

Breaking Bad Clarinet Sounds: when good players do the wrong things!

2/10/2012

Texas Music Educators Association

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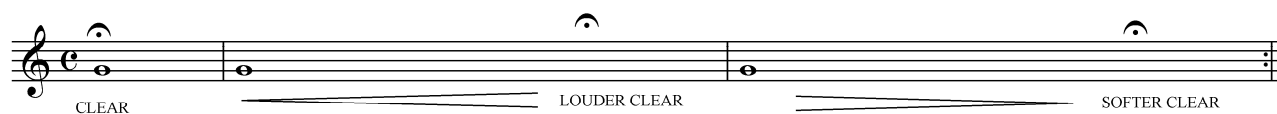
Three elements that adversely affect clarinet sound:

1. Slow Air Speed
2. Incorrect Embouchure Grip/Tongue Placement
3. Mis-matched Equipment

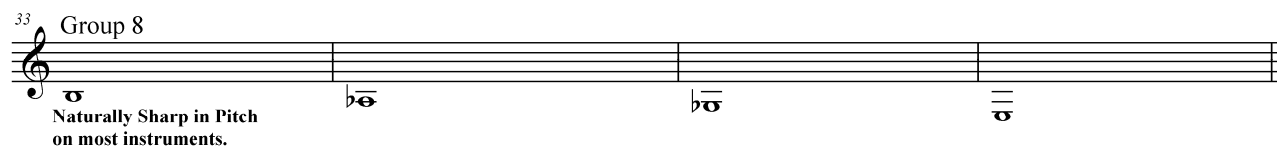
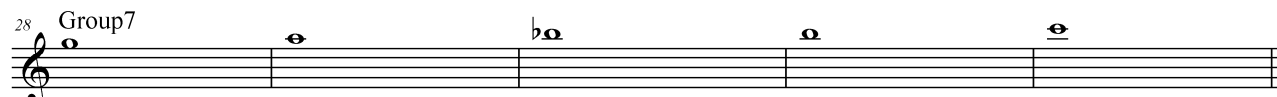
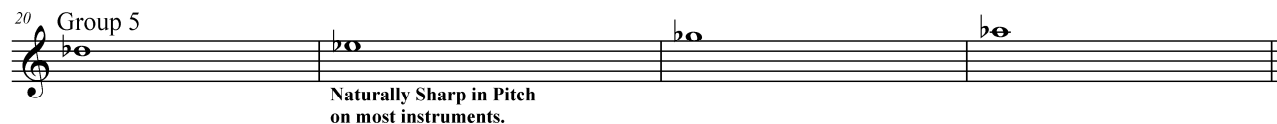
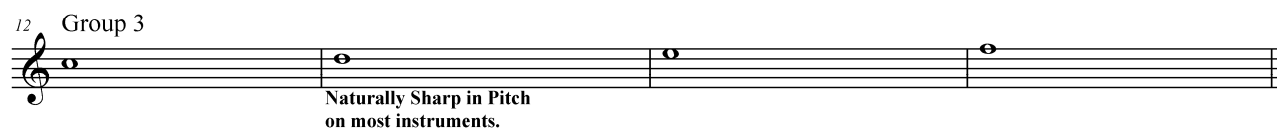
I. Air Speed

- Most students do not understand how much air it takes to make the clarinet respond properly. The impact of slow air speed is systemic: it greatly affects tone quality as well as articulation and response. The speed of the air must be fast enough for the player to feel resistance.
- If there is one thing students do well, it's shouting! Use this concept to help get the air moving. Shouting "HEY" is a good place to start because the concept is familiar to students. Refining to "ee" with firm corners will get the air moving to the front of the mouth.
 - 1) Shout "Hey"
 - 2) Next shout "ee"
 - 3) Turn shout to "ee" air stream while pushing corners "in" to direct air forward.
- Slow air speed at the beginning of a note is also a common problem. When the air speed is too slow or not voiced with 'ee' the sound may start with a "scoop", be fuzzy and/or unfocused. Have students practice starting notes using a reference pitch tuner as a model for clarity. (See Louder Clear/Softer Clear Exercise).
 - 1) Work for clarity, not blend.
 - 2) Air is intense at all volumes.
 - 3) To reduce heavy tongue starts tell the student to "get the tongue off the reed quickly."
- Why do students with good technique fail at all region auditions? The lower and upper registers do not match in quality and have an obvious "break" between them due to an inconsistent air stream. To address this issue, start register shifts as soon as feasible. Air and voicing is the same in both registers – "ee".
- Be aware that the lower register is relatively easy response. It is important to play with a full, focused sound while in this register. Adding the register key creates a slight 'delay' in middle register response. To account for this have students learn to put a slight crescendo at the end of the note preceding the register change. Everything "grows" from the bottom.
- With beginners, work for a vibrant sound from (Treble Staff) first line "E" down to "Bb" just below the staff. When the Bb is focused, check the middle register. Have students play Bb while you press the register key. If the top note does not speak, here are some possibilities:
 1. Slow air speed
 2. Weak grip/mouthpiece placement
 3. Tongue placement (voicing) HAH instead of EEE
 4. Equipment: reed is too soft

