

# Pedagogy Corner

*A panel discussion facilitated by Paula Corley, ICA Pedagogy Chair*

## NOT LIKE THE OTHERS: PLAYING STRATEGIES FOR A, E-FLAT AND BASS CLARINET

**W**hen asked about playing bass clarinet, J. Lawrie Bloom said, “I think you want to play them with as little change as possible if you are going back and forth constantly... How do I find the real voice of the bass and what’s different? There are things you can do on each instrument that you can’t do on the other, and that makes it exciting for me.”<sup>1</sup> Just what are those things? Bloom’s comments provide an excellent starting point to address some basic questions related to the A, E-flat and bass clarinet.

### A CLARINET

*One of the more difficult aspects of playing clarinet is the ability to go “seamlessly” from the B-flat clarinet to the A clarinet without changing the character of the sound. What advice do you have for players trying to create homogenous sound from B-flat to A?*

**Jérôme Comte:** Personally, I warm up with my A clarinet every morning. It’s easier to find “the sound” if I start my day with the A clarinet. I start with legato scales and studies and then move to some staccato. I work for very “precise and dry” in order to have a clean impact without forcing. It helps to focus the sound. I don’t change materials – it’s totally possible to have a similar sound with the same equipment.

I think the most important thing is the choice of the A clarinet. If you choose both B-flat and A at the same time, I suggest choosing the A clarinet

first. Then choose the B-flat with the same sensations as the A. Everything must sound with an easy resonance, using the body as a soundboard. Practicing the A every day will help you find the sound you want. There is no mystery. If there is a little difference – a slightly darker sound for example, it can also be beautiful, no? Have fun and be delighted to play the A!

**Greg Raden:** It is important to select an A clarinet that isn’t overly resistant so that when you switch back and forth from your B-flat, the resistance levels are similar. If not, your reed will feel heavier on the A. When selecting instruments, I try to pick a weightier B-flat and slightly lighter, more flexible A. I would also recommend doing your warmup routine (scales, long tones, etudes, etc.) on your A clarinet approximately every other day so you feel just as comfortable on it as on the B-flat.

**Kathryn Pirtle:** Make sure both instruments are in excellent working condition and free of leaks. Leaking in any clarinet will make it difficult to produce a great sound. Make sure the tone is coming from full breaths with excellent diaphragmatic and core support, so the air is not pushed. Keep the tongue wide in a relaxed “ee” shape with the tip as close to the reed as possible.

Work on strengthening the core and taking bigger breaths so diaphragmatic support is easier. Scales, long tones and articulation exercises should be played

with a focus on the breath alongside consistent embouchure and tongue placement. A great core exercise that will develop diaphragmatic support is to stand and take a deep breath filling up the “barrel” from the bottom of the ribs all the way to the collarbone, followed by an exhale where you bring together all the muscles of the core and pelvis including the buttocks. This exercise can be done throughout the day and is a good warm-up.

**Diana Haskell:** For me, the key to a homogenous sound between instruments is to purchase an A clarinet that matches resistance, sound quality and pitch to my B-flat clarinet. When purchasing an A clarinet, I do not recommend buying without assistance. Ask your teacher to select a few for you to choose from or find a music store that specializes in hand-selected offerings. Owning a matched pair greatly reduces problems that normally occur when switching back and forth.

I think of my A clarinet the same as my B-flat but with a little faster air. I used to think A clarinet had to be played differently, but that created unnecessary tension and made me nervous in performance. Once I began saying “oh here is my A – no big deal,” it became less stressful to make the change between instruments.

*Do you make any adjustments in equipment or voicing? Which notes (if any) respond differently from B-flat to A?*

**Greg Raden:** As an orchestral player, being able to go seamlessly between B-flat and A clarinet is crucial. The A clarinet can inherently have a bit more resistance and some have the tendency to “grunt” or produce an undertone in the left-hand notes. On the notes that are particularly prone to an undertone like the clarion A above the staff, try playing them without the register key like a harmonic. If you can master the voicing this way, when you add back the register key it will feel easy! Changing the register tube to a shorter tube can also help eliminate some of the undertone tendency.

