playing with a “Solo” sound.



My band director in graduate school, Allan McMurray, used to speak about the difference between performing with a “Solo” sound vs. an “Ensemble” sound. A “Solo” sound is a tone that zips right off the stage and straight to the audience. An “Ensemble” sound is one that blends and appropriately fits into the whole group. (The ensemble should project its sound, but it does so as a unit in support of the solos, etc.)

We can expand the concept of “Solo” sound to include a “Soli” sound. This is where a small group (a clarinet section, for example) blends their sound together and then projects it out to the audience—like one huge clarinet soloist.

Using the 4 (or 8) Laws to Teach Sound Projection

Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden said, “The four laws of learning are explanation, demonstration, imitation, and repetition. The goal is to create a correct habit that can be produced instinctively under great pressure. To make sure this goal was achieved, I created eight laws of learning; namely, explanation, demonstration, imitation, repetition, repetition, repetition, repetition and repetition.” (from *Wooden* by Coach John

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Wooden with Steve Jamison (McGraw-Hill, 1997) page 144. Check out Wooden's books—they are a life-changing treasure trove of genuine wisdom.)

Explanation

As per the above, explain to the students about the importance of good sound projection and the “Solo vs. Ensemble” sound distinction. Also, instruct them about how this relates to playing an ensemble soli with a “Soli” sound.

Also, I believe that it is much better to teach students to project the sound out to a specific point in the hall and NOT just a generalized “fill up the room with sound.”

Demonstration

You can demonstrate this easily with your voice or use an instrument. Speak to the students in a non-projecting voice and then speak straight to a percussionist in the back row. Ask the students which one sounds better. If you could show them this in a large auditorium it would be even more effective.

Imitation

Have the students copy you with their voices. Have the clarinet section sing a prominent soli section of a work with a “Soli” sound. Be sure to have them blend their voices together and then project out together as “one big clarinet soloist.” I like to say, “lock arms mentally.” (FYI, I have found that having students sing the music, rhythm, etc. is a great way for them to learn.)

After they get the idea with singing, have them try it on their instruments. You may need to make corrections to improve this. (“Correction” is included in this law of learning, FYI.) Work to get them to sense how it sounds and even “feels” when they are projecting as a blended section soli or soloist.

Repetition

Talk about and work on sound projection often in rehearsals and lessons – I work on it a little in every one of my own practice sessions. (See: clarinetmike.com/docs/Clarinet_Practice_Routine.pdf)

Also, when practicing in a small room, have the students pretend they are in a familiar large hall and play to a specific spot in the back.

Summary

In conclusion, I want to remind you that teaching students to project their sounds is really not difficult. However, I strongly urge you to mention this early and often in rehearsals, lessons, etc. as you cannot just mention it at the “last minute” before a concert or contest.

I encourage you to think of new and creative ways to convey this information to your students. I would enjoy hearing about how you teach sound projection and I welcome any feedback on this topic (or anything else). I may be contacted at my professional web site: clarinetmike.com.

Dr. Michael Dean is Associate Professor of Clarinet and Saxophone at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. He is the founder and director of the annual Southeast Missouri Single Reed Day festival in Cape Girardeau. He is also President of the National Association of College Wind and Percussion Instructors (NACWPI). In 2008, he toured England presenting recitals and master classes at the Royal Northern College of Music, University of Sheffield, Liverpool Hope University, and Colchester Institute. This fall, he will similarly tour Florida with stops at four universities. He has appeared as a recitalist at Carnegie Hall, the International Clarinet Association's ClarinetFest conference and the NACWPI National Symposium. Recently, he presented recitals and master classes at universities on tours of New York, California and Texas. Michael Dean is currently Associate Principal Clarinet with the Paducah Symphony Orchestra. Dr. Dean's new CD Desertescape: New Music for Clarinet features clarinet works by American composers. He also appears as chamber musician and soloist on the Red Mesa Trio CD. He has commissioned, premiered, and edited several new clarinet works. His publications include the book Clarinet On Campus and articles in various professional journals. Dr. Dean holds degrees in clarinet performance from Texas Tech University, University of Colorado at Boulder and University of Texas at Arlington. His professional web page is clarinetmike.com.