How to Teach Woodwinds if I Can't Play Them

CLINICIAN:

Greg Countryman

Texas Bandmasters Association 2012 Convention/Clinic

2012 Patron Sponsor

JULY 20 – 23, 2012
HENRY B. GONZALEZ CONVENTION CENTER
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

How to Teach Woodwinds if I Can't Play Them

2012 Texas Bandmasters Association Convention
Presented by Greg Countryman

I believe it is possible to successfully teach instruments that you can't play well, but it is important that you learn to demonstrate a few basic skills and that you also develop a thorough understanding of the basic fundamentals for each instrument. Today's presentation will focus on the key aspects of hand position and tone production, the skills you should learn to demonstrate, as well as important exercises to use in order to develop quality flute, clarinet and saxophone players. At the beginning level, I feel it is best to start with posture and hand position on the woodwind instruments until the students are comfortable with how their fingers/hands should work and then introduce tone production.

When teaching tone production, you must first introduce body posture and breathing, but in this presentation these aspects will not be discussed in order to provide more information pertaining to each specific instrument. At the initial stages of producing a sound, I would not include articulation, but it is important to discuss, demonstrate and stress instant sound, steady sound and natural ending.

- Instant Sound - No pause, air or extraneous noises prior to the tone
- Steady, Constant Sound - demonstrate correct and incorrect
- Natural Ending - explain by demonstrating how the sound ends when singing or talking. On the instruments, you just stop blowing to end the note. Make sure tongue doesn't move or stop the note.

FLUTE

HAND POSITION - You must first teach the students how to put the body of the flute and foot joint together. Be specific on how to hold the flute during assembly so keys aren't bent. Use mirrors on the stands so the students can see their hand position.

Right Hand - Start by having the students hold the flute vertically with their left hand at the top of the flute and the foot joint resting on the left knee.

- Right hand is a flat C
- Place the fingers first then the thumb – fingers should be flat and centered
- Thumb placement
- Thumbnail parallel to wall (keeps fingers from rolling onto the side of the finger)
- Top of the tip of thumb touches the side of the flute at about 3-4 o'clock
- Thumb touches flute between fingers 4 & 5
- Move the fingers from the large knuckles keeping the shape of the fingers – Stress keeping the fingers low and moving them straight up and down above the tone holes.

Left Hand – Place the flute vertically on the left knee and hold it with the right hand above the foot joint, but not using hand position.

Two ways to set the left hand position

1. Place the fingers on the keys and then raise wrist until side of the 1st finger (fleshy part of finger between 2nd joint and knuckle) touches the side of the flute. Add the thumb last on Bb key so the students don't hold the flute with the left hand.
2. Make a gun with the left hand. Place the side of the 1st finger (fleshy part of finger between 2nd joint and knuckle) on the side of the flute even with the top pad. Then fold the first finger down to the hole. Fold out the other fingers and keep the top of 1st finger parallel to the floor. Add the thumb last on Bb key so the students don't hold the flute with the left hand.

- Fingers should be flat and center – it is okay if the 3rd finger can't reach the center of the key.
- Stress keeping the fingers low, moving from the large knuckles (except finger 1 moves from the 2nd joint) and moving straight up and down above the holes.

TONE PRODUCTION

Headjoint

- The lips should move forward as if saying "pooh", but never completely finish pronouncing the word.
- Let the air make an opening in the center of the lips. Practice this in the mirror without the headjoint at first. You can also use a cocktail straw to help with the aperture by having the student blow and then pull the straw out.
- It is okay for the lips to blow away from the teeth and for the cheeks to puff slightly. A relaxed and slightly puffy face will keep the students from playing sharp in the upper register later.
- Make sure the corners do not pull back toward the ears or up as in a smile. It is okay if the corners go down slightly as if frowning.
- A clear and full sound on the headjoint is the key to making a good sound on the flute.
- Hold the headjoint in both hands with a thumb and two fingers in each hand with the palms facing away from the body to avoid putting too much pressure against the lip. I would suggest that the teacher place the headjoint for a few days so the students learn what it feels like for it to be correct.
- The students should keep their head level (chin not down or up).
- The headjoint should be parallel to the lip line and also in the same plane as the face. Have the students use a mirror on the stand to check this.
- As a starting place, set the bottom edge of the tone hole on the lip line. This has to be adjusted depending on the fullness of each student's bottom lip. The bottom lip should cover between 1/3-1/2 of the tone hole.

