



**Texas Bandmasters Association  
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**The Bassooner the Better: Building Your  
Toolbox to Build Budding Bassoonists**

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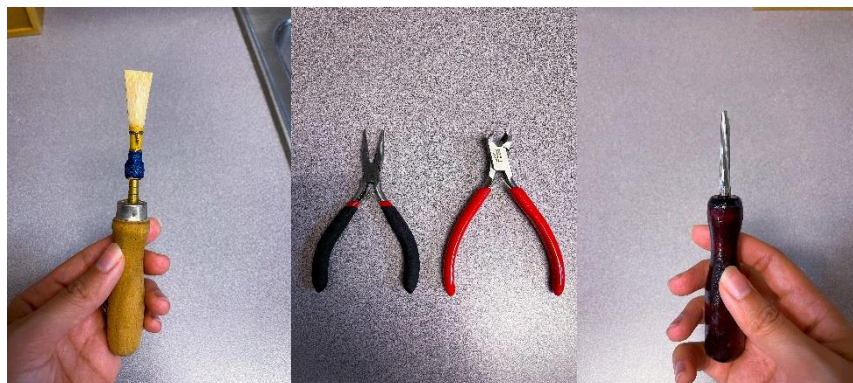
## Before the School Year Begins

### Choosing the Bassoonist

- Personality is key! We suggest a short interview with the potential bassoonist to look for the following:
  - You are looking for a student who likes a challenge and does not give up easily.
  - They need to be comfortable in a small group, having a lot of attention on them, and being asked to do things by themselves.
  - Can they figure things out by themselves, or do they always need assistance?
  - How excited are they about joining Band? Do they see themselves doing this for long or short term? Time investment in a beginning double reed player is a lot, and you want to do your best to find a student that will stick with it.
  - Siblings of past band students that check these boxes could also be great candidates.
- Suggested Questions to ask:
  - Do you like puzzles?
  - Do you prefer bigger or smaller class sizes?
  - Do you want an easy/medium/challenging instrument?
  - Do you think Band is something you will do for just this next year or do you see it in your future? What about high school?
- Physical Characteristics
  - Hand size: If their hands are too small, they will not be able to cover the tone holes and reach all the keys with their left thumb.
  - An overbite is acceptable.
  - Finger dexterity and independence can be helpful.
  - Double reeds are VERY EASY to produce a first sound. Unlike other wind instruments, sound production is rarely an indicator of future success
- Private Lessons
  - If your program has a bassoon private lesson teacher, willingness to sign up for and take lessons is a plus.
- Sales Pitch and Charm
  - Not many students join Band knowing what a bassoon is and having it as their top choice. If you have a great candidate for bassoon, sometimes it takes a little time to convince them to give it a try.
  - If possible, you can give the student a day or two to think about it before they make their final decision.
  - Show them recordings and examples of students close to their age playing the instrument.

### Supply List for Directors/Campus

- Instrument Options
  - Fox 41—beginners
  - Fox 222—middle school
  - Fox 240—high school
- Whisper Key Pads and Hot Glue Gun
- Bocal Brush
  - Do not use a bocal swab—they can easily get stuck!
- Reed Tools for Directors
  - Reamer
    - Use a reamer to adjust the tube of the reed if it falls off and is too small to fit properly on the bocal. Insert the reamer into the tube of the reed and rotate the tool to shave off some cane until it can fit onto the bocal.
    - **You can only use a reamer on a completely dry reed!**
  - Small Pliers
    - Use pliers to adjust the tip opening of the reed or to tighten loose wires.
  - Mandrel
    - A mandrel holds a reed while making reed adjustments (optional, although very handy to have).
  - Pipe Cleaners (not the craft kind)
    - Use pipe cleaners to clean out the inside of a reed if it's getting moldy or gross (can be purchased from Amazon).
  - Reed Knife or Razor Blade and Reed Block
    - If a reed is playing flat overall, the blade of the reed could be too long. Using a reed knife or razor blade, clip the tip of the reed against a reed block (you could also substitute a large bottle cap if you do not have a reed block).
    - Alternatively, you could also purchase tip cutters.



