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Basic Problems in Woodwind Teaching

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Basic Problems in Woodwind Teaching

AFORETOKEN of the gradual demise of the high school orchestra was the increase in the number of instrumental teachers who were not primarily string teachers. The inevitable result has been a matter of concern for a number of years. In many communities the instrumental program has been, and apparently will continue to be, one-sided. An obvious parallel, equally unpleasant to contemplate, pertains in the band. The condition of our woodwind sections may be due to a lack of understanding about how to develop woodwind players.

A lack of adequate training in instrumental methods will be especially noticed in the woodwinds where generalizations concerning embouchure and fingering systems cannot be made as easily as with the brasses. This is not to over-simplify the brass problem; but it seems that there are more teachers who are primarily brass players.

Tone Control Important

The basic problem in instrumental instruction is not digital technique; it is not the development of reading ability; it is the development of tone and tone control. For the basis of reading ability should be founded before instrumental work is begun; digital technique yields to the kind of practice which high school students find most interesting; and an intelligent teacher can understand the system of most keyed instruments by careful study of good fingering charts, preferably the complete ones found in the conservatory methods. But, again to draw the parallel with the orchestra, without exception the string program has been successful only where there has been a teacher who knew how to develop string tone; and almost without exception the teacher was one who knew how to produce and could exemplify good string tone. The development of tone need almost have been experienced if the teacher is going to help others develop good tone. Certainly a mental concept of good tone quality and vicarious experience in developing it are indispensable.

High school students are likely to be interested most easily in rhythmic problems and digital technique; but proper stimulation can lead them to find their fullest satisfaction in the development of good tone. Concern with improvement of tone can yield amazingly quick results, although its ultimate development is a slow process. It is a complicated process because the teacher has limited time to spend with his classes, and because embouchure development requires continuous correction and example by the teacher. Only the most interested students follow assiduously and correctly the teacher's suggestions and corrections. Subsequent practice develops other poor habits which again must be corrected.

Let us consider the clarinet, which should be basic to the teacher's approach to the woodwinds. While there are numerous problems of mouthpiece, reeds, and instrument which can be understood fully only by one who plays a woodwind instrument, an understanding of two basic problems will improve tone quality. A good mouthpiece and a good reed, both properly suited to the maturity and capa-

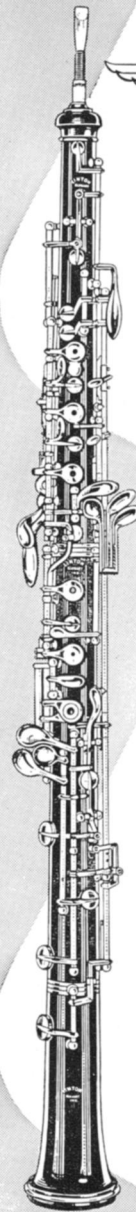
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bility of the student—and the one to the other—are necessary for good results.

Embouchure Needs Checking

Almost immediate results can be attained by checking the length of the bite and the amount of breath support. Attention to this first basic point can improve the quality of the clarinet section within a few days. A small bite results in a pinched tone; contrary to the student's expectation a pinched tone is often flat because of lack of breath support. A longer bite permits more air to flow into the instrument, requires more adequate breath support, and produces a fuller tone with better intonation. The bite must be long enough to produce a full tone, but not so long as to produce a wild tone; it may be roughly estimated at one-half inch, with variations dependent upon the length and openness of the lay and the maturity of the embouchure.

Embouchure development should begin in the lowest register. Playing low "E" with a firm round embouchure will hasten the development of adequate breath support and will strengthen the muscles, all of the muscles. The muscles are not used like the jaws of a pliers from above and below the mouthpiece but are used more like a rubber binder placed about the mouthpiece with firmness from all directions. Again, the over-exaggerated "smile" results in a thin, pinched tone. With the full roundness of the low "E" adequately supported with breath as his standard of tone quality, the student proceeds upwards for an octave, slurring various tonal combinations. There are some excellent exercises for this purpose in Baermann, Klose, and Lazarus. The work is to be slurred and all tones are to be compared to the full basic quality of the low "E". When this has been accomplished with some skill, always bearing in mind that the embouchure does not change and that breath support remains constant, the student should do similar exercises at the twelfth above.

The register change and even skips of small intervals in the low register seem to be crucial points for most teachers who are brass players. Overtone on brass instruments are produced by the embouchure; brass players react involuntarily to skips, more so than most of us, and find it difficult to understand the idea of a basic embouchure which need not change to produce various pitches. There is of course a slight adjustment necessary to aid intonation, but this humoring of those tones whose fingerings do not produce true pitch should not be confused with a change in the basic embouchure. The basis of tone is a firm, steady embouchure and a full flow of breath.

Pupils Should Know This

One way of presenting this fact is to show that tone production is the work of the embouchure and the breath. This may be considered one department of playing, unrelated to pitch, which is dependent upon fingering. It is possible to prove to the student, by the teacher fingering the instrument as the student produces the tone, that it is unnecessary to anticipate every change in pitch or movement of the fingers with a corresponding change in embouchure. The various pitches will be produced even though the students cannot anticipate what the teacher will finger.

