



The Midwest Clinic

International Band and Orchestra Conference

2019 DAY ONE CLINIC SERIES

*An Educational Initiative of The Midwest Clinic
Presented by Master Teachers of Beginning Instrumental Methods*

BASSOON PEDAGOGY

From DAY ONE

Jason Worzbyt, Clinician

Wednesday, December 18 • 4:15 – 4:45pm

Thursday, December 19 • 10:00 – 10:30pm

Friday, December 20 • 1:30 – 2:00pm

MEETING ROOM W182



BASSOON PEDAGOGY FROM DAY ONE

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SELECTING STUDENTS FOR BASSOON

Remarks: The bassoon is an instrument that readily accepts a wide variety of facial structures, including shape and thickness of the lips, jaw structures, tongue shape, and variations in dental structure. This is in large part due to the fact that the vibrating mechanism (the reed) produces the sound inside our bodies, and we refine this sound through guided manipulation of the performers' lips and oral cavity. Because of this, nearly any student can begin and/or switch to the bassoon provided that they are mentored properly and that they have the proper equipment to work with. Starting bassoonists is fun, and it doesn't have to be scary!

- One of the primary criteria for selecting a bassoonist is the size of the student. The bassoon is a rather large instrument with open holes, so it is important that the student can cover the holes adequately with their fingers.
- The largest span that the fingers have to cover are between the middle finger and the ring finger of the left hand (D tone hole to the C tone hole). Many bassoons have a plateau key installed over the C tone hole to help close this distance. The pad on this key can become sticky over time, so it is important to recognize when it needs to be replaced.
- Some of the "easiest" transitions to the bassoon that I have witnessed have been from flute and saxophone. Both of these embouchures are relatively round and flexible, which make them perfect candidates to begin the bassoon.

BEFORE THE FIRST SOUNDS ARE MADE

Remarks: Success in bassoon playing is much like a stool with three legs: a properly adjusted reed, a bassoon and bocal that are in good working order, and appropriate pedagogical materials. If one of these "legs" is taken away, bassoon playing becomes remarkably difficult. If two are taken away, it is almost impossible to build the most basic skills on the instrument. If none of these are present, the chances of having success on the bassoon are slim to none. Sadly, in my 23 years of teaching, the vast amount of students that I have encountered fall into those last two categories where the odds are truly stacked against them. Therefore, having quality equipment is paramount for success.

THE BASSOON REED

- Having a quality bassoon reed is fundamental to success on the bassoon. To quote a colleague of mine, “The reed controls the player’s sanity!”
- A properly constructed bassoon reed will have the following:
 - The wires have been properly tightened in that there are no gaps between the wires.
 - The binding on the end is properly sealed so that it will not come off even when the reed is dry.
 - The opening of the soaked reed should be about 1.5mm.
 - An ideal length from the top of the wire to the top of the blade should be about 30mm.
 - The blades are not slipped and the inside of the reed (particularly the throat) should be free from debris.
 - When the reed is properly soaked, it should produce a “triple crow” (see below).

THE INSTRUMENT ITSELF

• TERMINOLOGY

Bassoon students should learn the name of each part of the bassoon.

- Wing/tenor joint
- Long/bass joint
- Boot joint
- Bell
- Bocal

• ASSEMBLY PRECAUTIONS

It is best to set the bassoon case on the floor and have the student pick up one piece at a time for assembly.

- First, have them pick up the boot joint and tenor joint. They will notice that the tenor joint has a metal bushing at the large end, and that there is a metal insert in the boot joint. These go together. Gently push and twist. Many bassoons have a small line carved into both joints to indicate the ideal alignment.
- Next, have them pick up the long joint and insert the narrow end into the boot joint so that all of the keys are facing them.
- Take the bell. While holding down the Bb key (key on the bell), push and twist until the linkages line up.
- When inserting the bocal, it is critical to hold it close to the corked end and gently push and twist. Check that the small hole on the bocal is covered by the pad.

• BASIC MAINTENANCE

- In addition to swabbing out the bassoon after each practice session, it is important to clean the bocal with hot, soapy water once a month. Purchasing a bocal brush is a cheap and very effective way to do this.
- Once a month, it is important to take a vacuum cleaner and pick up all of the dust, hair, etc., that can accumulate in a bassoon case. These items can get underneath the pads and cause leaks in the low register.