## Supply List for Students

- Reeds
  - Reeds can be purchased from a reputable music store or from a private lesson teacher.
  - Reed strength indicates the resistance of the reed. Younger students can generally start on softer reeds (medium-soft or medium) and can move up to heavier reeds (medium-hard) as their embouchure develops. At the end of the day, whichever reed sounds the best is the one to use.
- Reed Case
  - **Do not store reeds in the plastic tube or container that they come in—they will get moldy!**
- Water Cup
  - Bassoon reeds must be completely soaked before playing (including the threaded part of the reed).
  - Prescription pill bottles work well.



- Silk Bassoon Swab
  - Cotton swabs are more likely to get stuck inside the joint.
  - Remind students to not to confuse a Bassoon Swab for a Bocal Swab.
- Seat Strap
  - S-hook seat straps or cup seat straps both work fine.
  - If using a cup seat strap, ensure that the cup does not interfere with any of the keys or pads on the boot. If they do, you can place a piece of foam/folded paper towels/etc. into the cup of the strap to get the cup to sit in a better position.
- Cork Grease
  - Only use cork grease on corked parts of the instrument.
  - Do not use cork grease on the stringed tenons. You can either use wax or take some strings off if the joint is too tight.
- T-Shirt Strip or Cloth
  - This can be used to protect the wing joint while in the case (especially if the wing and long joints move around while in the case).

## Class Structure and Schedule

- If it's possible for your program to teach beginning bassoonists without any other instruments in the class, great!
- Common instrument groupings for beginner classes:
  - Bassoon and Oboe
  - Bassoon and Saxophone
  - Bassoon and Clarinet
- It's ideal to have at least two bassoonists in a class together so they can encourage each other and more easily track their own progress. Plus, safety in numbers—this will help the more reserved students feel more confident.

## Starting the School Year

### First Lessons

#### Basic Posture

- Sit towards the back of the chair. Bassoonists cannot sit towards the front half/edge of the chair due to the use of the seat strap.
- Do not lean into the back rest. You still want a tall and straight back.
- Feet flat on the floor to create a 90-degree angle in the knees.

#### Breathing

- Teach breathing just like all wind players—calm air through an “O” shape in their mouth, thinking of expanding their rib cage and filling their lungs from the bottom-up.

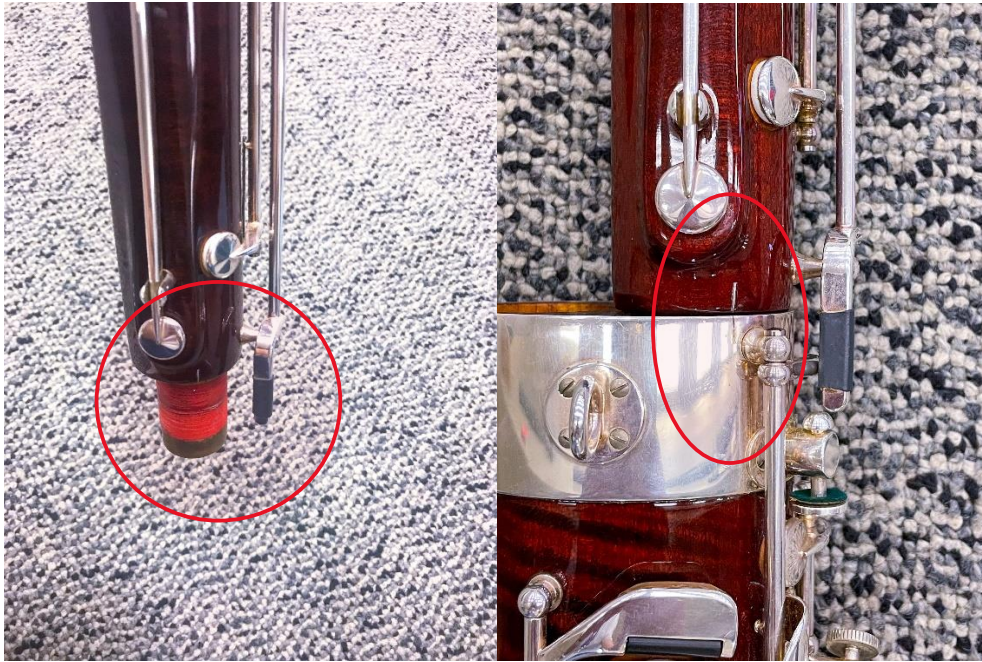
#### Assembling the Bassoon

- Open the case. If students have a cell phone, they can take a picture of the instrument in the case to use as a reference when it's time to disassemble to make sure it's put away correctly.
- Take out the boot. Place on the floor with the larger hole to the left.





