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Beginner Bassoon Toolbox-A Guide to Starting Successful Bassoonists

CLINICIANS:
Nicki Chappell, Lorna Quintanar, Christopher Sebesta

HENRY B. GONZALEZ CONVENTION CENTER
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Supplies

Working Instruments

- Pads (including whisper key pad) are in good shape. Get extra whisper key pads from the repair shop for quick replacement when they tear.
- Bocal—CVX 2
- Seat strap—prefer S-hook version
- Hand Crutch—especially necessary for students with long fingers for proper hand position

Other Supplies

- Reed case with vents
- Reed soaker—prescription bottle, small Tupperware or other container tall enough to soak entire reed
- Silk swab—with chain, not weight
- Bocal brush or pipe cleaners (fold end over so you don't scratch)

Reeds

- Handmade by private lesson teacher
- Singing' Dog
- Andreas Eastman
- Bocal Majority

Method Books/Resources

- *Accent on Achievement*
- *Musical Mastery*
- *Bassoon Student* by Henry Paine
- *Foundations for Superior Performance*—fingering chart

www.musicandthebassoon.org

Class Organization

- Double reed class ideal
- Flute and bassoon
- Other options

Choosing Bassoon Players

- Size—make sure to try left hand thumb on whisper key and first finger—must be able to wrap around to cover first hole without thumb collapsing onto Low D key
- Finger dexterity and independence—including thumbs!
- "Go-getter"—curious, likes to figure things out on their own
- Longevity—make sure not just a "one and done" kid/family—you want them to stick around and see a future in your band program

FIRST GRADING PERIOD

Grading Term Goals—students MUST know:

- **How to care for the instrument**
  - **Assemble**
  - **Disassemble**
  - **Swabbing**
  - **Carry**
  - **Set down on ground**
- **Posture**
- **Hand Position**
- **Tone Production**
  - **Start, sustain, and release a steady sound**
  - **Articulation**

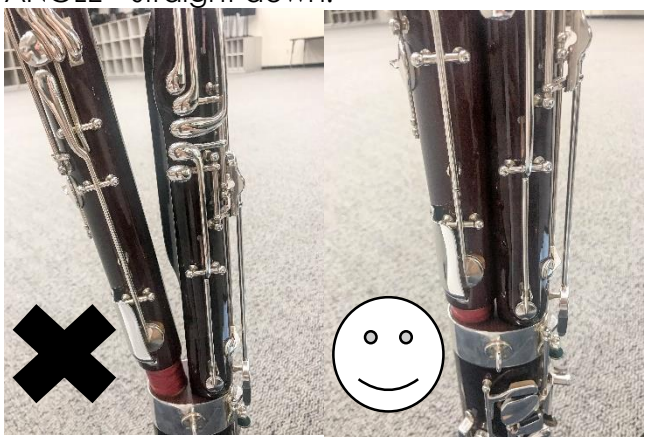
First Day with Instruments

- Assembly and care

Boot stays glued to ground while assembling—big hole on left, or pancake key facing you.

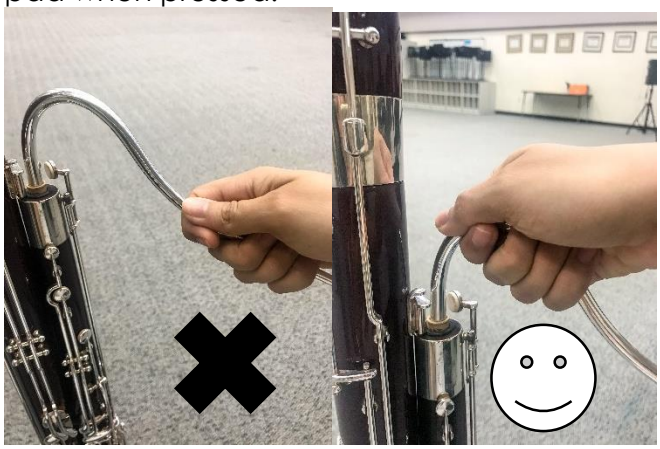
Wing joint into small hole, or hole on right—beware of bridge key with the boot.

Slide long joint down beside wing joint—thumb keys facing you. DO NOT SLIDE DOWN AT ANGLE—straight down.



Bell onto long joint—press down on Low B-flat pad to raise rod to connect to long joint.

