

Teaching Clarinet Smarter: assignments that promote student progress and make teacher assessment easier

By Paula Corley

What is the best way to keep clarinet students engaged and moving forward regardless of the teaching situation? Provide a curriculum that facilitates *measurable progress*. Without face-to-face instruction and interaction with other musicians, students may be wondering “why am I practicing at all?” For teachers, music assessment can be challenging because music assignments sometimes have “more than one answer.” Here are some task-specific materials that provide an easy way to measure progress.

Finger Technique

Literally thousands of options exist for developing smooth and even finger technique. When choosing for your students remember that perceptible progress is the goal and the “less is more” rule applies. Choose materials that are slurred - completely free of articulations - that can be practiced in any major key signature. Having difficulty choosing just one? Pick several and rotate the exercises.

Here are my suggestions:

1. Extended Pattern from *Daily Workouts* available here as a digital download.

Inexperienced students often falter or stop completely when faced with rapid stepwise passages. The Extended Scale Pattern is the first step toward recognizing scale patterns within the music, regardless of the stated key signature. Non tonic-to-tonic patterns require players to concentrate carefully and will help develop listening skills. Play at a ‘comfortable’ tempo. Take breaths at the ends of phrases when needed.



2. Interrupted Pattern from *Carl Baermann Complete Method for Clarinet*

Carl Baermann left a wealth of study material for clarinetists and his teachings are still the standard. He wrote “the purpose of technical study is to enable the player to master...the facility of execution in every detail.” The interrupted pattern can be practiced any number of ways. For the developing player, all slurred, at a moderate tempo that facilitates an even, clean scale will work best. Practice all keys.



3. Finger Warm-up adapted from *Vade Mechum*

Paul Jean Jean's *Vade Mechum* has long been a staple in clarinet technique development. The first group of exercises from the book is designed to warm-up the fingers. These half-step and whole step "trills" require excellent hand position and minimal motion. If practiced diligently, fingers become more even and smooth. Isolating simple chromatic intervals also reinforces enharmonic recognition skills and alternate fingerings.

Part One: Pinkie Fingers Trill Practice (adapted from **Vade Mechum**.)

Start at a comfortable tempo and gradually increase.



Part Two: right hand trill practice

*Tip: Work to leave right hand pinkie down
(on the top lever key) when trilling to A \sharp .

The first staff shows a trill exercise in C major, starting on G4 and trilling to A4. The second staff is marked "*same" and shows a trill exercise in D major, starting on A4 and trilling to B4. The third staff is marked "Use alternate B \sharp (fork)" and shows a trill exercise in E major, starting on B4 and trilling to C5. The fourth staff is marked "Use alternate B \sharp (fork)" and shows a trill exercise in F major, starting on C5 and trilling to D5. The fifth staff shows a trill exercise in G major, starting on D5 and trilling to E5.

Part Three: left hand trill practice

The first staff shows a trill exercise in C major, starting on G3 and trilling to A3. The second staff shows a trill exercise in D major, starting on A3 and trilling to B3. The third staff shows a trill exercise in E major, starting on B3 and trilling to C4. The fourth staff shows a trill exercise in F major, starting on C4 and trilling to D4. The fifth staff is marked "Alternate G \flat /F \sharp : Thumb F with Trill keys 3 & 4." and shows a trill exercise in G major, starting on D4 and trilling to E4.

Part Four: throat tone trill practice

Alternate fingering for G \flat : thumb F + trill keys 3 & 4

Flip to F \sharp

Regular F \sharp fingering

Regular B \flat fingering

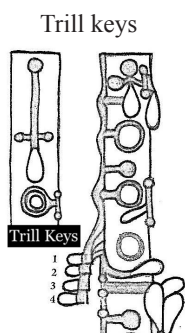
Regular B \flat or B \sharp Trill Fingering: A + 2nd Trill key

B \flat Trill fingering: A + 1st trill key

Regular B \flat fingering

B \flat Trill fingering: B \flat + 2nd trill key

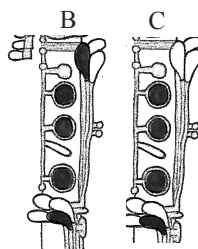
C Trill fingering: B \flat + 1st trill key OR B \flat + 1st & 2nd trill keys



Jean Jean suggested using a variation of the regular B \flat and C fingerings for trilling.

