

ARTICULATION

Hi Paula,

I happened to stumble across your site and I have a question.

I began playing clarinet in 6th grade, but was never taught the "proper" way to tongue. I've had so many people tell me that I "tongue too hard" but they can never tell me how to fix it! When I play I can never get the tip of my tongue to hit the reed, instead more of the middle area of my tongue hits the reed. So many people have told me, "Just tongue lighter!" but that does no good. I don't know to make the tip of my tongue hit the reed. Please help! I'm about to start my first year in our schools symphonic band and no way will I be able to cope if I can't tongue faster!

Kaitlyn

Hi Kaitlyn:

Thanks for your question! Tonguing (articulation) is the most talked about topic on clarinet city...that's because we all share the same frustrations at one time or another.

Tonguing too hard is a very common problem usually caused when the tongue is moving (inside the mouth) too much. My theory? In beginning band we all learn to play at slow tempos. Slow tempo articulation is the most difficult of all. I have my beginner clarinets start with the song "Lis -ten-to-the-moc-king-bird" which translates into 4 sixteenths, followed by 2 eighths, then a half note. When you tongue fast - it is almost impossible to move the tongue too much or to move the chin (chewing motion). If you don't have the melody "Listen to the Mockingbird" handy, just pick any comfortable note. Set your metronome to 96 or faster. Play a rapid succession of 5 sixteenth notes - on one pitch - as fast as you can go. If you still hear heaviness in the articulated sound, go faster. One of my students (9th grade) last week articulated best at 138.

Nothing is a "quick fix." Practicing tonguing will take time, patience, and diligence - do it every day. Most people tongue just behind the tip. I think the part of the tongue that touches the reed is probably slightly different for every mouth shape and tongue size. I also believe there is a limit to how fast one can tongue and will vary greatly from player to player. Speed improves over time but may never be as fast as we'd like it to be! Thanks for writing. I hope my suggestion helps.

Sincerely,
Paula Corley

I have a question, how or can you play the clarinet without putting your tongue on the reed. Every time I try to take my tongue off I squeak (my clarinet).

Thanks,
Alicia

Hi Alicia:

No, you should not play the clarinet without putting your tongue on the reed.

Let me give you an example: Do you know the tune "Listen to the Mockingbird" or the main melody from "William Tell" (sounds like the old Lone Ranger TV Show)? You cannot play music like this without tonguing.

Some people use their breath to tongue until the speed of the music becomes too fast. Then, they usually learn

to tongue or remain frustrated!

I would suggest that you memorize your favorite melody that requires tonguing. Practice it with your eyes closed and concentrate on feeling your tongue. You might find that you are moving your tongue too much or are striking the reed too hard.

If this doesn't work, check the strength of the reed you are using. Is it too soft?

And last, have an instrument repairman check your instrument for bent keys. Bent keys will cause squeaks. Please write back and let me know what you find.

Best,
Paula Corley

Hi Paula,

I teach mostly 5th graders, and have some older private students. When some of my students tongue, one can see movement when looking at the neck/throat area. I have never had this problem myself, so I don't know what it feels like. Do you have any advice for this matter? There has to be something more helpful I can say besides "That shouldn't move.?"

Thanks,
Cathy

Hi Cathy:

Thanks so much for your question. I get asked this often! Although each student is different, most share one common trait - moving the tongue too much. For some, the movement of the tongue is so large a motion that the chin, face, and or throat get involved.

Just a few days ago, I was discussing how we really should teach tonguing in reverse: start the students with fast bursts - Like the melody "Listen to the Mockingbird." Most students - when faced with tonguing a single note in fast succession - simply stop the chin and throat movement. I think this is because the notes are going by so fast, they cannot produce the extreme motion (effort) as they do on slower, articulated rhythms. Unfortunately at the elementary level, the melodies are at slower tempos. The students are trying so hard to "get it right" that they develop bad habits in the process.

Have your "chewers" practice 5 fast notes (sixteenth) in succession. You should demonstrate (on the barrel and mouthpiece separated from the clarinet) and ask them to copy you. Let them go as fast as they can and see what happens. The students should practice this daily while watching themselves in a mirror. Over time, they should slow the bursts down until they reach an eighth note speed. The barrel and mouthpiece will isolate the variables: you can really tell how much and how hard the tongue is moving.

