

# The Clarinet

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# Pedagogy Corner

by Phillip O. Paglialonga

## SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE IS OFTEN A RESULT OF GOOD STRATEGY

One of my passions away from the clarinet is playing golf. Though I love playing golf and do it often, I am not the best golfer. This past summer with fewer concerts happening and less travel, I was able to play golf most days of the week. As I began playing more regularly, I found myself wanting to improve faster to keep up with a couple of friends I play with. One of my friends in particular plays similarly to me in most ways; he hits the ball comparably and putts with about the same level of skill. The big difference between our games, however, is that he usually scores four or five strokes better than I do.

It did not take long for me to realize that my friend has better “course management” than I do. That is to say, his strategy and decision making usually lead to a better final score. He is a self-proclaimed “numbers guy” and has a high level position at a major bank. Once I asked him if he would like me to take the flag stick out while he was putting, or if he would prefer I left it in the hole. He quickly responded that a recent study showed that 15% more putts end up in the hole when the flagpole is left in. The statistics drive my friend’s thinking, and it works well for him.

As I worked to improve my course management this summer I slowly found my final scores dropping. I began to think about the ways my approach to clarinet playing helps me to play at a high level, and how I might make adaptations to my clarinet playing and teaching using the

same approach I had used to improve my golf game.

Below I have outlined this approach and hope that you will find it a useful tool to improve your musicianship. No strategies are perfect, and always searching for a more effective path is an essential ingredient, but these will help get you thinking about some concrete ways you can improve your approach.

### *Always play with a clear musical intention.*

This simple directive can fundamentally change how you communicate through music. When I play golf it is essential that I envision the exact flight of the ball, where it will land and where it will then roll before I even begin my swing. Having a specific result in mind helps me ensure a mental error will not cause a poor shot.

If you are a teacher, next time your student plays a phrase, stop them and ask them simply what they did that was musical in that phrase. The response is often quite shocking. Even many advanced students will generally look at you blankly, or merely point out a dynamic change printed on the page. If you cannot articulate what you are trying to do musically, the chances of your musical idea being effectively communicated to the listener are slim to none.

The most important thing is that you have some sort of musical idea you are trying to convey and that the idea has some connection to what is happening musically. I always try to have a couple of concrete musical ideas to convey. It can be simple or more nuanced, and perhaps

difficult to put into words, but there needs to be a clear intention. “In this phrase I am trying to lead to the dissonant tone, increase the weight of the sound in that note, and then release the tension as it resolves, ending with a gentle release.”

In my lessons with Larry Combs I would often ask him what he thought of his current program with the Chicago Symphony. I distinctly remember him saying once that the conductor had “a firm grasp on the obvious.” This was a truly biting criticism from Combs, who was never anything but a total gentleman when serving as principal clarinetist of the Chicago Symphony.

Decide exactly what you want to say musically, whether or not it is printed on the page, before you even lift your clarinet to play.

### *When confronted by a musical decision, try to follow good practice.*

Oftentimes when playing golf you are presented with a choice of two ways to approach a particular hole. Perhaps the hole is 350 yards away and you can decide how much of that distance you want to cover in each of your two shots. One option would be to hit 250 yards on your first shot, which would leave you with 100 yards on the second shot. Alternatively, you could try to hit your first shot 200 yards, which would leave 150 yards to the hole. When you consider these two options, at first, you think it really does not matter which approach you take, but when you remember that there is a creek about 90 yards in front of the green, that calculation changes a bit. Choosing the first strategy

risks hitting your ball into the water if you hit it slightly too far, but if you take the second option that risk is minimized.

Any time I am confronted with a musical decision, I try to take the route that more often leads to a favorable outcome, or somehow makes playing a passage easier. Of course, sometimes you are very committed to a particular musical effect that is somewhat more difficult, and that is fine. Too often, though, we do not take the time to think about which path would be the better choice. I call the better choice “good practice” because it is always good to take the easier route when you can.

