

# Single Reed Success (Part 2)

Greg Countryman

*This is Part 2 of an article titled “Single Reed Success”. Part 1, which covered hand position, embouchure and tone production, was published in the September issue of the Bandmasters Review. The handouts referenced in this article can be found on the TBA website: [www.texasbandmasters.org](http://www.texasbandmasters.org). Select Resources / Publication Archives / Convention Handouts (on the left hand side) / “Single Reed Success”. This entire article, Parts 1 and 2, will also be archived on the website under Resources/Bandmasters Review.*

## Articulation

It is best to wait until the students can consistently produce a characteristic sound on several notes before attempting to introduce articulation. A step-by-step approach will help ensure the students are successful in learning to articulate correctly.

**1.** Have the students say their articulation syllable (de, dah, doe, tah, etc.) with a hand on their jaw to make sure it does not move. Initially, I would start the first note without using the tongue, because this allows the airstream to be established prior to the tongue being used. Example: ah.....dah.....dah.....dah

**2.** Have the students blow air through their embouchure and let the tongue move as if saying the articulation syllable. The tongue should not stop the air, but only briefly interrupt it – much like a finger flicking side to side through a stream of water from a sink faucet. The students can hold their palm in front of their mouth to feel the airstream as the tongue touches the roof of the mouth.

**3.** Have the students say their articulation syllable with the mouthpiece/barrel-neck in the mouth.

**4.** Have the students blow air through the mouthpiece/barrel-neck without making a tone and let the tongue move as if saying the articulation syllable.

### Aspects to stress:

- The tongue touches the same place with the same strength each time.
- Touch the reed with one taste bud of the tongue. To demonstrate this, I usually have the students stick their tongue out and I touch the reed (assembled to the mouthpiece) to their tongue with a quick, light motion in the correct place.
- The tongue motion should be up and down and not back and forth.
- The top of the tip of the tongue should touch the tip of the reed from the bottom. Saxophones will need to touch the reed farther back on the tongue since the mouthpiece is farther in the mouth.
- The tongue should be down 99% of the time and only briefly touch the reed. The tongue should move like a snake striking or someone touching a hot stove with their finger.

**5.** Have the students start a sound on the mouthpiece/barrel-neck without the tongue and then start articulating after a steady sound is achieved.

### Aspects to stress:

- Articulate the sound and not the reed.
- No extraneous sounds caused by the tongue touching too hard or too much tongue being used.
- The articulation should not change the sound in any way.
- The articulation will lack clarity and/or produce a pitch drop if the tongue touches below the tip of the reed. Due to the angle of the saxophone mouthpiece, and most bass clarinet mouthpieces, the student must keep the tip of the tongue down, so they do not get a “slap” tongue (touching with too much tongue surface).

Also stress the importance of the tongue touching the center of the reed. If the students touch to the left or right of center, it often causes a squeak and/or lack of clarity. The vibrations need to be interrupted equally left to right across the tip of the reed. See *Warm Up #1 on the TBA website which pertains to introducing articulation.*



## Single Reed Success (Part 2)

**Visual articulation examples** - One continuous airstream and same sound (shape) throughout the airstream regardless of whether the students are tonguing or not.

8 count airstream – no tongue to start
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Air first – no tongue to start, then add articulation				
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Once the basic fundamentals (hand position, embouchure, tone production, articulation) have been introduced and the students can demonstrate them with acceptable proficiency, there are other fundamentals that should also be taught during the first year.

