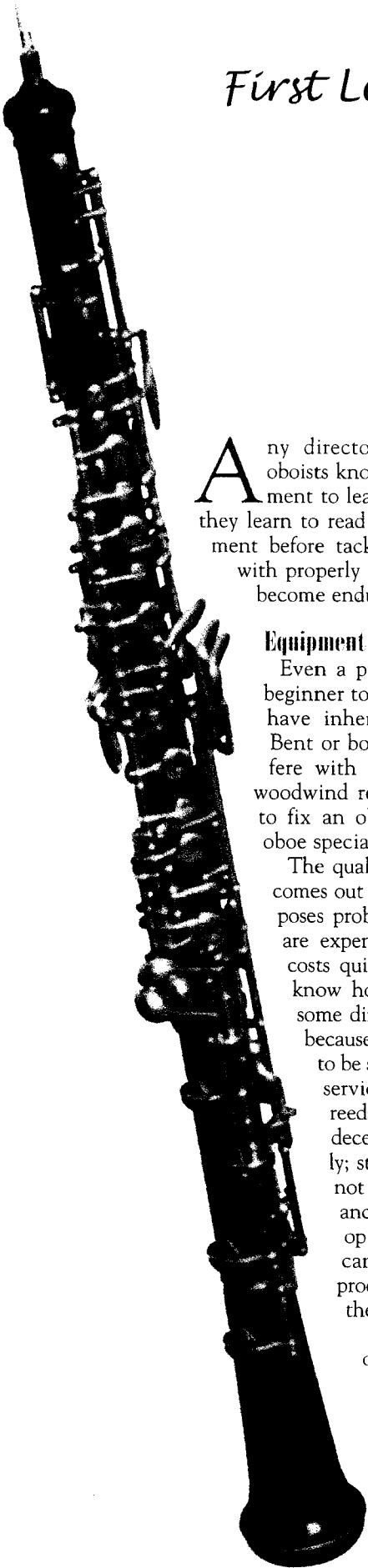


First Lessons On

Oboe

By Grover Schiltz and Kimme Katz



Any director who has taught beginning oboists knows that this is a difficult instrument to learn. Most youngsters do better if they learn to read music and play another instrument before tackling oboe. Problems not dealt with properly in the first oboe lessons usually become enduring bad habits.

Equipment

Even a professional oboe is tough for a beginner to play; most student instruments have inherent and frustrating problems. Bent or bound keys or leaking pads interfere with a good tone, and the nearest woodwind repairman may not be qualified to fix an oboe. Try to locate and use an oboe specialist for all repairs.

The quality of the reed determines what comes out the other end, but delicate cane poses problems for young students. Reeds are expensive at \$10 or more each and costs quickly mount if a child does not know how to care for them. Although some directors advocate Fibercane reeds because they don't break easily or have to be soaked, in the long run it is a disservice to start students on these reeds. Fibercane does not produce a decent sound and responds differently; students using Fibercane reeds do not become accustomed to the resistance of real cane and do not develop a strong embouchure. With a cane reed there is an ongoing process of alternately strengthening the reed and embouchure.

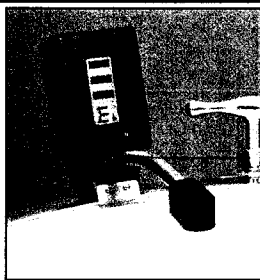
Cane reeds are available throughout the United States and are commercially made by hand in grades of soft, medium, or hard, but it is unclear whether these grades refer to the amount of cane left on the reed or the size of the tip opening. Both will

affect how the reed plays. A fairly closed reed that has a lot of cane on it will have resistance but may not be tough on the embouchure. On the other hand, a reed that is too open will quickly tire the embouchure. Directors should question how a manufacturer grades reeds before placing an order. A small opening is best for students because it doesn't tire the embouchure as quickly as a large opening. Commercial reeds with wire or a thin layer of plastic wrapped around them almost like nail polish should be avoided. The ideal reed has neither leaks nor any material covering up leaks.

Cane reeds will not produce a characteristic oboe tone quality unless they are soaked before playing, but students often omit the soaking process when time is limited after running from class to a rehearsal. In addition, it is not preferable to soak an oboe reed with saliva as with saxophone or clarinet reeds. Although this is better than playing on a dry reed, saliva does not soak into the cane consistently or adequately. Warm water is best for soaking oboe reeds, so directors should give oboists a minute to use a sink or provide a hot pot in the band room. It takes about three minutes to properly soak a reed in hot water, and longer if the water is cool. Players should also dry their reeds thoroughly after playing. Some reeds come in screw-top containers that do not let air in to dry the reeds, which causes them to rot and mold. Students should also understand that any type of Chapstick or lipstick will clog and ruin a reed.

Grover Schiltz played oboe and English horn in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for over 40 years. He has taught at Northwestern University and VanderCook College, coached the oboe section of the Chicago Civic Orchestra, and is currently on faculty at Roosevelt University.

Kimme Katz received a bachelor's degree in oboe performance from St. Olaf College and went on to study with John Mack in Cleveland. She has been a performer and teacher for 24 years and was a member of the Northwest Indiana Symphony and Ars Viva.