Insert bocal—grab from crook, never twist from the tip. Cork should not show. Nipple of bocal should be able to be covered by whisper key pad when pressed.



Reverse process to put away—swab wing joint (thread through bottom, pull through top to be careful of pulling against whisper key pad). Swab boot—drop swab chain into big hole, letting it gather at the bottom. "Pour" the chain out of the small hole and pull through.

- Reed Care
    - ENTIRE reed must be submerged in water for 1-3 minutes (before assembly, just put reed in water, and it should be good to go by the time instruments are assembled).
    - Handle with care by wires or string, avoid touching the blades of the reed.
    - When finished playing, blow through back of reed to get excess water out before storing in vented reed case.
    - New reeds need to be played on for 4-6 hours before they have reached their optimum playability.
- Playing Position
    - Allow bassoonists to sit further back on chair.
        - Consideration for smaller students—have them sit more on the right side of chair so that bassoon can rest on right thigh without touching the plastic of chair.
    - Straight back
    - Feed flat
    - Seat strap placement should be towards front of chair with hook or cup on the right side
        - This will allow right elbow to be in line with body, and not behind.
    - Bassoon should cross in front of body angled with bocal so that wrists can be straight when playing.
    - Balance points—seat strap on boot, right thigh, left hand.

Seat strap too far back—elbow behind body.

Seat strap towards front of chair—elbow in line with body.

Resting position.

- Hand Position
    - Fingers in soft C shape without tension
    - Fingers should remain spread over holes/keys
    - Watch that right thumb stays hovering over pancake key when not being used, NOT resting on bassoon up above thumb keys.

Embouchure and Sound Production

- "Oh, mo, no"
- Tall meditation face "oohhhmm"
- Watch that corners DO NOT go out or pull back
- Top lip just in front of first wire, bottom lip will be slightly farther back (overbite)
- Bottom lip rolled in slightly so that chin is flat
    - With fuller lips, it is okay to see some pink of lip below reed
    - Should not see the "wet" of bottom lip
- A lot of fast air for steady tone and supported pitch

Tonguing

- Tip of tongue to tip or opening of reed
- Start with tongue on reed and blow down to start
- "Whoo-doo-doo's"—start with good, steady sound and add tongue as fast as they can as if saying "doo"
    - Allows students to feel the sensation of moving tongue without stopping or slowing air

SECOND GRADING PERIOD

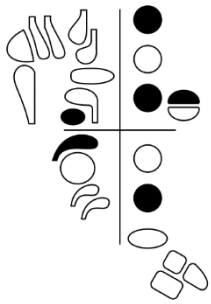
Grading Term Goals:

- **How to properly half-hole**
- **How to properly flick**
- **Proper voicing**

Common "Problem Notes"

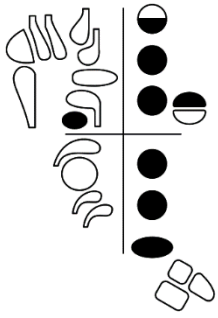
- E-natural in staff
    - Very flat if unsupported
    - Fast air
    - Good reed
- E-flat in staff
    - Many method books have varying opinions on this fingering; use the forked fingering for best response and pitch.

E-flat in staff



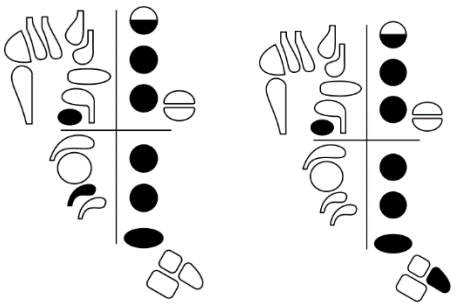
- 4th space G (half-hole G)
    - Must add resonance pinky to help bring down pitch

4th space G



- F#/Gb
    - There are actually two fingerings for this note—the thumb version, and the pinky version
    - The pinky version can be a little more in tune when half-holed
        - Also helpful when moving from other notes already using the required pinky or thumb

