

# Clarinet Clarity: An Interview with Julie DeRoche

Mary Ellen Cavitt

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## Part Two.

The first part of this interview was printed in the April issue of the *Bandmasters Review*. The entire article can be found under the Resources tab at [www.texasbandmasters.org](http://www.texasbandmasters.org).

*Julie DeRoche is Chair of the Music Performance Department and Clarinet Professor at DePaul University in Chicago and has performed frequently in the clarinet section of the Chicago Symphony. After having read many of her clarinet pedagogy articles over the years, I was excited to be selected to be in an administrative development program with her last summer at Harvard University. What follows is a discussion we had about clarinet skill development. I hope you enjoy!*

—Dr. Mary Ellen Cavitt

**MEC:** : In your mind, who has the ideal clarinet sound? Is it your own sound?

**JD:** [laughter] I wish. I think clarinet players are always looking for a good sound. I have occasionally heard myself have this sound that I like, but not always. There's an old recording of Robert Marcellus doing the Mozart *Concerto*. As a tone model, I think it's absolutely gorgeous. It's got a lot of richness in it, it's clear, and it's in tune. The articulation is wonderful.

**MEC:** Who else is on that recording?

**JD:** It's the *Mozart Clarinet Concerto* with the Cleveland Orchestra. I still send my students to that.

**MEC:** So that's your ideal?

**JD:** It's close. I guess at this point in my life, I think of tone with more flexibility. We still work hard with our students on creating a good tone. That's a big thing at DePaul. I let them have a little more variety than I used to because I've come to discover that tone is having a really even sound from the low range through our four registers, which are all distinctly different. Having a tone that is as even as possible, that's number one. Playing in tune note-to-note is number two.

**MEC:** When you say four registers, do you think of the throat tones as a separate register?

**JD:** Yes, the chalumeau, the throat, the clarion, and the altissimo. So a goal for me and for my students is to be able to play a slurred scale like a long tone with as even a sound as possible. The evenness and the pitch are actually more of a priority than the actual sound, as long as the sound doesn't interfere with music making.

**MEC:** And do you get this evenness by manipulating something?

**JD:** No, actually the opposite. This is really important. You get it by not manipulating. Consistency of embouchure, consistency of

tongue position, consistency of air against the reed, and subtle voicing coming only from the top lip, (not the tongue position!) will make an even and in-tune tone.

**MEC:** What do you mean by voicing coming only from the top lip?

**JD:** Just be flexible with it. If you want to control a break so that it's smoother, strengthen your top lip. If you want to control high notes, either for tone or pitch, use your top lip more. Any time I want to add extra control, I use my top lip more. Mostly it's instinctive. But the more you control your top lip, against the structure of the face and against the mouthpiece, the more you will control the sound and response.

**MEC:** Does using the top lip more let pressure off of the reed?

**JD:** It probably does. It probably does in very minor ways change the pressure point. It changes the roundness of the embouchure. It helps projection. It adds control. The tone then becomes a function of the music you're playing, not just clarinet tone. I have to say on the highest level, one of the tones I admire the most is my colleague Larry Combs'. He was especially

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good at playing the tone that matched whatever music was being performed. If he was playing *Rhapsody in Blue*, he would use a different tone than if he was playing the Mozart *Concerto*. If he was playing Bartok *Concerto for Orchestra*, it was a different tone than if he was playing Brahms *Third Symphony*. He used very subtly different tones. He was always playing the music.

**MEC:** So he wouldn't alter his equipment?

**JD:** Oh no, no, no. This is all an instantaneous thing while playing music. I learned this by playing with him, teaching with him, and watching him teach. Your tone has to be even and in tune, but it's a function of the music you're playing. Therefore, it's a mistake to always be playing your tone. You have to be playing music with your clarinet. Tone is a part of that. I think that's a really important thing. People who play with a single tone quality tend to all sound somewhat alike. Another thing about the "shh" tongue position: you can shape notes so easily; you can change the speed of the air. Dynamics and note shaping become a function of how fast or slowly you're moving the air, not the shape of the air. The air is always shaped the same. If you want loud or if you want soft, it's the speed of the air that changes. You need to have your tongue in a position that allows your airstream not to be too big and bulky so that you can move it with variety.

