

CLARINET ARTICULATION 101

COMMON PROBLEMS:

- Too Much Tongue Motion
 - Slow, harsh articulation
 - Grunting in the higher registers
 - Inconsistent, “scooping” sound during articulation
 - Flat pitch during articulation
- Improper Tongue Placement on Reed
 - Unclear articulation
- Fingers and tongue not aligned (usually a result of finger unevenness more than tongue)

SOLUTIONS:

95% of articulation problems are fixed by focusing on embouchure and air. The other 5% cannot be fixed until embouchure and air are in place.

What our tongues are actually doing and the words we use to describe it are often two completely different things. Additionally, we cannot see inside a student’s mouth to see what is happening, so the most productive solutions are to simply practice a given exercise until it is easily mastered consistently.

Embouchure basics:

- Corners in and chin concave against jaw and teeth.
- This embouchure opens up the space between the teeth and allows room for the tongue to touch the reed.
- It also helps direct and speed up the air stream.

Air

- Air needs to keep moving through articulation. Articulation is an interruption, not a stop of the airstream.
- Analogy: Turn on a water hose or faucet to its full capacity. If you pass your hand through the flow of water, it will interrupt the stream but not stop the water flow from the faucet. Even if you try to stop the water with your hand by covering the hose or faucet end, you cannot stop the water, you can only displace it.
 - In this scenario, your air is the water and your tongue is your hand.
 - Now quickly and lightly touch the water flow, as if you were touching a hot stove. This light, fast movement is the motion you want for your tongue.
- Create your embouchure face and blow a steady airstream. Tap your lips with your finger quickly to simulate the air-tongue relationship. Notice the air does not stop as you tap your lips.
- Once air is in place, work on legato tonguing to keep air going through articulation

Tongue Placement:

- “tip of tongue to tip of reed” is easy to say, but slightly inaccurate
 - just below tip of reed
 - just above tip of tongue
 - allows for a up-and-down motion rather than a forward and back motion, which will throw off air, voicing, and make fast passages impossible

- Feel tongue motion when you say “thee” or “nee” and find that spot on your tongue on the reed

Tongue Motion

- After air and embouchure are in place, most articulation problems are caused by too much tongue motion.

Analogies:

- Three grains of salt on the reed—one on each corner and one in the middle, and you want just the middle grain.
- Say “nee” or “dee” or “thee” and feel where the tongue touches the roof of your mouth. Now put the clarinet in your mouth and say each of those syllables

Exercises:

- Play single note, articulate legato and listen for consistency of each note.
- Gradually change speed and notes—start on open G and move to more resistant notes like low F and long B
- Start with articulating a single note, then move between two, three, four notes while maintaining the same feeling

CORRECTING SPECIFIC PROBLEMS

Most issues will be fixed with the above exercises, but some further explanation may be needed for other concepts:

Grunting:

- Usually a result of too much tongue motion.
- The back of the tongue moves with the tip of the tongue, which alters the note that comes out, resulting in a “grunt” of the lower register note before the clarion note speaks

Exercise:

- Play high B (above staff) and take away register key, but keep the B. Once the student can do that, slowly tongue the B and keep it from dropping to an E. Try on different notes down to G on top of the staff, starting the note with the register key then taking it away and keeping the clarion note. Focus on keeping tongue close to the reed and moving as little as possible.
 - Practice this exercise before playing an excerpt and replicate the motion in context
- Play a problematic passage without the register key (between top-of-the-staff G and high C) without dropping to the chalumeau register

Developing fast articulation

- Playing legato and connected will help develop speed. The less the tongue moves, the faster it can go.

Exercises:

- Syllable: try “nee” or “dee” or “tee” (different students will have better results with each)
- Alternate between playing a passage slurred and articulated. Make the articulated version as close to the slurred version as possible
- Practice “speed bursts” with tongue—two, three, four etc. quick articulations, preceded and followed by long tones (keep legato articulation):

