

Demystifying the Bassoon (Part 2)

Christopher Weait

A reality for bassoons in music education programmes is that the majority of music teachers are not bassoonists. A great many bassoonists have been successfully launched by non-bassoonists – myself included. Both parts of this article have been written with that in mind.

Here is the usual scenario for starting a bassoon player in a school music program:

- Teacher decides bassoon needed in ensembles
- Interested student approaches teacher, or teacher selects student to play it
- Teacher gives student instrument, method book, and reed
- Sends student home to learn it.
- Teacher hopes there will soon be a bassoonist in ensemble.

The ideal scenario would be more like the following:

- Teacher decides bassoon needed in ensembles
- Teacher has instrument checked over by a bassoonist, gets repairs if necessary
- Interested student approaches teacher, or teacher selects student to play it
- First lessons given by a bassoonist, with check-ups every few weeks thereafter.
- Student not to take instrument home until familiar with assembly, disassembly, and care.
- Teacher hopes there will soon be a bassoonist in ensemble.

The most important time for the advice of an experienced bassoonist is before and during the first lessons. The bassoonist can assess the instrument before beginning a new player. The quality of student-model bassoons has greatly improved over the last twenty years. The best known instrument brands, like Fox, Mosmann, Puchner, and Schreiber, all have good-quality instruments in their student model category.

Have the instrument put into playing condition by a competent repair person. Consider 20-minute daily lessons with a bassoonist for a week or so for your beginners. The investment in future playing progress, comfort, and confidence will be well worth the cost and effort. Consider that an advanced high-school bassoonist could serve as a teacher for beginners.

Choosing Students for the Bassoon

Prospective bassoonists should have:

- a good ear for mimicry

- good tonal memory
- solfège training or prior experience on another instrument, such as flute, recorder, piano, or strings
- large hands, especially for the tone holes under the left hand
- good manual co-ordination

The most important physical requirement for potential bassoonists is the size of their hands. They can begin in grade seven or earlier if they have fairly big hands. The point is somewhat moot, since few elementary schools have bassoons available for students. Students who are on average taller than their peers will be good candidates.

It is advisable that new bassoonists already know how to read music. For those familiar with the treble clef, learning to read bass and tenor clefs should not be a big stumbling block if the notes on the bassoon are learned in an organized and methodical manner.

Bassoonists often begin to play the bassoon after playing another instrument, most commonly a woodwind, especially the clarinet or saxophone. The clarinet has a more tightly formed embouchure. Ultimately, that tends to create more problems for the new bassoonist than it alleviates.

A better preliminary wind instrument for the bassoon is the flute. It has a similar requirement for awareness of breath speed and breath control in tone production. Playing a brass instrument while playing the bassoon is not recommended because the embouchures are not compatible.

A prospective bassoonist should probably *not* have hands with double joints, especially if the fingers can be bent backwards a long way. The fingers support the instrument as well as operating the keys. Fingers that cannot be held in a firmly curved position will prevent the player from establishing a comfortable technique. However, it is possible for some double-jointed players to play comfortably if padding is used to build up the side of the instrument to prevent the fingers from buckling.

The potential bassoonist should be:

- an individual who would enjoy playing an instrument quite unlike any other
- willing to be most likely the only bassoonist in the ensemble
- an individualist who enjoys solitary work
- a self-starter, motivated enough to teach self often
- a flexible personality, happy with the overwhelmingly supportive role the instrument has in most compositions
- manually skilled in order to adjust reeds and keep the instrument in good running order, especially in rural areas where there may be no skilled instrumental craftspersons

Playing The Bassoon

Beginning bassoonists should sit to practice and perform.

Standing to play can come later.

DEMYSTIFYING THE BASSOON (PART 2)

The bassoon requires less “air speed” than the other woodwinds, but more than the recorder. The embouchure is more “relaxed” than those of the oboe, clarinet, and saxophone.

