North Dakota State University
Challey School of Music

Summer Symposium in Music Education
Strategies for Teaching Better Bassoons

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Selecting Your Bassoonists

Who Makes a Good Bassoonist?

The best bassoonists all have the same two traits: ***Enthusiasm*** and ***Motivation***

I believe that the bassoon can be grown into, so the best traits for a new bassoonist are often the non-musical ones. (Although a good ear is extremely helpful.)

The initial learning curve on the bassoon is steep. The student needs to not be discouraged by the sounds (good and bad) that come with the unique embouchure and specialized fingering challenges that arrive earlier in the curriculum than similar difficulties of other instruments.

The best bassoonists are often found in your second flute/clarinet sections, but a good bassoonist can come from any section. Look for students who have a clear love for band, but maybe less initial talent.

Size Considerations

Two Important Tests

Can the student sit in a chair with feet on the floor?

This is important because it helps hold the weight and balance of the bassoon. If a student is too small, this can be accommodated by using a small box or board where a student can place their feet.

Can the student cover all the left-hand tone hole comfortably?

The left-hand ring finger must be able to cover the tone hole.
Many student bassoons come with a short reach key that will accommodate this as they grow.

It is important, however, to get a more advanced student off a short reach instrument, when possible, as the short reach key does affect the tone and pitch slightly, and this will become more noticeable as the student progresses.

Starting Your Bassoonists

Introducing the Instrument

The ground is your friend!

The case should always be opened on the ground. When assembling the instrument, place the boot joint on the ground. Do the same when disassembling the instrument. Hold the boot joint between the feet for extra stability.

Only add one joint at a time, start from the ground up. Boot joint, followed by long joint, wing joint and bell joint.

A Word About Joint Locks

Joint locks are a necessary evil for protecting your student model bassoons, unfortunately they can also make assembling the instrument difficult. If the joint lock gets in the way of easily assembling the instrument, reverse the long joint and wing joint when assembling and disassembling the instrument.

Before the First Notes

Important things to learn before playing the first notes:

Posture - Sit *ALL THE WAY* back in the chair.

This is necessary to allow the seat strap to take the full weight of the bassoon. It also affects the angle of the bassoon, keeping weight off the hands and wrists of the player. Move the bassoon to you, do not move you to the bassoon.

One of the most common issues I see when I work with young bassoonists is slouching the neck or lifting the chin to meet the reed. These posture issues can have negative cumulative effects on the body, and do not allow the students to use proper breathing techniques. The easiest ways to do this are to adjust the seat strap and the bocal.

Bassoon Position - The window to read music

The bassoon is not a saxophone and should be played across the body, like a hypotenuse across the body, or in a seat belt position. Once the bassoon is in place, move the bocal to the face, making sure that the whisper keypad can still be closed.

Hand Placement

If possible, have students use the hand rest from the onset. This is great in creating good hand position and is healthier on young hands and wrists. The right thumb should be placed lightly on the Low E key, not resting above the keys.

Seat Strap

There are many kinds of effective seat straps. The important thing is that they hold the weight of the instrument without slipping. Hook straps tend to work best for younger players, as cup straps have a tendency to get stuck in keys that aren't protected with tone hole protectors.

Be careful of novelty straps, which are fun, but can sometimes be overly slippery and could lead to accidents.

Seat Strap Placement

Place the seat strap near the front of the chair, roughly two inches from the front of the chair. It should also go under the thighs, not the hips or buttocks. The goal is for the bassoon to be as close as perpendicular to the floor as possible.

Embouchure

Keep the embouchure loose. Initially, students will try to bite down on the reed to aid in sound production, creating unhealthy habits that are exceedingly difficult to break. It is important to make sure that they are using air support to make pitch, not tight lips, and jaws.