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Directors should be able to make minor reed adjustments because most commercial reeds improve with some touch-ups. Students who start with a decent reed produce a fairly pleasant sound, but beginners have a difficult time trying to make a sound on a poor reed and quickly become discouraged. The area from which the cane is scraped greatly affects the pitch and tone quality. If most of the cane comes from the center of a reed, the result will be a nasal sound. There are a few helpful books that provide details on crafting and adjusting reeds. *The Reed Maker's Manual* by David Weber and Ferald Capps and *The Oboe Reed Book* by Jay Light are two good reed-making books for oboists. Originally written for oboe specialists, David Ledet's book, *Oboe Reed Styles* is an informative source for non-oboists because it covers various oboe reed styles from around the world.

Embouchure

The oboe embouchure differs from those used on other woodwinds in that the teeth do not touch or support the reed. For an oboe embouchure the lower jaw drops and the mouth relaxes. The lips are rolled over the top and bottom teeth with the mouth open. Students might say the word paw or think of forming an O with an open mouth before rolling the lips over the teeth. If students think of smiling, they tend to close their mouths, tighten the lips, and bring their teeth together. A common mistake for beginners is to form a flat, spread embouchure similar to that of a clarinetist, but the flatter and thinner the lips are over the teeth, the brighter and harder the sound becomes. With too much biting pressure, reed vibrations will cease. The concept of an O shape equalizes the lip pressure around the reed.

Approximately 1/4 inch of reed tip should be inside the mouth, which muffles some of the nasal, reedy overtones and emphasizes the fundamental and first overtone, the heart of the oboe sound. Lip size dictates how much reed to place in the embouchure. Students with full lips put more reed in the embouchure than those with thin lips. Unless the tip of the reed clears the inside of the lips, a player will produce a flat, unresponsive, unfocused tone if he produces sound at all. With too much reed inside the mouth, the tone sounds like a bagpipe. If a student tongues below the tip, the articulation will be a thud. The upper lip serves primarily to prevent

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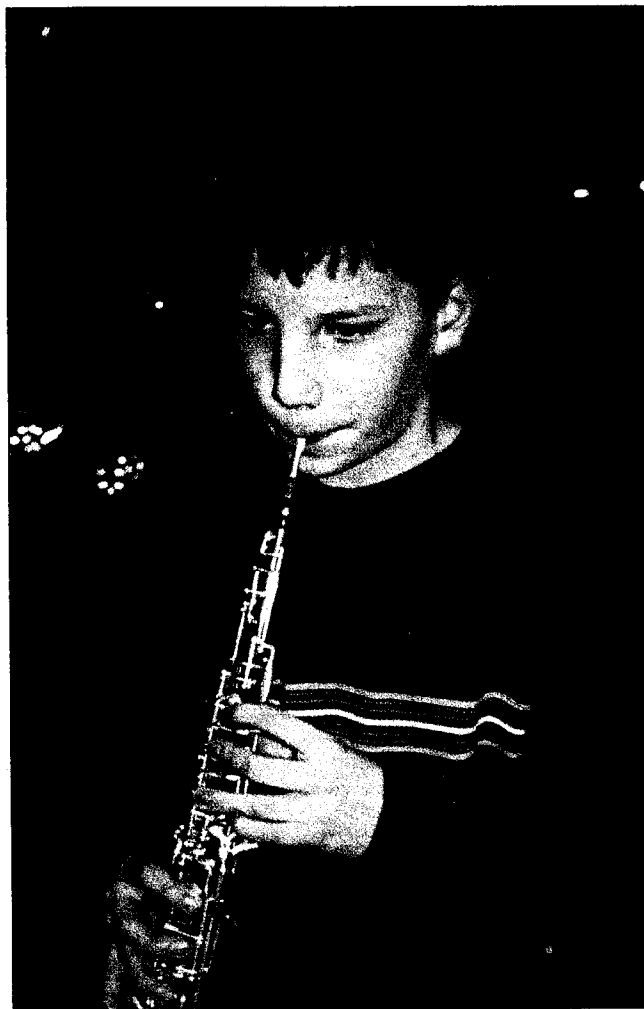
air leakage. A player should grip the reed firmly with his lips but without using the jaw to bite down. A loose seal around the reed reduces control and often produces a wild sound. A tight embouchure will close off the sound or cause the pitch to go sharp.

When shifting registers, oboists should roll the embouchure in for high notes and out for low notes rather than biting or moving the reed. Young players often try to produce different pitches by biting or pinching, but this hinders the dynamics. A good, solid *forte* comes from opening up the embouchure and letting the reed vibrate freely.

Puffy cheeks and lips should be avoided. The embouchure muscles have to be strong enough to resist the air pressure that builds up in the mouth; otherwise the lips will blow out or air pockets will form between the lips and teeth. Because air pockets distort the pitch and sound quality, students should work to keep the lips tight against the teeth, especially on the lower jaw.

