Flute, Clarinet, and Saxophone Toolbox: Problems, Solutions, and Tips

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Unionville High School

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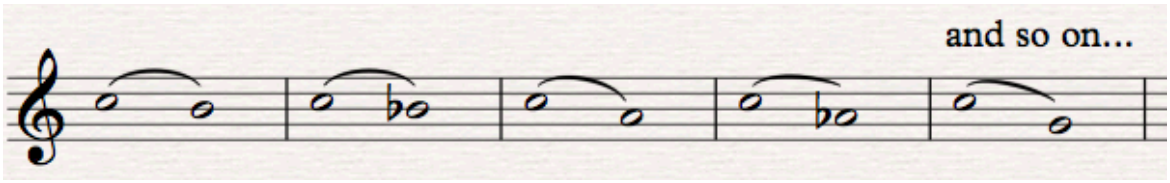
Goals

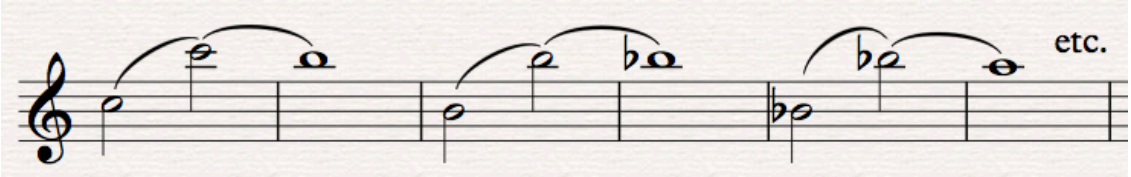
- Add some new tools to your toolbox, and perhaps dust off some tools you already have, for teaching beginning and intermediate flute, clarinet and saxophone players
- Use these tools to help your students
    - Achieve the necessary skills on their instrument(s)
    - Develop and retain good habits and techniques
    - Play confidently and musically, and enjoy doing so

Part I: Flute

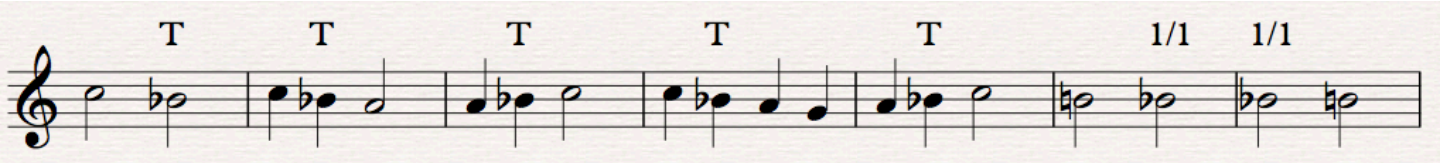
- Embouchure
    - What it isn't
        - "Overbite" or "parrot" embouchure
            - If you hear a student with incredibly airy and unfocused tone, most of the time, this embouchure is to blame
            - Flute embouchure can be a challenging transition for clarinet, saxophone players since they DO roll in their lower lip
    - What it should be
        - "Pouty face"
        - Lower lip out
        - Spitting out a poppy seed, grain of rice
            - Almost like a tiny buzz on a brass instrument
            - Encourage small aperture
        - Use a mirror
        - Look for a small, triangular pattern of steam on the lip plate
- Basic tone production
    - Starting students out on the headjoint with echo patterns
        - Closed
            - Fundamental and 5th are possible (A and E)
            - Easier than playing open
        - Open
            - Fundamental and octave possible (A)
- With the whole flute
    - Where are the three balance points?
    - Always bring the instrument <u>to you</u>, not the other way around
        - No turning head, lowering chin
        - Sit tall
        - Keep body tall and relaxed, whether sitting or standing
- Start in the middle and work outwards
    - Find the "sweet spot" of a given note, where it sounds in tune, dark, resonant
    - Import the good-sounding, warm starting note to other registers



- An exercise for evening out tone between octaves might look like this:



- Other tips
    - Don't be afraid to introduce students to thumb Bb!
        - In my opinion, this fingering is introduced too late in a lot of method books but should be used when it makes sense in the context of what they're playing
        - They can mark a "T" for "thumb" in their sheet music and 1/1 or R for regular Bb

