

TECHNIQUE

Vibrato?

Hello Paula,

Firstly an excellent page extremely informative and so useful and helpful for all players, thank you.

I have been playing clarinet and the complete single reed family for more years than I care to think about but recently came down to earth 'with a bang'.

When playing I have always introduced a little vibrato into the longer notes basically to add timbre and interest. However I recently joined a woodwind ensemble and was asked by the conductor could I not play with any vibrato, this really shocked me and I now find it hard to 'get out of the habit'.

I play in different ensembles i.e. military band, wind band, dance band and orchestra and when the occasion arises I always introduce a little vibrato.

What is your view on vibrato and its use when playing? I will value your comment. Thank you.

Peter
UK

Hi Peter:

What an excellent question! Thank you so much for writing.

Generally speaking, most by-the-book classical players do not use vibrato, particularly those here "across the pond" who perform contemporary literature in recital settings. Jazz and Dixieland are of course another matter.

Now with that being said, a story that's worth telling. In my youth I was fortunate to play for many great conductors. Among them was composer Clifton Williams, composer of many great band pieces - Symphonic Dance #3 is perhaps his best-loved. This concert was a program of all his works except one - Elsa's Processional to the Cathedral which he pointed out was the only piece he liked that he didn't write! When the clarinet solo arrived, he promptly stopped me after a bar or two and said "Vibrato, vibrato...where's the vibrato?" I was taken by surprise but managed to do enough to satisfy his request.

Another wonderful musician, Richard Stolzman, wowed me in a recital he did with Benita Valente (vocalist) with his very tasteful vibrato throughout the program. I thought it was a wonderful touch especially with the vocalist. I must admit I have occasionally added a pinch or two myself in certain operas. So using vibrato in selected pieces/settings would be appropriate.

However, I think the use of vibrato in contemporary wind groups might not be in the best interest of the ensemble unless you are playing jazz - Frank Ticheli's "Blue Shades" for example. The clarinet is really the "rock" of the Woodwind Quintet, often saddled with the responsibility of establishing pitch (since we cannot bend like the other woodwinds) and using vibrato might complicate matters. It's my experience that blend and tuning are quite challenging for small wind groups anyway. Many of the fine contemporary vocal ensembles I hear lately are "vibrato-less" perhaps to achieve more impact?

Thanks again for asking such a great question. Best of luck in your upcoming performances. I hope to meet you someday in Clarinet Land.

Best,
Paula Corley

ALTISSIMO

Hi Paula,

I bought a Clarinet a while ago and all is going well. I am using a 1.5 reed. I am playing pieces above the break and the teacher says I'm doing really well. But the other day I played a piece that happened to go from A (the highest A in the low register) to C sharp in the upper register, and I just cant get C sharp in the upper register when coming from A or G in the low register.

I can go from the low register to other notes in the upper register, and then go to C sharp once I am in the upper register, but not from A or G. I also have the same trouble going to D sharp in the upper register. I got my teacher to try it on my clarinet and it worked perfectly for her, so no trouble with the clarinet. She says it just needs practice. But if I'm never getting the note, how do I get it? Any ideas would be helpful.

Thanks,
Peter
South Australia

Hi Peter:

Thanks for writing with a very good question!

Approaching the altissimo register is tricky, especially when trying to reach it from the 'bottom' notes in the chalumeau. For more years than I would like to admit, I encouraged students to practice the intervals from the bottom: i.e.: low A to E to C#. I eventually determined that the changes in the shape of the mouth cavity were too extreme for most developing players.

Now, I teach the altissimo notes from a 'friendlier' place, adding it on top of the thumb "C." I have students start on low C, add the register key (G) and slur up the chromatic scale stopping on C#. Once C# is stable, we go back, repeat the exercise and go up to D. This continues until the student gets to high G. After high G, the fingerings and equipment (esp. reeds) play a major role.

As a general rule, the shape of the mouth cavity changes *slightly* from an "ee" to an "O" as you ascend. All this is outlined in my Daily Workouts.

I would also suggest increasing your reed strength. I think everyone needs a mouthpiece that supports at least a 2.5 (minimum) strength reed to be able to control the instrument in all registers AND to create enough back pressure to get a good sound.

Good luck!

Paula Corley

SCALES

Hi Paula,

I am a clarinet player in college and just recently got a job teaching private lessons to fifth and sixth graders. My question is: When should scales be introduced and how should they be introduced? How do I get them to understand what the point of playing scales is? I think that you really teach the clarinet well, I was part of one of your master classes at TMEA in San Antonio once, I was part of the Judson Band clarinet section and that book that was given to us is just amazing I love it. Anyways, I would really appreciate your help with my question.

Thanks,
Adrianna

Dear Adrianna:

Thanks so much for writing! Yes, I remember that clinic well...thanks again for playing!

