

The Sixty-Eighth Annual Midwest Clinic

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Meeting Room W187

Chicago, Illinois

Bassoon Boot Camp

How can I make my bassoon section sound better?

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This hands-on session will address how the public school music educator can help their bassoon section to sound immediately better using concise, useful and easy-to-implement strategies.

Techniques discussed in this session will benefit players of every performance level.

Topics will include: Tone, Equipment, Reeds, Intonation, Fingerings, Posture, Keeping Your Bassoonists Happy, Bassoon Fun, International Double Reed Society, Some Bassoon Resources.

Assisted by:

Margaret Oswald, Music Director Merrimack Valley High School, NH

(Ithaca College '09, '11)

Amanda Nauseef (Ithaca College '14)

“The bassoon is one of my favorite instruments. It has a medieval aroma, like the days when everything used to sound like that. Some people crave baseball...I find this unfathomable, but I can easily understand why a person could get excited about playing the bassoon.”

— Frank Zappa

Tone

Encourage your bassoonist, let them know you see and hear them.

1. Concept of Tone

- Listening to great bassoonists (see Resources)
- Initial sounds will be wild, I prefer to start with a wild sound I can tame rather than encouraging a small, weak sound to grow

2. Embouchure: lips relaxed

- Whistle or imagine drinking a thick milk shake out of a large straw
- Corners of mouth forward, like a drawstring
- Roll lips over teeth, almost to muscle (don't bite the reed with your teeth!)
- Put reed between lips, far enough so that the top lip is almost to the first wire (picture)

3. CROW the reed

- Three Sounds - Highs, Middles and Lows
- Full spectrum of overtones = fuller and richer sound
- If the crow has only high sounds:
 - too much wood on the reed
 - intonation will be sharp
 - low register will be weak and sharp
 - SOLUTION = free up the reed

4. Reed + Bocal = C

5. C-B-C exercise (<http://apps.texasbandmasters.org/archives/pdfs/bmr/2003-01-rachor1.pdf>)

- Relaxes the jaw
- Illustrates how much air can be used and how fast
- Control of instrument/pitch/sound
- Getting a BIG sound first
- Improves tone and intonation

6. Air Support

- Expand the back and ribs on inhale
- Support as though yelling at a football game (bottom of diaphragm)

7. Articulation

- Entrances:
 - Set the embouchure and air
 - Place tongue (just above the tip of the tongue) to the tip of the reed
 - Release the tongue
- Releases
 - Stop the notes with the tongue
 - Can get many styles of articulation with a tongue stop
 - A tongue stop will not go flat in pitch (as an air stop would) or sharp in pitch (as an embouchure stop would)

Equipment: Getting a Good Set Up

1. Your School Bassoon - A Leaky Bassoon is an Out-of-Tune Bassoon

- Have your bassoons inspected by a competent repair person each year
- Have your student inspect the bassoon for ripped and/or loose pads
- Here is a great article by Chip Owen of Fox Products on bassoon maintenance:
<http://www.foxproducts.com/pdfs/TakingCareOfYourBassoon.pdf>
- Store the bassoon in the case
- Temporarily store in a secluded, carpeted corner
- Don't lay bassoon flat during and after playing

2. Bocals

- Lengths numbered from shortest to longest: 0, 1, 2, 3
- Number is stamped on bocal
- Most commonly used lengths are #1 and #2
- Fox numbers are different by one number, therefore get #2 and #3 lengths in Fox
- Do not pull out the bocal to improve intonation.
 - change bocal length if necessary
- Intonation is related to air/embouchure/reed/ear.