**MEC:** Let's talk about articulation.

**JD:** It's much simpler than people think. If you use the "shh", your tongue is already in the right position for articulation. Use what I call the tip of the top of the tongue, not the edge and not the underside. It's the top, not the very end, just behind the tip. To find the right motion, try first without the clarinet. Take that part of your tongue, and put it on the roof of your mouth just behind your top teeth. Now, just blow it downward, like you're saying tee or dee. Think of it as

a downward gesture, and don't move it very far. Then try it with the clarinet. Obviously when the clarinet goes in the mouth you do not touch any part of the roof of your mouth. The reed will now be in about in that same place. Use the same gesture that you practiced, but do it off the tip of the reed rather than off the roof of your mouth, using air to make the tee or dee, rather than your vocal chords. You're simply going to "blow the tongue off" the reed, using the tee syllable, and then you're going to put it back on. You barely touch the tip of the reed.

**MEC:** Do you ever hear students tongue back and forth?

**JD:** Oh yes; I think I've heard every possible articulation. They're just using their tongue incorrectly. They are accustomed to moving their jaw, their mouth, and their tongue all together, but when we articulate, the embouchure must stay still and the tongue must work independently. There are lots of influences and I think some are cultural, simply because it's language-related.

**MEC:** Is there a particular syllable you use for articulation?

**JD:** I prefer a very light "tee".

**MEC:** Do you use that syllable in every register?

**JD:** Yes.

**MEC:** So there is no change in the syllable in the low register?

**JD:** No, no, no, no. If you change the syllable, you change the tone consistency, and this will destroy your evenness. When you touch the reed, the sound will stop, even when the air is right there waiting. When you let go of it, it's going to vibrate, and your sound will start again. When you put your tongue back on it, it stops. That's what articulation is about: silence, noise, silence, noise.

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**MEC:** So how do you tongue rapidly?

**JD:** Tonguing fast is just taking it off and putting it on more quickly. Slow legato is having it off the reed most of the time. Slow staccato is having it on the reed most of the time.

**MEC:** When you're putting the tongue back on the reed, is a syllable used? It's not another "tee", is it?

**JD:** Not really. I suppose you could think of it that way, but that's thinking too hard. So just go "tshhhh, tshhhh, tshhhh." Now form your embouchure and say the same thing. That's legato tonguing. Now go like this: "Tsht, tsht, tsht." That's staccato tonguing. Then you just start to develop faster and faster tonguing. Clarinetists often think it's one gesture to take the tongue off and another gesture to put it back on, when in fact all you're doing is releasing the reed and stopping it again when you want silence, in one flowing motion.

**MEC:** So, you're not stopping with the air; you're stopping with the tongue.

**JD:** Largely, yes. Unless you get into an air release, which shapes the back of the note, but that's more complicated.

**MEC:** So with beginners, I usually start them with all connected notes so that they don't have to deal with that. They don't have to deal with the ends of the notes because it's just the start of the next note.

**JD:** Exactly. The end and the beginning of the note are really simultaneous, that's the thing. I don't think you really need to talk about the end too much, until it comes to making different musical shapes. And that's later.

**MEC:** So you don't want to do that when they're beginners, but you have to get into it later.

**JD:** My big things are think of a tee more than a taww because taww pushes the tongue down, and

only have them move the tip of the tongue. And the tongue mainly stays in the "shh" position while doing this. Make sense?

**MEC:** So, they must isolate the tip of the tongue.

**JD:** Yes, I think that's a very good suggestion. I'm always saying "shhh," then put the t on it: "Tshh, tshh." I ask students to touch the part of the reed with the part of the tongue we talked about. They can even pull it out of their mouth so you can see. It's a funny thing to do with young students. Sometimes you'll find that the tip of their tongue is actually behind the teeth. A lot of it sort of relates to the way they speak. When I'm one-on-one with students, I really listen for the sound their t's or d's, and sometimes they don't work. Sometimes they actually articulate off the bottom teeth when they say tee. If they do, it's no wonder they're anchor tonguing. That's what we taught them to do. So you have to make sure this syllable works for each student.

