

HOW TO TEACH AND LEARN CHARACTERISTIC CLARINET TONE

by Tom Ridenour

Normally instructions concerning clarinet tone production concentrate exclusively on the cosmetic aspects of clarinet embouchure. But embouchure is only one component of the clarinet's tone production system, the parts of which are interdependent. As a consequence, learning tone production on the clarinet involves understanding how the whole system works together and putting it into practice.

THE TONE PRODUCTION SYSTEM:

There are two elements which work together to generate the clarinet tone: The air column and the reed. There are two elements which work together to control the clarinet tone: the tongue and the embouchure.

DEVELOPING TONAL CONCEPT

Thought must precede action. Thought, once put into action, bears the fruit of understanding. Understanding then directs subsequent action towards a more perfect concrete realization of the ideal held in the mind. This creative reciprocity between thought and action is the dynamic process at work where ever there is true learning. Therefore, before we talk about these tone production elements let's talk about our goal; producing a characteristic clarinet tone. Just what is a characteristic clarinet tone?

Professionals use certain words which give us clues about what fine clarinet tone is. Some of these words are: centered, focused, resonant, well defined, deep, free, and dark. If we juxtapose some of these characteristics, (for example; focused/free) we see they form paradoxes or seeming anomalies. Though they seem to contradict one another, they both are essential to characteristic tone and each must find concrete expression in the various components of tone production without compromising or diminishing one another. It is the development of both an auricular and intellectual understanding of clarinet tone which guides and judges our physical development. This development should also dictate the choices we make regarding equipment. If our understanding is clear, our physical development acoustically efficient and our choice of equipment intelligent and in harmony with our concept we will have fewer frustrations in achieving and maintaining the success we desire. To ignore this process is to one degree or another invite an increase of dissatisfaction and frustration.

Now let's take a look at the physical aspects of tone production and see how the various physical elements work together to realize our conceptual goals.

AIR STREAM AND TONGUE POSITION (VOICING)

The air stream for the clarinet tone needs to be very concentrated. Sometimes this is referred to as "cold air". What this means is that the air stream is a small, narrow, fast moving stream of air rather than a slow, (warm), broad one. Two things aid in the production of the concentration in the air needed for characteristic clarinet tone: blowing properly and effectively shaping and directing of the air stream. First, let's talk about blowing properly.

BLOWING PROPERLY

Most players, once they have taken in a good breath, squeeze the air out by contracting their stomachs, much like a tooth paste tube is squeezed. This method of blowing does not produce the proper compression needed for the clarinet. The best approach is to blow in such a way that the air is concentrated in the body much like material is concentrated in an aerosol can.

Here's how to do it:

After taking a good breath push or direct the air down and out, so that the tummy stays distended by the "low" air. If one is seated in a chair the air would be being pushed down as if it were going through the seat of the chair.

The first method of blowing creates what I call "toothpaste tube air", which as we said is too slow. The second method creates "aerosol can air", which has the proper concentration and compression for the clarinet tone.

PROPER TONGUE POSITION

The proper shaping and directing is done by using the tongue to shape and direct the air. This is done by playing the clarinet with what is called a high tongue position. It is easy to find this position. Simply place your tongue where it would be as if you were beginning to say the word "Key",

"Cake", or simply pretend you are about to say the letter "K".

When you do this you will notice that the middle part of your tongue must move somewhat back in the mouth and lift it up almost to the roof of your mouth so that you can feel the insides of your upper molars with the sides of your tongue.

This high/back tongue position significantly increases the speed of the air and directs it much better at the tip of the reed by creating a

narrow passage between the tongue and the roof of the mouth.

The "aerosol can" type of blowing and the high/back tongue position work together to create the air needed to produce the focused tone and high pitch needed for characteristic clarinet tone.

THE REED AND THE EMOUCHURE

Now that we understand how to energize and direct the air (our fuel for the sound) by proper blowing and voicing techniques let's see how we can best control the reed (our vehicle for the sound).

The embouchure should act upon the reed so it will vibrate both freely and in a controlled way. Here is how to best go about accomplishing this.

1. Open the teeth and lips slightly about the same amount you do when sipping soda from a straw. Notice in doing this that the jaw drops into the position it would be if you were saying the word "oh", or "go".
2. Place the tip of the mouthpiece/reed wedge loosely into the small embouchure opening of the lips and blow air freely through the clarinet without any sound.
3. Next, snug the mouthpiece/reed wedge a bit further into the mouth so that a sound appears. **DO NOT CLOSE THE JAW ON TO THE MOUTHPIECE.** At this point the sound may be very "unfocused" and flat. This is good, because the flatness indicates that your jaw is in an open position.
4. Next, make the lips firm to resist even more snugging of the mouthpiece into the mouth as you simultaneously move your tongue from the "O" position to the high/back "Key" position discussed earlier. (IMPORTANT: Keep the jaw in the "O" position at all times!) The snugging of the mouthpiece/reed wedge done simultaneously with the lifting of the tongue will center and clarify the sound and raise the pitch to the level it should be. (Notice that this high/back tongue position causes the chin muscles to stretch down into a point and pull flat and taut against the jaw bone. The action of the chin will greatly assist the lower lip to both cushion and resist the upward/inward snugging movement of the reed/mouthpiece wedge.) This approach is the "friction" method of reed control and is far superior to the "clamp" or biting method of reed control which results when the reed is controlled by the closure of the jaw.

PROPER RESULTS AND TROUBLE SHOOTING

As you snug the reed/mouthpiece wedge and increase the air pressure the tone will become clearer, more centered and higher in pitch. If, after a certain point, the tone seems to begin to spread or get lower in pitch you have probably

- a) snugged in too much mouthpiece, or, b) not been firm with the lips to cushion and resist the snugging of the mouthpiece, or c) moved the tongue position too low and forward in the mouth, or e) some combination of all three.

WARNING: DON'T BITE!!!!

One important thing to keep in mind is NEVER to close or bite with the jaw. The jaw should be kept in a fixed, open, stable position once it creates the embouchure opening. Reed control pressure should always be achieved by snugging the reed/mouthpiece wedge firmly against the lips, not by closing or clamping the reed with the jaw.

Biting is the single most destructive thing which can be done to the sound and, to repeat, should NEVER be done. ALL of the reed pressure should be gained by snugging.

The few rough drawings which follow should be of further help in learning and/or teaching the techniques we have discussed here.

CONCLUSION

If this material is properly understood and practiced the clarinetist will be well on his way to developing a beautiful, truly characteristic clarinet tone.

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