

Bass Clarinet 101: Tips for Improving your Bass Clarinet Section A Conversation with Howard Klug, Michael Drapkin & Alcides Rodriguez

Bass clarinet is a necessary ingredient to sounding good for any woodwind section, yet it still isn't completely understood. In an effort to help shed some light on this instrument, INSIGHTS posed the most commonly asked questions about bass clarinet to the some of the best clarinet minds in the musical world:



Howard Klug, Professor of Clarinet at Indiana University, is a master performer and pedagogue of international stature.

Michael Drapkin, author of “Symphonic Repertoire for Bass Clarinet”, standard literature for bass clarinetists worldwide.

Alcides Rodriguez, bass clarinetist with the Atlanta Symphony and rising orchestral star.

INSIGHTS asked: What is proper playing position for students? Should you use a peg, neck strap, or both?

Klug: Both. The peg supports the weight of the instrument (not the neck of the student) and the neck strap pulls the instrument gently into the mouth. The peg should allow the student to have an erect posture, sitting forward on the chair with the bass clarinet almost completely vertical.



Howard Klug
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Drapkin: Use a peg and a neck strap. If you just use a neck strap (without the peg), the body gets severely weighted down, which introduces a great deal of tension into the body which will degrade technical facility. Without it, the hands must be constantly “holding” the instrument in order to keep it from being pushed away. Using a neck strap and a peg locks the instrument into the body, resulting in a three point connection: vertically at the floor with the peg, front and back using the neck strap, and laterally at the mouth.

Rodriguez: The peg is very important, especially if you play a low Eb bass clarinet, because it allows you to control and achieve the desired playing height. The longer peg on this model makes it a little wobbly and therefore more difficult to control. That is why a neck strap would be a great help. A neck strap is also necessary to prevent the instrument from falling forward and helps to eliminate tension from the hands.

If you use a low C bass clarinet the peg might not be necessary, but placing the bell on the floor can be risky. A neck strap can be used but is not as necessary on the low C Bass as it is on the Eb Bass.

Both the peg and the neck strap will help you achieve the correct posture. I recommend trying different setups until you find the right position for you. Ultimately, you want to be

comfortable and should not have any awkward body positions. Be especially mindful of your shoulders and neck.

Bass clarinet mouthpiece angle: Would you adjust the placement of the bottom (bell) towards your feet in order to create an angle closer to the Bb soprano?

Klug: No. I would suggest having the student get used to the lower mouthpiece angle into the mouth, as this reduces the embouchure bite on the reed and helps get a more characteristic bass clarinet tone. This mouthpiece angle, determined by the crook of the instrument neck, can vary from brand to brand. Some well-meaning manufacturers, in an attempt to make a soprano player 'more comfortable' when switching to bass, have made the neck/mouthpiece angle significantly higher. This can have negative ramifications when the young player can no longer reach the mouthpiece unless employing the New York City phone book to sit on! Not all brands of bass clarinets will fit all students.



Michael Drapkin
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Drapkin: This is an issue that some manufacturers have tried to address for years. First of all, the bass clarinet is a clarinet and not a saxophone. Bass clarinet uses a variation of the standard clarinet embouchure - larger - but the concept remains the same. In order to achieve a good embouchure, your head must find the proper angle. Only then will you achieve optimal tone production.

Rodriguez: Yes. I do that myself, even though I have a bass clarinet with a neck that is ideally angled. The goal is to get a mouthpiece angle as close as possible (if not identical) to the soprano clarinet. I always sit towards the front of the chair and keep my upper body straight and slightly leaning forward. This gives me more room to place the bell towards my feet. I usually have my right foot forward (in front of the clarinet) and my left one behind (under the chair) so I can gain body stability. If you are playing a bass clarinet with a straight neck, do not be afraid to go as far back as possible. This will get you closer to the ideal angle.

What do you think about the traditional neck design where the mouthpiece goes straight inside the mouth like saxophone? Should there be any embouchure adjustments to accommodate?

Klug: I actually prefer the lower angle of the older/traditional instruments, as I believe this helps obtain a proper bass clarinet tone. The student merely has to get used to taking in more of the top of the mouthpiece. The bottom lip should be placed where the mouthpiece facing starts its curve away from the reed; use a 3x5 file card inserted gently between reed and mouthpiece to find this spot. This mouthpiece/reed fulcrum should be placed in the middle of the bottom lip.

Drapkin: Which method you do depends entirely on the instrument and the angle of its neck. However, under no circumstances should the mouthpiece be played like a saxophone, as tone production will suffer.

