Clarinet Articulation – Getting It Right from the Beginning

By Dr. Julianne Kirk

Before addressing articulation, be certain your students have solid fundamentals: good embouchure, air support and tongue position. Make sure they understand how the reed works and why they need to use the tongue to articulate.

Problems encountered with young students include huffing, which means not using the tongue to create the separation. This can be diagnosed if you see neck or throat puffing on every articulation. The student is stopping the air to create the separation rather than interrupting the air with the tongue.

If a student has jaw or lip motion on every articulation, they are most likely anchor tonguing. Anchor tonguing occurs when the tip of the tongue is anchored behind the lower teeth and the articulation is created with the middle of the tongue touching the reed. It should be noted that some very successful professional clarinetists anchor tongue. Ideally, the tip of the tongue touches just below the tip of the reed to interrupt the vibrations of the reed. The air column should remain constant at all times.

The reed vibrates in a "diving board" motion against the tip of the mouthpiece. Have students insert a business card between the mouthpiece and reed to see how far down the reed the "diving board" goes. This shows students how much mouthpiece should be in their mouth when playing.

Embouchure stability is the most crucial element for achieving successful articulation. To set the embouchure, have students pronounce "Ewe" as if they just sucked on a lemon! Do the same exercise again while looking into a mirror. (Using a mirror is incredibly helpful at any level.) Next have the student feel this sensation by using only the barrel, mouthpiece and reed. Close the end of the barrel with the hand, form the "ewe" embouchure, and suck the air out of the mouthpiece as if they were drinking a milkshake. This helps them see and feel the lips seal around the mouthpiece and creates a flat chin – essential elements of a good embouchure.

Using the Tongue to Articulate

The clarinet is played with a high tongue position. The tongue should be parallel to the roof of the mouth, arched and high. The syllable "hee" is very helpful. A great illustration is that of a garden hose. If you have a plant at the end of your driveway and your garden hose will not reach it, how do you get the water to the plant? If you put your thumb over the end of the hose, only a few drops might reach the plant. But, if you angle the garden hose up the allowing the water to arc up and over into the plant, it gets watered. The position of the tongue for clarinet articulation is very similar. The tongue is high inside the mouth, the air comes up and over the tongue and down into the mouthpiece. Only a small amount of tongue motion at the very tip of the tongue is required rather than the entire tongue moving. This allows a quicker and more effortless articulation speed.

Air is another essential fundamental for good articulation. The tongue interrupts the flow of air, but the air is never stopped to create separation. Have students put their hand on their lower abdomen and breathe in through their belly. As they exhale, have them keep the belly extended rather than let it collapse in.

Syllables should be used to create the desired quality of separation. Syllables such as “toh” while ideal for a brass player, are not desirable for clarinet. Any syllable that lowers the tongue position will cause embouchure movement and create unfocused tone quality. Syllables such as “tee” or “dee” will keep the tongue high in the mouth and maintain the embouchure shape. Have students practice the breathing exercise (mentioned above) while speaking different rhythms on “tee” or “dee.” Use a mirror for reinforcement of the “Milkshake face” embouchure with no neck or jaw movement.

These syllables should be practiced on just the mouthpiece and barrel assembly. Barrel and mouthpiece practice allows the student not to worry about the resistance of the entire instrument. When the student can comfortably articulate with no jaw or huffing motion, add the upper joint, then the lower joint, and finally the bell, in effect building the air column.

For more advanced students who want to create a “secco” or stopped staccato, simply add a “t” to the end of the syllables creating “deet” or “teet.” A good analogy for describing stopped staccato is a glass bottle filled with soda. If you shake the bottle, what happens to the soda? It fizzes! And, if you open the soda, the fizz would go everywhere. Imagine poking a hole in the top of the bottle cap with a needle. You would have a thin stream of “fizz” coming out the bottle cap. If you then covered that hole with your finger, the fizz would continue building, but would be stopped temporarily until you release your finger. For stopped staccato the fizz is the air and the finger is the tongue. The articulation is a “release” rather than an “attack.” Try this with the breathing exercise discussed earlier. Use the tip of the tongue to stop the air first, and then release the tongue, allowing the air to flow out immediately.

Always listen to the quality of sound when articulating. If the sound seems flabby or spread, the tongue is probably not in the right position. If the articulation seems hard or spongy, the same is probably true. The student could also be using too much tongue surface or pressure on the reed. For successful articulation, be sure the embouchure is stable, the air column is constant, and the tongue position is high.

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