Getting Your Ducks in a Row

Top Tips for Beginning Oboists

Thomas Pappas, D.M.A.

Assistant Professor of Oboe

Morehead State University

t.pappas@moreheadstate.edu

606.783.2495

Table of Contents

Assembly, Care & Maintenance

Top Tip: Bridge, bridge, bridge! Take great care in assembling the oboe.

- Keys are soft and can easily bend. When putting the oboe together and taking it apart, touch as little or no keywork as possible.
- To assemble, line up the bridge keys and simply push the joints together. Do not use a twisting action. Do not force the joints together.
- Use a small amount of cork grease on the oboe's joints (and the reed) if necessary. Cork grease should soak into the cork, and there should be no visible buildup.
- After playing, the oboe should always be swabbed out using a pull-through silk swab – this goes for plastic and wooden oboes. This removes moisture and helps keep it clean on the inside. Focus carefully on feeding the swab through the bell and inspect if for knots, to avoid getting the swab stuck.
- Carefully place oboe in case after each use. Keys should face up and no keys should be wedged in or depressed.
- The safest place for your oboe, when not being played, is in its case. Never rest an oboe on a music stand, or leave it sitting in a chair during a break. Either take it with you or put it in its case.
- If you do need to lay your oboe down, lay it on a sturdy flat surface (e.g. a table) where it will not be sat on or damaged in any way. When you do lay your oboe down, have the side octave key facing up, to avoid bending any of the left-hand pinkie keys (which will also be facing up).
- Do not randomly tighten/loosen screws. The slightest turn of a screw can make the whole oboe go out of adjustment (take screw driver away).
- Wooden oboes (and reeds!) like the humidity to be high (> 50%). The ideal temperature range is 65°-80° Fahrenheit. Avoid extreme temperature/humidity changes. Let the oboe get to room temperature before blowing air through it. You can place the top joint under your arm, or gently wrap your hands around it, to warm it up.

Resources

- Repair Specialist: https://www.onksws.com/ - website features useful resources, like blogs, FAQs, and other documents.
- Proper Oboe Assembly: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGLl23TP5V0 - video demonstrating proper assembly

Hand Position & Posture

<u>Top Tip</u>: Stay loose and relaxed.

Hand Position

- It is extremely important to set up proper hand position from the first note a student plays in order to avoid bad habits, which are difficult to unlearn.
- The fingers in both hands should stay curved at all times, as if holding an apple or soda can.
- Left hand (LH) goes on top:
    - The thumb placed on the wood, just beneath the octave key on the back of the top joint.
    - The index finger (LH1), middle finger (LH2) and ring finger (LH3) are all assigned a principal key.
    - The pinkie in the left hand is responsible for up to five keys on the bottom left side of the top joint: A♭, B, B♭, left F, and left E♭- that's a lot of keys! It takes time to develop a natural feel for where the pinkie needs to travel.
- Right hand (RH) goes on the bottom:
    - The thumb is placed under the thumb rest, on the middle joint. Correct thumb placement (i.e. over the nail, between nail and knuckle, over the knuckle) should be determined by the least amount of tension and natural curve of the fingers.
    - RH1-3 should be over each of the principal keys on the middle joint.
    - RH pinkie is responsible for three keys on the bottom right side of the middle joint: C (top), C# (middle), and E♭ (bottom). Most beginners get C and E♭ mixed up, which makes sense, considering E♭ is a higher pitch than C.
- Fingers should stay close and hover over the keys they are responsible for (when not actively pressing them down). Often beginners' fingers will travel far away from the keys straight up in the air, inhibiting finger technique and accuracy. Minimal motion is the key.
- It takes little force to operate the keys, so don't press too hard. Using lots of force or pressing hard only hinders overall finger technique.
- Wrists should be straight.
- There are three contact points which control weight/balance of the oboe: the RH thumb, LH1 (which never lets go of its principal key in the first two octaves), and the reed in the embouchure.
- If students are unable to support the weight of the oboe and are exhibiting signs of fatigue (e.g. flat fingers, tension, placing the pinkies behind side keys), try using a neck strap.