Producing a Sound on the Entire Flute

- Each day start on the headjoint and then move to the entire instrument.
- Make sure you explain how to align the headjoint with the body of the flute. The first pad on the upper joint of the flute should be lined up with the tone hole. Check this alignment on a regular basis, because incorrect alignment will cause tone production and intonation problems.
- Have the students sit at a 45 degree angle across the right corner of the chair. To get the flute parallel to the front edge of the chair, the shoulders rotate about 22.5 degrees back to the front of the chair and then the head finishes the remainder of the 45 degrees until the flute is parallel to the front edge of the chair.
- YOU should help the students place the instrument the first few times and then let them try it by themselves

<u>Flute Gymnastics</u>

- Start with the flute in a vertical position on the left knee with both hands in correct hand position. Then pull the bottom of the flute straight out away from the body until the flute is parallel to the floor with the headjoint resting over the left shoulder.
- Keeping the flute horizontal, pull the foot joint (right hand) back toward the body until the flute is parallel to the front of the chair. The flute is still resting on the left shoulder and below the chin.
- Once the student is comfortable with the above movements, have them lift the flute until the headjoint rests on the bottom lip. You will need to help them place the head joint in the correct place and use a mirror where the students can see the correct placement on the bottom lip. I have the students slightly tilt the head to the right so the flute doesn't have to be parallel to the floor to or to be parallel to the lip line. This slight head tilt creates less tension in the upper body.
- Discuss how the flute is suspended and not held. Explain that there are four suspension points.
    1. head joint on lip
    2. side of 1st finger in the left hand
    3. right thumb
    4. right pinky.
- Have the students put the flute in playing position with all the fingers down and then lift one hand at a time, starting with the right hand, until they are able to stabilize the flute using only the four suspension points. Stress trying to maintain proper hand position while suspending the flute, but

don't panic if for a while the hand position is tense and awkward.

- Once the students can suspend the flute, have them finger T12 and try playing an A above the staff. I have had more success starting students in the upper octave first. Students seem to be able to make the aperture larger more easily than they are able to learn to make it smaller.
- Once the students are comfortable and consistent in producing the A, have them add or lift one finger at a time to work on T1 (Bb) and T123 (G). Then just expand up and down as the students are ready.
- All of this is done by telling them what fingers to put down and not discussing note names or reading music yet. In my opinion, reading music at this point is too much information for the **students to remember. Let them focus on hand position, embouchure and tone production.**

OTHER IMPORTANT FLUTE SKILLS

High/Low on the head joint

- Start working on this skill as soon as the students are able to consistently produce a characteristic tone on the headjoint and the flute
- Teach this skill by having the students blow air on the palm of their hand and raise and lower the air by moving the bottom lip forward and back.
- Next, have the students do this on the head joint. Start on the low note and raise the airstream to produce the high note. It helps if the corners pull slightly to the center, which makes the aperture smaller, and if they let the cheeks puff slightly. While learning to develop this skill, the tone will sometimes stop right before the upper note responds so don't let them stop blowing when this happens.
- Be careful that the students don't get the high note out by just blowing harder. Tell them you don't want the high note to be much louder than the low note.

Octave Slurs

- This skill can be learned once the students can control high/low on the headjoint – probably near the end of the 1st semester or beginning of the 2nd semester.
- Have the students practice high/low on the headjoint first and then go directly to the flute.
- An "A" is a good note to use for introducing octave slurs. Once the students can control the octave slur on A, then gradually expand it up and down one note at a time. Octave slurs will work on E through C# (fingering must be the same for both octaves).
- Watch the bottom lip and make sure it is moving to change the direction of the airstream. Don't let the students just blow harder to get the high notes to respond.
- Even at the initial stages of learning octave slurs, it doesn't hurt to use a tuner to make sure the students are blowing the airstream in the correct location for each note. If the note is sharp then have them lower the airstream and if the note is flat have them raise the airstream.

