

Oboe Basics (Part I)

Elizabeth Raum

In this, the first part of a two-installment article about the oboe commissioned by *Canadian Winds / Vents canadiens*, I discuss selecting students to play the oboe, sound production, reeds, and the oboe mechanism. The second installment, to be published in the next issue of the journal (Fall 2007), will address additional aspects of oboe playing.

Selecting Student Oboists

When I was in grade school, my parents decided I should learn an instrument to play in the school band. It was a tradition in our family that we all had to learn musical instruments and play in the band. My older brother played the clarinet, and since I idolized him, I wanted to play it, too, but our band director had other ideas. He suggested the oboe, an instrument I had never heard of and feared was that big bedpost-like thing that I had seen in pictures of orchestras. I was really depressed!

Well, imagine my surprise when the director handed me the oboe, housed in a small box that was similar to my brother's clarinet case, and took out an instrument that looked to my eyes just like a clarinet! I was relieved.

One of the first things to take into consideration when assigning a student to play the oboe is her personality. Will she be embarrassed at being different or will she thrive on being special? Will she be hurt if the other kids make fun of her for playing such an unusual instrument, or does she like to stand out? Granted, I wanted to fit in with the rest of the kids, but when I realized that, with the stentorian sound a beginner oboist is capable of, I could dominate the band, I decided the oboe was for me after all. I'm going to assume for the rest of this article that we're working with that type of personality.

Sound Production

Regarding the unique sound of the oboe, this can actually be the first problem that both the band director and the student encounter. The old saying that the oboe is "an ill wind nobody blows good" had to be inspired by something, after all, and sometimes it is difficult for a band director to accept that sound permeating his band. However, I recommend patience. It is hard enough for a professional oboist to play as softly as some conductors require let alone a beginner with an uncontrollable reed and weak embouchure, and if the young oboist feels that his sound is offensive, he will tend to develop all kinds of bad habits trying to squelch it. I have had so many students who purposely did not support the sound adequately because that might make it louder, or who used painfully distorted embouchures in their attempts to quiet the reed.

On the contrary, I generally encourage my beginner students to play with what I call primary colors, which is a metaphor for a solid tone. The shading can come later, but they will never develop a good oboe sound if they're afraid of it from the start. So if the band director wants an oboe in the band, he should expect to put up with a few months of

good solid honking. Once the student has developed a sound, then she can start to work on modifying it.

Reeds

There are several ways to begin that sound modification, the first being a good reed and instrument. Of course, the best reeds are hand-made, preferably by the student's teacher, but more commonly the reeds are purchased from the local music store. I tend to ignore the classifications of hard, medium, and soft (and various permutations) with which the reeds are labeled, because they often do not fit.

There are too many outside influences like climate (reeds that play in the summer often do not play in the winter), humidity, and the resistance of the instrument itself. So I usually recommend getting a reed with a good-sized opening, since the closed ones, even when soaked properly, tend to stay closed. Reeds work best when placed in water for around five to ten minutes prior to playing, depending on the humidity of the atmosphere (summer or winter).

Sometimes the reeds with large openings are too "wild" and hard to control, but you can salvage them by various means. The easiest is to sand them with 1000 grit sandpaper. Try the reed and if it is still too hard, sand a bit more and try again. Let it dry out and try it again the next day. Keep doing that until it feels comfortable. This also serves the double purpose of breaking the reed in. If this does not get it to work, try massaging the back, rubbing it between your fingers to simulate playing while squeezing to help close a too-large opening.

Finally, you can "slip" the blades, or push them in opposite directions by holding the wooden part of the reed between your thumb and first finger and sort of rolling your fingers to cause the blades to overlap, the upper blade to the right and the lower to the left (or vice versa). This stabilizes the reed and narrows the opening even more. You usually do not have to do all of these things for every reed, though I have often found myself going through the entire regimen with mine, but you cannot do any of the above unless the reed starts out with a good opening.

Another tip is to use teflon plumber's tape, available at such locations as Canadian Tire or Wal-Mart, in case there are air leaks from the sides. The way to test for leaks is to form an embouchure on the reed while blocking off the cork end with your finger. If air is escaping, you will hear it, and can remedy the situation by wrapping a two-centimetre piece of teflon plumber's tape around the lower part of the wood to seal it off.

Air can also escape if the cork does not fit snugly into the reed well. I either moisten a piece of cigarette paper and wrap it around the cork, or use scotch tape to thicken it. Or if the reed was too tight and the cork has been shredded, I use Crazy Glue to fix it. Once a week, it is a good practice to run a small pipe cleaner (the kind they use for pipes, not crafts) through the soaked reed to clean it out. It is amazing how clogged they can get, and that hampers the vibration. Be sure to do it from the cork end, and once it has started out the reed end, keep going. Don't try to pull it back or you will wreck the reed.