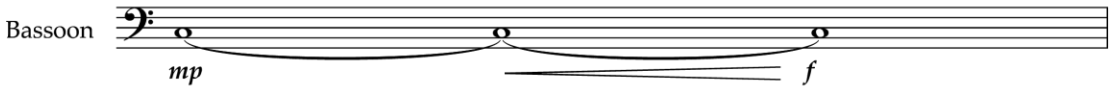
The students will probably play flat initially if they are using a correct embouchure.

To help students with learning proper breathing and embouchure, have students do the exercise on the following page.

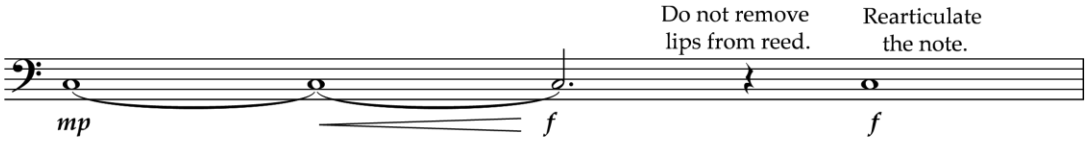
Embouchure Relaxation Exercise

Martin J. Van Klompenberg

1.) Pick any note. Start with at a moderate volume. Cresendo to a full forte dynamic and hold the note.



2.) Pick any note. Start with at a moderate volume. Cresendo to a full forte dynamic and hold the note. Release the note without removing lips from the reed. Rearticulate the note at the previous volume.



3.) Pick any note. Relax the embouchure by making an "Ahhhh" motion with the jaw and relaxing the lips. Do not stop if the note goes flat or the tone changes drastically.

4.) Pick any note. Relax the embouchure by making an "Ahhhh" motion with the jaw and relaxing the lips. Do not stop if the note goes flat or the tone changes drastically. Release the note without removing lips from the reed. Rearticulate the note at the previous volume.

Reeds

Whenever possible, purchase handmade and play-tested reeds. This will drastically improve the quality of new reeds and eliminate variance in quality. Avoid reeds labeled “soft” or “medium soft” for this same reason. Unlike single reeds, students do not “move up” on bassoon reeds. Medium reeds will work for most school-aged bassoonists for the entirety of their time in your band. While they are harder to play at first, this will help eliminate bad breathing and embouchure habits as they advance.

The standard machine-made reed is the Jones reed (The red one). This reed can be good, but the variance in quality is quite high. If you can, use the quick reed tests below on each reed before purchasing.

I have found that the following reeds are of slightly better quality and be available through your band supplier:

- Jones (The purple one)
- Eastman reeds (the rainbow one)
- Singing Dog Reeds

There are currently many fantastic reed makers out there to help your students. Examples include Jiffy Reeds, Raven Reeds, and ACDC Reeds. Bassoon specialty shops like Midwest Musical Imports, Bocal Majority and Forrests Music will also stock a wide variety of handmade reeds.

Quick Reed Tests

Check the E’s and C#’s - If they drop or play extremely flat, these reeds are too soft.

Have the student play quiet low notes, usually a low D and a low C. If the notes do not speak readily with normal air and tip pressure, the reed is likely too hard or too open. (Or both!)

Unless you have a quality back up immediately available:

DO NOT SCRAPE THE REED!!!

Basic Reed Tools

The most valuable tool for the band director is a simple pair of pliers.

Other tools that might be helpful:

- Plaque
- Sandpaper
- Tip cutter

Fixing the Reed

The easiest fix is to open or close the tip, by adjusting the top wire. Try to avoid changing the second wire. Only adjust the reed using pliers, as equal pressure needs to be applied from both sides of the reed.

Squeezing from the side will open the tip and harden reed
Squeezing from the top will close the tip and soften reed

If after adjusting the wires, the reed still plays flat, it may need to be shortened. Always underdo this adjustment. (More cane can come off, it cannot go back on) Never take off more than 1millimeter, and usually even less.

If a reed sounds “almost there,” a gentle sanding can soften it up a small amount.