Rodriguez: I would not adjust the embouchure to accommodate the angle of the neck. Instead, sit at the very front of the chair and move the bell as far back as is reasonable. Both Buffet and Selmer bass clarinets come with necks that have been re-designed to have an angle similar to the soprano clarinet. If you are looking for an after market neck, I would recommend a Charles Bay re-angled neck which provides a mouthpiece angle similar to that of a soprano clarinet, much more comfortable for most players.



Alcides Rodriguez
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Is the bass clarinet embouchure more similar or more different when compared to Bb soprano?

Klug: It is, indeed, very similar to the soprano embouchure, but it has a more rounded/circular grip with a less aggressive bite. Most young ‘switchers’ to bass clarinet also need to be encouraged to take in more mouthpiece which, when done properly, gets a large tone that speaks more easily. The embouchure grip is a gentler hold than the one on soprano Bb, and one can get away with less insistence on a flat/pointed chin.

Drapkin: The bass clarinet embouchure is a larger variant of the soprano clarinet embouchure. It is larger, and needs to accommodate the robust lower register which functions and is orchestrated in the bass range, while the upper tenor range plaintively follows the characteristic clear tone of the soprano clarinet, only with greater depth. It is preferable to approach bass the same as the soprano clarinet. It is therefore not unusual that most of the great bass clarinetists are also great soprano clarinet players as well.

Rodriguez: I believe the bass clarinet embouchure should be formed exactly like that of the clarinet with a few minor differences. Since the size of the mouthpiece and the reed is larger, you will have to take in more mouthpiece. The bottom lip should sit further down on the reed than it does on clarinet. The embouchure should be slightly more open than on the clarinet. The pressure applied to the reed is not the same as on the clarinet. Too much pressure on a bass clarinet reed will cause it not to vibrate. The bottom lip should be more relaxed, while keeping the shape of the chin.

What about reed strength? What strength best for developing players? Is it possible to substitute a tenor sax reed for a bass clarinet reed?

Klug: A student can usually drop a half or full reed strength in going from soprano to bass. If a young student is playing reed strength 3 and ½ or 4 on Bb soprano, they needn’t play more than a 3 on bass clarinet. Tenor sax reeds will work on bass clarinet but, being

narrower than bass reeds, they tend to vibrate more brightly, generally getting an edgier tone. If possible, tenor sax reeds should be avoided.

Drapkin: Many bass clarinetists prefer to use tenor saxophone reeds because of their additional heart in the cane as compared to standard bass clarinet reeds. Most younger players use lighter strength reeds because of their lack of facial muscle development. However, in order to get the best tone and flexibility, a stronger yet well balanced reed is required. The number of the reed can be a misnomer. Reeds need to be tested and adjusted to the player's needs just like soprano clarinet reeds.

Rodriguez: Reed strength should be chosen according to the mouthpiece. For young students, it is better to have softer reeds than harder reeds. This does not necessarily mean they should use a reed that is too light. In this case the reed will close up when trying to play in the high register. The feeling of the softness or hardness of a bass clarinet reed is more dramatic than in the soprano clarinet, so it is easier to figure out whether a reed is too hard or too soft. Because of the acoustical structure of the instrument, it is not very comfortable to play throughout the entire register with a hard reed.

I have never used a tenor sax reed on the bass clarinet. I think this should be limited to emergencies only. Even though they are similar in size, there are differences in the way they are made.

Leaks: What is the first indication that the instrument is leaking? What notes are usually affected first?

Klug: In the middle of the tube (low C, B, A, or 2nd register E, F, G) is where the upper joint leaks start to be noticed. These notes will then sound stuffy or unresponsive in attack.

Drapkin: Often the tendency of an instrument to “squeak” is an indication of a leak. The leak will act like a register key, causing you to play a harmonic of the fundamental tone. Sometimes you can tell by holding down a suspect key or pad (or getting someone to help you do that.) If the problem clears up, you have located your leak. This can occur anywhere on the horn and affect any note or register.

Rodriguez: It is very difficult to be specific about this, but there are a few things to watch out for. Even though a bass clarinet is bigger, the mechanisms are actually more delicate. There are long rods in the lower joint that are soft and bend easily. Gripping these long rods during assembly should be avoided. Be especially aware of the bridge key. They can be bent easily, therefore causing some notes not to speak. Most students get a bass clarinet out of adjustment when putting it together or taking it apart.

Another factor that can prevent the clarinet from working properly is the register key. The bass clarinet has a double octave system. If this system is slightly out of adjustment, the whole instrument will not work. This is a very sensitive mechanism and can easily get out of adjustment when assembling or storing the instrument.

Are there any “quick fix” adjustments that can be done without a repair person? Or, is this a big “do not attempt?”

