

Clarinet Basics, by Edward Palanker

I've had the good fortune of studying with some of the last century's finest clarinet players and teachers, and I wanted to share with you some of the teaching techniques that I've learned and developed in my four decades of teaching. Below is an outline of what I've learned from them, as well as from my own teaching experiences. Remember this is just an outline. I use this as a guide, but make adjustments when a student does not "fit" into the mold". Sometimes one has to think out of the box and teach to the student instead of by the book of rules. I try to emulate Leon Russianoff's philosophy. He didn't believe in making clones and was not afraid to deviate from the traditional teaching methods when confronted with a challenge. When conventional teaching techniques don't work for a student you have to experiment to find what works best for them. Everyone can't sound good using the same equipment or by playing the same way, and everyone doesn't have to achieve the same tone quality as their teacher to sound good. One needs to encourage some individuality in a person's playing and take into consideration the student's physical attributes. People with different teeth formations, lip thickness, tongue size, finger size and shape, etc. cannot necessarily get the same result playing the same way, but can achieve success just the same.

These are the teachers I've worked with. Eric Simon, Vienna trained, who taught at the Mannes College of Music and had great musical insight and was a great inspiration. Leon Russianoff, an extremely upbeat teacher at the Manhattan School of Music, was very encouraging and brought out the best in me and his students by finding the best in everyone. Joe Allard, a fine clarinet, bass clarinet and saxophone player and teacher at the Julliard School of Music, who played with the NBC Symphony, The Symphony of the Air and others. He helped me learn the fundamentals of voicing the bass clarinet, much of which I applied to the clarinet as well. Earl Bates, principal clarinetist of the St. Louis Symphony, followed the teachings of Daniel Bonade very strictly; I studied with him at the Aspen Music Festival for nine weeks. Bernard Portnoy, principal clarinetist of the Cleveland Orchestra was teaching at Julliard when I worked with him as an orchestral coach with the National Orchestral Association of NY. I later studied with Anthony Gigliotti of the Philadelphia Orchestra and Robert Marcellus of the Cleveland Orchestra intermittently over a period of time when I was in the BSO to hone my playing. I found them both very informative in their teaching and playing styles. Although I did not actually study with Ignatius Gennusa, I did sit next to him for three years in the BSO and listening to him play was a tremendous learning experience in itself.

It is interesting how different some of my teachers were in their approach to teaching the clarinet. In some respects there were even conflicting approaches when trying to solve the same problem. Over the years I utilized the best of what I learned into my own playing and teaching. I managed to disseminate what worked for me and what didn't, and I also learned the biggest lesson of all - what works for one person may not work for another. Remember that when you read my outline. This is where to begin, not where to end.

Breathing, This is the fuel of playing. The catalyst for tone, control and articulation.

Breathe from the bottom up as if the intake were coming from your legs instead of your mouth. Practice long slow breaths as well as fast quick breaths. Use abdominal muscles and diaphragm support to control exhaling, not your throat. Do not tense up to expand the diaphragm, only use air for the expansion. Only take in as much air as you need for a given phrase. You can even use commercial breathing aids to help develop your breathing.

Throat, The second most important tool for playing, perhaps even the most. The throat must remain open all the time. Think of pulling your lower molars down inside your mouth, or opening the space between your teeth. Yawning is the ultimate but you can't play that way. The air should begin from the diaphragm and pass through your throat to the mouthpiece without any tightening or obstruction. Think of your throat as a water hose. If you bend the hose you get less water and less pressure, same with your throat. If you constrict your throat you get less air and more strain.

Voicing, Voice in your throat near your *larynx and tongue as if vocalizing. Never raise your tongue so much that it blocks the air passage. Keep the very back portion of the tongue low, the portion behind the teeth, but the center of the tongue up near or between the upper molars arching the front to voice and articulate. If the tongue is too high, or the throat choked, the smaller the tone will be, especially in the upper register. If it is too low in the middle by the molars it will produce an unfocused or flat tone. You need to be flexible with the tongue position because it moves as you voice and change registers, especially when making large skips. Sing an arpeggio from very low to very high to see how you place your tongue and larynx as you go up high. Notice how the tongue does not have to go to high in front, if at all, to achieve the high notes. Do not block off the air but raise the tongue enough to focus the tone and pitch. Try playing the clarion register without the register key to help voice to avoid getting the undertone. Play a high E to a high A to "feel" how you voice the upper altissimo register.

