

7 Teaching the clarinet

PAUL HARRIS

Introduction

Today's young musician is growing up in a social and musical world considerably different from even the recent past. The methods and theories of such music educators as Carl Orff, R. Murray Schafer, John Paynter and Keith Swanwick have become widely known and assimilated (if, perhaps, unconsciously) and the more recent emergence of examinations which engage the student in original composition (as well as performing and 'listening') has produced a new generation of young musicians more creative in their thought, more emotionally mature and more vividly aware of their surroundings – they are, to use the contemporary term, more 'street-wise'. Our pupils are no longer to be seen as receptacles into which we 'drop' information – and thus we must acknowledge that the role of the teacher 'is transformed from that of musical "director" to that of pupil facilitator: stimulating, questioning, advising and helping, rather than showing or telling'.¹ We live in times of change and development, *fin-du-siècle* is a period of rethinking and innovation. It is in this spirit that we consider the various facets of clarinet teaching in the following pages.

The teacher

As instrumental teachers we are concerned with two distinct but interrelated disciplines. On the one hand, we must teach our pupils the skills necessary to play their instruments to the best of their abilities, and on the other, we must help them to develop their sense of artistry and musicianship. Drawing from students that subtle ability to communicate something of their innermost self through the medium of musical performance is simultaneously a most demanding and stimulating challenge. Without musical 'personality' performances will remain uninspired and the central message which music communicates is lost.

Learning to play a musical instrument and to perform music *at all levels* is both exacting and complex, requiring an approach that is methodical, imaginative, inspired, demanding, patient and sensitive. Such are the necessary prerequisites of the teacher. Rarely might you find *all* these attributes in one person, but a simple awareness of them is more than sufficient as a point of departure.

The lesson

The lesson constitutes the main, and often the only, point of contact with the pupil. Much care, thought and planning must therefore go into both its content and presentation. Ideally our pupils should leave their lessons feeling positive about themselves, about what they have achieved and about what they are to practise. This will arise from an approach that is challenging, absorbing, rewarding and stimulating. Anyone entering the teaching profession believing it to be an easy or second-rate option would be well advised to consider a different career! How then does one set about cultivating the ideal lesson?

The three principles: expectation – guidance – motivation

The key to presenting a successful lesson and indeed to cultivating a responsive and hard-working pupil is finding the appropriate balance between *expectation*, *guidance* and *motivation*, whilst all the time understanding the overriding necessity for communication. This balance will inevitably be different for every pupil; there is little doubt that the teacher who is sensitive to this can reasonably expect their pupils to try and give of their best. On entering the teaching room, the pupil should be greeted in a friendly and warm manner. Some discussion (whilst the pupil is putting the instrument together), be it topical, musical or perhaps connected with the pupil's academic, family or indeed social life, will serve to set up a good working rapport. Something remembered – a birthday, a recent exam taken, a visit to the dentist – will serve to indicate that you are taking an interest in them as a person. Use your own notes to remind yourself of such facts. The positive effect of taking such an interest cannot be over-emphasised. Try to establish and maintain an atmosphere of vigour; each teacher–pupil team will inevitably move at a different pace, but ensure that the forward impetus of the lesson is never lost. Once the lesson 'proper' has begun always *expect* the best. This will vary dramatically from one pupil to another, but the principle must always stand. In the first place you should expect work set for practice to have been well prepared (it's a very good idea to note in your notes, as well as the pupil's, what was set); during the lesson concentration should be maintained (though there must also be carefully timed periods of

relaxation). Encourage dialogue; pupils should be made to feel that you would welcome the asking of intelligent questions or discussion of some technical or musical point. Try to get your pupil to solve musical and technical problems by steering their thoughts in the right direction rather than simply telling them what to do.

The second element of our three principles is concerned with the *guiding* of our pupils through the learning processes. In other words, what and how we actually teach. It is essential to teach methodically, moving from one point to another only when the first is fully understood. Watch carefully for a glazed look in the eye or the lapsing of concentration. Often this is not the result of boredom or lack of interest, but of a lack of understanding. Allow the mastering of, or at least the knowledge of how to master, each technical hurdle before introducing the next. As for the actual content and balance of a lesson, each teacher will have their own recipes based on experience and experimentation, individually tailored to fit the requirements of each student. Suffice to say, variety is the spice of a good lesson and there should be both consolidation of what has been recently learnt together with the introduction of new material. Bear in mind also that some pupils need a lot of teaching, whilst others need comparatively little; don't feel you have to dot all the i's and cross every t – it is important to allow your pupils a certain degree of freedom!

