

HOW TO PLAY (AND TEACH) THE BASSOON!

(This is still a draft edition, should be complete in the summer of 2013)

INTRODUCTION

This ebook about the bassoon and music is for use by students and educators.

I've been studying, playing and teaching the bassoon for 45 years.

In that time I notice myself saying similar things repeatedly, and have tried to capture those thoughts into written words. The bassoon is a great instrument: the sound is exotic and is capable of many varied colors.

It is also a complex instrument to master. There are a few myths about the bassoon that I hope to dispel and a few tips that I hope to pass along.

THE BEGINNING

For a bassoonist, sound is everything and should be addressed first when learning to play the instrument. Mastery of the bassoon begins with learning to sustain a beautiful & sonorous sound. Later, fluency is developed starting with repetitive study of the two octave F-major scale. Finally, articulation studies are added.

Even if the student is relatively advanced, reviewing basic scale should be beneficial in the pursuit of establishing a firm technical foundation that emphasizes tone first, followed by fluency.

Beginning bassoonists should focus on establishing good positional habits right from the start. Details of good posture can be found later in this book, suffice it to say that due to the size of the instrument, the asymmetrical nature of the way it must be held, the restraint caused by the seat strap, the delicacy of the reed and so on, it is worth spending time getting good habits right from day one and beyond. One should consciously be aware of sitting (or standing) posture and make adjustments as needed at every playing session.

A SLOOOOOW START

Long tones are always a good idea to start- Start with the open f and work down to the low (7-fingered) F. Dig into the sound- find that sweet spot where maximum sonority is produced with a minimum of effort

Scales are best started slowly, always listening to the quality of the tone. The use of a drone pitched to the 5th of the scale is quite helpful in establishing good intonation habits. Once all scales have been learned by memory, speed can be increased gradually.

Early introduction of measured, diaphragmatic vibrato will establish good air support and control of vibrato speed.

When learning to play scales at a rapid speed, starting with F major is a good place to start. Keep track of your 'wall' to track progress. The goal is to be able to play all scales at sixteenth note to MM 120, but first master the F major scale.

To perfect rapid articulation, start slowly. Practice the stroke that you will use at the faster tempo (i.e. a very short note) Learn to release (end) the note with both the air and the tongue. Practice these at a slow tempo until mastered.

Due to the rather complex nature of bassoon fingerings, being so familiar with the scale patterns that all major and minor keys can be played in quick succession by memory is an invaluable skill to develop. A daily foray through the entire circle of fifths is the best fundamental for technical success.

Who should play the bassoon?

The best candidate to become a successful bassoon player is a student who is motivated, is interested in the bassoon and who realizes that consistent practice is the only path to mastery of the instrument.

Typically bassoon players start in the early teen age years. Body size can be a factor in being able to play comfortably, although there are many small people with small hands who are excellent bassoon players. There are plateau keys available to help keep crucial tone holes covered (usually covering the left hand third finger hole -the 'c' hole.) Recently there have been smaller bassoons built for smaller people. Some are pitched a fifth higher than the 'normal' bassoon, others are at pitch but are smaller in dimension, called a fagottino.

When starting a student on the bassoon, it's essential to establish good habits early. It's easier to learn new skills correctly the first time as opposed to having to 'unlearn' bad habits.

Tone

Bassoon tone: THE most important aspect of being an accomplished player. The bassoon get so little chances to be heard in much of the repertory (especially in Band); the sound should be pleasing to the ear. The tone should be balanced- not too dark, not too bright. Perceived 'buzz' is enhanced due to the reed which is vibrating inside the mouth, radiating sound through the Eustachian tubes to the back of the players ears. Using earplugs, listen to the internal sound and then discount that much buzz from the sound that others in the room hear. (No one else hears that little froggy singing!)

The key concept is balance: a complete sound has both high and low overtones.

The goal is to have a focused, resonant, full sound no matter what the dynamic.

Posture

It's very important to sit up straight, body relaxed, head floating on top of neck, shoulders symmetrical, arms slightly raised away from body, wrists even, 'Adam and God' fingers

Avoid allowing the body to twist, this can happen when the right arm goes too far behind the body. This can be resolved by moving the seat strap closer to the front of the chair and moving your torso to the back of the chair. Try to see if you can find a point of balance so that the bassoon will stay up without your arm holding it up. That is the ideal position, and one constantly has to remind oneself to stay in this position.

Be aware of any point of tension in the body, arms or fingers and once noticed, relax into a more comfortable posture.

Wrists should be evenly bent, not pronated. Frequently the left wrist can drift up, which causes a number of problems.

Always consider the possibility of injury from overuse in bad posture. Young people can become injured quickly if there is too much tension and adjustment of the body to the bassoon. The bassoon should come to you, not the other way. The bassoon is an awkward instrument that is asymmetrical. We have to try to find as much symmetry in our posture as possible in order to play for hours daily without causing injury.

