

“Better To Be Sharp Than Out Of Tune”

I've always loved that quote. I heard it was said by an oboe player from the Boston Symphony many years ago, but who knows for sure. There's something obscure about that, yet there's some truth in it as well. Sharp does not sound as out of tune as being flat, but it's still out of tune. A colleague of mine, Gordy Miller, who played 2nd clarinet in the BSO for 51 years, used to always say that intonation is a musician's disease. Some truth in that as well. I once heard a master class on playing Eb clarinet some years ago. How do you play the Eb clarinet in tune was the first question asked. The guest artist said, “by ear”. How much truth is in that statement. Intonation is definitely the most difficult of all the performance problems. Partly because you are so dependent on the players around you and partly because you are not always able to control the environment. Another problem is that everyone thinks they're right and egos get in the way of making music. If you're going to play in tune with others, you have to assume you're the one that needs to adjust and not be stubborn. “Better To Be in Tune Than Correct”. Maybe that one will catch on too. Remember who said it first.

I decided to write this article after a few incidents that occurred this past year. One was that a former student of mine, teaching middle school, asked me to give him some hints on getting his clarinet section to play better in tune. He was working on his master's degree in education and needed to write his thesis on that subject. He showed up with a book on intonation for all the band instruments. It listed every note on the clarinet with an arrow showing the tendencies of every note on the instrument. When he asked me what I thought about it, I told him it was useless. I asked him if every middle school student had a professional model clarinet. I explained to him that the chart does not consider the difference between a Bundy, a Conn, or a Buffet R13. How can all of these have the same tendencies. It's difficult enough if everyone has the same make and model.

When I work with school students, I notice that some of them have a professional type of mouthpiece while others have “stock” mouthpieces. Some use Vandoren or Grand Concert #4 reeds, while others use Rico # 1 1/2 . How can they possibly have the same intonation tendencies. I've heard kids play the upper register very sharp because they pinch, while others play the same notes flat because they don't support enough. The same severe problems arise in the throat tones. Students also tend to pinch and play sharp when they play soft and get flat when they play forte. I told him the book is useless as a guide to getting the students to play in tune unless everyone played on quality equipment and played with good embouchures and breath support. Even then it would only work if they could be taught to listen and recognize when they're out of tune.

The secret to playing in tune for a student, amateur or professional is to have good equipment and be able to hear - period. Your instrument is only as good as your ears. The artist describing how to play the Eb clarinet was right on, but it applies to all instruments, not just the Eb clarinet. If you can't hear it, you don't know it is out of tune, so you can't fix it. I'll make some suggestions on how to help your students or yourself

learn to play better in tune, but it can't be done if you can't hear. Some people are simply tone deaf when it comes to playing in tune.

To many people think that if they have the right equipment and an "in tune clarinet" that someone else "tuned for them," then they will play in tune. It isn't that easy. I wish it was. That's just the beginning.

A student who takes an occasional lesson now and then, was told that she must use a certain manufacturer's mouthpiece if she expects to play in tune. Her instrument was tuned to that mouthpiece. He forgot to tell her that it was him playing it when he tuned it, not her. Besides, she does not like that mouthpiece. She can't get a good sound with it. Does it really mean that she can't play in tune? I know very well that some mouthpieces have certain tendencies, but a mouthpiece does not make a clarinet play in tune, the player does. I know many players that play the same make mouthpieces and have different intonation problems. Do all Kaspers play in tune, regardless of who's playing it? Of course not. There are some very fine players that play very well in tune playing Kaspers as well as Morgans, Pynes, Vandorens, Selmers, and any number of other mouthpieces. But these players would play in tune on any mouthpiece because their playing in tune not the mouthpiece.

A colleague of mine, having taken a coaching session with a very prominent clarinetist, was told he should not use a tuning ring in the middle joint of his clarinet. The clarinetist said it could not work and took it out. When he asked me my opinion I told him that I use a double ring in my Bb clarinet because it tunes better that way. All one has to do is use a tuner and the answer is obvious; it either tunes better with a tuning ring or it doesn't. This person's clarinet, like mine, plays sharp in the lower joint in both registers. Using a tuning ring, the problem is corrected and the entire scale of the instrument is better in tune. I asked him what the other person said was the reason you should not use the ring and he said, he didn't say, only that it was not good. That's like answering a child "because" when they ask why the sky is blue. It's either better in tune or it's not. I advised him to use the rings if the clarinet plays better in tune that way and there's no tonal distortion.

Then there's this student I work with on occasion that was reprimanded by a respected professional for using a 66 mm "A" clarinet barrel. It's obvious when she plays that she needs a large barrel because her "A" clarinet is sharp without it. She plays just a touch sharp with the 66 mm barrel. I use a 67mm myself because my "A" clarinet tunes better with it. Am I supposed to play sharp or pull out more because I'm not supposed to use a "67 mm" barrel? Is that some kind of 11th commandment? Have I missed the rule book on clarinet tuning? No rings, no long barrels. Who makes these rules? I'm going to write my congress person.

