

# CLARINET FOR THE NON-SPECIALIST (AND SPECIALIST) TEACHER

Charles Hine

MORE than 25 years practical work in schools, colleges and music centres at home and abroad, accompanied by extensive workshop, masterclass and adjudicating experience nationwide, has enabled me to observe clarinet playing and tuition at all standards and ages. More recently at Colchester Institute school of music, my responsibilities as Head of Woodwind include interviewing and auditioning all prospective woodwind students (for admission to BA honours programme - many applicants also aspire to Conservatoire places) and then of course monitoring their progress if accepted on the course. It is this process that has over the years opened my eyes to some tremendous problems out there at "grassroots" level and which has prompted the subject matter of this article, a subject that has been a "bee in my bonnet" for some time and which prompts the ensuing tale of horrors.

These applicants represent the cream of our current musical education system and personify the best of a system that is the envy of the world. They play to a high standard for pleasure, often as a vocation, and have extensive practical ensemble and orchestral experience both in the classroom and through the opportunities offered by our excellent music services. Yet much of what they do is faulty - where have we, as teachers, gone wrong and what can be done to help?

This article is aimed at both the non-specialist teacher and at the specialist, because many of the horrors described are allowed to occur by both. Tough talk but true - and another real worry is that many of these young people, will soon be entering the music and teaching professions to pass on their own acquired knowledge and understanding, repeating many of the malpractices which are prevalent in teaching at present.

## 1st HORROR-POSTURE

Common faults include a sloppy stance with the weight on one foot or in a position similar to starting a cross-country run, leaning towards the music, legs crossed (even when standing!) When players are sitting I have seen them slouching or leaning with elbows on knees, legs crossed or in an almost horizontal position. Not so obvious to the uninitiated are faults such as bent neck, with arms clutching the body like chicken wings. These are often results of the early years when small bodies and fingers just cannot cope with the size and weight of the instrument.

## REMEDY

Always stand with the weight on both feet, slightly apart, a straight back and neck, the instrument held at a 45 degree angle with the arms away from the body. If the instrument is too large or the student too small, then sit down or use one of the many excellent slings or supports now available. It is also obvious that many instruments, both cheap and otherwise, have the thumb rest in a totally inappropriate position, often too low. It is relatively easy to change the position of the thumb rest; as an interim measure, try unscrewing it and replacing it upside down. Adjustable thumb rests are now becoming more prevalent.

## 2nd HORROR - EMBOUCHURE

This is directly related to our posture and arm/hand position because the instrument must enter the mouth at the correct angle. When I was young I had no idea what led a colleague in

my Youth Orchestra to liken me to a *camel sucking a straw*. It hurt then, and I am still painfully aware of this when I see rows of dromedaries sitting in concert bands - believe it or not, I still encounter the "double embouchure" (lip curled under top teeth) in players of some years experience.

## REMEDY

If we combine the **posture** and **embouchure** principles and ensure that the instrument goes to the player and not vice versa, then the remedy is quite natural and straightforward. The lower lip must not curl in too far and should mainly provide a cushion between teeth and reed. Watch out for the telltale red *tramlines* under the lower lip which indicate that it is in too far. It is preferable to be able to see some *pink* of the lower lip when the mouthpiece is in place. Upper teeth should rest on top of the mouthpiece and the upper lip closes around it to form a seal. **Do not bite, but smile slightly....**

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