

CLARINET SOUND, ARTICULATION AND STACCATO:

Getting it right from the Start

by Joseph Eller

A Brief Description

Getting beginning clarinet students started with the correct embouchure has its fair share of challenges, but this is the foundation to creating a great sound and articulating correctly with precision, clarity, speed and finesse. After briefly introducing the characteristics of this embouchure, I will explain a procedure of teaching staccato and articulation from the beginning stages. I will demonstrate teaching concepts of fast, consistent air support and show a progression of exercises for students to practice learn this difficult, yet very important technique.

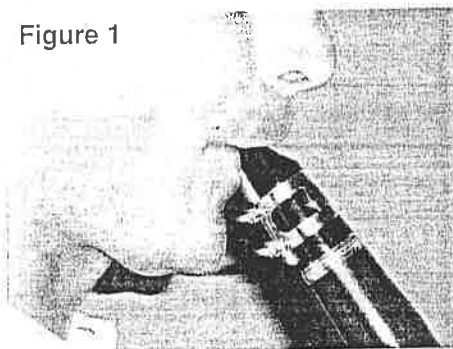
A combination of the following embouchure and oral cavity characteristics contribute toward creating a full, clear and focused sound on the clarinet, with resonance and brilliance.

Embouchure

- Little bottom lip over teeth, as if saying 'oo'
- Pull chin down and make very flat and firm (put chin muscles in a flexed position)
- Drop jaw (open mouth) and pull corners of mouth toward each other
- Create bottom lip cushion and relax lower lip so that the reed can vibrate more for improved sound, flexibility and legato
- Tuck or roll upper lip slightly inward (not under teeth) to create more pressure from top lip on top of mouthpiece. Push top lip down toward top of mouthpiece
- Pull corners of mouth downward, as if frowning, to help with top lip pressure downward

See Figure 1.

Figure 1



Voicing (tongue position)

- Voicing refers to the placement of the tongue in the oral cavity
- Place tongue up between top teeth (feel tongue between top teeth as if saying 'ee')
- Push tongue forward
- Tongue should fall like a ski slope where the tip ends up at the tip of the reed
- Think 'ee', then move the tongue more forward, so it is more 'er', or to be more exact, the French sound 'eur', like 'le fleur', which brings the front of the tongue higher and closer to the tip of the reed.
- Also think about a cat or snake hiss; or putting tongue in the 'key' or 'sh' position and blowing air

See Figure 2

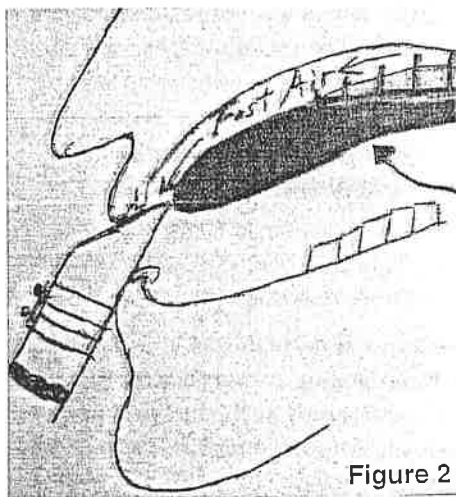


Figure 2

Tongue in high, forward position "eur"

Exercises

It is recommended that the embouchure characteristics be solidified before working on the oral cavity/tongue position characteristics. While working on the position of the back of the tongue can wait until after the embouchure is solidified, the position of the tip of the tongue at the tip of the reed should be taught from the beginning stages of one's study on the clarinet. This time frame of solidifying the embouchure, from one student to another, can vary from months to years depending on the student's progress.

1. Start out with long tones (throat tones for beginners) one note at a time, keeping the embouchure and tongue position constant. Vary with various dynamic ranges between each note and within each note. Make sure the student is breathing and pushing air from the diaphragm.

2. Play long tones that slur throughout different registers at different dynamics keeping the embouchure and tongue position constant (see exercise 1). Relax the lower lip and keep the corners of mouth pulled inward and downward as if frowning. Avoid the tendency to pull the jaw up and bite and the tendency to allow the front and back of the tongue to fall while notes change, especially going up and down over the register breaks. As the student changes registers (middle and upper), encourage him/her to keep the tip of the tongue very close to the tip of the reed so the air is blown directly into the mouthpiece. This voicing will help the upper notes (especially the altissimo notes) to speak more immediately and smoothly.

