

Starting Middle School Bass Clarinet

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There are several key points to consider when selecting students to play bass clarinet in your middle school ensembles. This article outlines the basic Who, What, When, Where, Why and How (though not in this order) to choose the right students to play bass clarinet.

When:

A good time to move a student to bass clarinet is in March/April of their beginning year of clarinet class. This allows ample time for the student to develop music reading skill and a firm understanding of clarinet fundamentals. As you observe your clarinet class, a few students will always stand out as driven and invested future clarinetists. These are your top candidates for bass clarinet.

Who:

When the time comes to move a student to bass, never choose a student sitting lower than the top 25% of their class.

Ideal candidates are the motivated type who will take the instrument home nightly and “figure it out” to the best of their ability. Too often, bass clarinet is viewed as a safe pivot for weak students because the ensemble writing for bass clarinet is less demanding. This is a short-sighted move: generally, this type of student has weaker music skills and poor practice habits. The cycle of putting weak beginners on bass clarinet yields students who will struggle immensely with playing the instrument, learning all region materials and meeting future high school playing demands.

Why:

Students selected for bass clarinet should play all the same materials covered in beginner class on bass clarinet. Continue to instill from an early age a high standard of playing the clarinet, regardless of whether it's bass or Bb. If your new bass clarinet student starts knocking chair tests out of the park and out-placing Bb students, that's AWESOME! Continue to challenge them and foster their long-term musical development.

While bass clarinet parts in most middle school literature tends to be rather simplistic, think about the long-term function of bass clarinet in higher ensembles, solo literature and all region auditions. In each instance, there is a stark contrast in difficulty between most middle school ensemble literature and the TMEA/ATSSB State audition materials for bass clarinet. Choosing driven and invested students ensures that the jump in difficulty will be seen as a rewarding challenge rather than an insurmountable obligation.

How:

First and foremost, have a competent repair technician or clarinetist play test any instrument that will go to a beginning bass clarinet player to check that the instrument functions

correctly. This will ensure that any student who receives a bass clarinet has the best possible chance for a positive experience trying bass clarinet.

Before students try bass clarinet, place some scotch tape over the

pinhole on the left hand first finger key. This one-time crutch for students trying the instrument ensures that they have a positive first experience on the bass clarinet. Future bass clarinetists must learn to cover the pin hole with their first finger.

From your top chair clarinet players, establish a short list of who

is interested and have them try the bass clarinet in a supervised setting. As the director, you can guide them through proper instrument assembly and reed placement as well as visually check that students trying the bass clarinet maintain good clarinet fundamentals. *Avoid any talk about how music for bass clarinet is easier or how standards are lower in region auditions.*

Students may need to be instructed to use a little more mouthpiece than what they use on Bb clarinet. Guide students to use less embouchure pressure if they are not immediately



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successful making a sound. The bass clarinet embouchure is not quite as firm as Bb clarinet. A helpful suggestion for first sounds is to have students create more space between their molars: the rear molars should be open enough for a blueberry to fit safely between them.

What:

Equipment and equipment care REALLY matter on bass clarinet. Despite its size, the bass clarinet is remarkably fragile with many connecting rods and refined levers. Any small deviation in adjustment can render the instrument unplayable, specifically with regard to the register mechanisms. Make a point of reinforcing the importance of holding the instrument correctly during assembly and keeping the corks well lubricated. If at all possible-purchase a bass clarinet stand so the instrument does not need to be rested on the floor. **(Resting the bass clarinet on the floor is THE most common reason bass clarinets go out of adjustment).**

I have found that the Clark Fobes NOVA bass clarinet mouthpiece to be the most consistent, playable and reasonably priced mouthpiece on the market. The NOVA mouthpiece has nearly identical dimensions to the old Selmer C* but is more reed friendly. It is best to start students with soft reads, usually #2 ½s. Once students are competent on the instrument, they may go to #3 reeds. Going beyond #3 reeds is not necessary and quite often is detrimental to the students' playing. If their tone is lacking in the second register, it is often because their tongue is not forward and arched enough or the muscle engagement from the lips is incorrect.

Avoid using tenor saxophone reeds on bass clarinet. While they will work in a pinch, the strength or number comparison is not equal. #2 ½ tenor saxophone reeds play much harder than #2 ½ bass clarinet reeds. Additionally, the facing of tenor saxophone mouthpieces is quite different than bass clarinet mouthpieces. This means the reeds are cut differently to accommodate the different facings hence the reeds do not function ideally when crossing instrument families.

Where:

When the bass clarinet is not being played in rehearsal, avoid resting the instrument on the floor! While purchasing a good bass clarinet stand can cost as much as a new mouthpiece, consider the cost of repairs in the long run. When the instrument is on the floor, the entire weight of the bass clarinet rests upon the keys. This is more than enough weight to slowly bend side keys and the register mechanism.

Instruct students to always store and transport the bass clarinet in its case, with the *case latches perpendicular to the floor*. When the case latches are parallel to the floor, the weight of the instrument is distributed on the side key work. Worse yet, many bass clarinet cases have degraded with time allowing the bass clarinet to shift in the case, compounding the problem of excess weight and force hitting the side keys. When the case latches are perpendicular to the floor, the weight of the instrument stays on the back-side body of the instrument and does not put any unnecessary pressure on the key work. Additionally, if the case has degraded, keeping the latches perpendicular usually helps prevent excessive force from hitting side keys and mechanisms during transport.

Additional Thoughts:

While not always feasible, it is highly recommended that bass clarinet players continue to rent/own a Bb clarinet and spend time playing Bb clarinet. This works out well during the summer when school-owned instruments go into the repair shop and bass clarinet students are left without an instrument. Long term, some high school programs do not march bass clarinet.

If beginner clarinet numbers permit, it is strongly suggested to start more than one bass clarinet player.

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