

# CLARINET CLINIC

## ATLANTIC FESTIVALS OF MUSIC 2024

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### **Breath Support And Tone Production**

The clarinet is a *wind* instrument - and it is therefore fundamental to both inhale and exhale efficiently. When **inhaling**, try to take a very deep and “low” breath. Imagine yawning. When you yawn you are slowly and steadily filling up your lungs to their full capacity. When **exhaling**, we want to think of a fast and cold airstream vs a warm airstream. Fast and cold air is what we want for the clarinet.

A good example of a warm airstream would be using your breath to clean your glasses - hot, warm and slow air is being exhaled. For a fast airstream I like to imagine a garden hose. If you put your thumb over the opening of the hose suddenly the water sprays out with great speed - that is the kind of speed and intensity we strive for when playing the clarinet.

Along with the embouchure, our breath support and airstream are responsible for producing a beautiful, and in tune tone (sound) on the clarinet. A great way to practice breath support and airstream is by doing “**long tones**”. As the name suggests, we want to play and hold a note for as long as possible until our breath runs out. A fun and useful exercise is to get out your stopwatch and time yourself playing a long tone on an open G<sup>1</sup>. How long can you go? As the days and weeks go by, track your progress and see how long you can hold the note.

### **Embouchure**

*Embouchure* is a fancy word for how we apply our mouth to the mouthpiece. A good embouchure is **not difficult** to achieve. The problem, however, arises when we don't spend enough time early on to ensure we are forming our embouchure correctly. It is really rather straightforward. Simply check off the following steps to guarantee you are forming your embouchure correctly:

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<sup>1</sup> You can take this exercise a step further by doing long tones chromatically on every note AND with your tuner handy to check the intonation of each note as you go.

1. Top teeth rest on the top of the mouthpiece.
2. Lower lip is spread **firmly** across the lower teeth.
  - \* Your lower lip should almost be divided in half. Half of the pink of the lip is covering over the top of the teeth and the other half is spread across the teeth.
3. Corners of the mouth create a seal around the mouthpiece.
  - \* The age-old analogy of "tightening purse strings" applies here.
4. Point your chin.
  - \* This step takes some getting used to and is often overlooked by beginners. It is, however, especially important to producing a beautiful tone. While the lower lip muscles closest to the reed pull toward the reed, the muscles further down the chin pull away, creating a *pointed* effect on the end of the chin. The chin should always remain pointed and motionless as we play, especially so between registers and when tonguing. Practice forming your embouchure in front of a mirror so that you can see when you are doing it correctly.

## Hand Position

A good hand position on the clarinet is one that is free from tension and undue stress. We want our hands to be **relaxed**. Some basic advice is to a) keep a natural curvature to your fingers, and b) seal the tone holes of the clarinet with the fleshy pads of your fingers and not the tips. Another important consideration is to keep your fingers **close** to the keys. By keeping your hands relaxed and fingers close to the keys, you will allow for speed and efficiency when developing your technique. H. Klosé *Celebrated Method for Clarinet* has a particularly instructive exercise (see below) titled "68 Exercises of Mechanism" for practicing your hand position.

### 68 EXERCISES OF MECHANISM.

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The exercises of mechanism have for their object the formation of the fingering by habituating each finger to act separately or simultaneously. By these exercises may be acquired that equality of fingering and that purity of tone which are the finest qualities of an Instrumentalist.

In the following exercises we must accentuate the sound upon the first note of each division of the bar.

Each bar or each sketch should be played eight or ten times and as a finish play the note after the dotted double bar.

All the notes should be slurred, ascending passages played *crescendo*, descending passages *diminuendo*.

The image shows the first 15 exercises of the '68 Exercises of Mechanism' set. Each exercise is a short melodic phrase, often consisting of a few notes with slurs and accents. Exercises 1-3 are on the first staff, 4-7 on the second, 8-11 on the third, and 12-15 on the fourth. The notation includes treble clefs, common time signatures, and various rhythmic values like eighth and sixteenth notes.

## Tonguing and Articulation

When tonguing on the clarinet it is important to remember that **less is more**. When we first learn about tonguing we are often taught to think “tee” or “tu”. These syllables do work for certain articulations but I greatly prefer to use “dee” and “du”. Try saying “tee tee tee” and then “dee dee dee”. The latter produces a lighter stroke of the tongue by optimally drawing the tongue away from the reed. Remember to keep your airstream **strong and constant** when practicing your tonguing.

*“Tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed”* is another old adage that has been passed down through generations of clarinet players. The general concept here is that only the tip or front part of the tongue should move. Whilst tonguing, the embouchure and in particular the chin should remain stable as if it were a statue made of marble.

## Mastering the Upper Register

For the advancing clarinetist, a mastery of the upper (upper clarion to altissimo) register becomes increasingly apparent. Alongside a fast and cold airstream, the key to playing these high notes is to have the correct **voicing**. The upper registers of the clarinet require subtle modifications to the throat, soft palate and to a lesser extent the embouchure. Practice your voicing through the following exercise:

1. Play a thumb F, then add the register key to play a high (upper clarion) C
2. Once the high C is stable, remove the register key but keep the high C. Don't let the note jump back down to the thumb F.
3. If you are successful with the F -> C, repeat the exercise, only this time once you are on the high C, without the register key, descend (go down) diatonically (C, B, A, G, etc.) as far as you can while keeping the notes in the clarion register.

