

Pedagogical Uses of Oboe Reed Alone

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The most essential skills needed by an oboist are those involved with tone production: how the embouchure holds the reed, how the oboist “voices” using tongue position, and how the oboist blows air into the reed/regulates air pressure against the resistance of the reed. These sets of skills together produce and control the tone irrespective of the kind of oboe played, reed style, and type of embouchure used. Oboe reed alone exercises can be useful for teaching and learning good tone production skills.

Typical reed alone exercises are as follows:

- 1) Play a C (above the treble staff), glissando down one perfect fourth to G. Glissando back up to finish on the C. The tone sounds continuously.
- 2) Play a B-natural (above the treble staff). Slur up one half-step to C. Return to the B. Slur down to A and then G. Finally, slur from the G back up to A and then finally B. (The pitches should shift clearly from note to note without much, if any, glissando. Tone sounds continuously with no articulation.)

The oboist should make sure his/her jaw remains motionless throughout these exercises. The pitch change is created by moving only the embouchure: out to move the pitch lower and in to move the pitch higher. When playing the lowest note (G), the embouchure has to have the lips still far enough over the teeth to be supported by the teeth.

The embouchure directly in contact with the reed should be the focus of embouchure motion. The embouchure should remain the same width through the exercise. The embouchure should not widen to raise the pitch (which would likely result in the teeth moving closer together).

The student can begin learning the exercises while holding the reed with his/her hand to stabilize the reed and to make sure it stays safely in the embouchure and does not go flying across the room. Eventually, however, one should play the reed alone exercises hands-free, using the embouchure only. (Please note these instructions are according to how I approach embouchure technique. Other approaches may work as well. The outcome is what is important: fine control and good, even tone.)

I began having my students learn reed alone exercises about five years ago. The exercises help students learn proper embouchure skills. First students learn to play a B and C on the reed. They watch their embouchures in a mirror, studying proper embouchure technique paired with hearing themselves play the correct pitches on the reed. Eventually, they learn to perform the reed alone exercises moving the embouchure only, avoiding jaw motion.

The exercises are helpful for students who are in the habit of playing with their teeth too close together; because one can do the reed alone exercise properly only when there is an appropriate amount of space between the teeth allowing embouchure movement. Over the past five years, I have had all my students learn the two reed alone exercises, above, and normally have begun lessons with the exercises along with other warm-ups and scales.

The reed alone exercises by themselves are rather limited, however, and are not fun or interesting for most oboists. The tone of the reed alone is not as beautiful as the oboe tone.

Though there is much to be learned by practicing the reed alone, most oboe students spend little time on reed alone exercises.

In 2011, as my students and I discussed possible projects for the 2012 IDRS Conference, we came up with the idea of presenting newly commissioned works of Bowling Green State University composers. (I was teaching at BGSU at the time.) One of the oboists in my studio was composer/oboist **Jon Fielder**. We don't remember exactly how we came up with the idea, but somehow we settled on the plan for him to write a work including oboe reeds being played alone à la the reed alone exercises. We envisioned the result being an etude/concert piece that would provide oboists the opportunity to develop highly refined skills playing the reed alone with technical precision as well as refined musicianship.

Mr. Fielder wrote a piece for three oboe reeds and English horn, *Reeding Session*, and delivered the score and parts to us in spring 2012. Three students took the reed parts, and I played English horn. We spent about two months rehearsing the piece and performed the world premiere during the 2012 IDRS Conference at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Here is an excerpt of the work. Please note, the clef for the oboe reed parts indicates treble clef, sounding an octave higher than written:

The three students playing the oboe reed parts brought diverse backgrounds to the project: **Marsha Croskey Kincade** was returning to the oboe after having taught in public schools for seven years. She was in the process of reestablishing her basic technique as an oboist. **Lindsay Foster** was finishing her Master of Music in oboe performance, having entered graduate school right after undergrad. She was a very advanced player. **Casey Wertepny** was a junior Psychology Major also pursuing a minor in music with oboe as her instrument. She played well but spent somewhat less time practicing oboe than the other two students.

The following is feedback from the three students about their experiences learning the Fielder oboe reed parts.

Outset

Marsha: Before this year, I didn't have any experience with the reed alone exercise. After being taught how to do it, I did it almost every day for a couple of months but gradually stopped and never really fully understood how much information about my embouchure could be gathered by thoughtfully doing these exercises. For me a large part of the challenge of beginning to learn the Fielder part was learning to start notes in time with good pitch and tone, especially the very long ones in the opening of the piece. Much of this probably stemmed from not practicing the exercises with the intent of starting at a specific time or pitches. Generally, even though I did experience some improvement in intonation because of the exercise, there was

a great disconnect between the exercise and playing the oboe. Learning what it felt like to play specific pitches was quite a challenge and the first reading through the piece was very rough because I hadn't developed the kinesthetic skill to needed to play the reed well.

Lindsay: I could do the reed alone exercises well. But upon receiving the Fielder part, I had difficulties playing the distinct pitches in tune. I could change the pitch on the reed to raise and lower the pitch, however, playing individual pitches for a prolonged period of time was difficult and something I needed to get into my ear and memory

Casey: Before the Fielder, I used the Reed Alone Exercise to help improve my ability to adjust pitch and also as a way to improve stamina and warm myself up for the day. When I first started the Fielder I was not very successful at playing my part. C, B, and A were easy pitches to achieve, but G was quite difficult to reach and even more so to sustain. I also had to work my way down from A to G, I could not just start on a G.