Klug: Leaks are often the result of loose adjustment screws (there are many of these on the tops of the keys near the finger tips), misaligned bridge keys, or leaky pads. A teacher (who, hopefully, plays clarinet) should be able to diagnose some of these issues, but students shouldn't attempt to repair/adjust these problems themselves. A qualified repairman should be consulted. Because of the greater complexity of the bass clarinet's key system, these instruments also need more periodic maintenance.

Drapkin: Because the bass clarinet is so large and the key systems are so spread out, the result is a complex system of levers and rods which can be difficult for even experienced repairmen to fix. Trying to re-seat loose or leaking pads yourself usually doesn't work. Occasionally a broken spring can be temporarily fixed with the use of a rubber band. However, the very complex key systems are next to impossible to adjust for “do-it-yourselfers.”

Rodriguez: Before attempting anything, make sure that the instrument is assembled correctly. Check to see that the all bridge keys are aligned, and that the register key system is working properly. Sometimes, if an adjustment screw has been moved, it can cause the whole instrument to stop working. If you cannot spot the problem right away, do not attempt to fix it - you will probably make it worse! When looking for leaks, ask a friend to help by pressing down the key or keys you suspect are leaking while you play. Once you find the leak, then you can attempt to make the necessary adjustment - tightening or loosening an adjustment screw, or raising or lowering a key by adding a piece of tape or cork underneath it, or even shaving some cork off. If the problem is not simple, seek a repair person! Do not attempt to bend any keys. This should only be done by a professional repairman.

Should students - with good equipment (instruments, reeds, mouthpieces) be able to perform the same materials on bass that they would perform on Bb soprano?

Klug: Yes, to a degree. Notes above the staff are notoriously perilous for young players. In the early stages, stick with repertoire written for the bass clarinet. This music generally has a lower range with more conjunct writing. Since the bass also takes significantly more air than the soprano instrument, sustaining phrases can also be more difficult. In choosing students to switch to bass, pick larger kids with “big hands and a big heart!” The bass takes a more robust physicality than soprano and students have to be capable of generating more energy to fill this large instrument. Students also have to be rather aggressive and confident, for while the technical demands are rarely difficult in school band music, the small number of students assigned to this instrument requires that they possess a soloist mentality.

Drapkin: Nearly. The larger question is whether that piece was conceived by the composer with the bass clarinet in mind (usually not), and does it sound characteristic on the bass clarinet. Most of the great bass clarinet players I know are also great soprano

clarinet players, and play both with equal facility. Those of us who love the bass clarinet strive for the beauty of its wide range of tone and see little or no technical limitations across its four octave range.

Rodriguez: Yes. Students should focus on mastering the basics of clarinet playing first (sound, articulation, and technique) and then apply the same to bass clarinet. Students should be able to play scales (I recommend the Klose scales), etudes (some work better than others), and even some of the standard repertoire pieces on the bass clarinet. Playing fast on the bass clarinet is more challenging because of the size of the keys, but it becomes easier as you get more familiar with the instrument and its mechanism. It is possible to play and tongue fast on the bass clarinet, just as on the soprano clarinet.

What is your best piece of advice for achieving success on bass clarinet?

Howard Klug: The blowing resistance on a bass increases significantly around F/G/A in the 2nd register. Typically, young players unconsciously drop their tongues and open their throats in response to this increased resistance. This creates big problems for the response and security of these notes, causing a sluggish/fuzzy tone and making staccato notes a virtual impossibility. Even starting a phrase on those notes can be difficult. Encourage a cold air, high tongue E for the mouth cavity voicing, and spend some time jumping 12ths from the chalumeau register to these notes WHILE HOLDING the chalumeau register mouth cavity. Assist the student in re-learning the second register voicing by having them play a forte C below the staff. Once that note is established, the teacher can activate the register key (without the student anticipating this action)—and a secure G above the staff will usually leap out. The student can then try various left hand 12th intervals (C/G, D/A, E/B) by opening the register key with the thumb of the RIGHT hand. This approach generally teaches the student to maintain the same mouth cavity for the upper notes, thereby increasing their security. “Learn from the lower register to teach the upper register.”

Michael Drapkin: Get a good instrument and mouthpiece, good reeds made from quality cane, and find a teacher who really knows the bass clarinet. Always remember that the bass clarinet is a great solo instrument with a massive tone.

Alcides Rodriguez: Approach the bass clarinet as an instrument with its own voice. The bass clarinet should sound like a bass clarinet and not like a clarinet played one octave lower. Apply the same sound concept as for clarinet, (round sound and evenness throughout the entire register). Always think about the unique sound of the bass clarinet. Accomplish things on the bass clarinet in the same manner as on the soprano clarinet. Enjoy the things that the bass clarinet can do that the soprano clarinet cannot, and have fun with it.