3. Carrying the Bassoon

- Reed in a safe place
- Put the bocal in the bell
- Hold it upright, using both hands, one hand always on the boot
- Careful walking through doors

4. Seat Straps and Swabs

- Seat Strap (rather than a neck strap) for best posture
 - lay the seat strap diagonally on the chair, with the hook on the front right corner
 - hook the strap to the hole in the boot cap on the side closest to the body
 - A cup seat strap is preferable to a hook seat strap
- Swabs: maintain good, clean swabs for your bassoons

Reeds

1. Acquiring

- A cane reed is generally going to be a better reed than a fibercane reed
- Purchased bassoon reeds:
 - will sometimes come in various strengths, purchase medium to medium soft reeds unless you or your student plan on adjusting the reeds
- Where to get a reed? (See Resources for recommendations)
 - Purchase from a reed maker
 - Purchase from a retailer
- Always examine a reed before you purchase, return a cracked or otherwise odd looking reed if it has not been played
- What to look for when selecting a reed:
 - tip opening
 - throat at first and second wire
 - tube of reed=round and clean
 - (cracked, flat tube, etc.)
- A beautifully made reed is usually a better reed

2. Care of the Reed

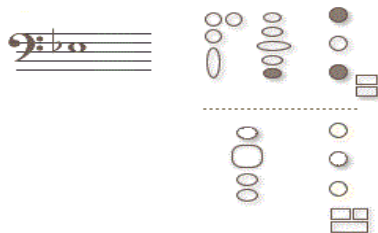
- Soak the entire reed in clean water (not saliva), for 1 minute.
- Storage: reed case, cardboard jewelry box, altoid box
 - NOT a plastic box or tube
 - Let dry out whenever possible to prevent mold
- Keep it clean
 - after playing blow out of back of reed, shake it off and let it dry out
 - run under warm water
- Beware! Soaking the reed in hydrogen peroxide will revive the reed for a few days, after which the reed gets much worse

3. Characteristic of a good reed

- A nice free crow
- Stable on E3 and C#3
- Plays easily in all registers
- Nice sound

4. Adjusting

- A few easy rules:
 - Light reed - good lows - lower in pitch - good response
 - Heavy reed - good highs (weaker lows) - higher in pitch - challenging response
 - Always work on a wet reed
 - When using a plaque (guitar pick), insert it carefully into the wet reed
 - Work with thin strips (1 1/2" X 2") of #220 wet/dry sandpaper (it's just the right level of aggressive, you will make fewer mistakes than with a knife)
 - Break in a reed
 - give the reed several days to change
 - it will change with the weather, altitude, humidity
 - Rotate reeds
- Tools:
 - Plaque (guitar pick), 220 wet/dry sandpaper, Pliers, Reamer, Mandrel, Knife
- If the reed is **too hard**:
 - It will likely be sharp in pitch and hard to play esp. in the low register
 - Tip too open? Squeeze the first wire from the sides
 - Tip too closed? Open it up
 - Is the crow high?
 - Too much cane on the reed, lightly sand in the back
 - Squeeze the 2nd wire from *top and bottom*, this will free the crow and lower the pitch (probably will leave the top too open, counteract this action by squeezing 1st wire from *top and bottom*)
 - Work a little at a time
 - **Playing Test:** Check the forked Eb3



- if it is unstable, the reed is still too hard = has too much cane
 - sand in the channels until 'short' Eb is stable
 - open the tip
- If the reed blows **too easily** or closes up:
 - Pitch is likely flat and the high register is difficult
 - This reed is too thin somewhere
 - Squeeze the 2nd wire from *side to side* to stiffen the reed (probably will leave the top too closed, counteract this action by squeezing 1st wire from *side to side*)
 - **Playing Test:** Play the F scale forte and stop on E
 - If E sounds more like an Eb:
 - Add the G key or low E key to stabilize
 - If the reed is broken in, you need to *reduce the size of the blade of the reed*
 - This can be done by making a small dog ear
 - Next shorten the reed by clipping the tip a little at a time
- Keep it together:
 - if the string becomes loose: tighten the 2nd wire and re-glue the binding (Duco cement or nail polish)
- Reed should fit on the bocal about 8-10 mm, if not, use the reamer when reed is dry

Intonation

1. Most common intonation issue is being sharp

- DON'T BITE the reed!
- Relaxed embouchure (keep coming back to C-B-C)
- Intonation is related air/embouchure/reed/ear
 - Sing to match pitch and to understand voicing
 - Droning, long tones
- Air support
- Don't overblow
- Typically the low register is sharp (Bb1-F2)
- Remember - *A Leaky Bassoon is an Out-of-Tune Bassoon*

