

The Clarinet Embouchure

Timothy Maloney

Single-Lip Embouchure

The embouchure discussed in this article is the “single-lip” embouchure of the French school of clarinet playing, used by many clarinetists around the world. It is referred to in this way because only one lip is directly involved: the lower lip is turned back over the bottom teeth so that about half of the pink, fleshy part of the lip forms a cushion for the reed to rest on.

The top teeth should rest lightly on the mouthpiece about half an inch or so from the tip. Both lips should encircle the mouthpiece

like a rubber band, supple and pliable, keeping all the air inside and channeling it through the mouthpiece and into the clarinet.

No air should leak from the corners of the mouth or form pockets in the cheeks or below the bottom lip. The corners of the mouth should be stretched back and upward, as if smiling, and the chin should be pointed downward toward the chest, stretching the skin below the bottom lip. These are the essential features of the French clarinet embouchure.

There are other approaches to the single-lip clarinet embouchure, notably that of the German school of playing, where the smile element is absent. There is also a double-lip embouchure, briefly discussed further below.

At the very beginning, students should practice forming the correct embouchure by substituting the right index finger for the mouthpiece. Have them check themselves in a mirror, making sure they incorporate each of the elements outlined above, concentrating particularly on pointing the chin and pulling the corners of the mouth back and up. As a second step, have them blow into the mouthpiece (or mouthpiece-barrel combination), detached from the clarinet but with a moist reed on it, checking in the mirror as they do so. Using reeds no stronger than 1½ or 2 for the earliest attempts should help the process.

It is essential that students not let their embouchure collapse as the mouthpiece enters their mouth. This is a common problem with beginners. They should think in terms of setting the embouchure and inserting the mouthpiece into it, or bringing the mouthpiece/clarinet to the embouchure rather than the embouchure to the mouthpiece/clarinet (by letting the embouchure lose its shape as the mouthpiece is inserted).

To maintain concentration on the mouth, the first note a student should attempt to play on the clarinet is an open G – not too forcefully, to help keep the embouchure from collapsing. If all goes well and the embouchure shape is maintained, the student can proceed downward step by step with the left-hand thumb and fingers, playing through F, E, D, and C. This should be relatively uncomplicated, and the focus should continue to be on maintaining a good embouchure shape throughout the process.

If the shape is lost or the embouchure collapses at any point, have the student begin again with the index finger, then with the mouthpiece-reed combination, and finally with the mouthpiece

attached to the clarinet. Make sure the reed is not contributing to any problems by being too hard, too dry, or incorrectly placed on the mouthpiece. Preparing the mouthpiece tenon with some cork grease ahead of time will facilitate the insertion/withdrawal of the mouthpiece or mouthpiece-barrel combination into/from the clarinet.

Let me pause briefly in this discussion to point out that I am a firm believer in holding separate introductory sessions for each instrumental group: i.e., clarinets alone, flutes alone, trumpets alone, and so on. The attention to details and individual problems possible in segregated beginner instruction sessions cannot be replicated in classes where beginners on different instruments are all trying to make their first sounds. I am also a proponent of having beginners play by ear before they attempt to read music, so as not to divert attention away from the embouchure and sound production too soon.

Early in my career, I taught Grades 6-12 instrumental music for a few years, and the strongest beginner band I ever had happened the year the band books did not arrive until a few weeks after classes began. By that point, the beginners in question, playing mainly by ear, had far outstripped my previous beginner classes in their command of the fundamentals. The reasons were easy to figure out.

Some basic first tunes to be attempted by ear include the following, which can all be played in C Major on the clarinet using only the left-hand: “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” “Twinkle, Twinkle,” “Lightly Row,” “Oh Susanna,” and “Fiddle-I-Dee.” When tunes requiring only the left hand have been sufficiently mastered with the embouchure intact, the right-hand fingerings of low B, B-flat, A, and G can be introduced, and tunes such as these can be attempted: “Alouette,” “The More We Get Together,” “Amazing Grace,” “Go Tell It On The Mountain,” “O Christmas Tree” (all in C Major), and “We Three Kings” (in A minor).

As students develop some proficiency on the instrument and expand the range of notes they can play, the basic embouchure shape described above should remain unchanged no matter what kind of music is played: low or high, soft or loud, fast or slow, staccato or legato. The clarinet embouchure can be equated to a violinist’s grip on her bow: no matter how she plays, her hand grip never changes. For clarinetists, our grip is our embouchure, and our bow is the air we blow. What does change is the air speed: faster air for loud passages, slower for soft (just like the violin bow speed); more intensity in the air stream for the high

register, less for the low – but our embouchure always stays the same. With young clarinetists, this is rarely the case, so it is a goal for them to keep in mind and work towards, with periodic reminders from their teacher.

Some embouchure Do’s and Don’ts include the following:

1. Too much lower lip turned over the teeth will interfere with the free vibration of the reed, and can also cause discomfort or pain from insufficient “cushion” between the reed and the bottom teeth.