**Diana Haskell:** My mouthpiece and reeds do not change, but I hunt for a barrel that further enhances the sound and articulation ease I am after. I work with a repair specialist to install a different register tube if I hear the dreaded “grunt” that is common to A clarinets in the upper range. Sometimes slightly shortening the tube is all that is needed, but this fix is not my first choice. A shorter register tube can lead to other issues such as a sharp clarion C. Tubes that are made with a smaller interior may be another option. My first choice is to add a tiny pin to the speaker key cork that enters the register tube very slightly.

Students seem to be drawn to A clarinets that have what they call a “dark” sound, which I take to mean an instrument which favors low frequencies with more resistance. What sounds pleasing up close often translates into stuffiness or dullness in a larger, more vibrant space. It is also more difficult to find reeds that respond the same on both B-flat and A. In an audition, the disparity between a more brilliant sounding B-flat and a dull A clarinet would be magnified and considered an uneven sound quality. Look for a good balance between high, mid and low frequencies, just as for a B-flat clarinet. Avoid super-resistant horns.

Be sure to check the pitch, especially of throat tones which can be flat and C6 which can be very sharp. Test the pitch of every contender with a

## “It’s easier to find ‘the sound’ if I start my day with the A clarinet.”

tuner. I once purchased a gorgeous-sounding A clarinet but could not use it in orchestra because of intonation issues. Don’t be like me – it’s a huge disappointment and a waste of money! I suggest a trial period where an instrument may be played in various spaces. Play for colleagues or teachers and include those who know nothing about clarinets. You will be surprised at what a violinist or percussionist hears.

*What are the most helpful materials to practice for achieving homogenous sound and technique?*

**Kathryn Pirtle:** In addition to standard repertoire, I like working on the transcriptions of the Bach unaccompanied cello and violin suites and sonatas, and the Telemann flute fantasias. This body of work offers a huge opportunity to work on every aspect of sound and articulation and develop one’s interpretation.

**Diana Haskell:** I will play a few long tones and test response in every register by starting individual notes with release of the tongue. I might play a little of the Mozart Concerto or an excerpt such as Rachmaninoff’s *Second Symphony* to remind myself of the faster air speed necessary to make the horn sing.

### BASS CLARINET

*What is the proper playing position for bass clarinet? Should you use a peg, neck strap or both? Where should the instrument be placed when sitting? What should players be aware of when standing to play?*

**Jean-Marc Volta:** I prefer using a floor peg when sitting. When sitting, the angle of the neck allows an almost identical playing position to the soprano clarinet. One can opt for a straighter neck which will place the instrument further away from the body in a similar fashion to the saxophone. When standing, players should pay

attention to posture in order to avoid tension in the right hand and around the mouthpiece. I use a longer peg when standing. When I use a neck strap, I position the instrument off center rather than right in front of me.

**Michael Lowenstern:** The bass clarinet should be parallel to the body when sitting. When standing, things obviously get looser, especially if you wear a strap. I personally recommend a strap that does *not* go around the player’s neck, but rather over their shoulders. There is too much important stuff going through the neck to be handling a 10-pound instrument from it!

**David Howard:** There is no one-size-fits-all position. For physical comfort it depends on many different factors, not the least of which is the player’s height. Shorter players might need a cushion instead of a peg. In my experience, it is a matter of trial and error.

*There are differing opinions on mouthpiece angle. Some suggest using the same angle as the soprano clarinet while others do not. Is it important to have a curved neck?*

**David Howard:** I like to bring the mouthpiece in at an angle closer to that of soprano clarinet, but that is not necessarily comfortable for everyone. If the neck angle of the bass clarinet model is steep, the bell does not need to be placed too far back. My first instrument in the orchestra had an almost horizontal neck angle. I put the bell so far back under my chair that I needed a neck strap and a clarinet case behind the bell to keep it from sliding. In the end, it’s a matter of experimenting with instrument position in order to achieve the sound concept you have in mind. It’s very important to have a sound concept.

**Michael Lowenstern:** I prefer straighter necks to upturned (clarinet-like) necks. I find this angle produces the most freedom and the least amount of reed pressure from the lower lip. The bass clarinet should *not* present as much resistance as the B-flat clarinet, and as such, players should not try to replicate that resistance.

**Jean-Marc Volta:** The mouthpiece angle must feel as natural as possible. It is important not to be too much on the tip, as it will compromise control and agility and will be more challenging to get a proper flow of air.