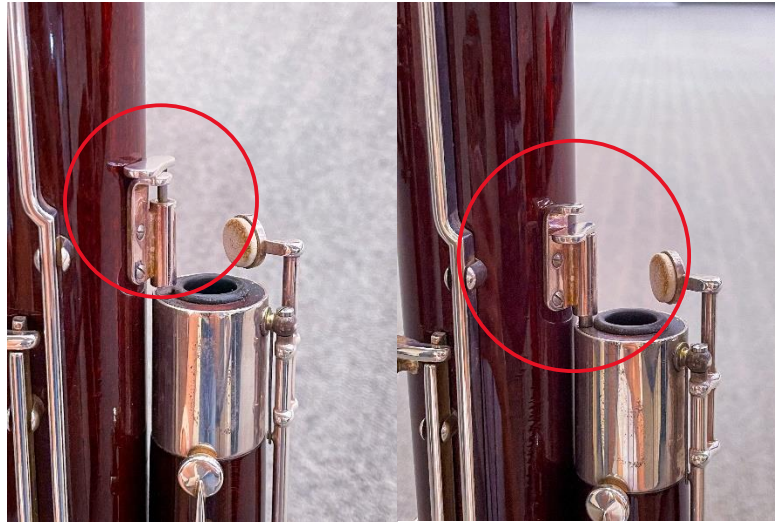
- Take out the wing joint/tenor joint. Watch out for the bridge key as you place it into the smaller hole to the right. Most bassoons have a mark etched onto the wing joint and the boot to show alignment. If not, you can place a sticker for your students.



- Take out the long joint. Look for the joint lock (if the instrument has one). Make sure the lock is sitting on the “shelf.” Otherwise, it could get bent during assembly. Place it vertically into the larger left hole of the boot with the thumb keys facing you.



- Take the joint lock off the “shelf” and place it into the wing joint. If joints are not aligned, adjust the long joint so the locking mechanism pops easily into place.



- Take out the bell. Push the key down before placing the bell at the top of the long joint, making sure that the key aligns.



*Remember, all of this is done while the boot is still in contact with the floor.*

- The seat strap can be attached to the boot at this time. This will help ensure the boot doesn't fall off if the tenons are loose while walking with the instrument.

#### Disassembling the Bassoon

- To disassemble, first place the boot back on the floor—do not try to disassemble with the bassoon still in the seat strap. Take apart the instrument in reverse order. Make sure you unlock the joint lock before taking off the long joint.
- Students must pass off assembling and disassembling the instrument several times correctly before they get to take it home or play on the full instrument.

The Seat Strap

- The seat strap needs to be placed so the hook or cup is on the right side of the chair. Playing chairs cannot have arm rests—be sure to ask your students if they have an appropriate playing chair at home while they practice.
- The strap needs to sit between the student's hips and knees (middle of the thigh) and not under their "seat."



- Neck Strap
  - Useful for small kids that need extra support; used WITH a seat strap.
  - Used when standing; pep rallies 😊 – Alternatively, bring chairs and have them sit using their seat strap.
  - Professional bassoonists that stand for solos typically use a harness with an attachment.

The Bocal

- Teach students the importance of treating the bocal correctly. Bocals cannot easily be repaired if damaged and are costly to replace.
- **Always hold the bocal by the crook—NEVER by the smaller end.**





- Always protect the opening—like a brass mouthpiece, you want to ensure it stays a perfect circle.
- Only put the bocal in the wing joint once the bassoonist is in their playing chair. When not in their seat, the bocal can go into the bell, tip down so the crook is hanging on the outside.
- When putting the bocal in the wing joint, first make sure the whisper key lock is not engaged. The whisper key lock is located on the right side of the boot—make sure it is in the “down” position. Otherwise, the lock can rip off the whisper key pad when it is placed into the wing joint.
- You want the whisper key pad to close the pin hole on the bocal. Check by pressing down the whisper key.



- If students need to get up out of their seat, **they need to take off their reed and their bocal, separately.** The bocal can either sit on their stand or in their bell.

