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Crossing the Break

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Every clarinetist and beginning band director can vividly remember the day they first “crossed the break”. For many, it was a traumatic experience and not something they look back upon fondly; however, more troubling is the lingering impact this day will have on a person’s clarinet playing.

Before I begin to discuss how to overcome this psychological hurdle, let us first explore some of the reasons this “crossing” was not a pleasant one. For starters, on that day you were probably using an abysmal reed that was ill-equipped to do anything but contribute to the trash pile. Your instrument was probably not sealing very well, as it was probably a poorly designed beginning instrument. Furthermore, your embouchure was likely not well formed, nor was your air stream functioning at a very high level. On top of this, add the fact that you may not have even been using the correct fingering or even completely covering the tone holes. Why on earth are we surprised that it was difficult to play in the clarion register? Even as a professional clarinetist, I cannot guarantee a note will speak with any of those factors working against me, let alone multiple of those issues present.

So before going any further, the first realization is that you do not have the problems that you once had, but the emotional baggage is still there. Start by accepting this fact and assuring yourself that crossing the break is not that big of a deal (or at least it should not be).

Unlike many wind instruments, the clarinet does not require any conscious change in the way you blow or form your embouchure for different pitches.¹ Clarinetists, for the most part, blow and move their fingers. You can prove this to yourself by positioning the mouthpiece upside down and blowing while holding only the barrel or bell and allowing a friend to finger the instrument for you. In this simple exercise you will quickly realize that every note comes out just fine, despite the fact that you are completely unaware which note your friend decides to play.

When playing, the biggest issue is that you feel a different amount of resistance for each note. Generally speaking, when you have a lot of fingers down you feel a greater amount of resistance than when you have fewer fingers

down. Additionally, when you add the register key to cross into the clarion register the resistance you feel increases. If you do not anticipate this change, as you add the register key often the air and embouchure will dramatically change, and tension will increase dramatically.

In his book, *Clarinetist’s Compendium*, legendary clarinetist Daniel Bonade provides a wonderful exercise to work on freeing the higher register and improving the flexibility of the sound.²

To attain a great flexibility in contrast of dynamics I recommend this very good exercise:



Play the first note (G) very loud (watching that the quality of tone remains nice) and, without any preparation of embouchure, slur quickly to the upper note (B) as pianissimo as possible—without any interruption of the slur...

Though Bonade is using this exercise to increase the flexibility of the tone, it can also be used to find a more relaxed, homogenous sound when moving into the clarion register.

For beginning and intermediate students, I would simplify this exercise even further by only depressing the register key (i.e. low G to clarion D). I would make sure to also repeatedly tell them that only two things should change as you move to the higher note: 1. the air will stay in the same focused stream but will slow down to make it quite soft and 2. the thumb will gently roll up and touch the register key. The position of the tongue and embouchure when crossing into the clarion register should not change at all. No visible movement, aside from the thumb depressing the register key, should be seen.

When working with beginning students it is usually best to start this exercise with a low Bb, since this combination will have the most equal pair of resistance. I usually will

Crossing the Break

have them hold the low note at least four slow beats with a big sound before moving up to the clarion register. Then, I will slowly ask them to move down an F-major scale (i.e. Bb, A, G and F) trying to keep the two notes in the most extreme dynamic contrast as possible.

Though I routinely suggest this exercise for young beginners, I also will suggest this exact same exercise to advanced graduate students. The problems are the same, and it works equally well to improve the quality of sound.

With more advanced students seeking to further homogenize the tone between the chalumeau and clarion registers, I like to refer to another very old exercise from the French school.

Perform the simple exercise (below), slowly, with a nice full, forte sound and strive for a totally homogenous tone between the two notes. In order to achieve this, strive for more resonance in the less resonant tone and try to avoid reducing the amount of resonance in the note with the fuller sound.

I usually have students practice this simple exercise by alternating all throat tone notes with a B, and then with a clarion C (i.e. G-B, G#-B, A-B, A#-B; G-C, G#-C, A-C, and A#-C). Though simple, this exercise is incredibly exhausting if done correctly. I generally suggest adding

this simple exercise to a more advanced performer's daily practice routine and find within or week or two the quality of sound between the chalumeau and clarion registers matches much better. I also find this exercise can help increase the amount of resonance in the throat tones so those notes sound full and project just as easily as the other tones on the instrument.

Though "crossing the break" is something we generally associate with beginning players, it is an issue that even the most seasoned professional is constantly thinking about and working on. The more one concentrates on producing an even sound that does not change in either quality or volume, the easier one's musical ideas will come across to the listener.

1. I generally like to tell students that no conscious manipulation is required at all at least until you reach the first high D above the staff. As you go higher than that, I acknowledge that some small manipulation is required, but it is such a small amount it is often difficult to quantify and usually not enough to think about too much.

2. This book is available for free online from the Conn-Selmer company, and is a wonderful resource for clarinetists at all levels from beginners to professionals.



Phillip O. Paglialonga currently serves as Associate Professor of Clarinet at the University of North Texas. For the last decade he toured extensively as a member of the PEN Trio, performing throughout the United States and in more than a dozen countries around the world. His book *Squeak Big: Practical Fundamentals for the Successful Clarinetist* has garnered significant praise from leading clarinetists including prominent members of the orchestras in Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Seattle, as well as stellar reviews in several major publications. Dr. Paglialonga is an artist for both Buffet Crampon and Gonzalez Reeds. More information about Dr. Paglialonga is available online at www.SqueakBig.com.