

Teaching Oboe

By Bennett Reimer

Perhaps more than any other instrument, the oboe is shrouded with an aura of mystery and trepidation. A good oboe player is usually regarded with some measure of awe, for it is widely known that the complexity of the instrument and the inconsistency of its reed establish barriers which are overcome only by those who doggedly pursue the almost supernatural beauty of tone which the oboe possesses.

Now, being a professional oboist myself, I am not in the least anxious to underestimate the difficulties and uncertainties of the oboe and oboe playing; but being a teacher too, I am anxious that these difficulties and uncertainties are not magnified and distorted. Very frankly, it is the latter which is most often done.

It is not easy to trace to the sources the confused and misguided ideas which the general public and the non-oboe playing musician maintain toward this instrument. Choose at random a high school oboist who has never studied with a specialist (this means just about 90% of all high school oboists). Examine his instrument. Look at his reed. Observe him playing a scale. Ask him a few questions concerning the most basic elements of playing, such as embouchure, breath control, tonguing, vibrato, control of intonation, etc. If you happen to be an oboist yourself you will find a physical setup which would terrify a Tabuteau and a confusion which would perplex a philosopher.

The first reaction to the above is to place the blame squarely on the music teacher, but this same teacher, if he happens to be a trumpet player, will usually turn out a fairly respectable clarinetist or flutist

or saxophonist. Similarly, the music teacher who is a performer on the clarinet usually manages to develop brass players who have at the very least, some valid notions about their instrument.

No, the instrumental music teacher with the normal amount of training is not really to blame for the plight of his oboist. He, as well as his student, needs to have a good many of the misconceptions about the oboe brought to light. It is my contention that the high school instrumental teacher, while not capable of developing an oboist to an advanced level, can do a great deal of good and undo a great deal of harm toward providing his music program with student oboists who are assets rather than detriments. The following points are some clear, simple, and practical steps toward that goal.

The Instrument

Complexities of bore and mechanism make the need for a fine oboe

more vital to success in performance than with most other instruments. Fine oboes are expensive. Money spent on a cheap instrument is thrown away. The most practical and money-saving oboe is an expensive one. Consult the oboist in the nearest professional orchestra or the oboe specialist at the nearest music college for advice as to which make to purchase. These are the people who are qualified to recommend an instrument. You will come out ahead both financially and in results if you take their advice.

The Reed

It is here that the gravest errors are made, for without the proper reed a great oboist sounds mediocre and the beginning oboist sounds horrible. It is wise to avoid the short-scraps variety in the commercially made reed. The tendency of this type reed is to sound like a kazoo — the snake charmer tone! Get in touch with the nearest professional oboist or oboe teacher and make arrangements for him to supply you with reeds of the long-scraps type (such as 99% of professionals use themselves). This is no guarantee of perfect results, as a reed must be built for the individual player and his instrument, but at least you will be on the right track.

With a good instrument and the proper type of reed, half the battle has been won. The professional oboist divides his practice time about half making and half in actual playing. Because he makes his living as an oboist you can be sure that he is not using his time wastefully. He knows how important the reed is to his success, and it is just as important to the beginner.



Embouchure

In oboe playing this is a relatively unimportant phase. This statement may sound like heresy to you, but it happens to be a simple fact. With the proper reed, control of playing by the lips is brought to an absolute minimum. One has only to place the bottom blade of the reed in the middle of the red of the lower lip; tuck the entire lip in over the bottom teeth; curl the top lip over the top teeth; bring it down directly above the lower lip; say *oooo* (not *eeee*); and blow.

Pressure on the reed comes from all sides. Because the long-scrape reed has a very narrow opening, pressure up and down will pinch it closed and either stop the air or make a buzzy tone. If you stress the fact that the lips form the syllable *oooo*, that the reed must not be squeezed shut, and that the top and bottom lips are exactly opposed, you have covered the essentials of embouchure. Any deviations from this are simply to make up for defects in the reed and will be dealt with later.

Air Pressure

It is this phase that accounts for the lack of emphasis on embouchure. On an oboe the pressure of the column of

air controls most things that the lips control on other instruments. Blowing comes from the contraction of abdominal muscles, and it takes considerable pressure to produce an oboe tone, enough to cause some beginners to experience occasional dizziness. This is nothing to worry about as the dizziness doesn't arise after a month or two of playing.

It is only after the pressure has been built up that the tone is ready to be produced. Insufficient pressure will necessitate pinching the reed with the lips to play in tune. Since this is taboo, it is obvious that the air column, and not the lips, controls overall pitch and tonal quality. A freely vibrating reed supported by an intense column of air originating from the diaphragm will totally eliminate the nasal buzz so erroneously associated with oboe tone.

If your oboist scoops his notes from below pitch (a common occurrence when tonguing at medium speed) you can be sure that it is not the tongue which is at fault but that the air pressure has been relaxed when the tongue moves. The pressure must be maintained while the tongue simply acts as a valve to release the already built-up



air column. High notes take more air pressure, low notes take less.

