

# TEXAS BANDMASTERS ASSOCIATION

BEGINNER INSTRUCTION SERIES



# BASSOON

BECKY LEWIS  
CLINICIAN

49TH ANNUAL CLINIC  
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS  
1996

## Foreword

The Texas Bandmasters Association for the second year continues to sponsor a series of clinics on beginning instrumental teaching methods, presented by some of Texas' premier music educators during the 1996 TBA Convention in San Antonio, Texas. These master teachers, chosen from the ranks of superior music educators in the State, represent a wide diversity in geographic location, as well as, in teaching situations.

A session will be presented on six band instruments with a companion handout. In this handout, you will find teaching methods, and classroom organizational skills which are used successfully in today's schools.

We acknowledge the efforts of the clinicians who prepared these booklets and, who also presented a clinic session. In addition we acknowledge Jim **Hagood**, TBA Immediate Past President, whose vision provided us with the many benefits we gain through this series of clinics. Jim **Hagood's** foresight, and diligent efforts in laying out the ground work for these series is very much appreciated.

This series is respectfully dedicated to the legions of band directors who have gone before us and who have built the music education program that is unique in history: TEXAS' BANDS. Representing the best of this tradition was the 1990 President of TBA, the late Malcolm Helm, whose example and teaching inspired and challenged all of us.

Bob Brandenberger, President, Texas Bandmasters Association

## BECKY LEWIS

Becky Lewis received her Bachelor of Music Education Degree in 1976 from Baylor University. She has performed with the Waco Symphony Orchestra, Baylor University Performing Groups, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Houston Ballet, Houston Symphony Children's Concerts, Young Audiences of Houston, Houston Chamber Ensemble and Community Orchestras. Presently Becky Lewis is a private instructor for jr. high and high school students in the Spring, Klein, **Tomball**, and Cypress Fairbanks Independent School Districts. Lewis has studied under Charles Price, Lawrence Reed, and Wilford Roberts.

# TAMING THE BASSOON MONSTER

## *In the Beginning*

Becky Lewis, Bassoon Instructor

For too long the bassoon has been considered a mvsterious and fiahtening instrument. Many band directors have either been intimidated by it, or they have avoided it entirely. It is considered by many to be too much of a problem to deal with, and for some, it has been positively "scary". Time to dust off the case, open the latches, and take out an instrument that I consider one of the most beautiful--an instrument that, with just a little special care and nurturing, will reap glowing reviews from others and will add a depth of color to the band that no other instrument can provide.

### **RECRUITING and SELECTION:**

#### **"Turning on the Light":**

Many students have never been introduced to the uniqueness of the bassoon's tone. If the teacher does not feel competent to demonstrate the instrument, he or she must look to the junior high or high school performing bands for a student to do this for them. Students relate to other students very well. If none of these options are available, try to find an excellent recording to play for the young prospects. The goal is to spark an interest in the sound that a bassoon makes. Most of the other instruments in the band are easily recognized by young students. The sound of a bassoon is not as easily detected so you have to make it "shine" for them.

#### **Narrowing the Choices:**

Talk with your elementary music teachers--- they already have a pretty good idea about their students' personalities and musical aptitude. You're looking for one of two types:

##### **The Ideal Student**

- A student with acceptable grades
- A student that is able to set and achieve goals---a "high achiever"---determined
- A student that has some prior music background (choir, piano, basic knowledge of rhythm and counting, etc.)---this is not an absolute but it will make the beginning a little easier.
- A student who is physically mature in body size and personality
- A student who is "A STAR"

OR

##### **Reality**

- A student with a body size to meet the requirements of handling the instrument (feet touch the floor when they sit, long fingers, etc.)