**MEC:** What notes would you use for a tuning sequence in a concert band setting, or how do you tune yourself?

**JD:** That's a really good question. I teach our college students to try to understand their concert A, which is the orchestra tuning note, but may not be best for our instrument. I think the good notes on a clarinet are actually a concert E-flat, our F. Ask students to play the clarion F and then the thumb F to get a sense of the range. Those usually tend to be pretty good notes if you have a good embouchure. Our C, concert B-flat, which is the note bands use to tune, is often sharp. Usually with a pretty good embouchure, a little bit of pull at the bottom of the barrel, and maybe a little bit in the middle joint, evens out the clarinet. Most clarinets are built that way.

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**MEC:** Do you have any resonance fingerings that you prefer to use?

**JD:** Yes, I use fingerings that make the sound of the throat tones more consistent with the rest of the range, a little bit more substantial, and usually this makes the pitch better. You have to find the best fingerings on each instrument, but it's usually the C key and maybe the third finger of the right hand and the third finger on the left hand for B-flat. For A, sometimes more fingers. For G, sometimes I use just the C key. I use some kind of fingering for G, G#, A, and B-flat. I place myself in the group's pitch, but most of the time with the groups I play in, I'm just pulled out a little at the bottom of my barrel and a little in the middle. Incidentally, I have taken my own student groups, like a clarinet quartet, who have been struggling with pitch. I'll say, "oh, for heaven's sake," and I'll pull all the clarinets in this way and it improves everything.

**MEC:** So let's talk about common bad habits you have observed.

**JD:** Using a "tah" articulation instead of "tee" is a common problem. The "tah" syllable pushes the tongue down and makes the sound less centered, and the tonguing much more laborious. Often this problem is caused when teachers tell students to open the throat and blow. If someone's got their tongue too high in the back of their throat and they're restricting their air, tell them to relax the tongue, but don't tell them to open their throat. You never want to push the tongue down when you're playing the clarinet, which is what they do when they open their throat.

**MEC:** Usually, the only way to manipulate your throat is with your tongue.

**JD:** Exactly. If you push your tongue down, you get a horrible, open, ugly sound that doesn't fit any of the music you're trying to play.

Another problem is that a lot of students are told to have an open C position between their thumb and first

finger on both hands, and that makes for bad hand position for both hands.

**MEC:** Because it's too wide and too stressful?

**JD:** Yes. And as I've said, I'm not a fan of neck straps unless they're really young kids with tiny hands. Even then, you have to be sure they're still trying to hold the clarinet correctly. That's the important thing.

**MEC:** So do you have them push up on their top teeth?

**JD:** A little bit. I think of leveraging both hands toward the top teeth and having the hands balance the clarinet in their mouth against the top teeth. Depending on the age of the student, you can test it by hearing the tone quality of their high notes. If they get to clarion A, B, and C and it won't come out, they have started to bite too much. If you just have them move the jaw slightly forward, all of a sudden it will come out, and it's like magic.

Also, stopped articulation is an expression that has become misunderstood. There's too much attention to taking the tongue off and then putting the tongue back on, which is technically what you do, but it should feel like one very small gesture.

**MEC:** So, you recommend not talking about that too much?

**JD:** Right, because if you start talking about stopped articulation, people think that they have to, to use Larry's quote, "embed the tongue in the reed", and they don't. Just barely touch it, and it will be quiet. If they're touching it at the right place (at the tip), it will stop. Otherwise, it gets much too forced and lacks in good shape.

But for me, the biggest mistake that teachers make is to tell the student to "open your throat and blow." That causes the student to push their tongue down, causing the sound to become raucous and out of tune, and the tonguing to become forced and inconsistent. It is the thing that drives many other problems.

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**MEC:** How about particular materials for different ages or recommendations or equipment?

**JD:** Band directors probably know more than I do. I grew up with the Rubank books and I still think they're great. They actually sequence teaching very well. I used to use the *Rubank Elementary Method*. When the students got a little better, add the *Selected Duets by Voxmann, Volume 1*. When they needed a solo, I would go to the local store and find *Clouds in Summer* (or that sort of solo) to keep them interested. Later on I use the Albert Scales, with a very specific practice method—slow to fast, and lots of repetition, but that is more for high school and college students.

