

# The Clarinet

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## JOHN BRUCE YEH



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# Pedagogy Corner

by Phillip O. Paglialonga

## DEVELOPING ARTISTRY

**R**ecently, I had an interesting conversation with a student who had just finished listening to one of the Robert Marcellus master classes found in the Northwestern University archive. She was struck by the fact that Marcellus considered the art of phrasing to be a fundamental skill alongside discussions about the formation of the embouchure, oral cavity and so forth. She went on to tell me that she had worked with many teachers who routinely talked about the importance of mastering fundamentals, but never considered phrasing to be a fundamental skill.

To me, the point of clarinet pedagogy is to help people learn how to make music. This certainly includes understanding the mechanics of the instrument itself, but too often there is a disconnect between that pursuit and the artistic aspect of being a musician. Personally, I love that Marcellus spoke of phrasing as a basic skill one must develop. Taking this further, we can identify skills and practices that can help us each to grow as artists.

Sometimes I get the impression that clarinetists are a bit uncomfortable when we label ourselves “artists,” and would much prefer just being a clarinetist or musician. Indeed, I think that this feeling is where we begin to limit ourselves and what we are able to do musically.

For my first “Pedagogy Corner,” I thought that it would be good to begin with an article on how we can each grow artistically, sharing some ways I encourage my own students in the hope that you too may find some of these ideas helpful. I also reached out to several clarinetists who inspire my own artistry. I simply asked

them to share some of their ideas and suggestions for how we could each become better artists.

For me, any conversation about what it means to be an artist, what art is, or how to grow artistically has to begin somewhat philosophically. In this way our pursuit is really no different than that of a painter, a dancer or a poet. Our medium is certainly different, but the underlying artistic intention is very much the same.

As we begin to consider our aims as artists, I would like to share with you excerpts from a letter visual artists Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote to the art editor of *The New York Times* in 1943:

We feel that our pictures demonstrate our aesthetic beliefs, some of which we, therefore, list:

- 1 To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.
- 2 This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.
- 3 It is our functions [sic] as artists to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way.
- 4 We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. ...
- 5 It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academicism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. ...

This succinct statement does a good job of encapsulating the goals of any great artist, and I think will help frame my other suggestions.

### *To us art is an adventure...*

The first step in growing as an artist is leaping out into the unknown. Simply embrace the adventure and open yourself to artistic possibilities.

How do you do this?

- Engage with other forms of art. Go to an art exhibit. Attend a play. Read a great novel.
- Try to experience forms of artistic expression that are outside of your norm.
- Stimulate your artistic thinking. Read a book that challenges you as an artist. Have a conversation with a friend about art.
- Explore other ways to express yourself. Try learning how to draw or paint. Play around with a medium that is completely foreign to you.

### *This world of the imagination is fancy-free...*

Look for ways to expand your imagination and experience things in a new way. One simple way to do this is to gather as many recordings you can find of a piece. Pick a phrase and listen to the first recording, then try to play it exactly the same way yourself, no matter what you think of it. Replicate what you heard in every respect (tone, pitch, shape, etc.). Then, listen to the second recording and do the same thing. I like this simple exercise because it helps me see other possibilities. I also like that it challenges me to make new sounds that I may not have considered before. Usually

when I do this I find it is easy to emulate my favorite recording, but extremely difficult to copy those that I do not like.

When I was studying with Mitchell Lurie, he encouraged me to always have multiple possible ways of performing a phrase. Try playing a phrase and then radically reconsidering it, making it as musically distinct as possible. I like to have at least two, if not three different versions that I have considered in my practice. I have found that coming up with these alternate versions helps bring more musical maturity and depth to my final product. (I also think, and I'm sure Lurie would have agreed with me, that this skill is an extremely important one to have when playing for a conductor who may not be fully convinced of your initial presentation. Having a second concept to fall back on is always a good thing!)

*It is our functions [sic] as artists to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way...*

To be a true artist you have to find a way to make others see the world through your eyes, to convince the audience that your way is the only way to view it.

I really enjoy listening to old recordings, in large part because I think there is often such a strong point of view. When I hear Casals or Heifetz, I immediately recognize their playing. Their music making is so distinctive and immediately personal. Unfortunately, I think today in our quest for perfection we are losing this individuality. Having said that, I believe that even in situations where we must play inside a tightly confined box we should challenge ourselves to find ways to be unique and to do something special.

To be a great artist you must be different than everyone else. There is no escaping this. If you do things exactly like those around you, by definition you will be ordinary. Have the courage to find your own voice. Think about those values that are universal and meet those standards, but also find subtle things you can do to make your music special. There are many great players in the world, so to be competitive for opportunities, you must offer something that is both unique and exceptional. Everyone should play in tune and with accurate rhythm, but doing

only those things will not allow you to be an artist.

