# The Clarinet

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# Pedagogy Corner

*by Phillip O. Paglialonga*

## WAYS TO MITIGATE BITING

When I was young, I distinctly remember band directors repeatedly instructing me "not to bite," and if I am honest, I really had no idea what that meant or what I should be doing. None of my clarinet teachers ever gave me the same instruction, and I was in graduate school before I even knew exactly what biting was and was not.

Biting, quite simply, happens when the jaw closes on the reed, causing the reed's vibrations to be stifled. When I was young, I think I was always somewhat confused because you have to close your jaw to some degree to play the clarinet. To be fair, the clarinet embouchure is, in fact, a controlled bite.

Reflecting back on my lessons from my youth I can now see that my teachers were trying to address biting, but it took me a long time to connect what they were doing to the issue. I distinctly remember a lesson I had with Mitchell Lurie when I was in high school where he walked over to the wall and told me to imagine that he punched a hole in it and then inserted the clarinet mouthpiece into that opening. After the lesson I wrote down exactly what he told me in my notebook and put a big question mark next to it. What on earth did he mean? Why would such a kind and gentle man even want to punch the wall?

Reflecting back on what he said now, I see how wonderful an illustration this is for the ideal clarinet embouchure. What he was saying was that the lips should form around the musculature of the face, and that this formation simply creates an aperture for the clarinet mouthpiece. While the clarinet is played, that aperture should not close. The embouchure, in fact, functions without the clarinet mouthpiece at all. That is to say, you should be able to form an embouchure without the mouthpiece in your mouth and all the ways the embouchure can flex should be possible without the clarinet in the mouth.

### EXERCISE 1: FORMING THE EMBOUCHURE WITHOUT THE CLARINET

One of the simplest things you can practice is forming a clarinet embouchure without the clarinet mouthpiece in your mouth. If this is difficult or feels strange you are likely forming the embouchure around the mouthpiece. After forming the embouchure independent of the mouthpiece, hold it, and then make sure the lips are held taut against the face. You can check this by gently poking your embouchure with your index finger and noticing where the lips are held loosely.

On the most fundamental level the clarinet is an extension of your body. The clarinet works as a sort of amplifier for the musical ideas within you, and consequently, the embouchure forms around the face and then the clarinet is inserted into that formation.

As simple as this exercise seems, it raises an important question: *What causes us to bite?* One possible reason we bite is to secure the clarinet within our mouth so that it does not move around as we play. The best way to experience this is this next simple exercise.

Fig. 1: Practice balancing the clarinet while only allowing the right-hand thumb and top teeth to contact the instrument.

Fig. 2: Another way to practice securing the clarinet against the top teeth is to practice with the bell held firmly against a wall. Play normally but push the bell up into the wall and top teeth.

Fig. 3: Push the mouthpiece as far to one side of the mouth as possible, then practice playing with your normal full sound.

## EXERCISE 2: BALANCING THE CLARINET[1]

While holding the clarinet only with the right thumb at the thumbrest, place the mouthpiece against the top teeth like you are going to play, but do not allow the lips to contact the mouthpiece (*Fig. 1*). You should be holding the clarinet only with the right thumb and the top teeth. The right hand thumb pushes the clarinet gently into the top teeth and secures the instrument. While balancing the clarinet in this position do you feel the strong urge to close your mouth around the mouthpiece? If so, that is biting for security. When the clarinet is unstable and not balanced against the top teeth it moves around and the only way to stabilize it is to grip the mouthpiece by closing the jaw. Practice holding the clarinet in this way and finding where it balances naturally, so you no longer feel the need to close the bite on the reed to stabilize the instrument. While doing this, feel the way you gently direct the clarinet mouthpiece up into the top teeth. When playing, try to direct the clarinet mouthpiece up into the teeth in this direction just a touch stronger to make sure the instrument stays pinned in place. If you notice the resulting sound is quite a bit louder than when you normally play, that is a good sign. This shows that you are used to biting on the reed and now that the reed is free to vibrate, the result is more sound.

I teach my students to always secure the clarinet up into the teeth in this manner, but when playing something incredibly sensitive or delicate to push the mouthpiece even more strongly up into the top teeth. Doing so helps guarantee the maximum efficiency in the vibrations of the reed, allowing maximum control.

## EXERCISE 3: MAINTAINING THE APERTURE

When playing the clarinet it is important that you consciously maintain the aperture, or opening, created by the embouchure. The jaw is extremely strong and exercised constantly throughout the day as you talk and eat. This strength is often underestimated, leading to unintentional excess jaw pressure while playing.