I do have a strong opinion that no one should use a Vandoren B45 mouthpiece.

**MEC:** Because the lay is too open?

**JD:** It's too open. The more open the mouthpiece, the softer the reed has to be because it has to reach the face of the mouthpiece to vibrate and make sound. When the student gets better, the soft reeds don't work. Then teachers tell their students to get a harder reed, which won't feel comfortable on the more open mouthpiece, so the student bites it like crazy. They use their jaw pressure to make their reed actually close against the face of the mouthpiece, but in a bad way.

**MEC:** And so would you recommend the Vandoren 5RV Lyre?

**JD:** That's the one, or 5RV; they both work. I went to a junior high and did a blind test with a bunch of different mouthpieces with kids that were in sixth, seventh and eighth grade, and the band director was also there. This was only one school, but it was maybe ten kids. I asked them what they liked, and I asked the band director what he liked, and I wrote down what I liked. We all liked the Vandoren 5RV. That was compared to some mouthpieces that were quite a bit more expensive.

**MEC:** What reed would you pair with that?

**JD:** Probably a 3 or 2 and a half.

**MEC:** A Vandoren 3?

**JD:** Depends on the age. I think at the beginning you don't have to start with Vandoren. I like LaVoz and Mitchell Lurie reeds. I play Vandoren now.

**MEC:** I don't think you need to spend that kind of money initially if they're going to break them frequently.

**JD:** Yes, and I think LaVoz can be better for kids. I haven't gotten hooked on Rico reeds for beginners yet, but some people really like them. The thing is, harder reeds will feel totally comfortable on a closer facing. You can move them gradually up from a 2 and a half, then three, etc.

**MEC:** What would you suggest after the 5RV?

**JD:** Well the 5RV can get them through much of high school, and then they should work with their teacher. I have had students come in who have had very beautiful tones on Vandoren mouthpieces, but they don't have the subtlety that allows them to be really flexible. So eventually, usually around sophomore year, I say, "do you want to try something else?" It may be another type of Vandoren, something completely different—depends on the student. I use a Richard Hawkins mouthpiece. It's one that he and I have collaborated on. It's somewhat of a combination of two of his mouthpieces.

Richard is the clarinet professor at Oberlin, and he has a mouthpiece business. He makes mouthpieces on a German blank called a Zinner blank, which is a commonly used type of blank. It's just the combination that I like. I use his mouthpiece, and a lot of my students use it. It's comfortable to play when you get a good one, and it makes a very flexible, beautiful sound.

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**MEC:** What do some of the other Chicago Symphony clarinetists use?

**JD:** Larry Combs uses a Richard Hawkins, the same one that I use. I'm not sure about the others.

**MEC:** It has your initials on his?

**JD:** On the invoice it does.

I wasn't quite satisfied with Richard Hawkins' R's, and I wasn't quite satisfied with his S's, each in different ways. I played an S for about 12 years, but I was always missing something. Then I played an R for a while, but it was missing what my S had. So we did a blind test where I tried a whole bunch of these and a whole bunch of those, and they all were coded. We came up with something, and it was pretty much my S facing on an R blank. That's how we got there. Then I gave them to Larry, and he really liked them so he plays one now.

**MEC:** How do you feel about the administrative aspect of your work?

**JD:** For me the administration is mentally challenging in a completely different way.

Dealing with the problems of other people and trying to help them to be happy and able to do their jobs. Then the teaching is more like, "ahh, I'm home." I really enjoy working with students because they keep me remembering why I teach.

**MEC:** Yes, I love teaching and my students too. Do you think you have a good balance between all the aspects of your professional life?

**JD:** I do, except I've had to reduce the amount of time I play. That was a choice I made, and I don't regret it, but sometimes I miss it and the music making. On the other hand, I don't miss all the rehearsals. I don't miss a lot of concerts. I don't miss the stress from that. I'm working on finding that balance, but I like the distribution in my job. Actually, I like it a lot.

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