

# CLARINET COMMENTS

## *Quality, not quantity, is primary in developing clarinet finger technique*

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In my last column, I shared a few thoughts on teaching the clarinet inspired by an article from an issue of *Woodwinds* magazine dated 1948. At the close of that column, I mentioned a second article in the same magazine, in which clarinetist Augustin Duques discussed the French approach to finger-technique development. The Duques article will serve as a point of departure for this present column.

To begin, we need to understand that some of us enter the world with greater gifts than others and that we each have strengths and weaknesses. Further, some of us develop our gifts later than others, as so-called "late bloomers." This is not fatalism, but reality.

Fortunately, it is only one part of reality. The balancing aspect is the existence of human freedom. In practical terms, we are in fact able to self-actualize to a certain degree. Although we cannot create more talent than we have been given, we can improve and refine the gifts we do have. Musicians usually do this by an activity commonly known as . . . practicing.

Often, an individual's ultimate development is as much a matter of heart as it is a matter of talent. When I was in school, I saw some students who had more natural musical talent than others, but for various reasons, they did not develop it. Consequently, their performance skills were eventually surpassed by others with less talent but with the drive, desire and discipline to work harder and smarter.

It is important to note that working both hard and smart is necessary for truly fine results. Practice does not necessarily make perfect—only perfect practice makes perfect. Time spent with the horn and even strenuous efforts mean little in themselves. Only time and effort that is directed and dis-

ciplined by a clear methodology will yield the desired result most quickly.

Most every product we know of has two aspects to it: quantity and quality. Who cares if the quality is great when there is too little of it? Conversely, who cares if the quantity is abundant when the quality is poor?

Since our technique is also a "product" (though an intangible one, it is the product of our efforts), technique must be subject to the same standards of evaluation to which any other product is held. We must concern ourselves with both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of technique. Who cares how elegant and refined our technique is if we can't play the music up to tempo? Who cares how fast we can play

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if everything is sloppy and uneven?

Quality of technique must always be given the higher priority, but quality does not happen accidentally—it only comes about when we know *what* needs to be done and *how* best to do it. Ultimately, the quantitative and qualitative aspects of technique are profoundly interrelated. If we neglect the qualitative, it can limit the quantitative.

The mistake many of us make, especially when we are young and less experienced, is to stress the quantitative first. Often we are encouraged to do so by people who ought to know better. We want to play the fast, difficult material to prove our skills and perhaps impress others.

At this early stage of the game, we are usually unaware that there is even a qualitative dimension to technique. Who cares if our fingers are out of position and wasting motion? Who cares if we are slapping and popping

the keys and tone holes when we play and if our fingers, hands, arms and shoulders are full of tension? We are getting the notes, aren't we? The true artist knows that it is not enough for passage to "be there" notewise—the passage must also be beautiful.

Many professionals have affirmed this truth. The history of music is filled with instances of fine players who understood that they had failed to develop certain qualitative aspects of the technique and concluded that their playing would always be limited unless they took the time to solve the problems. For many, this meant doing something so radical as declining to perform for a period of time so that they might work out the bad habits. By working in the good—enabling them to reach artistic heights of technical mastery and expressive freedom.

The article penned by Monsieur Duques reminds me of the traditional French approach to technique, which is qualitative from beginning to end. The French have traditionally concentrated on the manner and style of technique, seeking to master the qualitative aspects by means of perfecting the qualitative.

This brings a whole list of considerations, suggested below, for students to ponder during practice. The student should try to practice before a mirror when considering these questions in order to see faults in finger technique that are not always felt.

1. Are all the fingers curved, and are you covering the tone holes with the "balls" or tips of the fingers? Many players try to play with the flat part of the finger. This reduces tone emission and impairs the legato connection and efficiency of intervallic connections. It also causes the fingers to tend to straighten—a sure sign of tension that will soon fatigue the player.

2. Is the finger stroke a diagonal or a vertical motion? Diagonal motion in the finger stroke usually happens when a player covers the tone holes with the flatter part of the finger and when the fingers begin to straighten out due to tension. This causes wasted motion. The proper and most efficient finger stroke is a short vertical motion, using the tips or "balls" of the fingers.

Many of the great French masters barely moved the fingers while they executed very difficult passages. Their concentration upon and mastery of the proper finger technique eventually gave them a technical command com-

bined with an ease, security and relaxation they could not have achieved otherwise.

3. Do the fingers always remain curved, and are the forearms, upper arms and shoulders relaxed and free of tension? Relaxation while playing does not just "happen." Relaxation must be purposely practiced in order to become part of the player's skills.

4. Is the left thumb out of position when it is not covering the thumb hole or register key? Some young players even place their left thumb on the wood of the clarinet below the thumb-tube ring when they are playing throat A or open G. The thumb should never be out of position. Develop the habit of keeping the thumb in contact with the upper edge of the thumb ring and the tip of the register key at all times.

5. Are the pinkies wasting motion and following the movement of the ring fingers? Pinkies are hard to control because they share the same tendon with the ring fingers. Yet these two fingers must learn to work independently if the player is to develop a truly fluid, elegant technique.

A good approach to begin developing independence of the ring and little fingers is to practice slow trills on low C to D and low G to A while keeping the left pinky resting on low C# and the right pinky resting on low Ab.

6. Are the left-hand fingers kept close to their tone holes while the index finger plays throat A, Ab and Bb? Many players allow their thumb, middle, ring and little fingers to be pulled completely out of position when they have to play the throat tones. This can make playing over the middle break of the clarinet very insecure and difficult.

Understandably, many developing players try to execute difficult technical passages and play the rudimentary scales and arpeggios at fast tempos without regarding the manner, style or execution that constitutes the qualitative dimension of technical development.

Though understandable, it is not the best way to develop technique. Nor is it the fastest way, since willfully ignoring the qualitative aspects of technique will always prove to be an eventual liability, not only to the development of style and elegance of technique, but to the ultimate achievement of higher degrees of speed in the execution of technical passages.

Deliberate work on the manner of execution is the ultimate cure for both of these problems. □