

Woodwind embouchure problems (Mar 2024)

The embouchure is the shape formed by the mouth when playing a particular wind instrument. This shape has to be flexible so (in conjunction with the diaphragm muscles) the player can control the sound produced and change the loudness, tone, and intonation in whatever way they wish. Each wind instrument has its own particular embouchure although some are quite similar to each other.

Beginners

Complete beginners would benefit from having a teacher who could tell them whether they are correctly forming the embouchure necessary to play the instrument properly. If the player wants to teach themselves then it is still best to have at least a couple of lessons to check their embouchure once they can produce a reliable sound; for instance a common mistake made by Clarinet and Saxophone players is not to put enough of the mouthpiece into their mouths.

Embouchure fatigue

A problem that can be encountered by players working towards exams, or by beginners, or by players returning to the instrument, is that of embouchure fatigue. The facial muscles that control the embouchure get tired – in fact they tire **before** the player feels that they are tired.

Players working towards an exam sometimes suddenly start to practice for longer periods than they have done so before, or they spend more time practicing particularly tricky exercises that require the embouchure to work harder – for example playing 3rd register notes. In these instances players may think the instrument is not working correctly when it could be that their embouchure is tiring. Players should structure their practice regime in such a way as to avoid tiring their embouchure - perhaps breaking practices down into half hour periods rather than playing for 2 hours solidly.

Beginners will tire their embouchure very quickly and should start by playing for only 5-10 minutes a day and over a period of months build up to playing 3 or 4 half hour sessions a week.

Players returning to a particular instrument have the same problem – although they may be able to innately remember the correct embouchure they still have to re-build the strength in the muscles. Like beginners, they should start playing for only 5-10 minutes a day and over a period of months build up to playing 3 or 4 half hour sessions a week.

Embouchure interference

Players who play more than one wind instrument – particularly if the instruments are not from the same family of instruments – may experience embouchure 'interference'.

For example a player of both the Flute and Clarinet might find they cannot play the Flute immediately after playing the Clarinet because they cannot form the embouchure correctly. If this is the case then the problems can be reduced by careful structure of practice regimes – for instance practice the instruments on different days. If the player is working towards exams in both instruments then take the exams for each instrument at different times of the year and, when it is getting close to the exam date stop playing the non-exam instrument altogether until the exam is over.

Another source of embouchure interference is dental work. Dental work, particularly to the front 12 teeth will affect the embouchure. Many children have to wear a brace; the period when they first start wearing their brace and the period they first have their brace removed is when their embouchure will be unstable; during these times it is important that they do not attempt any important music exams nor should they upgrade their instruments or mouthpieces.

Older players

Embouchure fatigue can be encountered by 'senior' players (those over sixty) but it tends not to be identified by the player. 'Muscle density' slowly declines for senior players and that means the remaining muscle tissue is working harder. For the woodwind player it is the embouchure muscles and the diaphragm muscles that are of concern.

Some players find they cannot maintain their embouchure for the same length of time as they used to be able to do - an example would be finding their playing deteriorating towards the end of a two hour rehearsal; if the player is running 'out of puff' before the end of the rehearsal it could be the diaphragm muscles tiring before the embouchure.

There are various remedies to this situation and the first is to recognize that there is a limit to how long their embouchure muscles (or diaphragm muscles) can be controlled reliably and to plan accordingly. For example - if two hour rehearsals are a problem they may need to review what playing they are doing before the rehearsal (players often practice on the same day before a rehearsal) - or perhaps allowing an extra break in the rehearsal could be a solution. Another example where a player can experience fatigue is if they are practicing several different woodwinds (e.g Clarinet, Alto, and Tenor Sax) and beginning to find this is challenging - they should try and identify which instrument is the most demanding and perhaps re-organize their practice regimes to take this into account. As with many activities in older age it is about pacing oneself.

Players select mouthpieces (or head-joints) for a particular sound and most players select their mouthpieces (or head-joints) in their youth and 'middle years'. These mouthpieces/head-joints can be quite demanding on the embouchure but the players are able to meet these demands in their youth and 'middle years' - however for the senior player sometimes these mouthpieces/head-joints can become too demanding.

Reed players can consider experimenting with their mouthpiece set-up. They should start by experimenting with slightly softer and slightly harder reeds on their existing mouthpiece. Trying slightly harder reeds seems counter-intuitive, however, as tactile sensitivity also declines for senior players, some players they will find it easier to sense the resistance of a harder reed and so it will be less demanding to control the reed.

The next step would be to try the same make of mouthpiece but with a different tip opening, and then if necessary trying alternative mouthpieces. Note - before changing anything with the mouthpiece set-up it is best to have the instrument checked over in case the instrument is not operating correctly.

Embouchure re-calibration

Players that have let their instrument get into a very poor condition find they need to 're-calibrate' their embouchures when the instrument has been serviced. This is because the condition of an instrument deteriorates gradually and the player slowly develops habits to compensate for the poor response of the instrument - these include pressing harder on the keys harder, blowing harder, and working their embouchure harder. When the instrument has been serviced it is suddenly not necessary for the player to compensate and the player needs to break these habits. The best way for the player to re-calibrate their embouchure is to spend the first 5 or 10 minutes of their practice sessions playing simple scales and arpeggios (or easy pieces) whilst pressing as lightly as possible on the key-work, and at the same time relaxing the embouchure and blowing as lightly as possible; all this is easiest achieved by playing quietly. Clarinet and Sax players whose instruments have just had a long overdue service or overhaul might find it best to use a slightly softer reed than they were using prior to the repair work being carried out.

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