Overtones

- This is a skill that might be taught at the end of the first year or maybe earlier to specific students who are progressing quickly. If you don't introduce this during the first year, I would recommend introducing it during the students 2nd year of playing.
- This is an advanced exercise related to high/low on the headjoint and octave slurs.
- Although overtones can be done on other notes, I would suggest starting on a note between low C and low E.
- Have the students gradually raise the airstream and make the aperture smaller in order to produce all the overtones above the note you are fingering. Once they get high enough in the overtone series they can play "Reveille".
- The goal is to produce the clearest tone possible on each note and to be able to control when the notes change. Also work to eliminate any pauses or breaks between the notes.

Vibrato

- I don't usually teach this until the second semester and often near the end of the year.
- Have the students say/sing a long note and then add "uhs" into the sound with an extra push with the breath (stomach). Work for a continuous sound that doesn't start and stop with each "uh".
- Next have the students blow air through the lip aperture and try to create the air pulses.
- Then have the students try it on the headjoint. I will sometimes push in on their stomach to let them hear the amount of change needed in the sound. Make sure the students understand that they actually push the stomach muscles out to produce the pulses.
- At the initial stages of learning vibrato it is best if the pulses are exaggerated. When the students go to the entire flute, the change in the sound will not be as much as on the headjoint.
- I tell the students to make the vibrato a combination of steady air and faster than steady air. If the pulses are a combination of faster and slower than steady air, the pitch variation will be wider than desired.
- Teach pulsing quarter notes at about 70-80 first, then attempt 8th notes at about 60. Eventually add triplets and 16ths, but not until the slower pulses are comfortable and have clarity. Vibrato must first be taught as subdivisions of the beat and then later they will learn to make the pulses free and not a subdivision of the beat.

Chromatic Bb

- It is best to teach thumb Bb first since flutes will play mostly in flat keys.
- It is not necessary to teach 1-4 Bb until you start learning the chromatic scale or have Bb-B as adjacent notes in music.

CLARINET

HAND POSITION - You must first teach the students how to put the upper joint, lower joint and bell together. Be very specific about how to assemble the instrument to avoid bending keys. Use mirrors on the stands so students can see their hand position.

Right Hand – Put the bell on the knee and hold the clarinet at the top of the upper joint with the left hand.

- Place the fingers first and then the thumb (pinky on the C key) – Fingers should be flat and centered with the tab of the fingers in the middle of the holes.
- There should be a slight slope to the fingers - side of finger 4 should be near the side Eb key
- The thumb rest should be between the thumbnail and the first joint - thumbnail at a 45 degree angle toward the chin so that the fingers lay flat and don't roll on the side.
- Always move the fingers from the large knuckles. Stress keeping the fingers low and moving straight up and down above the tone holes.

Left Hand - Hold the clarinet under the thumb rest with the right hand - not in hand position

- Place the fingers first and then add the thumb
- First finger is the key to the left hand position
  - form a gun with the left hand
  - cover the first hole with the first finger
  - raise the wrist until the 1st joint touch the A key
  - roll the wrist back toward your body until the 2nd joint touches the G# key (should now see the back of the left hand – not the palm)
  - fold the other fingers out and let them cover the holes – all the fingers should slant downward at a 45 degree angle - put the pinky on the B key.

- Thumb goes across the hole at a 45 degree angle
  - Teach 3 positions of the thumb
    1. hole only
    2. hole and register key
    3. register key only (break at first joint to roll up to the register key)

