

## **Bass Clarinet in the Schools**

The first time you use low clarinets in your grade school, senior public school or high school band, you will wonder what took you so long to use them! The 4' voice in the clarinets does wonderful things for sound, intonation and colours from the wind choir. It can play very soft and loud (much to the envy of the bassoon) and it is arguably much easier to play than bassoon for a variety of logistical and pedagogical reasons. Composers use it in both harmonic and melodic situations – it has a beautiful, silky, lyrical quality in the upper register.

## **Instrument quality**

The challenge with the bass clarinet is very similar to the challenges with the other school woodwind instruments. They are often poorly maintained, have poor quality stock mouthpieces and ligatures and the mechanisms once set up well can be finicky. There are school instruments that I have tried and cannot play- what are the odds that a beginner likely to play it?

## **Some players are predisposed to it...**

Like many instruments, there are certain students that will be predisposed to it. If you have a tenor sax player that plays with a loose embouchure or a baritone sax player that plays with too tight an embouchure, give them a try on the bass clarinet. If you have a honky clarinet player that can move a lot of air, they would be a perfect candidate for the bass clarinet.

## **The Basic Differences Between the Clarinet and Bass Clarinet**

The fingerings on the clarinet and the bass clarinet are almost identical, they keys are just a bit further apart as the bass is twice as long as the clarinet. Most bass clarinets have an extra low note (low E flat, fingered on the right at the bottom of the cluster of four keys). Some have extra low notes that are often played with the thumb of the right hand. The lowest register (chalumeau) and the register that is on the staff starting on the middle line (clarion) are fingered exactly the same as the clarinet. The major exception is that the altissimo register (above high C) uses a “half hole” instead of lifting the index finger of the left hand completely off the tone hole. You will notice a small pinhole in this key – all that needs to happen for the altissimo notes to play is expose this hole while keeping the key closed.

## **Equipment recommendations**

Ideally, the first thing that the music teacher should do is take the instrument to a technician, and, if possible, spend at \$200 on it. Secondly, invest in a good quality mouthpiece: a Selmer C\* (pronounced “star”) is an excellent “middle of the road” mouthpiece, and get a good mouthpiece cap and ligature with it such as a Bonade. The ligature may cost an extra \$20, but it is worth it!

### **Reeds-not too strong...**

I suggest that each student purchase a Légère reed. It is a reed made of synthetic materials that is cut and shaped to play extremely well. It is not affected by weather and if it is put on the mouthpiece properly in exactly the same way every time, the student will have great success making nice sounds right from the beginning. It should be a 2 or a 2.5 strength to start. Other reeds that I have used through the years are Rico 2.5, Vandoren (2.5 – 3), Leblanc Reeds, etc.

### **Posture**

The student should be seated with a straight back and “up out of the hips”. It also may help if the player angles the torso slightly forward from the hips.

### **Hand position**

It is probably best that players with slightly larger hands play the bass, though this need not be a restriction. For players with small hands there is the advantage that there are no open holes on the bass clarinet like there are on the clarinet – holes not covered on clarinet=squeaks. The notable exception to this of the small vent hole in the key played by the first finger of the left hand. *This must be covered* to play any notes in the chalumeau or clarion ranges. The hands should curve gently from the middle knuckle and the finger pads can rest on the metal keys. The fingers can stay in contact with the keys – they can sit there lightly all the time, then the hands are in the perfect position. Another way of finding how the hands should come to the bass clarinet (or clarinet) is to hold a drinking glass with your fingertips and transfer that look and feel directly to the clarinet.

### **Angle of instrument**

Students should be seated with the bottom curve of the bass clarinet bell straight above their ankles, **in line with their ankles**. It should be supported on a peg, and a neck strap is helpful in supporting it as well (as with the saxophones). The instrument should be leaning slightly forward at an angle, so that it “falls” into the player’s hands.

### **Height of instrument**

The height of the instrument is perhaps the most important physical parameter. The instrument must be positioned so that the reed kind of “floats” into the mouth. At the other extreme, the player should not have to tilt the head back for the mouthpiece. You will have to use the peg or adjust the neck strap to do this, or you may have to stack two chairs to get the student’s mouth high enough. There must not be excessive contact with the lower lip (a bit is fine). If there is too much contact, the reed is dampened and reduces the sound quality and volume.