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2. Too little lower lip turned over the teeth can result in lack of control of the sound.
3. Biting or clamping down hard on the mouthpiece with the upper teeth may cause the teeth to loosen and move, and inflicts enormous wear and tear on the mouthpiece. Tell-tale evidence of this is gouging of the mouthpiece by the upper front teeth. The upper teeth should simply rest on the mouthpiece.
4. Too much pressure from the lower teeth or lip can also prove painful, and sometimes interferes with the reed's ability to vibrate freely. Inexperienced clarinetists often resort to this type of "biting" to try to bring high notes up to pitch, instead of increasing the intensity of the air stream. One can test for this by gently pulling the instrument from students' mouths while they are playing. This can be accomplished without causing any harm to the clarinetist or the reed. If a clarinet cannot easily be extracted from students' mouths while playing, they are probably biting to at least some extent. Breathing deeply and increasing the diaphragm pressure should be stressed and practiced to counteract this problem. Reeds of sufficient strength are also a requirement to play high notes without resorting to biting or other bad habits.
5. Too much or too little mouthpiece in the mouth can affect the tone quality and control of the notes being played. While the size and shape of everyone's mouth is different, it is possible for students to find the right placement for themselves by doing a little experimenting. Once they find the placement that gives them good control and tone quality, they need to keep it.
6. The jaw should not move when tonguing. It and the rest of the embouchure should remain stationary while the tip of the tongue moves forward and back inside the mouth, engaging and releasing the blade of the reed at its tip.
7. Over-blowing is bad for the embouchure and usually distorts the sound, causing the pitch to go flat. It also causes the embouchure to collapse. Avoid it at all costs.
8. Students need to hold their clarinets firmly, not letting the instrument move or wobble in their mouths. The right thumb should not only support the clarinet, it should constantly push the instrument upward, keeping it firmly in the mouth. The lips can then do their job of encircling the mouthpiece and maintaining the correct shape and functions.
9. Weak reeds are incompatible with "healthy" embouchures. As beginners gain experience playing "over the break" and exploring the upper register, they should be encouraged to use stronger reeds, moving incrementally to #2, 2½, and 3 as their embouchures gain strength and muscle-tone. Given the tessitura of first-clarinet parts in typical band music, members of that section should normally be playing on no less than #2½ reeds – #3 if possible. However, sufficient preparation and incremental change are crucial, since attempting to play on a reed that is too strong for one's embouchure is a sure way to cause the embouchure to collapse.
10. Intermediate and advanced students should also be encouraged to have several reeds broken in and used in rotation at all times, rather than playing one reed "to death." Rotating one's reed supply, and periodically introducing new reeds while phasing out older reeds (which weaken after much playing) helps keep the embouchure strong and flexible. Playing on one reed to the exclusion of all others is very harmful to anyone's embouchure. (For further information on clarinet reeds, see my article, "A Tutorial on Single Reeds," in *Canadian Winds/Vents canadiens*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 2003, pp. 18-23.)

Double-Lip Embouchure

Some clarinetists employ a "double-lip" embouchure, also cushioning their top teeth with the upper lip, as oboists do. In the nineteenth century, many more clarinetists played that way, especially the Italians, and it was the only kind of clarinet embouchure employed throughout Europe in much of the eighteenth century, when the clarinet mouthpiece was turned so that the reed was on top. Once it was discovered that stronger reeds (resulting in better tone and more volume) could be used by positioning the reed underneath, the double-lip embouchure was no longer a necessity for clarinetists.

For general use, this embouchure has some drawbacks (e.g., a looser grip on the mouthpiece, which usually necessitates supporting the clarinet bell with one's leg or knee), and most of us do not employ it today. Some of the finest professional clarinetists have used it with great success, though, including the late Harold Wright, the former Principal Clarinet of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. A present-day practitioner of the double-lip embouchure is Richard Stoltzman, a touring soloist with many CDs to his credit (visit www.richardstoltzman.com).

Most professional clarinetists today try to integrate the best feature of the double-lip embouchure into their single-lip embouchure: namely, the high arch in the soft palate (the soft tissue along the roof of the mouth back towards the throat). This can be accomplished by concentrating on an open throat, the "smile" shape of the lips, and constantly pointing the chin downward. The more the chin is pointed down and the skin there stretched, the greater the arch in the soft palate. One can also get the right feel by forming a double-lip embouchure on the mouthpiece and then gently withdrawing the top lip while concentrating on maintaining the arched palate. This is more a matter for advanced students to think about, not something that beginners need to worry about.

For beginner and intermediate clarinetists, it is a good idea to play frequently in front of a mirror to check for collapsed embouchures and other bad habits (e.g., poor hand positions). All band rooms and practice rooms should be equipped with mirrors. Spotting and correcting problems and bad habits early is much easier than trying to undo habits that have been reinforced over a longer period of time. It is also highly desirable for band directors to engage the services of a local professional clarinetist or an advanced university student to keep your clarinetists on their toes through clinics, workshops, sectional rehearsals, and clarinet-choir activities. Such attention

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to an instrumental group that is often the largest in the band can pay abundant long-term dividends. Further information and diagrams about the clarinet embouchure can be found at Web sites such as the following:

www.kjos.com/band/band_news/band_news_emb2.html

www.keynotesmagazine.com/article/?uid=162

en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Clarinet/Clarinet_Basics/Tone/Embouchure

www.clarinet-now.com/clarinet-embouchure.html



Timothy Maloney has played clarinet in professional orchestras and chamber ensembles in the U.S. and Canada, and has taught clarinet at the college/university level in both countries. His playing can be heard on commercial CDs issued by the CBC, CanSona, and Albany labels. Among his clarinet teachers were Harold Wright, Stanley Hasty, and Guy Deplus.



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