- A student that can match pitches
- A student that can mimic you in simple varied rhythm patterns
- A student with normal spacing between bottom of nose and top lip
- A student with lips that meet comfortably when back teeth are together  
(No large overbite or “buck teeth”)

## **EMBOUCHURE**

You’ve found your young **future** player. Now it’s time to start. Get them off to a good start with the formation of a good embouchure. Use the following concepts:

- Embouchure as natural as possible--no forced jaw tension
- Comers forward; concept of the feel of “oh”, “mo”, or “no’---no smiling allowed
- Jaw open and back teeth apart--jaw should fall open naturally without forcing --- suggest that they “make a large space between the back teeth”---concept of a “yawn” with the lips shut
- Top and bottom lips over the teeth

## **TAKING THE REED IN THE MOUTH**

Reed basics:

- Soak the whole reed **in water--not the mouth** for two or three minutes
- Reed enters the mouth at approximately a 90 degree angle to the face
- It should feel as if the top lip is taking one-half to three-fourths of the blade in the mouth
- Amount will vary according to lip size
- **Be careful:** playing too far on the tip of the reed will distort the tone and produce a “fuzzy”, flat sound and encourages students to bite

## **ASSEMBLING THE INSTRUMENT**

It is very important that the student do this the same way every time, so help them understand that there is only **one** way to do **this--hand over hand from bottom to top:**

- Hold the boot joint **upright** on the ground with the **left** hand with the face of the joint away from the student
- Take the wing or tenor joint in the right hand, and with a twisting motion, insert it into the smaller of the two receivers being careful to line up the bridge key over the bridge on the boot joint
- Now while holding the instrument with the right hand, take the long joint in the **left** hand, line up the joint lock, push down on the joint and engage the lock
- Take the bell with the right hand, push down the key and line up the bridge key with the bridge on the tenor joint
- Insert the bocal with a **gentle** twisting motion (no pushing) holding it in the curve of the crook of the bocal
  - \* **Only** insert the bocal when seated---a walking around the room with the bocal in the instrument

## POSITIONING OF THE INSTRUMENT

- Adjust the strap to adjust the height of the instrument so that the bocal enters the mouth without the student straining the neck up or ducking the head down to reach the bocal
- Student places his or her right leg forward so that the instrument rests on the outer thigh and **not** the chair
- Student should sit comfortably in the chair with the body away from the back of the chair---the instrument and the student meet somewhere in the middle

## THE "STARTUP" HAND POSITION

On the **first** few days, the student should use the right hand to grasp the instrument around the middle for security and support. All of the concentration should be on the left hand only for the first few days of the beginning year:

### **Left Hand:**

- Thumb resting either on or above the whisper key (never below it)
- Point of balance of the bassoon is at the base of the first finger (index finger)
- Second finger should curve slightly to seal the tone hole
- Third finger will appear almost straight as the pad ("fat pad" of the finger) covers its tone hole (don't allow the joint to collapse)

### **Right Hand:**

- Add the right hand as the learning of new notes demands
- Thumb rests **in the air above the Bb key** (do not allow students to rest their thumbs on the body of the horn)
- First finger (index finger), second finger (middle), and third finger (ring) extend naturally to cover the tone holes and keys
- Little finger ("**pinky**" finger) should touch the low F key gently
- If student has exceptionally long fingers, use a hand crutch to maintain proper curvature

### **Points to Remember:**

- Never tuck fingers under the keys
- Always play on the "fat pad" or fleshy part of the finger
- Do not buckle or flatten the fingers---work for a natural, curved feeling---like holding a ball

## THE STARTING TONES:

- To inhale, imagine filling a glass of water---bottom to top
- Get students to imagine that they are blowing out one birthday candle---air moves fast and cold in a straight line to the target
- Third line "**D**" is a good starting pitch. It is a stable tone and is physically an easy note to reach
- Start the tone by saying the word "**tah**" or "tee"
- Next, work on second space "C", being **careful** to make sure that they have a good,

secure seal on the **tonehole**

- Introduce the “face” notes of the horn (**F,E,D,C,B,A**, and G)
- Continue with these pitches until they are pretty consistent with a steady pitch
- Most young players play flat, even with a good embouchure---tell them that each note has a high and a low side: blow to the high side---this encourages them to blow faster air

### THE BASSOON WARM-UP:

- Teach the students a bassoon warm-up---these are notes that are in the middle of the horn and are easy to produce:



- The exercise can be shortened for playing ease for the beginner---delete slurs and add rests between each note
- Use this exercise to focus on tone control, tone matching, pitch, tapering, and dynamic contrast
- When first teaching the warm-up, the teacher should play or sing pitches with the students matching pitches on their instruments

### STARTING THE SCALES:

- An easy first scale to learn is the F major scale (going down first)
- Start introducing chromatic fingerings from open F to low F
- After the chromatic fingerings and tones are more consistent, begin to use the scales to help you to teach new fingerings (example: G major scale---going down first---to introduce the Half Hole)

### CROSSING THE BREAK:

- When the students have demonstrated some mastery of the half hole notes in the G scale, it's time to begin working on crossing the break
- Extend the bassoon warm-up exercise to include half hole G
- Do the complete warm-up as much as possible
- Important points to remember:
  - \* Left hand position is very important in break work
  - \* Students must be covering the third tone hole securely
  - \* Make sure that they do a “large” half hole on G (expose more of the tonehole)
  - \* Keep the embouchure the same---do not tighten as they cross the break

### THE SECOND REGISTER AND FLICKING:

- Students should use the same embouchure, without tightening, from first space A to B above the staff
- Teach them that these notes will respond best by flicking (quick tapping of appropriate thumb keys) and increasing the air speed (concept: double the air)
- Flick on the notes C and D above the staff but adjust with a more concentrated or firmer embouchure (concept: triple the air **from** C upward)

### EXTENDING THE RANGE DOWN:

Teach them to expand their range downward using scales:

- Play the C major scale down starting on second space C down to low C
- Around the notes G or F, they need to think about “loosening” the embouchure---think of blowing hot air

### VIBRATO-WHEN AND HOW:

- When the embouchure becomes more consistent and the tone is steady, the student is ready to begin work on vibrato---this is usually toward the end of the first year
- Important rule: **NEVER, NEVER use jaw vibrato on bassoon-it will create problems with pitch**
- Students begin with simple pulses of air, without the instrument, blowing on their own hands to feel the pulse then produce the pulse on the instrument
- Use the warm-up and scales to practice this gradually adding more and more pulses to the beat until the student is leaving pulsing and closer to vibrato---this is very individualized and the teacher must be very patient

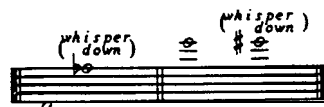
### GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FIRST YEAR:

Students should:

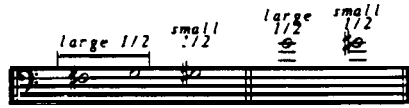
- Be able to match pitches with each other and the rest of the class
- Be able to produce dynamic contrast
- Be able to use proper fingerings at all times (incorrect fingering is **often** a source of pitch problems)
- Be able to play all of their major scales two octaves (excluding Ab and A but working to include these in the range)
- Be able to play the chromatic scale in the following range:



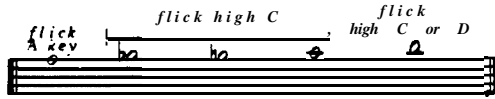
- Have proper knowledge of the Whisper Key use:



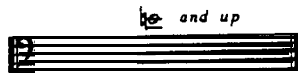
- Have proper knowledge of Half Hole fingerings:



- Have proper knowledge of the use of the flick keys:



- Have proper knowledge of the use of the low Eb resonance key:

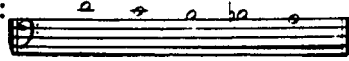




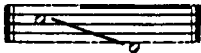
**TROUBLESHOOTING:**

**PROBLEM**

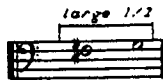
1. Pitches in this range braking to the lower octave:



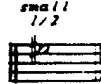
2. Pitches in this range popping up or squeaking to the next register:




3. These pitches either not responding or gurgling:




4. Poor response from:



5.  → chronically sharp

6.  → often a pitch problem

7.  → unstable in pitch

8. Everything is sharp!

9. Tone is flat and 'fuzzy'

10. Pitches are "sagging"



11.  unclear and "cracking"