Hope this helps. Thank you so much for your question.

Best,
Paula Corley

Dear Paula Corley,

My name is Bobby and I am a freshman clarinet major at a university in Maryland.

I have been playing clarinet since my freshman year of high school and was just thrown into things and learned pretty quickly and was advancing well. It was not until my junior year until I began to formally take lessons. One of my problems I have found is my chin moving like crazy while I play, especially when I articulate or tongue. In light tonguing passages, there is minimal movement, but in etudes dealing with jumps, there is a lot of movement going on.

Nothing seems to be working. This is a long term goal that I can not wait to accomplish. Do you have any advice, tips, past experiences that you have to help me out with?

Thank you very much, and I look forward to your response!

Bobby

Hi Bobby:

Thanks for your excellent question!

Chin motion plagues a lot of players...don't feel badly! I have had many students through the years battle this, most winning.

Here's what I suggest:

- Practice tonguing a short succession (say a "5" or a "9" on the same pitch) of sixteenth notes; I call them bursts and learned them from a great friend and mentor - Howard Klug. Use the metronome when you do this and find the absolute fastest speed you can go.
- Every time you practice include the burst practice, (with the metronome) at that same "break-neck" speed. Over time, reduce the speed, ever so slightly. Example: Start at 132 then drop to 128, then 126, then 120, etc. Don't obsess over this, just a little each day, gradually slowing to say 80 as a goal.

Over time the chin will stop moving. Why? You are re-training your tongue to not move so much - which is the root cause of the chin (chewing) motion. If you look at yourself in a mirror while doing this exercise at the fastest speed you can go, you should have little or no movement. The chin simply cannot interfere at your fastest speed.

Thanks again for writing. I hope this will help you. Be patient. With some diligence, you should see improvement.

Very sincerely,
Paula Corley

Dear Paula,

I am fifteen and have been playing the clarinet for a few years and until now I haven't used my tongue as much as I should. I always knew that all notes that aren't slurred should be tongued, but I've often cheated because it was easier. Now I'm trying to rectify that, however, and practice tonguing. I've been reading online about where to place the tongue on the reed and I was wondering if the tip of the tongue should touch the very tip of the reed straight-on or if the tongue should hit slightly lower on the reed. Also, I can tongue fine in the lower register, but once I get up into those high notes I really have to work to keep a good sound at the beginning of a note and I can't play fast while tonguing. Are there any exercises that would be good for me to work on? Also, often when I'm playing I find that air escapes out the sides of my mouth, yet when I try to tighten up my embouchure to fix the problem, the tonal quality decreases. Do you have any suggestions? Thanks so much for this wonderful resource.

Sincerely,
Patrick

Dear Patrick:

First things first...Please thank your teachers for helping you become such a great writer at age 15....very unusual. Plus, I am sure you must have some support at home to be able to express yourself this well.

Tonguing: It is very easy to "cheat" and not tongue, especially in ensembles where we (clarinetists) are often covered by other wind instruments! Yes, you should use the tip of the tongue as when saying "tee, dee, thee," etc. There is much disagreement among clarinetists as to which syllable works best. As an educator, I always live by the rule: One size does not fit all! There are many phonetic differences floating around in our now international population. The tip of the tongue should touch the reed just underneath the tip (top) of the reed.

Most clarinetists use too much force and motion when articulating. Keep the tongue high (ee) and try to exert as little effort as possible. To tongue faster: Think about lifting the tongue higher, towards the top of the mouthpiece. Imagine blowing the tongue "off the reed" with fast air. I practice by playing a long string of tongued notes (on the same pitch with one breath) getting faster as I try moving the tongue up towards the top of the mouthpiece. Good articulation on clarinet is really vertical.

The upper register notes require lots of air when articulating. Most players slow the air in the upper register because the instrument "feels" more resistant. Keep the air moving and do tonguing bursts (long string of fast, successive same pitch notes).

Of course I have certain scale based exercises that I do every day...SO naturally I would recommend my Daily Workouts. Air escaping from your corners could be 1) simple fatigue or 2) your corners are too far back (smiling face). I play with a "YOU" shaped embouchure which places my corners down and in, eliminating the air leaks.

Thanks again for writing. Hope these suggestions help.

Very sincerely,
Paula Corley