1. Oral Set-Up

- Improves tone and intonation
- Singing each note will help you find the correct oral set-up for it
 - Saying "low" can illustrate the set up for the low register, Bb1-F2
 - Saying "ahh" can illustrate the set up for F2 - F3
 - Saying "eh" or "ee" can help find the oral set-up for F#3 - F4
 - Back to "low" or "ahh" for F#4 - C5
 - An interesting and scientific article on *The Not-Quite-Harmonic Overblowing of the Bassoon* by Professional Reed Maker James Kopp:
<http://www.koppreeeds.com/harmonic.html>

2. The Tone/Balance/Blend/Intonation circle

- TONE: Bright vs. Dark
 - Bright sounds does not blend
 - Dark can be sharp
 - 'American' sound, some of the German darkness with the French response
- Dynamic range: too loud and too soft

3. Confidence:

- A confident second player who plays with a strong, secure sound is an asset.
- Together with a secure and confident first player = a strong team.

4. Reeds:

- See the Reed Section

Fingerings

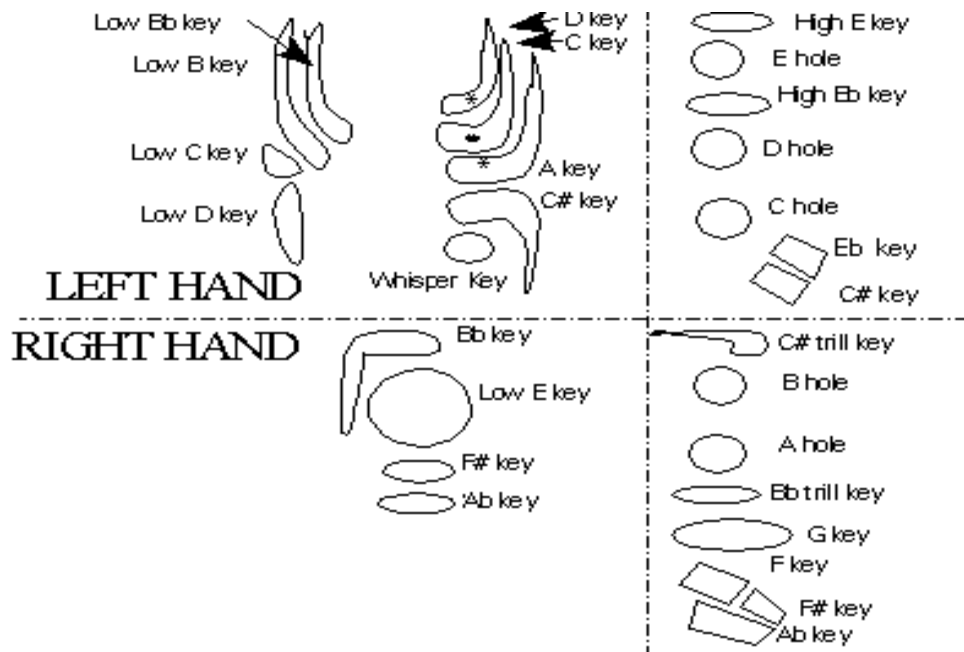


Photo Credit: Terry Ewell

1. Fingering Charts:

- Bassoon fingering charts can be confusing to read and unreliable, there is help!
- I recommend several charts:
 - <http://www.idrs.org/resources/BSNFING/BsnFingerings.pdf>
 - <http://www.foxproducts.com/pdfs/LetsPlayBassoon.pdf>
 - Both charts include some alternate and trill fingerings
 - The *The Bassoon-Family Fingering Companion* web site of the International Double Reed Society is a great option: <http://www.idrs.org/resources/bsnfing/finghome.htm>. Here you'll find everything you need including fingerings for trills, shakes, pianissimo, microtones, harmonics, specific musical passages, french bassoon, historical bassoons, etc.