Ah yes, scales. I don't know if there is really anything we (mature) players can do to interest young students in scales. In fact I was just listening to a group of high school kids today who sounded pretty good on their all region music but not so good on their scales. The interesting thing is that they are playing wrong notes in the scales that showed up as missed accidentals in the music! It's still hard to explain the connection.

In *So You Want To Play The Clarinet* (my beginner book) I used the "Can Can" by Offenbach to introduce scales. All of the kids in my Plano clarinet classes seemed to really like this tune and miraculously, they learned the scales by default. You can get a copy at Muncy Winds, Penders, RBC, or Music and Arts Centers.

As far as when to introduce, I would say not until they can connect the registers - also in my beginner book. One octave scales are ok, but I try to minimize the scale practice until the student can play comfortably in the middle register.

Thanks again for writing. I am so glad to hear you are still playing and teaching!

Very sincerely,
Paula Corley

ENDURANCE

Hello Paula,

I have joined a hometown band after not playing for 45 years. I practice some but my embouchure struggles. When we have a gig, I just can't last for 1 hour. Can you give me some exercises that will build the muscles back up to make this more enjoyable.

Thanks much,

Jean

Hi Jean:

Thanks so much for your question...a good one! If you have not played for 45 years, you must be patient. You will need to build back an embouchure slowly.

The current free download on my site - Make Me Sound Better Now - should work well. (I have attached it to this email). Use the long tone exercise (based on the chromatic scale) and play as many notes as you can until you tire. If you have a metronome set it at 60. If not, watching a clock hand will work! When your embouchure gives out, stop and take a rest break. Later in the day, go back and start again to see if you can go for a longer period of time. If you do this regularly - every day - your endurance will improve. Then, you can add scale patterns which will help everything.

I think it's great that you are "back in the band." Band geeks rule!

Sincerely,
Paula Corley

Dear Paula Corley,

Hello! My name is Rachel and I am a 10th grader in the Wind Symphony band at my high school. I have been told I have great technique and have received many awards, solos, and honors. But I have three problems. First of all, I do not have the endurance I would like with my embouchure. For our concerts, we our band plays many lengthy pieces like Enigma Variations and Molly on the Shore and I have a hard time keeping a good sound through the end because my embouchure weakens. How can I become stronger to be able to play better longer? Second of all, I can never seem to be able to find good reeds. When I buy a new box (Vandoren V12's, 3.5, I live in Dallas) I test the reeds out and always find four or five good ones, but after playing them for one to three days, they become weak and airy. I don't know if I should try a new strength or brand, because reeds are expensive. Thirdly, I developed a bad habit when I first learned the Bb Clarinet six years ago to not flatten my chin. My director this year has started to get on to me about it, and when I think about it, I can flatten it. But when I'm playing the finale of Enigma and the notes are flying across the page, it's the last thing I think about and the hardest thing to do because of the endurance problem. It causes my sound to spread and I would really like to be able to keep my embouchure firm around the mouthpiece so I can hopefully be selected for the All-State Band my junior year. Sorry for all of the questions, but I'm desperate! Thank you so much!

Rachel

Dear Rachel:

Thanks for writing. Wow...lots of good questions.

Endurance: You must do "long tones" everyday. Start with 3 minutes building to 5 minutes. Do them on your own time - band warm-ups do not count as they are usually geared toward brass players and are not clarinet specific. In my "Daily Workouts" available at Penders Music - www.penders.com (Denton, in your area) I have written several options for this. It is best to play for 30 minutes non-stop (no rest breaks) each day. This 30 minute practice period should be long tones first followed by scale patterns. There are many options for scale pattern practice, enough to keep you interested for a lifetime. You mentioned you would like to make the all state band. If you practice what I have outlined above, everything about your playing should improve, maybe not enough to get into all state but certainly the tone, endurance, confidence, and sight-reading abilities will get better. It's best to continue your lessons so that you get one-on-one feedback. It's impossible for me to diagnose without hearing you play.

Reeds: There is no perfect reed. Getting 5 or 6 to work out-of-the-box is great, especially in the high Dallas humidity. I have tried many other reeds and prefer Vandoren because of two reasons - 1) consistency - you always get some that play great out of each box and 2) If you rotate them, they will last longer than one session.

Flat Chin: Practice your long tones with a "double lip" embouchure. Take your top teeth off of the mouthpiece and hold the mouthpiece with just your lips - similar to an oboe. Only do this for long tones. Go back to your regular embouchure for everything else. Removing the top teeth will force your chin down. A "Double Lip" embouchure is for re-training only. Do not use it except for this one specific thing. There are some other things we could try, but this is the easiest to explain without seeing or hearing you play. Don't stress about a flat chin. Improve the quality of your practice (outlined above) and see what happens!

Good luck and thanks for writing. Let me know how these suggestions work for you.

Best,
Paula Corley