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Trends in Clarinet Playing

GEORGE E. WALN

OVER THE YEARS there has been controversy regarding what constitutes correct clarinet playing, particularly tone quality. The aspiring pupil who seeks a new teacher often asks him, "Do you teach the French School of playing or the German?" There is a distinct difference in the types of tone produced by clarinetists in different countries. This is also true of other instruments. The German musician likes a clarinet tone which is big, solid, and a little on the rough or harsh side; a tone which emits from the use of a firm reed with a long vibrating surface, fitted to a mouthpiece which has a long open facing. The opposite effect is found in the character of tone produced by the French musician. He likes a timbre which is sweet, refined, light, and flexible. To produce this quality the player uses a softer, more flexible reed attached to a mouthpiece which has a short facing (close lay), without much vibrating distance between the tip of the reed and the mouthpiece. There is much to be said for each type of tone, the German and the French.

Trend in the U.S.A.

The influences of the European teachers who have come to this country obviously have been felt strongly. Over the years the young American clarinetists who have studied with these German, French, and Italian artists have not been satisfied with the European extremes. The majority of them, although leaning more toward the French method than the German, have worked toward a compromise between the German bigness of tone and the French sweetness of tone. It is a compromise between the long, open-lay mouthpiece with a stiff reed, and the short close facing with a comparatively soft reed. When I am asked what school of clarinet playing I use and teach, the German or French, I reply "Neither." I favor the American school, a method which employs a mouthpiece of medium facing as to both length and tip opening, and a reed of medium strength. A tone produced from this equipment in the hands of a capable player meets the demands of our orchestra and band conductors for its round, mellow, and flexible characteristics. It has good carrying power. The greater the distance between the reed and the face of the mouthpiece, the softer and thinner must be the reed. A reed which is cut so thin as to accommodate such an open facing will not hold up under continued playing.

Trend Toward Vibrato

The clarinet has been one woodwind instrument which has not been played extensively with the use of the vibrato. Its warmth, blend, flexibility, and natural beauty have not encouraged the added device of the vibrato. In recent years, however, with the wide use of the clarinet as a featured instrument in the dance band it

has been common practice to waver the tone while playing this type of music. If this waver were confined to use in playing dance music there would be little concern over the trend about which we are speaking. Good or bad, the trend is creeping into the classical field.

Danger in Using Vibrato

Even if carefully and wisely used in a few instances by the schooled, mature player, this trend of using vibrato seems to me to be bad. Our young players in the schools who gain most of their mental conception of a fine clarinet tone through hearing clarinetists on radio and in concert will certainly try to imitate what they hear. It is one thing for an experienced player to use a vibrato in a few effects, but still quite another thing for the young player to allow his tone to waver in an attempt to copy a clarinetist whom he has heard on the radio or on recordings. The boy or girl can be kept in check if he is under the guidance of a specialized clarinet teacher, but all too often in the public school curriculum this specialization is impossible. Too many young clarinetists purchase mouthpieces with open facings in an effort to get what they call an "edge" to the tone. This has its place for certain effects in the dance band, but it is not good for the student who is trying to develop a mellow tone suitable for use in the school band and orchestra where blend and quality are of the utmost importance. And, besides, the open facing is usually fitted with a stiff reed which overtaxes the young player's strength and endurance. Such a reed prevents the playing of pianissimo and it produces a "fog horn" low register.

Opinions about Vibrato

After exchanging ideas and opinions with other clarinetists on a recent trip, I have come to the conclusion that the vibrato trend is most prevalent on the east and west coasts. It seems to be a fad which is picked up by the player himself and is not taught by the serious teacher. The clarinet teachers I visited in the colleges through the Midwest and South were meticulous in their demands in building embouchures and breath support capable of producing solid and flexible tone quality. Many private teachers on the east and west coasts likewise are producing fine clarinetists. The teachers who obviously are placing the remuneration for teaching above the quality of their own work are in the minority, and, yet, there are too many of them in the profession.

Daniel Bonade whose playing and teaching are internationally known has this to say about vibrato¹: "I have never touched on the controversy about vibrato tone on the clarinet, but I will say just this: I have never heard a vibrato tone on the clarinet that had the purity the instrument is known for. In fact, vibrato distorts the clarinet tone and is a mistaken substitute for what should

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¹*Symphony Magazine*, May 1950.

be 'intensity' of tone." Anthony Gigliotti of the Philadelphia Orchestra writes²: "Vibrato is not generally accepted because it tends to distort the tone of the instrument." These words came from David Weber, clarinetist at CBS in New York.³ "A good clarinet tone is clear and pleasant in its simplicity and does not require vibrato *all the time*. I use it occasionally when the composers indicate that they want it. I assume they don't want it when they do not indicate it. However, if vibrato is used, by all means use the best one; that is, the controlled spasm of the diaphragm."

