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Playing in Tune

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To play the clarinet in tune is a very difficult task. Usually it is the concern of only the advanced student and professional, and it gives the former a few uneasy years. By playing in tune, I do not mean the simple act of tuning to a given note and then forgetting all about the matter. It is a practical measure in a large ensemble to tune to a given note, but the problem of intonation merely begins at this point.

To illustrate: tune your instrument to the A of the piano and then compare each note on your instrument with the comparable note on the piano. It will be found that most notes need some adjustment in your embouchure, although you had been playing within a limited dynamic range. If you want to hear the problem vividly illustrated, swell the tones from *pp* to *ff*. The "perfectly tuned instrument" does not take care of the intonation of such a wide dynamic range.

What, then, is the remedy? The first thing to consider is your equipment. Tune your instrument and mouthpiece -- the latter is very important -- as well in tune as is within your power. The other piece of equipment is the reed. A too-hard reed is one of the commonest causes of playing out of tune. The great drawback of a hard reed, as far as intonation is concerned, is that when diminishing the tone from loud to soft, the pitch rises like a rocket taking off. To play the last few notes of the introduction to Weber's Concertino in tune is an impossible task on a hard reed. Play a reed of medium or medium-soft strength for best results.

But even when our instrument and reed are satisfactory, the problem remains. The real cure, in the final analysis, lies only in listening carefully. If one does not concentrate on intonation while playing, it is impossible for him to play in tune.

There are, however, many situations that you can anticipate. Playing loudly, generally speaking, makes the pitch go flat; playing softly makes it go sharp. If you play a long passage without a rest, it is fairly certain that you are beginning to pinch a bit and therefore are a little on the sharp side -- not much, but a little. If you make a crescendo the tone will be flat; if you make a diminuendo, it will be sharp. Knowing these facts in advance, one can guard against them by taking care "to hold" the reed with sufficient pressure when playing forte, and taking care to relax the embouchure when playing piano.

The next step, if necessary, is to open or close various keys to sharp or flat notes. For example, let us assume that you are playing a long legato passage in the middle register and the immediate notes ahead are down to an open G, A, B, and C. It is almost certain that the G and A will be slightly sharp. There are two remedies: one would be to leave the middle finger of the left hand on the tone hole when playing G, or it might be better to leave all the fingers of the right hand down on the G, since they should be held down in any case to play the following throat A in the "covered" position. One of the fingerings should give the desired result.

Let us next assume that you are playing the solo in Strauss's Don Juan and the conductor asks for a great crescendo on the lower E to the high E. To make the crescendo that is generally desired at this spot is to send pitch scampering down out of tune. If you open the E-flat key with the little finger, the note will be too sharp. Admittedly, we are in a difficult situation. The only answer here would be to compromise. Open the E-flat key, make a large crescendo, and relax the embouchure slightly -- a little practice will enable you to play it perfectly and give the conductor the crescendo he desires.

These examples serve to illustrate the almost infinite possibilities that exist for adjusting notes so that one may