I went to see Guy Chadash last year to have my upper B-C and throat Bb lowered on my Buffet "A" clarinet. He did a fantastic job in relocating my register tube and re-sizing it. He reworked the bore of the tube after moving it till we were both satisfied with the intonation. (If only I did that years ago). I had been using a Moennig

66 mm barrel at that point. He suggested I try a 67 mm barrels so I would not have to pull out my barrel so much. I was still playing the clarinet a bit sharp with my 66 mm. His adjustments did not affect the entire instrument, only those problem notes. I have no problem playing it in the orchestra, my quintet, or with my tuner. When warmed up, I still have to pull out a bit so I have a little leeway. I guess I'm breaking the golden rule too, a 67 mm barrel on the "A" clarinet.. I'll have to plead the 5th in tuning court.

Now, obviously your clarinet should be as well in tune as possible. Some mouthpieces or barrels may have a tendency to play certain registers sharp or flat. You need to find the right combination for you. You may play one register sharp or flat and may need the equipment that compensates for your fault if you are unable or unwilling to correct a problem. Barrels come in all different bore sizes. None work best for everyone. Just like a mouthpiece, you need to try them to determine which one sounds best and tunes best for you. Even with the same make barrels, each one may play slightly different because each piece of wood may have a different resistance and quality.

Most players agree that it is best to use a "Bb" barrel and an "A" barrel for those particular clarinets because the bores are different. Though it is possible for some to use the same barrel for both types of clarinets. The famous English clarinet player, Jack Brymer, suggests doing that in his book "Clarinet" (1). He suggests doing that so that more of the clarinet is warm when you switch clarinets and to "avoid the embarrassment of pulling off the ligature and reed at a crucial moment". He states that the barrel is an extension of the mouthpiece (rather than the clarinet), an interesting thought.

The important thing to remember is that If your clarinet has a problem, try to fix it. It is easier to play in tune if you don't have to adjust too much. You should not have to distort your tone quality in order to play in tune. Using tape or finger nail polish (cork on a bass clarinet) in the tones holes are some ways to lower the pitch of a note. Pulling out the barrel, middle joint or bell or putting down extra fingers on the throat tones are other solutions to making notes flatter. Bringing the pitch up is more difficult and usually requires undercutting or bore work by an expert repairman. No note should be more than 20 cents sharp or 10 cents flat because it's too difficult to adjust without distorting the tone. That's a maximum not a recommendation. Obviously the closer in tune your scale is with itself, the better in tune you will play. You should also learn alternate fingerings for as many high notes as possible, so you have choices when there is a problem up there. It's more difficult to play the high notes in tune because of the faster frequency the pitch is vibrating at. That's why it's more difficult to play the regular clarinet in tune than the bass clarinet (if you believe that one I have a bridge on the Chesapeake Bay for sale). Although the lower notes are more forgiving and less offensive sounding if there is a slight variance in intonation. That applies to the low register of the clarinet as well as the bass clarinet. It's still better to be in tune.

You should be able to play with a tuner and adjust every note without having to be a contortionist. Make sure your tuning note, concert "A", is in tune with the rest of

your clarinet otherwise everything else will be out of tune in the opposite direction. I always tell people to tune their bass clarinet to a high or low concert "A" because the middle one is sharp and that means everything else will be flat in relationship. If your concert "A" is flat with the rest of your clarinet, you may need to look into shortening or replacing the bell. . It could also be a problem with the bore of the lower joint. I would definitely try other bells before having the bore worked on. Of course you can pull it out a bit if it is sharp.

One way you can learn to play in tune, is to learn to listen better. Most people can improve their intonation by learning to match tones and learning the tendencies of their instrument. Have your students, or yourself, sit at a piano and match pitches. It doesn't matter that one is tempered pitch and one is not. We're talking one note at a time. Learn to recognize what it sounds like to be flat or sharp and to adjust it by using your ear instead of your eyes. Use the tuner to check yourself but use your ears to match the pitch. After a while you will learn to recognize the differences. Do this for 10-15 minutes a day for as long as it takes, even months if necessary. Flat and sharp have a different sound, though admittedly it can be confusing sometimes. I suggest that you loosen up a bit if you can't tell. If it does not improve or gets worse, you were probably flat to start with.

Playing with a tuner is also a good way to learn the tendencies, but don't let it become a crutch. Use it to check yourself and learn. Ultimately you need to hear it. Play octaves, three at a time, example, low E, to throat E, to the third E, and back down. Learn to adjust each note. Notice the tendency of the pitch, at times going sharp when going up, and flat coming down, especially in the throat tones (this is one of my biggest annoyances when listening to clarinet players). Keep your tone focused or it will cause you to go or sound flat.

Playing scales and chords slowly with the tuner is also a good exercise. Every once in a while, play a slow solo or etude with the tuner on your stand and watch to see if you tend to favor certain notes one way or the other. Play duets with a colleague and tune your octaves and intervals often. Learn to listen. You can lead a clarinet player to a tuner but you can't make them listen, or was that a horse? I always get those quotes mixed up.

Remember, it's you that plays in tune not your mouthpiece or barrel. Everyone is well intentioned but some are less open minded than others. Everything that works for one player may or may not work for you. Go by the old adage, if it ain't broke don't fix it. Translation, if it's in tune it's right. That's what my teacher Leon Russianoff used to tell me. One of my other teachers, Eric Simon, used to say, when in doubt pull it out, (the barrel that is) your more likely to be sharp than flat.

1. Clarinet by Jack Brymer - Yehudi Menuhin Music Guides, Schmirmer Books
Edward Palanker is a Member of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and on the faculty of the Peabody Conservatory of Music. e-mail, palanker@aol.com