

Little Steps to the Big Break

When clarinet students first join band, they enter a whole new world, one that is fresh, novel and fun. As the year progresses, certain aspects of the clarinet can become quite challenging. One of the more difficult areas is conquering the technique required to go over the break. Without proper guidance, many students become frustrated, dejected and may even quit. The following article will concentrate on this issue and suggest a systematic approach to introducing and mastering the break.

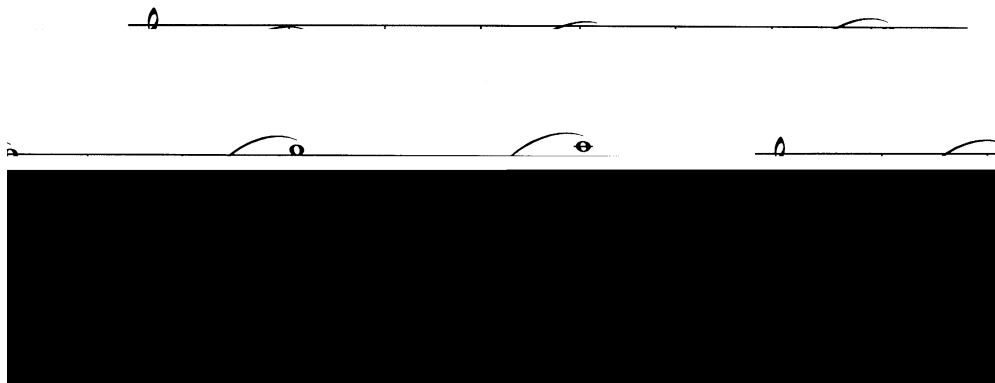
A couple of items must be addressed prior to introducing break exercises. First, students must have good hand position in order to create fluid technique. This implies relaxed hands with naturally curved fingers. Unfortunately, beginning students often play with caved-in knuckles. If this is the case, check placement of the weight on finger pads. When a finger covers a hole, the weight should be located at the front of the pad, closest to the tip of the finger. If the weight is transferred to the back of the finger pad, the likelihood of a caved-in knuckle is much greater. Encourage your students to focus on weight placement which will in turn keep their first knuckles curved.

Also be sure your student's middle knuckles of both hands gently point up toward their face, keeping palms parallel to the instrument. This should place hands in the proper position. The left hand index finger will wrap around the clarinet with the side of the finger making contact with both the G# and the A key. Hopefully, this position will reduce the tendency to "hop" on and off the A key. The middle knuckle of the right hand index finger will be very close to the lowest side key on the upper joint. This placement will allow the student to lean into the side key rather than changing the hand position to reach keys. If the student's knuckles are low and the hands are perpendicular to the clarinet, they will constantly move the hands in order to access certain keys. It is the job of the fingers to close holes and depress keys, not the hands.

Encourage your students to practice simple exercises slowly while maintaining good hand position. Practicing in front of a mirror will help achieve correct placement of the finger weight and proper position of the knuckles.

Second, students must be able to play register slurs and clarion notes prior to working on break exercises. If students are unfamiliar with high notes, register slurs are a wonderful introduction. Unlike the other woodwind instruments, the clarinet is built in 12ths. It is imperative for students to recognize and hear this interval since it is the natural over-blowing tendency of the instrument. Register slurs also help students see and understand the relationship between the notes and the fingerings.

Music example 1:



Begin with the following three register slurs: A to E, Bb to F and C to G. Since many students have difficulty producing the lowest and highest notes on the clarinet, these three mid-range register slurs are excellent starting points. Use a good strong air stream and visualize blowing through the low note to the top note. As students become more comfortable with these three slurs, systematically add the lower and higher slurs to their daily routine. If squeaking occurs on the lowest chalumeau notes, check that the right hand is completely covering the holes on the

eight. Once this feels secure, the student is ready to attempt to go back up to C. Most likely there will be a bump or a hesitation when playing the second C. This will improve as the student repeats the exercise and learns to move the four left hand fingers as a unit.

When the student is proficient at producing this leap over the break, it is time to concentrate on a different element: the left hand index finger. Since leaving the right hand down is now comfortable, the focus is placed on how the left hand index finger opens the A key. The new exercise will begin on C and go through throat tone A.

Music example 3:



Be sure the side of the middle knuckle of the left hand index finger _____ into the A key. Hopping will occur if the student tries to use the pad rather than the side of the finger. After playing this downward leap several times, the student is ready to go over the break back up to C. Be sure that the index finger leans off the A key down to the first hole and lands on the pad. The shape of the index finger should not change. Since this is a tricky movement, it will require repetition and lots of encouragement.

When this leap becomes manageable, it is time for a new focus: the left hand thumb. Double check that the left hand thumb is positioned at approximately a 40 degree angle or the 2:00 position on a clock. The final exercise will begin on C and go through throat tone Bb, similar to the other music examples. To play C, the pad of the thumb covers the hole while the tip presses open the register key. As the exercise moves to Bb, the tip of the thumb retains its position while the pad lifts off the hole. Make sure the student leads the lift with the large knuckle at the base of the hand; do not lead the lift with the thumb knuckle.

Music example 4:



It is essential to decide when to place the right hand down and when to pick it up. Many clarinetists move the hand down on G, the first throat tone. In some instances, hand coordination may be problematic since the hands move in opposite directions. If so, try placing the right hand down on A; this allows both hands to move in a downward motion. Either is acceptable. Be sure to apply the same decision to the descending form of the scale as well.

Creating smooth technique over the break is one of the largest obstacles for beginning and advanced clarinetists. Help younger students break down the concept into small bites of information. A methodical approach will help establish good habits and the result will be even technique through register changes on the clarinet. Best of luck and may all your reeds be good!

Patricia Pierce Card, Associate Professor of Clarinet and Assistant Chair, joined the Sam Houston State University faculty in 2001. Dr. Card has performed at the International Clarinet Association's *ClarinetFest* in 2008 (Kansas City) and 2004 (Washington D.C.) and has been a featured guest artist at several conventions including National Association of Teachers of Singing (Dallas), National Flute Association (San Diego), and Texas Music Educators Association (San Antonio). Prior to her appointment at SHSU, she was the Assistant Professor of Clarinet at Oklahoma City University and principal clarinet of the Oklahoma City Philharmonic Orchestra (1997 to 2001). She was an active musician and private teacher in her hometown of Richardson, Texas preceding the move to Oklahoma City.