Making Reeds Last

Ditch the tube!
Tubes and clamshell cases do not allow for proper air flow and can cause reeds to deteriorate or become moldy. Simple reed cases can be made from metal mint containers, lined with paper towels, which should be changed regularly.

When choosing a proper reed case, make sure that the case allows for some air flow. Often less expensive cases will need to have a hole drilled help with this.

A quick soak in plain Listerine style mouthwash (The non-foamy kind) followed by a rinse will help elongate the life of the reed. Always wipe off the excess liquid with a towel before putting the reed back into the case.

Advanced Reed Tests

These are the tests that I instruct my students at NDSU, it is designed for a more advanced student. These tests are designed to be done in numerical order. The goal of these tests is to improve pitch and response. After each adjustment, sand and smooth the reed. If an adjustment is made, the reed tests need to be re-started from Step 1.

1.) Play a two octave F Major scale. Play at a comfortable mezzo dynamic. Play both slow and fast scales.

Is the reed generally responsive? Are any notes particularly out of tune? Is the tone color uniform throughout?
No scrapes are done at this time.

2.) Articulate Low Db as quietly as possible.

Is it possible to articulate multiple ***pp*** low Dbs?
If you cannot clearly articulate the Db, the tip of your reed is too heavy. Scrape lightly in Zone 1.

3.) Test the Bb harmonic

Are the two notes mostly in tune? Ignore tone color, focus solely on the pitch.
If the harmonic Bb is sharp, scrape lightly in Zone 2.

4.) Slur D2 to F#2. Slur E2 to G2.

Are the slurs responsive? Are the top notes in tune? Secondarily, can perform these slurs at a ***pp*** dynamic?
If the F# and/or G is sharp, scrape lightly in Zone 3.

5.) Arpeggiate an F major triad aggressively in a low F.

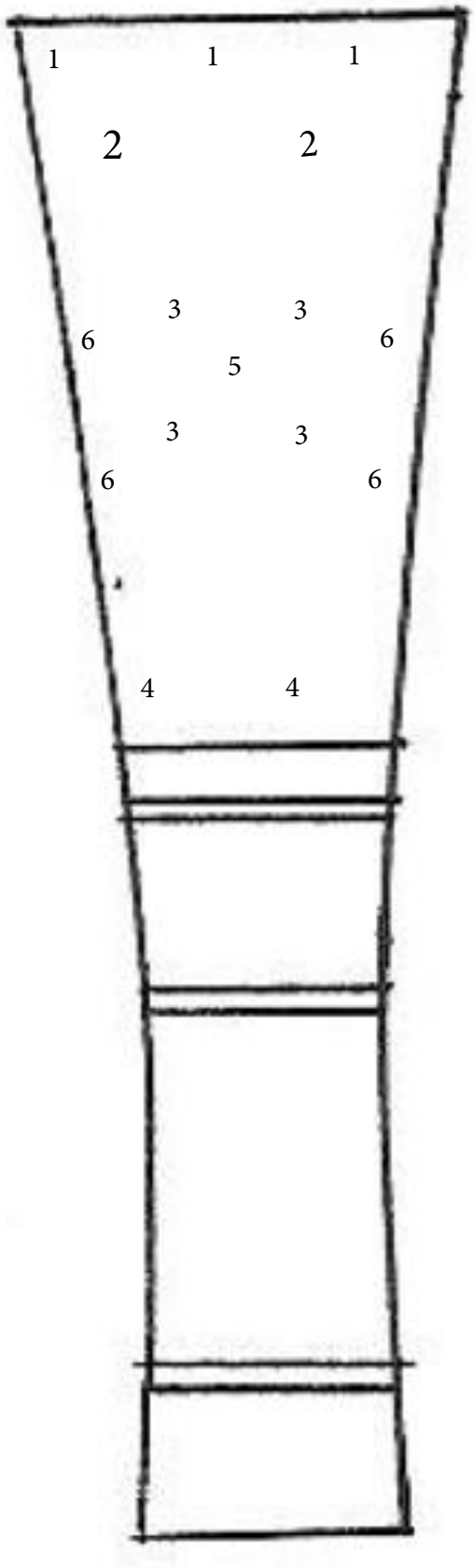
Is the slur clean? Is the bottom F in tune? If yes, also play a low F to low C slur aggressively. Is the slur clean? Is the bottom C in tune?
If is it sharp, scrape lightly in Zone 4

6.) Decrescendo a D2 until the sound completely disappears.