When practicing voicing for the upper register it is especially important to keep your tongue **high** and **arched** in your mouth. We achieve this by putting our tongue into an “**eee**” position. Without the clarinet, try exhaling with the tongue in the “eee” position. You should hear something that resembles a hissing sound. Maintain that tongue position when blowing into the clarinet.

## How to Practice

1. Set Goals
  - \* Be specific. Decide what you want to accomplish in your practice session and stick to it.

## 2. Pace Yourself

\* 30 minute practice intervals work better than working yourself to the point of exhaustion. Practice for 30 minutes and then take a 5-10 minute break where you do something completely away from the clarinet.

## 3. Don't Practice Mistakes

\* A lot of the time we spend our practice session making mistakes. Mistakes are part of the learning process, but don't practice them. If you are stuck on a difficult passage **slow it down**. Don't be bound to tempo. Instead of working the same section over and over at a tempo that you cannot handle, slow it down and play it correctly. Another way to approach difficult passages is by playing them backwards, or altering the rhythm. It sounds strange, but it works!

## 4. Use a Metronome

\* The best way to learn to play something at the right tempo every time is through the use of a metronome. Metronomes are also very useful for helping you to locate those places where you might be rushing or dragging.

## 5. Record Yourself

## 6. Use a Tuner

\* Using a tuner is as easy as downloading a free application on your phone. A tuner is the clarinetists best friend.

## The Importance of Scales and Arpeggios

A **scale** is a collection of notes ascending (going up) and descending (going down) in alphabetical order in a given key. For every scale there is an **arpeggio**. Arpeggios are made up of the 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 8th note of the scale. There are many different types of scales and arpeggios. Fundamentally, we want to be able to identify and perform the **major** and **minor** scales. Broadly speaking, music in a major key sounds happy and music in a minor key sounds sad. Being fluent in the major and minor scales and arpeggios is of the utmost importance, since they are the basis of western music and are frequently used in nearly any and all repertoire you will encounter.

H. Klosé *Celebrated Method for Clarinet* has an excellent example of the Major and Minor scales (see below), and Gustave Langenus *Complete Method for the Clarinet, Part III Virtuoso Studies and Duos* (see below) has an equally fine major and minor arpeggio study.

Acquiring proficiency on the major and minor scales and arpeggios will give you a deeper understanding of any music you may encounter. And, as an added bonus you will become more adept at sight reading music and recognizing patterns.

# Major and Minor Scales

H. Klosé *Celebrated Method for Clarinet*

H. KLOSE

The image displays a musical score for a clarinet exercise, consisting of 12 staves of music. The first staff is marked with a '1.' and begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The music is written in a single melodic line, featuring a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together in groups. The piece is divided into several measures by bar lines, with some measures containing slurs or phrasing marks. The key signature changes to two flats (B-flat and E-flat) in the sixth measure, and then to three flats (B-flat, E-flat, and A-flat) in the tenth measure. The notation includes various accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) and rests, indicating a complex scale exercise. The overall style is characteristic of 19th-century clarinet pedagogy.

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# Major and Minor Arpeggios

Gustave Langenus *Complete Method for the Clarinet, Part III Virtuoso Studies and Duos*

The image displays a musical score for clarinet, consisting of 13 staves of music. The first staff is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes the instruction *simile*. The music is written in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The first two staves are in the key of C major, while the remaining eleven staves progress through various keys, including B-flat major, A-flat major, G-flat major, F major, E-flat major, D-flat major, C major, B-flat major, A-flat major, G-flat major, and F major. The piece features continuous arpeggiated patterns, often spanning multiple staves, with various rhythmic values and articulations. The notation includes slurs, accents, and dynamic markings such as *p* and *simile*.

## A Note on Reeds

There are a multitude of clarinet reeds available on the market. Choosing the right reed is essential for producing a beautiful tone. When choosing a clarinet reed, the two primary considerations are the **brand** of reed and the **strength** of reed.

There are many **brands** on the market. For beginners, Rico reeds are a good choice. Rico is an American brand that is favored by beginners, as the reeds are easy to use for someone who is still learning to form a good embouchure and produce a strong airstream. For the advancing clarinetist, reeds from the French brand Vandoren are an excellent choice. Vandoren offers many different models of reeds but the traditional “blue box” is a good starting point. Vandoren is favored by many professional players, as they are known for their craftsmanship and attention to detail.

Clarinet reeds come in various **strengths**, and use a number system. The system ranges from 1 to 5, and uses half numbers to help evaluate the hardness. The higher the number, the harder the reed. It is generally understood that a harder reed produces a better sound, however, a clarinet player should never jump into using a reed that is too hard for them, as this will make it harder for the player to produce a sound. Beginners should start at a 1.5 or 2 and gradually work their way up to a harder reed. Intermediate and advancing clarinetists will often prefer a 3 or 3.5 strength reed.

## Continuing Your Clarinet Studies

If you are interested in furthering your development on the clarinet there are many resources available to you. Seek out the following:

1. Find a **private teacher** and take regular weekly lessons. Contact me to schedule a lesson. My contact information is at the top of this handout!
2. Find a music-centered **summer camp**. Acadia University’s Summer Music Camp is an excellent choice. Mount Allison University also has a Summer Academy of Music.
3. Consider applying and auditioning for **provincial ensembles** such as the NSJWE, NSYWE, and NSYO.