Injury from the instrument is typically found in the tendons and jaw. TMJ is a serious condition and at the first sign of pain needs to be addressed.

Air Support

comes from abdominal area

think of the air in the lungs as under pressure, like a bagpipe bladder

pneumatic power!

the reed is sitting open in its natural state. two things make it close: the flow of the air and the squeezing of the jaw

‘Hot air’ for low notes, ‘cold air’ for higher ones

Paradox- air under pressure moving slowly- the reed is a limited intake device

there are medical devices (penis enlarger, rubber bag) to help

knuckle inhale

yoga breath

learning to swim correctly is helpful- learn to control breath

try almost blowing out a candle

air support is a cushion, not a fire hose

Embouchure

should be as loose as possible while maintaining an air seal

try to be aware if you are leaking air- it's a bad habit that's hard to break.

Awareness is key.

minimal jaw pressure- too much stifles the tone and drives the pitch high

Dynamics

- The Bassoon has a fairly narrow range of 'dyne' variation so we need to 'fool the ear' by adding overtones for the forte, damping the overtones for piano; thereby modulating the tone color as appropriate.

Dynamics and Tone Color don't have to share an axis; more variety can be found if these two factors are made independent.

•'Piano' means 'Soft.' That can refer to the texture of the

sound as well as the dynamic. Likewise, 'Forte' means "Strong.'

Note the difference between 'loud' and 'resonant'. A 'piano' can still be resonant.

Vibrato

- It's difficult to talk about vibrato- is individual
 - Used to enhance sound and to drive the phrase
 - The vibrato is to be found within the sound- not cupcake and frosting, but fudge swirl
 - Is powered by the same area in the abdomen, so vibrato will help support
- when learning vibrato, make a big sloppy over-exaggerated not-for-public-consumption sound

ARTICULATION (Tonguing)

Mastery of articulation comes through examination of the 'envelope' of the note- this term refers to both the nature of the beginning and the ending of the note. Develop the ability to be able to create whatever type of envelope is artistically appropriate.

Short notes have energy, long ones are lyric

- Tonguing involves a three step process, similar to a golf swing.
- 1) let a bit of air through the reed (like the upswing of a golf club)
 - 2) place tongue on reed, blocking the flow of air while increasing pressure (like holding the club up in the air, ready to swing)

3) RELEASE the tongue from the reed, continue to blow (like swinging, hitting the ball and continuing the swing past the contact point with the ball)

- The word 'release' refers to the ending of the note

'air release' means you stop with the air, by stopping the flow of the air

'tongue release' means you stop with the tongue

to gain mastery of articulation, perfect both the tongue and the air release techniques

the listener should not be able to tell if you are using air or tongue- practice a variety of envelopes so that there is overlap- e.g. the longest tongue release is similar to the longest air release and vice versa for the short notes.

- Your fastest tonguing speed is dependent on the length of your shortest note- the 'square peg, round hole' problem.

- Frequently, a slow or sluggish tongue can be made faster and more agile by a careful examination of every aspect of both the beginning and the end of the note.

- Practice ultra short notes at slow tempi, while maintaining breath pressure as the tongue is on the reed- you are practicing the stroke that you will be doing during rapid tonguing slow motion.

- Get the maximum result from the minimum effort. Relax the tongue and throat as much as possible.

- Don't think of the tongue as starting the tone by hammering the reed, like a piano hammer strikes the string. Think of the tongue as going backward from the resting position, which is with the tongue ON the reed.

- mixed articulations- start scale practice with all slurred until scale is mastered. Then introduce 1) 'two & two' (which is woodwind shorthand for two slurred followed by two tongued) and 2) all notes articulated (tongued)

- *Position of tongue- can depend on size of tongue. Some prefer the tip, some make contact further back on the tongue.

Scales

- Start with F major- always slur - wait for introducing articulations (tonguing) until basics are mastered

- I prefer using a pattern of even notes instead of the quarter note followed by 8th note model-

- The point of scales isn't finger development, it's tone development

- match the 'scale' on the instrument- 'scale' in this case meaning the tone color and volume

- important to play every day - learn by memory

- Only once all scales learned by memory (have a 'scale-off) at a slow tempo do you start to speed up

- Learn all keys- go circle of fifths, chromatically, randomly

you want to learn not just each scale as a unit, but feel the entire circle of fifths as an entire unit in your muscle memory.

Speed Scales- F MAJOR at first until speed goal is met: start with all slurred, notch up in increments of mm 10, starting from quarter note = 60. Start with quarter notes, work up to faster. Many repetitions will be needed. The goal is quarter note = 120 for sixteenth notes. Once the F major goal is reached, only then work on speed for other tonalities. Introduce mixed articulations as appropriate, but start slowly and work up. Once 'two and two' is perfected, then start adding the other variations of mixed articulations.