F#/Gb



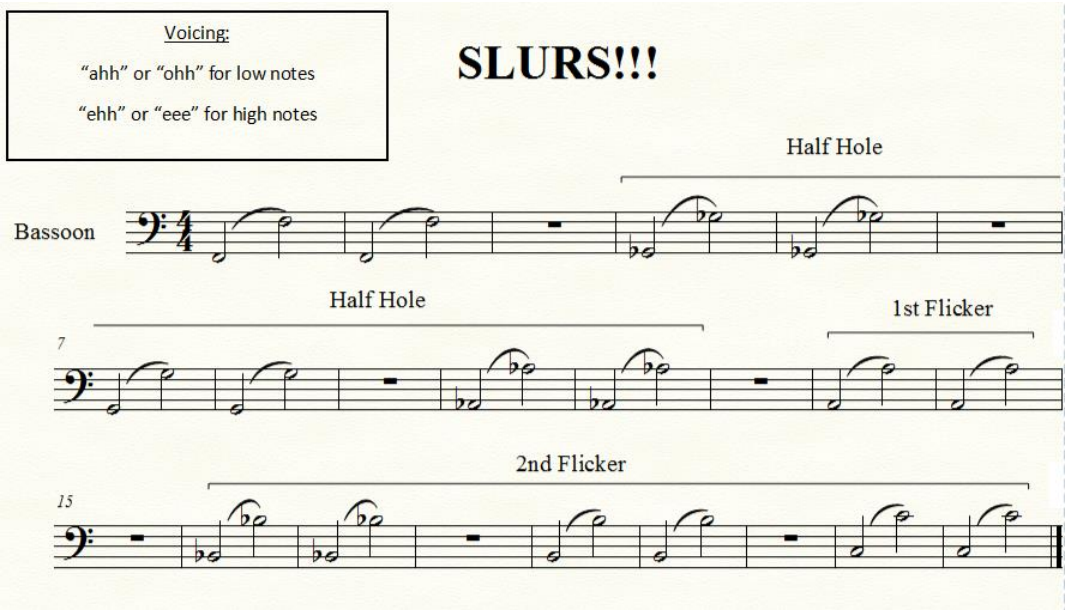
Half-holes vs. Flicking

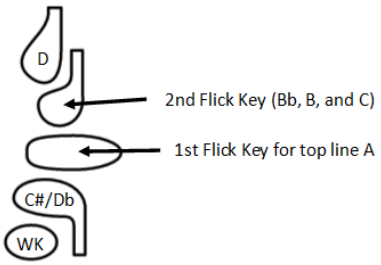
Half-holes

- 1/2 hole open for G
- 1/3 hole open for Ab/G#
- 2/3 hole open for Gb/F#
- If note growls low—half-hole more
- If note squawks up—half-hole less

Flicking

- Creates a clear and consistent attack to note
- Depress the correct flick key when tonguing beginning of note or change fingers when slurring
- If tonguing same note repeatedly, hold flick key down and vent





By the end of the 1st semester…

- **Students make a supported and characteristic sound**
- **Octave slurs**
- **Can play Mini Scales, expanding to Major Scales**
- **Play Low Bb to Flicked C (middle C)**

BEGINNING OF SECOND SEMESTER

Grading Term Goals:

- **Major scales**
- **Chromatic scales**
- **Pulsing/vibrato**

Scales

- Learning common finger patterns that will occur in music as well as when appropriate to use certain fingerings

Pulsing/Vibrato

- Created on bassoon by pulsating the airstream
- Even though true vibrato does not have a rhythm, practice by adding pulses to warm-ups like Long Tones, etc.

- You will want to hear distinct, consistent waves in the sound
- Once waves are consistent, you can work on speeding them up and making them less "rhythmic" sounding

Understanding Intonation

- You CANNOT pull or push anything out to adjust intonation on bassoon
- Students must learn to adjust by listening and bending pitch with embouchure and air

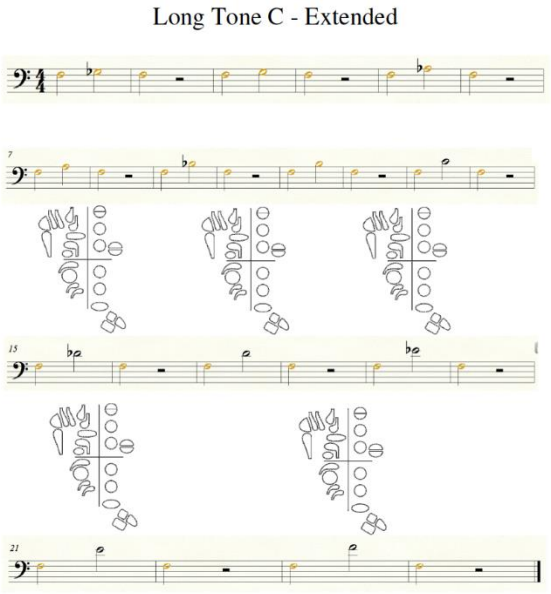
Common Pitch Issues:

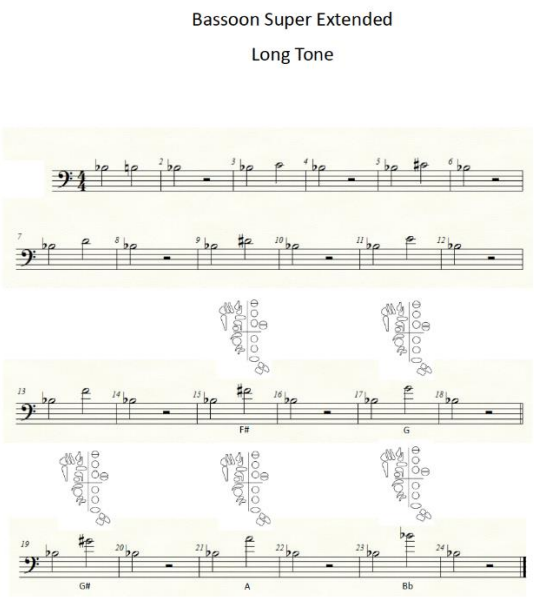
- Reeds
  - Reeds that are too thin or soft will tend to be flat in pitch
  - Reeds that are too thick or hard will tend to be sharp
  - Reeds that are too long will be flat
  - Reeds that are too short will be sharp
- Bocal
  - Standard #2 bocal should work well on student bassoons
  - Typical lengths are 1-2 (shortest to longest)
  - If bocal is too short, pitch will be sharp
  - If bocal is too long, pitch will be flat
- Breath support/posture
  - Poor posture/breath support will lead to unsupported, flat, out of tone/tune sound
- Vowels/voicing
  - Too open or loose will cause pitch to be flat and saggy sounding
  - Too tight or biting will cause pitch to be sharp and tight sounding
- Dynamics
  - As volume increases, pitch will tend to go flat
  - As volume decreases, pitch will tend to go sharp

MIDDLE TO END OF SECOND SEMESTER

Expanding Range

- Extended Long Tones
- Two-octave scales





Other Helpful Tools for Teaching Bassoon

Easy Reed Adjustments

- Wires—this is the safest adjustment to try to make since you are not removing any cane from the reed
    - Check reed opening at tip
    - First Wire (closest to blades of reed)
        - If too open, using fingers or pliers, squeeze first wire gently from top and bottom to close opening
            - This will create a slightly lower, brighter pitch, and make the reed easier to blow and control
        - If too closed, squeeze first wire gently from sides to open
            - This will create a slightly higher, darker pitch, and make the reed more difficult to control
    - Second Wire (closest to thread)
        - Squeezing from top to bottom will open the tip creating a slightly more resistant, slightly darker and higher pitch. DO NOT squeeze too much, or the lower notes will become less responsive
        - Squeezing from sides will create a smaller tip opening, making the reed less resistant/easier to blow. The sound will become reedier, and the high notes will be more prominent.
- Tip adjustment
    - You will need: a bassoon mandrel, bassoon plaque, fine grit sandpaper (220 grit)
    - The tip of the reed should be very smooth and thin—if the tip is too thick, it will be very resistant and have bad response and may be slightly sharp
    - The safest way to adjust the tip is to put the reed onto the bassoon mandrel, insert plaque between blades, gently sand each reed tip evenly.
    - Sand a little on each side and play-test. Repeat as necessary, but remember, you cannot put cane back on once it has been removed, so little adjustments, and play-test frequently.
- Do not recommend cutting into the reed as there are several different areas for adjusting certain aspects of the reed. If you have never used a reed knife, do not do so without an experienced reed maker.

Troubleshooting

What to do when low notes won't come out

- Make sure fingers are covering holes completely and keep firmly pressed down
- Vowel shape—"ahh" or "ooohhhmm" even tongue is low in mouth and throat
- Reed opening—not too closed/not too open
- Whisper key and pancake are actually covering the opening on the bocal—sometimes you have to move the wing joint further onto the hump of the bridge mechanism on the boot.

What to do when high notes won't come out

- Vowel shape—"eee" tongue raises
- Faster, colder air for support
- Roll lips over more reed
- Check half-hole/flick