

Those pesky little passages.

When I was a student in college, everyone used to think that using “fake or false fingerings,” as we used to call them, were for sissies, I bet you haven’t heard that term used in a long time. We would do anything not to use an alternate fingering for high D or C#. I soon changed my way of thinking when I realized how important it was to use them when necessary. The secret to using any fingering is to make sure it makes the passage sound better, not just to make it easier. It really needs to not only sound in tune, but should be homogeneous with the surrounding notes, matching the color and intonation of it’s neighboring notes. The exception to that rule is if you have no other choice in order to play the passage up to tempo. Unless you have a couple of extra fingers, most of us need to occasionally use a fingering that does not meet that criteria just to be able to play some passages in tempo. There’s a quote credited to a famous clarinet player when asked why he plays everything so fast. The quote is “because I can”. Well most us can’t, so we have to find ways to compensate. I will point out some exceptions, but it is rare to have to play something out of tune in order to execute a passage correctly. Here are some examples of when you could or shouldn’t use an alternate fingering that sounds less than “perfect”. Remember, making a passage easier is not the ultimate goal, making it sound better is. Too often I hear students play notes out of tune when they probably could play the passage perfectly fine if they took the time to practice it properly and listened to themselves, or at the very least, use a tuner.

One of the most strict rules one must observe is to voice the notes properly. This especially applies to the alternate fingerings for high C# and D. These can often be a bit flat, so they must be voiced up and care needs to be taken not to emphasize them as much as their neighbors. In other words, don’t bring attention to them in the passage, and phrase in such a way as to make them sound like a passing note.

Ex. 1, Rimsky Korsakov’s Capriccio Espagnol Some players play this with the RH 3 or LH G# side key “D” instead of the normal D fingering. Many students try the side key because it is easier, but so often does not match the pitch or tone color of the “C”. It is not that difficult to use the regular fingering and with a little more practice it will sound more professional. That’s not to say that using the side key can’t sound good, but often doesn’t. You need to use your ear to determine for yourself, but in my opinion if the listener can tell you are using the side key, you probably shouldn’t be using it.

Ex. 2, Mendelssohn’s Mid Summers Night Dream, Scherzo. Using the side key RH 3 for the B in the first measure, certainly is easier, and on some instruments it sounds as good as the regular fingering, but has less resistance. The advantage is that it could have the same tone color as does the “A,” but often sounds a bit sharp. Again, playing it smoothly but out of tune, should never be an option if it can be avoided. Make sure it blends if you use this fingering.

Ex. 3, Borodin’s Polovetsian Dances. The use of the RH side key 3 for the D in measure one, is often used here and can usually be played well in tune when playing this passage in tempo. The secret is not to emphasize the D, but to emphasize the C instead and back

off a bit on the D so it does not stand out. This also depends on your instrument and your ability to “voice” the D properly.

Ex. 4 Ravel’s Daphnis and Chloe This is one of those passages that most of us normal people just can’t lay a finger on when playing in tempo and trying to use the normal “D” fingering. You have to be an octopus to play this with the regular fingerings. I suggest using the opened D, and over blowing the throat tone G. It is a bit out of tune, but it’s better than not playing it at all, and fortunately it is a tutti passage. Once again, try not to emphasize the out of tune note, and play the D with a little less zeal than the surrounding notes. It’s sometimes given at auditions.

Ex. 5 & 5a Stravinsky’s Suite from the Firebird Variation de L’oiseau de feu In example 5, using the open D, over blowing the throat tone G, will make this passage easier. In example 5a, using the first finger, over blowing the throat F#, will help you play this passage more smoothly. These are often more in tune on the “A” clarinet than the Bb, but still must be voiced to be in tune. Again, do not accent those notes.

Ex. 6 & 6a Ginastras’s Variaziones Concertantes, Variation IV I find it easier playing the original Bb part using the following fingerings for these passages. I know that many players prefer to do it on the “A” clarinet and some even suggest using a “C” clarinet. Of course one can change clarinets and do part of the excerpt on the Bb and part on the A. I even once played it switching to the Eb clarinet for the high passage. Anyway, here are my suggestions for the following passage on the Bb clarinet. This is one of those pieces that most of us just have to sacrifice some element of intonation just to play some of the passages at all. As usual, voicing and not emphasizing the “bad” notes helps make it sound better in tune. In example 6, play the C# by over blowing the throat F#, and in 6a by fingering the high C plus the side keys 1&2.

Ex. 7 Neilson’s Clarinet Concerto The use of the open high “D” is very useful in playing this passage in tempo. Again, it sounds good if you voice the D up and play it slightly softer than the C. Sort of like accenting the C slightly, but not the D.

Ex. 8 Debussy’s Rhapsodie Use the 1st finger for C#, over blowing the throat F#, but leave the side key Bb depressed to make this passage more smooth. Again, do not emphasize the C#.

Ex. 9 & 9a Bartok’s Miraculous Mandarin In example 9, the problem is that it’s just about impossible to use the regular fingerings in the fast tremelo notes, and you don’t want to have too much of a pitch differential when you use the regular fingering on the dotted 8th in the 5/8 bar. Use the fingering for the C# by over blowing the throat F# but leaving the Bb side key depressed. For example 9a there are several fingerings people use. Play the D# using the RH side key #3 without the thumb or register key, or the A key without the thumb or register key. The trick here is to make the intonation sound as close as possible to the regular fingering when you play the last run, because at that point it becomes too slow to use the “false” fingering.

Ex. 10 Poulenc Sonata The high D can be played opened, over blowing the throat G, if you voice it up and play it slightly softer than the B before it. I'm not necessarily recommending this, but it will work if you have trouble playing this smoothly. Remember, you must voice the D up or it will sound flat.

There are many other passages in the literature that warrant the use of alternate fingerings. Just remember the golden rule. If it does not sound better using an alternate fingering, use the regular fingering and practice a little harder. Playing smoother, but out of tune, is not playing it better. I encourage my students to try and learn all the possible fingerings and to choose the one that sounds the best. I suggest that you do the same.

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