

# **The Middle School Woodwind Section: Three Suggestions That Will Improve Tone, Tuning, and Balance**

By Cynthia Lansford

The middle school band woodwind section can make the entire ensemble sound really mature. Or, the woodwind section can produce sounds that are uncharacteristic – even unrecognizable – creating tuning that is frightening, and causing serious balance problems. These suggestions are the result of thirty-plus years of teaching, listening to, and working with middle school woodwind sections.



## **1. Find a clarinet and saxophone mouthpiece that you like, and stick with it!**

It is difficult to ask students to “sound alike” and “match pitch” when they are playing on different types of mouthpieces. Mouthpieces have different facings, chambers, and tip openings. Choose a mouthpiece that you like and insist that your students use it. Sections using the same equipment will have a far greater chance of achieving an even and matched woodwind sound. If you are unsure of what mouthpiece to use, consult a reliable colleague. Choose someone whose woodwind section sounds good and ask them for equipment advice.

In addition to mouthpiece recommendations, be involved in student reed selection. Work with local music stores to make sure that the equipment you are recommending is available. Make online music supply information available to your students as well. You **MUST** be involved in the equipment and supply recommendations - follow through, and then follow up!

Stick with your mouthpiece selection for several years. If you change equipment recommendations every year, you will end up with a band full of mismatched tones! Your choices affect the high school band as well, so coordination between the middle school and high school directors is beneficial for everyone.

## **2. Try to include of ALL the woodwind instruments in your middle school band!**

Top priority for the middle school woodwind section is filling out your low reed section. Bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, and baritone saxophone will add resonance and color to your overall ensemble sound, making your band will sound more mature. You will find it easier to achieve proper ensemble balance when you include these instruments in your woodwind section. Don't rely on the tuba section to carry the weight of the bass line alone.

When changing students to the low reed instruments, choose students that are rhythmically stable and that can play independently. Too often, the low clarinet and saxophones become a place to “hide” students who are technically and rhythmically less proficient. Don’t place students who can’t keep a steady beat in the low reed section. Low reed players are one or two on a part, therefore the players need to be strong and confident. These instruments may be the perfect match for a clarinetist who has a slightly looser embouchure or an alto saxophonist who doesn’t quite have the sound you like.

If your student numbers support a complete instrumentation, include oboe and bassoon in your middle school band program. Some beginner band programs are set up to start double reeds. If this is not possible, consider switching students after a semester or after the beginning year. Double reeds, when properly taught, add a wonderful tonal color to your middle school band, and will allow you to explore more mature literature that includes “solo” and “soli” scoring for these instruments.

### **3. Learn how to properly balance your woodwind section!**

You know how it goes: the first clarinets are your strongest, and sometimes LOUDEST, players! Combine these with your endless supply of flutes and you have a major balance and tuning problem that is next to impossible to fix!

Here are some recommendations for keeping your woodwind section properly balanced within the ensemble sound:

- ◆ Keep your clarinet section balanced, with first clarinet being the smallest of the two or three sections. This is the same for all split parts (flute, alto saxophone), but it is the most critical for clarinet.
- ◆ If flute tuning is an on-going problem, seek help to teach proper flute embouchure. Students learning to play with improper fundamental skills create most flute tuning problems.
- ◆ Balance unison lines to the proper instrument or octave.
  - Flute/clarinet playing a tutti passage in the SAME octave – flute should be stronger.
  - Flute/clarinet playing a tutti passage with clarinet an octave lower – clarinet should be stronger.
  - Clarinet section playing in octaves – make sure the lower octave is the stronger part.
  - Clarinet/saxophone playing a tutti line – balance to clarinet sound.
  - Keep low saxophones in check when balancing to the trombone / euphonium line.
  - Low reeds SHOULD NOT play louder than tuba.

So, to summarize:

- ◆ Insist on quality, matched equipment.
- ◆ Develop your low reed sections.
- ◆ Keep the woodwind section balanced properly.

Follow these suggestions and you will be well on your way to an excellent woodwind section.



Cynthia Lansford is a nationally recognized educator, conductor, and clinician. Her bands have been featured at the Midwest Band and Orchestra conference and also received the coveted Sudler Cup presented to the “best of the best” in instrumental music. “Miss Lansford” received the Meritorious Achievement Award given by the Texas Bandmasters Association in 2008, and retired early – after 30 years of teaching – just to keep up her busy clinic and adjudication schedule. A graduate of Texas Tech University, Cindy is a member of Phi Beta Mu, Texas Bandmasters, and Texas Music Educators associations. She resides in Keller, Texas, with husband (and well-known clarinetist) Gary Whitman.