

An Open Mind is a Terrible Thing To Waste.

Why are so many clarinet players close minded? No, I don't mean you of course, only the other guy. So many of us are unwilling to accept another way of doing things. Whether it's a fingering or an articulation or a mouthpiece. It seems to me that in so many cases, the better the player is, the more close minded they are. That's why I feel qualified to write this article. I know I'm the best clarinetist in Phoenix, Maryland, though the fourteen year old down the street is coming on pretty strong. My kid once told me that I was the best clarinetist he had ever heard. He was five at the time. I only have a moderate size ego, but it's enough to get by on. It's not so big that I really believe that no one else can do it better. I love my sound, but have heard many others that I admire. I believe there is more than one way of doing everything. I'm even opened minded about equipment. Wow, that's an anomaly for a clarinetist. Too many clarinetists think their way is the only way to do anything. I'm passionate about my teaching and I'm willing to explore any avenue to help a student achieve their goal, even if it means doing something different from the way I was taught or the way I do it. And get this, I don't insist that all my students play on the same type of mouthpiece or reed. Hard to believe, isn't it?

I'm not mentioning most names in this article because I don't want to become an outcast amongst my peers. The idea of writing this article came to me when I was thinking about what a conductor said at a rehearsal several years ago. He was having a disagreement with the concertmaster over a bowing and phrasing in a Mozart Symphony and I heard him say "well we could do it that way but it wouldn't be Mozart" I thought, what would it be, chopped liver? How close minded to think that just because it's not phrased the way he thought it should be, it must be wrong.

Then I thought about all the times I've heard of clarinet teachers telling their students that their way of articulating the Mozart or the Weber Clarinet Concerto's is the "only correct way". I've heard some pretty dogmatic statements on that subject. Personally, I have my preferences, some which I have changed over the years. I don't

think I've ever performed them the same way twice. If I hear someone do something that I like, I make a note of it. When I teach them to my students I give them my preferences and also point out to them several other interpretations. I ask them to try different ways of articulation and to listen to several recordings and form their own opinion. Of course I do guide them through the process. How many of you do that? Is there really only one right way?

The first person I studied the Mozart Concerto with was Eric Simon. He has a very good edition published by Schirmer's. When I asked him how people decide what to tongue and what not to he replied, if you have a fast tongue and want to show off, you tongue more, if you don't, you tongue less. He also added, always do it in good taste. Don't tongue often just because you can.

When I was in school I had the privilege to have James Chambers as a coach of our wind repertoire class. He was the principal horn in the NY Philharmonic at the time. He would do a piece with us and point out how different conductors would do different phrases. When we did Tchaikovsky's 5th, he pointed out how some conductors interpret the clarinet solo in the second movement at the moderato con anima. He said some conductors allow the player great liberty with rubato and others ask for it to be straight forward with little or no rubato. You must be prepared to be flexible in your interpretations. I have found that to be very true throughout my career. I always have my students practice orchestral passages different ways, not just the one that I prefer.

My favorite closed minded statement of all time came from a bass clarinet player of major orchestra. A former student of mine went to him for a "coaching" session to help prepare her for an audition. I agreed that it is always a good idea to get another opinion. Boy was I wrong in this case. The first thing he asked her was what equipment she was using. Before he ever heard her play a note he told her she could not play on what she was using. He then proceeded to try her set up and said "see, if I can't play on it how can you". She came to me and told me what had happened. She gets a very good sound on her equipment and I can play on it just fine. She

plays on a Selmer C* with a Rovner ligature and Vandoren #4 reed. Not too far different from what I use. Is there something wrong with me that I can play on it or something wrong with him that he can't? He sounds very good on his equipment and I think I sound pretty good on mine, and hers for that matter. Which one of us is playing the "correct" equipment?

A clarinet player, who also manufactures his own mouthpiece, once told me that Vandoren does not make their mouthpieces properly. They do not cast them the right way he said. They should do it the way his does his, the right way. I guess all of you that use Vandoren mouthpieces better get rid of them, sorry. He also told me that the Pyne mouthpiece has far too much resistance to be played properly. I told him I used a Pyne for several years and really liked it. I had no problem with the resistance, I just prepared my reeds accordingly. Then I mentioned that my former student Ricardo Morales (I'm a name dropper) uses a Pyne and has a beautiful sound and plays with incredible finesse and control. I said everyone does not play the same way or are they looking for the same sound. He had nothing to say, just silence. It's so easy to criticize others just because they do it differently than you do.

Then there was the teacher that told a student of mine at a master class she attended, that her mouthpiece wasn't very good. He told her that Ralph Morgan, the maker of her mouthpiece, doesn't know enough about the clarinet. Excuse me, he was the head technician for the Selmer Company in the USA before retiring. I think he knows something about the instrument. She tried the mouthpiece he uses, on his recommendation, and really did not like the sound she got so she went back to her Morgan. I told her that I liked the sound she was getting with her Morgan and that the other teacher was very closed minded and was just trying to push his mouthpiece. I told her that there are some fine players that use that particular brand of mouthpiece but that everyone that I know that uses it had it refaced. I don't know anyone that gets a good sound with that mouthpiece that plays it as it was originally purchased.

At a mock audition several years ago, a fellow clarinet player

said this to me about one of the players “He’ll never get a job in this country with that sound, it isn’t a classic clarinet sound”. I said there are lots of players that have that type of sound quality. I mentioned several that I knew that hold major jobs. His reaction was, “they’re exceptions”.

A maker of fine barrels once told me that his barrel will make any clarinet play better. He advocated using his barrel on my Bb and A clarinet and that it would make any brand play better in tune. I asked him how it could do that when each brand has a different size bore. He said “it just will”. Another mouthpiece maker told a student of mine that her clarinet will play better in tune if she used his mouthpiece. “Any clarinet will play in tune with my mouthpiece” he said. Wow!

A player once told me that I could not really make a good reed with a Reed-Du-Al. This was back in the days when I made my own reeds. I made them successfully for 15 years. He told me that cutting a reed with sandpaper was not good and that it had to be done with a blade. I asked him how come I was making so many good reeds. He also told me that a Cordier reed trimmer was no good because it clipped the tip instead of cutting it. I informed him that every reed I made was finished with a Cordier reed trimmer. It’s funny how people don’t know what to say when you tell them that you are successful doing something that they say can’t be done. It’s so easy to be closed minded. By the way, he now makes reeds the same way I did, and finishes them with a, you got it, a Cordier reed trimmer. It took him ten years but he came around. Of course I now use Grand Concert reeds so I don’t have to make them any more.

When Rovner was marketing his new ligature, he asked me to send them to people I knew to get their reactions. Most players were very receptive to the design but a few would not dare to use it at first. It was too radical for them. After all, almost everyone used a metal ligature in the USA back then. One player wrote back and said the idea is good but it just won’t work. Well I guess he was wrong. It’s probably one of the most widely successful and copied ligatures on the market today. Another player, a principal in a major orchestra

then told me that he really liked the Rovner but would not use it because he was hired using the equipment he plays so he should not change. I pointed out to him that the conductor that hired him was not there any more and that he's been principal for fifteen years now. He still did not change.

Then there's always those teachers that insist that a student finger a passage a certain way even though it may not sound as in tune or smooth as another. I'm always amazed when I get a student that fingers a passage a certain way that sounds out of tune or clumsy. When I ask them why they choose that fingering they reply that their former teacher told them they had to do it that way. Some teachers don't consider the way the student sounds as much as they want to have them do things the way they do it. I don't think they are doing anyone a favor by not being more opened minded. We need to care more about the student than our egos.