

## ***INTONATION BASICS FOR YOUNG CLARINETISTS***

by

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Proper intonation for young students is a problem that is very often ignored in the hopes that "it will eventually get better". I believe that good intonation can be learned and taught fairly early. Without getting into a long pedagogical discussion about acoustics and hearing I would like to delineate a few basic tips that I have found work well with young students.

Most young students tend to play flat. It is a function of learning to use muscles in an unfamiliar way. I don't worry about flat pitch in the first few weeks or even months, but as muscles firm up and the student becomes familiar with playing and holding the clarinet he/she should be able to achieve good basic intonation. **Intonation** is always a function of good **tone production**. The primary focus of this article will be the elements of clarinet tone; the **mouthpiece**, the **embouchure**, **breath support**, and **physical support of the clarinet**. Of course, one cannot begin to attempt to teach a clarinetist if he/she does not have a good clarinet in good repair. I highly recommend the **Buffet B-12** clarinet for beginners, but there are several other excellent brands including Vito and Yamaha.

Before considering the physiological elements of producing a good tone the student **must** have a good **mouthpiece**. The mouthpiece and reed are the basic tone generating system of the clarinet and the **fundamental variable** for proper intonation other than the player. The mouthpiece should have a medium tip opening and students should **not** play a reed softer than a Van Doren #2. The mouthpiece should respond easily with a good focus. The **CLARK W FOBES Debut** mouthpiece is designed specifically in this manner. I recommend that students move up to a 2 1/2 or 3 strength reed as soon as possible.

After the mouthpiece, the **embouchure** is the next greatest variable in tone production. Correct embouchure is a tricky concept to teach and may take several weeks for a student to achieve. Here is the method I teach which produces a good embouchure for most students at the first lesson:

Assuming that you have already taught the fundamentals of the position of the mouthpiece in the mouth and the student can produce an "E" (first finger and thumb), ask him/her to remove the clarinet from their mouth. Have them look into a mirror and say "oo" and hold the shape of their lips. Now ask them to say "ee" without moving their lips from the "oo" position. They will not be able to do it, but what you want them to do is hold the "oo" shape with a slight pulling in the corners. This also puts a nice dip in the chin just below the lower lip. The sound "oo" also places the oral cavity in a good position for proper air flow. "O" or "ah" opens the throat too much and causes a flattening of pitch. For this reason I also teach the syllable "t-oo" for tonguing. Once the student can produce this shape without the clarinet, try again with the clarinet in the mouth. **ALWAYS USE A MIRROR**. I find that students are still very visually oriented at this point and their own model is best for visualization. Most students will be able to do this in the first lesson, but it is very important to keep hounding them on good embouchure every week.

Proper **breath support** is fundamental to getting the reed to vibrate at a sufficient speed to produce good tone and pitch. I cringe whenever I hear an educator using the old saw, "*support with the diaphragm !*". In fact, the diaphragm has nothing to do with support and everything to do with breathing **in**. The diaphragm is a dome shaped muscle below the plural cavity that can **only pull downwards** and is not involved in **pushing** air out. Diaphragmatic breathing is what we all do naturally. What we want to teach is how to breathe in **efficiently** and to blow out **naturally**, but with a little added support from the **stomach muscles**.

A very relaxing way to teach breathing is to ask your students to yawn without raising their shoulders. Yawning is the body's way of quickly sending oxygen to the blood supply. You will notice yourself in trying this how quickly and fully air moves into the lungs. **The important lesson is to draw the breath in quickly and let the stomach expand out so that the lungs fill completely.**

Once the student learns proper breathing you can begin to instruct proper **blowing**. Eventually they begin to figure this all out intuitively, but I have a fun technique that starts them thinking about **controlled breath support** early. Light a candle and place it on a table about eighteen inches away. Ask them to blow it out. That's easy! Now re-light it and ask them to just make the flame flicker **without** blowing it out. That's a little harder. Now ask them to make it flicker **steadily** until they run out of breath. If you try this technique yourself you will find that in order to make the candle flicker and not go out the breath must be very controlled. You will quite **naturally** use your stomach muscles to accomplish this. After the demonstration ask them if they felt anything in their stomach area. They will probably tell you they noticed a tightening there. These are exactly the muscles they must focus on when **blowing out** for good breath support.

Finally, an area that has been largely ignored is the manner in which students **physically support** the clarinet with their bodies. It is extremely important that the mouthpiece be held firmly in place and move as little as possible. Holding a clarinet is in and of itself a very unnatural task. The complication of fingering notes with the right hand while trying to hold the clarinet in position makes for a very clumsy and often frustrating experience. I wish all young students of the clarinet would be given neck straps from the very beginning. A neck strap will help in two very positive ways. First the weight is taken off the right hand so that there is no conflict between **supporting** the clarinet and **fingering**. Second, the neck strap can be adjusted so that the mouthpiece is consistently positioned in the mouth. This very simple and relatively inexpensive solution will make clarinet playing less frustrating for the young student and encourage better tone production and intonation.

Once students begin to progress into a level of fluency on the clarinet I think it is important to have them play in situations where they have a good pitch reference. For most of us this was playing duets with our teachers. As soon as possible have your students play solos with piano and as they become more adept have them play quartets among themselves. Young students are sponges and **will** begin to use their ears very soon if it is expected of them.

The suggestions offered here have been very basic. As students develop, the improvement of intonation becomes a matter of refinement of technical skills and ear training. I cannot stress enough the importance of using a **good tuning device** as an adjunct to good musical training. Korg makes an excellent small tuner called the "AT -20". Its cost is about the same as a box of reeds. Consistent use of a tuner will help students assess problems in their playing and or equipment. For young students, an excellent first use of a tuner to check pitch generation is very simple. Have the student play with **mouthpiece and barrel only**. With a good **mouthpiece**, a firm **embouchure** and proper **breath support**, they should be able to generate a relatively in tune **concert F#**.

As the student becomes more sophisticated, the search for better equipment also starts. Be certain that your students are playing **mouthpieces and barrels** that have proper tuning characteristics. A good Buffet R-13 Bb Clarinet should tune properly (A= 440-441) with a **66mm** barrel. Given variations in individuals and mouthpieces, **65mm** and **67mm** are also acceptable lengths. A Clarinets generally use **65mm** barrels, but **64mm** and **66mm** are acceptable. In most cases a barrel with a **reverse cone taper** like the **CLARK W FOBES** barrel will produce the best results for intonation and response. If a clarinetist requires a barrel length that is outside of the parameters listed above then a problem exists either with the mouthpiece, the clarinet or the player. I do not recommend the use of adjustable barrels **if they are being adjusted beyond these parameters**.

*(Yamaha and Leblanc clarinets require similar barrel lengths to Buffet clarinets. New Selmer Signature clarinets are quite different and require much shorter barrels)*

Good tone and intonation is something that all musicians strive to achieve in their playing and performing . I believe that proper intonation need not be a mystery to young students and can be learned with careful instruction and **excellent equipment**.

## Clark W Fobes