We can only hope that all our pupils are enthusiastic, practise efficiently and display a receptive and positive disposition throughout lessons. Only rarely is this the case on all counts. The pupil's level of *motivation*, particularly when affected by the moods of adolescence, will have its ups and downs. So can motivation be monitored and increased? There are certainly a number of factors that can be kept under careful scrutiny. Is your pupil practising regularly, efficiently and effectively? Are they showing enthusiasm for taking part in associated activities? Do they behave positively at lessons: listening and responding thoughtfully to your comments, adopting a good posture and remembering to bring their notebook and all their music? Are they undertaking any 'extra-curricular' work that you may not have set them? If the answer to the majority of these points is affirmative, then you have a well-motivated pupil. What can be done for those who are less well motivated? You, the teacher, must be enthusiastic and encouraging (though you must have it in you to put your foot down if the need arises; your pupil must sense that this is the case even if you never do!). Never underestimate the power of praise. Praise your pupils often – we all acknowledge the importance of praising the beginner every step of the way, but praise, when it is appropriate, should be no less forthcoming for the more advanced student. New material is best introduced imaginatively. The negative approach is less successful: 'You've got to learn these scales or you

won't pass your exam' is not likely to inspire. There must always be variety in the work set and you should never set too much or make unrealistic technical demands.

Most students will benefit from regular musical activities – these are ideal ways of focusing and directing work and will, in most cases, act as powerful sources of motivation – concerts, examinations, festivals, participating in ensembles, wind bands, orchestras, clarinet choirs and attending music courses. Some pupils respond well to regular assessment – at the end of lessons you may like to give each pupil a grade (e.g. A–C) for practice (how well they have prepared set work), performance (the way they played during the lesson) and progress (since the last lesson).

Occasionally a pupil may become poorly motivated for practical or personal reasons. An instrument that is not functioning properly may well be a source of frustration – instruments should be checked and overhauled by an experienced technician on a regular basis. Your pupil may be suffering from over-zealous parents or they may be intimidated by their peers who tease them for practising rather than socialising. The best way to deal with such problems is probably to confront and discuss them – this may well provide a solution.

Towards a course of study

Unlike 'academic' subjects there is no prescribed national syllabus for the learning of musical instruments; this may be one reason why instrumental teaching often lacks structure and direction. It is so often a case of trial and error because instrumental teachers are left to create their own courses. As the new teacher sets off certain questions must be fully thought through. For example: do you base your teaching on a particular tutor or method? Should you evolve your own method? Do you structure your teaching around grade examinations? Whichever avenue you choose, and it will probably be a combination of these, always bear in mind the short-term objectives and the longer-term aims of your 'syllabus', and always explain them to your pupils rigorously. Young pupils need direction – aimless teaching (even if it is technically correct) will not bring forth particularly good results. So evolve your own 'syllabus' (at least in general terms) – this will develop as you experiment, experience, explore and discover and will almost certainly ensure a greater degree of success.

The pupil

In an ideal world we should always be able to choose our pupils; in reality, more often than not, we have little or no choice. It is important

however to feel able to redirect unsuitable pupils to other instruments to avoid frustration and a negative experience for all concerned.

Assessing a potential pupil

There are certain fundamental questions to be answered before taking up the instrument. Are there sufficient finances? Instruments, their up-keep, reeds, music, lessons, exam and festival fees, and travelling all add up to make learning an instrument an expensive business. With the advent of the plastic C clarinet it is now possible to begin lessons at quite a tender age, but it is still important to take build, physical stamina, hand size and dental situation into account. Does the child demonstrate a sense of determination, tenacity, enthusiasm and a personality tending to the extrovert? Some gentle aural tests will indicate whether the child has a 'musical bent'. Can they sing back a note in tune? Maintain a steady pulse and clap back a simple rhythmic pattern? Having established the above it is also important to ascertain *why* the child wishes to learn. Beware if the idea is entirely parent centred.

Technique

The actual art of how you play the instrument has been analysed and written about by many great players and teachers. There are a number of different approaches to each aspect of technique, therefore the intention here is to set in motion a train of thought designed to clarify the central concepts of each of the main technical areas. These should be instilled in your pupils from the outset.

Sometimes the practice of technique needs to be almost purely mechanical, but always remember that even if you are, for example, working on a series of finger exercises or a scale pattern, they are still music, and should be treated as such.

Tone

Tone, the sound you actually make, is perhaps most fundamental to playing an instrument. No one will really want to hear a player, however fast the fingers move, if the sound is unpleasant. It is essential therefore to encourage care and attention to tone-quality from the very first lesson. As the young player develops it is important that they have a clear mental conception of a 'good' sound. This can be achieved by frequent demonstration at lessons. In addition pupils should be encouraged to purchase recordings of great players, play to each other in group lessons and attend concerts featuring the best players of the day.

