

# Simple Strategies for a Better Bassoon Section

TMEA 2013

Dr. Ann Shoemaker  
Ann\_Shoemaker@baylor.edu

## I. Embouchure

- *It's all about the corners!* The corners of the lips must be drawn in. They provide as much support and control as the “top” and “bottom”. These muscles must be developed, which is why it is typical for younger players to bite down on the reed at first as compensation.
- *Instructions:* Whistle, then lower whistle pitch to as low as possible. Maintain this position of “corners in,” and roll lips slightly over teeth. Lower lip may be rolled in slightly more than upper, though this is different for every player based on physical setup of teeth, lips and jaw.

## II. Support

- Support is not just from the abdomen, but is around the entire torso. Back muscles and oblique muscles should also be engaged. Use your “core,” just like in Pilates class!
- *Instructions:* Take a deep breath in and exhale naturally. Before taking in another breath, force out any remaining air in lungs, paying attention to the muscles used to force out the air. The “core” muscles should be used for this action. These are the muscles that should always be engaged when playing bassoon.
- Physical energy must be used to keep air speed fast enough. This is more necessary than a large volume of air.
- Support can be adjusted by the shape of the throat and the oral cavity, as well as by tongue placement. However, this should be secondary to the core support.

## III. Intonation

- Ear training is just as critical as a physical mastery of intonation adjustment. Almost every note on the bassoon must be adjusted for accurate intonation.
- Assuming proper air support, the order for adjusting intonation should be:

- Voicing-

*Adjust the shape of the oral cavity and tongue placement to alter the pitch. A smaller oral cavity creates a higher pitch. A larger oral cavity lowers the pitch.*

- Embouchure pressure

*Pull up on the lower blade of the reed to help raise the pitch, especially in the tenor register (middle C up to F), which is naturally flat. Pull down on the upper blade of the reed and relax lower jaw to help lower the pitch, especially in the low register (low F and below), which is naturally sharp.*

- Air speed.

*Faster air speed leads to higher pitch. Lower air speed leads to lower pitch.*

- Practice flexibility and ear training rather than memorized physical placement.
- Drone Exercise (individual and as a group)
- Triad Tuning exercise (as a group)

#### **IV. Resonance**

- Finding the physical set-up where the body, reed, and bassoon resonate most freely.
- Oral cavity: A larger oral cavity allows for more resonance. Say “Oh!” as if surprised, with raised eyebrows! It should raise the soft palate and roof of mouth and create more space.
- Intonation: An in-tune note will resonate and project more.
- Direction of air: Spin the air in the oral cavity, rather than forcing it out with laser-like projection. This will add more resonance.

#### **V. Vibrato**

- Start training through abdominal exercises.
- *Instructions:* Say “Ha!” This will encourage abdominal movement as well as direct the air forward, out of the mouth. Practice saying, “Ha!” rhythmically, and then use the same technique while playing. Build speed gradually with the metronome.
- Do not rush implementation into music. Can lead to bad habits such as jaw vibrato or “nanny-goat” vibrato.

## **VI. Finger Technique**

- Five-note segments: Focus on five notes at a time rather than full scales or multiple octaves of scales. This allows for more attention to detail and prevents tension that develops when students feel overwhelmed by the task at hand.
- Scale practice: Graduate to scales after five-note segments have been learned.
- Charts to map progress, set goals

## **VII. Long tones**

- Herzberg quarter note exercise- The perfect exercise for soft entrances.
- Herzberg long tones- Develop control of dynamic range and a steady air stream.

## **VII. Chamber playing**

- Mixed ensembles: Wonderful for developing independence and musicianship.
- Bassoon ensembles: Develops section camaraderie, intonation awareness, can build confidence with sight-reading and playing individual parts.

**Examples of practice charts, Herzberg exercises, and five-note patterns available at:**

**<http://www.baylor.edu/music/woodwinds/index.php?id=66792>**