("The larynx, colloquially known as the voicebox, is an organ in the neck of mammals involved in protection of the trachea and sound production. The larynx houses the vocal folds, and is situated just below where the tract of the pharynx splits into the trachea and the esophagus. Sound is generated in the larynx, and that is where pitch and volume are manipulated.")

Tonguing, Tongue as close to the tip of the reed as you can, but not on the actual edge. Try to have the middle of the tongue between the lower part or between the upper molars. Arch the tongue so it strokes the reed near the tip of the tongue close to the tip of the reed. Careful not to raise the tongue to high, especially in front, or you'll block the airflow, but high enough to get the angle and stay focused. Also keep the tongue in a forward position. Use as little tongue motion as possible and as light a stroke as possible unless you are accenting. Avoid any tongue motion in the back of the throat or back of the tongue. Use a mirror to see if there is motion in your throat or under your jaw. Use the finger before the tongue technique to help improve your tongue - finger coordination. Although you are limited by your individual physical attributes, your tonguing can be improved with proper technique and diligence.

Posture and Angle. Do not bend your shoulders over or slouch when playing. Try to eliminate all tension in your hands, fingers, neck, back, arms, legs etc. Hold the clarinet at approximately a 30 to 40 degree angle, more or less, depending on your teeth formation. Do not allow the ligature to press against the chin and do not hold the clarinet straight out, jazz style. Some physical movement is OK if not overdone and does not interfere with your tone and control. Find the best angle for your comfort and control

Embouchure. Achieve a dimple in your chin between the lower teeth and lower chin bone with the jaw protruding down slightly, a little like a pucker but firmer. Keep the sides of your mouth firm preventing the air from escaping but relaxed with the lip portion of the lower lip folded over the teeth. The top lip should be firm and sealed around the top of the mouthpiece pulled into the upper teeth and pressed onto the mouthpiece similar to playing double lip but not folded over the top teeth. Practice simulating double lip to get the feel. This helps direct the air more precisely and helps to open the throat a bit. Try a mouthpiece patch to more closely simulate the feeling of playing double lip if you wish. Use a straw or blowing over the top of a soda bottle to simulate a well-shaped embouchure. Use a mirror. Of course you can also play double lip if you like.

Fingers. Your fingers should always work in unison from the knuckles not from individual joints. They should be curved like you're picking up a ball and covering the holes on the soft fleshy part of the fingers, not the tips. Don't flatten out your fingers. The thumbs should be placed in a position that most easily allows this to happen without putting any extra strain on your hands. The first finger in the left hand needs to be almost touching the "A" key, and curved over the G# key. In the right hand the first finger should be close to the side key Eb. The thumb should be in a comfortable position to support the clarinet with the other fingers in the above position. The thumb in the left hand needs to be just about touching the register key while covering the thumbhole. It should also be at a slight angle of about 45 degrees, not straight up and down to the register key. This way you don't have to slide the thumb up and down when going to and from the register key. Use legato fingers, high and slow for smooth playing, not too high though, and snap fingerings for precise firm playing. Keep the fingers close to the keys and relaxed for fast playing. Legato playing is a combination of smooth, coordinated fingers and a steady air column. Practice raising your fingers slowly as though they're sticking to the keys to attain a smooth controlled legato.

Intonation. Practice octaves, twelfths and slow scales with a tuner. Learn to adjust the pitch with your embouchure as well as adding fingers or opening keys to alter the pitch if necessary. Also sit by a piano and match tones, if you're not sure use the tuner to double check. Try different barrels if you're having problems, they sometimes make a difference if entire registers are sharp or flat. Learn how much and where to pull out the separate joints of the clarinet to tune your clarinet best. Have your repairman make necessary adjustments to notes you cannot easily adjust if possible.

Mouthpieces and Reeds. Once your embouchure is set try to find a mouthpiece that fits you best. Look for one that gives you the sound and flexibility you want as well as the

comfort level, intonation and control that you need. Everyone's mouth features are different so no one type of mouthpiece fits all. There's a mouthpiece with your name on it someplace. Look for it and don't be afraid to make a change if something is better than you already have. The same with reeds, try several brands and strengths to find what works best for you. Also, learn to adjust your reeds.

Footnote. Larynx, Google the definition and read what the Wikipedia encyclopedia says.

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