Maybe a piece begins marked *piano* with a melody that soars up into the altissimo range. One option would be to try to play quite soft with a really sweet sound. Another option might be to play a bit more on the loud side of *piano* and not to play at our lower limit. At first glance either option could work, but when you realize the same material comes back later marked *pianissimo*, *piu dolce* it becomes clear it would be best to not play the initial passage too soft.

In many cases good practice is to do the opposite of whatever is coming up later. If you are starting a *crescendo*, it is always a good idea to do a slight *diminuendo*, the opposite of what is about to happen, just before you start your *crescendo*. Likewise, if you want a final section to sound quite fast, it would be best to play the section immediately preceding it a bit on the slow side.

*Identify your tendency and try to play against it.*

This suggestion seems obvious, but I find very few people are willing to fully play against their negative tendencies. If my golf ball tends to go to the right it makes absolutely no sense to aim directly at my target. Instead I should try to aim to the left of my target so that the potential for error is reduced.

Do you tend to play with a lot of tension? Instead of trying to play in a neutral position, try to play in a way that is too relaxed. Do you tend to play sharp? Practice landing flat on notes you normally play sharp.

This idea is so simple that when I point it out to people they nod, as if to

say, “Of course, I do that all the time.”

The truth of the matter is that most people are unwilling to go too far in the opposite direction. If you consistently land on a note sharp and in your practice you never find yourself over compensating and playing flat, you are not making a big enough correction.

*Try to find a solution in your fingers first.*

On the golf course you quickly realize you can change the distance a shot goes by taking less than a full shot. I might hit my 7-iron 150 yards when using a full swing, and my 5-iron 150 yards when using a  $\frac{3}{4}$  swing. The result is the same, so you might say it should make little difference which club I use. The problem is trying to finesse a shot exactly the same each time is difficult.

On the clarinet the corollary is to avoid accomplishing everything you want to do in your voicing. Sure, you can voice a note lower, but finding it exactly in the right place is difficult to do under pressure. If there is a way you can at least get the pitch closer in your fingers, you will not have to change as much in your tongue and embouchure position. Usually this means you might have to experiment with depressing an extra finger or key to get your desired result. Once you figure out exactly which extra key to add you simply have to practice using that finger to get the desired intonation.

Of course, you cannot always find the right solution merely through changing your fingering. Sometimes you might have to look for a solution in some other place. The Andante movement in Brahms's third symphony presents a good example. The first passage ends on a clarion D which tends to be quite sharp on most instruments. Unfortunately, when you play this note you cannot make any changes to the fingering that will correct the pitch. In this case it is helpful to remember that if you play normally and move the clarinet angle too far out the pitch lowers slightly (and conversely, when you move the clarinet angle too close to your body it raises). Knowing this, I try to play this passage sitting normally and opening my clarinet angle 10-15° on that final note so that it speaks in tune.

You do not have to be taught all of these little things you might try. Keep track

of what happens when you do different things. Notice that when you play with the bell pointed into your knees the pitch lowers on your long B and C, but it does not change most of the notes higher than that in a significant way. Notice that when you take in a breath and immediately play, the note tends to come out sharp and then as you run out of breath the pitch goes flat. Practice trying to correct the pitch of a sharp tone by holding your breath for a few seconds before exhaling. How many seconds do you have to hold your breath for that normally sharp note to speak exactly in tune?

*Spend your practice time only on the things you cannot do.*

Finally, spend your practice time working on the things you cannot already do. It is an inefficient use of time for me to spend all of my practice time hitting long drives on the driving range when my putting is the weakest aspect of my golf game.

When someone walks by your practice room they should not hear you at your best! Instead they should hear some pretty awful things happening as you work to correct the biggest issues in your playing.

Many people overlook what appear to be simple and obvious strategies because they believe that they already play with the best approach. The truth is that nobody can ever say their approach is perfect or that making different choices will not lead to better results. Take the time to evaluate what you are doing and be sure that your strategy leaves you with the best possible chance of success. ♦

## ABOUT THE WRITER



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