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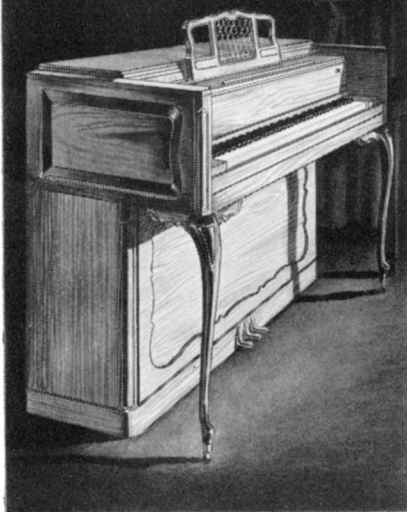
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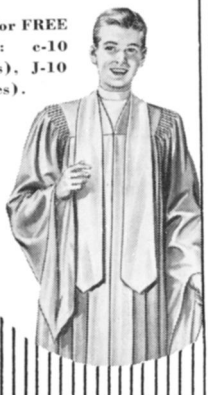
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scendo and diminuendo might well be deferred until the student can play with good control of pitch. Inherent in this concept of tone production is the legato approach, the smooth flowing from one tone to another, carrying the full quality of the basic tone gradually higher and higher. This is in antithesis to the approach in teaching brass instruments where early emphasis is on attack, and presents another difficulty for the brass major. Firm, steady embouchure and continuous breath support are aided by slurred studies and are hindered by those which require continual articulation. Scales, scales by thirds, arpeggios, and larger intervals constitute the cumulative material of this study in legato playing.

The beginning band books are often based on the brass approach, with emphasis on the attack and release of tones of short duration. This rhythmic approach is important for the student as a potential band member but does little for his development as a clarinet player. Legato is important also for the development of digital facility; detached tones conceal the lack of smooth finger action. The band approach must be complemented by exercises as suggested.

Correct Articulation Essential

The second basic point is articulation. It is essential that the student learn how to begin a tone. Even slurred passages must be started. But the word "attack" is misleading. Adequate though the term may be for brass teaching it connotes a hardness, a thrust, which may be responsible for the type of articulation which is often heard. Some fine teachers have borrowed the vocal term "place," which is hardly descriptive except to suggest the care with which the breath is sent into the instrument. And that is the heart of the matter: basically it is a matter of setting the reed in motion with the breath, the breath having been set in motion by the action of the tongue. The action of the tongue is a retrograde motion away from its initial position near the tip of the reed. It may be noted that the reed can be set in motion by the breath alone without any action of the tongue, but this method lacks definitude. Extreme legato tongue is merely a matter of giving repeated impetus to the air column; in a sense it is tonguing on the air column. An analogy may be drawn with the legato down-up bow of the violinist who maintains the vibration of the string even though he changes the direction of his bow. Too often the clarinetist not only does not maintain the flow of air, and the flow of tone, in legato tonguing, but attacks each new tone with such vigor as to upset the pitch and even to chop off the previous tone.

Rapid tonguing carelessly executed results in the tongue stopping the reed even as it attempts to set the reed in motion for the next tone. This will not happen if it is remembered that starting the tone is essentially the function of the breath aided by the tongue, that the forcible action of the tongue underneath the reed is unmusical. The question about where the tongue should be placed may be debatable, for tongues are equal neither in length nor agility. But the effect is the thing; and the effect should not include the noise of the tongue beginning the tone. The light use of the tongue's tip near and below the tip of the reed will produce the most legato and musical effect; the heavier action of the tongue nearer its base or from the throat or the

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use of the tongue underneath the reed will produce an unmusical effect.

If it is understood that staccato is basically a matter of shortening the length of a tone, of thereby separating tones from each other, the modulation from legato tonguing is not too difficult. Separating the tones, releasing the tones, is not the function of the tongue, but is achieved by the breath which now simply does not hold the tone for its full written value. It is true that certain qualities of staccato may require more forceful expelling of the breath; but it should be borne in mind that the action of the tongue is limited to the initial placing of the tone. Stopping a tone with the tongue, which spoils quality and affects pitch, can easily become a habit unless proper articulation is practiced very slowly so that each tone may be carefully placed until such action becomes habitual. An essential of all qualities of attack is that the pitch must be constant; there must be no initial impact with a falling off and subsequent rising to pitch.

Good articulation can be developed from the slurred tone exercises which were suggested earlier, but might be started on a single tone such as the repeated placing of low "E". An additional exercise follows: play the scale of F, or G, in one octave from the lowest F. Slur upwards and return. Play with the fully supported tone and good finger action previously suggested. Then without stopping, except for breath at the bottom, do the same thing using a very legato tongue. Some students find the syllable du or da is an aid to comprehending the idea. The legato tongue must be as smooth as the slurred scale; it is the next thing to a slur. Play slowly. Play the same scale but this time do not connect the tones. I used the phrase advisedly: "Do not connect the tones." This is staccato. The tongue action may be the same. Had I said: "Separate the tones," the student might have substituted a different tongue action. By alternating the three: the slur, legato tongue, and separated tones, the idea is impressed that the essential difference is the length of the tones. Various qualities of staccato can be developed from this stage.

The quality of the entire reed section can be improved by attention to embouchure, concomitant breath support, and articulation. The method of articulation is similar, except that larger reeds respond less easily than do small ones. In the last analysis the entire matter depends upon the aural discernment and sensitivity of the player and the teacher. Young people are sensitive to quality and under stimulating leadership will work hard to improve tone and articulation.

FRANCIS N. MAYER

This article is reprinted from the February 1953 issue of *Gopher Music Notes*, official magazine of the Minnesota Music Educators Association and Minnesota Public School Music League. Mr. Mayer is band director at the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, and is well-known throughout his home state as an adjudicator and clinic director.

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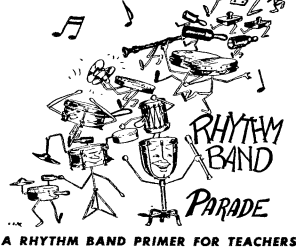
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