

Clarinet Fundamentals ... Revisited!

Gary Whitman

Regardless of our age and experience as clarinetists and music educators, I have found it necessary to constantly practice and revisit the fundamentals of embouchure, tone quality, breath support, finger motion, technical development, and reed maintenance. Without the attention to detail in the fundamentals, the execution of our music making in our ensembles, chamber music and solo repertoire is limited, at best. This article will examine the areas of embouchure, amount of mouthpiece, hand position, and finger motion as well as offer some tips I have found effective in working with students at all levels.

Embouchure

As clarinetists, we obsess about the pointed chin, but miss the point that the top lip is equally important in forming the correct embouchure. To quote renowned pedagogue, Robert Marcellus, “using the top lip actively helps prevent unnecessary jaw pressure into the reed, even preventing sharp intonation in soft passages.” Encourage your students to pull the top lip down against the teeth and the mouthpiece, so it is tucked very neatly. (See example 1 for a side profile of the tucked lip, with the lower jaw back and down.) Andy Crisanti, retired principal clarinet of the Fort Worth Symphony, once described the



example 1

perfect embouchure position as a 45-degree angle from the tip of the nose to the tip of the chin. With the tucked top lip and pointed chin, the idea of an overbite position should be maintained, without moving, during register changes. Think the syllable “ee” to properly shape the oral cavity. This shape allows the air column to be at a fast compression for maximum focus to the sound and evenness during register changes. Some clarinet teachers prefer the French syllable “teu”: tee for tonguing and “eu” for the shape of the lips, resulting in “teu.”

Amount of mouthpiece in the mouth

This is a detail of clarinet pedagogy that many times gets overlooked. Taking the proper amount of mouthpiece into the

mouth can solve many problems with intonation, response, tonal focus, and depth of sound. One visual illustration I use with students is placing a card between the reed and the mouthpiece. The mouthpiece should go into the mouth at the point where the card stops at the bottom of the facing. (See example 2 below.)



example 2

Taking more mouthpiece allows maximum efficiency from the reed, brings the reed closer to the tongue, and allows for a more intense sound at the softer dynamic levels. There is a point where taking too much mouthpiece can result in a spread, flat sound. Not taking enough will result in a sharp, thinner quality. It is important to experiment with each student and determine what is the best amount for them, based on their equipment and the size of their mouth.

Clarinet Fundamentals . . . Revisited!

Hand Position

Since the clarinet is built with open holes and rings, the curvature, position, and motion of the fingers is important for technical execution and the quality of the sound. Maintain curved fingers in both hands that move from the back knuckle, always maintaining the curved position as the fingers lift and drop from the keys. The wrists in both hands should be down, with minimum movement, to facilitate the curved fingers. In example 3, the fingers in the left hand should slant upwards and hover over the A-flat key for the proper position to roll onto the A-key for a smooth slur over the break.



example 3

The left thumb plays an important role to complete the left hand position. If the register key points to “12:00” on the clock, strive to position the left thumb at “2:00 o’clock.” See example 4 for the left thumb position as well as the “V” shape formed by the curved fingers and downward left wrist.



example 4

The fingers of the right hand should be curved in a “backwards C shape,” with the right wrist down for maximum curvature. Try having your students hold a soft drink can to illustrate the “C” shape and curved fingers! (See example 5 below.)



example 5

Clarinet Fundamentals . . . Revisited!

Monitor the right hand position for curved fingers (example 6) and the lifting and dropping motion from the back knuckle for maximum efficiency of the fingers (example 7).

Many times it is difficult for the student to analyze if their fingers, or “biting” with the embouchure, is the cause of response failures in the low register. At this point I will turn the clarinet “around” and finger the passage as the student blows. If the response is good, with a full sound, then I have convinced the student that their fingers are not covering properly.

Finger movement and the air stream

How many times have we said, “as the notes get faster, the speed of the air column must be faster!” Many students decay, or decrease, the intensity of the air stream when playing intervals and directional change of the finger motion. The Klose mechanism study is a great exercise to teach the development of a fast, steady air column during intervals and change of note direction. Example 8 is another exercise by Gaetano Labanchi that changes directions often, allowing the air column to remain steady, under fast compression, with a firm embouchure that does not move during the intervals.

To quote Kalmen Opperman, “it is a matter of time, patience, and intelligent practice.”



example 6



example 7

A musical score for a clarinet exercise, labeled 'no 2'. It consists of two staves of music. The first staff is in 3/4 time and features three sections: 'Largo' (slow), 'Andante mosso' (moderately slow), and 'Allegro' (fast). The second staff is in 2/4 time and also features three sections: 'Largo', 'Andante mosso', and 'Allegro'. The music is written in treble clef and includes various rhythmic patterns and dynamics. The tempo markings are placed above the corresponding sections of the music.

example 8

Clarinet Fundamentals . . . Revisited!

Bibliography

Crisanti, Andrew, personal communication, June 25, 2009.

Guy, Larry, 2012. "The Pedagogy Corner," *The Clarinet* (September): 28-31.

Luevano, Kimberly Cole, 2012. "The Pedagogy Corner," *The Clarinet* (December): 28-31.

Photos courtesy of Paul Cortese, Assistant Director, TCU School of Music.

Gary Whitman is Professor of Clarinet and Division Chair of Woodwinds at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. Active as a recitalist, he has presented performances at ClarinetFest conferences in Arizona, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, Maryland, Missouri and Nebraska, as well as international conferences in France, Belgium, Sweden, Canada, and Portugal. He has also presented masterclasses in Mexico, Peru, Belgium, Puerto Rico and China. He has performed new works in Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, the "Cliburn at the Modern" series in Fort Worth, and the Shanghai Concert Hall. He is a member of the Texas Clarinet Consort, Trio Con Brio, a TCU faculty trio commissioning and performing new works for clarinet, viola and piano, and the Fort Worth Symphony, where he performs as the bass clarinetist. In 2009 TCU conferred upon him the College of Fine Arts Award for the Chancellor's Distinguished Achievement as a Creative Teacher and Scholar. Past-President of the International Clarinet Association, Mr. Whitman is an artist-clinician for the Buffet Group USA, Inc. and Rico Reeds.