

# Upgrade Your Ensemble by Strengthening Your Clarinet Section

**Beth A. Fabrizio**

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Well-respected veteran music educator Beth Fabrizio shares her favorite pedagogical tips and advice, recapping the information presented at her clarinet clinic at this year's TMEA Conference.

## Breath Support

Breath support is the key to having a great overall sound. I recommend the use of a fast, laser beam air stream and a two count breath from the diaphragm, whenever possible. Say the word “oh” while exhaling and inhaling, with no restrictions and total relaxation. Long tone exercises will strengthen sound in all three registers. Straight back posture, as if a string were attached to your head pulling you to the ceiling, must be stressed while standing or sitting in a chair. Breathing Gym by Sam Pilafian and Patrick Sheridan is a great resource for all wind performers.

## Embouchure

The lower lip should be curved slightly over the teeth. Too much bottom lip creates a sound that is bright and edgy, while too little bottom lip creates a dull sound. Taking too much mouthpiece results in a spread and unfocused sound, which is usually flat, whereas

taking too little mouthpiece causes the sound to be pinched and sharp. Place a business card in the opening between the mouthpiece and the reed. Wherever it falls, mark the reed with a pencil. This is roughly how much mouthpiece one should be taking, which tends to be approximately 5/8 of an inch. Beware of biting the mouthpiece (too much pressure from the teeth)!

It is important to keep the head up, and to use a firm bottom lip and a firm, flat chin. The corners of the mouth should be down, in, and snug. Practice in front of a mirror. Do not rest the bell of the clarinet on your leg, as this affects air, embouchure, tonguing, and pitch.

A mouthpiece patch can be used for comfort, to check placement of the embouchure, to control how much mouthpiece one is taking, and to gauge if the student is biting.

## Tongue Position

There are three parts of the tongue we consider as a clarinetist:

- the tip, for articulation
- the middle, for clarity of the sound and center of the tone
- the back, which controls the

register (high in low register/low in high register).

The syllables “ee” or “shee” capture the natural placement of the tongue, and facilitate comfortable articulation. The syllable “tee” is



used for single tonguing at all note lengths. There should be no jaw movement when tonguing correctly; one must have a flat chin at all times. Please note that the tip of the tongue only stops the reed from vibrating momentarily.

Maintain a constant stream of air behind the tongue at all times.

A quick barometer of tongue placement is to have the student play C3 and trill to D3, using the second side key from the top. This will only speak when the tongue is positioned correctly. If you are puffing your cheeks while tonguing, the corners are not firm.

Use a drinking straw to practice the correct formation of the embouchure, position of the tongue, and execution of the air away from the clarinet.

I recommend the *Rico Reserve X5* mouthpiece for students to facilitate the proper development of sound fundamentals, and to promote a good tone and articulation.

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### Hand Position

The clarinet should be held like one holds a flute; the right hand should form a “C.” The right thumb should be under the thumb rest at base of thumb nail. Fingers should be close, curved, and relaxed. Use the pads of the fingers—not the tips. The fingers should never extend beyond the rings, in either direction.

Never rest the right index finger under the side keys in order to support the instrument. This is a very common problem in young clarinetists, and slows not only the development of technique, but also prohibits the use of the right hand for resonance fingerings and pitch shading. Consider using a neck strap with students, only after they have been playing for some time, to help facilitate better right hand position.

The typical angle of the clarinet from the body should be around thirty degrees. Adjust accordingly from there, in or out, depending on sound, pitch, and facility of the altissimo register.

### Reed Placement and Care

The tip of the reed should be placed in line with the tip of the mouthpiece. In order to extend reed life and prevent warping, encourage a break in procedure. Below are a few tips that I use in my own playing, as well as with my students.

- Rotate reeds; use a different reed each time you play or practice. 5-7 days is a typical break-in period for a reed. In the first few days of use, reeds should only be played for very short increments. Label reeds with date started, or number them. Reeds will alter with change in temperature, humidity, and age.

- Lay each reed flat on Plexiglas and rub the vamp (top half) of the reed with your thumb vigorously to seal the pores. Some prefer the use of 600-grit sandpaper instead.

- Use a reed case for reed storage, not the plastic holders the reeds are packaged in. I recommend the

*Rico Reed Storage Case*, which holds eight of any size reeds. Each slot is numbered, which is wonderful for rotation, and the case utilizes a two-way humidity control system to maintain a stable environment for reeds when not in use.

- For myself and my students, I highly recommend *Rico Reserve Classic* reeds, which are remarkably consistent, and flexible enough for both the concert and marching arenas. They are available in half strengths with special 3.5+ and 4.0+ strengths, which allow you to move the student up in quarter strengths. I recommend the following strengths, depending on level:

- Beginner: 2.5 to 3.0

- Intermediate: 3.0 to 3.5

- Advanced: 3.5+ and up

If the reed strength is too high (hard), the sound will be fuzzy, airy, and the pitch sharp. If the reed strength is too low (soft), the sound will be buzzy, spread, and the pitch flat. The upper register will also not respond well. For quick, subtle reed adjustments:

- If the reed is too soft, raise the reed on the mouthpiece.

- If the reed is too hard, lower the reed on the mouthpiece.

### Tuning

“Open G” is the best note of the clarinet to begin the tuning process with. For adjustment, pull out or push in at the barrel. Next, tune a “third-space C” (C2), to check the mid-range of the instrument. Pull out or push in at the middle joint of the clarinet for this adjustment. Tuning rings and different size barrels can be used to help facilitate the tuning process.

Chromatic tuners should be used with all students as they begin to play. They are wonderful tools as they begin this important portion of their playing.

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For advanced students, a “tuning chart” can be developed and used with the student in lesson and practice. Work with the student to chart the pitch tendencies of the instrument on every note at two or three different dynamics. Tuning tendencies will change based on type and brand of instrument, mouthpiece, reed, and ligature, and barrel length and taper.

Venting or dampening fingerings can also be used to develop further flexibility in technique and intonation adjustment. Explore the use of the right

and left hands in resonance fingerings for throat tone notes: G2, G#2, A2, and A#2.

If you have any specific questions, Beth Fabrizio can be reached at [bfabrizio@hilton.k12.ny.us](mailto:bfabrizio@hilton.k12.ny.us).

*Beth A. Fabrizio has been a public school band director in New York for twenty-eight years, and has taught clarinet privately for thirty-three years. In addition, she is an active guest conductor and clinician and frequent drum corps competition judge. Her field experience, paired with her conservatory clarinet training with noted pedagogues Stanley Hasty (Eastman School of Music), Michael Webster, and Richard Waller, has given her great insight into teaching clarinet effectively in the school setting.*