I recommend one does these first two steps at one dynamic until the basic characteristics of the embouchure are solidified. Changing dynamics within each group before the embouchure

Exercise 1

Register Long Tones

Exercise 1
Quarter note = 60

B♭ Clarinet

techniques are under control can be a distraction.

The above embouchure and tongue positions should be very comfortable before starting to work on the following staccato section.

Staccato

“Tip of the tongue, tip of the reed’ is the golden rule for delicate staccato. Staccato is the musical effect created by detaching a note from its neighbors. Adjoining notes must be completely separated by intervals of silence.

I like to believe, and I contrive to create the same impression in the minds of my students, that the art of staccato playing is one of the easiest things we can hope to

accomplish, for there is so little movement involved. Actually it is not so easy, as there is only a small margin of safety. The distance the tongue should travel is probably no more than a quarter of the distance involved in the blinking of an eye. Therefore futile movement of the mouth and jaws should be avoided: interference of this nature can only add to the problem.”

— Reginald Kell, *17 Staccato Studies for Clarinet*, International Music Company, New York City, 1958

Please note that this is a procedure for developing a very clean, fast and short staccato despite the fact that many of the exercises that follow are very slow and deliberate.

Some important techniques to remember through practicing for staccato:

- Keep the air pressure consistent from the diaphragm, no matter what the tongue is doing
- Depending on one’s tongue size/shape, the general area of the tip of the tongue should lightly touch the very tip of the reed (see Figure 3)—while some smaller tongues will be able to hit tip to tip, larger and longer tongues may have to hit slightly above the very tip of the tongue.
- Correct tongue position and embouchure should remain constant throughout tonguing

Figure 3a

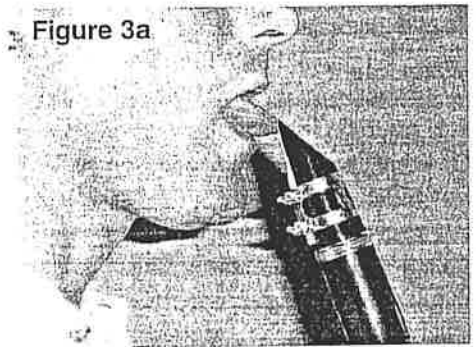


Figure 3a: Incorrect tongue placement: tongue hitting the flat side of the reed.

Figure 3b

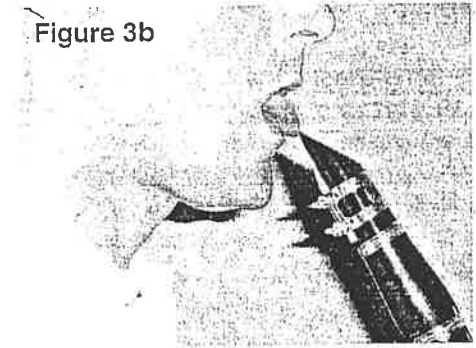


Figure 3b: Correct tongue placement: Tip of the tongue touching the tip of the reed.

Exercises

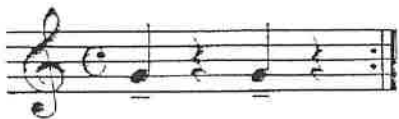
Start with long tones where the tip of the tongue slightly touches the tip of the reed every couple of seconds. This will give the student practice in tonguing lightly with the correct part of the tongue touching the correct part of the reed (see Exercise 2 below).

Exercise 2: One can do long tones from exercise 1 (or single long tones) with a very light, slow brushing of the tip of the reed with the tip of the tongue on the beats, with the metronome set at 30 (or 60 touch-

ing every other beat). While doing this it is recommended that the student be sure he/she does not move the tongue away from the reed any further than needed and also touches the reed as lightly as possible. This will help the student become acquainted with where the tip of the tongue needs to be at all times, while articulating and playing *legato*.