Posture

- Elbows/arms should be relaxed, hanging from the shoulders.
- Angle of the instrument should be between 30-45 degrees (typical in America).

- Sitting:
    - Feet should be flat on the floor.
    - Sit up straight, head up, perfectly balanced on the spine.
    - Don't bring embouchure to the reed, which will result in your head tilting forward, causing tension in neck, back, and torso. Instead, bring the reed up to your embouchure, keeping your head up and balanced.
    - Don't rest elbows on knee.
    - Don't place bell between knees.
- Standing:
    - Feet should be shoulder width apart.
    - Knees should be loose, not locked.
    - Arms and head should be the same as sitting.
- Resting:
    - Oboe should be resting with the bell placed on the thigh, with the reed pointing up, to prevent water from entering the tone holes.
    - Alternative: rest oboe in the lap with keys facing up. But first remove the reed, so it doesn't get damaged by the person/objects next to you, or someone walking by.
    - Never balance the oboe on the bell on the floor or a flat surface.

Breathing & Blowing

Top Tip: The oboe is an AIR instrument, *not* an embouchure instrument.

- It does not take a lot of air to play the oboe, only a fast and concentrated air stream.
- Maintain an even, continuous stream of air through reed to the oboe. Aim your air for a spot about a foot in front of your forehead.
- Blow through difficult passages. Often students will back off with their air, resulting in notes not speaking and connecting properly. The same tends to happen when playing high notes, causing those notes to sag. Blowing a better air stream can fix many problems!
- Breathing for oboists requires two actions: (1) releasing the stale (deoxygenated) air, and (2) taking in new (oxygenated) air.
- It is important to breathe through your mouth, by opening your lips. It is the most efficient way to take in air quickly. This also gives your embouchure momentary relief, allowing blood flow to be restored to your lips, and can help prevent fatigue and poor embouchure habits.
- Oboe playing is physically demanding. Maintaining general fitness through exercise (e.g. jogging, swimming) increases the player's lung capacity, benefitting not just their playing but also their overall health.

Exercises

Note: When doing breathing exercises have a chair nearby, in case you get dizzy.

1. Air Control

- Place a small piece of paper (3"x3") on wall, holding with fingers.
- Begin blowing air stream on paper. Create slight resistance with lips, or blow through a staple. Mouth should be 8" away.
- Increase the speed of air, and you should be able to let go of the paper while your air stream holds it on the wall.
- Try to hold it on the wall for 5-10 seconds.

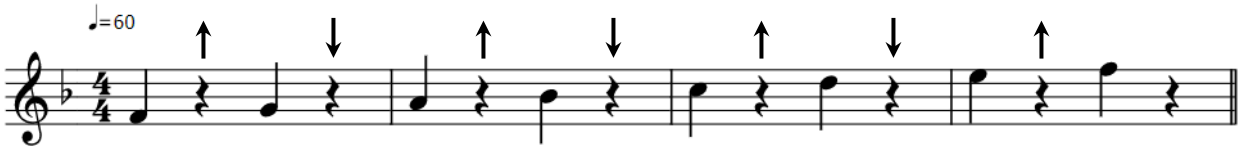
2. Inner Tube

- Standing straight, legs shoulder width apart, grasp waist between fingers on hips, just below ribs.
- With metronome at 60, inhale for four beats, filling your belly with air.
- Your fingers and thumb should be pushed outward, as if you were filling an inner tube around your waist.
- Exhale for four beats, and watch/feel your fingers and thumb move inward.