The muscles of the mouth should be thought of as encircling the reed. The lips should not be squeezed in a vice-like grip. While playing, think of the vowel sound “awh” in order to form the correct tongue position inside the mouth.

The player should not have to “bite” or blow extremely hard to play. If that is happening, the reed is too hard and should be replaced or thinned down. The distance between the reed blades at the center of the tip should be the thickness of a dime. With an efficient reed, one can play for long periods of time in rehearsals and concerts without undue fatigue. The bassoon reed is flexible and allows a wide variety of articulations for starting and ending notes.

Reed Care & Facts

- Soak the entire reed, not just the tip.
- Keep reeds safely in a small box that can be stored in the instrument case.
- Players should brush their teeth before playing.
- Keep reeds clean by flushing them out with water once a week.
- Most reeds will last about 50 hours of playing time, more if the teeth and reed are kept clean.
- Have a spare operating reed as a backup.
- Signs of reed wear include poor attacks, softening of the blades, and sharpening of the pitch.
- Order new reeds well ahead of when you will need them.
- Two reliable makes of bassoon reeds are Danzi Reeds, available through Miller Marketing Inc. (www.millermarketingco.com), and Paul Buttemer Reeds from Victoria, B.C. available at www.pbreeds.com.

The tongue should be free and relaxed, not stiff or rigid. When tonguing, the tip of the reed meets the tongue a few millimeters above and behind the tip of the tongue. Tonguing too far back on the tongue is a common problem.

Short notes are normally separated by stopping the air. When successive notes are fast, the following note will be started at the same time the previous note is ended. It is awkward to do and sounds pretty awful at first, but encourage students to end notes by stopping the air rather than using the tongue.

A steady, firm air supply is necessary for good reed function and responsive articulation. Playing requires using more of the lung capacity than breathing normally. Breathe deeply by inhaling to expand the waistline. Inhale slowly for maximum relaxation. Gradually the player’s endurance will increase. Avoid hyperventilation by having beginners play only for short periods,

sustaining notes for a few seconds at a time.

At this point, I will address the young player directly so that readers can more easily instruct their students.

As you play, ask yourself if you feel uncomfortable, stiff, cramped, or tense. Relax those parts of the body that do not contribute directly to the playing effort. Twisting the legs or needlessly tensing the arms and fingers robs a lot of energy from the playing process.

Observe yourself in a mirror as you play. Sit naturally with the instrument as if you were not holding it. Avoid contorting your body. Keep your head straight, not tipped to one side, your shoulders relaxed, not twisted, your trunk erect but not stiff. Your arms and shoulders may have to be angled slightly to accommodate the slant of the bassoon.

The whisper (or octave) key on the bassoon works in the opposite fashion to other woodwinds. It is depressed to obtain the *lower* octave.

Bassoonists use both thumbs as well as all of their fingers. The fingers and thumb of the right hand should be curved naturally around the butt joint, as if holding a softball. (See Figure 1.)

The fingers and thumb of the left hand are in the most awkward positions in normal playing. Since the bassoon angles upwards from right to left across the player’s body, the left-hand fingers must cover holes that are inconveniently angled in relation to finger length. The first finger must be rounded, the second less so, and the third almost straight. The fourth has to be rounded slightly again, depending on the design and placement of the Eb and Db keys on the long joint.

