Building successful clarinet foundations

Correct embouchure and breathing skills are the foundation of successful clarinet playing.

When teaching a beginner clarinetist it is important to give very clear direction in the first lesson on correct embouchure formation. Perseverance in reminding the student to maintain this embouchure in subsequent lessons is vital to ensure that the correct habit is formed early to save later unnecessary angst.

The student can be encouraged from day one to produce a strong sound and to incorporate long “loud” notes into their practice routine. To avoid boredom setting in, make it a “time challenge”, encouraging the student to beat his/her last note-holding record and in a group lesson those of others. It can be fun!

Breath capacity is extended enormously in this way and teachers should not be afraid of boring the student by “nagging” on the above points during early lessons. It can be done in a light hearted fashion and most students will appreciate the difference in their sound and will feel more satisfied and confident when producing a bigger and more supported sound.

Once a secure embouchure and sound are formed, there is a firm foundation on which to build a more successful clarinet playing technique. Upper register notes will be less challenging with greater air flow, as will articulation. Students will often “blow” less to avoid squeaking, when in fact well supported tonguing is far less likely to squeak if the embouchure is secure. In most cases a well formed embouchure will also ensure little or no flatness in pitch, even in a beginner.

Once a student advances to the stage of being able to play technical work, even in the simplest form, they can be encouraged to play scales etc., with a strong and focussed sound. This consolidates breathing and tone and helps to further develop a reliable embouchure and evenness of sound across the range of the instrument.

Most students thrive on clear direction and a stricter regime, especially when they recognise the progress they are making. As a teacher it can be tedious continually picking up on all these points, but doing so will reap rewards for the student. Establishing correct playing habits from the very start eases the path to a more advanced playing technique.

Mary Waterhouse, AMEB Clarinet Examiner

Check the State AMEB website for downloadable entry forms and all State information

www.ameb.adelaide.edu.au

Keyboard: Fingering and other techniques

Many teachers are concerned whether their pupils are playing their pieces with the correct fingering from the examiner’s standpoint. Scales and arpeggios cause less worry as the AMEB’s recommended fingering is very clearly laid out and teachers who decide to deviate from this are usually confident about their reasons for doing so. Particular hand physiques, hand sizes – often age-related – and so forth are the principal causes and usually make for a clear-cut case.

Examiners may well comment on scale fingering which in their opinion is causing uneveness or inaccuracy. This is because scalar patterns are repetitive and fingering being used is easily seen. However, with pieces, passages where doubtful fingering is being used are far more difficult to spot and even harder to pin down with any accuracy while writing a report. Consequently criticisms which may ultimately be sheeted back to incorrect fingering are often couched in more general terms that refer to uneven tone quality, poor finger facility, slips and note inaccuracies.

Indeed, with piano technique in general open to so many differing possibilities and viewpoints – which even casual concert goers are aware of in relation to concert pianists they have seen – examiners will often avoid being too definitive in their comments. Unhelpful posture for example may have led to deficient fingering and hence to poor results or repeated substitution of the third finger for the fourth may be the result of poor hand positioning. In such instances the musical or unmusical outcomes will usually become the examiner’s target for criticism instead. The one possible exception to this is poor thumb-under technique, where bumpy sound quality and uneven rhythm often result and this aspect can be clearly viewed throughout a performance. This particular instance sometimes draws a direct comment on an examination report.

In most cases therefore teachers have to sift through examiners’ comments to discover the real technical problems underlying particular musical criticisms and will often do well to look for fingering faults at an early stage in their investigations although they will know that this may not be the root cause. In the final analysis examiners’ reports more often than not serve to underline in a general way what teachers will have been specifically working towards for some time. However in most cases they will not present a forensic breakdown of the pupil’s particular technical strengths and weaknesses.

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