

Does one mouthpiece fit all? Does yours measure up?

Do you know someone that measures the bore of a mouthpiece or barrel before playing it to decide if it's going to be any good? I love it when someone tells me that a mouthpiece can't be any good, can't play in tune or can't play focused before they ever hear or try it.

I remember when there used to be distinct national tones, even local tones (cities), we referred to the Philly sound (Philadelphia), and the Cleveland sound. There was a German, French and English sound, which were all very distinct. Some people even spoke of a New York sound, but those of us in New York could not understand whose sound that referred to. When I was studying in New York, there were so many great players around: Robert McGinnis, Stanley Drucker, Herbert Blayman, David Weber, David Glazer, Alexander Williams and Bernard Portwnoy, just to name a few. There were a host of other fine players and teachers in NY as well. We could never figure out what the NY sound was. It was more like a universe of clarinet sounds. So many of these fine players sounded so different. I believe every one of these players used a different type mouthpiece. Which one was the "right one"?

That brings me to the point of this article, if there is one, what mouthpiece to choose for yourself or your students. I once went to Hans Moennig to have some tuning done on my old Buffet Bb clarinet. The high B and C were sharp and the 12th below was flat. After a few hours of undercutting, boring and taping he said the problem was my mouthpiece, not the clarinet. The bore on my "Wells" mouthpiece was too large, he said. It played 12th too large. He gave me a stock Buffet mouthpiece and said this is what I needed because it had the proper bore size. Of course I sounded like a goat with that mouthpiece, so I gave up on the clarinet instead. I purchased a new one that played better in tune (using that Wells mouthpiece). I was older and wiser at this point and could hear better than when I picked out my first Buffet as a student.

I still use that "new" Buffet clarinet but gave up the Wells mouthpiece some years later. I had gotten that Wells from Leon Russianoff, my teacher. He was famous for his "bag" of mouthpieces. He owned a music store called "Banner Music" and would accumulate lots of mouthpieces, new and old. When either he or his students was not satisfied with what they had, he would send

them home with the “Bag”. I had changed several times while studying with him, always searching for the perfect one. I even used a Portnoy while doing coaching with him at the National orchestral Association. Russianoff like it too. He was not at all concerned that I got it from another clarinet teacher, so I used it for about a year until I came across the Wells (more about that later).

I don't remember Russianoff or any of my other teachers “measuring” my mouthpieces. When taking a lesson from Robert Marcellus in the 60s, he tried my Wells mouthpiece and commented on what a good mouthpiece it was based on his playing it, and hearing me, not measuring it. What was important to him was how it sounded, if it tuned well, and if it articulated cleanly. I never assume the bore is a problem unless I hear a problem. Use your ears first, then your bore gauge.

I know that every student has different facial muscles. Everyone has different lip thickness, tongue size, throat opening, over bite and under bite, oral cavity size, jaw strength, air pressure and capacity (did I leave anything out?). Then how can everyone sound their best on the same mouthpiece? Everyone has a different voice when singing and speaking because everyone has different natural features. Do voice teachers try to make all of their students sound the same? Of course not. A student arrives with their natural equipment and they try to develop it to their fullest potential. Your own voice (tone) should be your signature. So why do many clarinet teachers try to make all of their students sound alike by making them play “their” mouthpiece. Just think what a boring clarinet world this would be if one great teacher-player succeeded in doing that. We would all sound the same because we would all be clones of some great teacher from years past. Just think about those poor players who could not sound that same, that could not fit the mold. Their teacher would have said, “Sorry son, but you can't make it as a clarinet player because you can't sound like me. I gave you the same mouthpiece as I use, the same reed type, ligature and clarinet. I showed you how to form your embouchure as I do. Why can't you sound like me? “You better give it up you just don't have it.”

I think some teachers have all of their students play the same equipment because they think it's easier for them to teach that way.

They don't have to try to figure out what's best for every different personality and physical makeup. If they all play the same way with the same equipment they will all sound good, the way their teachers think they should sound. Well, this may work for some students, but what about the students who can't adapt to that equipment? Some people just naturally have tendencies towards a certain type of tone quality. Wouldn't it be more beneficial to try to find what works best for them instead of forcing them to try to get the same sound as you do by having to use the same mouthpiece? I'm not suggesting that the student should not try the mouthpiece that the teacher prefers; of course that should be a top consideration. I'm suggesting that you both stay open-minded and find the best mouthpiece for that student. I know there are teachers who have produced great sounding students with the "one-fits-all" approach. The really talented student that can sound like their teachers do so because they are so talented that they could adapt themselves and fit their teacher's mold. What happens to those students that can't fit that mold but might produce a really nice tone if they were given some other choices? Maybe they were smart enough to go to someone else, or maybe they got so discouraged that they quit. Will we ever know? We only hear of the students that "made it", not the ones who didn't. Teachers get credit for their successes, not their failures. We rarely, if ever hear of them.