**REMEDY**


1. Make sure Whisper Key is up **and/or blow** faster air

2. Make sure Whisper Key is **down**

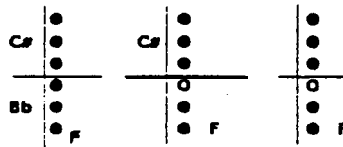
3. Bigger Half Ho&

4. Smaller Half Hole

5. Add left hand little finger (Eb Resonance Key)

6. Add the following right hand keys: 

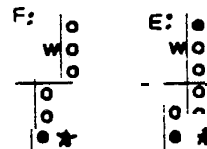
7. Use one of the following long fingerings:



8. Possible solutions: a. player may be **clenching teeth**---tell them to make a bigger space between the back teeth and "soften" the face muscles, b. reed may be sharp---if reed **adjustment** is not possible, try other reeds, c. if **all else fails**, try a number 3 **bocal** (may lower the overall pitch but can cause "trouble" notes to be unstable)

9. Possible solutions: a. player may be **playing too far out on the tip** of the reed---take a little more reed in the mouth, b. **blow** faster air, c. reed may be **flat**---if reed **adjustment** is not possible, try other reeds, d. try a number 1 bocal

10. Possible solutions: a. reed may be **cracked**---trash it!, b. **center** the tone and **blow faster air**, c. last resort---add the following right hand key to stabilize:



11. Possible solutions: a. **embouchure** may be too tight---relax embouchure as if playing a lower octave A, b. consistent **flicking on this A** is advisable

## **REEDS, REED CARE, AND REED SOURCES:**

- Reeds** • Most beginners can survive on a reed **from** the local music store
- I have found Jones Medium or Medium **Soft** reeds to be the most workable with some adjustment
  - Best Scenario: handmade reeds from a private instructor or a professional player---expect to pay more for these, but it's worth it
  - Many mail order suppliers also sell reeds ---investigate them individually---you will find most suppliers very cooperative as many of them are double reed players themselves

- Reed Care** -Teach students that reeds are very expensive and delicate---care for them as such
- Do not store the reeds in the plastic containers that they are sold **in---the reeds will mold**
  - Reeds should be stored in some type of container that has holes for air circulation
  - Reeds should be soaked **in water-not the mouth** before playing
  - Keep reeds clean---no lipstick---pull a pipe cleaner through the wet reed **from** back to tip about once a week

### **Reed Sources**

There is an abundance of quality double reed suppliers. Here are just a few with which I have had personal experience:

**Arundo** Reeds and Cane  
18081 N.W. Dixie Mt. Rd.  
Hillsboro, Or. 97124  
Phone: 503-647-0958

Charles Double Reed  
141 West 28th Street, Suite 1203  
New York, NY 10001  
Phone: 212-967-3113

Edmund Nielsen  
61 East Park Blvd.  
Villa Park, Illinois 60181  
Phone: 708-833-5676

Forrest Music  
**1849** University Ave.  
Berkeley, California 94703  
Phone: 510-845-7178

Jack Spratt Woodwind Shop  
11 Park Ave., P.O. Box 277  
Old Greenwich, **Conn.** 06870  
Phone: 800-626-9277

Jones Double Reed Products  
P.O. Box 3888  
Spokane, Washington 99220-3888  
Phone: 509-747- 1224

Mark Chudnow Woodwinds  
13757 Victory Blvd.  
Van Nuys, CA 91401  
Phone: 800-780-4340

For informative articles and dealer advertisements write:  
International Double Reed Society  
626 Lakeshore Drive  
Monroe, Louisiana 7 1203-4032

## **EQUIPMENT AND MAINTENANCE:**

### **Equipment:**

- Buy the very best instrument that you can for the money---stretch a little---the bottom of the line starts at around \$1800 and can extend all the way to the \$8000 range for a good student instrument
- If the best that you can **afford** is the bottom of the line, try to improve your setup with a better bocal such as the Fox CVX #2---**bocals** are numbered 0 through 3---the higher the number, the longer the bocal
- **Bocals** fit instruments like shoes fit feet---if possible, try several