Louder Clear / Softer Clear: Work to make your volume threshold larger without sacrificing clarity and focus.



1. Use a reference pitch tuner.
2. Start the first note at the volume where it is clearest.
3. Use fingers to shade sharp pitch - never oral cavity (voicing).
4. Play each pitch 3 times:
 - Clear
 - Clear, Crescendo, full volume release
 - Clear, Decrescendo, lifted release



Tuning varies according to instrument quality, mouthpiece, reed, and barrel length. Therefore it is difficult to make generalizations regarding pitch.

Generally: Tune open G first, adjusting barrel to change. Low C/top space G (12th) can be adjusted in middle joint. Adjusting the middle joint does not change the overall tuning significantly. Concert A (3rd line B) is more stable in pitch than 3rd space C. Pull bell slightly if B-natural is sharp.

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Basic register shifts for younger players – start on the note that is most comfortable (chalumeau) and work up and down until the full chromatic is mastered.

Be sure to put a slight crescendo at the end of the lower note preceding the register shift. Think of the upper note as “lifting” out of the bottom note. This is an essential technique in playing clarinet.

Register Shift Warm-ups

Register shifts are perhaps the most important exercise for developing players. Start with a note that is easy to play - Middle C - and work backwards (lower) and forwards (higher) until you can play the full range of the instrument. Advanced players who can navigate the chromatic scale without hand position squeaks should start with low E and do all.

1. Make sure the bottom note is clear and played full value.
2. Use a fast air stream always.

Help! The top note won't speak. Think "Hee" as you play. Your tongue may be too low as in saying "Hah". If the top note is flabby and unfocused, you are not thinking "hee" as you play.

Keep a firm grip, lift the tongue towards the top of the mouthpiece, and play with a fast air stream.

Bottom note and top note must match in volume and quality. Do not blow harder to make the upper note speak. If the bottom note is vibrant and clear, the top note should speak.

It is important for advanced students to practice higher (range wise) so that notes below are confident. Playing above high "G" is tricky. Fingering options are affected by player, equipment, and how the notes are approached.

Advanced Register Shift Patterns

1. Practice these exercises for a few minutes each day.
2. Play at a reasonably slow tempo. Slur everything.
3. Keep each phrase at a constant dynamic level. No screaming please!
4. Be patient and build your range gradually.

Potential "Pitfalls":

1. Low Tongue Position (too relaxed)
2. Over-blowing
3. Poor Hand Position

The image displays seven staves of musical notation, each representing a different register shift exercise. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The exercises are structured as follows:

- Staff 1: A single melodic line starting on a middle C (C4) and ascending stepwise to a high G (G5), all under a single slur.
- Staff 2: A single melodic line starting on a middle C (C4) and ascending stepwise to a high G (G5), all under a single slur.
- Staff 3: A single melodic line starting on a middle C (C4) and ascending stepwise to a high G (G5), all under a single slur.
- Staff 4: A single melodic line starting on a middle C (C4) and ascending stepwise to a high G (G5), all under a single slur.
- Staff 5: A single melodic line starting on a middle C (C4) and ascending stepwise to a high G (G5), all under a single slur.
- Staff 6: A single melodic line starting on a middle C (C4) and ascending stepwise to a high G (G5), all under a single slur.
- Staff 7: A single melodic line starting on a middle C (C4) and ascending stepwise to a high G (G5), all under a single slur.