*Is the bass clarinet embouchure similar or different when compared to soprano clarinet? Do you adjust grip, voicing or anything else?*

**Michael Lowenstern:** Not really. At least not as different as, say, playing saxophone. Voicing is, however, quite different. You need to learn the voicing of the bass clarinet as separate and distinct from the B-flat.

**David Howard:** Bass clarinet embouchure is quite different from clarinet. Much more relaxed, chin out and not as straight up and down as clarinet. Grip and voicing are a personal preference.

*Let's talk about the altissimo register. How do you approach playing above high C? Is "half-holing" standard on all bass clarinets? On what note should half-holing begin – C-sharp or D?*

**Michael Lowenstern:** Half-holing is standard, and you can start using it at D, not C-sharp. C-sharp sounds and responds best when the F-sharp/B key is open.

**David Howard:** I don't use half-hole fingerings. I prefer a sequence of overblown throat fingerings, some of which employ the register key without thumb key.

*Leaks seem to be problematic for bass clarinet. What is the first indication that the instrument is leaking? What notes are usually affected? Are there any quick-fix adjustments?*

**Jean-Marc Volta:** The first indication that the instrument is leaking is a deterioration of sound. You will hear parasite noises, have trouble with air flow, and feel more finger tension. The tone will sound "off." A leak will usually affect all the notes on the instrument. If the problem is manageable, one can use the adjustment screws to fix the leaks. However, if the pads are at fault, the best solution will always be to get the instrument fixed by a repair professional.

**David Howard :** The easiest quick fix adjustments are aligning the joints properly and making sure the throat A key has enough play in it. The rest are "do not attempt" in my opinion.

**Michael Lowenstern:** Leaking in the top joint causes the most issues. You'll find it harder to play right-hand notes, especially in the clarion register. If the bass is leaking on the low notes (under low E), that's a separate issue. The notes will sound stuffy, or you will have to press extra hard to make the pad seal. In either case, take the instrument to a reputable repair person. Make sure your screws are all in place. This can often be the cause of catastrophic (and sudden) issues with the instrument.

*How do you maintain great tone quality on both bass clarinet and B-flat clarinet? Should players be able to*

*perform the same materials on bass as soprano clarinet?*

**Michael Lowenstern:** You should be able to perform the same materials on B-flat and bass within reason. Bass clarinet does not need separate etude books. Extrapolate from your existing materials – you don't need a separate scale book. Some of the best work for growing bass clarinet students are the Bach cello suites. In these, you are exposed to the full range of the low C bass clarinet and bass clef.

**Jean-Marc Volta:** It is useful to know how to perform the same materials on the bass and soprano clarinets. One can also perform materials meant for the cello and the bassoon. This is a great way to extend one's repertoire.

**David Howard:** Some materials are appropriate for both instruments. Some are so tricky on bass that they are not worth mastering. The most important thing is to not make a big deal mentally when switching. Once you have the proper fundamentals on both instruments, it should not be difficult to go back and forth.

**John Cipolla:** With the bass clarinet, there is an instinctive reaction for me to sit on the edge of my chair, take deeper breaths than when playing the soprano clarinet and to allow my upper chest cavity and throat to feel like resonators. This is like playing saxophone. The upper chest and throat are very much a part of the resonance and production of the sound. Certainly breathing from the lower portion of the torso is important (some refer to this as diaphragmatic breathing). But for me when playing the bass clarinet, I find that the upper torso is really where I can physically feel the air resonating and the sound being formed before it leaves my mouth. When playing in the low register on the bass clarinet, I often imagine that I am part of the trombone or bassoon section instead of the woodwind section. Practicing long tones that trombone and bass trombone players practice are very beneficial to developing a resonant low note concept on the bass clarinet. Blending the bass clarinet sound with the other low instruments is often more important than playing louder than the

**"The bass clarinet should not present as much resistance as the B-flat clarinet, and players should not try to replicate that resistance."**



other low instruments. These parts serve as a foundation for tuning and rhythm that the rest of the ensemble relies upon. Our minds and ears direct our body to replicate what we are imagining. This imagination or concept of sound is largely learned from listening to others. The ears and mind are the most important components for developing our sound on each instrument and having the ability to switch between different instruments.

