

10 Steps to a Better Oboe Section

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I. Equipment

Having the right equipment is crucial both to the student's success and to the longevity of the instrument. Oboes are not cheap, but an investment into the right instrument, and insistence that the students properly care for the instrument, will pay dividends.

A. Buying an Oboe for your band

1. Wood vs. Plastic: plastic instruments are recommended, as they cannot crack and do not wear out as quickly.
2. Recommended Instruments: Fox Renard 330 or Yamaha 441a. Both are intermediate level instruments with the necessary key work for technical proficiency on the oboe. Both are priced around \$3,500.
3. Price is directly related to the quality of the materials and craftsmanship. Beginner models start around \$2,000, but have minimal key work and are constructed from cheap materials. The intermediate models range from \$3,000-\$5,000, and professional models run from about \$6,000-\$10,000.
4. Junior oboes, which are made by Howarth of London, are excellent for young beginners, as the key work is very minimal, which reduces the weight of the instrument, and the keys are closer together. They are priced around \$1,500, but probably are only worth purchasing if you have a band program that starts younger students on oboe frequently.

B. Basic Equipment List

1. Reed case: The student should own a case that securely holds at least three reeds. This will protect the already delicate reeds from breaking while being stored.
2. Swab or Turkey feather: Swabs can be made of silk or cotton, but they run the risk of getting caught inside the instrument. The use of a turkey feather eliminates this risk, though they need to be replaced more frequently. These should be used when the student is finished playing and more often if water consistently collects under a tone hole.
3. Cork grease: only a small amount should be used on the tenon corks, but this should be done often to avoid having the tenon corks tear. Students should remove any excess grease with a cloth after each application.
4. Water cup: The student should have a small cup (about the size of a shot glass) to soak the reed in before playing.
5. Cigarette paper: this is used to remove water from underneath the pads .

II. Switching Students to the Oboe

A. Flute, Clarinet, Saxophone

1. Flute: similar fingerings and the oboe doesn't require as much air. Considerably more back pressure on the oboe, and flute players aren't used to playing on a reed
2. Clarinet: similar fingerings and embouchure. More back pressure on the oboe and the oboe uses a double lip embouchure
3. Saxophone: My favorite switch. Very similar fingerings and similar embouchures in spite of the oboe's double lip embouchure.

B. Ideal Student Traits

1. Look for students with a good ear and good musicianship that can deal with the oboe's challenges.
2. Look for students who are patient and like to problem-solve.
3. Do not choose students who struggle with basic tone production on their current instrument. These problems will not go away on the oboe.

III. Embouchure: When teaching embouchure, focus on ways to help students create the correct shape. Use a mirror so that they can see the desired shape and begin to connect the visual shape to a physical sensation.

A. Creating the Shape

1. Place your hand on your chest, palm up
2. Blow air onto your hand without looking down.
3. Note how this affects your mouth: corners come in, chin flattens out
4. This shape can also be formed by whistling or puckering
5. Practice forming this shape before introducing the reed.

B. Reed Placement

1. After forming the shape, place the reed on the center of the lower lip
2. Keep the lower lip relaxed in the center.
3. Using the reed, roll the lower lip in and out. If you can't, relax your lip, reform the embouchure shape, and try again.

C. Amount of reed in the mouth

1. Place the reed on the center of the lower lip a few millimeters past the pink of your lip.
2. Using the reed, roll the lower lip in just enough to cover your teeth.
3. Roll your top lip just over your top teeth, and lower it onto the reed.
4. Only a few millimeters of the reed should protrude inside your mouth past your lip. Using a mirror, open your mouth and check your placement.
5. Your lips should cushion the reed, not crush it. Do not bite with the center of your lips.

D. Troubleshooting the embouchure

1. If the lips are pulled back in a smile, remediate to the embouchure shapes to help shift the corners forward. A smiling embouchure will result in a pinched, often sharp tone.
2. Watch for puffed out cheeks and air around the embouchure. This will destabilize and fatigue the embouchure quickly.
3. If the sound is consistently harsh and/or sharp, check the reed placement, as it is probably too far into the mouth.

