

Single Reed Success (Part 1)

Greg Countryman

Part two of this article will appear in the December issue of the *Bandmasters Review* and includes teaching articulation as well as important aspects of the larger instruments of the clarinet and saxophone family.

Greg Countryman presented the clinic “Single Reed Success” at this past summer’s convention and the handout is referenced in this article. It can be found on the TBA website: www.texasbandmasters.org. Select Resources / Publication Archives / Convention Handouts (on the left hand side) / “Single Reed Success”.

The key to developing outstanding single reed players is to establish and maintain strong fundamentals. It is crucial that beginning students are set up with correct hand position and finger motion to develop adequate technique, and correct embouchure and use of air to produce a characteristic sound in all registers. These fundamentals are the foundation for producing outstanding players regardless of their level or grade.

Hand Position and Finger Exercises

For all the woodwind instruments, it is suggested that you teach hand position and finger motion before introducing tone production. To eliminate temptation, collect the tone producing part of the instrument (mouthpiece or head joint) from all beginning students while teaching hand position and finger motion. Be very specific and detailed about how to get the instrument out of the case and assembly to avoid bending keys. Use large mirrors on the music stands and number the fingers to speed up the process of teaching of hand position: Left hand – Thumb, 1, 2, 3, Pinky and Right Hand – 4, 5, 6, Pinky.

Clarinet

When teaching right hand position, have the students put the bell on the left knee and hold the clarinet at the top of upper joint with the left hand.

- Place the fingers first and then add the thumb. Place the pinky on the C/low F key.
- The fingers should be flat and centered with the tab of the fingers in the middle of the tone hole.
- There should be a slight slope to the fingers with the side of finger 4 near the side Eb key.
- The thumb rest should be between the thumbnail and the first joint. The thumbnail should be at a 45-degree angle toward the chin so that the fingers lay flat and do not roll on their side.
- Stress that the fingers move from the large knuckles, stay low and move straight up and down above the keys.

After the hand position is set, teach finger motion through finger exercises. *The finger exercises, as well as other additional information, can be found in the convention handout archives on the TBA website.*

For left hand position, place the clarinet on the right knee and hold the clarinet with the thumb rest in the “V” of the right hand and then lightly wrap the fingers around the lower joint. The key to left hand position on clarinet is the first finger.

- Form the loser sign with the thumb and first finger of the left hand.
- Keeping the loser sign, cover the first hole on the clarinet with the first finger
- Raise the wrist up until the first joint of the first finger touches the A key.
- Then, roll the wrist back toward the body until the second joint of the first finger touches the G# key. The student should now see the back of the left hand.
- Fold the other fingers out and let them cover the tone holes. The fingers should slant downward at a 45-degree angle and place the pinky on the B/low E key.
- The thumb should be across the tone hole at a 45-degree angle with the fleshy part of the thumb covering the hole.

(continued)

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- Teach the three positions of the thumb and have the students practice going from position 1-2-3-2-1.
 - Position 1 - hole only
 - Position 2 - hole and register key
 - Position 3 - register key only
(break the first joint of the thumb to roll up to the register key)

Left hand finger exercises for clarinet can be found on the TBA website.

Saxophone

Make sure the students create a habit of putting the neck strap on before attempting to get the saxophone out of the case. To teach right hand position, hold the instrument at the top with the left hand and let the saxophone hang to the side of the right leg.

- Place the fingers first and then add the thumb. Put the pinky on the C key
- The fingers should be flat and centered with the tab of fingers in the middle of pearls. Students with large hands can touch the pearls with the fingertips.
- Put the right thumb under the thumb rest and push the bell toward the knee until it rests on the side of the thigh. This will help the students anchor the mouthpiece later.
- Stress that the fingers move from the large knuckles, stay low and move straight up and down above the keys.

Right hand finger exercises for saxophone can be found on the TBA website.

For left-hand position, use correct right-hand position to hold the saxophone.

- Place the fingers first and then add the thumb.
- Center the fingers on the pearls and then raise the wrist until the top of the first finger is the same height as the top of the 2nd palm key.
- Place the pinky on the G# key.
- The thumb should be at a 45-degree angle with the hard part of the thumb (1st joint) on the pearl. The thumb then rocks to the tip of the finger to push the octave key. Do not let the students lift the thumb to hit the octave key.