*We favor the simple expression of the complex thought...*

Look for ways to say more with less. To achieve this, you almost always have to take a step back to consider what exactly you are trying to say and then figure out how you might be more concise. Taking a moment to think about what you are trying to convey musically can help bring clarity to your finished product.

Look at the structure of the piece and be sure that every aspect of your interpretation contributes to your overall narrative. I often explain this to my students as the detective trying to understand what happened when arriving at a crime scene. If every person the detective speaks with gives a similar account the detective walks away convinced about what occurred. The problem is when the accounts do not agree, which leaves the detective skeptical. Musically, I think we must be sure that our overall intention is clear and that all of our actions support our larger musical goals.

*It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted...*

Clarinet players are guilty of falling into this trap far too often. I think this stems from our experiences playing in larger ensembles where we have little to no input in programming decisions. Having said that, even in those situations I still believe that we must have some knowledge about the overall intended statement of the music we present.

In recent years I have been incredibly impressed by so many of the performances I have seen that achieved this artistic goal. Oftentimes the performances that leave me thinking about a particular idea or commonality help me process what I heard.

Sometimes these overarching statements are quite strong and moving, while other times they are more subtle and academic. A few years ago I was fortunate enough to do a series of performances of James Whitbourn's *Annelies* in both the United States and Israel. The work is a musical setting of *The Diary of Anne Frank* for soprano, choir, violin, cello, clarinet and piano. It was impossible to perform a work like that without considering the

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gravity of the subject matter. I had read Anne Frank's diary when I was in school, and I found it depressing, but was never moved like I was playing this piece. The sounds happening around me led me to consider this now familiar story in ways I never had previously. It was tremendously moving and certainly an experience I will never forget.

While my performance of *Annelies* was certainly a powerful experience, it is not one I would want to repeat every week for the rest of my career. Frankly, I'm not sure I could emotionally handle repeating that piece every week for any extended period of time. So, while I think there is a place for this type of art, I also think there is a place for other types of artistic experiences.

Experiencing the performing arts in person is probably the only way to fully understand what is possible, and for this reason is an essential part of any artistic growth.

We each endeavor to better understand how we can communicate more effectively with the listener to share our humanity. This pursuit will never end, but by constantly looking for ways to grow we unlock our potential as artists.

### How can we become better artists?

To be yourself even if as a young student you copy your teacher or some other model. My generation had no internet or YouTube, we had only a few good LPs, radio and sometimes television, so we did not copy too many bad examples. To be sincere and honest with the composers that we play, respecting exactly the indications that they write and performing through the prism of our personality. Practice, and practice so with the repetition you discover not just the music that you play, but also yourself.

– Philippe Cupe, France



One of the key things for me is to attend as many concerts as possible, and listen widely, go to lots of unusual events you wouldn't typically attend. Also be bold and actively reach out to people you admire – whether it's clarinetists or other instrumentalists, composers or authors – and have a chat. Sometimes just to talk with inspiring people refreshes your creativity. If you feel stuck, or like you've reached an end goal, break down that wall and keep searching, questioning, remain curious throughout your life.

– Anna Hashimoto, United Kingdom



Listen carefully to artistic performers, great vocalists and string players, and really great clarinet players. My mentor Harold Wright provides an excellent aural model of true artistry on the clarinet, for example. Really notice how these communicators are able to shape, inflect, drive, and color a phrase, a note, or a whole song, and vividly tell a story as a result. Remember what that sounds like. Have a very vocal concept in mind first, and always produce a singing sound on the clarinet. Master all the challenges our instrument presents. The system of tone production and articulation are all invisible, inside the mouth, so use your ears and always demand the result you want to hear. Cultivate a vocal diminuendo and vocal articulation. It's all about the "song and the wind," as my former colleague Arnold Jacobs always said.

– John Bruce Yeh, USA



Primary motivators – anything artistic – are helpful in keeping the mind focused on achieving the musical results you want, and can be as simple as ordering/hearing a beautiful tone, or as complex as the phrase you spent time carefully crafting. In other words, go for what you want and keep the "don'ts" (negatives) out of your mind. Dedicate yourself to hearing these qualities as you play, providing the necessary wind to achieve the song you hear. The song is the result of what you want to hear, and it guides you on a lyrical path. Away from the clarinet, spend time vocalizing the music that you're working on, and commit yourself to singing with artistic intent, linking musical ideas one to another. Think of that singing quality and character when you pick up the clarinet to play.

– Monica Kaenzig, USA



### SUGGESTED READING

Adolphe, Bruce. *The Mind's Ear: Exercises for Improving the Musical Imagination for Performers, Composers, and Listeners*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Edwards, Betty. *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: A Course in Enhancing Creativity and Artistic Confidence*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1989.

Rothko, Mark, and Miguel López-Remiro. *Writings on Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. ♦

### ABOUT THE WRITER



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