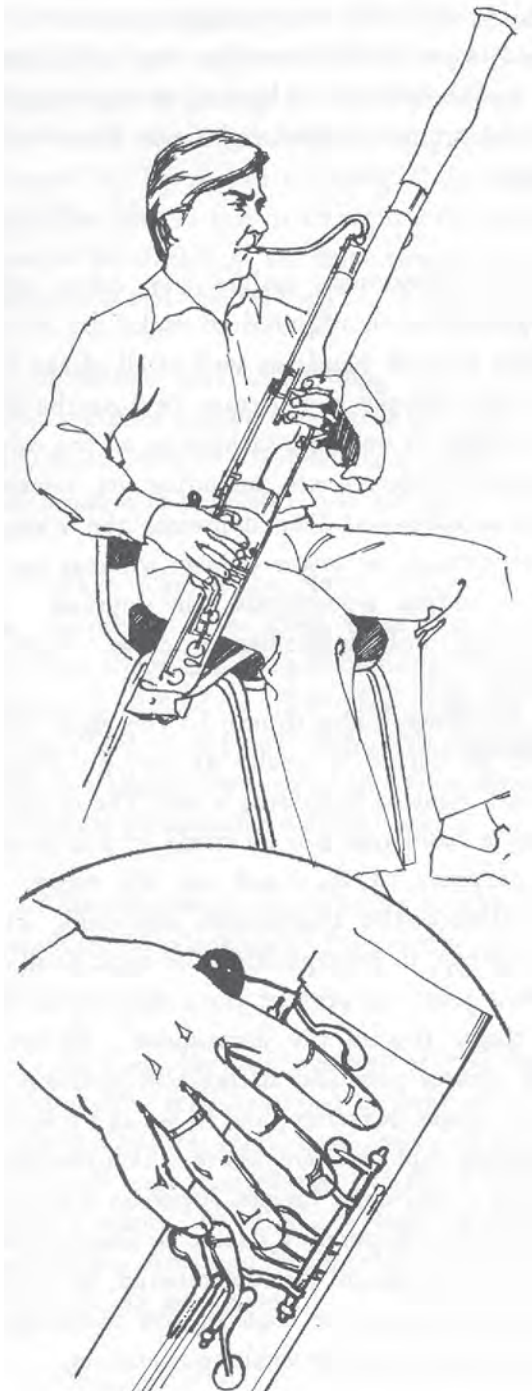
The left thumb has to remain free to operate a minimum of eight keys. On the left hand, the area where the first finger joins the palm acts as a temporary brace for the instrument during some fingerings. Be aware that some inexpensive bassoons do not have keywork that fits the hands very well.

Using a hand rest is recommended to help balance the instrument. It positions the right hand, prevents the first finger from collapsing toward the instrument, and acts as a fulcrum for rapid finger movements. Hand rests can be made smaller or redesigned to fit very small or very large hands.

As the bassoon has become heavier with additional keys and denser woods, the balance of the instrument has changed. The author recommends using a seat strap with a leather cup that fits over the butt cap of the instrument. The cup maintains a comfortable angle for playing.

DEMYSTIFYING THE BASSOON (PART 2)

Figure 1: Seated Playing Position and Detail of Right Hand.



The first notes require the use of the left hand. It will feel very awkward and even painful at first because of the dual role of support and tone hole covering. With time, the discomfort should cease but if it does not an effort should be made to find a manner of suspending the instrument that will reduce it. Avoid playing with the left elbow leaning on top of the left leg to counter-balance the weight of the instrument.

About Technique

It is a myth that the bassoon cannot play quite as fast as other woodwinds. There is probably no outer limit to the technical capabilities of the instrument given an instrument that works properly and a reed that is satisfactory. For advanced players, alternate, substitute, and trill fingerings can be found to make difficult passages “work.” A great many “impossible” passages are rendered possible when the bassoon is functioning properly, without leaks or key maladjustments. The reed is often blamed for the inadequacies of the bassoon, but a good reed cannot function well on a badly maintained bassoon.

Obtain a reliable fingering chart. I recommend the one listed under “Free booklet” in the Teaching Resources below.