### **General Maintenance:**

- Students must be taught to swab their instruments daily---give them a little extra time at the end of class for proper care
- Swab the boot and the wing joints carefully---the new silk swabs are great ---make sure that there are no knots in the swab
- Flush the bocal out with water once a month---use a **soft** pipe cleaner or buy a bocal brush

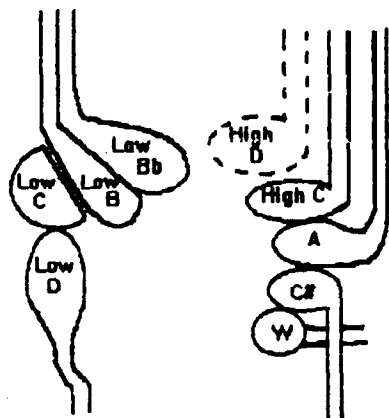
## **SUMMING IT UP:**

- Try for the best that you can get in instruments, **bocals**, and reeds
- Be diligent about correct fingerings, proper embouchure, and proper hand position
- If at all possible, work to establish private lessons for your bassoon students
  - \* Go to your nearest college or university, get in touch with the bassoon teacher or see if some of the better college students are available to teach
  - \* If no college is available, try to hire someone to come in a couple of times a year to do several class lessons with your bassoon students---another option is to send your kids to a good band camp or even go yourself and attend the bassoon classes
- Tell your students to read their music by looking to the right of the instrument
- Do not let the students share a stand---each bassoon player with his or her own stand is best

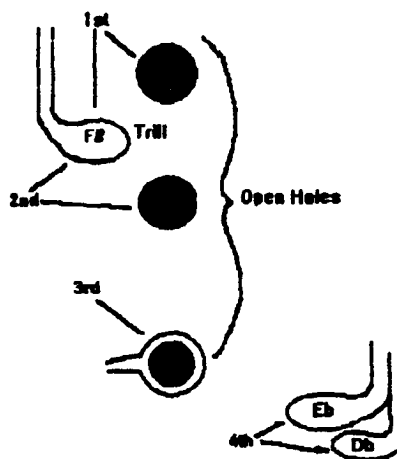
- Give bassoons a little extra time to get their instruments together---this will help prevent damage to the instrument
- Most important: Expect just as much **from** your bassoon students as you do any of the other students in your class

# FINGERING DIAGRAM

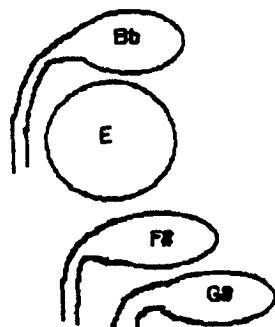
LEFT HAND THUMB



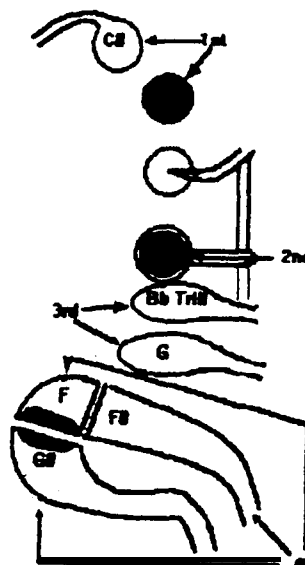
LEFT HAND FINGERS



RIGHT HAND THUMB



RIGHT HAND FINGERS



## BASIC FINGERINGS

A#-Bb    B    C    C# - Db    D    D# - Eb    E

Diagram illustrating basic fingerings for notes A#-Bb, B, C, C#-Db, D, D#-Eb, and E. The diagram shows the placement of fingers (1st, 2nd, 3rd) on the strings for each note, with labels for Low Bb, Low B, Low C, Low C#, Low D, and Low D#.