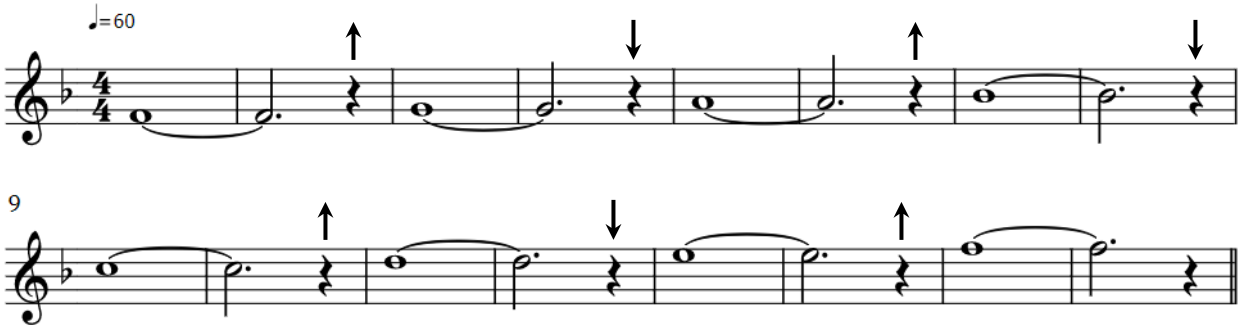
3. Inhale/Exhale

Use these exercise to practice alternating inhaling and exhaling. The ↑ indicates an exhale and the ↓ indicates an inhale.

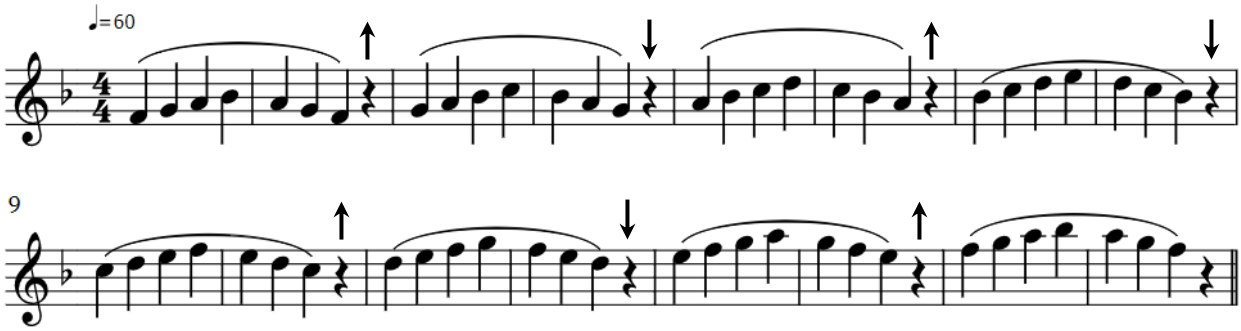
Short note scale



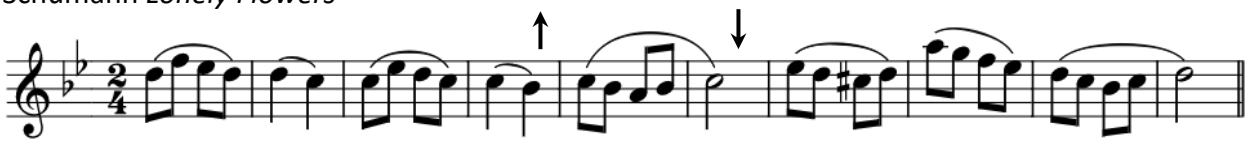
Long note scale



Tetrachord scale



Schumann *Lonely Flowers*



Embouchure

Top Tip: Keep it round.

- The embouchure should be round, puckered, corners drawn inward, like you're sucking a thick milkshake through a straw. No smiling embouchures or "Muppet mouths."
- Common approach to a good (American) embouchure, in four steps:
    1. Open your mouth and form an "O" with the lips.
    2. Curl the lips in to make a cushion for the reed.
    3. Carefully rest the reed on the middle of the lower lip, with the tip of the reed extending slightly past the lip into the mouth (so that your tongue can make contact with it).
    4. Close the lips around the reed from all sides, like a drawstring purse, creating an airtight seal.
- You should be able to see 2/3 of the reed's cane showing outside the mouth most of the time.
- Lower jaw should be dropped.
- Throat should be relaxed.
- Don't bite. Teeth marks inside your lips are a sign that you are using too much jaw pressure on the reed. The sound quality will be pinched and sharp.
- Don't puff out cheeks.
- The number one cause for a poor embouchure is poor reeds, that are too hard (not responsive) and too difficult to control.