TONE PRODUCTION

Mouthpiece and Barrel - Be very detailed on how to put on the ligature and reed

- The best way to get the correct embouchure on clarinet is to have the students shape the face as if they are trying to drink a thick milkshake through a straw. The chin should be very flat (sculpted) and the corners toward the center and anchored to the teeth. Once they get the shape of the face correct have them keep the same face and blow out. It is important to have the students practice this in a mirror.
- **The students should be able to form the correct embouchure WITHOUT the mouthpiece.**
- Teach the students to open and close the jaw without changing the embouchure. Try to get the jaw open the correct amount before inserting the mouthpiece. It is best if students don't have to close the jaw to get the teeth to the top of mouthpiece. This will prevent biting.
- Hold the barrel with the thumb and two fingers to establish the correct angle.
- Take in enough mouthpiece so the reed vibrates freely. When the sound starts to spread or squeaks occur, there is probably too much mouthpiece in the mouth. If the reed doesn't vibrate freely, there may not be enough mouthpiece in the mouth.
- Make sure the head is level (eyes looking across the room and not down). Form the face first and then slide the mouthpiece in on the bottom lip until the top of the mouthpiece hits the top teeth. The bottom lip should not be over the teeth prior to inserting the mouthpiece (should be able to talk while forming the embouchure). The back part of the lip should fold over the bottom teeth (like a sheet over a mattress) as the reed slides in on the bottom lip. You can have the student put their first finger on the bottom lip (like the reed) and push into the bottom teeth slightly to see how the lip folds over the teeth. I actually do this with my finger when a student is having difficulty getting the correct amount of lip over the teeth.
- You need to make sure the students understand that the top of the mouthpiece must be anchored to the top teeth and that there will be some pressure into the top teeth. This pressure must be applied without letting more mouthpiece slip into the mouth.
- The cheeks shouldn't puff on clarinet and if the corners are anchored to the teeth, the air can't get into the cheeks.
- The pitch on the mouthpiece and barrel should be a "F#" (it is okay if it is a sharp F# or very flat G).
- Make sure that you teach the vowel sound of "eee" at the initial stages of tone production.

Producing a Sound on the Entire Clarinet

- Hold the clarinet with the right hand in correct hand position and the fingers down. Hold the barrel with the thumb and two fingers of the left hand to guide the clarinet into the mouth.
- The elbows should be at the center of the body to set the correct angle.
- The first note should be a G with the right hand down.
- As they become comfortable and consistent in producing the G in this manner, have them start the note and then take the left hand off of the barrel. Next, start the note and take the left hand off of the barrel, and then lift the fingers in the right hand. This teaches the students how to pull up into the top teeth with the right thumb only and not with the "grip" of the right hand. Make sure they keep the correct right hand position as they lift the fingers.
- A good way to see whether they are anchoring to the top teeth is to take your finger and 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 mouth or the sound changes, the student isn't anchoring enough.

- Once the students are comfortable with stabilizing the clarinet into the top teeth by pulling up the thumb without any other fingers, have them start playing T1, T12, & T123
- Once they are successful with these notes, then start adding fingers 4, 5 & 6 in the right hand.
- All of this is done by telling them what fingers to put down and not discussing note names or reading music yet. In my opinion, reading music at this point is too much information for the **students to remember. Let them focus on hand position, embouchure and tone production.**

OTHER IMPORTANT CLARINET SKILLS

Right Hand Down on Second Line G, G# and A

- I would strongly recommend that you teach G, G# and A with the right hand down. I have taught it both ways throughout my career and I decided about 15 years ago that it is best to teach the right hand down on these notes
- Although students will eventually learn how to play these notes with the right hand up, you will find that the students will be more successful going across the break if they are taught to have their right hand down on these three notes.

Register Key

- Review 3 positions of the thumb.
- Teach the students to use the register key by playing a "C" (one ledger line below the staff) and then YOU (not the student) add the register key to make the note skip up to the high "G". If the note grunts or doesn't skip instantly, the student probably isn't anchoring enough. Other causes could also be that the reed is too old, too soft or placed too low on the mouthpiece.
- Once the student can consistently produce the C to G, then add fingers in the right hand one at a time and practice the same register key skip.
- If the mouthpiece isn't anchored to the top teeth or the vowel sound isn't correct (eee), the upper notes may be spread, sound flat or not respond instantly.

Rolling to the A key

- The first finger in the right hand is the most important finger in learning to play the clarinet.
- The first finger should rock back and forth (like a windshield wiper) while moving from the knuckles. Students MUST roll up and hit the A key with the side of the first finger on the 1st joint. Make sure the students aren't picking the first finger up to get to the A key.
- Have the students slur from 1st finger F# to A. If they are picking the finger up instead of rolling, there will be a "G" between the two notes.
- "Old Timey" ambulance siren – Finger T-1-2-3-P in the left hand and then roll the 1st finger off of the hole and up to the A key. This is not a real note, but it teaches the students to roll the 1st finger while keeping the left hand fingers in the correct hand position.
- Being able to roll to the A key correctly is vital in order to play across the break smoothly.

