

## The correct tongue position #1

First let me say that I don't believe there is such a thing as one correct tongue position. Everything depends on a person's physical make up. We all have different size body parts and that certainly includes the tongue. The one thing I think most people will agree is that a low tongue position in the back by the molars, middle of the tongue, will most likely cause an unfocused and perhaps flat tone, especially in the throat tones. Though when the tongue is too high in front you are creating a small air passage and that can contribute to getting a forced, bright tone.

As a student I had trouble tonguing up to high G and Leon Russianoff told me it was probably because I was closing off the air passage when I went up high by raising my tongue too high in the front trying to voice those notes. Once I got the concept of keeping it a lower in front the problem went away. Later Joe Allard tried to get me to keep my tongue high in front so I could tongue the reed tip to tip but he realized my tongue was too large and I was choking off the tone. At first I was very confused by the whole thing until I analyzed myself more and realized what was happening. Now I always think low in the back of my throat and keep my tongue low in the front and high in back, never the EE feeling like so many players do.

I have the middle of the tongue up high in between or up near the upper molars. Then I like to angle the front of my tongue in an arch so that the front of my tongue touches my lower lip above my lower teeth. When I tongue I do use near the tip of my tongue and it goes in a slight upward angle to the reed instead of a straight stroke like Allard tried to get me to do. I use the back of my tongue and area by the larynx to voice my high notes, not just the front of my tongue. I'm not saying that's best for everyone, but it works for me because I have a large tongue. That way too, I get a darker, fuller sound than when the front of my tongue is high in my mouth. One has to consider your physical attributes and experiment to find the best position. It also depends on the quality your looking for too, you may like a brighter or darker sound so go for it. The only correct way to do anything on the clarinet is what works best for you, the Russianoff way.

## Tonguing Problems #2

Tonguing problems are not always black and white because people have different size tongues. Some teachers teach the same way to everyone, insisting that their way is the only correct way. Unfortunately that doesn't work for a good number of people. So, you have to experiment. I advocate

arching the tongue in back so it is near or touching the upper molars. Then bring the front of your tongue as close to the tip of the reed as you can and as close to the tip of your tongue as you can. This means it might be different for many people, it could be close to the tip or even a bit further back. If your tongue is on the longer side, as mine is, you will actually come up from under the reed and stroke the reed from below instead of at a straight angle as so many insist you do. Basically you have to experiment to find what works best for you. A really good teacher will not only encourage you to do this but will give you ideas on the angle and tongue position to achieve your maximum goal. It's a shame that there are so many, including some very fine teachers, that insist all their students tongue the same way they do, mostly because it came natural to them and they have no concept of how else to tongue. The secret is to use a light stroke with as little movement as possible without blocking the air passage or choking in your throat. Experiment.

### Hey Slow Poke, Your Tongue is a Body Part Too #3

For those of you that simply can't tongue as fast as you would like to, did it ever occur to you that your tongue might be too big? In our society, we are all so conscious of various body parts being too small or too large. Women are getting breast implants and some are having them made smaller. Nose jobs are commonplace. Big or small butts are conversation pieces and we are all aware if our ears are out of proportion to our faces. Do you notice that you never hear anyone say, "my tongue is too large?"

I'm aware of that problem because I have a "large" tongue. When I teach my students to tongue I teach them to tongue the classic way, by the book. The tip of tongue should be as close to the tip of the reed as possible. But what if the student, or you, can't do that? I bet it never occurred to many of you that an enlarged tongue could be the cause of the problem.

I could just refer you to the excellent chapter on tonguing in "The Art of Clarinet Playing" by Keith Stein published by Summy-Birchard Inc or Jack Brymer's chapter on tonguing in his book called "The Clarinet" by Schirmer's, and that would be the end of my article. Both of them point out the fact that we are not all created equal when it comes to tongue sizes and the use of our tongue in tonguing. I could stop now but I want to share some experiences with you. For those