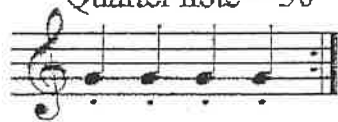
Exercise 3

Quarter note = 50 up to 200



Exercise 4

Quarter note = 50



Exercise 5

Quarter note = 50



Exercise 6

Quarter note = 50 up to 120

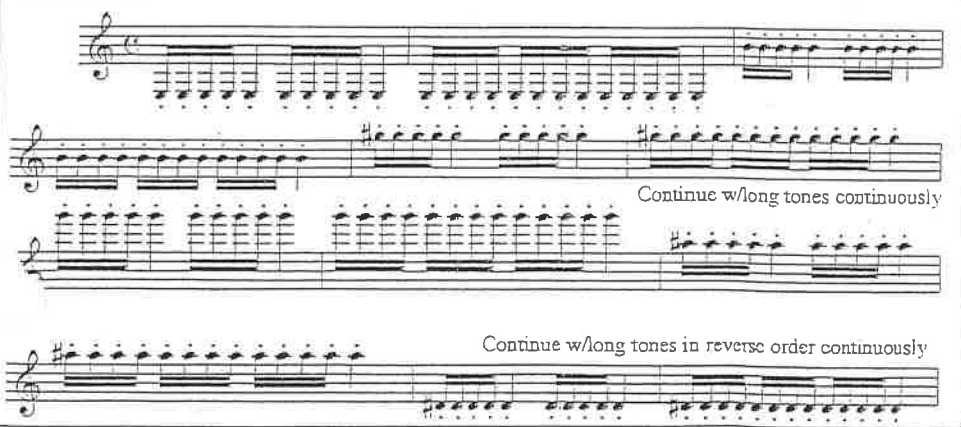


Exercise 7

Do this non-stop for five minutes. Take one minute break.
Do it again non-stop for four minutes.



Exercise 8



The following exercises are in stages. Depending on the student's progress, each stage may take a week or several weeks to grasp. Please be patient and don't push the student beyond their capabilities. Be sure to honor the repeat signs in the examples which have them.

1. Teach the student how to play a long open G and leak air out of their corners simultaneously. Relax corners slightly to achieve leakage. (Make sure this air leakage does not become habit and noticeable in other assignments.)
2. While playing the above, teach the student how to stop the note while continuing to leak air at the same speed as when they were playing the note. Then teach the student how to start the note again. Again, make sure they are touching "tip to tip," with a high tongue position and correct embouchure.
3. Set the metronome to 50. Have the student play open G, leaking air. Then have him/her stop the note on a beat, start the note on the next beat, stop on the next, start on the next, etc., while a constant stream of air is leaking throughout this process. The air speed should not change. Also make sure all

of the techniques mentioned above regarding embouchure and tongue position are still being applied correctly. Have the student do this drill, gradually increasing the metronome marking to about 200. (see Exercise 3)

4. Set the metronome again at 50 and have the student play a very short staccato note every beat while he/she is still leaking air consistently. (see Exercise 4)
5. Have the student play four beats of quarter notes staccato, followed by four beats of eighth notes staccato. (see Exercise 5)
6. Then add four beats of 16th notes to the drill. (see Exercise 6)
7. Have the student gradually increase the tempo of Exercise 6 to about 120.
8. When the metronome reaches approximately 100, begin to gradually phase out the air leakage, making sure the air pressure remains constant.
9. Exercises 7 and 8 are recommended for tonguing practice. (Exercise 7 is from Sean Osborne, clarinet instructor at the University of Washington.) It is recommended that the student find the tempo at which he/she can successfully do both exercises cleanly and accurately. Pick the lower of the two tempi and practice both exercises at that tempo. Alternate days, so one day the student practices Exercise 7 and the next he/she practices Exercise 8. When the student can do both exercises cleanly, accurately and consistently, then move the metronome up one notch (i.e. 92 to 93) and work on these at the new tempo. Continue this process indefinitely.

It is important to understand that there comes a point in one's tonguing speed where staccato becomes one motion—where the end of one note is also the beginning of the next note.

These or similar exercises should be a constant in one's daily practice indefinitely if they wish to improve their tonguing technique and speed throughout their playing careers.

ABOUT THE WRITER...

Joseph Eller is assistant professor of clarinet at the University of South Carolina. For questions, please contact Joseph Eller at 803.777.4728 or at <jeller@mozart.sc.edu>. You may also visit the University of South Carolina Clarinet Studio Web site at <<http://home.sc.it.com/usclarinet/home.htm>>.

HOW TO TEACH AND LEARN CHARACTERISTIC CLARINET TONE by Tom Ridenour

Normally instructions concerning clarinet tone production concentrate exclusively on the cosmetic aspects of clarinet embouchure. But embouchure is only one component of the clarinet's tone production system, the parts of which are interdependent. As a consequence, learning tone production on the clarinet involves understanding how the whole system works together and putting it into practice.

THE TONE PRODUCTION SYSTEM:

There are two elements which work together to generate the clarinet tone: The air column and the reed. There are two elements which work together to control the clarinet tone: the tongue and the embouchure.

