

Bass Clarinet 101, Bass Clarinet for Dummies

By Edward Palanker

The bass clarinet is a unique member of the clarinet family. If you don't voice it correctly in the upper register you're in for a surprise, and disappointment. One of the big problems playing the upper register is how easy it is to get the high overtones. You think you're squeaking but you're really playing the altissimo register. The bass clarinet has an incredible range; the problem is how to control it. Try this for kicks. Play a Bb3 and pinch or voice up a bit, you should get a G4, pinch more and you get a C5, pinch more, it keeps going, and going and going. You're not squeaking, you're playing overtones. You have to avoid voicing high or pinching in the upper register or you'll be higher than a kite. A bass clarinet squeak is when you skip to a low note and it chirps, or you hit a throat tone key when you shouldn't. You'll notice because everyone in the hall hears it too because it's so loud.

Approach;

Don't approach the bass clarinet as if it were a clarinet. There are similarities but there are differences also. The bass clarinet needs to be voiced differently than a clarinet because the "clarion" register has a very unique problem. G3 to C4, counting from the very low C, the C above the treble clef, has discouraged more clarinet players from learning the bass than any other factor. It's relatively easy to produce a sound on the bass clarinet below the break, just relax, blow easy and use a large volume of air. When you reach the break notes you will probably squeak or sound unfocused. As you go higher it only gets more difficult to control.

Upper register:

The clarion register on the bass clarinet has a good deal more resistance than does the comparable register on the Bb clarinet. You need to voice this register like you're voicing the lower octave, not the upper octave. You need to learn the "feel" of these notes, G3 to C4. I usually suggest practicing 12ths. Playing low E and depressing the register key to produce the 12th above. Do this on every chromatic note until you get to F2 –C4. Play each note about two slow beats, making a slight crescendo to the high note and a diminuendo once on the high note. Try to voice the upper note in the same manner as you voiced the lower note. In other words, do not close

your throat, do not tighten up, constrict or pinch and keep blowing low. Once you begin to get the feeling of how to voice the upper notes, begin to practice each upper note by trying to “voice” the note in the same manner as you did the 12th below. You have to learn to copy the feeling until it becomes natural. Then practice quarter notes with quarter note rests, starting and stopping without stopping the air column. I suggest you think of starting the high notes as if you are playing flat and as soon as you hear the note sound, firm up just a bit, but don't pinch. You always have to voice lower than you think and keep that throat opened. You can get away with closing your throat a bit on the clarinet, though I don't suggest it, but it's disastrous on the bass. You need to play relaxed, no tension in the throat or embouchure.

Angle:

The angle of the mouthpiece is an important aspect of controlling the tone. Don't try to angle the mouthpiece like a clarinet mouthpiece, but not like a saxophone either. There's a happy medium and everyone is different, so you need to experiment. With the older model instruments you need to angle the instrument so the peg is at a slant under your chair a bit and your head angled back slightly so you don't have the mouthpiece going straight into your mouth. Today's instruments have more acute angles and you don't have to adjust as much, if any. You should also try to take as much mouthpiece in your mouth as is comfortable. Too little and your tone will be pinched and small, too much and you'll get a choked and uncontrolled sound. Everyone has a different bite so the ideal amount of mouthpiece will vary from one player to another. Because of the size of the mouthpiece, you don't always have to play with the same amount in your mouth. You will find that you can be flexible once you become comfortable. You might want to take more or less mouthpiece in your mouth when playing loud or soft, high or low. A lot will depend on the reed too. When a reed is a bit on the softer side I tend to take a slightly larger bite.

Reed:

If you use a soft reed it will make the low register very easy to play, but you will increase the chances of squeaking in the upper register and you will probably get a smaller sound. If you use a reed that's too hard, you will not be able to support, probably squeak and get a harsh tone. Try something in between. Make sure the reed seals on the mouthpiece. It's a problem on

clarinet but it's deadly on the bass. The upper notes won't come out, will speak late or you'll squeak when you try to make an entrance. I suggest using Grand Concerts or Vandoren, 3 1/2 or 4s.

Embouchure and Position:

All basses come with a peg these days. I suggest you use it to stabilize it, and to get the proper height for your best comfort and control. Some players also use a strap to help secure the instrument. I prefer not to use a strap, but sometimes I will hold the bell in between my feet to secure the instrument in a "nervous" passage. I suggest the mouthpiece come up to your mouth so that you don't have to bend down or stretch up to reach it. You should lean into the mouthpiece, not sitting back bringing the mouthpiece to you. I believe in a soft embouchure, not loose but not rigid. The jaw and sides of the mouth should be firm but relaxed as well. The only pressure should be the top teeth and top lip holding firmly on the mouthpiece but remaining relaxed at the same time. This secures the mouthpiece from moving about and enables the lower lip to be somewhat relaxed and flexible so it can wrap comfortably around the reed. Project the embouchure in a forward direction as if you are blowing out a candle or whistling, but not to that extreme. This will eliminate the unneeded tension of blowing in one direction and holding the muscles in the opposite direction. Folding the top lip into the top teeth will enable you get a slightly bigger, more open tone, simulating a double lip without the teeth cutting into the lip. This will also enable you to open your throat more. Although the lower lip should remain reasonably stationary, you need to be a bit flexible in "rolling" the teeth slightly when skipping from the upper register to the lower register while voicing the back of the throat low.

