

MCMASTER MUSIC EDUCATION *NOTEBOOK*

Number 8

Clever Clarinet Tips

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**Assembly:**

Make sure the corks are greased, but not too much. You shouldn't need to apply grease more than once every week or two. Gently depress the rings on the top and bottom joints. Use a twisting (not jamming) motion to attach the joints. Be careful to align exactly the mechanism that bridges the two main joints. Avoid bending the long keys.

**Embouchure:**

Bring the clarinet to your mouth, not your mouth to the clarinet. Set your embouchure before the clarinet goes into your mouth (think "eeuw" to establish the proper placement of your jaw and tongue). Balance the mouthpiece between your top teeth and your thumb; then, bring your lower lip and jaw out to meet the reed. Your top teeth should always be higher on the mouthpiece than the lower lip. Point your chin downward. Seal the edges of your lips around the mouthpiece so air does not leak out. The back edges of your tongue should seal against your molars, leaving the tip free to touch the reed. Play a note; take the clarinet from your mouth and start over. Watch yourself practice in a mirror, BE PICKY, you are your own best teacher. Always play with as much reed inside your mouth as possible. Your lower lip should contact the reed at the spot where the mouthpiece begins to angle away from the reed. Playing on the tip of the reed results in a thin sound.

**Tonguing:**

Keep the air going forward. Use your tongue as a stopper, build air pressure behind it and then release. Staccato starts when you remove your tongue from the reed. Practice by blowing an open G (or other pitch) with your tongue on the reed and removing it quickly and cleanly. Practice moving passages slurred first. If you can't slur them, you won't be able to tongue them.

**Finger Position:**

To keep your fingers properly positioned over the finger holes, your "pinky" fingers should always lightly touch the B/E key (left hand) and C/F key (right hand). Roll the first finger of your left hand upward and touch the "A" key with the side of your finger to open it - avoid lifting your finger out of position. If your left hand position is correct you should be able to open the "A-flat" key by moving your first finger only minimally. The thumb rest should contact your right thumb NO FARTHER BACK THAN THE BASE OF YOUR THUMBNAIL. Any farther back will limit the freedom of your right fingers. Many clarinetists attach a short piece of rubber tubing to the thumb rest for additional comfort and to make correct right hand position easier to achieve. The left thumb should remain parallel to the floor. Open the register key with the upper left "corner" of the thumb.

**Tone:**

AIR. AIR. AIR. The clarinet is a wind instrument. Always use proper breath support. Your airstream should be fast and cold—not slow and warm. (Experiment by blowing on the back of your hand.) Imagine your air spiralling through the instrument.

**High Register Pitch:** Maintain correct embouchure. Keep the chin down. Imagine that there is a cherry between the back of your tongue and the roof of your mouth. (Another way to say this is when playing high think "eee" with your throat.) If you get an undertone push up on the thumb rest with your right thumb. Practice listening for the correct pitch—it's not enough to just finger the note.

**The "Break":**

Maintain proper finger/hand position. Use a mirror—if your fingers are away from the instrument it will be very difficult to make a smooth connection. Use “venting” or right hand down fingerings for the throat tones, especially if the phrase will carry you over the break. Maintain a steady airstream and make sure your embouchure remains stable. Practice!

**Preparing Reeds:**

I prefer Vandoren reeds, especially their V-12 line. Most high school players should play on strength 3 or 3 and a half. Reeds last longer if they have a chance to rest. This is especially crucial when they are new. Play them only for a few minutes at a time for the first few days. Warping is a major cause of squeaks. Prevent it by sealing your reeds. Compress the tiny tubes in the cane by rubbing the reed (being careful of the tip) on a sheet of paper that has been through the photocopier. Or, rub your own facial oils into the surface of the reed—gross, but effective. A reed is sealed when you can no longer force air through the tiny tubes by blowing from the thick end. Reeds will last longer if they are allowed to dry face down on a flat surface. If a reed is too hard, move the ligature down; reverse if too soft.

**Practice Tips:**

Always blow through the phrase. The metronome is your best friend—use it! If you can’t play a passage fast, slow it down. Play it 9 times slow for every 1 time fast. Practice subdivision. Think about where a phrase is going: sing it, play louder as you go higher, softer as you go lower. Maintain good posture. Isolate your problems: air, fingers, tongue.

**Throat Register Resonance (Venting) Fingerings:**

Throat register notes are sharp and sound stuffy. The following fingerings help to bring the pitch down and improve the resonance. Use them whenever possible.

B-flat: add the third finger of the right hand plus the C/F key

A: add the second and third fingers of the right hand plus the C/F key

G-sharp (A-flat): add the second and third fingers of the right hand plus the A-flat/E-flat key

G: add all three fingers of the right hand plus the C/F key