If trills require better tuning, experiment with a combination of fingers in the right hand instead of using the trill fingerings.

Adding left hand fingers may lower the pitch too much.



Squeaking? Notes won't speak? Make sure your left thumb covers the tone hole when pressing the register key.

Rhythm

4. Changing Subdivisions from *Daily Workouts* available here as a digital download.

Good rhythm or “sense of time” is arguably the most important aspect of any musical evaluation. With all other aspects being equal, the player with the best rhythm usually “wins.” Players must be able to perform accurate rhythmic subdivisions of 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8. They also must have the ability to shift between subdivisions without changing the tempo, often within a single measure or beat. Sound complicated? It doesn't have to be, if the task is presented in the right way.

- Transpose this into different keys and clefs. Works well for a variety of instruments.
- Vary tempos from Adagio to Allegro.

Rhythm and Articulation

5. Legato Subdivision Exercise



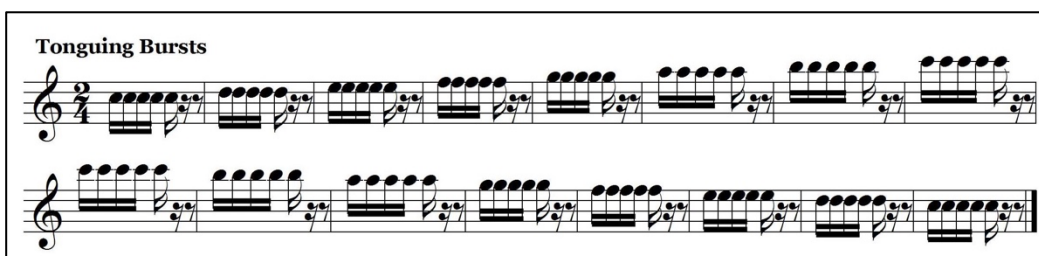
- Practice the Legato Subdivision Exercise with “one beat” for each grouping.
- 32nd note grouping determines the tempo.
- Play the entire exercise in one breath.
- Start with a comfortable note in the chalumeau register. Next, add the register key and repeat.
- Try playing with eyes closed and visualize where the tongue is touching the reed. Higher, near the tip of the reed is the best place for articulation.

The clarinet sound should not change when players articulate. **Poor articulated tone on clarinet is likely the result of excessive tongue motion and not the consonant used to start the sound.** Excessive tongue motion occurs when practice tempos are too slow. Allow students to start at their ‘natural’ tempo. Faster tempos minimize tongue motion.

Pronunciation of consonants and vowels provide a concept for articulating on clarinet. However, when we speak, we don’t have a clarinet mouthpiece and reed inside our mouth. The vowel sound long “e” works well for maintaining good tone while articulating. The most focused clarinet sound occurs when the tongue is high and forward inside the mouth. In some languages there is no long “e” sound, so it may be necessary to look for alternatives to produce the same sound. For example, in Mandarin the number “one”, (yi), sounds like a long “e”.

Consonants may also be pronounced differently according to native language. For example, when making the “t” sound in English, the tongue touches the gum ridge behind the upper front teeth. The Spanish “t” is produced quite differently, with the tongue actually touching the back of the front teeth, without the puff of air that characterizes the English “t”. “T” has four different pronunciations in the English Language. Most commonly, “T” as in the word “tea” is used in clarinet articulation for a crisp start to the sound. “D” is produced with slightly less air stress than “T” and also works well for clarinet articulation.

6. Tonguing Bursts from **Daily Workouts** available here as a digital download.



- Speed is directly related to the distance of the tongue from the reed. Keep the tongue as close to the reed as possible to minimize motion and increase speed.
- If embouchure movement is present, start at the fastest tempo possible and work backwards to slower tempos.
- Practice in all major keys.