The famous players often attract the best students regardless of their teaching ability though many of those players are often fine teachers as well. Take Robert Marcellus as an example. I think most of us would agree that he was a great player, and I know he was also a fine teacher. He had a sound that many players tried to emulate, many still do. How many of his students do you know who sound like he did? Remember, I didn't ask how many of them sound good, I asked how many of them sound like him? I know many of his students who have very nice sounds. He attracted many of the finest students to study with him, yet I believe his tone quality remains quite distinctive.

Remember, using the same mouthpiece, as another player will not necessarily give you the same sound. As a matter of fact, it is very doubtful that you will get the same result just by changing mouthpieces. We each have our own "voice" and we should try to cultivate it to the best of our ability. As Russianoff used to tell me, "I

don't care if you get a dark sound, or a bright sound, as long as it is a good dark or bright sound, well-focused, full and in tune. He would say, "sound like Eddie Palanker, not Leon Russianoff.

There are some mouthpieces that are considered "dark" and some "bright". Without getting into brand names, I have heard many players get the opposite result from those mouthpieces. We often ask the students auditioning at Peabody what mouthpiece they are using out of curiosity, and sometimes I am very surprised at the answer. It's not just the mouthpiece that produces the sound; it's the collaboration of equipment and player that produce the sound. You need to find the proper match. When a player wants to change their sound they have to change more than just a mouthpiece. They have to change their approach to that mouthpiece. If you don't work at it constantly, you will soon get the same sound you got on your old mouthpiece because you will slip back to what comes naturally and feels comfortable. Everyone has his or her natural tendencies.

So when should you change mouthpieces? You should consider changing when you can no longer get the tone quality or comfort level you desire or you have determined that the mouthpiece you are using has faulty intonation. The best way to find the right mouthpiece for you is to be open-minded. Try a variety of mouthpieces with a variety of reeds. When one gives you something you like, work with it for a while. A single playing is not enough. I'm not suggesting that anyone change mouthpieces often, but it doesn't hurt to be willing to occasionally try other equipment.

I've changed mouthpieces several times in my life. The first time I remember was when I was a student at the Aspen Music Festival in the summer of "58". Earl Bates was the clarinet teacher, and he told me that I needed to change to the Bonade mouthpiece. He also changed my embouchure that summer so I could play the Bonade mouthpiece. My teacher at that time, Eric Simon, was not impressed. I soon changed back to my other mouthpiece. The summer of "60". Later I played a summer job with Larry Combs. I was so impressed with his sound that I bought the same mouthpiece as he used in hopes of duplication his sound. I didn't. As a matter of fact, I could hardly even play on it; I believe it was a Sumner. The next year I used the Portnoy until my teacher, Leon Russianoff, gave me his mouthpiece to try. It was a Wells (previously Stowell-Wells) I did

not like it very much so I did not keep it. A couple of months later a school friend of mine asked me if I wanted to try his mouthpiece because his teacher was making him buy his brand and he needed the money, I tried it and loved it. It was a Wells. Russianoff was as surprised as I was. Unfortunately, I dropped it a month later at a dress rehearsal of our school orchestra concert and I called Russianoff in a panic to borrow his. I ended up using that one for the next 5-6 years, until my dog chewed it up (his bark really improved). In my search for another Wells, I came across a Bay that I preferred and played that for about 15 years.

While in North Carolina one summer, I tried some Pyne mouthpieces that Robert Listokin had customized. I came across one that I fell in love with and began using it immediately. That love affair lasted about three years, then my reed blank source went out of business and I began having trouble-making reed for it. I soon came across a Morgan mouthpiece while trying mouthpieces in New York for my students. It took the better part of a year, playing it on and off, until I became comfortable enough to use it all the time. Now I can't play my Pyne at all and I adore my Morgan, go figure. (It now been 19 years since I found that Morgan.)

Interestingly enough, when I hear performances of myself throughout the years, there isn't as much difference in my tone as I would have thought. There are subtle quality differences to be sure, but hardly as much as one would think considering the different types of mouthpieces I've used. I always sound like Eddie Palanker. I've just made it easier to please myself. There's no reason to change if you can't improve something about your tone, but if you never try, and you're not open-minded, how will you ever know?