Tonguing

Aside from the relationship between tongue and air pressure

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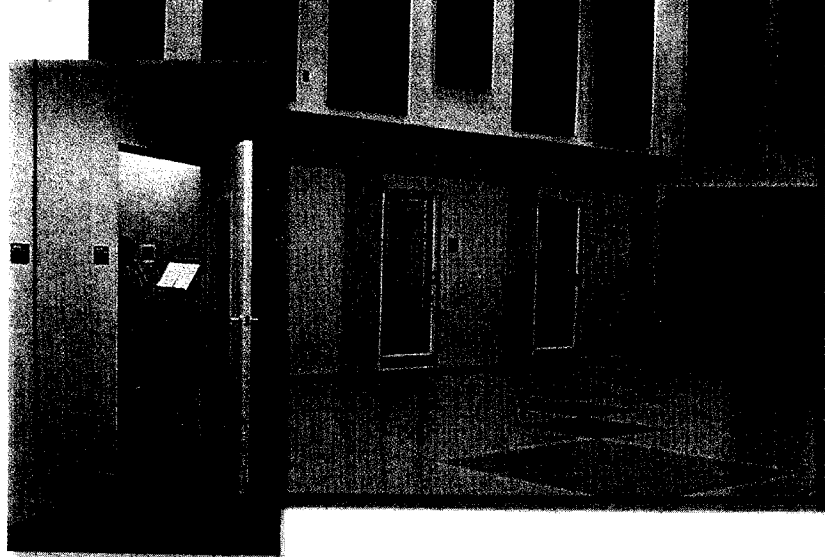
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already pointed out, one must remember that the very tip of the reed is touched by the top surface of the tongue slightly beyond the tip. As in all other wind instruments, lightness of touch and delicacy of release is the rule. No really unique problems exists here.

Fingering

Any standard fingering chart can be relied upon for guidance. Aside from the use of the half-hole on D \flat 5, D5, and D \sharp 5, and the double octave from high A5 to C6, there is little to be said about fingering. The usual procedures for developing technique on the other woodwinds apply here. Do not make the mistake of assuming that technical problems are more severe on oboe than on any other woodwind. You can expect the same overall progress in technique from your oboist as you can from your other students.

Vibrato

There are three ways to produce vibrato on woodwind instruments — jaw, throat, and diaphragm. For oboe, the correct way is the last. Diaphragm vibrato is the alternating

intensity of the air column originating from the diaphragm and carrying through to the bell of the instrument. To produce it one must approximate a silent belly-laugh — as if saying *hoo-hoo-hoo* without the use of the vocal cords.

Patience and understanding are needed here. Only time and continuous practice will change the exaggerated and nervous shake into a smooth, controlled, and natural-sounding vibrato. Work from slow, controlled pulsations to faster, less measured pulses. The goal is an unobtrusive, free, and natural vibrato, such as any fine singer possesses.

Control of Intonation

With a perfect instrument and a perfect reed nothing at all would need to be said about intonation. Normal playing would take care of it entirely. Since the perfect setup is nothing more than a blissful dream, however, compensations must be made.

Three devices are employed on the oboe to temper pitch. First, the amount of reed protruding into the mouth cavity. The more reed taken into the mouth beyond the lips, the higher will be the pitch. The less reed

in the mouth, the lower the pitch. Because the spot on the reed that the lips cover in normal playing varies from reed to reed (a good reed permitting only the tiniest sliver of cane to protrude beyond the lips into the mouth cavity), there are no hard and fast rules about the distance one can move the reed in and out. This is further complicated by the fact that higher notes require more reed in the mouth. Low notes require less. The important thing to remember is that when playing correctly a slight shift of the reed in or out will cause a similar shift in pitch.

The second control of intonation is the position of the back of the tongue. The higher the tongue is placed, the higher will be the pitch — and vice versa. High notes demand a higher arch in the tongue; low notes require a lower arch. Control of pitch must start from the normal position. Any changes are made merely to favor a certain note, or in extreme cases an entire register.

The last and least satisfactory way to control pitch is by pinching and relaxing the lips themselves on the reed. Once the normal amount of pressure for a given reed has been determined

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every effort should be made to keep from changing it. Most beginning oboists have the urge to pinch the reed for high notes. It leads to extreme sharpness of pitch.


A more intense air column, a slight bit more reed in the mouth, and a higher tongue arch will be more than ample to support the pitch in the high register. The only possible way to keep a full tone on these notes is by these principles last stated. Any pinching will immediately cause a sharpness of pitch and a constriction of tone quality.

The suggestions in this article are but few, yet their judicious application should bring amazing results. They are basic to the instrument. Let me assure you that the above techniques represent no one school of oboe playing. Rather, they embrace the finer points of many schools. With a little experimentation and some courage you will find yourself developing oboe students capable of making real contributions to your music program.

When Bennett Reimer wrote this article in December 1957, he was assistant professor of music at Madison College in Harrisonburg, Virginia, teaching woodwinds and wind ensembles, and in 1963 he earned a doctorate from the University of Illinois, Urbana. He went on to become chairman of the music education department and director of the Ph.D. program in music education at Northwestern University and director of the Center for the Study of Education and Musical Experience. He retired from Northwestern in 1997 and became the John W. Beattie Professor of Music Emeritus. He is author or editor of 14 books and more than 110 articles, chapters, and reviews.

Hannover Competition


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