Reed Drills

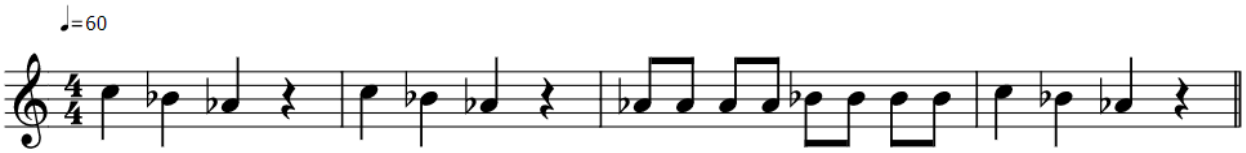
Top Tip: Make reed drills part of your daily warm-up.

These exercises should be done for a few minutes each day with the reed alone. They are important for developing your embouchure and building control and endurance. They also allow you to focus on other aspects of oboe playing, like articulations and dynamics. These exercises can also help identify if a reed is doing all that it should.

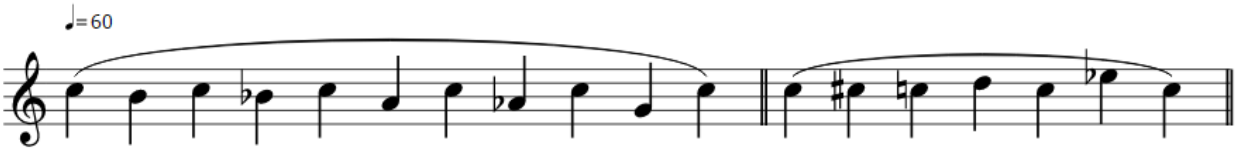
Exercises

1. Hot Cross Buns

Each of these pitches corresponds to the embouchure used to play in a different register. The C represents the high register, the B♭ the mid-range, and the A♭ the lower register.

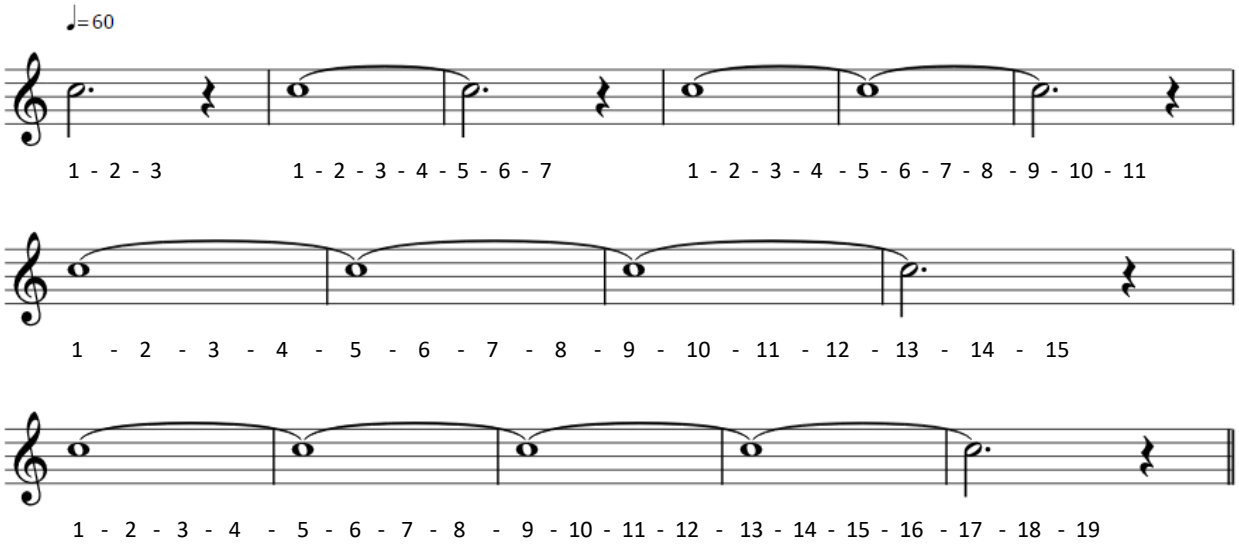


2. Reed "Push Ups"



3. Glissando

4. Long Tones



Keep the pitch stable. Practice with and without tonguing to mark each beat. For an additional challenge, add in crescendo/diminuendo.

