

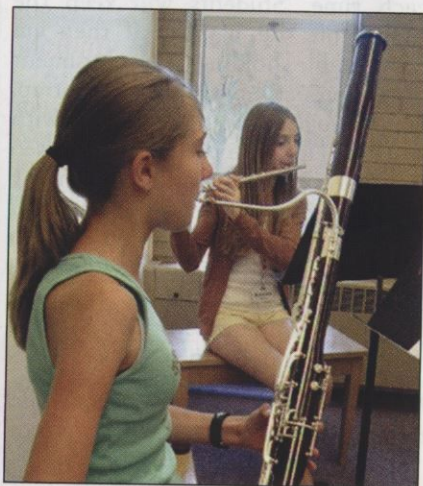
First Lessons on **Bassoon**

by Robert Barris and Michael Jampole

It is the ungainly size of the bassoon that causes directors to assume incorrectly that it is difficult for students to play. However, the bassoon embouchure is relatively easy to form, and a seat strap will make this large instrument manageable.

Start or Switch

Some outstanding bassoon players began on the bassoon while others switched to bassoon after starting on another instrument. Smaller students should probably begin with another instrument and learn many general skills before coping with an unwieldy instrument. Changing from saxophone to bassoon is one of the easiest switches because the saxophone embouchure is rounded and loose, much like the bassoon embouchure. With the abundance of saxophone students in most bands, the prospect of moving several over to play bassoon should delight most directors. Both the clarinet and flute embouchures are substantially different from that used on bassoon

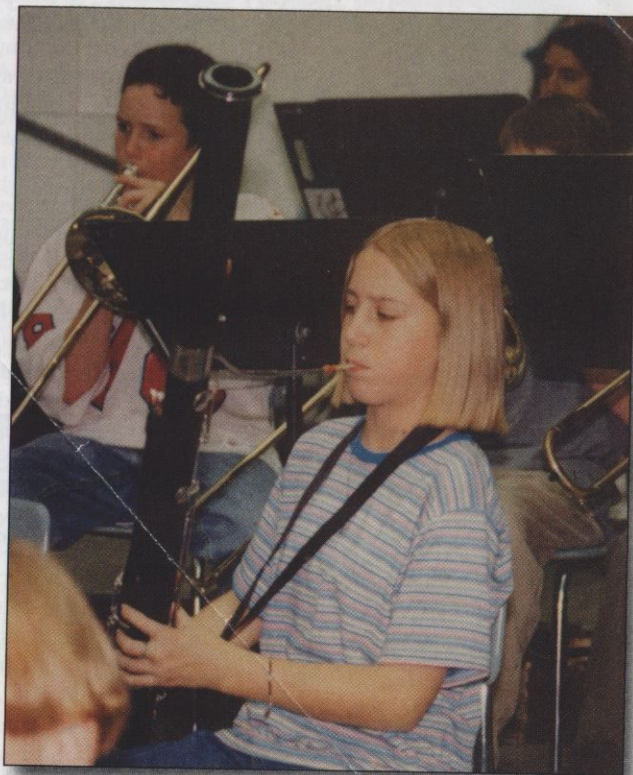


and often cause problems for students who make this switch.

Many directors will want to start bassoonists in a beginning band to add the depth of sound to an ensemble. It doesn't work very well to give group lessons to beginning bassoonists along with students on other instruments because most method books start with difficult pitches for young bassoonists, such as the F3. This note uses no fingers and causes a new bassoonist to feel insecure holding the instrument. Then methods often move on to notes that go over the break and use half-hole fingerings. The bassoon method by Julius Weissenborn is a good standard method book written specifically for bassoon. *The Art of Bassoon Playing* by William Spencer (Summy-Birchard) and *Teacher's Guide to the Bassoon* by Homer Pence (Selmer) are good reference books for directors.

Reeds and Embouchure

It is unnecessary for a beginner to have a professional reed, but the quality of the reed directly influences tone production. Beginners can use cane or plastic reeds, each of which produces a good sound when played correctly. Cane reeds are delicate and easy for careless beginners to break. Plastic reeds call for more embouchure control than cane reeds, so students using them are more susceptible to embouchure problems. By the end of the first year all students should use cane reeds. A director should have the tools on hand to repair and adjust cane reeds, including 220 or 400 grade wet-



and-dry sandpaper, a mandrel, a plaque, and a reed knife.

Cane reeds have to be soaked before playing but soaking takes less time if warm water is used. A reed is sufficiently soaked when the wires can no longer be wiggled. An older reed will shrink and cause the wires to loosen, so it will take longer to soak. Do not tighten loose wires, but simply soak the reed for a longer time.

The first step is for a student to play on the reed alone, called crowing, which should produce a buzzing sound, not a steady pitch. There is nothing difficult about forming a proper bassoon embouchure: simply put the reed in the mouth and form a relaxed circle around it with the lips. A student who cannot produce a crow should whistle or purse his lips as if kissing. In whistling the jaw drops and the teeth are separated into a good position for playing the bassoon. The reed should be inserted into the mouth with the lips almost but not quite touching the wires. Students may bite down on the reed, which cuts off the sound and makes the pitch sharp. It may even jump the pitch an octave higher. The embouchure should seal the reed so no air leaks out. Beginning students often do not have the lip muscles to control the reed, so they incorrectly use jaw muscles instead with the lips acting as a cushion. This is an incorrect embouchure. The teeth should not bite down on the reed. The mouth



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should be open, as when yawning. If a student has dimples while playing, this indicates an embouchure that pulls the corners of the mouth back too far into a smile.