<b><i>The Clarinet and Bass Clarinet Embouchures: What are the differences?</i></b>	
<b><i>Clarinet</i></b>	<b><i>Bass Clarinet</i></b>
The placement of the reed on the mouthpiece in exactly the same place and secured to the mouthpiece with the same tension on the ligature screws is imperative to figuring out how to play consistently. The reed must be at the same height (perhaps showing just a bit of tip rail) and it must be centred on the mouthpiece (showing equal amounts of side rail both left and right).	Reed placement is crucial. Please refer to the notes directly left.  If you are using a Légère reed, placement is even more crucial. The reed can tend to slide more on the mouthpiece as you are putting it on. If the reed is out 0.5mm any direction, it will not play the same, and the student will wonder why they cannot make a sound this day.
The main difference between clarinet and bass clarinet embouchure is that <i>in the clarinet embouchure, the top of the bottom teeth are in contact with the inside of the bottom lip</i> . The teeth are used as a direct structural support for the lip.	The bottom lip “floats” a few millimeters above the top of the bottom teeth. <i>The inside of the lip does not have direct contact with the top of the bottom teeth</i> . The bottom lip does have contact with the front of the bottom lip, as it does on the clarinet embouchure.  This feeling of floating can be simulated by saying the syllable “OH” with very firm lips, or the sound “Û”, the German U with an umlaut.
The bottom lip is firm across the bottom teeth	The bottom lip is firm across the bottom teeth
With the embouchure formed, open the jaw a small amount, about 3/8”	With the embouchure formed, open the jaw a small amount, about 1/2”
Close the lip around the mouthpiece. Pushing down with the top lip. Make sure that the top teeth are pressing on the top of the mouthpiece. Once the lips are firmly in contact with the mouthpiece, push the mouthpiece/reed 1mm further in	Close the lip around the mouthpiece. Pushing down with the top lip. Make sure that the top teeth are pressing on the top of the mouthpiece. Once the lips are firmly in contact with the mouthpiece, push the mouthpiece/reed 1mm further in
Play an open G – if it squeaks loudly, take a little less mouthpiece in the mouth	Play an open G. If it sounds tight, make sure that the top of the bottom teeth are not touching the bottom lip, then take more mouthpiece in the mouth

Blow air “fast” through the instrument – it will feel cool if you blow on your hand	Blow air “warm” through the instrument - t will feel warm on your hand. If the sound is too loose, make the air go faster/cooler. Try firming up the muscles around the mouthpiece by emphasizing the “O” shape.
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### **Developing Nice Sounds**

Play long tones in the chalumeau register at solid mf

- Listen for 12ths while playing these notes
- Listen for 12ths + 6<sup>th</sup> above that (= major chord). It is easier for a listener rather than a player to hear the 6<sup>th</sup> (major third, 5<sup>th</sup> partial).
- Make a crescendo on long tones in the chalumeau without letting sound get spread
- Make diminuendo without closing of reed with teeth

### **Expanding the Range And Solving Problems**

**Clarion Range** - In order to play in the clarion range, play a low E or F and when the sound is focused and the 12<sup>th</sup> is audible “inside the note”, the teacher should press the register key. The clarion note will simply come out if nothing changes. If the 12<sup>th</sup> is not audible, try putting less reed in past the lower lip and gather the mouthpiece with a stronger embouchure. Try the chalumeau to clarion 12<sup>th</sup> again, then have the student try with changing nothing but adding the register key.

**Low Notes Do Not Speak** - If bottom notes do not come out (the 12<sup>th</sup> does instead or it sounds pinched or not full), make sure that the bass clarinet embouchure is in use (not the clarinet, i.e., no teeth on the lower lip). Try also more reed past lip, try more air. Make sure that the vent hole is covered under the 1<sup>st</sup> finger, left hand.

**Altissimo** - The altissimo register on the bass clarinet is a challenge for a young player. Use of the vent hole is imperative-the player cannot lift the left hand index finger off the key. The key must be closed and the vent hole open.

**Easy Altissimo** - If the student is adept at playing up to clarion high C (left hand thumb and register key), the lower notes in the altissimo range by staying in that register (the 3<sup>rd</sup> partial) rather than venting the small hole (5<sup>th</sup> partial). If the high C is good, try raising the hands of the key and finger an open G. With any luck, the note that will come out is the high D. The high D#, E and F can be played by fingering the throat G#, A and A# respectively. The note may want to drop down to the 1<sup>st</sup> partial, but it is worth a try for quick and easy access to the altissimo range.

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