Highs and lows and All you wanted to know.

This is a combination of two articles I wrote years apart. There were too many similarities to print both of them here. “All you wanted to know about the bass clarinet and have been afraid to ask” and “The highs and lows of the bass clarinet”.

I decided to write this article after experiencing many misconceptions, as to the proper approach to the bass clarinet. Many of my bass clarinet students are either doublers that want a few “hints” or clarinetist that want to learn the bass, usually in two or three easy lessons. That’s their first mistake; thinking that a clarinet or saxophone player can simply learn the bass clarinet. The bass clarinet is neither a clarinet nor a saxophone. Although there are many similarities, it is an individual instrument. I teach and perform on both instruments and consider myself a clarinetist and bass clarinetist because I’ve taken the time and effort to learn and study both instruments as if each were my major and continue to treat them as equals.

One problem confronting the beginning bass player is the third octave, especially high, 3rd octave, G, A, and B. These notes take very special care, but often I’ve found the problems to be mechanical. The slightest leak can cause trouble. Unless the coordination between both register keys is working perfectly, it will cause delayed attacks and squeaks. Any leak in the upper joint will be disastrous, especially for the inexperienced player and has been the largest factor in the discouragement of playing the bass clarinet.

The third octave does indeed have more resistance than the lower two and must be approached very carefully and slowly. There is a certain feeling necessary for playing this register that is not found on the clarinet or saxophone. It’s almost a delayed action, which can only be mastered by practicing soft attacks, long tones, and easy tonguing exercises until one develops that “feeling.” There is no short cut. The tendency is to voice them too high producing their overtones. One has to think and voice low unlike a clarinet in the same register.

One of the most common errors in the early stages of switching to the bass is due to the ease in which it takes to get a nice, big, vibrant tone in the low register, especially with a soft reed and closed mouthpiece. But what happens above the throat tones? A small, choked, often squally sound is the result. What’s needed is a

relatively free-blowing mouthpiece with a medium opening that will enable the player to use a reed that has body and that will not close up when supported up high.

The combination of reed to mouthpiece goes hand in hand with the choice of mouthpiece. Generally, the more open the mouthpiece the softer the reed, and the more closed the mouthpiece the harder the reed, though there are exceptions. This being a very personal choice, one can find dozens of possibilities. A reed that's too hard, especially at the tip, will tend to produce a harsh tone and late attacks. Too soft a reed leans toward a reedy sound and often closes up. Getting smaller as the range goes higher. So what's left? Try a reed somewhere in between; a reed that responds to your will yet has enough body to provide the necessary resistance to produce a big, rich, full sound; one with depth and darkness throughout the entire range.

Embouchure problems are created through the myth that the bass clarinet embouchure is the same as that of a clarinet or saxophone. Not true. There are many similarities but one should be approached as if it were a completely different instrument. Here are some of my recommendations. Please keep in mind that embouchures are very individual for a variety of reasons and what works for one may not have the same results for another. I believe in a soft embouchure, not loose but not tight. The jaw and sides of the mouth should be firm but not tense. The only real pressure is on the top teeth as they press downward on the mouthpiece. This secures the mouthpiece from moving about and enables the lower lip to be relaxed 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 directions. Folding the top lip into the top teeth will enable you to 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 the throat more.

I must emphasize the importance of good breath support and a relaxed and opened throat. The lack of proper breath support and a closed throat are responsible to 3/4 of the problems on the bass, especially in the high register, doing these properly are a must.

Sometimes people have a problem with the low notes not speaking when they skip down to them or even try starting them forte. That's usually caused by a lack of lip flexibility or not voicing low enough. You must be relaxed when you play skips down there. There's the tendency to voice those low notes too high or have your tongue to high in your mouth or back by your throat.

The bass has no special hold on tonguing problems. The techniques are basically the same as on other single reed instruments except that the angle of the mouthpiece differs in the mouth and therefore the point of contact with the reed may vary. The tongue should be free of obstruction as in an opened throat. Movement should be confined to the tip area not the back and there should be no movement in the throat. Having a larger reed than clarinet does not mean using a heavier tongue stroke. The reed will react just as well to a light, precise stroke and can be just about as flexible as on a smaller instrument. When beginning a tone, especially in the upper register, it is advisable to have the air pressure built up prior to the attack. This is a good practice on any wind instrument but especially on one with such a large chambered mouthpiece to avoid delayed or hard attacks.

The angle of the mouthpiece is a very important point, generally overlooked by the novice. It is individual and should be somewhat experimented with to find the position most comfortable and beneficial. With the newer neck angles one does not have to bend your head nearly so much, if at all, to get "under" the mouthpiece. You need to find the position that is most beneficial to getting a good tone and control. Remember, it's not like a clarinet but not like a Saxophone either, somewhere in between. You also have to experiment with how much mouthpiece to take in your mouth. I suggest as much as possible that is comfortable and gives you the best control. I always suggest using a peg so that the height of the instrument is stable and consistent. The use of a neck strap is optional in my opinion.

The hand position does not differ very much from that of the clarinet. The left hand does have to work harder to get over the height of the G sharp key. I recommend a little more flexibility in the moving of the wrist and even the forearm in fast passages around the section of the instrument than you would do on a regular clarinet. Fingerings

differ very little from a clarinet until you get to the altissimo register. Please refer to my fingering chart in another article. The low D-C and be a bit confusing because they differ on every make and model instrument. The only thing in common is that most of them are played with the right thumb with some alternates in the left and right pinky.

For the student that has orchestral playing in mind, there are some facts about notation they should know. First of all, one must be able to transpose from bass clarinet in A in both treble and bass clef. Some examples are Ravels La Valse and Wagner's Tristan and Isolde. Now there are two basic way for notating, the German and the French, but because there are so many exceptions to these two ways, we should consider there to be three ways, the third being a kind of mix and match.

The French is the easiest. It's written the same as a clarinet, it just sounds an octave lower. This is the way all band music is written and most contemporary music. Some examples are Revel's Daphnis and Chloe and Gershwin's American in Paris. The second way is the German way, written in the octave it sounds, not sounding an octave lower. So the low G written on the first line in the bass clef is played as the lowest G on the instrument. When it goes up to high register the composer writes it in the treble clef but you have to play it an octave higher. Since the bass clarinet will sound an octave lower in the treble you have to play it an octave high so it sounds the note you are actually reading. Some examples are the Franck's D minor Symphony and Strauss's Death and Transfiguration. Unfortunately there are many composers that did not understand that like Rachmaninoff who always got it wrong. They wrote in the bass clef in the register it sounds but in the treble clef expecting it to sound an octave lower. I know, it's confusing, which is why some composers never got it right. Just use common sense when determining how it should go. Your not supposed to be sounding higher than the clarinets.

Intonation is always a concern on every instrument. Most bass clarinets are somewhat sharp on the break notes, or flat on the throat tones, so one must be very careful when choosing an instrument. Often some of the 12ths below the break notes are flat but they are very forgiving in that register. It is far more important to have the

throat note and the break notes as in tune and as close to a homogeneous tone quality as possible. You actually play more in that register than any another.