

TMEA 2024 Handout: Working with Student Oboists in an Orchestra

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Before we begin...

Consistent, functioning reeds and an instrument in good working order make life much easier for oboists and directors! Students will strive to make poorly made reeds and out-of-adjustment instruments function the best they can, developing incorrect playing habits and struggling to enjoy making music. Working with the band director and the students to ensure they have a steady supply of good reeds and keeping the instruments maintained by specialists makes the ensemble experience more rewarding for everyone!

Basics of Oboe Tone Production

Air Support:

Correct air support is key to comfortable, flexible tone production. A good oboe breath starts with a comfortable inhale, followed by firmly engaging the core/abdominal muscles beneath the lungs. The key with oboe is the quality of the air – not the quantity! The opening of the reed is quite small, so rather than trying to force large amounts of air through the instrument, encourage students to focus on playing with a controlled stream of high-pressure air by always actively engaging those core muscles while playing. This constant, controlled stream of pressurized air maintains the tone, meaning the throat and jaw can stay relaxed and open, allowing the student to achieve greater control and flexibility of tone, intonation, dynamics and vibrato.

Embouchure:

The basic oboe embouchure can be thought of as the lips, rolled in over the teeth, forming a circle around the reed. This circle of lip cushions/controls the vibration blades of the reed and holds the reed in place. A key component is keeping this circle by equal tension from the sides (“corners”) of the lips, as opposed to squashing the reed closed from top and bottom (“biting”). By keeping this circle, the tone will remain complex throughout the dynamic range and the pitch will be much more controllable. The circle can be made larger to allow the reed to vibrate more, which increases the volume of the tone, helps with lower notes, and lowers the pitch – conversely, the circle can be made smaller to dampen vibration, which decreases the volume of the tone, helps with higher note, and raises the pitch.

Troubleshooting Tone Production Issues

If the tone is too loud, try:

- Rolling in the lips over the teeth to muffle the vibration of the blades of the reed
- Firming the corners of the mouth/lips to control the opening of the reed
- Decreasing the intensity and quantity of air
- Pinching the reed closed

If the tone is too muffled, try:

- Opening the mouth/lips to allow more vibration of the blades of the reed
- Increasing the intensity and quantity of air
- Pinching the reed open from the sides

Additional Suggestions:

- To avoid being called out as loud and “ducky” in ensembles, many young students learn to bite the reed closed (closing the teeth/jaw and squishing the blades of the reed together), which leads to sharp, thin tones.
 - o Encourage students who struggle with projecting to open up their embouchure into a comfortable circle, relax their throat, engage their core air support muscles, and sing through the instrument. Encourage them to embrace the rich, complex tone that makes oboes so effective in orchestral music!
- Fatigue Issues
 - o Like brass players, oboists deal with mouth fatigue, so planning lengthy rehearsals directly before a concert is not ideal and can lead to diminishing returns during the concert.
- Dynamics
 - o Student oboists likely will not be as adept at playing comfortably at soft dynamic levels as other woodwinds, as it requires more developed embouchure and air control and well-functioning reeds. Tips for blending an oboe into a soft woodwind passage if the student is still learning the skill of playing softly include:
 - Remove vibrato
 - Allow other woodwinds to bring their volume up a bit
 - Remind the student to continue to aggressively engage their core support muscles, while making the circle of cushioned lip around the reed smaller.

Troubleshooting Intonation Issues

To lower pitch (and to improve notes in the low range) try:

- Less reed in the mouth
- Dropping the jaw
- Releasing tension in the throat and mouth (“ah” vowel in the throat)
- Pinching the reed open from the sides

To raise pitch (and to improve notes in the high range) try:

- More reed in the mouth
- Firming up the corners/sides of the mouth
- Firmer air support (“eee” vowel in the throat)
- Pinching the reed closed

Additional Suggestions:

- Don’t tell students to physically pull the reed out of the instrument to bring the pitch down. Pulling the reed out causes other issues and likely won’t even bring the pitch down. Other instruments are designed to be tuned by pulling out/pushing in various components, but not the oboe.
- Flat reeds are often the cause of sharp playing! Many reeds available in local stores are extremely flat, requiring significant lip control, which always leads to sharp pitch and quick fatigue. Encourage reeds from a private instructor or other small-batch source.
- Flat pitch is much less common with oboists. While beginners often are simply not yet using the correct embouchure control, flat pitch in a more experienced player can be a sign of a poorly made reed (I’ve encountered many store-bought reeds that play nearly a half step flat!) or potentially an instrument issue.

Suggested Sources for Reeds & Other Resources

Private oboe instructors are invaluable for ensemble directors, as they can provide and adjust reeds, troubleshoot instrument issues, and correct any poor playing habits that lead to issues in ensembles.

Bocal Majority (Richardson, TX)

- Reeds and accessories
- Repair services
- Summer camps and masterclass/workshop opportunities for students, as well as Band Director Double-Reed Boot Camps

<https://www.bocalmajoritystore.com>

MAS Oboe Repair

- Reeds
- Repair services

<https://masoboerepair.com/products/ols/products/studentintermediate-oboe-reed>

Oboe Duck

- Reeds and accessories

<https://www.oboeduck.com/product-page/oboe-reed>

Haines Oboe Reeds (Etsy Shop)

<https://www.etsy.com/shop/HainesOboeReeds?ref=l2-about-shopname>

Erin's Oboe Reeds (Etsy Shop)

<https://www.etsy.com/shop/erinsoboereeds>

Fingering Chart by Martin Schuring

<https://www.trevcomusic.com/products/schuring-martin-fingering-chart-for-oboe-and-english-horn-ob-eh>