Demystifying Double Reeds

University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point
Double Reed Faculty
Prof. Stacey Berk, Oboe
Dr. Patricia Holland, Bassoon
UWSP Brass Fest and Woodwind Workshops Day

Saturday November 12, 2016
Noel Fine Arts Center
UW-Stevens Point
9:00 - Registration
9:30 to 4:30 - Clinics, Ensembles, Master Classes

Register at www.uwsp.edu/music
Don’t Myth Out

- Oboes and bassoons add more variety of timbres to your ensemble
- The students who play them can become your best “band geeks”

- Myths
  - Difficult Double Reeds
  - Impossible Intonation
  - Deadly Dynamics
  - Raucous Reeds
The Myths

*Oboe and Bassoon are hard instruments to play*
The Myths

*Impossible Intonation*

- Good (even excellent!) intonation is possible from double reeds
- Listen
- Adjust
  - Vowel sounds
  - Imagery
  - Don’t ask double-reeders to “pull out” or “push in” as these changes will not impact intonation like they do on other wind instruments
Deadly Dynamics

• Okay, so dynamics are a little hard on double reeds!
• The biggest variables for dynamics are the reed opening and air support
  • If too loud, squeeze the reed more shut
  • If still too loud, use a little less air
  • If too soft, use faster air
  • If still too soft, pinch reed open
The Myths

**Raucous Reeds**

- Decent commercial reeds DO exist!
- Try a variety from different businesses/makers
- Talk to professionals about supplying reeds
  - See our websites for some suggestions
Concepts for Double Reed Success

Embouchure

- Use a mirror
- Have student whistle
- Increase distance from upper to lower teeth (mouth more open)
- Bring corners of mouth in
- Cushion reed, don’t grip
Concepts for Double Reed Success

Embouchure

• Bassoon
  • Create distance between upper and lower teeth, especially in the low register
  • The top lip can sit farther forward on the reed than the lower lip
  • Roundness is essential!
  • Cushion reed with lips
Concepts for Double Reed Success

*Embouchure*

- **Oboe**
  - Pull the upper lip down (stretch the nostrils)
  - Use the muscles just to the sides of the middle of the top lip to focus inward to the reed
  - Keep the corners directed forward
  - If the pitch allows, pull the lower lip down, away from the reed
  - Keep the soft palate high
Concepts for Double Reed Success

Breathing and Air

• Use breathing concepts for all winds:
  • Take low breaths
  • Use abdominal muscles
• Bassoon and Oboe don’t usually require a large volume of air
• They DO require lots of pressure to the air
  • Pressurized air is needed for clean articulation
  • Good intonation and tone are only possible with pressurized air
Concepts for Double Reed Success

Articulation

• Tongue contacts reed about 1/4” back from tongue tip
• The tongue touches the bottom blade of the reed
• Articulation starts with the release of the tongue from the reed
• The tongue should be free to articulate at its tip and move to different vowel positions in the back for tuning and tone adjustment
Oboe Concepts for Student Success
Posture/Body & Head Position

• Head up!
• Elbows away from body
• Relaxed shoulders
• Oboe about 45%
Oboe Concepts for Student Success

*Thumb & Hand Issues*

- Wrist issues are a real problem for oboists
  - If oboists complain of pain in their right thumb/wrist, take it seriously

- Products to help support oboe differently (available at Forrests Music)
  - Kooiman thumb rest
  - Dutch and other thumb rests
  - Kickstand
  - Harness or neck strap (take a little pressure off, but not completely)
  - English horn support peg
Bassoon Concepts for Student Success

Tips on Bassoon Posture

• Sitting all the way back on chair
• Put seat strap all the way forward on chair (yes, always have students use a strap!)
• Have student bring the instrument to them, rather than leaning forward to reach the instrument
• Tension is the enemy! Have students relax:
  • Neck
  • Embouchure
  • Throat
  • Arms
  • Back
Bassoon Concepts for Student Success

Fingerings and Thumb Issues

• Many variations on fingerings/fingering charts
  • Have students develop criteria (with your guidance) on fingerings that “work”
    • Does the note speak well?
    • Is intonation good?
    • Is a good tone possible with this fingering?
    • Is a good legato possible?
• Hands may move and uncover holes for some fingerings
• Thumbs are very active!
All Thumbs...
This is just for the left thumb!
Bassoon Concepts for Student Success

Differences from Other Woodwinds

- While fingerings for oboe, flute, saxophone, and upper register of the clarinet all correspond to one another, bassoon fingerings correspond to the clarinet’s low register.
- This means bassoons must use advanced techniques (half-hole and overblow notes) very early.
- If possible, have bassoons start outside of class for a few weeks to prevent bad habits.
Reeds
Reeds

*Importance of the Crow*

- Indicates functionality of the reed before placing on the instrument
- Fullness of pitches
- Range – high or low
- Relative difficulty or ease of blowing
Reeds

What to Look For in a Reed

• Bassoon
  • Material
  • Good taper from back of each blade to front (hold to bright light)
  • Symmetry, left to right on each blade and one blade to the other
  • Thin tip (helps response)
  • No abrupt differences in thickness except collar (connection of blades to tube)
  • Tip opening of about 1-1.5 mm

• Oboe
  • Total length 70 mm
  • Symmetry
  • Tip opening about 1 mm
Reeds

Sources

• Oboe
  • Tristan from Midwest Musical Imports.com
  • Blue Professional reed from Nielsen Woodwinds
  • Chicago Oboe Reeds - $17, made to order
  • American Oboe Reeds - $12 for student (I haven’t tried these, but they are worth a try for that price)
  • Bocal Majority – band bundles for reduced prices

• Bassoon
  • Forrests Music
  • Reed Expertise
  • Woodwind/Brasswind
Reeds

Easy Adjustments and Fixes

Bassoon

- Use a pliers or pressure from your fingers to open (make harder) or close (make softer) the reed
- Thin tip to improve articulation.
  - Place some 320 grit wet-or-dry sandpaper on a table top and draw the reed across it with light pressure from your finger tip on reed tip and corners

Oboe

- Use pressure from your fingers to open or close the reed
- If the reed is flat in pitch and easy blowing, take a single edge razor blade and clip tiny increments off the reed tip until the pitch comes up and more resistance is created to blow against
- Refer to my reed fixing handout
Recruiting Strategies

• Establish their value: make it seem fun and special
• Make playing double reeds a reward
• When to start students
Retaining and Nurturing Double Reed Players

- Ensure instruments in good condition
- Help with reed sources
- Recordings
Not Enough Data?

• We’re happy to help with questions anytime!

• Feel free to contact us at:
  • sberk@uwsp.edu and pholland@uwsp.edu
Q & A