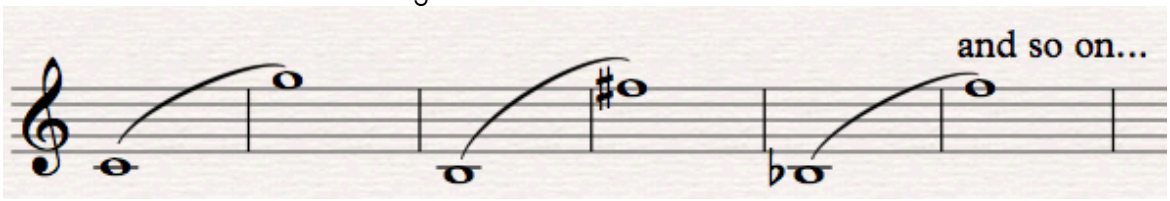


    - When not played for awhile (a long period of rest in a cold room, for example), the flute fills with cold air
        - Finger low D, seal over the tone hole, and "fog the bus window" with warm air to bring the flute back into operating temperature
- Tuning
    - Microscope analogy: coarse adjustment and fine adjustment knobs
        - The headjoint position is the coarse adjustment
        - Rolling in and out is the fine adjustment
            - Rolling out drives the pitch up, rolling in drives the pitch down
            - Demonstrate this concept to your students, and let them experiment with it themselves

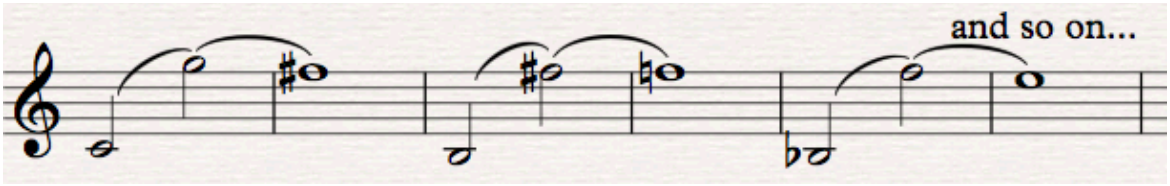
Part II: Clarinet

- What is working against our beginning clarinet players?
    - Stock mouthpieces that come with beginner instruments can be a great hindrance if not upgraded a year or two after the student begins
        - They are designed for students to produce a tone quickly with minimal air, which is good for beginners
        - Low quality construction, tiny chamber can lead to student dealing with back-pressure, being afraid to play out, weak sound, frustration and worst of all…quitting!
- Embouchure
    - Gently flatten lower lip, insert mouthpiece, rest teeth on top (teeth guard is a must)
- How much reed should they use?
    - The sticky-note test
        - Slide it down between reed and mouthpiece
        - Where the sticky note stops, is how much reed to use
            - It can be marked lightly with pencil
            - This will vary based on the tip opening of the mouthpiece they are using
- Causes and types of poor tone
    - Too much reed in the mouth sounds squawkish and brittle
    - Not enough reed in the mouth sounds muffled and flat…or doesn't make any sound at all
- Mouthpiece alone should play around a C
- Ligature placement (move it down!)
    - 85% of the time, beginners put their ligatures on way too high
        - This chokes the reed and inhibits vibration, leading to a restricted sound
        - Sometimes this is not the fault of the student, as the ligature is too small to begin with
    - The ligature should be about halfway between the shiny bark part of the reed, perhaps a bit higher than that

    - If students are using Rovner ligatures or other kinds of ligatures that are designed to be inverted, make sure they are not put on backwards
- The "break"
    - Don't make a big deal of it…instead, *trick them into it* from notes above!
    - One practice session might look like this:
        - Start them on written middle C
            - "Ok, what if we press this key (register key)? What will happen? Try it."
            - Do the same on the other surrounding notes
            - Practice slurring downward