Can you adequately lower the sound? If yes, also test this on F#2.
If the sound cuts out, scrape more in Zone 5.

7.) Is the reed buzzy?

If the reed is buzzy, scrape slightly in Zone 6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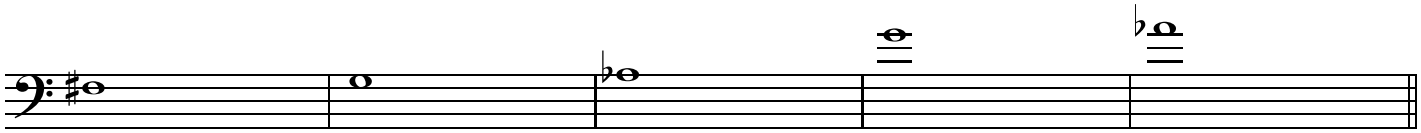
A Look at Better Fingerings

Fingering charts in most standard band texts are often lacking.
The following are commonly used fingering solutions used by many professional players.

The Half Hole Notes

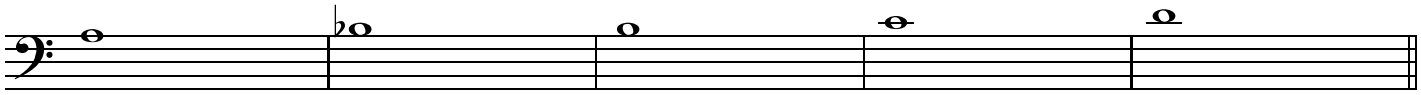


More open HH Normal HH Less open HH Normal HH Less open HH

Important notes about Half Holes: Half hole notes should always use the whisper key. These notes may speak without it, but it stabilizes the note greatly!

Venting/Flicking

Venting (or most commonly known as Flicking) serves as the "octave key" for bassoon. Frequently, standard band texts will not have these as the standard fingering, but adding these keys will ensure consistent articulation and pitch on this range, which is among the most resistant on the instrument.



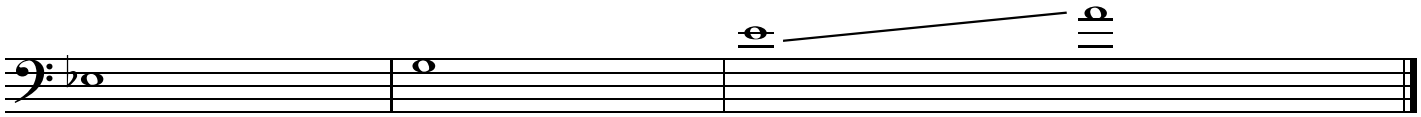
A Key Bb Key Bb Key Bb Key D Key
Often not on student instruments

The vent keys are located in the five (or four on most student instruments) key row that is played by the left thumb. From bottom to top those keys are called: The Whisper Key, The C# Key, The A A Key, the Bb (or C) Key, and the D Key.

It will look like this in a standard fingering char:t

D
C
A
C#
W

The E-flat Key



The Eb key is the top, left pinky key. It provides stability, added resonance, and better intonation.

Equipping Your Bassoonists

Finding An Instrument for Your School

Bassoons are expensive, invest your program's money wisely. Wood instruments generally have a freer sound that is much more easily manipulated; however, they tend to cost roughly twice as much as a quality plastic instrument and may require regular maintenance.