Fingerings

- Differ from one bassoon to another- good to know many alternative fingerings
- Cooper, Corey books

Vent keys- flick or depress?

The Bocal

- Is a very important part of the bassoon- needs to be matched with the bassoon.
- Never adjust the pitch of the bassoon by pulling out the bocal.

It doesn't work. Don't do it!

Reeds

- You can only win the war with an army of reeds
- "A reed a day keeps the psychiatrist away" (courtesy of John Mack)
- Try to have an evenly grouped set of reeds, about $\frac{1}{3}$ breaking in, $\frac{1}{3}$ mature, $\frac{1}{3}$ older ones that still work- (let that last group rest for extended periods between use)

- Eubanks tests bring the reed into balance
- Break in the reeds carefully- don't overplay the young ones

Conceptual Pedagogical Tricks

- This a way to show how to blow and keep from pinching: 1) play a 'c' (on the staff) 2) let it sag to a 'b' 3) keep your embouchere unchanged but blow more. let pitch go up to 'c'. That's what one should do all the time
- Try to whistle the note- noticing where the tongue is placed
- Blow into the bassoon, remove reed from mouth, still blowing air out. See what pitch your tongue is creating! It should be the same pitch. You're trying to create a little sympathetic resonating chamber, by making a size that favors a standing wave for that particular frequency
- Think 'hot air' for low notes, 'cold air' for high notes.

Establish consistent practice habits.

There is no magic! No pills you can take!

•There is only repetition. And routine.

Consistent and regular practice habits are essential to making progress on a musical instrument.

You are better off with 15 minutes each day than 30 every other day (or even worse, an hour every four days....) The ideal routine involves practicing at the same time of day if possible. If a busy schedule preclude a daily session at a particular time, establishing a weekly cycle of time can also work.

If the practice is a routine part of the day, the question of when to practice is already answered. Frequently, the day can come to an end without practice if there isn't a plan in place in advance.

15 minutes may sound like a short amount of time, but a lot can be done in 15 minutes of organized, concentrated practice.

How to learn: Repetition - SLOW repetition- is the key to perfection. If you can't play it slow, you can't play it fast. As you repeat a piece slowly, play it with the same musical intention and gestures that you will do at the eventual concert tempo. Fast is slow. We learn just like dogs learn; we do best what we have repeated over and over. Learn slowly and correctly.

It's important to practice for success- play what you can, well, and don't push the speed and difficulty level of the music past your current abilities (this especially applies to pieces chosen for performances)

Practice for success-

Do what you can do comfortably, and add new elements one by one

- Try to find a quiet place and a consistent time of day. If you can't play at the same time on a daily basis, try to make a weekly schedule. After a few weeks you'll feel the rhythm. Start warming up early in the morning to get loose for the rest of the day.

•Establish feedback loops-

mirror

recording or video taping

practice buddy

Aphorism Corner:

•If you can't play it slow, you can't play it fast. Don't be afraid to make many slow repetitions of difficult passages. Once your fingers (and brain synapses) have become familiar, speed will then ensue. Learn speed as a new skill. I ask my students to show mastery of all the major scales before starting with speed scales. Start with an F major scale at first. Don't go on to the other scales until the student can play the F major scale in sixteenth notes @ quarter note = 120 cleanly.

•We musicians are like performing dogs- we do our tricks well because we've done them so many times we don't have to think about it- we use the 'lizard brain' when we're in 'the zone'

What to practice:

Keep a flow going of the material that you practice - don't just work on the lesson material for the week. Look ahead to upcoming studies and review old pieces. Sight read as much as you can. Be able to make note mistakes yet recover rhythmically (otherwise known as 'faking').

•The Practice Pie chart

3 parts:

1) Pure technique- ideally without using written music
scales (major, minor, whole tone, half diminished, etc.)

slow finger exercises

long tones

attacks

dynamic variations

slowly play difficult passages that you are trying to master

Use a drone as frequently as possible. It's helpful to have a frame of reference for your pitch. Without such a reference, it's very easy to be playing sharp (or flat) and not realize that there might be a problem.

2) Woodshedding- 'Stop and Start' mode, rinse and repeat

Use techniques like the

'loop method',

practicing backward (starting with the last note, then playing the next to last and then the last note, etc)

'bumpy rhythms'- transform rapid passages by changing the rhythm from even notes to these variations:

a) dotted eight/sixteenth

b) sixteenth/dotted eight

3) 'play-through' mode

important to have the ability to recover from mistakes and keep going. The professionals call it 'faking' and it's a good skill to develop. If you never practice without stopping; if every time a mistake is made the player stops and then starts right where the mistake was made the end result will be to learn mistakes. Usually the problem develops before mistake; better to start a few measures before the mistake.