The Reed

- Reeds need a few minutes to soak through before playing. Students should place reeds into their reed cups **before** assembling the rest of their instruments. The time it takes to assemble the bassoon is usually adequate time for the reed to soak in water.
- Directors can keep a water bottle or pitcher in the classroom if there is not a sink or water fountain close by.
- Use fresh, room temperature water every time. If the water is very cold, the reed will need more time to soak.
- After playing, students can dump out their water or drink it. Perhaps invest in a reed plant the students can water 😊
- The entire reed needs to be soaked, including the thread. (This is different from oboe).
- Once students have their instruments assembled, their seat straps placed in their chairs, their instruments in playing position, and bocal placed, THEN they can put on their reeds.
- Teach students to only have their reeds on their bocals when they are in their seat.
- Always be aware of where your reed is in space. If students place the bassoon on their shoulders in a resting position, they need to be aware of what's behind them (walls, music stands, other unaware students, tall chair backs, etc.).
- When students need to get up out of their seats, they can take off their reed and either place it on their stand, in their mouth, or back in their reed case.
- Do not store reeds in the plastic tube or case they were purchased in. There is no air ventilation, and they will mold very quickly. It's also easy for students to accidentally break the tip of the reed while trying to put the reed into the tube.

Bassoon Posture

- Once basic posture is established, specify bassoon posture and positions.
  - Resting position can be holding the bassoon in your right hand vertically or on the shoulder (just being careful not to hit the reed/bocal on anything behind you)
  - Playing position. The bassoon should be at a 45-degree angle. Make sure students are not contorting their bodies to reach the instrument.
  - The right elbow should be more in line with the shoulder, not pulled behind the torso.
  - The seat strap should lie evenly across the chair, not at an angle.



Hand Position

- Left Hand
  - The “ball” of the left hand is the contact point on the side of the long joint. Students should not have a gap between their left hand and the bassoon.
  - The left thumb’s “home base” is the whisper key. It will not move from the whisper key until they play very low or start “flicking.”
  - Fingers 1-2-3 go onto the tone holes. 3 could be a key depending on the model of the bassoon.
  - Left pinky should be placed on the top left pinky key to rest when not being used.
- Right Hand
  - Crutch—optional. Most beginners’ hands are not large enough to warrant using the crutch. If not using, you can take the holder off the bassoon (just make sure you keep it).
  - If not using a crutch, the side of the right index finger can rest on the rod on the right side of the boot.



- The right thumb can hover above the top thumb key on the boot.
- Fingers 4-5 go onto the tone holes.
- Finger 6 goes onto the G key (it’s the larger of the two keys that are directly below the tone holes)
- The right pinky can be placed on the top right pinky key to rest when not being used.
- For the first few days of playing, students can use their right hand to hold the top ring of the boot for balance/stability before moving to the described hand position above.

## First Sounds

### Embouchure

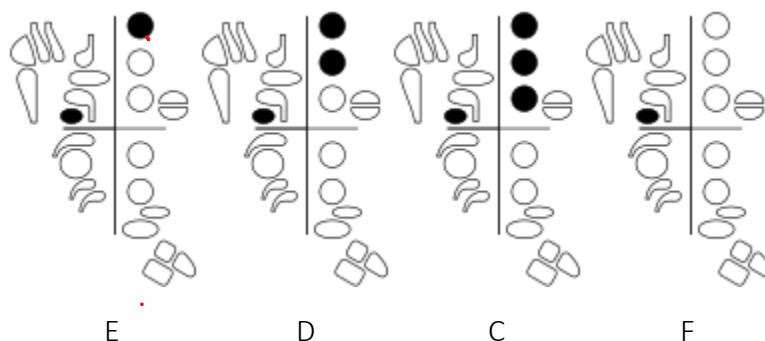
- Firm corners
- Lips rolled over teeth
- Rounded embouchure
- Top lip should almost touch the first wire
- When breathing, the top lip should remain in contact with the reed; drop the jaw to take in air.