To illustrate how to maintain the aperture, form an embouchure without the clarinet again. This time, take your hand and gently try to push your bottom jaw closed. While doing this, simply tell yourself to keep your aperture the same. Notice that as you push at your chin to close your jaw you are able to resist with a minimal amount of effort. Do note that often when first doing this people overestimate the amount of strength it will take to resist closing the jaw, which in turn creates tension. Consequently, I always try to stay as relaxed as possible while holding the jaw open. When playing you must consciously tell yourself to resist closing in the exact same manner.

## EXERCISE 4: HOW MUCH SHOULD I OPEN MY JAW WHEN PLAYING?

Though this topic does not directly relate to biting, it inevitably comes up when working on how to maintain the size of the aperture. To determine the ideal opening of the jaw (which, of course, helps determine the space inside the mouth) it is important to remember that sound waves not only travel forward away from you, but also backwards into your mouth. In order to achieve the most resonant sound possible, the amount of space between the top and bottom teeth must be optimized.

The easiest way to discover the ideal opening of the jaw when playing is to again form an embouchure without the mouthpiece inserted. Continue to hold the embouchure as if you are playing, and lightly tap the aperture with your fingers as if you are quickly giving yourself a "high-five." Notice the resulting sound created by tapping against the aperture. If you do not hear a sound try opening the jaw a very small amount while continuously tapping and notice if this allows you to hear a popping sound.

I always recommend starting with the aperture you usually play with, then gradually opening the jaw to see if the resultant popping sound is strengthened. Be sure to hold the embouchure as if playing, and try to stay as close to your natural playing position as possible. The goal is to find the opening that creates the most resonant popping sound; this aperture will also be ideal for playing the clarinet.

When returning to normal playing, try to hold your jaw open the exact same amount as when doing this exercise. Be mindful in doing this that you do not change the formation of the embouchure in any way. That is to say, the only variable should be how much you open your jaw. When doing this if you find yourself squeaking or no longer producing a sound, you are likely changing something other than the space between your top and bottom teeth. When you play, if you notice the sound is both louder and fuller you are likely in a more optimal position.

Having done this exercise many times, I am now convinced that there are multiple "sweet spots" that yield a loud popping sound when doing this exercise. It is important to find the opening closest to the natural aperture so that it is possible to play comfortably while holding the jaw in that position. Be mindful when changing the aperture to maintain your normal tongue position. To achieve this, it might be advantageous to think about slightly raising your tongue to counteract any drop that opening the aperture may cause.

### EXERCISE 5: FINDING MORE RESONANCE THROUGH EFFICIENCY

After spending time working on the exercises outlined above, I often will have a student play with the clarinet mouthpiece held off to the side to hear exactly how the reed is vibrating. Simply play normally, but push the mouthpiece as far to one side of the mouth as possible (*Fig. 3*). Try to play as you usually do and simply notice how full or thin the sound is. If the sound is stifled, it is a sign that you are biting up on the reed. Also repeat this same exercise with the mouthpiece pushed to the opposite side of the mouth. Try to get the same full, resonant sound while playing off to the side as when you play normally. Once you get the sound full while the mouthpiece is placed off to each side, play normally and notice how much more resonant your tone becomes.

Mitigating biting is one of the most important things to address in order to improve sound production. Though I have provided numerous suggestions in order to address excessive biting I have not made any suggestions involving the engagement of the embouchure using the lips. After mastering the exercises I outline in this article, I would suggest learning about how the embouchure can be used to further reduce biting through use of the corners of the embouchure and the upper lip.

Biting is never something that is totally alleviated, or fully mastered. Instead, it is something that must be constantly addressed through continual practice and increased understanding of the mechanics of the instrument. Using the ideas and exercises I have presented in this article, I hope that over time you will find your sound becoming both more resonant and easier to produce. ❖



## ENDNOTES

1 This exercise is really geared for those people using a single lip embouchure. If you play with a double lip embouchure, anchoring the clarinet mouthpiece this way will obviously not work. Many people using a double lip embouchure will often find another way to anchor the instrument, such as bracing the bell in the knees.

## ABOUT THE WRITER

*Phillip O. Paglialonga is associate professor of clarinet at the University of North Texas and pedagogy coordinator for the International Clarinet Association. His book,* Squeak Big: Practical Fundamentals for the Successful Clarinetist, *has garnered significant praise from leading clarinetists around the world. More information about him is available online at www.SqueakBig.com.*