IV. Articulation

A. Point of Contact

1. The tip of the tongue should contact the tip of the reed
2. Only light contact is necessary
3. The embouchure and jaw should not move while you tongue.
4. The airstream should not start and stop with each note: the airstream and the tongue operate independently

B. Starting the sound

1. Your tongue should begin on the reed as you prepare to initiate the sound.
2. To start the sound, use the following steps:
 - a. Form the embouchure
 - b. Place the tip of your tongue on the tip of the reed
 - c. Start blowing air against your tongue
 - d. Release your tongue from the reed to start the sound: the tongue acts as a valve for the airstream

C. Rest position

1. When not in use, your tongue should rest in the center of your mouth.
2. If you place your tongue behind the teeth (top or bottom), it will likely force you to move your jaw in order to get your tongue to the reed.

V. Hand Position

A. Right Hand

1. Before bringing your hand to the oboe, relax it at your side.
2. Bring your hand up to the instrument in a relaxed position.
3. Place the thumb rest on your thumb between the first knuckle and the nail.
4. Your thumbnail should face mostly towards your body, not the ceiling
5. Place your first three fingers on the F-sharp, E, and D keys, making sure that they are still round
6. Your pinky should rest on the C Key, which is the first of the three pinky keys.

B. Left Hand

1. Repeat steps 1 and 2 from above (right hand). Your hands and fingers should form a “C” shape when relaxed.
2. Your thumb should rest on the instrument just below the thumb octave key on the back of the top joint.
3. Place your first three fingers on the B, A, and G keys, with your pinky resting on the A-flat key.

VI. Breathing on the Oboe

A. Taking a breath

1. Inhalation is the same as other instruments. Oboists still need to breathe low, filling the lungs from the bottom up.
2. Exercise to promote proper inhalation:
 - a. Sit on the edge of a chair and place your hands on the floor in front of you
 - b. Take a deep breath. Do you notice your abdomen expand?
 - c. Sit a little, placing your elbows on your knees. Take another deep breath. Do you notice the same expansion?
 - d. Sit up in playing position and take a deep breath.
 - e. Throughout this exercise, you should feel your abdomen expand first, then your chest.

B. Exhalation

1. Because of the back pressure on the oboe, oboists never use up all of their air before the air becomes “stale,” meaning that it loses all of its oxygen. Therefore, oboists must learn to exhale *and* inhale while playing long passages.
2. Only inhaling while playing will lead to a feeling similar to hyperventilating. If you keep taking in air without getting rid of excess CO₂, you will become light headed and tired quickly.
3. Practice breathing in and out in simple passages.
4. When breathing in, you do not always have to take the biggest breath possible, but you should still breathe low

C. “Support”

1. Support for the airstream is controlled by your abdominal muscles and the muscles around your ribs, **not the diaphragm.**
2. Think of a spot right around your naval, about the size of a tennis ball. The muscles there should push inward (towards your back) and upward (towards your lungs).

VII. Reeds

A. Factory-made vs. Handmade

1. Factory-made reeds typically lack structural integrity and a stable pitch center. This makes the reed more difficult to blow through and to control. They typically cost between \$10 and \$15 per reed.
2. Handmade reeds are made by oboists from start to finish, and are tested by the maker to ensure that they work well and have a stable pitch center. If the student studies with a teacher that makes his/her own reeds, they can get a product that is more tailored to their needs. These reeds usually sell for between \$20 and \$30.

3. Handmade reeds are the better option because of the built-in stability and superior structural integrity. Students won't have to fight the reed, which will allow them to develop proper habits.

B. Where to purchase reeds

1. Factory-made reeds can be found in many local music stores or online. Handmade reeds are also available online or through a local teacher or reed maker.
2. Here are some recommended websites for hand-made reeds
 - webreeds.com: based in Chandler, AZ with David Weber
 - mmimports.com: Midwest Musical Imports, in Minneapolis, MN
 - forrestsmusic.com: Berkeley, CA
 - oboenik.com: Phoenix, AZ

C. How to maintain the reeds

1. Soaking: Always soak the reed in water before playing on it. About 2-5 minutes should suffice.
2. Handling the reed: Never touch the tip of the reed with anything but your lips. The tip is thinner than a piece of paper, and will easily chip or crack if bumped. When you're not using the reed, put it in its case. When you're finished with the reed, blow through it from the cork end, then gently wipe any excess moisture off on your pant leg.
3. Storing the reed: Keep the reed in a reed case that holds the reed securely. Reeds are expensive. If your case allows the reeds to move around to the point where they can be damaged, get a different case. Store your reed case in your oboe case, and keep both in a stable environment. Do not keep them next to an air vent or furnace, nor in your garage or car trunk.