- OTHER CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE INSTRUMENT ITSELF
 - Most bassoon related catastrophes that require repair happen when the bassoon is not being used, but is fully assembled. Therefore, when you are not using the bassoon, be sure it is in the case.
 - When transporting a bocal, place the tip of the bocal in the bell and not in the tenor joint. Doing so can either scratch the bore of the tenor joint or damage the delicate opening of the bocal.

BODY POSITION/BALANCE/POSTURE

- It is very important to have your students use a seat strap and not a neck strap for supporting the instrument. A seat strap allows the bassoonist to relax their body and balance the instrument so that there is almost no weight on the player's left hand. Due to the fact that the left hand has over 11 keys to play, having a seat strap will play a major role in their success. There are many different designs of seat straps (hook, cup, ring), but any of them will provide the support a bassoonist needs.
- Place the seat strap on the front $\frac{1}{4}$ of the chair, and have the player sit in the chair with their hips as far back as possible. It should feel like the chair is supporting their entire weight.
- Once the bassoon is attached to the seat strap, be sure that the student brings the bassoon to them, making one half of an "X" across their body. Their shoulders and their torso should not be twisted in any way – keep everything facing forward.
- In order to find the ideal instrument height for each student, have the student look straight ahead and bring the bassoon to them with the reed attached. It should touch the space between their lower lip and their chin. The player then slightly looks down to take the reed into their mouth.

HAND POSITION

- The left hand is curved and relaxed with the first, second, and third fingers just above the tone holes. The left thumb will spend a lot of time using the whisper (pianissimo) key for the first several months of study, so I often have them use that as a "default" position. As previously mentioned, the biggest stretch will be between the middle finger and the ring finger due to the tone hole placement.
- As long as the bassoon is properly supported by the seat strap, there should hardly be any weight on the left hand. This will allow the left hand to be relaxed.
- As with the left hand, the right hand is curved and relaxed, looking like the right hand is "draped" over the bassoon. Some bassoons will have an assembly for a crutch/hand rest installed. Since these are primarily used with students that have larger/fully grown hands, it is safe/more effective to take this off. It brings the right hand closer to the bassoon and facilitates technique.
- The biggest challenge with the right hand is where to place the thumb. Many students will try to rest their thumb on the metal band of the boot joint. It is important to discourage this habit as they will need to have use of this thumb when playing the low register. Having them keep their thumb above the low E (pancake) key is an ideal location.

PRODUCING THE FIRST SOUNDS

Remarks: Due to the imposing size of the bassoon, having students begin making sounds on the reed alone not only reinforces the skills they will need for tone production, but it allows them to focus on one dimension of bassoon playing at a time.

EMBOUCHURE

- Having the student whistle, or attempt to whistle, is an excellent way of forming the basic embouchure for the bassoon. If a student in your class has a hooded sweatshirt on, have them pull their hood over their head and look at the opening. That's it!!!
- Pull the corners of the mouth towards the center of the face, making the opening as round/oval as possible. The jaw will be slightly dropped.
- The goal of the bassoon embouchure is to gently hold the reed with equal pressure from all sides of the mouth. This allows the entire reed to vibrate.
- Equal pressure from all sides of the mouth allows the reed opening to be at its maximum, which is the idea for the majority of bassoon playing

CROWING THE REED

- To prepare a bassoon reed, immerse the reed in water, remove, and place on a surface for 1-2 minutes. This method is more effective than soaking the entire reed in water for several minutes, and actually prepares the reed for performances in a shorter amount of time.
- Insert the soaked reed so that 2/3 of the blades are in the mouth.
- Place the tip of the tongue on the tip of the reed, then, release the tongue letting air into the reed.
- If the reed is properly soaked and adjusted, a mix of three frequencies will occur, producing a single pitch from an Eb to an F.
- These frequencies can be isolated by first blowing a slow air stream and then slowly increasing it. The longer that these three frequencies last, the better the reed is.
- Almost all embouchure issues are due to reeds that are poorly made/adjusted, which means that the facial muscles must compensate for any deficiencies in the reed. In most cases, this happens where the bassoon reeds are too thick and/or the aperture is too open.
- If a student can only produce a high pitch on the bassoon reed, then either the reed is poorly adjusted, or the embouchure is too linear ~~in design~~.
- Once the student can produce a crow with all three partials, have them sustain that crow for several seconds.
- Once they can sustain the crow, have them move the reed back and forth in the mouth but still sustain the crow. This will show them how relaxed their embouchure needs to be.

