

A Bassoonist's Hierarchy By Michael Burns



Above is a graphic representation of what I describe as my hierarchy for the bassoon. This indicates some of my priorities on the instrument. I believe that we have to remember that first and foremost we are doing this to make music—presumably that is what drew us to this activity in the first place as it sure isn't for the fame and fortune!

The top level, therefore, is that of the **Musician**. All of our bassoon playing and practicing activities should be with the end goal of producing the best musical product. Some universal (i.e. non instrument-specific) elements that exist at this level are: rhythm, intonation, 'musicality,' direction, style, character, making the music sing or dance, etc.

Level two is **Wind Player**. We produce all of the sounds on our instrument of choice by blowing into it. With the exception of a small handful of contemporary pieces which incorporate key clicks and the like, all of our repertoire relies on the breathing mechanism to make it sound and bring it to life. To demonstrate this, play the Mozart bassoon concerto (or any other 'standard' repertoire piece) without blowing into the bassoon. Not very exciting is it?

The third and lowest level of **Bassoonist** is where we actually spend the most time. It is at this level where we deal with the nuts and bolts of being a bassoonist: fingerings (including bassoon-specific elements like half-holes, flicking, etc.), embouchure, hand position, posture, voicing, etc. General elements of bassooning are of course essential to our ability to make music but they are the means to an end and not an ends in themselves. A friend and colleague of mine used to use an analogy when talking with students about the need to practice scales and arpeggios. He would refer to them as the musician's tools

of the trade. No carpenter would show up to build a house without his hammer and nails, saws, etc. His point was that no musician should show up to an ensemble rehearsal without having brought their own tools—the skills of how to play scales and arpeggios that they have practiced individually. In my opinion, the level three bassoon elements serve a similar purpose. They are the building blocks that allow us to make music on the bassoon. Therefore we MUST learn all of the necessary elements contained on level three, but then we have to use those in our quest to be a musician and to make music on our wind instrument. I strongly advocate and teach that students learn a full regimen of scales, arpeggios, 7th chords, etudes, etc. I also teach a variety of practice techniques aimed at improving their level three bassoon skills. All too frequently I still find students so embroiled in working on the correct fingerings for a passage (level three) that they forget to blow properly—therefore compromising level two and further, not thinking of their phrasing, direction and musicality therefore compromising level one. I suggest that when I think the most of the musical end product that technical issues often seem to diminish and the musical product is indeed improved.

Music, to me, is one of the most incredible forms of non-verbal communication. There are pieces of music that when played well always elicit a direct physical response in me: a shiver of the spine, a smile, sometimes a tear. I use this hierarchy to help remind myself and my students of the need to always make music and to make it ‘say’ something, not to just lose oneself in the technique. Music is always more than just flapping our fingers in a meaningless series of patterns.

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