

# **Starting a Student on Bassoon**

## **Bassoon Clinic with Janet Polk**

### **STARTING A STUDENT ON A BASSOON**

According to myth, teaching and playing bassoon are hard. This myth is one perpetuated by professional bassoon players and teachers—rarely is this a conscious act but one that has been ingrained from the start of their careers. But new approaches, insights, and techniques have evolved over the past few years that make life much less complicated for the beginner or professional, bassoonist or teacher.

This workshop and this resource guide are to make the task of starting and teaching bassoonists easier for you and ultimately easier for the students. No two professional bassoonists play, teach, or make reeds the same way. Therefore, there are many paths that may be taken to come up with a solution to any given problem. A first “rule” is to trust your instincts. Two other guidelines are:

For the student: In any one situation, is the option the most natural/efficient thing to do?

For you: Do you feel comfortable with the solution?

The resource guide has two sections:

- 1) basics for getting a bassoonist started
- 2) supplemental information for further study

## BASSOON BASICS

### 1. Assembling

Putting together the bassoon is mostly figuring out how the puzzle pieces go together. A little cork grease and some careful body English is enough to get things in order. The one fragile element is the bocal. Grab this on top of the curve, then with a firm but gentle twisting motion, put it in the wing joint.

### 2. Positioning

- a. The seat strap goes across the front of the chair.
- b. The bassoon goes across the body.
- c. The head, neck, and spine are aligned and shoulders and fingers relaxed.

### 3. Embouchure

The embouchure on the bassoon is merely an attempt by the lips to keep the air from escaping around the reed. It should have flexibility as some of the fine-tuning of the pitch is adjusted from here.

- a. Put the reed in your mouth with lips almost up to the first wire (no teeth on reed, please!)
- b. Keep the corners of the mouth (the side muscles used for whistling) around the reed.
- c. Find the “crow” point --- this is a lovely multiphonic rasp not unlike the sound of distraught black birds! Very little air will be needed. When the student can do this, it is the perfect embouchure!
- d. Lips are looser for low notes, firmer for high notes.

### 4. Breathing/Blowing

Because the opening to the reed is so small, back pressure is created when blowing into the instrument. Therefore, bassoonists do not need to take in as much air as other instruments.

- a. Fill about a third of the lungs from the bottom up. The remaining space in the lungs creates flexibility for pitch adjustment and vibrato.
- b. Shoulders and chest remain down and relaxed.
- c. The support from the vertical abdominal muscles is less for the lower notes, then increases as the notes get higher, i.e. the higher the note, the “more the air.”

### 5. Tonguing

- a. Relax the tongue – practice letting it fall to bottom of the mouth.

- b. Start notes with tongue lightly placed on reed. Blow, then release the tongue from the reed.
- c. “Tip to tip” is the easiest to remember but not a golden rule. The tongue should touch the very tip opening of the reed but what part of the tongue depends on the size and shape. Most often it is behind the tip on top of the tongue.
- d. Use “too” or “doo” if syllable is needed.

## 6. Reeds

Normally this is a topic that is as controversial as politics. It need not be. Deal with this problem in the easiest manner possible for you.

- a. If your students are using cane reeds, make sure that the entire reed is being soaked for 1 to 3 minutes before playing.
- b. The best source for cane reeds is a local professional bassoonist. If there is a music school or conservatory nearby, an advanced student would probably be eager to make a few bucks. The listings at the end of this booklet give addresses for reliable sources for reeds.
- c. If the dream of having your students use cane reeds turns into a nightmare, use plastic reeds. They are easy to get, last for a long time, and with new advances in technology, are more consistent than cane and produce quite a pleasant sound.

## 7. Playing loud and soft

- a. The motto for the first three months or so is “loud is good!” Encourage lots of air. When the muscles in the embouchure become stronger, then some dynamic control can be achieved.
- b. To play loudly – looser lips, lots of air/support
- c. To play softly – less air/ support, lips firm around reed and push out slightly (a bit of a “fish face” approach!)

## 8. Fingerings

This is an area that can be confusing, I mean, look at all those keys! If one can look at the bassoon, stripping the image of all those shiny things away, what is left are just some holes that look a whole lot like a recorder. It just happens that this basic scale begins on fourth line F rather than C, but the woodwind principles of putting down one finger at a time still apply.

With a few rare exceptions, once students know the notes of a C major scale, any accidentals are based on this premise:

A note plus a key makes it a half step higher i.e. A plus a key gives you A sharp; G plus a key gives you G sharp.

The following fingering chart is excellent and can be given with confidence to any student.

B $\flat$	B	C	C $\sharp$ - D $\flat$	D	D $\sharp$ - E $\flat$	E	F	F $\sharp$ - G $\flat$	G	G $\sharp$ - A $\flat$

A	A $\sharp$ - B $\flat$	B	C	C $\sharp$ - D $\flat$	D	D $\sharp$ - E $\flat$	E	F	F $\sharp$ - G $\flat$	G

G#-Ab	A	A#-Bb	B	C	C#-Db	D	D#-Eb	E	F	F#-Gb

G	G#-Ab	A	A#-Bb	B	C	C#-Db	D	D#-Eb	E	F

F#-Gb	F#-Gb	G#-Ab	G#-Ab	D#-Eb	C#-Db	F#-Gb	F#-Gb	D#-Eb	E

alternate fingerings

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 6110 S. SR 5, P.O. BOX 347  
 SOUTH WHITLEY, INDIANA 46787-0347 U.S.A.

