

# Care and Feeding of Your Freshmen Double Reeds

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Does this sound like a scenario that you have witnessed a few times in your career? A bright and talented fifth grader enters your beginning band program. She/he is a bit of a loner who doesn't mind traveling apart from the crowd and has taken a look/listen to various instruments on YouTube. He has also gone out to the internet and has found a web site that lists the various instruments by their relative ease or difficulty and is intrigued by the statistics showing that oboe and bassoon are considered to be among the most challenging instruments in regular use in wind bands. She decides to take the plunge and announces to you that playing a double reed instrument is what she wants to do, so you arrange her schedule so that she starts the sixth grade in the beginner class that includes oboes, bassoons and saxophones.

A bit of shock settles in when she discovers that saxophone reeds sell for about \$25.00 for a box of ten, while a student line oboe or bassoon reed bought over the internet sells for \$16.00 apiece (a professional reed will cost about \$25.00). He goes to the sheet music store to look at method books only to find out that there is a much smaller selection of oboe/bassoon music available and that it seems

to cost more than the saxophone music. When her parents ask about purchasing a student model instrument (since the school-owned instruments seems to have been brought over on the *Mayflower*) they assume that since a student model beginner alto saxophone can be had for around \$2000 (or far less if you buy one of those saxophone-shaped-objects that can easily be found on the internet), a student line bassoon or oboe should sell for about the same. Oops, a beginner oboe will cost \$3000 and a beginner bassoon will cost \$4500. The beginner classes start and the bright sixth grader can hardly hear himself over the roar of the saxophones in the room. In any case, there are so many more of them than there are of him (oh, by the way, he is the only bassoonist in the room) that the over-burdened band teacher trusts that the young man's above-average intelligence will help him to survive the year with crummy reeds and a fingering chart in the beginning band book that likely contains at least a few wrong fingerings.

The first year comes and goes. If the young oboist or bassoonist is extremely lucky, contact has been made with a private teacher who is able to provide good reeds (or can tell the student where to purchase them), correct the wrong fingerings in the beginning band book, and demonstrate a characteristic sound on the instrument at every lesson. (If the private teacher is unable to satisfy any one of these three, find another teacher immediately.)

Because the pool of double reed players at the middle school is rather shallow, the young player finds herself in the top ensemble, preparing for concert and sight-reading contest in the spring. Oboes, bassoons and low brass are among the instruments whose players take the longest time to mature to the point where a characteristic sound can be produced. Our middle school band's low brass section receives lots of our attention because they are completely indispensable to a

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successful trip to UIL in the spring. The oboe and bassoon players make fairly unattractive sounds at this stage, but there is practically no music on the grade 2 or 3 list that has essential solos for these instruments, so the director is always asking them to blend in with the flutes and clarinets (for the oboe) or with the saxophones and bass clarinets (for the bassoon). Over these two years, the young oboe/bassoon players learn to hide themselves as well as they can. It's a lot like being a groundhog—if you are noticed, the attention that you receive is seldom positive, so you learn to keep you head down and hope for the best.

Let's assume that our bright, socially misanthropic double-reed player stays with the program all the way to the freshman year. What happens now is a nightmare of epic proportions. A decision must be made about what area of the marching band will be their home for the next four years. The color guard unit is a possibility for only a few of the double-reed players.

If he or she was coordinated or a fine dancer, chances are that they wouldn't have gone into the world of oboe and bassoon playing anyway. (The author of this article is a bassoon player, and he KNOWS what mis-fits we are.)