DEVELOPING TONAL CONCEPT

Thought must precede action. Thought, once put into action, bears the fruit of understanding. Understanding then directs subsequent action towards a more perfect concrete realization of the ideal held in the mind. This creative reciprocity between thought and action is the dynamic process at work where ever there is true learning. Therefore, before we talk about these tone production elements let's talk about our goal; producing a characteristic clarinet tone. Just what is a characteristic clarinet tone? Professionals use certain words which give us clues about what fine clarinet tone is. Some of these words are: centered, focused, resonant, well defined, deep, free, and dark. If we juxtapose some of these characteristics, (for example; focused/free) we see they form paradoxes or seeming anomalies. Though they seem to contradict one another, they both are essential to characteristic tone and each must find concrete expression in the various components of tone production without compromising or diminishing one another. It is the development of both an auricular and intellectual understanding of clarinet tone which guides and judges our physical development. This development should also dictate the choices we make regarding equipment. If our understanding is clear, our physical development acoustically efficient and our choice of equipment intelligent and in harmony with our concept we will have fewer frustrations in achieving and maintaining the success we desire. To ignore this process is to one degree or another invite an increase of dissatisfaction and frustration. Now let's take a look at the physical aspects of tone production and see how the various physical elements work together to realize our conceptual goals.

AIR STREAM AND TONGUE POSITION (VOICING)

The air stream for the clarinet tone needs to be very concentrated. Sometimes this is referred to as "cold air". What this means is that the air stream is a small, narrow, fast moving stream of air rather than a slow, (warm), broad one. Two things aid in the production of the concentration in the air needed for characteristic clarinet tone: blowing

properly and effectively shaping and directing of the air stream. First, let's talk about blowing properly.

BLOWING PROPERLY

Most players, once they have taken in a good breath, squeeze the air out by contracting their stomachs, much like a tooth paste tube is squeezed. This method of blowing does not produce the proper compression needed for the clarinet. The best approach is to blow in such a way that the air is concentrated in the body much like material is concentrated in an aerosol can.

Here's how to do it: After taking a good breath push or direct the air down and out, so that the tummy stays distended by the "low" air. If one is seated in a chair the air would be being pushed down as if it were going through the seat of the chair. The first method of blowing creates what I call "toothpaste tube air", which as we said is too slow. The second method creates "aerosol can air", which has the proper concentration and compression for the clarinet tone.

PROPER TONGUE POSITION

The proper shaping and directing is done by using the tongue to shape and direct the air. This is done by playing the clarinet with what is called a high tongue position. It is easy to find this position. Simply place your tongue where it would be as if you were beginning to say the word "Key", "Cake", or simply pretend you are about to say the letter "K". When you do this you will notice that the middle part of your tongue must move somewhat back in the mouth and lift it up almost to the roof of your mouth so that you can feel the insides of your upper molars with the sides of your tongue. This high/back tongue position significantly increases the speed of the air and directs it much better at the tip of the reed by creating a narrow passage between the tongue and the roof of the mouth. The "aerosol can" type of blowing and the high/back tongue position work together to create the air needed to produce the focused tone and high pitch needed for characteristic clarinet tone.

THE REED AND THE EMOUCHURE

Now that we understand how to energize and direct the air (our fuel for the sound) by proper blowing and voicing techniques let's see how we can best control the reed (our vehicle for the sound). The embouchure should act upon the reed so it will vibrate both freely and in a controlled way. Here is how to best go about accomplishing this.

1. Open the teeth and lips slightly about the same amount you do when sipping soda from a straw. Notice in doing this that the jaw drops into the position it would be if you were saying the word "oh", or "go".

2. Place the tip of the mouthpiece/reed wedge loosely into the small embouchure opening of the lips and blow air freely through the clarinet without any sound.

3. Next, snug the mouthpiece/reed wedge a bit further into the mouth so that a sound appears. DO NOT CLOSE THE JAW ON TO THE MOUTHPIECE. At this point the sound may be very "unfocused" and flat. This is good, because the flatness indicates that your jaw is in an open position.

4. Next, make the lips firm to resist even more snugging of the mouthpiece into the mouth as you simultaneously move your tongue from the "O" position to the high/back "Key" position discussed earlier. (IMPORTANT: Keep the jaw in the "O" position at all times!) The snugging of the mouthpiece/reed wedge done simultaneously with the lifting of the tongue will center and clarify the sound and raise the pitch to the level it should be. (Notice that this high/back tongue position causes the chin muscles to stretch down into a point and pull flat and taut against the jaw bone. The action of the chin will greatly assist the lower lip to both cushion and resist the upward/inward snugging movement of the reed/mouthpiece wedge.) This approach is the "friction" method of reed control and is far superior to the "clamp" or biting method of reed control which results when the reed is controlled by the closure of the jaw.