## E-FLAT CLARINET

*What is your concept of sound for E-flat?*

**Mary Druhan:** E-flat showcases our fundamental weaknesses vividly. For that reason, learning to play E-flat can be a source of information and correction for fundamentals on all clarinets. The E-flat clarinet should be an extension of the clarinet range, similar and matching in tone for both orchestral and wind playing. Players will benefit greatly from trials of mouthpieces, reeds and ligatures to determine what works well for them personally, rather than simply playing what is handed to them.

**Jorge Montilla Moreno:** My concept for the sound is mellow and velvety, especially in the high register. The best compliment is when listeners say that I sound more like a higher B-flat clarinet. The sound should be rather dark and smooth.

**Elizabeth Crawford:** The E-flat clarinet routinely gets a bad rap for being shrill or “squeaky.” The sound should be as rich as the B-flat clarinet sound. If the reed is too soft, this will be impossible! It’s important to have a harder reed than one might typically play on B-flat. Not only will the tone be better, but altissimo register playing will be much easier.

*Should the E-flat sound have the same character as B-flat?*

**Jorge Montilla Moreno:** Not necessarily! These are two different instruments. The repertoire and the criteria to write for these instruments is and should be different. Performing the E-flat and sounding like a B-flat clarinet only refers to having a darker, sweet and centered E-flat clarinet sound.

*What adjustments do you make in voicing and/or embouchure from B-flat to E-flat? Are the instruments totally different?*

**Elizabeth Crawford:** I do not believe the instruments are totally different. I use a lot of air when I play E-flat clarinet and I teach that. I don’t teach changes in embouchure because I believe they are virtually the same. It’s also the same for voicing. If the high E and F are flat, you may have to add a bit of jaw pressure. I hate to use the word “bite,” but that’s what you may have to do. You can also add the left-hand sliver key for both of those notes and that often helps a lot. Long F is usually fairly well in tune.

**Mary Druhan:** I think the E-flat and B-flat clarinet mouthpieces are so alike in design that the fundamentals for creating tone and voicing are very similar. The make and material of the mouthpieces need to be somewhat consistent. For example, playing a hard rubber mouthpiece on one instrument and crystal on another can create complications. Also, having one mouthpiece with a close facing and the other an open facing can create confusion in your fundamentals. I use a setup that feels consistent with my B-flat/A set-up. Even with similarities that make playing E-flat fairly predictable, it takes a lot of work to finesse your skills, especially in the altissimo. The pressure against my bottom lip and teeth is often greater on E-flat so I typically use a guard to prevent inflammation for my E-flat playing.

**Jorge Montilla Moreno:** The voicing is a bit different from B-flat to E-flat. Articulating the high register of the E-flat requires more careful voicing. I describe the voicing as the letter “e” in the front of the mouth with a more open throat position in the back. The B-flat can take a bit more bite and tighter use of the lips. The E-flat does need bite for intonation but works best with a more gentle use of lip pressure so the sound is not too “pinched.”

*Does the E-flat respond differently from B-flat? Is there an obvious break where the range becomes problematic?*

**Elizabeth Crawford:** Yes, it does respond differently and becomes more of a problem once you head into the altissimo register. The B and C above the staff are often sharp, so sometimes I play those notes without the register key. It’s not always feasible to do that, in which case you just must lip down. I find that the notes above F are often sharp (unless your reed is too soft). Playing above high A just isn’t feasible and I encourage my composer friends not to write there. I believe there are a few orchestral works with an altissimo B-flat or even B.

**Jorge Montilla Moreno:** Yes! E-flat is a more explosive instrument. The E-flat clarinet responds faster and delivers a resonant sound in any register with pads that seal properly. The B-flat appears to be a bit sluggish compared to the E-flat in terms of response and projection. Just like the B-flat clarinet, the E-flat demands your careful attention above high C.



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**Mary Druhan:** In general, the problematic ranges of E-flat sharply mirror those of all clarinets: the throat tones, the upper clarion, the altissimo, and the longest fingerings (E/B and F/C). Every great musician needs a great acoustician/repair person to keep things in check.

*How do you approach tuning and pitch correction on E-flat?*

**Elizabeth Crawford:** You can add the left-hand sliver or side key G-sharp key to bring up the pitch of E or F, especially on older instruments. The newer horns seem to be better in tune.

**Jorge Montilla Moreno:** Some of the E-flat's intonation issues could be resolved by slightly biting or releasing the biting. Voicing helps and specific fingerings are sometimes the best option to correct intonation issues. I have adopted many "alternate" fingerings to help improve the intonation of high notes.