2. Tuning and Many Fingering Choices:

- *Essentials of Bassoon Technique*, an encyclopedic presentation of bassoon fingerings and their usage, meant to be utilized by teachers, serious advanced students, and artist performers
- For Low E2, add low C#/Db resonance key to lower the pitch
- Eb3, so many choices
 - I recommend using a long fingering choice unless the music is complicated and/or fast (ex. *Variations on a Korean Folk Song*, by John Barnes Chance, 1965)
- G3, always add Eb or Db resonance key, changes pitch and timbre for a lower pitch experience

- The many C#4 choices, (short and long) <http://www.idrs.org/resources/BSNFING/BsnFingerings.pdf>
 - All the F#4 choices, *Essential of Bassoon Technique*
 - Trill solutions
 - <http://www.idrs.org/resources/bsnfing/finghome.htm>
 - Slur Eb4 and E4, lift RH 1
- 3. Half-Hole Technique:**
- The left hand first finger acts as a vent, aiding the bassoon into the overblown octave range
 - The notes that require a half-hole are: F#2, G2, Ab2, F#3, G3, Ab3
 - Each note needs a slightly different half-hole sizes. The size of the half-hole decreases as you move up the scale. The F#s requires a large half-hole, the Gs require a medium half-hole, the Abs require a small half-hole
 - Use the whisper key when half-holing, since both act as vents, you only need one at a time
- 4. Flicking**
- Flicking Rule: When *sturring* from F2 and below to A2, Bb2, B2, C3 and D3, you must flick. Use the *A thumb key* for A2, and the *C thumb key* for Bb3, B3, C3 and D3.

Posture

- 1. Bassoon:**
- Bring bassoon TO YOU
 - Balance the weight in both hands and on leg
- 2. Equipment:**
- The right chair, flat seat with nothing on the sides
 - Balance weight
 - Placement of seat strap at a diagonal, with the hook on the front right corner of the chair
 - Angle of bocal
 - Angle of reed
 - Hand rest (crutch), large hands, gives student an idea of where the keys are
- 3. The Player:**
- Straighten out/up, changes the sound
 - Back and neck aligned and square
 - Playing with head a little down into the reed, rather than up, better, more full sound
 - Adjust height of bassoon so reed will touch bottom lip
 - It should feel natural, as singing or talking with head up not natural
 - Thumbs: Left thumb should rest near whisper key, Right thumb should rest over pancake key
 - Rounded fingers, no tight grip, seeing tone holes on pads of fingers
- 4. Challenges:**
- Seeing the music
 - Sharing a stand
 - Shadows on own music

In Closing

- 1. A happy bassoon section sounds better.**
- **I hear it over and over again, I'm the only one in my band/school/district, etc.?**
 - **How to make them happy?**
 - LOOK at your bassoonists, notice when they are being good (or not bad).

- TALK to your double reeds, let them know you see/hear them and that they make a difference.
 - USE AS POSITIVE EXAMPLES, to enhance confidence and leadership
 - **Why does this work?**
 - Creates confidence and a sense of TEAM
 - They are so rare, they generally enjoy each other's company, work together as a unit
 - Hard working, smart and driven individuals
 - Way more fun playing together, cool sounds and more confidence
 - Teamwork is FUN
 - Friendly competition
 - **Give bassoonists extra time to pack up before class**
 - Big, expensive instrument, give the student some time to properly clean it before leaving the room
- 2. Seating**
- I recommend seating the double reeds on the outside of your band
 - Can hear themselves (not drowned out by brass and saxophones)
 - Feel like they are contributing
 - Not overblowing
 - Being a section, oboe band of the past
 - Balance and blend will improve, and so will attitude

Bassoon Fun

<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=10152488281343067&set=vb.190898018066&type=2&theater>

International Double Reed Society

The website of the International Double Reed Society (<http://www.idrs.org>) is a treasure of information and resources. Much of the site is available to the public. On it you can find:

- MultiMedia of all kinds, including:
 - MIDI accompaniments for solos
 - Score downloads
 - Videos and recordings
 - Podcasts
- The rich Resources Page includes:
 - Fingerings
 - Instrument Makers
 - Who's Who
 - Publications