### Other Important Clarinet Fundamentals

**Register Key** – Introduce the register key by having the students play a low C and then YOU, not the student, add the register key. If all the previous tone production fundamentals (embouchure, anchoring, vowel sound, etc.) are established correctly, the students should not need to change the embouchure or air to produce a centered and focused sound in the upper register on their first try. If the mouthpiece is not anchored to the top teeth correctly or the vowel sound (“eee”) is not correct, the upper note may not respond, be spread or flat in pitch. Have the students then add the register key themselves while playing the C. Once they can produce the C to G correctly, add fingers in the right hand one at a time while playing the lower note first and then adding the register key. *See Warm Up #3 on the TBA website for exercises to use.* Only play the first two notes of lines 1-6 at first. You can probably introduce #1-3 the first day and then add #4-6 one line at a time as the students are ready. Once they can play the first two notes of each line successfully and with a good sound, then you can add the remainder of the lines.

**Conquering the break** – The first finger in the left hand is the most important finger while learning to play the clarinet and must move correctly in order to be able to

play across the break smoothly. This finger should move side to side at the large knuckle like a windshield wiper. Students should hit near the bottom of the A key with the side of finger one at the first joint. To practice this, have the students slur from first finger F# to A and there should not be a G between the two notes. Another good exercise is to finger T123 + left pinky and then roll the first finger to the A key while keeping the other fingers down. This is not a real fingering and produces a sound like an “old timey” ambulance siren. This exercise teaches the fingers how to stay in place while rolling to the A key, so that later the fingers will stay in position as they hover over the holes. If the students are not voicing correctly, they may squeak when hitting the A key, so this exercise is also a good way to check voicing. In addition, teaching the students to play G, G# and A with the right hand down will make playing across the break much easier.

During the first year of playing, clarinets should learn to play from low E to high E (above the staff), both right and left fingerings for the pinkies and chromatic fingerings (F# - first finger and thumb + bottom 2 side keys; B natural/ top line F# - middle finger and 4 + ring key; Eb – T12 + bottom side key).

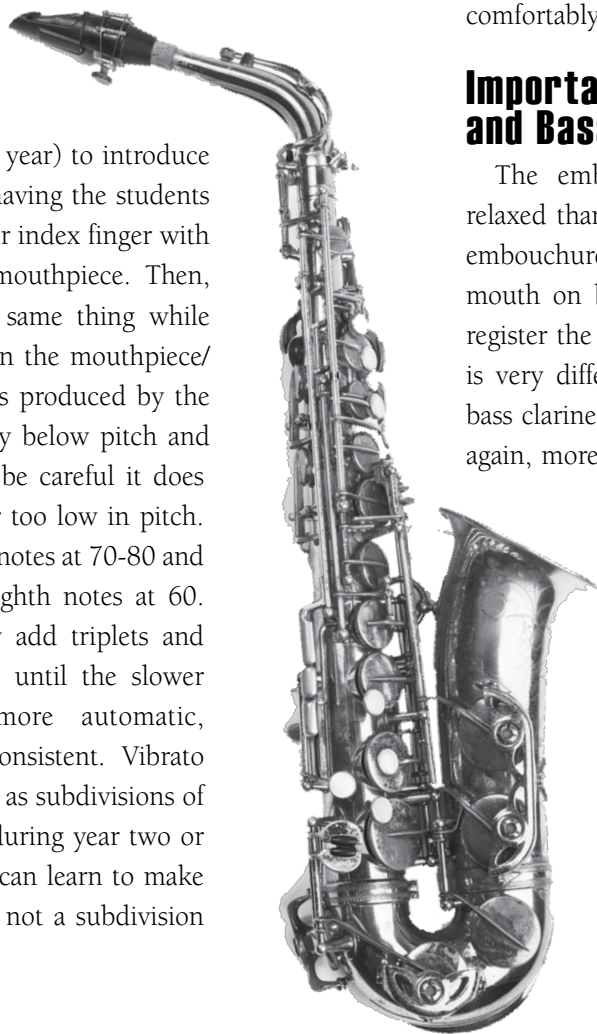
### Other Important Saxophone Fundamentals

**Palm Keys** – Try to keep the correct left-hand shape as much as possible when using the palm keys to facilitate better technique in the future. The first palm key is depressed by collapsing the palm slightly. The second palm key is depressed with the second finger and the third palm key is depressed with the third finger.