2. Embouchure Grip and Tongue Placement

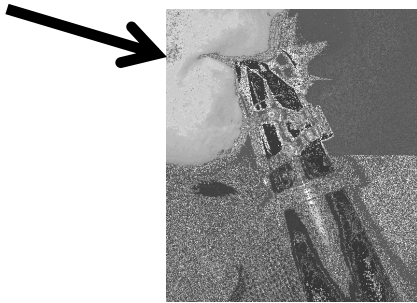
Grip

- The top teeth and corners are critical elements:

The top teeth (grip) affect focus. When the sound is ‘loose’ or ‘flabby’, ask the student to take in more mouthpiece and/or put a little more pressure on the top of the mouthpiece.

Corners affect endurance and overall tone quality. Ask students to direct corners “in” towards the mouthpiece and keep them firm.

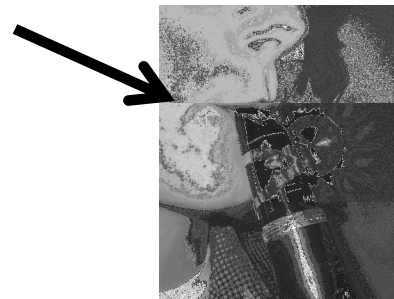
- Most students do not take in enough mouthpiece. When it squeaks, it’s too much. When it’s sharp and “metallic” it can be too little. Playing on the edge of the mouthpiece encourages biting (to control sound).
- Avoid saying “make your chin flat.” Use the ‘straw principle’ instead. Bottom lip should be firm but not stretched outward (smile). A smiley embouchure reduces endurance, overtones in the sound, and may encourage biting for control.



BEFORE:
Corners back & soft.



DURING
Drinking a milkshake.



AFTER
Corner Energy!

- The angle of the clarinet is in close proximity to the knees when sitting. Do not allow students to “duck” head when sitting.

Tongue Placement

- The clarinet sound happens at the front of the mouth.
- The entire range of clarinet can be voiced with “EEE”. Ask students to keep the tongue high and forward, close to the front of the mouth.
- A sure sign that the tongue is too low in beginners – open G is a high D.
- Nothing about clarinet is “relaxed” (especially oral cavity) except for fingers. Embouchure is firm.
- Tongue placement determines shape of the oral cavity. Undertones can be caused by a “relaxed” oral cavity and slow air speed – HAH shape. Tongue is too low in front and floats up high in the back shutting down the air.

3. Equipment

- There are no quick fixes.
- Equipment may enhance good playing, but it will not mask or improve poor playing.
- Go for clarity, not blend.
- Do not give beginners too much resistance, just moderate. Use equipment that requires students to use fast enough air to create back pressure.
- Most common error: Mis-matched reed strength to mouthpiece.

Instruments

Generally speaking, you can expect better materials (wood, springs, pads, etc.) and better tuning from higher priced models. My preferences:

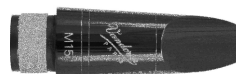
- Buffet Crampon R13 – the industry standard.
- Buffet Crampon E11 – lower cost; lots of ‘zing’.
- Buffet Crampon B12 – Same basic design as R13 - great choice for beginners & marching band (synthetic).



Mouthpieces

Most students will be successful with standard mouthpieces. Beware of mouthpieces that require the purchase of additional equipment to play in tune. My preferences:

- Vandoren M15 (Profile 88, American Pitch):
Crisp & Vibrant – works well for many
- Vandoren M30 (Profile 88, American Pitch):
Rich & Vibrant – less resistant, for players with good control already in place
- Vandoren 5 RVLyre (Profile 88, American Pitch):
Crisp & Vibrant – best beginner/intermediate choice; “in the middle” in every aspect



Reeds

- Too soft reed =’s spread sound, undertones;
- Too hard reed =’s cloudy and reedy sound.
- Softer Clear/Louder Clear Reed Test: Have students test reeds; try the exercise with just the barrel and mouthpiece (F#). Look for reeds that allow you to 1) play a true Forte without spreading and 2) allows a soft, tapered release.



My preference: Vandoren Blue Box Traditional Cut – works well in humidity challenged environments.

Ligatures

- Ligatures do matter. Metal ligatures create more “zing” for most players.
My preference: Vandoren MO - great flexibility for the reed; slightly different sound according to finish.



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