When encountering physical or musical problems, examine things in this order:

- the instrument
- the bocal – clean it and the vent regularly!
- the reed; and finally,
- the player

In analyzing the player, examine in this order:

- posture
- breathing
- embouchure

Realities of Bassooning

Once students are playing in an ensemble, they become aware of the realities of bassoon scoring. They rarely have solos, and when they do, their part is often doubled by others. In concert-band music, for example, their part is inevitably doubled by tubas, euphoniums, saxophones, low clarinets, and horns. They may not have a fellow bassoonist to share their lot. The wise ensemble leader gives the bassoonist an opportunity to be heard once in a while. Young bassoonists can find great satisfaction playing in small ensembles, where the bassoon can really shine.

Useful Items for the Teacher

- Small screw driver
- Bocal brush
- Clean, used toothbrush
- Baby powder (to keep tone-hole pads from sticking)
- Safe cleaning fluid (for cleaning tone-hole pads)
- Very soft brush for dusting instrument
- Instrument repair kit
- Small oiler with needle applicator
- A basic set of tools for adjusting reeds

TEACHING RESOURCES

Free booklet

Fox, Hugo. “Let’s Play Bassoon.” Fox Products Corporation, P.O. Box 347, South Whitley, Indiana 46787, USA. Contains

DEMYSTIFYING THE BASSOON (PART 2)

instructions for instrument care and an *excellent fingering chart*.

Band method

O'Reilly, John and Williams, Mark. *Accent on Achievement*. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co., 1997. Well-illustrated and attractive.

Beginner's methods

Curtis, Michael. *New Millennium Bassoon Method*. Oregon, USA: MSS Publishing, 2001. Moves quickly for the bright student with previous experience. Includes work in atonality, transposition, pop styles, multiphonics, microtones, and a broad range of articulations.

Nitz, Donald. *The Bassoon Transfer Book. An Efficient Musician's Method for Class or Individual Instruction*. River Falls, WI: Trimble Music and Software, 1993. Excellent for converting from other instruments to bassoon. Used by university woodwind methods classes.

Polanchak, Richard. *Primary Handbook for Bassoon*. Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Meredith Music, 1982. A thorough, thoughtful method book for young or adult beginners.

Standard Method Book (preferred for decades)

Weissenborn, Julius. *Practical Method for the Bassoon*. Augmented and Adapted by W. F. Ambrosio. New York: Carl Fischer, 1941; 121pp. There are two versions of this method. This is the shorter, cheaper one but it has a better page layout.

Reed-Making

Weait, Christopher. *Bassoon Reed-Making: A Basic Technique*, 3rd ed. New York: McGinnis and Marx Music Publishers, 2000.

Contacts to Obtain Bassoon Material

Buckley's Music (www.buckleysmusic.com)
Harknett Musical Services (www.harknettmusic.com)
Long & McQuade (www.long-mcquade.com)
Music Direct (www.musicdirectltd.com)
MusicStop (www.musicstop.com)
St. John's Music (www.stjohnsmusic.com)
Tom Lee Music (www.tomleemusic.ca)
Twigg Musique (www.twigg-musique.com)

Summary

Make sure the instrument is in good playing condition. Obtain the best possible instruction and a reliable fingering chart for beginners.

Obtain the best possible reeds.

Allow your bassoonists to be heard in your ensembles and acknowledge their roles.

Encourage chamber music.



Christopher Weait has wide experience as a performer, composer, and conductor. He has taught at the high-school and university levels, and has adjudicated at numerous music festivals. Since 1984, he has been the professor of bassoon at Ohio State University in Columbus. For 17 years prior to that, he was a principal bassoonist of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. He can be heard on recordings for the d'Note, Innova, Crystal, and CBC labels.

Chris was the soloist in his own *Three Canadian Folksongs for Bassoon and Band* at Sir John A. MacDonald Collegiate Institute in Scarborough, Ontario on March 23, 2004. He performed the work with the Ohio State University Symphonic Band, conducted by Professor Richard Blatti, during their tour of Ohio, New York, and Ontario. The work is 6'30" and is not difficult for bassoon. The three movements are entitled "When the Shantyboy Comes Down," "Bold Wolfe," and "Alouette."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.