Some double-reed players head for the "pit," where they can find a home with the percussion players, but some are lost to the percussion section forever and others are bored standing around for hours on end while the wind players in the band master the art of marching sideways or backwards while playing their instrument as they

learn the drill. Some double-reed players are thrust into the wind section of the band where they find that they have to memorize a show and learn stand tunes on an instrument (usually saxophone, but occasionally one of the mid to low range brass) where they are three years behind the skill level of the other members of the section. Once summer band is over, school begins and the young double-reed player, probably one of the brighter members of her class, makes the adjustment to the new campus, with a different routine for class changes, A/B lunch, and deals with the shock of going from being top dogs at the middle school to being at the

bottom of the food chain at the high school. Although the young person was in the top ensemble at the middle school, only a few freshmen make it into the top performing ensemble at the high school, often due to policy that restricts that ensemble to upper classmen. In spite of all this, the oboe and bassoon player is assigned to the symphonic wind ensemble for the year. (Sorry, the pool of double reed players has collapsed over the years, so an exception will be made to avoid those empty chairs at UIL in the spring.) Did we mention that all members of the honors wind ensemble are required, as a condition of being in the top ensemble, to audition for district band (TMEA All-State) in early November? So in addition to the stress of learning a new instrument for marching band (or perhaps spending lots of quality time with the color guard instructor), our fearless oboe or bassoon player is looking at three All-State etudes in key signatures that



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they have never seen before, with extreme high and low notes that have never appeared in any band music that they have seen (do fingerings exist for notes that high?), and to add insult to injury, the bassoonists are looking at something they are seeing for the first time—tenor clef.

How many double-reed players will survive this shock? Not as many as we would like. What do we do to fix it? Here are some ideas.

The long-range health and success of the band program at the high school level and beyond should be the main focus of the public school band program. The high school band is in the public eye to an extent that is unimaginable for the middle school band, primarily due to appearances at football games and marching in the occasional parade. If the middle school program thrives while the high school program struggles, the situation that creates this imbalance will not be tolerated for long. If the

pool of high school double reed players is going to be able to meet the needs of grade 4 and 5 literature, then two or three players on each double reed instrument is needed in each grade level at the high school. Attrition is a fact of life in all extra-curricular activities. In order for there to be two players on oboe and two players on bassoon survive in the program until the senior year, at least three or four players on each double reed instrument should be started in every sixth grade beginning class. Of course this means that the inventory of every middle school should include six to ten each of oboes and bassoons, and it goes without saying that all of these instruments need to be well maintained and in proper playing condition.

The highest priority should be given to securing the services of a good teacher for oboe and bassoon to work with the students outside of regular beginning class time to work on individual problems and make sure that the instruments and reeds are functioning properly. Most

of the better private teachers want to work with beginners rather than avoiding them; it is far better to establish good habits at the beginning than to try to get rid of bad habits in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade when they are well established.

There is no easy solution to the problem of expensive instruments, reeds and sheet music. The laws of supply and demand have left us with an unalterable situation. As long as there are far fewer players on oboe and bassoon than on clarinet, flute and saxophone, then instruments, reeds and sheet music will always be more expensive due to the smaller level of buyers for those products. As long as oboe and bassoon reeds

have to be made by hand, there is no hope that prices will fall to the level of clarinet and saxophone reeds. As easy as it is to chip saxophone and clarinet reeds, it is easy to see that clamping these reeds to a mouthpiece gives them some small measure of protection. Without the protection of the mouthpiece, it can't be helped that oboe and bassoon reeds are exposed to all kinds of accidents that seldom befall clarinet and saxophone reeds, nor can we do much about the inherent clumsiness of students at this age. As these students mature, the number of crunched reeds will fall, but until that happens, a chipped or broken reed will be a common sight in your band room. Remember, you get what you pay for. You can't guarantee that the most

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expensive reeds will be good, but you can rest assured that inexpensive reeds will be uniformly awful.

Directors of your middle school bands should be encouraged to program music that exposes the double reeds rather than hides them. It simply is not true that a botched solo from the oboe or bassoon causes a band to get a lower rating at contest. When bands make a 3<sup>rd</sup> division at concert competition, it isn't the ugly oboe sound or the sharp bassoon that was the cause, it was the overall level of success in the preparation for the performance. I have never heard of an instance when an adjudicator lowered the rating for a band because an oboe or bassoon player had a bad day. We need to choose music that gives these students the chance to be heard and appreciated. The selection of the proper program for contest may be all that is needed to encourage your double-reed players to rise to the challenge. If these young players are kept hidden for two years of middle school band, we are doing nothing more than kicking the can down the road instead of fixing the problem.

