



# BASSOON BOOTCAMP FOR BAND DIRECTORS

## Strategies for Success in Starting and Supporting Bassoonists in Your Band

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### 1. Why the bassoon?

- a. The bassoon fills out the low end of the woodwind section and adds an additional depth of timbral color to the section.
- b. Many standard pieces of the band and wind ensemble repertoire include independent parts for the bassoon.
- c. The bassoon is a challenging but rewarding instrument that can open up many musical pathways and opportunities for your students.

### 2. Which students should play the bassoon?

- a. ANYONE who shows an interest!
  - a. Most bassoonists pick the instrument because they fall in love with the sound and/or enjoy the idea of playing something that is different from what everyone else is doing.
  - b. Students who are curious, patient, and independent tend to make excellent young bassoonists.
- b. Transitioning from another instrument
  - a. 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade is a great time to switch over because it gives students plenty of time to learn the specific skills of bassoon.
  - b. It's important to stress the difference in embouchure from whatever instrument they came from.

### 3. Things to check before starting on/transitioning to bassoon

- a. **Question #1:** Can their left hand fingers reach the holes/keys while the thumb can still reach whisper, C#, and flick keys?
- b. **Question #2:** Can their weight support a bassoon with a seat strap?

### 4. Common modifications for size

- a. Short reach bassoons
- b. Case or yoga blocks under feet
- c. Use of whisper lock before learning notes above the staff
- d. Additional strap to help with the weight of the instrument

## 5. Bassoon Basics

### a. Anatomy of the bassoon

- a. Bocal
- b. Wing joint
- c. Boot joint
- d. Long joint
- e. Bell

### b. Embouchure

- a. The bassoon has a 3-point embouchure, meaning there is some pressure coming from the corners of the mouth and top lip.
- b. Teaching an embouchure in 30 seconds: Open mouth about 1 finger distance wide, say the first part of the word Bird “bir” and notice the engagement of the corners. Roll in the upper and lower lips ever so slightly so the flesh covers the teeth.
- c. The embouchure should allow for a split sound in the crow. If it is too high pitched, the student may be biting.

### c. Hand position

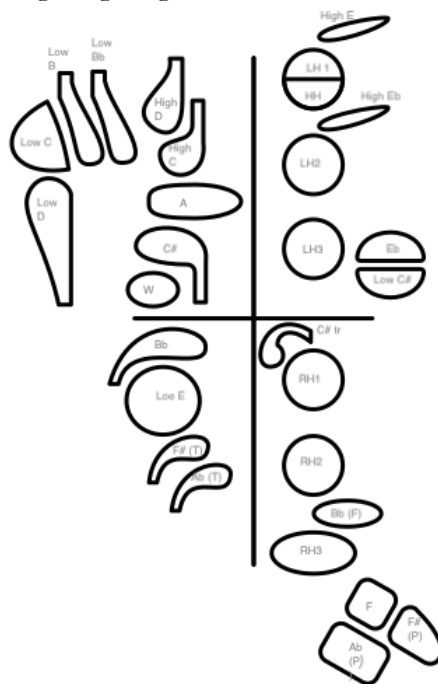
- a. **Left hand:** make the letter C and wrap around the body of the instrument. Space between index finger knuckles rests on instrument, thumb wraps around to the whisper key.
- b. **Right hand:** with or without hand rest/crutch should look like an “up bow”.

### d. Posture

- a. Adjust the seat strap height and angle to bring the bassoon directly to the mouth.  
*Always bring the bassoon to you!*
- b. Seat strap should be closer to the front of the seat, and student should sit at a part of the chair where their feet easily touch the ground.

### e. Fingerings

- a. Fingering diagram



- b. Easy notes scales, etc. to start with
  - 1. First 4 notes: C, D, E, F in bass clef
  - 2. Scales: F Major, C Major
- c. More difficult scales to start with
  - 1. Scales that include E-flat: B-flat Major, E-flat Major, etc.
- d. How to tell a good fingering chart from a not-so-good one
  - 1. E-flat fingering uses 2 hands, not just forked.
  - 2. Use of resonance/whisper key.
- e. Fingering chart resources
  - 1. Weissenborn book (New Morelli Edition)
  - 2. Music and the Bassoon ([www.musicandthebassoon.org](http://www.musicandthebassoon.org))

## 6. Demystifying Bassoon Technique

### a. Whisper Key

- a. Name for the octave mechanism on the bassoon.
- b. Used on all notes in the fundamental register of the bassoon, from low B-flat to open F (top of bass clef staff) to keep the pitch down the octave.
- c. Also used on additional notes in the higher register, tenor notes above E4.

### b. Half Hole

- a. Used in combination with faster air in order to produce an octave higher version of some notes.
- b. Roll the left hand first finger (index) open/downward so the finger is able to uncover a portion of the tone hole.
- c. F $\sharp$ /G $\flat$ , G, and G $\sharp$ /A $\flat$ .
  - 1. G uses a moderate half hole (about half open).
  - 2. A $\flat$  uses a tiny half hole (cover more of the hole, about 1/4 open).
  - 3. F $\sharp$  uses a very large half hole (barely cover the hole, about 3/4 open).