of you that have never thought about it before, I'll try to give you some suggestions to help you overcome this "handicap". It is something that does not affect a person in ordinary life. Until you become a single reed player, it doesn't make a bit of difference. I discovered that I had a large tongue when I was taking bass clarinet lessons from Joe Allard. I was taking clarinet lessons from Leon Russianoff at the same time so he was careful not to contradict anything that Russianoff was telling me. Russianoff never mentioned anything about a problem, he assigned and I prepared. Allard explained the concept of tip-to-tip and said rather than coming up from the bottom of my mouth to the tip of the reed, I could probably tongue faster if I raised my tongue in the back of my mouth. Because the bass clarinet mouthpiece came further into the mouth than did the Bb mouthpiece it was more difficult to touch the tip of the reed. I hit the reed little below the tip with just below the tip of my tongue Allard demonstrated it to me by taking out his false teeth and showing me a full view of the inside of his mouth placing his tongue up high. It was not a pleasant sight. Almost like taking a course in oral anatomy. Looking inside of his mouth without his teeth was a bit graphic for me, but I kept my composure. He had me try it, with my full set of teeth left in of course, but I had a very difficult time getting the concept. "Go home and experiment," he said, so I did. I got on the NY subway and went home to the Bronx from his studio in Manhattan. Within half an hour of trying it, I was choking so badly that I was unable to play at all. I called him up, went back down to his studio and had another lesson. After about fifteen minutes he said, "you have an enlarged tongue. You will have to continue tonguing the way you do." Up till then I didn't even think I had a problem. I always managed to tongue everything I had to at the tempo I needed to. Eventually I learned that although I could get by on all the standard literature, I was limited when the tempos really got going.

One summer while playing principal clarinet at The Eastern Music Festival, we were doing the Saint Saëns Symphony #3, and it was going too fast for me. The bassoon player leaned over and said, "Eddie you're falling behind." I replied "really?" I went back to my studio and tried every trick I ever heard of to keep it in the tempo the conductor wanted and I finally hit on something. I had previously tried to double tongue the way I heard you were supposed to, but my

“large” tongue just got in the way. Every time I did anything like a Ta-Ka I just choked and nothing would come out. I finally developed a way of using air instead of tongue. It’s sort of like doing Ta-Ka but the Ka is more of a huh. I still can’t tongue extremely fast for long periods of time but I can get by when push comes to shove. I went in the next day and kept up fine with that double-tonguing bassoon player. I showed her and at least didn’t embarrass myself at the concert in front of all my students.

Tonguing is something that you can certainly improve by doing things the right way and practicing hard but you do have to remember something. The tongue is a muscle, and just like other muscles, it can be exercised properly to obtain strength and durability, much like a runner works their leg muscles or a weight lifter works their arm, shoulder and chest muscles. What you have to remember though, is that there are limits for each individual. There are reasons that some people can run fast and others, no matter how hard they train, simply cannot keep up.

I have found tonguing to be the most difficult aspect to teach because I cannot see what the student is doing. I must rely on feedback and sound. I had a student once that was not tonguing properly. I asked him at every lesson to describe to me the placement of his tongue on the reed. He gave me the classic placement, tip of the tongue near the tip of the reed. We worked on it for a year and a half. I asked him every week to describe it to me. One day he came in and said, “Mr. Palanker, I’m not hitting the reed, I’m hitting the roof of my mouth.” I told him I felt like hitting him. We had him tonguing right in two weeks. He later became a Jesuit Priest, thank the Lord.

Then there was Ricardo Morales. You’ve heard of him? He studied with me at the Eastern Music Festival for several summers. There he was, a kid of about fourteen, only playing the clarinet for a couple of years, and single tonguing faster than I ever thought possible. When I asked him how he tongued so fast he replied, “I don’t know, I just do it.” It was a little rough fortunately, so I had something to “teach him”. When he was seventeen he won the EMF concerto competition with the Nielsen Concerto. I still can’t tongue that fast staccato passage in the Nielsen as fast and clean as he did back then.

One summer I had a student from the west coast that was studying with a very prominent teacher. At his first lesson he asked me if we

could work on tonguing because he always had trouble with that. I discovered soon enough that he simply could not tongue the conventional way and that is what he was being encouraged to do. There was no way he was going to get the tip of his tongue on the tip of the reed. He just choked every time he did that. We experimented with different placements and I'm happy to report that he was very successful. He now had speed, quality and comfort. A year later he got into Curtis and has been successful in his career. Last I heard he was playing in one of the better military band.

The point here is simple. Some people are born with the physical ability to do some things better than others, while the rest of us just have to work harder and perhaps find alternative methods of accomplishing the same goals. If you can't play a fast staccato and can't get the knack of double tonguing, experiment with different tongue positions and tongue-air techniques to see if you can't find another solution. Everyone cannot tongue the "conventional" way, and should not have to. Try placing the tongue a little lower on the reed. Try using the portion of your tongue behind the tip. What's most important is if you can't tongue the classic way, keep the motion to a minimum and stroke the reed as light as possible. Most people can overcome an "enlarged" tongue by working hard at developing what they have. You need to tongue fast and clean but you don't have to break speed records to make it if you have everything else going for you.

What do I suggest you do with a student whose tongue is too short to reach the reed you ask? I tell them to play a string instrument, of course.