Articulation

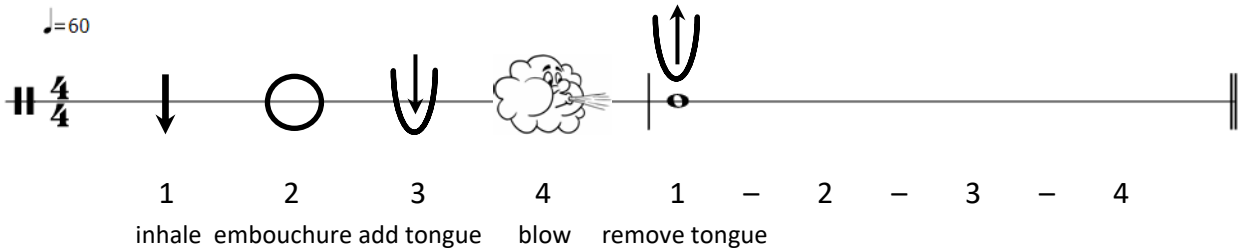
<u>Top Tip</u>: Releasing the tongue from the reed starts the sound.

- To start a tone, the tongue should first be touching the tip of the reed. Once the air pressure is built up behind the reed, the tongue pulls back from the reed, allowing the reed to vibrate, resulting in a tone.
- The top of the tip of the tongue is the point that should touch the reed. No tonguing with the underneath of the tongue.
- Aim for the corner of the bottom blade. Tonguing in the center of the reed can result in thuddy, harsh articulation.
- Tongue on the wind. Keep blowing through articulated passages, without stopping the air between consecutive notes. Let the tongue separate one note from the next, not the air.
- Be gentle when returning the tongue to the reed.

Exercises

1. 1, 2, 3, 4, Tone

This exercise can be done on the reed only, or with the instrument.



2. Legato Articulation

The tongue gently flicks the reed between notes, while blowing a steady stream of air.

3. Staccato Articulation

The tongue immediately returns to the reed, after the note sounds, while blowing a steady stream of air.

Finger Technique

<u>Top Tip</u>: Know your fingerings and don't open the half-hole late.

Fingerings

- Octave keys
  - Depending on the note, there are three methods for sending notes of the first (lowest) octave up to the second octave: (1) half-hole, (2) thumb octave key, and (3) side octave key.
  - There are three half-hole notes, five thumb octave notes, and four side octave notes (3, 5, 4). The fingerings are otherwise identical in both the first and second octaves.
  - Newer, professional oboes will typically also have a third octave key, just above the thumb octave key, which is used for fingerings in the third octave.
- F fingerings
  - The most commonly used alternate fingering is for F.
  - The main fingering for F is generally called "right F." The second fingering option should be "left F." This means that "forked F" is your third option, only to be used if the other two don't work.
  - If an oboe doesn't have a "left F" key, every effort should be made to acquire an oboe that does have this crucial key.
  - Most passages can be played with "right" and "left Fs" only, and they sound identical. By comparison, "forked F" can sound stuffy and out of tune.
- Other alternate fingerings
  - Another alternate fingering frequently used is the "left E♭/D#." It is used when preceded or followed by D♭/C#, typically when the key signature has four flats or four sharps.
  - Right A♭ is necessary if preceded or followed by a note that uses the left pinkie. The side of your right index finger will activate this key.
  - For most notes in the third octave there are many alternate fingerings.

Half-hole Technique

- There are three notes in the second octave that use the half-hole as an octave key.
- The left hand index finger (LH1) must slide, roll, or pivot downward to clear the vent in center of the LH1's principal key. Do not lift and then replace the finger to open and close the half-hole.
- The action should be minimal and movement isolated to just that one finger.
- The main cause for half-hole "chatter" is the delayed clearing of the half-hole. If the half-hole opens late, after the other fingers have already arrived, the lower octave of that note will temporarily sound.