The correct control of breathing and embouchure is paramount to the development of a fine tone. In terms of breathing it is clearly essential to teach the concept of support via the appropriate use of the abdominal, intercostal and diaphragmatic musculature. The use of analogy and imagery is always helpful when putting across new technical concepts to the young player. For deep inspiration, 'Suck air in slowly as though you were sucking a thick milk-shake through a straw' or 'Think what it feels like when you're really out of breath and gasping for air'. For producing the correct abdominal tension 'Hold your abdominal wall as though someone is about to punch you in the stomach'; 'Feel as though you are having to hold your trousers up without a belt'. Many of these are tried and tested, but the imaginative teacher will always be able to think of a 'fun' way of describing the necessary technical task. Ask your pupil what the perfect sound might look like – a densely filled-in shape with very clean edges would be a perceptive answer.

The embouchure is the word used to describe the formation of the lips and associated facial muscles around the mouthpiece. Its main functions are to provide an air-tight seal between the player and the instrument and form a platform for the reed. Again an analogy, this time that of an elastic band, surrounding and exerting equal pressure all round, will serve well.

Different kinds of breathing exercises and of course the playing of long notes are fundamental to developing tone. Constant reminders to avoid tension in the embouchure ('don't "bite" on the mouthpiece') and the maintenance of supported breath pressure will always be necessary.

The clarinet is a notoriously difficult instrument to play really well in tune. Careful and critical listening to foster awareness of intonation should be insisted upon from the first lesson – only in this way will the young student become sensitive to this important area. Some experimentation with different vowel shapes in the oral cavity may be useful in influencing fine tuning. An 'eee' shape will usually produce a sharper pitch than an 'aw'.² The use of the oral cavity may also improve the tone of the problematic throat notes by increasing resonance.

Articulation

Articulation refers to starting or separating notes. The four elements involved – breath, embouchure, fingers and tongue – are co-ordinated to control the attack, 'weight' and dynamic levels of notes. Again analogy can be useful: consider watering the garden with a hose pipe, the breath equals the water and the tongue is your thumb over the pipe. This analogy also instils the importance of maintaining contin-

uous breath pressure throughout a tongued passage. In teaching articulation you will have to repeat time and time again that it is the air that actually produces the sound – your pupils must blow when tonguing: a lack of air pressure during the tonguing process is often the reason for an inferior tone-quality. The function of the tongue itself is to open and shut the air-stream and thus allow the breath, under pressure, into the instrument. Preparation, before the note begins, is crucial: breathing muscles and embouchure must be ready for the moment the tongue releases the air. Though there is a certain difference of opinion over the way to end a note, it is recommended that breath decay should account for most note endings except where a really short *staccatissimo* is required. Here the tongue is returned to the reed to finish the note abruptly. It is generally considered that the tip of the tongue on the tip of the reed is the most appropriate position. An alternative position may be necessary owing to the particular dental structure, and the size and shape of the player's tongue.

Different forms of articulation

The developing clarinet player has a vast number of 'colours' available to give variety and interest in performance. These are related to dynamic levels and different forms of articulation within those levels. As well as experimenting with different tongue syllables ('du', for example, instead of the more usual 'tu' will produce a more gentle attack) the player should study the style and character of the music to establish the most appropriate weight of attack and dynamic level. It is also recommended that you study books on violin technique, with special reference to bowing and articulation styles, these may well stimulate ideas for thought and experimentation.³

The importance of articulation in giving life to musical phrasing must also be understood. Often the 'meaning' of a phrase or 'sentence' is dependent on the way in which notes are related in patterns of separation – the matching of tonal levels and articulation styles must be a prime consideration here.

Finger technique

All clarinet players want to move their fingers with precision and velocity. If your pupils obey certain rules and practise diligently they should, in time, develop control, fluency and dexterity. The fingers should be held directly above the appropriate toneholes; finger movement should be precise, firm and economical. Fingers should be lifted and replaced with a crisp, mechanical action; in operating the various keys, economy of movement is always the essential factor. A tension-free posture is essential. Carefully devised exercises should be

practised to facilitate this development. Scales and other related patterns are of course invaluable, but don't simply suggest to your pupils that the playing of scales will, *per se*, improve their technique. They must identify the technical problems, isolate particular patterns and then practise *them* carefully before working at the scale as a whole.

Musicianship

Playing musically

Learning to play a piece technically is of course only part of the learning process. Performing musically is much more difficult to define and certainly challenging to teach. Some of our pupils will probably have innate musicianship – but even if they display only very occasional glimpses of this there are many ways we can help them develop this side of their personality. In the first place we can pose questions and lines of thought for pupils to ponder: What is the piece about? When was it written? Who composed it? What do they know about the composer? What is the character of the music? What range of dynamic levels and articulations would be appropriate? Then, perhaps more important, the pupil who is involved culturally will inevitably produce more artistic results; therefore encourage your pupils to read, visit art galleries and attend concerts. Above all we must try to instil the idea that you must 'speak' through your performance – 'narrating' as if telling a story and always retaining a continual sense of direction. A truly musical performance is something very special and intimate – it must 'touch' or move the listener.

