

# Oboe Basics (Part II)

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This is the second part of a two-installment article about the oboe. In the spring 2007 issue of *Canadian Winds / Vents canadiens*, I discussed selecting student oboists, sound production, reeds, and the oboe mechanism.

## Embouchure

The oboe embouchure is one of the most tiring, and often takes many months for the student to be able to hold it for more than a few minutes, so it is not a bad idea to have oboe candidates start on another instrument with easier requirements until the muscles are developed. The saxophone is probably the most common double, as the fingerings and range are similar (allowing for the sax being pitched in another key), and many of the study books are actually interchangeable.

One way to describe the oboe embouchure is to say “eee” with the inside of the mouth and “oooh” with the outside (as in saying the French word, “tu”). Another is simply to try to whistle with the lips over the teeth. I always advise to “keep the inside of the mouth small.” Sometimes in the beginning, it is helpful to have them try to play simple tunes on the reed alone as they need to use their mouth muscles to produce different pitches, and this forces them to use the very muscles they will need for playing the oboe.

Along the same lines, an excellent exercise is to play “dips” by liping the tone so it dips in pitch. For someone watching this exercise, it looks like the oboist is pushing the reed in and out of the mouth, but in actual fact, he is rolling the lips in and out to control the pitch. I always thought of this as lip “push-ups,” and it achieves the same results: building lip muscles.

Often there is a problem with a small student who has not completed her growth but has her adult teeth, which are large in proportion to her size and therefore very difficult to get her lips around. I actually had my front teeth filed down to make playing easier, but by then I had decided to become a professional oboist.

A good way to show students how the embouchure affects the reed is to have them pretend their index finger is a reed and put it in the mouth as they would the reed. I have had students who used to play clarinet hold the oboe too close to the body. If they pretend their finger is the reed and hold it in their embouchure, they can see how the pressure is not evenly balanced between the top and bottom lips, and will tend to close the reed. Likewise if they hold the oboe too far out, although that is not usually a problem, since it is too heavy to hold that way for long.

Another thing the reed controls is the pitch level. If the student is playing sharp, he can pull out the reed a millimetre or so, but no more, as it will affect the overall intonation. If he is flat, he can “lip” it up a bit, although if he does that too much, he will be biting on the reed, which is not a good practice. In the beginning, young oboe players tend to have trouble with pitch simply because of poor reeds, so it is important to find a good reed source.

Hold the oboe at a 45° angle from the body and keep the wrists straight.

Depending on the broadness of the hand, the oboist might have to have the fourth finger of the right hand straight in order to reach the D key. I do, so it must be OK.

Then form the embouchure around the reed, take a breath, and blow. I can often tell from that first attempt if a student is right for the oboe or not. One who takes to it immediately produces a healthy honk. One who is going to have trouble has her lips blow out and might manage to produce a breathy buzz, but not the kind of honk that indicates that this child has what it takes to be an oboist.

## Breath Support

For some, the effort to get a sound makes them dizzy, but this happens more because they aren’t supporting properly than because they are small or weak. I have never gotten into the “diaphragmatic breathing” school of thought partly because the oboe takes so little air to produce a sound that the biggest problem is getting rid of the excess, as opposed to not having enough. In actual fact, I find filling the lungs to capacity causes me to become dizzy! Rather, I’ve found the following exercise to be invaluable for teaching the concept of breath support.

I hold the oboe for the student but turn it backwards so I can finger it. Then I position it with the reed in his mouth to simulate his playing it himself, and have him put his hands on my shoulders, lock elbows so the arms are straight out, and push down on my shoulders. Sometimes I have to coach the student to push with all his strength. When students do this, the stomach automatically engages the support muscles and they find blowing the oboe easy!

I am constantly amazed at the results, and so are they. Where before they try this exercise they don’t seem to have the strength to make a sound, while they are pushing down on my shoulders they produce the kind of tone oboists are known for with a fraction of the effort they used before. I suggest they find something shoulder height at home to rediscover those supporting muscles, and do the exercise several times during their practice.

Another unique problem of the oboe is that you deplete your oxygen before you use up all your air, much like swimming under water, so you must exhale the stale air before you inhale again. This is something you have to point out, as students will just keep inhaling at the breath marks until their lungs are ready to explode. I actually have them practice exhaling and then inhaling at the breath marks to avoid this. As they play more complicated music, they may have to exhale in one spot and wait a second for another spot to inhale, as there might not be time in the phrasing of the music to do both. Since the oboe requires so little air to play, this is possible.

## Phrasing

A universal tendency of young wind-instrumentalists is to breathe when they want to, regardless of the phrase, so it has to be pointed out that there are right and wrong places to breathe. You can demonstrate this simply by speaking to them and pausing in inappropriate places. They’ll get the idea. Often the breathing places have to be planned ahead of time, as they’ll ignore a perfect pause in the phrase because they don’t need a breath at that moment, but create problems for themselves if the continuation of the phrase takes them beyond their air capacity. With oboists especially, remember that it’s more oxygen they eventually need, not just air.