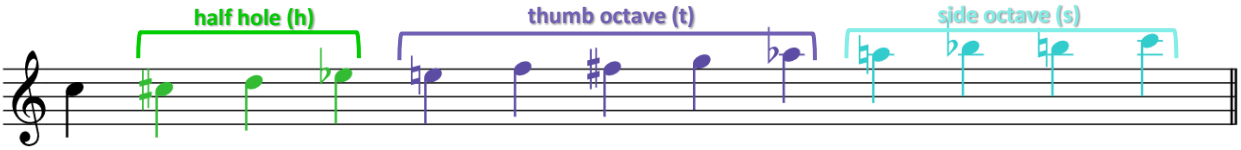
- Slowly practice connecting half-hole notes to notes in the first octave, thumb octave, and side octave key notes. All exercises should be slurred.

Resources

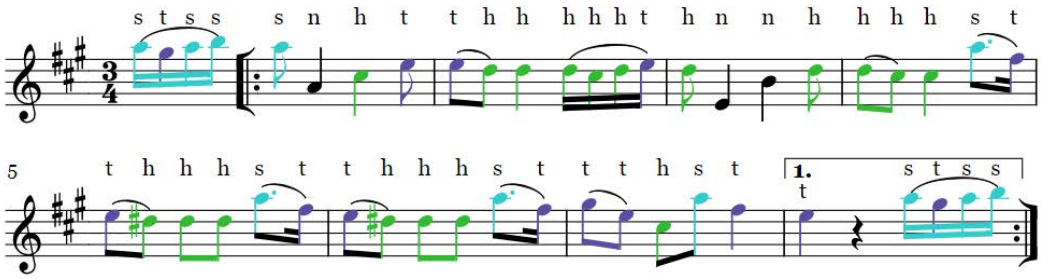
- Oboe Fingering Charts:
    - https://www.wfg.woodwind.org/oboe/ - includes main fingerings for all three octaves, alternate fingerings, and trill fingerings.
    - https://www.idrs.org/resources/fingerings/ - includes main fingerings for all three octaves, alternate fingerings, and trill fingerings (for oboe & English horn).

Exercises

1. Playing in the Second Octave

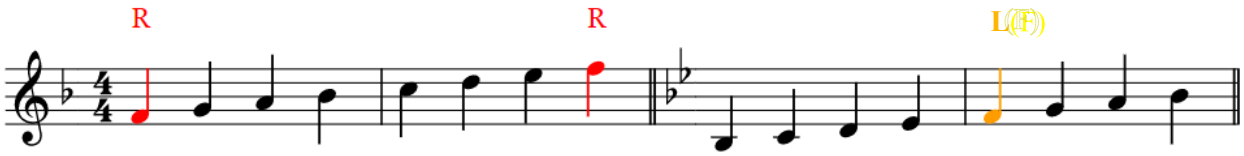


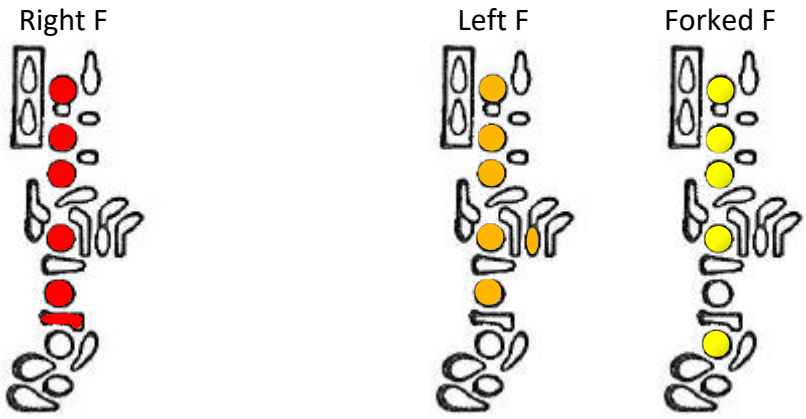
Boccherini *Minuet*



2. F Fingerings

When you have a student playing in the key of F major, make sure they use the “right F” fingering. Most beginners learn B♭ major as their first scale due to being in band class. This repetition of being in flat keys for the first years of their oboe career can teach them that THE fingering for F is “forked.” Advanced and professional oboists do not use the “forked F” fingering unless absolutely necessary.

