

Some Thoughts on Bassoon Articulation

One of the problems with teaching and learning articulation on the bassoon has always been that the teacher cannot see what the student is doing and the student in turn cannot see what the teacher is doing inside the mouth while tonguing. Therefore we rely on verbal descriptions and any external clues we might notice and, of course, with the resulting sound to try and teach and learn tonguing. I am lucky enough to have Ear Nose and Throat surgeon and IDRS-list member **Karol Wolicki** as a bassoon student and he and I have done some research which videos the inside of the mouth while playing. I therefore have video of some of my own tonguing procedure on bassoon. Karol gave a presentation showing this at the IDRS 2003 conference in Greensboro. With the ability to video inside the mouth we may be able to actually show some of the processes involved and learn what is correct and what not. I hope that this will lead to clearer and more efficient teaching in this important area to bassoon playing.

I am also lucky to have a rapid single-tongue and in fact don't double tongue and can still play Beethoven 4, Marriage of Figaro, etc. at a pretty reasonable pace. While this is unusual it is not unheard of as one of my former teachers, Sherman Walt was the same way and I have heard that David McGill may also do this although I don't know if that is correct. I have also had some success in improving the speed of some of my students' single tongue speed so I hope that this helps. Here are some suggestions for single tonguing:

1. Make sure that the same part of the tongue is always contacting the same part of the reed and that it is always traveling the same distance away from the reed and back again--in other words try to make it as machine-like in its precision as possible. You may need to turn your "mind's eye" inwards into your mouth to determine which part of the tongue is contacting which part of the reed but once you can "see" that and can produce a single good clear attack then try to ensure that it remains as consistent as possible when you add repetitions and increase speed, without varying the points of contact or the distance moved--this is actually for both slow and fast tonguing. It may be helpful (or even essential) in case of a problem (If it ain't broke don't fix it though.) to use the very tip of the tongue on the tip of the reed. Most individuals don't know where the real (Look at it!) tip is. [Most will indicate a point a millimeter or more behind the visual tip.] It's can be useful to tactilely "mark" the visual tip of the tongue using a screwdriver, sharp pencil point, a reed (or whatever). I personally tend to use just behind the tip of the tongue contacting a point on the reed on the lower corner of the tip opening on bottom blade of the reed.
2. Think of ALL tonguing as light and relaxed--DON'T try to tongue harder for loud passages, make the dynamic change with the airstream not the tongue. Also don't allow the tongue to tense up as you try to speed up!! This is common but counterproductive. The basic position of the tongue is on the reed. Don't push the tongue into the reed. Keep the minimum contact to keep air from leaking through the reed.
3. A standard practice technique is to start slowly and gradually increase speed and this is excellent. I suggest that you also try doing short bursts at speed and gradually increase the number of articulations in each burst e.g. 3 fast tongued notes, then 4, 5, etc. At all times trying to keep the throat and tongue as relaxed as possible.
4. If you can "speak" faster tonguing than you can play then it is not that your tongue cannot move quickly but rather that you are probably aiming for the incorrect target. When we speak a Ta Ta Ta articulation the tongue contacts the hard pallette usually just behind the top teeth close

to where the teeth meet the gums at the back. When you insert the reed it is lower and the point of contact we want is usually further back in the mouth. If the tongue is still aiming for the same point on the hard pallette it will hit the reed too soon and too hard which creates tension and slows us down. Try making a "false roof" where the point of contact on the reed (usually just below the tip on the lower blade) replaces the point of contact the tongue aims for. In order to do this you probably need to move the entire tongue a little down and back so that it still moves as freely and has the same type of arc of motion that used to take it to the hard pallette when there is no reed in the mouth now takes it to the reed. Also don't try to tongue with the entire tongue--it is pretty long and you really only need to use the front tip area. To give an analogy it is like the difference between just waving your fingers vs. waving your entire hand at the wrist vs. waving your arm at the elbow, at the shoulder, etc. The more you engage, the slower and more labored you become. We want to tongue with the smallest most mobile area near to the tip. I hope this makes sense--when I teach it to students I draw pictures or make 'hand puppets' with one hand being the tongue and the other the reed so that they can see what I am describing--then there is also the video to show them :-).

Actively only remove the tongue and when you do keep the tip of the tongue close to the reed. Then allow the tongue to return to the reed in the airstream. Don't actively move it back. This is advocating a tongue stop that is inaudible. The sound would be "TaaX" The X marks the site of the smallest letter "d" that you can imagine. If you can hear the "d" it is too hard. This is not a technique for sound followed by silence. It is only for continuous tonguing.

Try to say the famous "ta Dah!" as rapidly as possible. By rapidly I mean that you should make the two sounds as close together as possible. When it's easy and relaxed try doubling the pre-Dah - make three sounds. Gradually expand on that idea, increasing the number of pick ups to Dah.

1. There is a "bassoonistic" style of very short staccato where we do want the note stopped with the tongue--think the Sorcerer's Apprentice solos as an example. For this you should actually deliberately tongue with a syllable something similar to Tat.
2. However, very frequently students will use the tongue to stop ALL notes. This is not good and is incorrect technique. They need to learn to stop the longer notes with the airstream which also requires a balancing with the embouchure. As the airstream slows and stops the embouchure compensates to keep the pitch steady as otherwise the note wants to tend to sag flat in pitch. This has to be learned and practiced at first but soon becomes second nature.

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