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Bassoon Low Notes

By Katie Holland

Young bassoonists frequently have difficulty controlling the bottom fifth of the instrument (B \flat 1 to F2). If a student is having difficulty getting these notes to sound, the problem is likely in one of a few areas.

The first thing to check is whether students are accidentally uncovering tone holes with the left hand. This is likely to be caused by contorting the hand into an odd position to reach left thumb or pinky keys.

The bassoon may have a leaky boot joint or faulty mechanism. Check the low E key and make sure that when this key is pressed the whisper key pad is completely covering the hole on the bocal. If this not is the case, send the instrument to a repairman; in the boot joint it is possible to develop an air leak in any number of places, including through the wood itself.

It is also possible that the reed is too closed. The tip opening should be approximately the thickness of a dime, but frequently the tip opening is thinner. Pinching at the sides of the first wire of the reed will open the reed and help students play low notes more easily.

In an emergency, the second wire of the reed can be moved toward the butt of the reed tube. This wire should be viewed as a fulcrum; any adjustment will affect the entire range of the instrument. Moving it down makes low notes easier but inhibits the upper register.

Another possibility is that the embouchure is too tight. If low notes crack or come out with a pinched, nasal sound, the student is likely biting the reed and not using enough air. This is especially likely to be true of students who switch over from clarinet or saxophone. I will ask students to think of the syllable *lew* while they are playing and remind them to use slower air but still support.

A good way to check the tightness of a student's embouchure is to have students play low B \flat , B, or C and then slide the lips across the reed from left to right while sustaining the pitch. If students cannot do this without changing the pitch or stopping altogether, the embouchure is too tight.

Sometimes a student may be able to play low notes easily at louder volumes but have difficulty in soft passages. If this is the case, have students come out on their reeds and roll the lips out or pucker slightly. This muffles the vibrations of the reeds which can make it easier to attack in soft, low passages. The more lip making contact on the surface of the reed, the more dampening of the sound.

Students having problems tuning low notes are likely struggling with a closed reed or poor embouchure. In addition to the above fixes, have students practice with a drone. Good exercises include scales, arpeggios, and

I-IV-V-I. These should be played slowly, with students not changing notes until the one they are playing is in tune with a good, full, sound. If a student struggles to find the center of a pitch, have him purposely start extremely flat or sharp and slide into the note.

The bottom register of the bassoon can be tricky to master. Careful attention to maintenance, hand position, reeds, and embouchure will help struggling students play these notes well. □



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