With a good reed and properly formed embouchure, an oboist should be able to crow two or three octave Cs and produce a straight, steady pitch. The reed should exit the mouth at a 45° angle downward with the head held straight and the chin parallel to the floor. Some students make the mistake of holding the reed and instrument at a 45° angle to the body but bend their neck so their head is down and the reed actually comes straight out of the mouth.

It takes a similar amount of air pressure to play an oboe as it does to overcome the initial resistance when inflating a balloon. Because of the air resistance, young oboists often contort and raise their shoulders or dig their elbows into the sides of the body. Breathing should be natural, as if



inhaling while running. Students often respond well when asked to play loudly because they equate more air and breath support with loudness. From the time they make their first sounds, students should breathe with the mouth and not through the nose, keeping the reed in place on the lower lip but without pressure. Breathing through the corners of the mouth doesn't give the lips an opportunity to relax and recover. The importance of opening and relaxing the embouchure with each breath is that this allows blood to flow back into the lips.

Tone Quality and Pitch

Like young string players, beginning oboists produce poor sounds for a long time unless teachers emphasize tone quality from the first lesson. Teachers should play with oboe students frequently to illustrate a characteristic sound and to focus on typical ensemble problems of oboes. For instance, it is difficult to raise the pitch in the low register, so the first part player in a duet has to bring his pitch down to match the second part player. Directors who cannot produce a good sound

on the oboe should play recordings of professional oboists, such as Richard Woodhams, Ray Still, Alfred Genovese, and John Mack, to give students a concept of a good oboe sound.

Tuning cannot be glossed over with beginning oboists. Unlike most instruments, oboes can be played almost a half-step too high or low even with a good reed. To avoid the possibility of playing out of tune, all beginning oboists should purchase a tuner. In most ensembles the first oboist provides the tuning pitch, so these players should also develop a good ear. Even in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra a tuner is used to verify that the tuning pitch is correct.

Holding the Instrument

Because the keys on the oboe are spread apart, students with small hands may find it difficult to reach all the keys. For proper left-hand position a student should begin by placing the index finger on the appropriate key and stretching the pinkie down to the E^b key just below the A^b key. With these fingers in place the other two fingers will naturally fall into correct position. Too often, beginning students let the left-hand pinkie hang in mid air because it is rarely needed in beginning oboe pieces. When the pinkie is finally introduced, there is no way it can reach the appropriate keys without distorting the established hand position, creating a problem that is difficult to correct.

The thumb rest should contact the right thumb at the base of the fingernail, where it meets the skin. If the thumb rest is too far out on the thumb, the balance of the instrument is affected; if too far in, the hand will cramp. Students will also make the mistake of bending the wrist and forcing the hand outward, but the hand should extend from the wrist and forearm without contorting.

Double jointedness is a common ailment that causes students to use stiff, flat finger positions in which the tips of the fingers shoot out over the keys. All fingers should be curved as if playing a chord on the piano, with only the tips of the fingers against the keys.

Although most directors initially avoid teaching the half-hole technique, it is an integral part of oboe playing that should be covered within the first three lessons. Because D5 is a good sounding note that responds easily, use it to introduce the half-hole technique, which involves a combination of sliding and rolling. When using the half hole, it is fairly easy to slide the finger down, but difficult to slide it back up, so a combination slide-roll works best. Young students may also have difficulty clearing the entire hole and moving the finger



all the way onto the pancake portion of the key without sliding and rolling the finger at the same time.

Overall there will be fewer oboe dropouts if directors are persistent in eliminating the most common mistakes before they become bad habits. With a good reed, a well-maintained instrument, and correct guidance, beginning oboists will be more likely to become advanced players. □

Martin, continued from page 30

I play a little bit of piano but I'm really bad at it. Currently I'm taking guitar lessons, but I'm embarrassingly bad and it, too. After playing a melody instrument for so long I enjoy working on harmonics and the balance of chord changes. I really love trumpet, yet sometimes I wish that I had stuck with the horn and its beautiful sound. I also envy string players, especially violinists and cellists, who have such incredible repertoire to choose from. They could spend a lifetime playing just Classical and Romantic music and never cover it all. Trumpet players have only a handful of great pieces from past eras, but many fine composers are now writing for brass. This is a good time to be a brass player.

Whenever I get nervous about an upcoming performance I remind myself that all I can do is try to be the best I can in that moment. I try to stay

focused and forget about tomorrow or whatever may happen in the future. The same is true for an audition, when you have only five minutes, ten at the most, to play. If you don't get into that school or land that job, life will go on. Play your best and try to enjoy playing for that moment. Strive to have fun regardless of where you are and who is listening. It is easy to have fun playing in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra because it is like sitting in the middle of a finely-tuned machine. Anyone who has ridden in a really fantastic sports car knows what an incredible experience that is, and I find being part of the Chicago Symphony is like that. I am surrounded by incredibly focused and talented musicians, and we play great music. I couldn't ask for anything more. □

Chris Martin was appointed principal trumpet in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 2005. He was previously

the principal trumpet in the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra since 2000. He earned a degree in trumpet performance from the Eastman School of Music, where he studied with Charles Geyer and Barbara Butler.