It is also easy to break an expensive oboe reed if the student walks around with the reed in the instrument. I always take my reed out if I am going to be moving around, and when you take the oboe apart, the

first thing that comes out is the reed. Always be sure to have a few spare reeds simply because they *are* so fragile.

One last thing about oboe reeds is that they must be wet to play! Although this seems obvious, I was at a festival once where the band director wanted the musicians to sit at attention when not playing, with their instruments resting on their right knee until the moment of their entrance. It looked great, but the stage was unusually dry and when the oboists went to play, not a sound came out because the reeds had become dry and closed. There were many tears that day, and a lesson learned. Oboists always must prepare a few seconds before they start playing by holding the reeds in their mouths and moistening them with saliva.

Mechanism

Nobody can play on a poor instrument or an instrument that is out of adjustment, and the oboe is probably the most persnickety of all instruments. Before I get into adjusting the oboe, I want to tell a story of my own first attempt. My youth orchestra was going to Carnegie Hall and then on to Washington to play for President Kennedy. I was so thrilled and excited that I polished up my oboe and checked to see if all the screws were tight. After all, were the screws not supposed to be tight?

I do not have to elaborate on the horror of the moment when I tried to play, but after an hour or so of frantic examination, I realized that some of the keys were not even touching the wood of the instrument when I pushed them down. I figured out what was wrong, and then spent the next few hours trying to rebalance the adjustments. It was a frightening learning experience but I did discover that the solution was completely logical and mechanical. I was able to bring the oboe to my teacher for a final check, and he told me about his first attempt to fix his oboe. He had to bring it to the store in a paper bag!

The point of this story is that you can adjust the oboe mechanism if you're mechanically inclined, but it is best to learn the process from someone who knows the instrument, since many of the adjustments depend on other adjustments in a sort of domino effect, and it is important to be familiar with the line of causes and effects. There are a few simple ones, however, that often cause the oboe to seem unplayable but are easy to fix.

The first is simply lining up the top and bottom joints correctly. The connecting bridge mechanism between the two joints, especially on the left side as the keys face you, must be lined up correctly for each particular oboe. As those keys are easily bent, the lining up is not always the same from one instrument to the next, and often they do not look lined up at all but work best that way. I always experiment with different settings on my students' oboes and when I find the optimum position, I will point it out to them and tell them to be sure to put the oboe together that way every time.

Another typical adjustment is the screw on the key that looks like a little arm curving up between the top and bottom joints. (See *Adjustment 1* in the diagram at the end of the article.) This key is there to keep the Ab key closed for doing various cross-fingerings, but if the screw is too tight, it will not allow the F# key to close, thereby negating all notes below G. Loosen the screw and then test it by playing a low D while

pushing down the Ab key. If it is too loose now, you will hear the sound change, so tighten it slightly and try again. It is just a matter of trial and error to get it right. When you reach the point where you can play a low D while pressing the Ab key, it is correct.

Sometimes the octave keys can stick, caused by the edge of the tone hole cutting into the cork pad. Humidity can swell the pad, making it worse. A trick is to take a five-dollar bill (I used to use one- or two-dollar bills but Loonies and Toonies do not work), putting it between the hole and the pad, and pushing down hard. The thickness of the bill seems to stretch the groove created in the cork pad, loosening it enough so it does not stick.

Water in the key is another problem that puzzles new students. You have to show them the technique of blowing across the key with an abrupt burst of air to blow the water out. If that does not work, they can take the instrument apart, swab it, and then cover all holes and the bottom end of the joint and blow into the instrument, lifting only the key with the water to clean it out. Cigarette paper is often used under the water key as a blotter, but I have never had much luck with that method.

A good trick for water in the octave key is to take the top joint, close all the keys, put your finger in the bore (the hole on the bottom), open the water-logged octave key, and suck (not blow) through the reed well at the top. Do this with both octave keys. Then I rap the upper joint on my knee, with the keys facing up, to knock out any remaining water. Works like a charm. I do that several times during practice and every time I put my oboe away.

Another common problem is for the top two trill keys to leak, causing the oboe not to play at all. (See *Adjustment 2* in the accompanying diagram.) You can test those by having someone hold them down while you try to play. If that is the problem, it will play normally when they are held down. I have temporarily fixed those keys by putting a rubber band around them to hold them shut. I have also loosened the rod screw a bit, as that sometimes causes the key to bind, but if neither of the above works, you'll want to take it to a repairman, as the springs may need replacing. But before you do that, check to see if the springs have not simply come out of their moorings and just need to be hooked back in.