### Crowing on the Reed

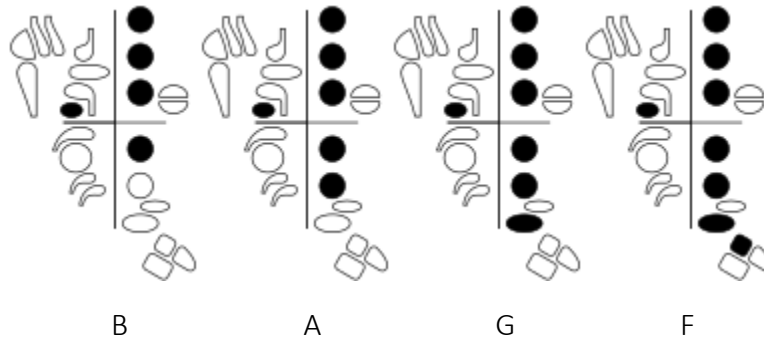
- Does not need to be a specific pitch
- Listen for a “double buzz” vibration–this is the ideal sound
- Make sure students hold onto the threaded part of the reed with one finger and a thumb, otherwise the reed will go flying across the room.
- The reed can be placed onto the bocal alone to practice before moving onto the full instrument. **Make sure students hold the bocal by the crook.**

### First Notes

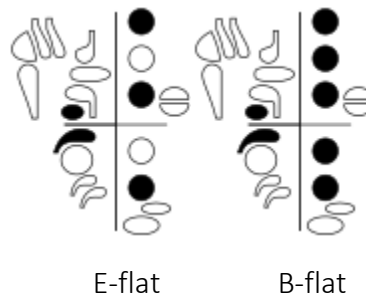
- The left thumb will be “glued” to the whisper key for the majority of the first semester.
- Start on 3rd-space E. This note tends to be very flat; as students get more comfortable playing, remind them to firm up their corners and use fast, skinny air to help support the pitch.
- Add one finger to play 3rd-line D
- Add another finger to play 2nd-space C
- 4th line F is whisper key alone.



- Then add right hand fingers 4, 5, and 6 (B, A, G).
- Then add right hand pinky (low F)



- Start to fill in gaps chromatically (Eb and Bb being most important to performing songs); working D to Eb is important (contrary motion)



### Tonguing

- Introduce tonguing sooner rather than later.
- The tongue will touch the bottom blade of the reed, not in the tip opening.
- The tongue needs to move in an upward/downward motion
- Students can practice tonguing while they crow on the reed; this is a good indicator if their air is staying steady. The crow should sound the same between articulations.
- The embouchure shouldn't move around when tonguing—corners need to be firm enough to hold the reed still while the tongue articulates. Have students use a small mirror to watch themselves while tonguing. Make sure there is no movement in the jaw when they tongue (it can look like they're chewing).

### **End of 1st Semester Benchmarks**

- Students should know proper assembling and disassembling procedures, as well as basic instrument maintenance and care (swabbing, reed care, etc.).
- An ideal range of notes would be from F below the staff to 4th space G by the end of the first semester.
- Students should have practice with the half-hole technique to play 4th space G.
- Students should be able to consistently articulate before moving on to slurring.



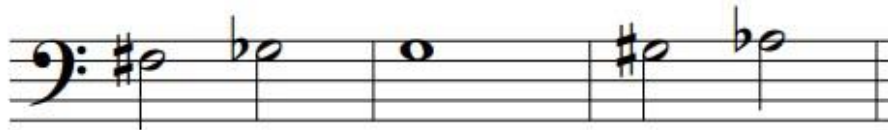
## Progressing Through the Year

### Vibrato

- It's recommended that you only start introducing vibrato once students can consistently play with correct air support and breathing technique, 2nd semester at the earliest.
- Vibrato comes from air pulses, not from any movement in the jaw or face—similar to flute vibrato
- Start with exaggerated quarter note pulses, then move on to 8th note pulses. Play on a comfortable note like whisper key F.

### Half Hole Technique

- Used on the "G's" (Gb, G, and G#) at the top of the staff.



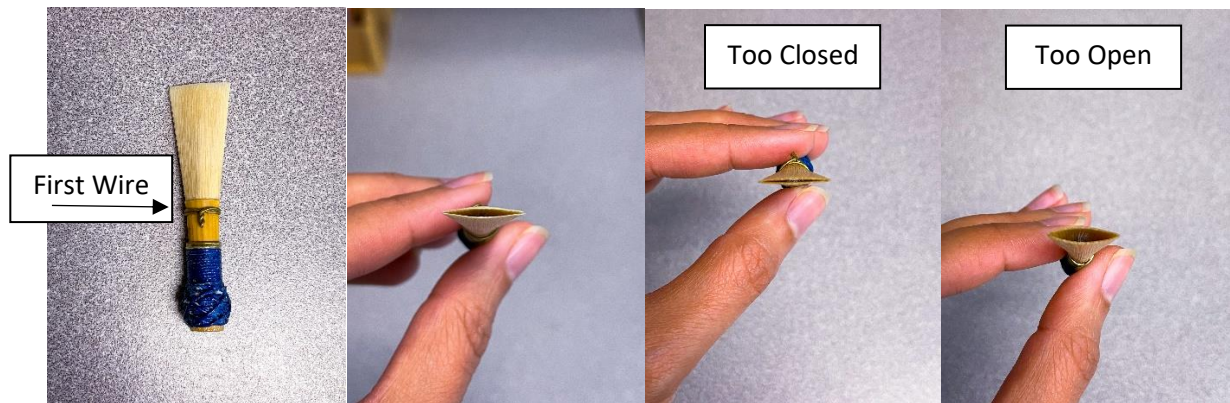
- Students can practice the half hole technique with octave slurs.



