

How to Avoid the Dreaded “Third Clarinet Disease”

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FUNDAMENTALS

Here are some helpful tips to teach fundamentals to individual students or an entire class of clarinetists. **Exact words you could use in instruction are in bold.**

- Embouchure:
 - Lower Lip: **Stretch 10% of the colored part of your lower lip over bottom teeth, and pull the bottom lip flat over the teeth, as if saying “Tee”.** Students tend to put too much lip inside their mouth, which creates a fuzzy sound and contributes to flat pitch.
 - Top Teeth: **Bite down medium-hard on top of the mouthpiece.** Demonstrate by having the student put their thumb in their mouth like a mouthpiece and bite down hard enough to resist an attempt to (gently) pull the clarinet away from their mouth, without biting hard enough to hurt. Then transfer this feeling to the mouthpiece. When you gently try to pull the barrel of the clarinet from side to side, their head should move with the mouthpiece.
 - Corners of Mouth: **Bring in corners to say “eeuuuu” while still keeping the center of the lip flat.** Have students practice by stretching the lower lip, identifying the center of the lip where the reed will sit with their finger, and bringing in the “eeuuuu” corners without the clarinet. Use the **“Lip, Finger, Eeeuuuu”** mantra so they have something to rely upon when practicing on their own.
- Tongue position
 - **Tongue should be high up inside the mouth, as if saying “Heeeeeee”**
 - **Feel sides of the tongue touching insides of top teeth.** This is a good “landmark” to help students remember where their tongue should be.
- Articulation - stop working so hard!
 - Tonguing is way less work that most students believe! **If the tongue is in the proper high position, the tonguing action should be a tiny distance from the tip of tongue to the tip of reed.**
 - **Say “THEEEE”, touching the tip of tongue to the tip of the reed.**
 - Anything more than a tiny movement where the tongue connects with the reed will result in a thunky articulation (too much tongue action) or a fuzzy, non-descript articulation (tongue not actually touching the reed). Telltale signs of too much tongue action include movement in the throat, a very heavy articulation, and jaw movement.
- Intonation issues
 - Tuning the instrument - first, play Open G, then adjust the barrel (to tune the top of the instrument); second, play C2 and adjust in the middle (tunes the bottom of the clarinet).
 - Not all notes are in tune naturally... the clarinet is an imperfect instrument designed with a series of compromises. For example, Low E tends to be sharp, while Low F tends to be flat.

- Equipment - Every mouthpiece tip opening and facing is different and requires different reed strengths. Please do not require every student to play on the same reed strength.
- Instruments: Students should know their equipment. Clarinets from all different manufacturers have intonation complications.
- Reeds
 - Beginner reeds are designed to be easy to play. If a 2nd or 3rd year student is playing on a beginner reed (such as Rico), it is likely not strong enough for them to achieve a good sound, especially in the higher notes. If intermediate or advanced reeds are unavailable, move them to a harder strength beginner reed.
 - Intermediate reeds are usually $\frac{1}{2}$ strength lower than advanced reeds. Example:
 - Intermediate Mitchell Lurie 3.5 → D'Addario Reserve or Vandoren 3.0.
 - Soft reeds tend to play flat, but too-hard reeds tend to lead to biting, resulting in a sharper pitch.
 - Practice tuning to a drone. Begin with open G-A-B-C against a drone of C (Concert Bb).
 - Lack of proper fundamentals (embouchure, tongue position, and air) contribute to poor pitch.
 - Again, reed strength should be appropriate for the ability level of the student AND the mouthpiece. Please don't insist that all students should be playing the same size reeds unless they are all playing on the same mouthpiece. Please see the attached Mouthpiece/Reed Strength Guide.
- Tone quality
 - **Be sure to take in enough mouthpiece.**
 - **Practice using "too much" air.** Many students do not understand how much air the clarinet requires... get them to use too much air, and then whittle down from there.
 - **Embouchure must be firm and not move when the fingers move.** Top teeth and lips hold the mouthpiece steady... no wiggling around when playing!
 - **Push up with the right thumb...** it's the magic trick of the clarinet!
- Fast Fingers
 - **Fingers have two jobs: cover the holes and push down the rings.**
 - **They should stay as close to their holes as possible, and use the pinkies as 'home base keys'.**
 - **Fingers should be rounded, as if holding a tennis ball**

ENSEMBLE ISSUES

How to make your section stronger as a whole.

- Seating shakeups!
 - Invert once a week (sit the third clarinets in front, firsts in back).
 - Stagger the section (1,2,3/1,2,3/1,2,3, etc)
 - 52-player shuffle: have every kid in the band sit next to someone that plays a different instrument.
 - Violin-style seating (winner of audition is 1st, 2nd place is principal second, etc.)

- Rotation
Assign different parts/chairs to each student for each piece. This is certainly time consuming at the beginning, but so worth it in the end, as it allows the section to sound stronger and more homogenous.
- Chamber music
Incorporate small ensemble playing during the school year. This is an excellent opportunity for weaker players to be put into leadership roles and sit next to stronger players.

Both individual and section autonomy is achieved through encouraging students to use as much air as possible (especially at the beginning of the year), daily technical warmups, and rotation.

COMMON QUESTIONS:

Why are the clarinets so flat all the time?

Most clarinets tend to be quite sharp. If a student is flat, it is likely because of their embouchure. To fix this scourge of the clarinet section, work with them on learning a proper embouchure, specifically their lower lip, as described above. Other culprits could be their tongue position, too soft reeds, or mouthpieces that are too easy to play.

Why is this kid squeaking on their high notes??

- Tension in their shoulders and chest. Make sure they are taking “Darth Vader breaths” for a relaxed chest and open-feeling air column.
- Fingers not covering the holes completely or pushing down hard enough.
- Mechanical issues with their clarinet (leaks, etc.).

Books we recommend:

Beginning

N.W. Hovey. Rubank Beginning Method (Hal Leonard Publishing, 1992)

George Waln. Elementary Clarinet Method (Alfred and Belwin Mills Publishing Corp, c. 1956 and 1983)

Fred Weber. Student Instrumental Course: Clarinet Student and Tunes for Clarinet Technic, Level One (Alfred Music, c. 2001)

Intermediate

James Collis. Modern Course for the Clarinet, Books 2 & 3 (Henri Elkan, 1960)

N.W. Hovey. Rubank Intermediate Method (Hal Leonard publishing, 1949)

Kalmen Opperman. Velocity Studies Intermediate (Carl Fischer, 1998)

Fred Weber. Student Instrumental Course: Clarinet Student & Tunes for Clarinet Technic, Level Two (Alfred Music, c. 2001)

Advanced

J.B. Albert. 24 Varied Scales and Exercises (Carl Fischer, 1905)

James Collis. Modern Course for the Clarinet, Books 4, 5, & 6 (Henri Elkan Publishing, 1960)

Avrahm Galper. Upbeat Scales and Arpeggios (Mel Bay Publishers, 2004)

Wonkak Kim, DMA. Daily Exercises for Clarinet (WK Publishing, 2017)

Phillip O. Paglialonga, DMA. Squeak Big!: Practical Fundamentals for the Successful Clarinetist (Imagine Music, 2015)