**Mary Druhan:** It can be difficult to train pitch, especially the quick alteration of pitch, alone in a practice room. You should use a tuning drone and study the intonation of each note in your practice. I chart each note with separate columns for standard pitch at a comfortable dynamic level, varied dynamics, and favorite corrective techniques. From this information I develop a "library" of altered fingerings for different situations like tuning the third, rising with other instruments in a crescendo or decrescendo. Each performance requires a little work in shading and venting to match with others.

An instrument that is not well-maintained is an obstacle. For example, the ring height and bridge mechanism can cause issues with pitch and response. The position, size and shape of the tone holes can cause inconsistencies in pitch and tone. The pitch of the upper clarion and altissimo registers varies significantly with each brand, make, model and year of manufacture.

*What are the most helpful materials and techniques to practice for mastering the E-flat?*

**Mary Druhan:** My first instinct when practicing E-flat is to jump right in and get busy with the flurry of notes and high range in the standard audition excerpts. But, without fail, I am thrown back into a routine of correcting voicing with register slurs and harmonic exercises for Stravinsky, long tones and pitch drones for Ravel, prepared finger exercises and technique drills for Strauss, and articulation studies for Shostakovich. Excellent fundamental execution is the best predictor of excellent performance so be sure to work those fundamentals on E-flat clarinet often.

**Jorge Montilla Moreno:** I do flexibility exercises that I also do on the B-flat soprano clarinet in order to achieve even registers and good intonation. Books with alternate fingerings are great. Some specific pieces of the solo and orchestral literature require the use of specific fingerings to help finger dexterity and improve intonation. Other than this, I practice the same things to play better B-flat clarinet.

**Elizabeth Crawford:** For mastering the instrument, a tuner is vital. I like to have students practice scales slowly with the tuner and work on etudes from the B-flat clarinet repertoire with which they are already familiar, particularly those in a comfortable range with no extremes in register. ❖

## FURTHER READING

Hadcock, Peter. *Orchestral Studies for the E-flat Clarinet*. Roncorp, 1981.  
Sparnaay, Harry. *The Bass Clarinet, A Personal History*. Periferia Music, 2011.  
Volta, Jean-Marc. *The Bass Clarinet*. International Music Diffusion, 1996.  
Voxman, Himie. *Introducing the Alto or Bass Clarinet*. Rubank, 1952.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Kyle MacMillan, "Bass Clarinet J. Lawrie Bloom takes a solo turn in *Ophelia's Tears*," CSO Sounds and Stories, Jan. 30, 2020, [www.csosoundsandstories.org](http://www.csosoundsandstories.org).

## PANELISTS

**John Cipolla:** Professor of Music, Western Kentucky University; Radio City Music Hall Orchestra

**Jérôme Comte:** Soloist, Ensemble Intercontemporain; teacher at CNSM de Paris

**Elizabeth Crawford:** Professor of Music Performance – Clarinet, Ball State University

**Mary Druhan:** Professor, Texas A & M University – Commerce; B-flat and E-flat, the Dallas Winds

**Diana Haskell:** Associate Principal Clarinet, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

**David Howard:** Los Angeles Philharmonic; Adjunct Associate Professor, University of Southern California

**Michael Lowenstern:** Bass Clarinetist

**Jorge Montilla Moreno:** Clarinet Professor, University of Iowa School of Music

**Kathryn Pirtle:** Clarinetist, Orion Ensemble; Principal Clarinet, Lake Forest Symphony

**Gregory Raden:** Principal Clarinet, Dallas Symphony Orchestra; Adjunct Associate Professor of Clarinet, Southern Methodist University; Adjunct Clarinet Faculty, University of North Texas

**Jean-Marc Volta:** Clarinetist, French National Orchestra (retired)

## ABOUT THE WRITER

Paula Corley is a Texas music educator whose



passion is clarinet. She is the "mayor" of Clarinet City ([www.clarinetcity.com](http://www.clarinetcity.com)), pedagogy chair for the International Clarinet Association and the clarinet instructor at Texas Lutheran

University in Seguin. The author of two books for developing clarinetists, Paula has appeared at over 40 music conferences throughout the United States. She is a performing artist and clinician for Vandoren and Buffet Crampon, and is featured in the "Play Wind" app developed by Buffet Crampon Paris.