- The first finger should roll or peel from the first tone hole, it shouldn't slide down.
- Slightly more open for the F# and less for the Ab.
- It can differ by person and/or the bassoon.
- The ultimate goal is for the note to speak clearly—no "growl"
- When in doubt, more half hole.

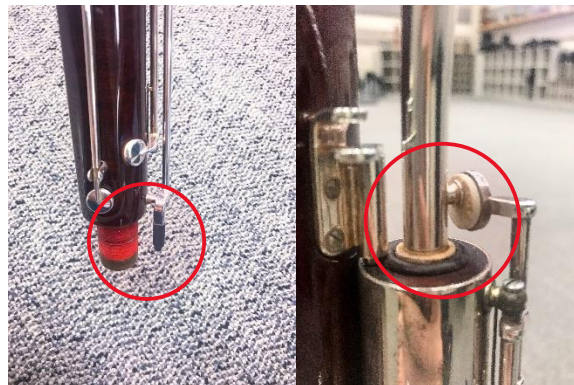
## Reed Adjustments

- The first wire can sometimes be too loose. Take the pliers and pull up on the wire thread and twist to tighten if needed before placing the wire thread back down against the reed.
- Tip openings—use pliers to either open or close the throat (just above the first wire) of the reed to adjust the tip opening.
- If the reed plays flat overall, the tip can be cut back slightly (think millimeters).



## Whisper Key vs. Pancake Key Mechanisms

- Whisper key is used on EVERY note from 5th line Ab down to low Bb.
- If notes are jumping up an octave or not quite speaking, the pad may not be making full contact. You can think of it as a “reverse octave key.”
- When the pancake key is engaged, it also pushes down the whisper key, freeing your left thumb for low note keys.
- If the whisper key pad is not making full contact when only using the pancake key, you need to make an adjustment (could be simple or require sending in for repair). Electrical tape can be wrapped around the bridge key so that the whisper key pad closes when using the pancake key.



## Venting/Flicking

- The flick keys are the left thumb keys that sit above the whisper key and C# key on the wing joint. Some bassoons have 3 keys while some only have 2.
- The notes that need venting/flicking are A, A#, B, C, and D at the top of the staff. These notes are sometimes shown in fingering charts as using no left thumb; however, this increases the risk of those notes cracking. Venting/flicking is extra insurance that those notes will have a clean note start.

The image contains two musical staves. The top staff is titled "Roll on Up" and shows a sequence of notes: A, A#, B, C, D. Below the first two notes, there are diagrams of the pinky key being pressed. The bottom staff is titled "Soaring Up" and shows a sequence of notes: A, A#, B, C, D. Below each note, there is a diagram of the thumb key being pressed.

- Venting the key (holding it down for the duration of the note) can be easier to teach beginner students, so they get used to the thumb movement.
- Some notes can play out of tune when venting (A and D in particular), but others can become more stable (A#, B, C).
- Flicking refers to the quick press-release technique at the note start. The easiest way to think about it is that the thumb presses the key at the same time and for the same duration as the tongue touches the reed when articulating. This ensures a clean note start without compromising the pitch. It's also practical in faster passages when the thumb has to jump from key to key.
- As students progress to more challenging music, A-flat can also be flicked with the same key as A-natural if needed (like in a slurred passage) but should never be vented as it changes the intonation.
- General Rule of Thumb: When initially playing one of these notes, venting/flicking is necessary. If slurring in a step-wise motion to these notes, it may not be needed. If slurring more than a step or articulating any of these notes, venting/flicking is needed.

