A Band Director's Guide to Beginning Woodwinds

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1

Foundations

- Breathing
  - Need gas/electricity to drive the car
  - Inhalation is just as important as exhalation
    - Intercostal muscles
- Commonalities vs. Differences
  - Make connections when you can
  - Realize when "negative transfer" can happen

2

2

Commonalities

- Assembly
  - Torque on keywork is bad
  - Assemble reed instruments from the bottom up
  - Pads – need to seal and open correctly
    - Swabbing
  - Key action
    - Spring bars

3

3

Commonalities

- Playing position
  - No part of the body touches another part of the body
  - Hands are relaxed (“relaxed C”)
  - Right hand is always further away from the face
- Embouchure
  - Corners never back by ears
- Woodwind technique is all about reps

4

4

Foundations

- Teaching matters
  - Need plans
  - Sequencing
    - Set them up for success
    - Baby steps
    - Big leaps
- Develop troubleshooting heuristics

5

5

Flute

Student Selection

- Smooth top lip vs. tear drop/cupid's bow
- Finger/arm length

Assembly

- Clean tenons regularly
- Rod on the foot joint lines up with keys on the body
- Embouchure hole lines up with keys

Breathing

- More air than any other instrument
  - Edge tones
- Air is controlled by the lips, not the instrument
- Breathing to play, not to live, is essential

6

6

Flute

Embouchure

- Sweet spot placement is crucial
  - Top lips influence placement the most
  - Help students find the spot
  - Condensation trail
- Bottom lip must cover some of the embouchure hole
- “Neutral face”
- Corners in or down, not out or up
  - Pooh or pure
- Registers and intonation controlled primarily in the embouchure

Articulation

- Embouchure and air prerequisites
- Steady wind
- Tongue placement

7

7

Flute

Playing Position

- Lips and head joint aligned
- Right arm forward/head turned left
  - Marching band posture is bad for beginners
- Balance points
- Right thumb and fingers

Other Tips

- Octave slurs build flexibility and control
- Work your way up to longer notes (stress the role of the embouchure in controlling the air/wind)
- Vibrato requires still jaw/tonuge

8

8

Oboe

Student Selection

- Responsible
- Willingness to follow directions

Assembly

- Soak reeds in water, not in mouth
  - Only the cane portion
- Reeds always go on last and be removed first
  - Reed cork needs grease too
- Pay attention to bridge keys
- Avoid sudden temperature/humidity shifts if possible

Breathing

- Backpressure is the name of the game
  - Teach students to get rid of bad air

9

9

Oboe

Embouchure

- Going to have to build up strength in the facial muscles due to the back pressure
- Less than half of the reed goes in the mouth (generally)
- Lips roll in barely to cover the teeth
- Even energy from lips (teeth only support)

Articulation

- Different schools of thought on tongue placement
  - All agreed on relaxed position under the reed
  - Tip of the reed (but not closing the blades)
- Jaw still

10

10

Oboe

Playing Position

- Generally, between 40-45° angle
- Head has to stay neutral – the oboe goes to the body, not the body to the oboe
- Right thumb holds the weight
  - First knuckle under thumb rest
- Avoid tension in fingers (natural C hovering)

Other Tips

- Insist on practicing half-hole technique
- Be patient, dynamics are partially tied to embouchure strength – intonation is largely tied to embouchure strength and reed
  - Fill breaks with other activities and take them often early on

11

11

Bassoon

Student Selection

- Finger length
- Underbite

Assembly

- Soak reeds in water, not in mouth
  - Only the cane portion
- Reeds always go on last and be removed first
- Handle bocals with care
  - Near the cork
  - Never store in bell
- Avoid sudden temperature/humidity shifts if possible
- Only corks need cork grease (not string)

12

12

Bassoon

Embouchure

- Even energy around the reed matters
  - Too loose = flat
  - Too tight = sharp
- Lips roll in to cover the teeth
- Teeth even or overbite (depending on approach)
- Teeth apart in the back
- More reed in mouth than people think
  - Not touching the first wire
  - Half to ¾ of the reed in the mouth

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Articulation

- Tongue touches the center of the bottom blade
  - Avoid touching the top blade at all
- Tip of tongue
  - Can be a challenge due to the amount of reed in the mouth

13

13

Bassoon

Playing Position

- Straps (seat or neck) are required
- Instrument crosses the body
- Fingers need to seal the holes

Other Tips

- Teach half-hole and venting
- Bocal lengths affect tuning
- Bocal materials may affect tone (less important for beginners)

14

14

Slide 13

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Clarinet

Student Selection

- Four front teeth
- Finger pad size (specifically finger 6)

Assembly

- Reeds always go on last and be removed first
- Beginner clarinet rods/keys prone to bending
  - Don't put torque on the rods
- Align mouthpiece window/table with register key
- Leave space between barrel and upper-joint – even for beginners
- Don't over tighten ligatures

Breathing

- Not as much backpressure as oboe, but still may need to release bad air/wind

15

15

Clarinet

Embouchure

- Bottom lip barely covering teeth
- Corners in
- Flat/pointed chin
- Arched tongue
- F# on mouthpiece and barrel
- Single or double lip

Articulation

- Tip of the top of the tongue touches the tip of the bottom of the reed
- Tongue stays arched
  - Tee syllable
- Quick motion, light touch

16

16

Clarinet

Playing Position

- Never rest bell on the knees
- Don't be afraid to use neck straps – alleviates tension in the right hand
- Head has to stay neutral – students like to look down at the clarinet and mess up their bottom lip
- Angle approx. 30-40° (decide based on tone quality)

Other Tips

- Take time on mouthpiece and barrel to establish a stable embouchure
- The break isn't scary if you've taught the composite skills
  - Correct and stable embouchure
  - Raised tongue
  - Moving right hand fingers in unison
  - Proper left hand position

17

17

Sax

Student Selection

- Weight of the instrument on the strap
- Front Teeth
- Left hand reach around the palm keys

Assembly

- Reeds always go on last and be removed first
- Avoid handling the octave key by the pad
- Neck straps need to be adjusted for proper playing position (us saxophonists are notoriously lazy about this)

18

18

Sax

Embouchure

- Not the same as clarinet, but similar
- Bottom lip squishy pillow for reed
- Corners in like a drawstring bag
- Top teeth touch mouthpiece
- Biting is common among beginners, watch for jaw tension/pressure

Articulation

- Tip of the top of the tongue touches the tip of the bottom of the reed
- Tongue relaxed in mouth
- Quick motion, light touch
- Watch out for anchor tonguing

19

19

Sax

Playing Position

- Set neck straps standing up the first time
- Center vs. side
  - Torso size
  - Adjust mouthpiece

Other Tips

- Check jaw pressure on the mouthpiece alone, not the mouthpiece and neck
  - A for altos
  - Requires proper embouchure before attempting
- Voicing
  - Changing tongue position/oral cavity
  - Crucial to intonation and tone

20

20

Practical Examples

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21