Some Bassoon Resources

Reeds and Tools

Bel Canto: <http://www.belcantoreeds.com>

David Brundage (for contra reeds, too): <http://www.hickeys.com/pages/bn35.htm>

Charles Double Reed: <http://www.charlesmusic.com/cgi-bin/theo?action=home>

Hodge Products: <http://www.hodgeproductsinc.com/catalog/>

James Kopp Reed Maker: <http://koppreeds.com/index.html>

Forrests Music: <http://www.forrestsmusic.com/index.htm>

Miller Marketing: <http://www.millermarketingco.com>
Edmund Nielsen Woodwinds: <https://www.nielsen-woodwinds.com>
Barry Trent: <http://www.reedcrafter.com>

Instruments

Forrests: <http://www.forrestsmusic.com/index.htm>
Fox Bassoon Products: <http://www.foxproducts.com>
Midwest Musical Imports: <http://store.mmimports.com/bassoon-1/>
Miller Marketing: <http://millermarketingco.com>

Books

The Art of Bassoon Playing, William Spencer
Essentials of Bassoon Technique (Big Book of Fingerings), Cooper and Toplansky
Advanced Reed Design & Testing Procedure for Bassoon, Mark G. Eubanks
Bassoon Reed Making: An Illustrated Basic Method, Chris Weait

Music

Forrests: <http://www.forrestsmusic.com/index.htm>
Gail Warnaar Double Reed Shop: <http://www.doublereedshop.com>
Hickey's Music Center: <http://www.hickeys.com>
Trevco: <http://www.trevcomusic.com>

Method Books

Beginning:
Practical Method for the Bassoon, Julius Weissenborn
Bassoon Warm-Ups, Chris Weait

Intermediate:
Fifty Concert Studies, Op. 26, Ludwig Milde
25 Studies in Scales and Chords, Op. 26, Ludwig Milde

Cool groups and people to inspire your bassoonists to excel, practice and innovate

Bassoon Brothers Bassoon Quartet: http://bassoonbrothers.com/?page_id=316
Boulder Bassoon Quartet: <http://boulderbassoons.com>
Breaking Winds Bassoon Quartet: <http://thebreakingwinds.com>
2Cellos: <http://www.2cellos.com/us/home>

Suggested Listening (a few of my favorite artists)

Sergio Azzolini: <http://www.naive.fr/en/artist/sergio-azzolini>
Monica Ellis: <http://www.imaniwinds.com/artist.php?view=bio&bid=1942>
Pascal Gallois: <http://www.pascalgallois.com>
Paul Hanson: <http://paulhansonmusic.com>
Nadina Mackie Jackson: <http://nadina.ca>
David McGill: <http://www.music.northwestern.edu/about/news/2014/cso-bassoonist-david-mcgill-joins-bienen-school-faculty.html>
Frank Morelli: <http://www.morellibassoon.com>
John Steinmetz: <http://www.johnsteinmetz.org>
Christopher Weait: <http://weaitmusic.com/node/15>

Historical Bassoon Players

Michael McCraw: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0x549YO5h2g>
Anna Marsh: <http://annamarshmusic.com>
Dominic Teresi: <http://www.tafelmusik.org/about/orchestra/bios/dominic-teresi>
Wouter Verschuren: http://www.wouterverschuren.com/Site_Wouter/pg1.html

Other Resources

International Double Reed Society, www.idrs.org

Terry Ewell: <http://www.terryewell.com>

Barry Stees Blog: <http://steesbassoon.blogspot.com>

Barry Stees Reed Adjusting Chart:

http://www.steesbassoon.com/reedmaking/adjusting_reeds.htm

Barry Stees, Awesome Reed Diagram: <http://www.steesbassoon.com/reedmaking/diagram.htm>

Bassoon Blog (Betsy Sturdevant): <http://bassoonblog.blogspot.com>

Bassoon Resource: <http://www.bassoonresource.org/tips.htm>

Multiphonics: <http://www.leslieross.net/multiphonics.html>

Bulletproof Musician: <http://www.bulletproofmusician.com>

Pence, Teacher's Guide to the Bassoon: <http://www.hickeys.com/downloads/000/sku000815.pdf>

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