Left hand finger exercises for saxophone can be found on the TBA website.

Embouchure and Tone Production

Prior to teaching embouchure and tone production, briefly discuss important aspects concerning breathing such as the face staying the same as you breathe and exhale and that the air should be calm coming into the body and going out to reduce tension. Have the students practice breathing and exhaling while watching their face in a mirror and spend a couple of days working on the correct shape of face before adding the mouthpiece. As embouchure and tone production are introduced, the students should still be working on the finger exercises.

The best way to get the correct embouchure on clarinet is to have the students shape the face as if they are sucking a thick milkshake through a straw. The chin should be flat and sculpted with the corners toward the center and anchored to the teeth. Once the students get the shape of the face correct, have them form the embouchure as they exhale. On saxophone, have the students say “ooo”. The corners are still to the center, but the face should not be too tense or sculpted. Teach the students to open and close the jaw while forming the embouchure and make sure the lip moves with the bottom teeth. If the students can get the jaw open the correct amount before inserting the mouthpiece, they will not have to close the jaw for the top teeth to touch the mouthpiece which will help prevent biting.

Be very detailed on how to put the ligature and reed on the mouthpiece and have the students practice this for several days. *A detailed description of how to teach this can be found in the handout on the TBA website.*

When the students are ready to produce a sound on the mouthpiece, the instructor should place the mouthpiece in the mouth for the first few days. It is recommended that the mouthpieces are collected each day and not taken home until the students can consistently and successfully place the mouthpiece in class. Clarinet students can achieve the proper angle by holding the barrel with the thumb and two fingers. Saxophone students should hold the neck

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with the thumb and two fingers on the octave key. The students should form the embouchure first and then become a statue with their head level. The bottom lip should not be over the teeth prior to inserting the mouthpiece (the students should be able to talk while forming the embouchure). To better understand this, the students can form the embouchure and then place the index finger on the bottom lip to feel how the back of the lip will fold over the bottom teeth. Place the reed on the bottom lip and the back part of the lip will fold over the bottom teeth as the reed slides in until the top of the mouthpiece hits the top teeth. The students should use air to start the tone and articulation should not be discussed at this time.

The best way to determine if a student has the correct amount of mouthpiece in the mouth is to listen for free vibrations of the reed. When the sound starts to spread or squeaks occur, the student generally has too much mouthpiece in their mouth. If the reed does not vibrate easily, the student may not have enough mouthpiece in the mouth, or they could be biting. Students must understand that the top of the mouthpiece must be anchored and that there will be some pressure into the top teeth. The cheeks should not puff on clarinet, and if the corners are anchored to the teeth, air cannot get into the cheeks. It is fine if the cheeks puff slightly on saxophone, because this helps to produce a darker, more velvety saxophone sound. The clarinets should produce a F# or flat G on the mouthpiece and barrel. On saxophone, do not worry about a pitch on the mouthpiece/neck. You do not want to push the mouthpiece too far on the cork, because if the cork is compressed too much it will have to be replaced. Just listen for an open tone quality and free vibrations instead of listening for a specific pitch. Make sure you teach the vowel sound at the initial stages of tone

production. Clarinet should use an “eee” vowel sound and saxophone should use an “ooo” vowel sound.

Some of the main issues I see pertaining to tone production are:

- Too much lip over the bottom teeth, which leaves too much lip touching the reed and the reed cannot vibrate freely.

- Not anchoring to the top teeth.
- Using reeds that are too hard. If the sound is airy or harsh, the reed may be too hard, and this can also make the students bite.
- Trying to use a clarinet embouchure on the saxophone or vice versa. They are not the same!

Once the students are comfortable producing a sound on the mouthpiece, start discussing instant sound, steady sound and natural ending so they become aware of the ultimate goal.