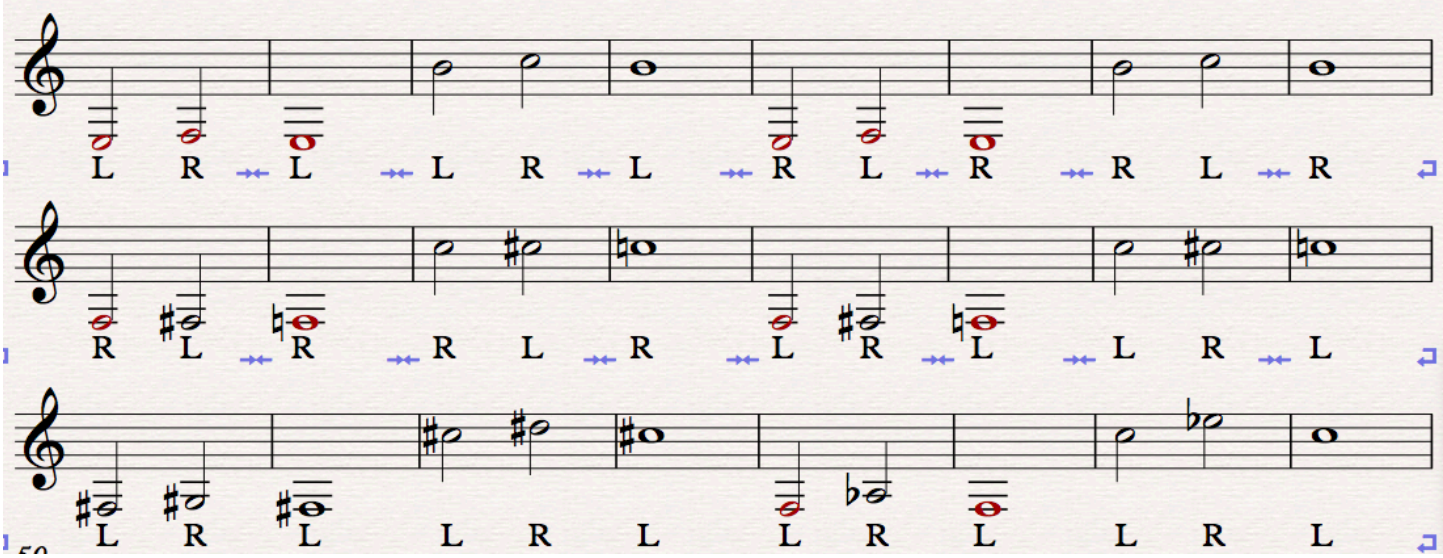


"Good job! Now when you play the higher notes this time, can you try to gently firm up your lower lip a bit and say "ooo?"



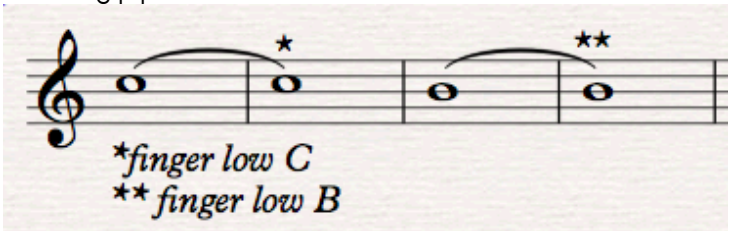
        - The dreaded approach of middle B, from A
            - Leave the right hand down on F-E-D (and pinky C) while still playing A
- High notes: growling and the "Squidward effect"
    - Having firmness in the lower lip is important, but when this sound emerges, you know the student is biting / applying too much pressure
- Encourage students to have "suction cup fingers" over all of the tone holes when they play

- Left and Right (do you know your left from your right?)
    - Show the students the different ways to play B, C, C# (E, F F# in low register)
    - Watch what happens mechanically on the opposing side when keys are pressed
    - They need to get in the habit of marking "L" and "R" in their music
    - Repeating (L to L or R to R) is to be avoided at all costs!
- Try these:

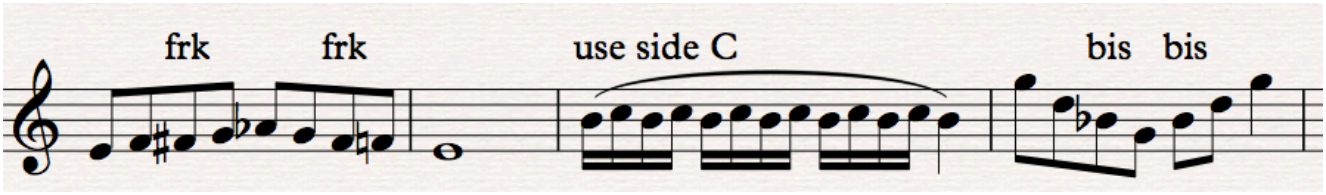


Part III: Saxophone

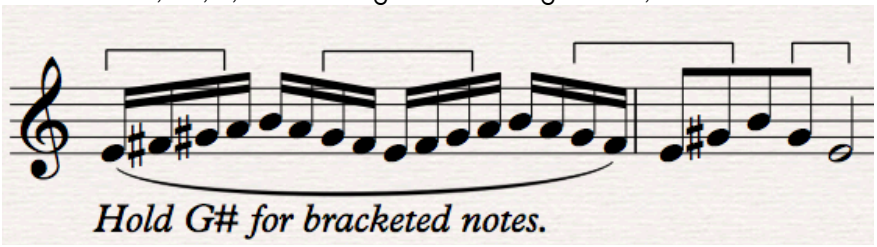
- Mouthpiece, ligature, reed items from above apply to saxophone
- Mouthpiece on its own should sound an A; with the neck, an Ab (alto saxophone)
- Neck strap height is important as it has an effect on tone
    - Make sure the student's neck strap brings the saxophone to them, not the other way around
    - Avoid neck straps that are "springy" and bounce around, as they can adversely affect embouchure
- Tuning the saxophone with itself
    - Short pipe C versus long pipe C
    - Short pipe B versus long pipe B