PROPER RESULTS AND TROUBLE SHOOTING

As you snug the reed/mouthpiece wedge and increase the air pressure the tone will become clearer, more centered and higher in pitch. If, after a certain point, the tone seems to begin to spread or get lower in pitch you have probably a) snugged in too much mouthpiece, or, b) not been firm with the lips to cushion and resist the snugging of the mouthpiece, or c) moved the tongue position too low and forward in the mouth, or e) some combination of all three.

WARNING: DON'T BITE!!!!

One important thing to keep in mind is NEVER to close or bite with the jaw. The jaw should be kept in a fixed, open, stable position once it creates the embouchure opening. Reed control pressure should always be achieved by snugging the reed/mouthpiece wedge firmly against the lips, not by closing or clamping the reed with the jaw. Biting is the single most destructive thing which can be done to the sound and, to repeat, should NEVER be done. ALL of the reed pressure should be gained by snugging. The few rough drawings which follow should be of further help in learning and/or teaching the techniques we have discussed here.

CONCLUSION

If this material is properly understood and practiced the clarinetist will be well on his way to developing a beautiful, truly characteristic clarinet tone.

Exercise 1

Register Long Tones

Exercise 1
Quarter note = 60

B♭ Clarinet

techniques are under control can be a distraction.

The above embouchure and tongue positions should be very comfortable before starting to work on the following staccato section.

Staccato

“Tip of the tongue, tip of the reed’ is the golden rule for delicate staccato. Staccato is the musical effect created by detaching a note from its neighbors. Adjoining notes must be completely separated by intervals of silence.

I like to believe, and I contrive to create the same impression in the minds of my students, that the art of staccato playing is one of the easiest things we can hope to

accomplish, for there is so little movement involved. Actually it is not so easy, as there is only a small margin of safety. The distance the tongue should travel is probably no more than a quarter of the distance involved in the blinking of an eye. Therefore futile movement of the mouth and jaws should be avoided: interference of this nature can only add to the problem.”

— Reginald Kell, *17 Staccato Studies for Clarinet*, International Music Company, New York City, 1958

Please note that this is a procedure for developing a very clean, fast and short staccato despite the fact that many of the exercises that follow are very slow and deliberate.

Some important techniques to remember through practicing for staccato:

- Keep the air pressure consistent from the diaphragm, no matter what the tongue is doing
- Depending on one’s tongue size/shape, the general area of the tip of the tongue should lightly touch the very tip of the reed (see Figure 3)—while some smaller tongues will be able to hit tip to tip, larger and longer tongues may have to hit slightly above the very tip of the tongue.
- Correct tongue position and embouchure should remain constant throughout tonguing

Figure 3a

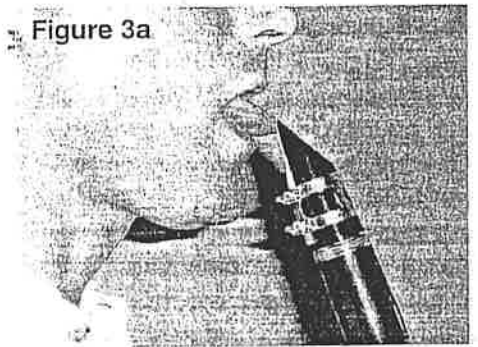


Figure 3a: Incorrect tongue placement: tongue hitting the flat side of the reed.

Figure 3b

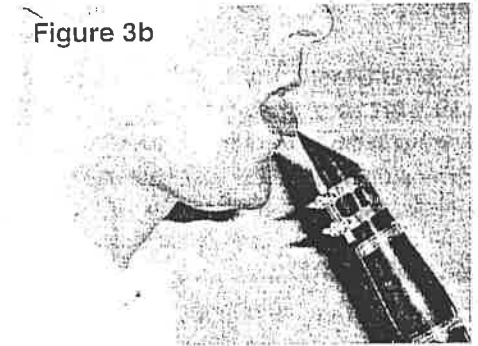


Figure 3b: Correct tongue placement: Tip of the tongue touching the tip of the reed.

Exercises

Start with long tones where the tip of the tongue slightly touches the tip of the reed every couple of seconds. This will give the student practice in tonguing lightly with the correct part of the tongue touching the correct part of the reed (see Exercise 2 below).

Exercise 2: One can do long tones from exercise 1 (or single long tones) with a very light, slow brushing of the tip of the reed with the tip of the tongue on the beats, with the metronome set at 30 (or 60 touch-