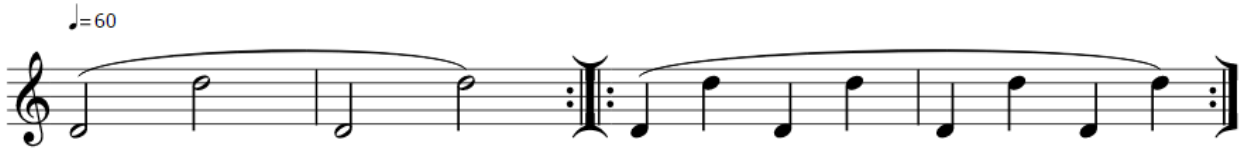




3. Developing Half-hole Technique

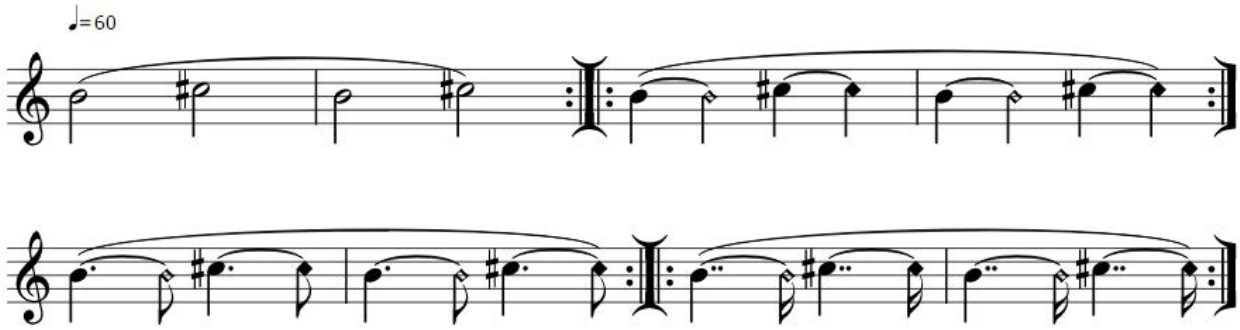
The half-hole functions like an octave key. Use a sliding, rolling, or pivot motion to clear and cover the hole. A common problem with half-hole technique is timing; often it is late and/or the movement too small, resulting in “chatter.”

Octave leaps

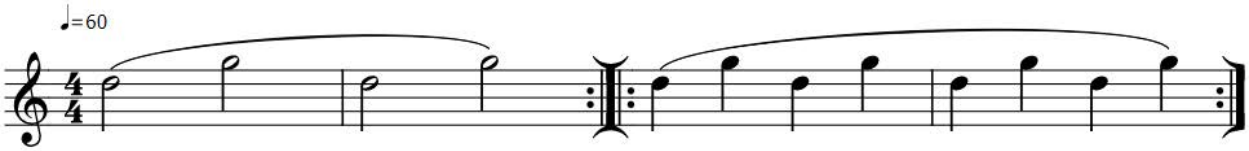


Repeat slurring from C#4 to C#5 and E♭4 to E♭5.

Early action ◇ = opened half-hole ◆ = closed half-hole

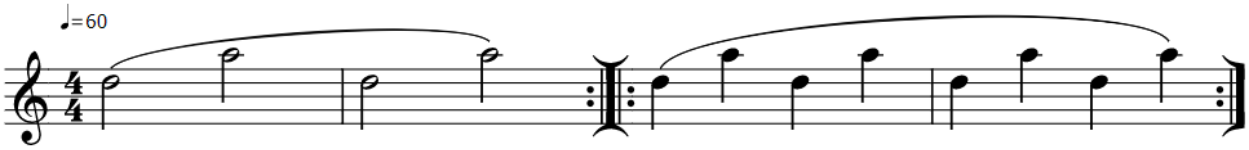


Half-hole to thumb octave



Repeat slurring from C#5 to F#5 and E♭5 to A♭5.