When scheduling play-offs for the show music for your high school marching band, please bear in mind that the oboists and bassoonists who have been thrust into the saxophone or brass section, or who are now spending lots of time in the "pit" will need lots of remediation if they are to be productive members of those sections. It may be worth considering that the double reed players might be instrument carriers rather than players, or perhaps they could be assigned to operate the band's sound system. One very large and successful band program in suburban San Antonio had such large numbers that the double reeds were excused from marching with the band altogether, instead spending their time indoors in the practice room and taking their private lessons while their classmates were outside pounding the asphalt. Seldom will it be found that other members of the band resent the

dispensation given to the oboe and bassoon players, the more understanding band members will be aware that playing the oboe and bassoon at a high level of proficiency is usually quite enough of a challenge.

If the middle schools have failed to produce sufficient number of double reed players to fill the chairs when concert season arrives, don't give up hope. Start looking for players to make the switch to oboe or bassoon in the first weeks of school.

Here are a few things to remember when you contemplate who should make the switch:

1. The double reeds are well-known to be the most challenging instruments in the woodwind section; a struggling 3<sup>rd</sup> clarinet player or 2<sup>nd</sup> band saxophone player is unlikely to have the talent to make the switch successfully. You may not wish to encourage your first chair clarinet or best saxophone player to make the switch, but if this player has any thought of a career in music, they will bless you in later years that you encouraged them to make the move to the double reeds. Saxophone players at the university level have very little opportunity to make chamber music with their fine colleagues, but after taking up the oboe and gaining proficiency to handle the 2<sup>nd</sup> oboe part in a Mozart or Beethoven octet, they will have many more doors open to them than before. Remember that the Broadway "doubblers" (musicians who show up to play the Reed books in the touring production of "Wicked") are almost entirely clarinet and sax players who have taken up the flute, oboe, and/or bassoon. It is very rare to find an oboe or bassoon player who has taken up the flute, clarinet or saxophone, although they can be found.

2. Consider brass players (if you have excess numbers) to make the switch, thinking about which of these players might have dexterity that you don't see when they play an instrument that has only three valves or none at all. One of the most successful bassoonists in San Antonio in recent years switched

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from trombone before going on to be a multiple year All-Stater. Remember that the student who has played brass during middle school but taken up the oboe or bassoon in high school doesn't have to worry about what he/she will play at football games.

3. Contrary to what you might think, bright percussion or piano players are not good candidates for the switch. It takes more control of the air stream to play oboe and bassoon than nearly any other instrument in the band, so a percussion or piano player who has never had the need to control their breathing in this manner will likely take years to master this aspect of the instrument. It is certain that somewhere a fine oboist or bassoonist can be found who began life as a pianist or percussion (or violin) player, but I haven't met that person in my four decades of professional life as a bassoonist.

While I encourage band directors who want a healthy double reed section to keep all of the things that I have discussed in mind, I want to stress again that the most important part of the equation is the availability and support of a talented and qualified

private teacher. It is easy to see that very few band directors are themselves double-reed players. This can be confirmed by a conversation with the person in your region who is given the task of assembling judging panels to hear district and region band auditions. Ask that person how easy it is to assemble a trumpet or low brass judging panel and ask them how difficult it is to put together a panel to hear the oboes or bassoons. How often those panels of five judges have no more than one actual double reed player on them?

The long-range goal should be to encourage our most successful high school oboe and bassoon players to follow our lead and seek out a profession in music education, just as we did. But until that golden age dawns, we should do everything in our power to find and keep a good private lesson teacher for our oboe and bassoon players. If the student musicians are willing to go the extra mile to give us that touch of color and beauty that will make this year's performance of "Four Scottish Dances" or "Incidental Suite" memorable, we must go the extra mile to give them the help they need to succeed.

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