VIII. Tuning on the oboe

- A. Never adjust for pitch by pulling the reed out. The reed should always be pushed all the way into the reed well. Pulling it out disrupts the shape of the bore (which is conical from the top of the tube on the reed to the bottom of the bell) and will cause more pitch problems and instability.
- B. Pitch should be controlled by how much reed is in your mouth. This is adjusted by your right hand, which can push or pull the reed in or out of your mouth. Only small adjustments are needed!
- C. The pitch can also be affected by vertical pressure by the lips on the reed, commonly referred to as "biting." This shouldn't be necessary if your reed is stable and up to pitch. If you feel yourself biting, and the reed isn't the problem, then strive for a focused, energized airstream. The muscles of your abdomen are much stronger than those on your face!
- D. A poorly supported airstream could cause the pitch to sag. Likewise, a forced, tense airstream could cause the pitch to rise.
- E. The good news on oboe is that when a note sounds full and resonant, it is most likely in tune. Listen for the resonance of each note. If the tone sounds thin, pinched, and/or shallow, you are probably sharp. If the tone sounds droopy, dull, and/or unfocused, you are probably flat.

IX. Technical Difficulties

A. The Half hole

1. This refers to the first key on the left hand, which has a small plate attached to the bottom part of the key. It is first encountered on the notes C-sharp⁵, D⁵, and E-flat⁵
2. It is operated by sliding the left index finger off the tone hole and onto the plate, exposing the tone hole while leaving the key depressed.
3. The use of this key occurs at a "break" similar to that of the clarinet, where the fingers go from few fingers to many, all while coordinating with this new motion. You must learn to coordinate this motion with the rest of your fingers.
4. The motion of the left index finger must not disturb the position of the rest of the left hand.

5. Practice sliding onto the half hole plate and then back to the tone hole without moving the rest of your left hand.

B. The First Octave Key (Thumb Octave)

1. This key is operated with your left thumb. It is first encounter on the notes E⁵ through G-sharp⁵.
2. You can either lift your left thumb off the instrument and then onto the octave key, or simply slide your thumb up onto the octave key. Keep the motion small.
3. This key is not difficult to use by itself, but it can be difficult to move between notes that use the first octave key to those that use the half hole. Practice these intervals, making sure to use the appropriate octave.

C. The Second Octave Key (Side Octave)

1. This key is operated with your left index finger by rocking your wrist backward (towards your body). You should contact this octave key around the second knuckle of your index finger.
2. The first octave key is automatically closed by using the second octave key. Therefore, you may keep your thumb on the first octave key while using the second octave key. This allows for greater ease of technique, as you do not have to constantly lift and replace each octave key while moving between the two.
3. This key is used for the notes A⁵ through C⁶, as well as for some harmonic fingerings.

X. Alternate Fingerings

A. F⁴ and F⁵

1. The first two octaves of F on the oboe have three fingerings. The use of each is dependent upon the notes that precede and follow the F and the context of the music.
2. **Regular F:** This fingering is the default fingering for F. It is the easiest to play, and is very stable. It should be used when the F is neither preceded nor followed by a note that requires the use of the right ring finger.
3. **Forked F:** This fingering should be used when the F is followed or preceded by a note that uses the right ring finger, specifically in fast scale passages. This fingering may sound dull or stuffy, particularly on lower level oboes, so it should be avoided if possible in exposed, lyrical sections. It should not be played with the E-flat key; that fingering was developed to solve a technical problem that is no longer an issue on most oboes. Though, unfortunately, it is a fingering that has survived in many oboe method books.
4. **Left F:** This fingering should be used in lyrical passage when the F is followed or preceded by a note that uses the right ring finger. It is the same fingering as the regular F, except that the F key is operated by the left pinky finger instead of the right ring finger. Many beginner model oboes do not have this key.

B. Left E-flat (for E-flat⁴ and E-flat⁵)

1. The first two octaves of E-flat on the oboe are usually played with the right pinky, but when preceded or followed by a note that also requires the right pinky, it can be played by the left pinky using the left hand E-flat key.
2. The most common note combinations where the left E-flat is needed are: E-flat to D-flat (first two octaves) and E-flat to C (bottom octave only).
3. This is necessary early on in many band programs, so it is crucial that the students know when and how to use this key.
4. Knowledge of this key is required for scales in the keys of: A-flat, D-flat, G-flat, B, and E (and their relative minor keys).
5. The use of the left hand E-flat key eliminates the need to slide between pinky keys. Sliding is only acceptable when no other options exist.