EXERCISES ON THE REED AND BOCAL

- Insert the reed on the bocal and have them use their tongue to begin a sound. It will be some type of “B” or “C” on top of the bass clef.
- Once they can perform this skill, have them move the reed and bocal back and forth as they did with the reed alone.
- Once they can do this, it is time for the bassoon!

AIR

- The total length of the bassoon is eight feet from the bocal to the bell, so it is important to use enough air to fill up the instrument.
- In his book, *Sound in Motion*, bassoonist David McGill advises wind players to inflate the lungs all the way to the bottom so that our abdominal muscles can properly support the sound. This information is pivotal to creating a characteristic sound on the bassoon.
- Almost all intonation issues on the bassoon (and many other instruments) are really tonal issues in disguise (Eugene Corporon), so being able to discern the ideal bassoon sound is an important step towards building intonation skills.
- A great habit to get beginning students into is not stopping their air when connecting one note to another.

FIRST NOTES

- Begin with second space C in the bass clef, and gradually introduce D, E, and F. If the first C is flat, have them firm up the embouchure a bit.
- Gradually slurring one note at a time and then expanding these intervals allows the students to learn the spacing between each tone hole as well as getting used to sealing a tone hole with their fingers.
- Using the “fleshiest” part of their fingers is best to seal the tone holes as opposed to coming at the tone hole from a perpendicular angle or drifting towards the top joint of the fingers (this is mostly seen in students that have big hands).
- Once these pitches are mastered, extend the range downward to low F just below the bass clef: C-Bb-C, C-Bb-A-Bb-C, C-Bb-A-G-A-Bb-C, C-Bb-A-G-F-G-A-Bb-C.

ARTICULATION

- The vast majority of articulation on the bassoon is done on the tip of the reed just behind the tip of the tongue.
- “One taste bud on the reed!” Many beginning students use too much tongue tissue to articulate, which will eventually compromise their tonguing speed and variety of articulation styles.
- Many articulation issues can be due to poorly adjusted or simply bad reeds, so having a functioning reed is critical to a bassoonist’s success.
- Much of the initial articulation that beginning students use can be done with a “dah” syllable. It uses the tip of the tongue and opens up the oral cavity.

RECOMMENDED METHOD BOOKS AND PRINT MATERIALS FOR BEGINNERS

Remarks: For beginning students in middle school, *Essential Elements* and *Standard of Excellence* work well. However, for students that are entering high school, the *Weissenborn Method for Bassoon*, edited by Doug Spaniol, is a must.

- Having a good quality fingering chart is critical for success on the bassoon. In addition to the resources listed above, Fox Products offers a free PDF entitled “Let’s Play Bassoon,” which has a very easy-to-read fingering chart.
- Once a student has completed the Weissenborn text, most students will move on to the *50 Advanced Exercises*, also by Weissenborn.

RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT FOR BEGINNERS

Remarks: Finding a quality bassoon that is in working order at an affordable price can sometimes be a difficult prospect at best. The recommendations that follow are solid choices for beginning students of all ages.

- Fox/Renard 41, 51, 222, 220, 240
- Moosmann M20, M22, M24
- Nobel Bassoons
- Having a quality reed case is also very important. Do not store bassoon reeds in the plastic cases they came in. They do not breathe, and encourage mold.
- An affordable reed case can be constructed by purchasing a box of Altoids mints, cleaning out the tin, poking holes in the top, and lining it with paper towels.
- For bassoon reeds, I recommend Jones medium soft or medium reeds. These are quality reeds that have stood the test of time. Consulting with a local teacher can also provide excellent results.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Remarks: Double reeds are not double trouble! They add a wonderful voice to the concert band and might provide the impetus for some of your students to start a woodwind quintet! Reach out to the local bassoonists in your area – we are often lonely and love to meet new students!!!! A small investment of time can pay huge dividends to your ensemble.