- Fortunately, the saxophone's fingering system is very forgiving and logical
    - Here are some basic exercises to introduce fork F#, side C, and bis Bb:



- Avoid 1 and 1 for Bb, as this is a flute fingering
- G# can be held down while F, F#, E, or D are fingered on the right hand, like so:



- Advanced students can be introduced to front fingerings for high E, F, F#
    - E = top space G + high note key; F = 1 ledger line A + same key; F# = high F + side Bb key
    - "Stairway to altissimo"

Brief Comparison of Classical/Concert versus Jazz/Commercial Styles

- The saxophone is a versatile instrument and both of the traditions of playing are important and relevant
- Students must learn to use the right style for the right situation
- Neck strap height
    - Classical: higher neck strap brings saxophone mouthpiece to the mouth at a slight upward angle
    - Jazz: lower neck strap brings saxophone mouthpiece so that it sits on the lower lip
- Embouchure
    - Classical: lower lip rolled in a bit over bottom teeth, chin pointed down
    - Jazz: lower lip not rolled in, or even rolled out a bit, relaxed chin
- Tone
    - Classical: dark, round
    - Jazz: a bit edgier, colorful
- Mouthpieces
    - See below

Part IV: Final thoughts…

- A common factor on all flute, clarinet, and saxophone
    - The left hand should cut in at about a 45 degree angle relative to the instrument, right hand cuts in perpendicular to the instrument
        - Flute: helps with LH balance
        - Clarinet: helps negotiate the LH side keys
        - Saxophone: helps negotiate the LH palm keys
- Reed cases for clarinets and saxophones
    - Keep the reeds laying flat so that the top view doesn't start looking like a ruffles potato chip, and the side view doesn't start looking like a city skyline
    - Ideally, reed cases should live on their music stands during rehearsal, or be close at hand
    - Developing a reed rotation – have 2 or 3 choices!

        - Thought process: "This one worked yesterday, but doesn't sound as good today, so I'll use this one instead."
    - Some other basic equipment
        - 400 grit sandpaper, Tupperware with water for soaking
- Reed size (hardness)
    - Personal preference, but avoid extremes
        - Extremely thin reeds result in a kazoo-like tone (too *little* resistance)
        - Extremely hard reeds result in an airy tone (too *much* resistance)
    - Stay between 2.5 and 3 during middle school (most of the time)
    - Stay between 3 and 3.5 during high school (most of the time)
- Synthetic reeds
    - Like anything else…some are well made, some are not
    - They are consistent and require less "maintenance"
    - Tone may arguably be not as good as cane reeds, but some players swear by them
    - Can be good for marching situations where temperature and humidity are constantly in flux and consistency is especially vital
- Vibrato
    - Developing vibrato can be done in a systematic way
        - Written top line F or G right above top line F are good places to start
        - Practice bending on one of these pitches on a long tone (the amplitude)
        - Now practice bending below the pitch of the note and then returning to that note, using measured
            - Quarter notes, 8^{th} notes, 8^{th} note triplets, 16ths (the frequency)
        - Vibrato becomes more natural with practice
            - Listening and transcription are invaluable! (Who are you emulating? What style/era are you playing?)
- Mouthpieces that have worked for my students and I
    - Never order blindly: try them out, test them, live with them
        - Consider:
            - Comfort/Ease of playing?
            - Tone?
            - Intonation?
            - Do you like the way you sound?
    - Clarinet
        - Hite, Vandoren, Clark Fobes, Portnoy
    - Saxophone
        - Classical
            - Selmer S80, Vandoren
        - Jazz
            - Meyer, Vandoren V16, Berg Larsen, Otto Link
- Doubling…
    - If your students express interest in doubling…let them try it!
        - They will discover the similarities and differences between the instruments
        - Deeper levels of thinking and learning are unlocked
- Listening (feed the ears!)
    - Encourage your students to listen to quality recordings of their instrument being played
        - After all…how will they know characteristic tone, if the only aural references they have are themselves, and their section mates at school?

- Thank you for coming today! I hope you found a few new tools for your toolbox, and dusted off a few old ones that you already had. If you picked up a tool that you don't think will work for you, I hope you will keep it in your toolbox anyway. You never know when it might come in handy.
- Questions?