Breathing and Tonguing;

Needless to say breathing is very important. The same principles apply to the bass as to any other wind instruments; it just requires more air than a clarinet. Tonguing principles are the same as on a clarinet, but because of the larger reed and mouthpiece it is not always possible for many players to tongue near the tip of the reed. The most important thing is to tongue at the tip of the tongue and use a light stroke, even though the reed is much larger than a clarinet. I think the tongue should be arched in back to help direct the air and voicing, but should not remain high at all times. The higher the front of the tongue sits in the mouth, the more apt you are to get a smaller tone. Voice mostly with the back of the tongue, not the front, even as you go into the higher register. Move the tongue only as high as necessary to keep the

tone and pitch focused. This will vary with each individual, as will many other factors. The tongue is not the same size in all individuals. We are all built slightly different and may need to approach playing any instrument in a slightly different manner.

Hand position and Fingerings:

Hand position is basically the same as on the clarinet, but with a wider spread. Because of the height of the G# throat tone key I suggest using a bit more flexibility in the moving of the wrist and even the forearm, in fast passages around that part of the instrument. Fingerings are the same as on clarinet except for the very low notes, since the clarinet does not go that low, and the extreme high register. There are several different configurations of fingerings for the low notes depending on the model and make of the instrument you have. It can be confusing when going from one model to another. The high register has two basic sets of fingerings. The first is pretty much the same as the clarinet, with the exception of having to use the “half hole key” for everything above the high D. High C# and D will work with or without the half hole. The second set of fingerings, which many players use as their main fingerings, are very much like some alternate fingers on the clarinet, but work very well on the bass clarinet. An example is C#4, played with the thumb plus side key 1&2. This is a trill key for C-C# on the clarinet, but a very good C# on the bass. It goes on from there. Over blow throat tone G to get a high D. You may need the register key depressed without the F thumb key depressed, Then use the G# key to get an Eb, the A key to get a high E. These are some examples of the alternate fingerings. It's possible to go up to a high G5, above what you would consider a high C on the clarinet, but they sound like ..., well I won't go there. The practical orchestral range is to a G4 but I've had to play to a C5 on a few occasions in contemporary music.

Notation: There are three ways of notating for the bass clarinet, the French, the German and a combination of both, which is confusing, and wrong. The French, using only the treble clef, is the easiest because you read the same way as you do a clarinet part and it sounds an octave lower. The German, using the bass clef, sounds in the octave it is written. A written low G on the bottom line of the bass clef sounds like a low G, not an octave lower. Now for the confusion. When a composer wants to write up high in the bass clef, instead of writing lots of ledger lines, they write it in the treble clef. But because it is written as it sounds, you have to play it an octave higher, so it will sound like the note you are looking at. The problem is that many

composers did not understand this and when writing in the bass clef and going to the treble clef they want you to play it in the French style, as written instead of an octave higher. It can be confusing and there's no way to know other than common sense and experience. Most composers like Dukas, Franck and Strauss (in some of his works), wrote in the German style and understood it, but some did not. Rachmaninoff never got it correct and even Stravinsky got it wrong on occasion. In *Petruchka*, the early version, he wrote the same passage in both the French and German notation. There is also a need to learn to transpose from "A" bass clarinet. Some composers that wrote for bass clarinet in "A" are Wagner, Mahler and Ravel. Learn it all, it's worth it. Many players transpose their parts for auditions or performances, but I think you should learn how to transpose down a half step. It's not difficult unless you are in a key with several flats because then you have to think double flats.

Mouthpieces;

Before you begin you will need to have a decent mouthpiece. This is a catch 22 situation. You don't know what a good mouthpiece is for you until you can play it, and you may not be able to play it until you have a good mouthpiece. You're stuck. The other important requirement is to make sure the bass doesn't have a leak and that the automatic double octave key is perfectly coordinated. Again you're stuck. If you can't play it, how can you tell if it's working properly. The answer is to find an experienced player and have them help you. There are many mouthpieces on the market. I've been very successful with the Selmer line, especially the C* and C** for a full, mellow and dark sound. The C85/15 is very good and has a tendency to be a bit "sweeter" sounding, I've even had a student that sounded good on the HS**, but it has a tendency to be more unfocused. I've had some luck with the Forbes CF and RR as well. Of course everyone has his or her own preferences for mouthpieces and everyone could easily get a different result with the same equipment, but you have to start someplace. I suggest beginning with the C* and once you can really control the horn, you can try out others. There are lots to choose from. I suggest you try several brands and facing. When you decide on which one you favor, try out three or four of that facing to pick the best one. Mouthpieces are like snow flakes; there are no two alike. Getting one refaced is also an option, but I think you're better off trying out as many as you can first, that way you can try a variety. There's a perfect one for everyone, you just have to find it. When you get one refaced, you need to know what it is you're looking for. I've had mouthpieces refaced by some very competent people, including the

legendary Everett Matson, in an attempt to make a copy of the one I use, and I can say that some have come close, but no one has ever been able to duplicate my mouthpiece exactly. It's one of a kind, an old stock Selmer C**. Now I use a C* refaced by Dave McClune.

What to buy:

Ready to purchase a new bass clarinet? I don't have a recommendation as to which one to buy. What I do recommend is that you try out several brands and check for tone and feel. Once you decide on the brand you like, be careful to make sure the resistance is equal throughout the instrument. Many models have had a lot of resistance in the break register and feel like someone stuffed something in the bell. Also check intonation carefully, especially the throat tone notes and the break notes. You don't want to go from a sharp C-B on the break to a flat Bb, A, G below. Tune your throat tones to a tuner and then make sure you can adjust the break notes without distorting the tone quality. Don't be overly concerned about the low notes, they are very forgiving, but make sure they are reasonable. Make sure the E-F and B-C twelfths are not too large and can easily be adjusted as well. If you find the perfect horn let me know, I'll buy it from you.