## End of 2nd Semester Benchmark

- Range from low B-flat chromatically at least two octaves, if not to F above the staff

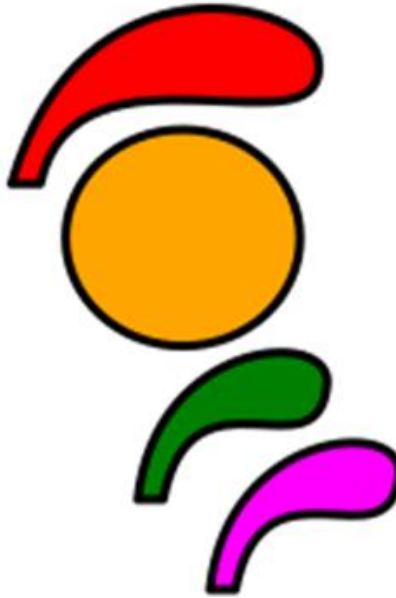
## Key Diagrams

### Left Thumb Keys



- White | Whisper key (used on everything from 5<sup>th</sup> line A<sup>b</sup> down to the bottom)
- Red | C<sup>#</sup>/D<sup>b</sup>
- Orange | A key (flick)
- Yellow | C key (flick/vent B<sup>b</sup>, B, and C)
- Green | D key (flick high D; not on all bassoons)
- Blue | Low B<sup>b</sup>
- Purple | Low B
- Magenta | Low C
- Light Blue | Low D (also used on 2<sup>nd</sup> space C<sup>#</sup>)

## Right Thumb Keys



- Red | B<sup>b</sup> (also used for 3<sup>rd</sup> space E<sup>b</sup>)
- Orange | Pancake key
- Green | F<sup>#</sup>/G<sup>b</sup>
- Magenta | G<sup>#</sup>/A<sup>b</sup> (Rarely used)



## Troubleshooting

### **Replacing Whisper Key Pad**

- Use hot glue to replace the whisper key pad if it has torn or fallen off. A pad with ripped skin **MUST** be replaced with a new pad.

### **Whisper Key Pad Not Covering Bocal Pinhole/Low Notes Not Responding**

- If students have difficulty getting their lower notes to respond (E below the staff and lower), it's possible that there's a leak due to the whisper key pad not covering the bocal pinhole when the pancake key is being pressed down.
- If the whisper key pad is not covering the bocal pinhole when students press the whisper key **OR** the pancake key, first check to see if the rod has bent. If not, the bridge key of the wing joint can be wrapped in electrical tape to give it the proper leverage to press the pad onto the bocal pinhole.

### **Notes at the Top of/Above the Staff Playing an Octave Too Low**

- Their whisper key lock is probably on. The lock is located on the right side of the boot.
- The whisper key lock is very useful for musical passages that are below the staff that involve the left thumb moving around several keys but will interfere with 4<sup>th</sup> space G-flat up to D above the staff.

### **Blockages in the Instrument**

- Supplies in bassoon cases can sometimes move around and get lodged inside joints of the instrument (cork grease, reed tubes, etc.).
- If the instrument can't play and you can't find an obvious issue, check that nothing has gotten stuck in the wing joint or boot.

### **It's Not Always the Reed...**

- Although sometimes it is.
- Students should have multiple reeds that they can try if an issue arises in their playing.
- Vertical cracks in the blades of the reed can be difficult to see. Use light pressure with your fingernail to run along the edges of the reed to see if there's a crack.
- Check the tip opening. If the tip is completely closed off, use pliers to slightly open the throat of the reed (by the first wire, closest to the tip of the reed). If the tip opening is huge, use pliers to slightly close the throat of the reed.

### **Screws on Keywork**

- All screws on the instrument can be tightened—you can't over-tighten anything.

## Resources and Links

### Online Stores for Reeds and Supplies

Bocal Majority

<https://www.bocalmajoritystore.com/>

Miller Marketing

<https://millermarketingco.com/>

### Resources and Lesson Plans for Teachers

Music and the Bassoon

<https://www.musicandthebassoon.org/>

Bocal Majority *Beginner Class Boot Camp Book*

<https://www.bocalmajoritystore.com/books-music/beginner-book/>

### Method Book

Weissenborn *Practical Method for the Bassoon*

<https://www.carlfischer.com/o2150-practical+method+for+the+bassoon.html>