## Single Reed Success (Part 2)

**Chromatic fingerings and Bis** – Teach both fingerings for F# (middle finger and finger 4 + F# key with finger 6 in the right hand) and side C. I teach Bb as 12 + bottom side key first, but feel it is important that the students learn the Bis fingering (hitting both the B key and the key beneath it at the same time with the first finger) before the end of the first semester. The students may resist at first, but this is an important fingering for saxophone technique, so insist they learn to use it. Beginning saxophone students should be able to play the full range of the instrument during the first year.

**Vibrato** – The students need to be able to produce a consistent, resonant tone quality before introducing vibrato, so it is best to wait until the second semester (often near the end of the year) to introduce this skill. Start by having the students lightly chew on their index finger with it inserted like a mouthpiece. Then, have them do the same thing while producing a tone on the mouthpiece/neck. The vibrato is produced by the sound going slightly below pitch and then back up, but be careful it does not get too wide or too low in pitch. First, pulse quarter notes at 70-80 and then progress to eighth notes at 60. You will eventually add triplets and sixteenths, but not until the slower pulses become more automatic, comfortable and consistent. Vibrato must first be taught as subdivisions of the beat and then during year two or three, the students can learn to make the pulses free and not a subdivision of the beat.



## Selecting Students for Tenor/Baritone Saxophone and Bass Clarinet

When selecting students for tenor/baritone saxophone and bass clarinet, do not put your weaker students on these instruments. They may be the only person playing their part, so the students playing these instruments must be strong rhythmically and confident players. Look for talented players who do not have a great tone quality on soprano clarinet or alto saxophone, or a student who has difficulty forming the embouchure for their current instrument. These students often sound terrific on the larger instruments and become outstanding players. Always check to make sure the student's hands are big enough to comfortably fit on the larger instruments.

## Important Differences in Bb Soprano and Bass Clarinet

The embouchure on bass clarinet is much more relaxed than soprano clarinet and more like a saxophone embouchure. More mouthpiece must be inserted in the mouth on bass clarinet and when playing in the upper register the student must think of opening the jaw, which is very different from soprano clarinet. The airspeed on bass clarinet is generally slower than soprano clarinet and again, more like a saxophone. Bass clarinet does typically use a harder reed (3 ½ - 4 Vandoren) than the soprano clarinet.

Students often have difficulty playing in the upper register on bass clarinet and the best way to improve in this register is by practicing register key slurs. Be patient when first switching a student to bass clarinet, because it may take time for them to get the upper register to respond without slurring from the lower register. You must also make sure the students have a quality instrument, because many lower end bass clarinets will not play in the upper register regardless of the ability or experience of the player.

## Single Reed Success (Part 2)

### Important Differences in Alto, Tenor and Baritone Saxophone

Most students have little difficulty adjusting to the larger saxophones, since the differences in these three instruments is not significant. As the mouthpieces get larger, the student must take more mouthpiece in the mouth and the embouchure is more relaxed. Tenor saxophone players must understand their instrument is pitched in a different key from the alto and baritone saxophone. The alto saxophone bell should be pushed forward to the thigh on the right leg, but for tenor/baritone saxophone the instrument should hang at the hip. The larger saxophones do typically use a harder reed (3 ½ - 4 Vandoren) than the alto saxophone. Due to the tenor/baritone saxophone being much heavier instruments, a padded neck strap or harness is recommended. It is vital that the larger saxophones learn to blend inside the ensemble sound. Tenor saxophone should be inside the trombone/euphonium or bassoon sound and the baritone saxophone should be inside the tuba or bassoon sound.

Hopefully you will find some of the teaching strategies discussed in this article useful and can find ways to incorporate some of the ideas into your current teaching methods. If you have any questions or need further clarification, please don't hesitate to contact me at [info@txmaa.org](mailto: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.*

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