Brands: Fox/Renard, Moosmann, Schreiber (Howarth)

Plastic instruments have improved greatly in quality over the last decade. There are more options than ever. The biggest difference between the various brands is in the keywork. Less expensive instruments tend to have weaker keywork, which can lead to broken keys, pads that will not properly seal, etc. Most school-aged bassoonists can use a good plastic instrument for the duration of the time in your band and will sound excellent.

Brands: Fox/Renard, Noble

Maintaining Your Existing Instruments

One of the most important maintenance issues involves storing the instrument in ultra-dry storage facilities. This can dry out the wood and lead to cracking. It is important to make sure you have your wood bassoon properly re-oiled by a professional repairperson.

Swab the wing and boot joints after each use. Always swab from bigger end to smaller end. Both cotton and silk swabs are quality, however, silk swabs are less likely to get stuck in the wing joint.

For the wing joint, swab from bottom to top
For the boot joint, swab from the larger hole to the smaller hole
This will prevent swabs from getting stuck in tone holes. For the boot joint, this will also help with wood rot.

To check the seal, slowly play a C diatonic scale from bottom line G. If a note becomes extremely difficult to play, or does not play at all, that particular key is likely not sealed correctly.

This is the range where air leaks are most common due to fragility of the longer, more complex keywork. Damage to these keys is most common during assembly/disassembly of the instruments.

Keep cases clean and maintained. Broken cases will rattle bassoons, causing leaks. If the bassoon does not sit tightly, the case needs to be replaced.

Bocals

Damaged bocals will not play properly. Once a bocal has become bent, it will greatly affect pitch and response. To prevent bends, use the “Finger Gun” method.

Finger Gun Method:
Make a gun shape with your right hand.
Place the index finger (or barrel) on the cork of the bocal
Place the palm of the hand on the top of the first curve.
Slowly screw in the bocal, and do not force it.

Never apply pressure from the reed end of the bocal. This will cause bends will weaken the metal on the bocal and can cause splits. This applies pressure to the stronger parts of the bocal and prevents bends and cracks.

Upgrade your bocal before your instrument. An updated bocal can drastically improve tone and pitch, while also saving your program thousands of dollars. Fox, Heckel, Moosmann, and Leitzinger are the most common brands of upgraded bocals.

Beginning students will only need one, if possible, a “2” bocal. Store extra bocals away from the instrument to prevent damage.

Selected Vendor List

Bocal Majority (Richardson, TX)

www.bocalmajoritystore.com
Carries instruments, maintenance supplies and reeds/reed making supplies.
Runs a weeklong, Texas-based oboe and bassoon intensive camp that meets several weeks each summer.

Chemical City Reeds (Baton Rouge, LA)

www.chemicalcityreeds.com
Carries instruments, maintenance supplies and reeds/reed making supplies.

Forrests Music (Berkeley, CA)

www.forrestsmusic.com
Carries instruments, maintenance supplies and reeds/reed making supplies.

Midwest Musical Imports (Minneapolis, MN)

www.mmimports.com
Carries instruments, maintenance supplies and reeds/reed making supplies.
Provides specialized instrument repair and maintenance.

Miller Double Reed (Philadelphia, PA)

www.millerdoublereed.com
Carries instruments, maintenance supplies and reeds/reed making supplies.
The exclusive dealer of Moosmann bassoon in the United States.

TrevCo Music (Middlebury, CT)

www.trevcomusic.com
Double reed specific sheet music dealer. If they do not sell it, it probably isn't in print.

Additional Resources

Bellamy, Cayla. www.caylabellamy.com.

Bohls, Sally & Jennifer Auerbach. Beginner Class Boot Camp: A Double Reed Classroom Method. Bocal Majority. 2016.

B.O.S.S. (Bassoon Outreach to Support Students) www.bossbassoon.com

Huddleston, Cheryl Ann. Foundations for Success: Technical Training for the Young Bassoonist. Southern Music. 2004.

Stees, Barrick. www.steesbassoon.com