## 9. Beginning bassoon methods

Any method book that is educationally sound and fits the needs and interests of the music educator is appropriate for the beginning bassoonist. The following annotated list is for those who do not have already a method series for like instruments or mixed instrumental ensembles. The advantage of the listed books is that the third space E flat is not introduced for several pages. The E flat is an unstable note and involves a careful use of the ear and the embouchure and can also be affected by the balance of the reed (see “Bassoon Reeds,” page 9 for more information on how to fix this reed problem).

Anzalone, Valentine. Breeze – Easy Method. Warner Bros., Inc.

A limited range of notes and rhythmic values, easily attainable goals, large percentage of folk songs, and solid approach to fundamentals makes this the most attractive method for the very youngest of students. Fingerings are good and a fingering is given with each new note learned. There are alternate fingerings given for F sharps, A flats, B flats, and third space E flat but the preferred is listed first and labeled as preferred.

Eisenhauer, William. Learn to Play the Bassoon. Alfred Pub. Co.

This method is most appropriate for Jr. High to early high school age. It is a solid teaching manual with a good balance of etudes, songs, and duets. The fingering chart is accurate but has alternate fingerings for a number of notes without a preferred fingering given.

Gekeler, Kenneth. Belwin Bassoon Method. Belwin Mills Pub. Co.

This method is recommended for the older beginner or music education major in a techniques class. Its emphasis on etudes with some songs and few duets may not keep the interest of a younger student. The notes and rhythms introduced in the book are limited. The fingering chart included is good except for the listing of some alternate fingerings without a preferred fingering.

Lentz, Don. Lentz Method for Bassoon. Belwin Mills Pub. Co.

A lot of material is covered in a very few pages but done so in a logical manner. This would be good for an older beginner or a student transferring from another instrument.

Skornica, J.E. Rubank Elementary Method for Bassoon. Rubank, Inc.

This method is excellent for the older beginning bassoonists who are transferring from another instrument. It moves rather rapidly after the first few lessons; so much so that some less mature students may need the addition of other methods and materials. It is still one of the most logical and educationally sound methods on the market today for those fitting the above requirements. The fingering chart, however, is a nightmare to read

with its inaccurate and multiple alternate fingerings and should be removed from the book upon purchase!

Weissenborn, J. Complete Method for Bassoon. Carl Fischer or Cundy-Bettoney.

This has been the standard method since its publication in the 1800's. In general, a new note is introduced with each lesson. The exercises range from simple to difficult within each lesson in terms of time signatures and rhythms within the context of the notes already learned. Because of these difficulties early in the book, an intelligent and serious older high school student that is very proficient on another instrument would be the best candidate for this. A student that is younger or is not transferring from another instrument would do well to choose another method.

## **BEYOND BASICS!**

### RESOURCE BOOKS

- Fox, Hugo. Let's Play Bassoon.  
Fox Products Corp., South Whitley, Indiana
- Popkin, Mark, and Glickman, Loren. Bassoon Reed Making.  
The Instrumentalist Publishing Co., Northfield, Illinois, 1987
- Pence, Homer. Teacher's Guide to the Bassoon.  
Selmer, Inc., Elkhart, Indiana, 1963
- Snitkin, Harvey R. Practicing for Young Musicians.  
HMS Publications, Inc., Niantic, Conn., 1983
- Spencer, William. The Art of Bassoon Playing.  
Summy-Bichard Co., Evanston, Illinois, 1969
- Weait, Christopher. Bassoon Reed-making: A Basic Technique.  
McGinnis & Marx Music Publishers, New York, 1970

## BASSOON REEDS

The condensed guide to quick fixes.

For those music educators who feel comfortable or interested in adjusting purchased reeds, the following is a guide to the basic tools needed and to trouble-shooting the most common problems.

### BASIC TOOLS NEEDED:

1. mandrel or the equivalent for holding the reed
2. reamer or round file for taking material from the inside of the reed for better fit on bocal
3. plaque or guitar pick for placement between blades of the reed
4. reed knife or jackknife
5. needle nose pliers
6. scissors
7. #22 soft brass wire or equivalent for a broken wire

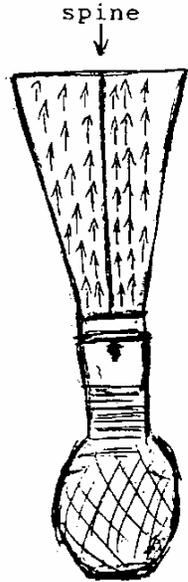
### THE MOST COMMON PROBLEMS AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

The reed should be wet for all reed adjustments

1. The reed is too hard to blow.
  - a. Check tip opening. This should be  $1/16^{\text{th}}$  of an inch.
  - b. If too open, close at first wire with pliers.
  - c. If too open, open at first wire with pliers.
  - d. If tip opening is o.k., put reed on mandrel, put plaque between blades and take off cane on both sides of the reed with a knife or sandpaper.
2. Third space E sags/goes flat
  - a. Clip the smallest amount possible off the tip (which makes the reed slightly shorter). Test and clip until the E is stable.
3. Third space E-flat is sharp/unstable.
  - a. Put reed on mandrel and plaque between blades. Scrape the channels (see diagram next page).
4. Low notes are hard to get out
  - a. Reed on mandrel, plaque between blades. Scrape tip and back with knife (see diagram next page).