Aural training

Aural training is the basis for critical and active listening – it develops the musical ear to produce sensitivity to intonation, tone-quality and quantity and a heightened awareness of other parts when playing ensemble music. By helping pupils to spot their own mistakes it is the key to good practice.

Sight reading

The entire process of teaching would be so much easier if our pupils could read music as fluently as they do words. The major problem here is that they don't have to read music nearly as often as they do words. Additionally, you don't have to read words in time! If you can inspire your pupils to sight read every day, preferably using a metronome, considerable improvement will inevitably ensue.

Don't relegate sight reading to the last two minutes of a lesson – you might even begin lessons with it.

The beginner

The content of the first lessons is of paramount importance – if you plan nothing else, you must plan these! You must clearly set out all the fundamentals of playing, thus ensuring the development of good habits from the start. Correct posture – an upright position to allow maximum use of the lung capacity – and a lack of tension should be emphasised.

Correct embouchure, breathing and tonguing should be explained simply but accurately; after each new step ensure that your pupil fully understands what is required before proceeding to the next. By the end of the first lesson your pupil should be able to produce a neatly articulated and clear-sounding supported note. You may like to use a tutor or invent exercises and tunes of your own. If you opt for a tutor choose wisely; find one that is stimulating and challenging, avoiding those that leave little room for imagination.⁴ Teach your pupil music from the earliest moment and instil a desire for perfection.

Practising

The young student needs very clear guidance on this topic otherwise practice will be nothing more than wasted time. Two fundamental rules always apply: the pupil should know exactly *what* to do and *how* to do it. A basic formula (in the absence of any other) is perhaps to use a 'reconstruction' of the lesson. Good practice, however, will result from thorough planning. The notebook is essential here – set out each week's practice details carefully. You may even suggest a way that practice might 'develop' throughout a week⁵ – the importance of daily practice must always be stressed (Fig. 7.1).

Advise your pupils to practise in a relaxed, unrushed and methodical manner – total concentration is required if the session is to be of real value. It is the time for solving problems, making technical progress and *thinking* about the music. A lot of slow playing should take place with the pupil encouraged to listen critically to themselves, correcting their mistakes as they go along, just as the teacher would at a lesson. Suggest time to be taken on each topic. Ask your pupil to keep a practice diary noting aims, achievements, problems and time taken.

Repertoire

There is a vast quantity of music available – looking through any comprehensive catalogue can be a bewildering experience. Efficient teachers should visit a good music shop regularly and, by looking

Figure 7.1 Weekly practice schedule

	FIRST HALF	SECOND HALF
Technique	Long notes	Add dynamic variations
Scales	Slow practice – ensure patterns are known	Add variations of articulation, dynamics and develop fluency
Study	Isolate problem areas and practise slowly	Work at fluency
Pieces	Think about style; deal with technical problems	Develop your ‘performance’

through the shelves, will gradually become familiar with and discriminate in their choice of materials. A well-balanced diet is fundamental: the tutor (see above) may be sufficient at the earliest stages. You can either opt for one of the classic methods written by the great player-teachers of the past; among these you might consider the tutors of Carl Baermann, Hyacinthe Klosé and Henry Lazarus.⁶ It should be borne in mind that these were written for beginners more advanced in years than the average beginner of today. Alternatively there are a number of more modern tutors written especially for the young beginner. Soon you will need a book of studies and varied pieces encompassing different styles and periods of music. The lists are so long that it would be inappropriate to pick out particular titles – each teacher will form their own preferences. Beware though of employing a limited repertoire - this will inevitably lead to staleness and unimaginative teaching.

Performing

The intention of most young players, their teachers and parents, is to take part in various forms of music-making. There are, for example, the didactic occasions – examinations, festivals and competitions – with many coherent arguments both for and against. Of course music is not a sport, but if treated in the right spirit, with the emphasis on the preparation rather than the result, then these can be positive, stimulating and rewarding experiences.

The young player should be encouraged to perform at concerts as often as possible; it is here that all the technical ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ must be subordinated to the communication of the music. Remember especially the importance of the composer over and above the performer. It is a regrettable characteristic of our ‘street-wise’ younger generation that they are often very self-orientated and liable to think of the projection of their own image rather than Mozart’s!

In conclusion, the influence of the teacher is both broad and considerable:

Education is surely more than merely having 'experiences', or acquiring ... skills and facts. It has to do with developing understanding, insightfulness: qualities of mind.⁷

The importance of this profession must never be underestimated.