Process

Marsha: Before the first rehearsal, I practiced just with a tuner. I switched to first playing the part on the piano, then playing the part on the reed and the piano, and finally with just the reed alone. Initially Casey, Lindsay, and I rehearsed the reed parts together without the English horn part and used tuners as we rehearsed. We fairly quickly switched to playing parts on the piano, singing them with the piano, playing reeds with the piano, and then playing reeds alone and spent considerable amount of time doing this. If one of us was having difficulty or there was a spot that was difficult for all of us, we would all learn each part together. Then after each part was learned, we returned to playing just our parts. Doing this meant that I was more aware of what each part was doing in relationship to my own. Up until about three weeks before the performance, consistently getting G to speak easily with good tone and pitch was very difficult for me. After trying a reed that was made to play a bit flat and not having any success, I experimented with changing how I was using my embouchure to fix this problem. Lindsay and I practiced together once and decided to record ourselves while playing. After listening to the recording, it was very evident that we would have to pay very close attention to being musical to really carry out the piece effectively.

Lindsay: In practice, I would spend a portion of time playing the pitches as long tones. First I would sing the pitches to get them into my ear, and then I would play them, focusing on keeping the tone steady. Also, as I got better at playing the individual pitches, I began working on crescendos and decrescendos, staying in tune. In group rehearsal, Casey, Marsha, and I worked on singing our parts together (especially the faster sections) and then playing them using a metronome.

Casey: The rhythms were simple enough to work out, with the quintuplet in the beginning being the most difficult. The thing I really struggled with was the pitches, specifically making sure the half steps and whole steps were accurate. As mentioned before, C, B, and A were simple enough and I was able to be successful with those after just some practice. It was G that gave me the most trouble. In order to make sure my pitches were accurate I would practice with a piano, playing one measure several times and then singing it several more before attempting to play it. This got

the pitches in my head and made it much easier to be accurate. I found learning the parts aurally to be much more helpful than staring at a tuner.

Results

Marsha: After practicing in the ways described, my ability to accurately play my part was much improved. After changing my embouchure to allow myself to play G accurately, the other pitches were easier to play. Playing G was never as easy as A or B, but in the end it became much easier. The very beginning of the piece was easier after attentive practice, but the faster section was by far the easiest to play accurately.

Lindsay: I now can play the individual pitches notated in the Fielder part using good air support. Beginning notes is still troublesome, I still lack the confidence to come in on a perfectly in-tune pitch. Something to work on!

Casey: Because I took the time to learn each measure by playing it on piano, singing it, and then playing it, I became extremely familiar with the piece and how it goes. In fact, even writing about my practice after the fact is getting the piece stuck in my head. This sort of detail was necessary for learning the piece though, because in order to play the piece correctly we had to basically have it memorized. It is much more difficult to find a pitch on the reed alone than it is to find on the oboe. Without fingerings to help, knowing exactly what is coming next is necessary for success playing reed alone.

Big Picture Outcomes

Marsha: The largest impact learning the piece had on me was making the connection that if what I am doing with my embouchure sounds bad on the reed, it will sound bad with the oboe, too. When I was experimenting to see if I could better play G, I tried changing how firm my embouchure was on the reed because that has been a consistent issue with my playing, but I also tried changing how much reed I was taking into my mouth. Playing with my embouchure more engaged combined with taking slightly less reed in my mouth made a world of difference in not only the tone but also easily producing B, A, and G in tune on the reed. There really is just a slight difference of where the reed is in my mouth, maybe just a couple millimeters, but the change is drastic. The challenge is now to do this with the oboe and keep aware of it as I practice. To make sure this change sticks, I am continuing to mindfully use the reed alone exercises.

Lindsay: I think I have gained more of an understanding of using air and confidence to play individual pitches. Sometimes, on the oboe, I shy away from troublesome notes like C, C#, 1st octave E, etc. However, using air and confidence, and intensification of notes, they are better in tune and in my ear! Yay! I think reed alone work will continue to focus my attention on air and pitch and making notes musical!

Casey: Learning the Fielder has definitely improved my stamina, I am able to last much longer playing oboe than I could before. I also have more control when it comes to adjusting the pitch. My only expectation for the effect on my future oboe playing were I to continue giving the reed alone exercises the attention necessary to play the Fielder would be that all elements of my playing would continue to improve.

As a result of my experience rehearsing Jon Fielder's work for three oboe reeds and English horn, and witnessing how the experience positively affected my students, I have a greatly enhanced appreciation for oboe reed alone etudes. I now have my oboe students write short oboe reed alone etudes for themselves to perform in their lessons. In studio class, sometimes my students and I compose reed alone etudes on the spot and we each play all the etudes we write. This more in-depth utilization of oboe reed alone work, employing specific pitch material, dynamics, various note durations, accents, and other musical details greatly enhances the benefit gained from reed alone work.

In light of the substantial pedagogical benefits that can be gained from oboe reed alone etudes, I plan to publish a book of reed alone exercises (35) and etudes (20) co-authored by myself and McGill University oboe and composition students. The exercises will target techniques specifically and in great detail. The etudes will be in a variety of musical styles and bring together all the skills developed in the exercises. Etudes will be primarily solo etudes; but duo and trio etudes will also be included.

In addition to the hard copy book, we will create a website presenting the materials. Students and I will record all of the exercises and etudes; and the recordings will be posted online so oboists can hear what the reed alone exercises and etudes should sound like.

Throughout the world, we oboists use a variety of instruments, reeds, and embouchure styles. But our commonalities are much greater than our differences. We all share the need to produce a tone well and control quality, dynamics, color, intensity, and pitch. Perhaps further developing our pedagogical use of reed alone exercises and etudes will help us standardize and universalize how oboe technique is taught and learned.

Reeding Session is self-published by Mr. Fielder: jonfieldermusic@gmail.com