You don't have to do equal blocks every day, it's OK to mix it up, but you make the best progress if you utilize all three in each session.

Use of Metronome

The Metronome is your FRIEND!

- Good to use, but the danger comes from ignoring it or becoming dependent
- Use a metronome that goes very slowly - best is one that goes all the way to one beat per minute- and then practice with the click at one, two measures or more.
- Lots of new iPhone apps that are good

Apps that I'm using:

Clartune

Mental attitude/ Stage Fright

- Get in 'the zone' by repetition
- Sometimes the occasional dropped note in the middle of a good performance is good, it's a reminder to stay focused
- Stage Fright happens when you're not confident. The way to be confident is to have repeated your music enough that you're SURE you can play the music well. Playing the music from memory is one step of that process

Your eyes should be in two places at once- right at the point of the music where you currently are, and also slightly in advance of where you currently are

Your brain should be in three places at once- 1) looking out from within & evaluating what is happening 2) thinking slightly ahead about what's to come up soon and 3) observing from without

Pulse: Pulse can be used to drive the phrase and set the emotional tone. You can play on top of the beat, ahead of the beat to drive forward or behind the beat to make a musical point.

Phrasing: Most of the time, when the phrase goes up, the volume goes up.

Vibrato: can be used to drive the phrase

learn by measured pulses. Wind vibrato is loud-soft, not up and down in pitch

Articulation- short notes have energy, long notes are lyrical. Unlike piano players and string players who have more latitude, wind players are obliged to play the exact articulations that are on the page. If you have disagreements with what's on the page, notate it so that you aren't in the habit of disregarding what's on the page

Rhythms- the most difficult rhythm to repeat over and over is the 'Beethoven's 7th' rhythm- dotted eighth, sixteenth, eighth and repeat. Remember that the rhythm is in three, not two. After that in difficulty is the dotted eighth/sixteenth rhythm.

Rules of Music

When the musical line goes higher in pitch, play with more intensity- vibrato and volume. When the pitch goes lower, less intensity.

Short notes are energetic, long notes are lyrical

Frequently the MUSICAL solution to a phrase reveals the solution to a TECHNICAL problem.

Triplets are lazy, jazzy.

Dotted Eight/sixteenth patterns are snappy, energetic

Take advantage of the beat by playing with it- you can be 1) right on top of the beat, or 2) slightly pushing (not rushing) or 3) slightly being behind (not dragging)- each slight variation will give a different musical result

Clues to interpretation can be found in the metric framework. Avoid playing in one- and especially avoid 'swing and sway'

How to Determine the Musical Intention of the Composer

- Sing the music
- Try music at various tempi to see which one works best
- Imagine a scenario- a little story that you can organize your interpretation around

ABOUT THE BASSOON

The bassoon is a curious instrument. Of ancient origin, it possesses a unique, antique sound that evokes memories of long lost days. Famous for being 'the clown of the orchestra', it is also capable of playing the most heart-breaking phrases.

"The bassoon is one of my favorite instruments. It has a medieval aroma, like the days when everything used to sound like that. Some people crave baseball...I find this unfathomable, but I can easily understand why a person could get excited about playing the bassoon."

— *Frank Zappa*

A BRIEF History

Double reed instruments were a part of ancient Greek and Egyptian culture. The ancestors of the modern oboe and bassoon were a varied group of instruments, ranging from the rackets to the shawn and dulcian. These days, there are musicians playing on replicas of both the baroque and the classical bassoon. The modern bassoon is the only instrument in the wind section (other than the trombone!) that wasn't improved during period of advances in instrument due to improved understanding of the physics of wind instruments. The clarinet was improved with the Boehm and Albert Systems, the flute was transformed from a wooden, narrow-bore, open small tone hole system to the modern flute made of metal and keywork. The Oboe was improved via the Conservatory System. The Saxophone was invented. The bassoon basically stayed the same in bore and tone hole placement. There are more keys on the modern bassoon than the classical bassoon, but otherwise the basic instrument is the same one that Mozart and Beethoven would have been familiar with.

There are national styles of playing, and the French, German (and Austrian) instruments are different in significant ways although they share the same repertoire. Major differences include a different bore type and reed construction.

There is a type of bassoon that is twice the size of the 'normal' bassoon, it's called the Contrabassoon. It's pitched an octave lower than the bassoon and it's low low Bb is one of the lowest pitches in the resources of the modern orchestra.

Another 'specialty' instrument is the Heckelphone, made by the Heckel bassoon manufacturing company. This instrument is halfway between a bassoon and a bass oboe (which is bigger than an English Horn)