

Strategies for Teaching the Bassoon Embouchure

By Michael Burns

This article is aimed at giving a few suggestions and strategies for teaching the bassoon embouchure that I have learned over the past several years of teaching at the University level.

First, as with many of the woodwind instruments, there have been changes and adaptations on what is considered to be the “norm” in embouchures on the bassoon. I will outline my own beliefs, which may or may not be the beliefs of other bassoonists.

For a great many years it was thought that the bassoonist should cultivate a pronounced overbite (i.e. the lower jaw is noticeably further back than the upper jaw.) I do not advocate this type of embouchure and the vast majority of professional players and teachers that I know also do not. Instead, we advocate a rather neutral lower jaw position with teeth aligned such that the lower teeth are only slightly behind the upper, forming what I will call a “natural bite.” The jaws will be open somewhat to accommodate the reed but keeping this natural and neutral positioning. The lips are going to be covering the teeth and therefore need to be rolled-in slightly, but not too much. There should be some “pink” of the lips showing—particularly on the lower lip. A common error in bassoon embouchures is to have the lips—particularly the lower lip—rolled in too much. The lips form a cushion for the blades of the reed and the corners of the lips need to come inward in a nice rounded shape. The essential purpose for the embouchure is to seal around the reed. I have found two wonderful descriptions as analogies for the embouchure shape that work well with my students, as they are shapes that most or all people already know:

1. **The Drinking Straw Embouchure.** The shape our lips make when we seal around a drinking straw is almost perfect for the bassoon embouchure: Round with just a little roll-in of the lips or pucker, and relaxed. Of course, we will be blowing into a reed rather than drinking in a liquid.
2. **The Whistle Embouchure.** The other good analogy is the shape that your mouth makes when you whistle. Again it is a round, puckered, relaxed shape. Not everyone can whistle but they usually understand the shape you would make if you did.

Usually one or the other of these analogies will strike a chord with the student and help have them producing the correct type of shape for the embouchure. Now it must be monitored to see how much lip is rolled in and to ensure that the student is not “biting” the reed. Biting is usually caused by too much vertical pressure from the upper and lower jaws, often also accompanied by an overtightening of the lip muscles. This results in a more pinched tone, sharper pitch, and more embouchure fatigue for the player. Instead they need to concentrate on the roundness, making the lips apply even pressure from all points but concentrating on the corners or sides so that the vertical is not exaggerated. Another analogy that is used for many woodwind instruments to combat biting is to describe the lips as being like a “draw-string bag.” Additionally, I advocate developing a somewhat relaxed embouchure and developing greater use of, and control with, the abdominal muscles and the support mechanism (this was described in an earlier article I wrote on breathing.)

I would like to finish this article by giving you two embouchure related exercises that I employ frequently when giving clinics and masterclasses:

1. Playing on the wrap of the reed. This is an exercise to illustrate and determine how much of a note's pitch is controlled by the airstream as opposed to the embouchure. Again, I advocate that the embouchure be relaxed and that most of the pitch should be held up by the air support. The exercise is this:

- Have the student play a C in the bass clef staff (three fingers of the left hand and the whisper key) with a full sound and good support.
- Next, have them move their lips up over the wrap of the reed being careful to not jab themselves with the reed wires! Now, have them try to play the C again. If their breath support is sufficient then a C will come out (with a somewhat raucous tone but still a C). However, it is quite possible that a C-flat or B-natural will come out instead. The student then needs to be encouraged to use more and more air support and air pressure to try and get this note up to the desired C. If they can easily obtain a C with their normal embouchure but cannot obtain one when playing on the wrap of the reed this usually indicates to me that they are controlling the pitch too much with lip tension and not enough with the abdominal support.

2. The “Dying Cow.” This exercise gets its name from the sounds that may be made while doing it resembling a cow in distress! Similarly, the exercise is based around playing the C in the staff and is performed as follows:

- Play the C normally with a full sound and good support.
- Next, have them relax both their embouchure and their abdominal support but keep blowing. They should be able to get the note to drop down to the C-flat or B-natural with a rather ugly sound (the dying cow). If they cannot get the pitch to drop despite relaxing their embouchure and support as much as they can it is highly likely that their lip muscles are still too tight, or, perhaps there is an issue with the reed.
- Assuming that they are successful in getting the pitch to drop, then have them try to raise the note up to the correct pitch by adding in sufficient abdominal support NOT by tightening the embouchure. I will frequently teach them right from wrong by doing this exercise as described and comparing it to deliberately pinching with the lips to get the note back up to pitch. This way they can identify if they are slipping into the incorrect way of supporting the pitch (i.e. using a tight embouchure and biting it up), or if they are doing the way I advocate—using a relaxed embouchure and increased air support.

I hope that some of the above strategies prove useful in getting your bassoon students to play with a good embouchure. As with all aspects of playing, I believe it is always best if they can do this under the guidance of a bassoon specialist and they should be encouraged to take private lessons if possible.