F F# - Gb G G# - Ab A A# - Bb B

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

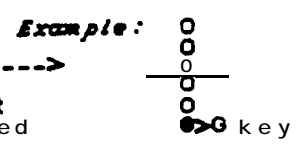
G G# - Ab A A# - Bb B C C# - Db

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

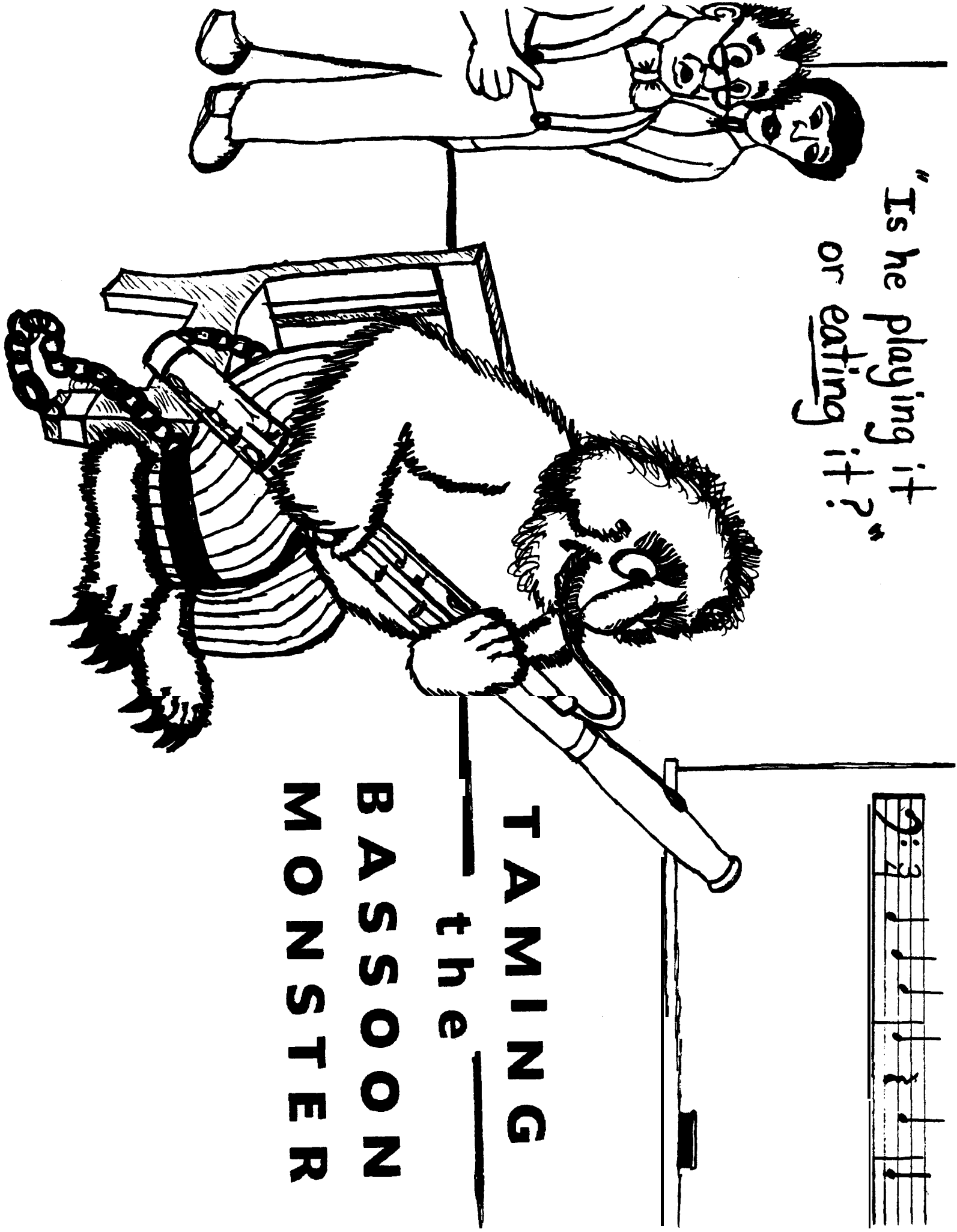
A A# - Bb B C C# - Db D

**Special Instructions**

1. The front right hand G key is **bein** treated as a tonehole for thr right hrnd third 3inger.----->
2. The left hand Eb resonance key is a standard part of the fingering where indicated but can be removed for pitch adjustment.
3. The use of the high D key is preferred where the left hand thumb D or C key is indicated.



"Is he playing it  
or eating it?"



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