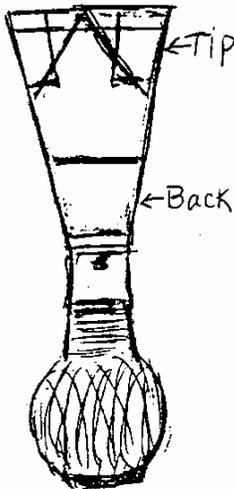
For every scrape on one side of the reed,  
do the same scrape on the other side.

Channels



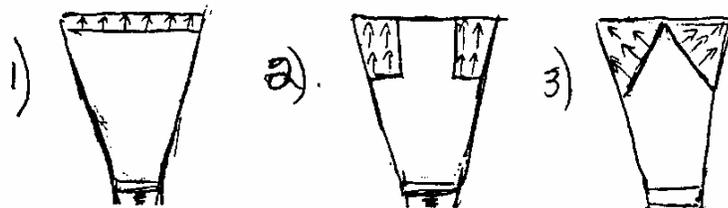
The channels are the areas on each  
side of the spine. Scrape in direction  
of the arrows.

Tip and back



The tip consists of three geometric shapes  
which should be scraped in this order:  
1) straight line across --scrape toward  
the tip starting 1/16th of an inch below  
tip of reed.  
2) rectangles -- scrape toward tip  
starting about 1/4 of the way down  
the reed.  
3) triangles -- these connect the other  
two shapes. The only scrape that goes  
against the grain.

The back consists of 1/4 of the area  
nearest the wires. Scrape  
entire area.



## BASSOON REED-MAKING TOOLS

The following list is for a student or teacher who might be interested in pursuing reed making.

### ITEMS THAT MAY BE OBTAINED FROM LOCAL STORES

6 inch ruler  
jackknife  
emery boards or flat file  
exacto knife or scalpel  
needle nose pliers  
diagonal clippers  
wooden drawer knob  
guitar picks  
wet/dry sandpaper 240 & 400  
Duco cement  
crochet thread or button & carpet thread  
sharp scissors  
single-edged razor blades  
nail set  
round file  
paraffin wax or a candle

### SPECIALIZED TOOLS TO ORDER

mandrel (replaces nail set)  
reamer (replaces round file)  
plaque (replaces guitar pick)  
reed knife (replaces jackknife)  
drying rack  
cutting block (replaces wooden drawer knob)  
#22 soft brass wire

gouged, shaped, and profiled bassoon cane

## **BASSOON REEDS (r) and TOOLS (t)**

Fox Products (r & t)  
6110 S. SR 5, P.O. Box 347  
South Whitley, IN 46787

Phone: (260) 723-4888

Vigder's Bassoon Supplies (r)  
1464 Reeves St.  
Los Angeles, CA 90035-2958

Phone: (310) 286-2620

Arundo Reeds and Cane (r)  
P.O. Box 704  
Forest Grove, OR 97116

Phone: (503) 357-8506

Jones Double-Reed Products (r & t)  
P.O. Box 3888  
Spokane, WA 99220-3888

Phone: (509) 326-1529

Mark Chudnow Woodwinds (r & t)  
13757 Victory Blvd.  
Van Nuys, CA 91401

Phone: (818) 780-4491

Forrest's (r & t)  
1849 Univ. Ave.  
Berkeley, CA 94703

Phone: 1-800-322-6263

Mark Popkin (t)  
740 Arbor Rd.  
Winston-Salem, NC 27104-2210

Phone: (919) 725-5681

Jack Spratt Woodwind Shop (t)  
11 Park Ave.  
P.O. Box 277  
Old Greenwich, CT 06870

Phone: (203) 637-1176

Frederic H. Weiner, Musical Instruments Sales and Service (t)  
92-16 37<sup>th</sup> Ave.  
Jackson Heights, NY 11372

Phone: 1-800-622-CORK (orders only)  
(516) 437-9873

Prestini Musical Instruments Corporation (t)  
Box 2296  
Nogales, Arizona 85621

Janet Polk, bassoon, earned her Bachelor's degree in music education at the University of Massachusetts and her Master's in music history at the University of New Hampshire. She is principal bassoonist of Portland (Maine) Symphony and Vermont Symphony, and is a member of The Block Ensemble, 1988 prize-winners in the International Concert Artist Guild Competition. In addition to her performing career, Ms. Polk teaches bassoon at the University of New Hampshire, Dartmouth College, University of Vermont, Concord (New Hampshire) Community Music School, and St. Paul's School.