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Embouchure

Embouchure — the lip and surrounding facial muscles required in performing — is the heart of clarinet playing. When the embouchure begins to function correctly, the way is cleared for success in tonal entrance (tonguing), tone development and response in general. A faulty embouchure will inevitably result in playing problems. As already mentioned, the human being is resourceful and will find a way to accomplish any task put before him. Therefore, it is imperative that correctly supervised embouchure development take the place of “catch as catch can” self-learning. It is a basic fact of life that every human being is seeking security. If pre-tested pedagogy does not give the player a way of anchoring the mouthpiece snugly into the embouchure he will quickly find his own security, which most often settles into a vise-like wedging termed “jaw-bite.” This is the most natural device for him to seize upon since he has used his jaws to chew with from birth. Biting pressure is a vicious habit in that it immediately shortens amplitude of reed vibration which, in turn, limits flexibility of tone. It also spreads tenseness rapidly to other playing areas. Once used, this “bite” is almost impossible to break away from without re-learning embouchure habits completely. The late Ralph McLane, credited by many critics with one of the most glorious of clarinet tones, attributed his success to the *use of the lips* in making tone instead of the customary jaw pressure. It is true he used a “double-lip” embouchure which in itself relies largely upon the lips alone. But actually, regardless of whether single or double-lip is used, the lips must assume the bulk of the work. Too often the lips are a false front behind which the powerful jaws and teeth are applying the pressure. For clarification, “single lipping” implies that the reed lies across the lower lip with the mouthpiece anchoring directly behind the front teeth on the top side. “Double lip” embouchure is the complete encasement of the mouthpiece and reed within both the upper and lower lips.

Preliminary Steps for Embouchure Foundation

A firm foundation for the more delicate part of the embouchure to rest upon is necessary. The reasoning is similar to a fragile wooden house being built over a sturdy foundation of stone or cement blocks. Begin by closing the lips and holding them easily together while gently lowering the jaw approximately $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch. Notice that in keeping the line of lips touching, a considerable bulk of lip remains in the center. The lower lip in particular seems to rise and reach directly upward, bending outward past the lower teeth instead of lapping over them. Go before a mirror and,

using the fingers of one hand, vigorously stroke the lower flesh down and outward toward the point of the chin while the immediate lower lip draws upward in the opposite direction as indicated in the diagram:



Within the natural hollow or dip of the chin and just below that point the stretch should feel rather hard with a downward pull like the contracted biceps when showing off one's muscle. But in the lip bulk around the mouth opening, where the delicate part of the embouchure is to be formed, the flesh should remain soft and flexible. One student remarked “It feels like I'm stretching my chin down to the floor until I can almost step on it.” Of course, what he actually referred to was the flesh over the chin-bone structure. Another student said that his chin felt long and pointed as though he were trying to imitate the likeness of Uncle Sam with his goatee.

In addition to the “two way stretch” taking place within the lower lip area, a similar one of opposite pulls is simultaneously transpiring between the jaw drawing downward and the immediate lower lip reaching upward.

Mouthpiece Insertion

Back up against the wall until some part of the head touches. When you come away from the wall, avoid dipping or “heading down” into the mouthpiece. In other words, bring the clarinet up to you — don't go down to meet it. Before inserting the mouthpiece, keep in mind that the portion of mouthpiece to be placed inside the mouth is very small and wedge shaped. Since the jaws are parted ever so slightly, there is no need to open up at all to insert the mouthpiece. In fact, keep the lips touching and try to form a puckered smile, being careful not to protrude them as in a kiss. Keep the red of the lower lip turned outward. Never allow it to roll inward and be lost. At this point some students successfully cup the lower lip into the tiniest possible quarter-shaped moon with the corners pointing upward thus:



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High-Register Playing

It has been emphasized that the lips should remain stationary while playing so far as the conscious self is concerned. It must be admitted at once that the lips are actually in constant fluctuation, but in a degree less than the eye can usually follow. A similar muscular action takes place when a needle, placed upon a table, is picked up with the thumb and first finger. Notice that the finger tips can be separated or brought closer together by a slight rolling movement inward or outward without actually losing contact. Observe also that the knuckles flex with the roll. Form the embouchure (without the mouthpiece) and practice lip movement patterned after this muscular "roll". Operate this contracting and expanding roll within the moon-shaped confines of the poised and firm embouchure formation. Do not allow the lips to alternate from a flabby relaxation to a hard muscular re-grouping.

While practicing this action apart from playing, the clarinetist is consciously aware of the exaggerated movement. In actual blowing, the same constant fluctuation takes place within an apparently quiet embouchure and is hardly perceptible either through sensation or by close observation in a mirror. Regard the lips as a storehouse of strength and flexibility from which the nerves and muscles are able to extract the precise amount of support needed to encompass an interval or play a high note. The conscious self, in matters of such delicate nature, often operates on a policy of over-offering to insure sufficiency. This seemingly harmless strategy is a chief reason why many clarinetists are unable to play high tones well. They indiscriminately offer lip contraction sufficient for a tone some three or four octaves above high C when in reality they are aiming perhaps for A, first line above the staff. The usual result is a complete reed closure or, at best, the emission of a weak sub-tone. Many players finally settle for a thin, kazoo-like sound in the upper register. This is due to the number of times they have been frustrated in their attempts to play high tones through pure force with an over-all tightening up. They then turn to the only alternative they know; letting down all diaphragmatic pressure, loosening the embouchure to a flabby state, and drifting through the clarinet a paper-thin facsimile of tone which might as well be played with a comb.

A second major cause for inability to play high tones results from a conscious loosening up to play low notes. This is unwholesome because it necessarily demands a gradual tightening up as the player progresses upward in the range. The most beneficial single aid in high register playing lies in the main-

taining of as muscularly-poised an embouchure for the low notes as is expected to be used in the high register. It also goes without saying that breath must be well supported and directed to a forward placement in the oral cavity during low tone playing. The common reaction of many players is to loosen up perceptibly in the low register when they experience the comparative ease of response, as one might have a tendency to order size twelve shoes for his size nine feet because they feel so comfortable.

This teacher advises his pupils (in playing chalumeau tones) to set their embouchures the way they expect to play in the high register and make no conscious alterations thereafter. When the player is securely settled in a more advanced stage of playing, he can begin to experiment with conscious lip fluctuation. He is then more aware of the extent to which the lips may be moved *within beneficial limits*.

If the student's first few attempts at high clarion and third register tones are fairly successful and painless through proper guidance by the teacher, he will not carry a sense of frustration regarding them, nor will he flinch and tighten up when encountering them thereafter. Caution students not to yield to curiosity by experimenting with upper register tones before they are deemed advisable by the teacher. An effective scheme for the teacher to aid the student in playing his first clarion register tones is the following: Stress supporting and filling out the chalumeau tones as much as possible while maintaining a "dressy" embouchure. Direct the student to keep on the job, blowing at full strength no matter what happens. At the height of his tonal build-up, the teacher unsuspectingly steps up from behind and presses (and holds down) the register key. If the student continues to blow at full strength as though nothing had happened, the tone will automatically pop up and sustain on the twelfth above. Should chalumeau F be used, then third space C will be heard. The teacher may use a baton to touch the register key from a distance. The student has no chance to tighten up in preparation for the change, and consequently plays his first clarion tones free, full and resonant. The psychology of knowing that each twelfth above can be played with little or no conscious effort beyond that used for the fundamental dispels much of the fear and tightening found in the upper register. The teacher may follow up with another convincing demonstration by playing sustained chalumeau tones with eyes closed and asking for volunteers to depress the register key at will. Repeat with the students trying it out on each other.