Ending phrases is another technique to refine. Most students simply stop

## OBOE BASICS (PART II)

blowing when the music ends, giving the impression that their heads were suddenly chopped off. Oboists should learn to round off the end of the phrase by dampening the sound with their lips. I describe it as closing down on the reed while keeping up the support until the end, so there's a fast *decrescendo*.

Also, there are different types of starts and finishes to notes, all of which have to be learned. The attack happens when the student oboist is already blowing and the tongue is taken from the reed, allowing it to vibrate. Some people actually object to the term "attack," as it's more of a "release," but this isn't something that a young student cares about. He just wants to know how to start the sound properly.

### Tonguing

Many of my beginner students start the sound simply by blowing into the reed, and it takes effort to convince them that this isn't the most efficient way to do it. Here's where you must explain "tonguing" to them, and I find the easiest description is to say "ta" when you want the sound to begin. If you get more technical than that, they'll be confused. The refinements can come later, but for now, it's enough for them to differentiate between tonguing and slurring.

Eventually, they'll want to master different types of tonguing, and I've found that the simplest technique is the best. I've had students who accompany each tongued note with a chewing motion of the lip or a glottal accent. This might work nicely for very slow tonguing, giving shape to the notes, but for fast tonguing it gets in the way, so I advocate starting and stopping the note with the tongue alone. I have them play a long tone and interrupt it with the tongue, not allowing anything else to move. The length of the note depends on how long they keep the tongue on the reed, so a staccato is controlled by leaving the tongue on the reed longer than having it off. You can also control the abruptness of the attack by taking the tongue off lightning fast for a sudden attack, or with a "th" feel for a more gentle attack. Some do this naturally, but some have to work at it. Much of this is more advanced and needn't be discussed with a beginner but later, when you want more finesse in the performance, this technique is helpful.

An excellent teaching device for support and tonguing is to have them hum and play at the same time. The best way to learn this is to take the reed out of the instrument and hum while holding it in your embouchure. Then hum louder and louder with a faster and faster air speed until the reed is also making a noise. Many students find that their throats close as soon as the hum starts, and they stop humming, so it takes co-ordination but most get it eventually. Next, put the reed into the oboe and do the same thing.

When the reed is in the oboe, you have to blow much harder to produce the sound, so it works as a support exercise. When they do manage to produce a sound, it will be quite raucous and uncontrolled, as the embouchure tends to relax, but that doesn't matter. Have them keep playing and tongue as they're humming. If they continue to practice this, they'll learn to control the embouchure and the sound will be normal, much like the performing techniques of some jazz musicians. This is also a device commonly used in contemporary music, especially with brass instruments.

### Fingering

Composers and publishers often assume there won't be an oboist in the band, and thus write parts that don't suit the instrument. I've coached many a session where the oboe parts consist of many measures of rests with an

occasional half note. Or equally, I've seen oboe parts that were so full of flats, I would have to practice to play them well. To accommodate the more numerous B-flat instruments in the band, composers and arrangers frequently end up with oboe and flute parts in keys like A-flat or D-flat so the trumpets and clarinets, which are written a step higher than the C instruments, can play comfortably in B-flat or E-flat. When this happens, I feel it's perfectly legitimate for the band director to rewrite the oboe parts to make them more playable by students.

First, we will cover some of the unique fingering problems encountered by oboists. There are three fingerings for F: forked F, right F, and left F (the latter is not found on some student oboes). Since most bands begin with the B-flat major scale, the oboist will start with the forked F, as he'll be coming from an E-flat which requires merely lifting the middle finger of the right hand to get to F. This is not the best F fingering for most other situations, however. Have the student practice the C major scale using the regular right-handed F, and for more advanced students the left F can be substituted for the forked F. This is something a private teacher would cover using exercises specifically written to practice the three forms of F.

The half-hole is another problem specific to the oboe. First, there's always confusion as to when to use the octave key and when to use the half hole. Just remember, D, C#, and Eb in the middle register use the half-hole. When using the half-hole, don't let the student lift the finger off the key; the finger should either slide or roll off the hole, not leaving the key. I like to slide mine but some students have moist hands and their fingers stick, making it difficult to slide. By the way, be sure they don't try to use both the half hole and the octave at the same time!

Use the thumb octave key up through high Ab, and then switch to the side octave for A through C. By the time the student needs the fingerings above high C, he's probably with a private teacher or knows how to read the fingering chart.

