

Halt! Please Step Away from the Bassoon!

Dr. Nathan Koch

All too often, I encounter the following situation in lessons: a talented young bassoonist performs a solo or etude fairly well from a technical standpoint, but there are too many pitch and tone quality issues throughout the entire work for it to be truly satisfactory. In their pursuit for note accuracy, they let their air and embouchure fundamentals fall by the wayside.

Usually at this point, I work with the individual away from the instrument for a bit in front of a mirror. Without the cumbersome instrument in the way, we are able to focus on exactly how the embouchure, air, and reed are interacting. One of the keys to a full, rich bassoon sound is to rely heavily on air support and to use an embouchure that is only as firm as necessary, and this focus can greatly improve many common pitch and tone quality issues. Everything that is done to the reed directly affects what comes out of the instrument, so it is important to occasionally isolate that element.

What follows are some of the areas I like to address using just the reed and the reed+bocal. And for the purposes of this article, any notes referenced are numbered according to middle C as C4.

Breathing

One relatively easy way to make an immediate, positive impact on the sounds coming out of the



bassoon is to focus on the air that first enters the lungs. If you form the word “how” as you breathe in, it accomplishes several things at once: it brings the corners of the mouth in to help form the embouchure, it opens and relaxes the throat which leads to a fuller sound, and a large amount of air can be inhaled within a relatively short amount of time. In

addition, you can encourage deep, full breaths by focusing on filling up the bottom of the lungs first, and by letting the lungs expand primarily in horizontal directions (front-to-back, and side-to-side). Too much upward expansion while breathing in may lead to shallow breaths and tension in the neck and shoulders.

It is also recommended to use a top-lip reference point on the reed. Leaving the top lip on the reed and dropping the lower jaw to breathe helps keep the airway relaxed and open, the pitch low, and the tone full. Take care that the jaw is not forced down, as that may lead to severe jaw issues later in life.

Embouchure

Because of the lack of a hard mouthpiece, the bassoon reed requires an embouchure that has equal, steady pressure all the way around the reed, with the corners pulled in towards each other. A good reference point for the position of the corners is to keep them roughly in line with the incisors (the “vampire” teeth). This type of embouchure helps keep the tip of the reed open and evens out the pitch and tone quality inconsistencies throughout the different registers of the bassoon.

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One analogy that seems to resonate well with many players is that of a drawstring bag; pulling one string causes the entire opening of the bag to draw towards the center at the same time. Picture the opening of the mouth as the opening of the bag, and the drawstring is coming out of the center of the mouth. Pulling the string tighter puts more pressure all the way around the reed to help with flatter notes, and loosening the string allows lower notes to speak more easily and lowers the pitch.

Every player's mouth is a bit different, so the amount of pink showing on the upper and lower lips may vary from player to player. In general, more pink should be showing on the lower lip to provide a sizable cushion for the reed without too much upward pressure. Experiment with rolling in and out until an optimum, focused sound is achieved while still maintaining a small amount of lip covering the teeth.

The lower jaw should be relaxed, and dropped down and back with a slight overbite. There should also be a decent amount of space between the player's upper and lower teeth – usually enough to fit an index finger.

Reed and Reed + Bocal Exercises

Place the reed in the mouth at an angle that is slightly upward, with the tip of the reed pointed straight at the back of the throat. This promotes a full sound and ease of tonguing.

When playing on the reed alone, aim for a pitch of an Eb, E, or F. This amount of embouchure pressure corresponds to the feeling of playing notes in the middle of the bass clef staff such as C3, D3, etc. Listen for clarity of tone (no extra “crackles” in the reed), steadiness of pitch, and even and effortless tonguing.

Using the same embouchure pressure should also produce a C on a reed and bocal combination. Take care that the proper angle is maintained when the bocal is added.

Play the following one-measure rhythmic patterns on the reed alone first, and then repeat on the reed+bocal. Do not progress to the reed+bocal combination until the exercises on the reed alone can be performed perfectly.

Once these exercises can be successfully performed on the reed and the reed+bocal with correct embouchure, reliable tonguing, and a steady air stream, then repeat the same exercises on the bassoon using C3.

One-measure rhythmic patterns exercise

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Other Suggestions

To encourage younger players to maintain the correct embouchure shape and healthy air stream, it's ideal for them to stay in the middle and lower registers of the bassoon for the first few years of their development. This gives them the time they need to learn how to use their air efficiently, develop a warm, rich sound, and avoid excessive embouchure pressure. Too often, young bassoonists are forced to play higher notes on the instrument much too early, which require more advanced techniques like flicking, half-holes, voicing, and uncommon finger combinations – a lot of things to think about for a beginner! Their support muscles are not properly developed yet, and as a result, they often use incorrect embouchure manipulations to produce the higher notes instead of relying on air support and voicing. Their sound quality is diminished and constricted, and their pitch will likely get sharper and sharper over time.

Bassoon parts in beginning band are often combined with bass clef brass instruments, which are able to play higher in the bass clef staff earlier in their pedagogy.

To help with this, transpose bass clarinet parts for your young bassoonists. Bass clarinet music is much less likely to go over our “break” between F3 and F#3, and allows for the player to focus on developing a full, rich sound with minimal embouchure effort.

Online Resources

Another fantastic tool at your disposal is the free online method *Music and the Bassoon* developed by Kristin Wolfe Jensen at The University of Texas at Austin. Several of the introductory videos also demonstrate some of the reed and reed+bocal exercises that were outlined earlier. Located at <http://www.musicandthebassoon.org>, this incredible resource serves as a nice alternative to the standard method book by Julius Weissenborn. *Music and the Bassoon* offers helpful videos, sound clips, play-along duets, and 50 progressive units that let beginning bassoonists develop a strong foundation in the middle and lower registers before progressing to the higher registers.

In conclusion, it can be very beneficial to get back to basics on occasion. Strip away all of the distractions, aim for a big, beautiful sound on the reed using minimal embouchure pressure, and enjoy the positive effects it will have on your overall sound quality.

Dr. Nathan Koch joined the faculty of Sam Houston State University as the Assistant Professor of Bassoon in the fall of 2012. He has presented workshops and clinics at Southern Methodist University, Sam Houston State University, and many area middle and high schools. He has also presented at the conventions of the Texas Bandmasters Association and the International Double Reed Society, and has been a featured soloist at the convention of the Kansas Bandmasters Association. His freelancing work has led to engagements with the Houston and Wichita Grand Operas, the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, the Austin Lyric Opera, and the Austin, Tulsa, Victoria, and Brazos Valley Symphonies. Festival appearances include the Victoria Bach Festival, the Round Top Music Festival, the Texas Music Festival, the Pierre Montoux School Orchestra, and the Festival de Música de Santa Catarina in Jaraguá do Sul, Brazil. He has been on the faculties of the Longhorn Music Camp, Bocal Majority Bassoon Camp, and the High Plains Band and Orchestra Camp. Several of his chamber music arrangements are available through TrevCo Music, including works by Vivaldi, Beethoven, and Debussy.

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