- Instant Sound - No pause, air or extraneous noise
 - Steady, Constant Sound - demonstrate correct and incorrect
 - Natural Ending - Explain by demonstrating how the sound ends when singing. Tell the students to just stop blowing and make sure the tongue does not touch the reed to stop the sound.
- When you are ready to start producing a sound on the entire instrument, start each day on the mouthpiece/barrel/neck and then move to the instrument. For the first few days, YOU place the instrument and then eventually transition to the students doing it themselves.
- On clarinet, have the student hold the instrument with the right hand in correct hand position with the fingers down and hold the barrel with the thumb and two fingers of the left hand to insert the mouthpiece. The first note should be a G with the right hand down. As the students become comfortable and consistent in producing the G in this manner, have them start the note and then take the left

To get the most out of this article, download “Single Reed Success” by Greg Countryman from the 2019 TBA Convention/Clinic. The handout can be found on the TBA website: www.texasbandmasters.org. Select Resources / Publication Archives / Convention Handouts / “Single Reed Success”

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hand off the barrel. Next, start the note, take the left hand off the barrel, and then lift the fingers in the right hand. This teaches the students how to anchor into the top teeth using the right thumb. A good way to check anchoring is for the instructor to slightly pull up on the bottom rod (just above the bell) to add pressure to the top teeth and then let go after a couple of seconds. If the clarinet drops out of the student's mouth or the sound changes, they are not anchoring enough. The next notes for the students to play would be T1, T12, & T123 and then add fingers 4, 5 & 6 in the right hand. To allow the students to focus on hand position, embouchure and tone production, do not bother with note names or music reading at this time.

On saxophone, the instructor will need to help the students adjust the neck strap, neck and mouthpiece so the student's head is level and not tilted. Check this daily until the students can do it themselves. Put all the fingers down in both hands to insert the mouthpiece into the mouth. If the neck strap is the correct length, the mouthpiece will enter the mouth as the student uses the right thumb to push the bell forward until it is on the side of the thigh just behind the knee. This also helps anchor the mouthpiece

into the top teeth. The student should not have to raise or lower their head when inserting the mouthpiece. Start by playing B, A or G and if G skips to the upper octave at the beginning of the note, the student's face is too tight, or they are anchoring too much. Have the students play down to the low D soon, because this also lets the instructor know if the student's embouchure is too tense, if they are using too much vertical pressure with the jaw, or if they are anchoring too much. Again, do not bother with letter names or reading music at this time.

The Finger Exercise worksheets are used to teach the students to play at this point, but they are not yet reading music and are just given fingerings (taught by rote). When the students do start reading music, these are the first lines the students play. It is easy for them to learn these exercises because they have already been playing them without reading music. The students are now given a letter name and placement on the staff for the notes they have already been playing.

If you have any questions concerning any information in this article or the handout on the TBA website, please do not hesitate to contact Greg Countryman: info@txmaa.org.

Greg Countryman retired in 2019 after being a band director in Texas for 35 years. For the last 18 years, he was Director of Bands at Fort Settlement Middle School in the Fort Bend ISD. He is a native of Decatur, Alabama, where his music career began under the direction of his father, Jerry Countryman. He earned his Bachelor of Music Education degree from Louisiana State University and a Master of Music Education degree from the University of Houston. The Fort Settlement Band has been a state finalist in the TMEA Honor Band Competition five times, chosen Best in Class at the Festival at the Falls ten times, a recipient of the National Wind Band Honors Award, awarded the 2009 Sousa Foundation's Sudler Cup, performed at the National Concert Band Festival in Indianapolis and was the 2012 Texas Bandmasters Association Exemplary Middle School Band Program. Mr. Countryman was previously Director of Bands at Quail Valley Middle School where the band was selected to perform at The Midwest Clinic in 2000 and chosen as the 2001 Texas Music Educators Association CCC Honor Band. Mr. Countryman has presented clinics at the TBA and TMEA conventions, The Midwest Clinic and for the TBA Professional Development Series. He served many years as the Middle School Band Coordinator for TMEA Region 13, is a Past President for the Texas chapter of the Phi Beta Mu International Bandmaster Fraternity and Past President of the Texas Music Adjudicators Association. Mr. Countryman is currently the Executive Secretary for the Texas Music Adjudicators Association and is an active clinician and adjudicator.