I believe there should be a clear distinction made between vibrato in the tone and *intensity*. For warmth of expression there are frequent uses made of an intensity effort. This is done from the diaphragm and controlled in the mouth and throat. Some would say that it is produced and controlled from the soul.

"Single Lip" Embouchure versus "Double Lip"

One treads upon argumentative ground if he advocates a superiority of "single lip" embouchure over "double lip," or vice versa. I should like to make only a few comments. The French for years have taught the use of the "double lip" position (covering both the upper and lower teeth with the lips similar to the embouchure used in playing the double-reed instruments), while the American plan of embouchure resembles the German in that the "single lip" is used (resting the upper teeth on top of the mouthpiece while covering the lower teeth with

²*Symphony Magazine*, April 1950.

³*Woodwind Magazine*, January 1950.

the lower lip). Both styles of playing are currently used in the United States. The "single lip" embouchure is by far the most widely used, although many fine artists use the "double." For educational purposes in our schools I feel convinced that the "single lip" type is preferable. I am convinced because I believe that the young player can more easily and quickly build a usable "single lip" embouchure than he can the "double lip" type. This is because in the "double" the player must develop a spot on the interior of the upper lip where the teeth must cushion and press. He can likewise maintain an embouchure with less practice when using the "single lip" setting. I believe too, that the "single" enables the player to use a medium strength reed which is probably too stiff and taxing for the "double lip" formation. This firmer reed will not only last longer but will produce a more solid tone.

Conclusion

I should like to express a few words of praise for the fine teaching which I have so recently had the pleasure of observing from coast to coast. Poor teaching in the music field is all too prevalent. I observed some of that, too. However, I feel that there is a growing awareness of their limitations among the woodwind teachers of this country, and that they are making every effort to correct and rise above them. Every clarinet teacher will have to weigh in his own mind the advantages and disadvantages of the factors of embouchure, mouthpiece, reed, and vibrato. My references are stated in the foregoing lines, but this is no sign that I am right. I would like your ideas!

Graduate Studies Cooperative Project

FOR MANY YEARS the Music Education Research Council has served as the study group of the MENC. Until recently, the members of the Council, assisted at times by a number of selected authorities, have carried on the various studies assigned to and originating within the Council. It is now apparent that in order to meet the many requests for information which come to the Council through the headquarters office, and to adequately serve music education, the Council must call on the schools of graduate studies for assistance.

With the start of the school year 1950-51, it was proposed that graduate schools suggest that their students consider the selection of a dissertation topic from the list of proposed studies provided by the Research Council. If a graduate student selects one of the proposed studies with the approval of his college or university, the Council will, after receiving the dissertation, consider it for publication either in its original form or with suggested revisions. This does not constitute an advance commitment to publish any dissertation. Without doubt, there will be many dissertations that cannot for practical reasons be published, but perhaps should be brought to the attention of teachers and administrators. Studies falling into this category may be referred to the Editorial Board to be considered for inclusion, in whole or in part, or in digest form, among the articles appearing in the *MUSIC EDUCATORS JOURNAL*.

Graduate students and their advisors must be reminded that the Council will not consider any study submitted until the following requirements have been met:

(1) *Declaration of Intent*. A form is supplied which must be filed with the chairman of the Research Council at the start of the study. The chairman of the Council will select an editorial committee of three who will report on the study to the Council and make appropriate recommendations to that group. The student making the study and his advisor will be informed as to whether a similar study has been started at another graduate study center.

(2) *Approval by Sponsoring Institution*. The approval of the proposed study by the faculty advisor, or graduate committee of the sponsoring institution in which the author is a student, must be certified on the blank called "Declaration of Intent."

(3) *Abstract of Study*. An abstract must be supplied to the Council by the author at the time the study is submitted for consideration. A study without an abstract will not be accepted.

The list of graduate studies recommended by the Council and submitted to all graduate schools this year will be found on page 52. MENC members are invited to study this list, and to submit to the chairman of the Research Council their suggestions regarding other studies which they believe should receive attention.

Further information on the studies may be received by writing William R. Sur, chairman, Music Education Research Council, Michigan State College, Music Department, East Lansing, Michigan.

Note: With the cooperation of the MENC Division presidents, arrangements have been made to give Conference members an opportunity to attend sessions of the Council at the 1951 Division conventions, and to make suggestions for inclusion in the listing of recommended studies which the Council plans to prepare and submit annually to the graduate schools.