Finally, sometimes the pads on the little keys between the direct contact keys of the upper joint are not making proper contact and need adjusting. (See *Adjustment 3*.) You can test those by putting a piece of cigarette paper under the small keys, covering the upper fingerings, and pushing down the F# key on the lower joint. The F# key raises those two keys when the other contact keys are not being held down, but when they are, the adjustment should be such that the little keys stay snugly down. If you can pull the cigarette paper out too easily, then air may be escaping.

Tighten (ever so slightly at first) the screw that controls that combination of mechanism that causes the Bb key to hold down the little key above it. The placement varies from one make of oboe to another, but you can find the proper screw by fingering a C and then a Bb, noticing which screw is involved with coupling the Bb key to the small key just above it. (See *Adjustment 4*.) That is the screw that must be tightened if the cigarette paper doesn't

“grab” properly. If you tighten it too much, however, the Bb key won’t close properly, so proceed slowly.

After you have tested this key, go to the next by fingering a Bb and then an F#, noticing which screw is involved with the coupling of the small key between the A and G keys. (See *Adjustment 5*.) Follow the same procedure as above regarding the tightening of the screw. It is a balancing act, but it can work miracles. Still, I always keep track of how much I tightened or loosened each screw so I can get back to “square one,” if necessary.

These are the adjustments I often have to make on student oboes (and my own!) that will render an unplayable oboe playable again. If none of these things work, there may be bent keys or worn pads, which are best fixed by a professional. One other thing: I always carry cigarette paper in my case, but I always remove it when going across the U.S. border, as it is hard to explain its use to the border guards.

Please watch for the second installment of **Oboe Basics** in next fall’s issue of *Canadian Winds / Vents canadiens*, when I will discuss such issues as embouchure, breath support, phrasing, tonguing, fingering, and how to assemble and disassemble the oboe correctly. Meanwhile, questions about oboe playing may be sent to me at the following e-mail address: elizabeth@elizabethraum.com.



Elizabeth Raum is the principal oboist of the Regina Symphony Orchestra and an accomplished, prolific composer. She earned her Bachelor of Music in oboe performance from the Eastman School of Music, her Master of Music in composition from the University of Regina, and in May of 2004, she was awarded an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters from Mt. St. Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Raum has been an orchestral oboist for over forty years. When she lived in Boston, Massachusetts, she performed often as an extra musician for the Boston Symphony and the Boston Pops Orchestras. She also played regularly with the Boston Opera and Ballet Companies. Later she moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to assume the position of principal oboist with the Atlantic Symphony Orchestra and the Charlottetown Festival Orchestra. In 1975, she and her family moved to Regina, where she began her career in composition.

Her works include three operas, over sixty chamber pieces, 17 vocal works, choral works including an oratorio, several ballets, concerti, and major orchestral and band works. She is considered one of Canada’s most “accessible” composers, writing for varied media and in a wide range of styles.

Ms. Raum has been featured in articles in the *New Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the *New Grove’s Dictionary of Opera*, and the *New Grove’s Dictionary of Women Composers*. She is presently working on a score for the Winnipeg Ballet’s feature-length production of *The Passion of Carmen*, based on the Prosper Mérimée novella.

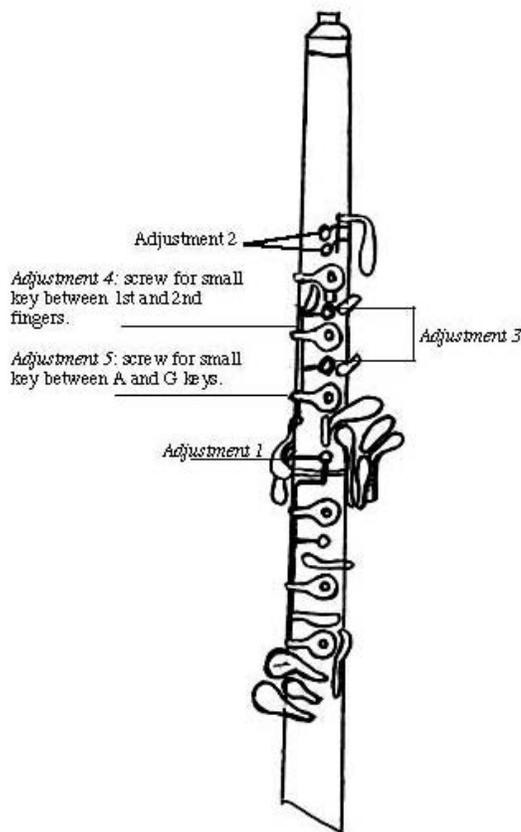


Figure 1. Oboe mechanism with reference to adjustments discussed in the above article.

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