Posture

Bassoonists should sit up straight and far back in the chair with the feet flat on the floor. A flat-bottomed chair works best, while a contoured seat makes it difficult to position the body correctly. Seat straps are a necessity for beginning bassoonists. Neck straps put too much weight on the neck and hands and cause the instrument to fall at an awkward angle. A seat strap transfers the weight of the instrument from the neck and hands to the strap. Even if the only available strap is a neck strap, it can be used as a seat strap by putting a leg through it and attaching the end of the strap to the hole that is at the bottom of most instruments. Cup straps and ring straps fit around the bottom of an instrument that does not have a hole.

The seat strap should be at the front of the chair to put distance between the player and instrument and position the instrument at the correct angle. When the seat strap is moved back, the instrument is too close to the body and has to be leaned forward so the weight falls on the left hand. Light-weight students tend to move the strap back under their bottoms to put more weight on the strap, but this causes the instrument to lean forward as it does with a neck strap. For light-weight students the seat strap should be long enough to wrap around their leg or wide enough so there is friction between the strap and chair to keep the instrument from slipping. Another solution is to run the strap from the left rear to the right front of the chair.

In a good playing position the bassoon should lean slightly across the player's body. It is important for a player to bring the instrument to his mouth, not the mouth to the instrument. The reed should hit just below the lip at the small of the chin, so the player has to tilt the head slightly downward to meet it.

First Bassoon Notes

Young players should begin with pitches using only the left hand, such as C3 and D3. For C3 the first three fingers cover the holes on the wing joint and the thumb goes on the whisper or piano key. At this point the right hand remains off the instrument.

All fingers should be in a rounded position, never collapsed. If the wrist is straight, the fingers will go straight across the instrument rather than approaching the keys from below or above. A common error is to arch the left-hand thumb, which should be flat and straight. Students with very short or long fingers will find this position difficult and may not be suited to bassoon. An instrument with a closed plate over the left-hand ring finger key helps to accommodate small hands.

Generally a C3 will be a flat pitch, and the solution is to use more air rather than tighter lips. If a student is not flat on C3, he should relax the lips and lower the pitch a half step to match a B $\frac{1}{2}$ with the C3 fingering. After sustaining that pitch a half step lower, blow three times as hard to drive the pitch up to the C. This exercise forces players to relax the mouth muscles and blow correctly. The sound may be raucous, but it is easier to control a raucous sound than it is to relax a pinched sound. To move from C3 to D3, simply lift the third finger of the left hand.

Add the right hand on a B2. With the first finger pushing down the appropriate key, lean the right hand against the instrument so that the bottom knuckle of the first finger touches it; the spot at which the knuckle hits the bassoon is the permanent point of contact for the right hand. Immediately correct students who rest the entire palm on the instrument. Hand crutches are available, but they may cause tension in the hand.

The most common right-hand problem is resting the thumb on the instrument for added stability, but this too adds tension in the hands. When the thumb rests on the bassoon it is out of position to press a key until an extra movement brings it back each time. Students will keep the thumb off the bassoon if they are comfortable holding the instrument with a properly positioned seat strap. This is augmented by beginning with just the left hand. Students often respond to images such as pretending to hold a ripe blueberry in each hand without squeezing hard enough to cause juices to run out. The fingertips should never become white from the pressure of depressing keys. The elbows should be in a relaxed position, neither out like wings nor dug into the sides of the body.

During the first few months of playing, beginning bassoonists should not

play at or above open F3. Because higher pitches entail more embouchure strength than young students have, they use the wrong muscles and develop a tight embouchure. In addition, the pitches over the break of the bassoon use half hole techniques that are uncomfortable for beginners.

Students who prefer low voices and don't mind playing accompaniment parts in band make the best bassoon players. Directors can help these students progress quickly by approaching the bassoon in a way that makes it easy to handle. □

Robert Barris earned bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Michigan and is a former member of the Dallas and Detroit Symphonies. He taught at Central Michigan University, the Interlochen Arts Academy, and Northwestern University.

Michael Jampole is in his 35th year with the Wilmette, Illinois public schools, where he teaches grades five and six instrumental music at Highcrest Middle School. He received a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University and a master's degree from Northern Illinois University.

Prohands Gripmaster

Prohands Music has dissolved its agreement with the D'Addario/Planet Waves company, which had distributed the Gripmaster, a hand exercising device. Prohands, which invented and manufactures the Gripmaster, has started a campaign to advertise the product in print media and on a new website; it also lowered the price of the product from \$19.95 to \$13.95. Using the Gripmaster, musicians can exercise each finger independently to improve its strength and speed. The product is available in three models. (800-880-3427 or www.prohands.net)

McGinty Music

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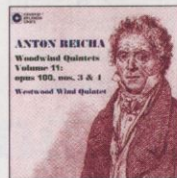
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