Pinkies

- Students should know both fingerings (right and left pinkies) for playing C, C# and B (low F, F#, E without the register key). Don't wait until 7th/8th grade to teach these other fingerings.

Chromatic Fingerings

- First space F# - 1) first finger and 2) thumb + bottom 2 side keys
- B natural below the staff (fifth line F# with the register key) – 1) middle finger in the right hand and 2) 4 + ring key with finger 6 (make sure they don't use finger 5).
- First line Eb (high Bb above the staff with the register key) - I usually only teach T12 + bottom side key. More advanced students should also know T12 and ring key with finger 3, as well as T14 (bridge key must be adjusted correctly for this fingering to work).

Altissimo Register (above the staff – C# and higher)

- It is best to teach these fingerings in relationship to the notes already learned and explain that the first finger in the left hand serves as another register key.

- One good way to practice these fingerings and response in the altissimo register is to finger the note with the similar fingering in the clarion register and have the students either roll the first finger in the left hand down (half hole) or completely lift the finger off of the hole (Ex. 4th space # to C# above the staff).
- Voicing (eee) and fast air are vital to playing in this register. At first, it is okay for this register to be louder than other registers. The students need to first get the notes to respond and over time they can learn to control this register.

SAXOPHONE

HAND POSITION - The students will first need to learn how to suspend the instrument from the neck strap and balance it against the side of the right leg. Younger or smaller students should not play with the sax between the legs, because it will interfere with the right hand position.

Right hand - Hold at the top of the sax with the left hand and let the sax hang to the side of the right leg.

- Place the fingers first and then the thumb - put pinky on the C key
- Fingers should be flat and centered with the tab of the fingers in middle of the pearls.
- Put the thumb under the thumb rest and push the sax forward to the thigh - just before the knee. This will help the students anchor the mouthpiece correctly. Students with small hands may need to place the thumb on the right side of the thumb rest.
- Move the fingers from the large knuckles, stress keeping the fingers low (staying on the pearls) and moving straight up and down above the keys.

Left Hand - Use correct right hand position to hold the sax

- Place the fingers first and then 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 (unless the student's hand is small).
- Place the pinky on the G# key
- Thumb goes across the pearl at a 45 degree angle with the hard part of the thumb (at the 1st joint) on the pearl. The thumb then rocks to the tip to push the octave key. Avoid students lifting the finger to hit the octave key.

TONE PRODUCTION

Mouthpiece and Neck - Be very detailed on how to put on the ligature and reed

- The best way to get the correct embouchure on saxophone is to have the students say "ooo". The chin doesn't need to be as sculpted as clarinet, but the chin should not bunch up toward the reed and the face shouldn't look tense. The corners should still be toward the center slightly.
- Once the students get the shape of the face correct have them keep the same face and blow out. It is important to have the students practice this in a mirror.
- **The students should be able to form the correct embouchure WITHOUT the mouthpiece.**
- Teach the students to open and close the jaw without changing the embouchure. Try to get the jaw open the correct amount before inserting the mouthpiece. It is best if students don't have to close the jaw to get the teeth to the top of mouthpiece. This will prevent biting.
- Hold the neck with the thumb and 2-3 fingers (fingers on the octave key) to establish the correct angle, which should be slightly below parallel to the floor.
- Take in enough mouthpiece so the reed vibrates freely. When the sound starts to lose focus, sound hollow or squeak, there is probably too much mouthpiece in the mouth. If the reed doesn't vibrate freely, the student may not have enough mouthpiece in the mouth.
- Make sure the head is level (eyes looking across the room and not down). Form the face first and then slide the mouthpiece (reed) in on the bottom lip until the top of the mouthpiece hits the top teeth. The bottom lip should not be over the teeth prior to inserting the mouthpiece (should be able to talk while forming the embouchure). The back part of the lip should fold over the bottom teeth (like

a sheet over a mattress) as the reed slides in on the bottom lip. You can have the student put their first finger on the bottom lip (like the reed) and push into the bottom teeth slightly to see how the lip folds over the teeth. I actually do this with my finger when a student is having difficulty getting the correct amount of lip over the teeth.