Another difficulty is the required use of the alternate fingering for Eb when going to a Db. Since the fifth finger of the right hand is needed for both Eb and Db, they had to invent an Eb key on the left side of the oboe to avoid having to slide the right-hand little finger around. This always causes problems for small hands because when the little finger of the left hand stretches to reach the Eb key, it pulls the fourth finger off the G key and you lose the sound. Even professionals can have that problem, so that's why oboists hate to play in keys with Db's.

There are myriad fingering tricks that help playing in difficult keys but most of these are for advanced musicians. I think it might be more practical at this stage to suggest some changes the music director could make. With music-notation software widely available and easy to use today, it is not that difficult to rewrite oboe parts to make them more playable.

A good general solution would be to substitute an easier progression of notes while staying within the pitches of a given chord. (See *Musical Examples 1 & 2*). Or one could simply leave the awkward notes out without compromising the integrity of the music. (See *Musical Example 3*).

While some might feel that students learn through being challenged, what usually happens is that they learn to fake and accept that as a legitimate way to play music. I agree that setting high goals helps to make students improve, but one has to be realistic about the distance between their current

## OBOE BASICS (PART II)

level of playing and the goal. Also, one must take into consideration that the levels of playing ability within a band can vary greatly, and it's probably going to be pretty discouraging for a beginner oboist to try to play at the same level as a senior clarinetist. I've had so many students come to their lessons nearly in tears because they had no hope of playing oboe parts which, as I mentioned earlier, would give me a run for my money, but they feel pressured to do it "somehow."

At the other end of the spectrum are oboe parts that are too easy, consisting mainly of rests and half notes. When that happens, why not write something for the oboist that duplicates the clarinet or flute parts, transposing the clarinet part or putting the flute part in the oboe register if it's too high?

*Music Example 1: Here the difficulty lies in having to use the octave key, no octave key, and the half-hole in quick succession, always a problem at first. The clarinet has a similar challenge when having to go back and forth across the "break" quickly. Also here, the left-handed Eb must be used in the third beat without much time to prepare. Doubling notes gives the same rhythmic energy but allows time to get ready for the next fingering.*

*Music Example 2: Here, I've simply turned the patterns around and stayed below D to avoid going back and forth over the half-hole. The jump from low Eb to high F in the third beat is easily accomplished with the octave key.*

*Music Example 3: The scale pattern is preserved but omitting every other note of the pattern makes an extremely difficult passage quite easy. If the student plays the eighth-notes staccato, no-one will ever notice the ones that are missing.*

Then there's the oboe part that just won't quit! The composer doesn't realize that the oboe has an endurance problem others don't have, and by the end of a *Largo* chorale they could be in severe pain. A solution for that is to have the oboe rest or pretend to play where they won't be missed. That's done (surreptitiously) even by professionals.

### Assembly and Disassembly

A wooden oboe is always in danger of cracking if it gets cold and is played before being brought up to room temperature. Blowing hot air down a cold instrument expands the inside, potentially causing it to crack. So, if your oboist has just arrived for an early morning rehearsal after a cold school-bus

ride, have her put it under her arm for a few minutes to get it up to room temperature before trying to play it.

There are several rules that must be observed so that keys are not bent. I begin by taking the bell in my right hand and the second joint in my left above the three keys on the bottom (to avoid bending them), and I twist the bell back and forth onto the cork of the bottom joint. If it's hard to manoeuvre, I use cork grease, but only if it's really tight. Then I grip the upper joint in my left hand under the side octave (almost as if holding it to play), and I line up the lower joint so the keys match, gripping *under* the three lower keys this time, and again twist back and forth gently to put them together, being very careful not to bang the arm over the F# key. Here's where the side mechanism can get caught and bent if the student tries to turn the oboe too far out of line in putting the joints together. They should line up the side mechanism as I described earlier.

To take the oboe apart, reverse the order, being equally careful about the mechanism between the upper and lower joints. Then swab out the instrument using either a cloth swab made specifically for the oboe or a turkey feather. Often there are two swabs for the oboe, one for the upper joint which is very narrow, and another for the lower. If the swab gets stuck in the upper joint, *never* try to pull it out through the top. It's impossible and only becomes wedged tighter. What you need for this operation is a very thin knitting needle or a piccolo swab rod which will fit through the reed well of the upper joint. Then gently push the stuck swab down until it comes out the bottom, being very careful not to scratch the sides of the oboe. Usually this works, but if it doesn't, take it to a repair shop.

### Final Word

I hope I've been able to pass on some insights and tips for working with oboe students, but at the end of the day the best way to learn about the oboe is to take private lessons, even if only once a month. The oboe is a complicated and difficult instrument what with reeds and adjustments, and a beginner can easily become discouraged. But if they stick to it, playing the oboe is one of the most rewarding musical experiences there is. And nothing impresses like an oboe in the band! Questions about oboe playing may be sent to me at the following e-mail address: [elizabeth@elizabethraum.com](mailto:elizabeth@elizabethraum.com).



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