### c. Flicking

- a. Used to produce A, B $\flat$ , B, C, and sometimes D above the staff without any cracks or squeaks.
- b. Lightly tap and release the correct flick key with the left thumb at the beginning of the note. Adjust air support and embouchure in combination with flicking to get the best possible sound.
- c. There are some situations that may require more or less flicking.
  - 1. For notes that are slurred by step, may not be necessary.
  - 2. For fast and repeated notes, one may choose to hold down the flick key instead which is called "venting".
- d. Flicking or venting should be taught as part of the fingering from the beginning and can be practiced by doing slow octave leaps from the lower octave to the flick note.

### d. Resonance key

- a. Improves intonation and timbre.
  - 1. E-flat key for left hand pinky, is used as a part of the standard fingerings for middle E-flat, middle G, and all tenor notes about E $\flat$  above the staff.

## 7. Reed selection

- a. Where should students buy reeds?

- a. Commercially available hand-made: with the internet there has been a boom in professional bassoonists starting small businesses selling high quality handmade reeds for students. These tend to vibrate better than factory made.
- b. Some of my favorites:
  - 1. [Jiffy Reeds](#)
  - 2. [Laughing Crow Reeds](#)
- b. What should they be looking for in a reed?
  - a. **Stability:** notes like F, E and C# in the staff don't sag.
  - b. **Flexibility:** Low notes articulate clearly.
  - c. **Vibration:** reed should be able to produce a split tone when crowded. Too high of pitch means it's too resistant/sharp/heavy.

## 8. Reed adjusting

- a. Common issues:
  - a. **Hard:** sharp but could also be flat, stuffy, hard to vibrate. Can't play soft.
  - b. **Soft:** flat, weak, unstable, buzzy.
- b. Tools
  - a. Pliers
  - b. Plaque
  - c. Holding Mandrel
  - d. Sandpaper
  - e. Fine grit file
- c. Simple methods for easy adjustments
  - a. **Wires:** Rounding wires with pliers adds resistance and makes sharper/darker sound. Flattening wires reduces resistance and makes flatter and buzzy.
  - b. **Articulation:** sandpaper/file 1mm from the tip evenly across to improve response.
  - c. **Low register is sharp:** sandpaper/file in the back closest to the wire.
  - d. **Overall flat:** round wires, clip tip.
  - e. **Overall sharp:** sandpaper channels of reed, flatten wires.

## 9. Reed maintenance

- a. How many reeds should a student have?
  - a. At least 3 working reeds at a time makes for a good rotation that extends the life of all reeds.
- b. Best practices for soaking reeds
  - a. Reeds only need to soak for a minute or so before playing. After that, I like to take them out of the water and let them stabilize for another minute before playing.
- c. General reed care
  - a. Always keep in a case.
  - b. Don't oversoak!
  - c. Dip back in water after playing to rinse saliva off. This extends the life of a reed.
  - d. Have a well-ventilated reed case to avoid mold: generally, these have some holes built into them.
  - e. If any reeds mold, thoroughly clean the case to prevent the spread to other reeds.
  - f. Ask students to brush their teeth before playing.

- g. The inside of the reed may be cleaned out by blowing water through, sticking a plaque in, or using a pipe cleaner.

## 10. Equipment and basic instrument maintenance

- a. Knick-knacks
  - a. **Seat strap:** the bassoon needs to be held up because it's one of the only instruments besides the piano that you need all 10 fingers to play
  - b. **Cork grease:** regardless of if the tenons are cork or string, this will help with humidity and ease of taking the instrument apart.
  - c. **Reed soaker:** students often forget this and as a result, they try to play on dry reeds that don't vibrate well.
  - d. **Reed case:** but too many students just let individual reeds float around their case, which is a recipe for cracking and other disasters! Bassoon reeds are expensive compared to clarinet and saxophone reeds, so stress the importance of proper care and storage
  - e. Consider making a "bassoon essentials" handout for your new bassoonists with information about accessories and care!
- b. Swabbing
  - a. Essential for wing and boot joint.
  - b. Two different swabs- one for each joint that is a different size.
  - c. Stress that this is done after every time the bassoon is played.
- c. Bocal cleaning
  - a. ESSENTIAL! If not done regularly, the instrument becomes overly resistant and sharp.
  - b. Specific bocal swabs and brushes are commercially available.
- d. Appropriate assembly/disassembly
  - a. Please allow your bassoonists enough time! Bassoonists are often the last woodwind players left in rehearsal because of the many pieces and swabbing.
- e. Transportation
  - a. Always carry the bassoon with two hands, one on the boot joint and one on the long joint as tenons can be loose.
  - b. Never walk around with the bocal on the instrument- always take it off and carry it in the bell.
  - c. Don't leave the instrument lying across a chair. Put it away, in a safe corner, or bassoon stand.

## 11. Finding a private teacher

- a. There are several fundamental techniques of bassoon playing that can be confusing to young players without individual attention, and a good private teacher from the start can make a huge difference in a student's success and development on the instrument.
- b. If it is feasible for your program, reach out to local university students to come give workshops. Otherwise, reach out to these same institutions or local orchestras for recommendations on private teachers.
- c. What if you have no luck or there is no one available at a rate that the student can afford?
  - a. Great online resource: [www.musicandthebassoon.org](http://www.musicandthebassoon.org)