- You need to make sure the students understand that the top of the mouthpiece must be anchored lightly to the top teeth and that this pressure must be applied without letting more mouthpiece slip inside the mouth. The mouthpiece doesn't need to be anchored as much as on clarinet.
- It is okay for the cheeks to puff slightly when playing the saxophone. This will actually help the students to produce a "darker, velvety saxophone sound".
- Don't worry about a specific pitch on the mouthpiece/neck at first because you don't want the students to push the mouthpiece too far on the cork. Just listen for an open tone quality with free vibrations.
- **Make sure that you teach the vowel sound of "ah" or "ooo".**

Producing a Sound on the Entire Saxophone

- You will need to adjust the neckstrap, neck and mouthpiece so the students head is level and not tilted. You will need to check this daily until they understand how to do it themselves.
- Close all fingers to insert the mouthpiece into the mouth.
- The students should push forward with the right thumb which will bring the mouthpiece to the mouth. The neckstrap will need to be adjusted so that the students don't have to duck or raise their head for the mouthpiece to enter the mouth. This also helps the students anchor the top of the mouthpiece into the top teeth.
- Start by playing B (3rd line), but quickly have the students try starting on a G because if it skips to the upper octave at the beginning of the note, you know the student's face is too tight or they are anchoring too much.
- Go ahead and have the students play down to the low D fairly soon, because this will also let you know if they are using too much vertical pressure with their jaw or anchoring too much.

OTHER IMPORTANT SAXOPHONE SKILLS

Palm Keys - Try to keep the correct left hand shape as much as possible when hitting the palm keys.

- 1st palm key is hit by collapsing the palm slightly
- 2nd palm key is hit with the 2nd finger
- 3rd palm key is hit with the 3rd finger

Chromatic Fingerings and Bis

- F# - 1) middle finger in the right hand and 2) 4 + F# key with finger 6 in the RH
- I teach Bb as 12 + bottom side at first, but I feel it is important that the students also learn the Bis fingering (hitting the B key and the key beneath it both with the first finger at the same time) before the end of the 1st year and that they become comfortable using this fingering. They will be reluctant to use it at first, but be persistent because it makes technique much easier when playing in flat keys.

Vibrato

- I don't usually teach this until the second semester and often near the end of the year.
- Start by having the students lightly chew on their finger.
- Then have the students try it on the mouthpiece/neck. On saxophone, the vibrato is created by letting the sound go below pitch and then back up. Be careful that it doesn't get too wide (too low).
- Teach pulsing quarter notes at about 70-80 first, then attempt 8th notes at about 60. Eventually add triplets and 16ths, but not until the slower pulses are comfortable and have clarity. Vibrato must first be taught as subdivisions of the beat and then later they will learn to make the pulses free and not a subdivision of the beat.

Main issues I see when working with flutes are:

1. Incorrect body posture. This is so important to producing a characteristic tone quality and being able to play with consistent intonation.
2. Students not focusing the airstream. This creates an airy, unfocused tone quality and it is almost impossible to fix intonation problems.
3. Students not changing the embouchure and just blowing harder to get out the higher notes. This produces airy upper register notes that are usually out of tune. When students just blow hard, they can't play high notes softly.
4. Students with the right thumb too far under the flute. The makes the right hand position look more like a "claw".
5. Students with their heads slightly ducked. This typically causes the bottom lip to cover too much of the tone hole, which produces a dull tone quality.

Main issues I see when working with clarinets/saxes are:

1. Too much lip over the bottom teeth – This causes too much lip to touch the reed and it can't vibrate freely.
2. Not anchoring to the top teeth – This causes the sound to be unfocused and also response problems in the upper register.
3. Using reeds that are too hard. If the sound is airy or harsh, the reed may be too hard. Clarinets will need to increase the strength of the reeds for the upper register, but saxes don't necessarily need to do this. I feel it is okay for the sound to be a little unfocused with beginning students.
4. Trying to use a clarinet embouchure on saxophone. Make sure the saxophone embouchure is much more relaxed with a less sculpted face.
5. Poor hand position – right hand thumb is probably the worst. This is something you must be constantly adjusting regardless of the experience of the student.