Half-hole to side octave



Repeat slurring from C#5 to B5 and E♭5 to A♭5.

Intonation

<u>Top Tip</u>: Check everything.

- Intonation on the oboe can be affected by so many factors.
- **The Reed**. If the reed is not in good condition or the proper length, intonation will be a problem. Oboists should check their reeds every day for cracks and response.
- **The Instrument**. The oboe should always be checked for proper working condition. If the instrument is old, if can begin to sound “blown out” and sharp.
- **The Embouchure**. If the embouchure is too tight or loose, pitch will be affected. Pinching causes the pitch to go up; loosening causes the pitch to go down. If the reed is too fat in the mouth the tone will be harsh and the pitch will be sharp. Likewise, if not enough reed is in the mouth, the tone will be fuzzy and flat.
- **Air**. If the oboist isn’t playing with enough air/support, the notes will be flat and flabby. If the oboist is using too much air, the pitch will go sharp.
- **The Temperature**. As with most woodwinds, temperature can wreak havoc on oboists. The oboe will go sharp as the temperature rises and flat as it lowers. Screws (meaning the adjustment) and the keywork are also affected by temperature changes. Oboists should always be on the lookout for screws trying to wiggle themselves free.
- **Range/Register**. Playing in the high register the oboist must roll the reed into the mouth, playing closer to the thread. Playing in the low register the oboist must roll (or “spit”) the reed out of the mouth. This will obviously affect the pitch.
- **Notes**. Tuning tendencies in the lower register are FLAT, half-hole notes tend to be sharp, and the upper register tends to be FLAT.

Dynamics

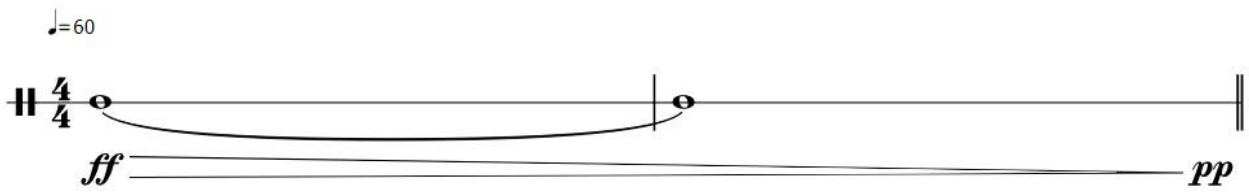
Top Tip: Try reed-only exercises, away from the oboe.

- Dynamics are controlled by the amount of air released from the embouchure, the air speed, and the size of the opening of the reed.
- To **decrescendo**, decrease air speed. The reed opening should become gradually smaller. Purse the lips firmly all the way around the reed so that it vibrates less freely.
- To **crescendo**, increase air speed. The reed must be allowed to open gradually and vibrate more freely. Relax the embouchure and drop the jaw. Think "O."
- For both, if you are sharp, relax the embouchure grip. If you are flat, increase the air speed and abdominal support and firm up the embouchure.

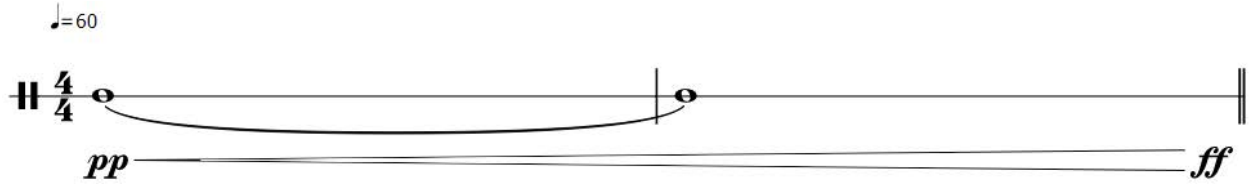
Exercises

These exercises can be done on the reed only, or with the instrument. Make sure the pitch stays stable.

1. Decrescendo



2. Crescendo



Tone

Top Tip: Be patient. A beautiful tone takes years to develop.

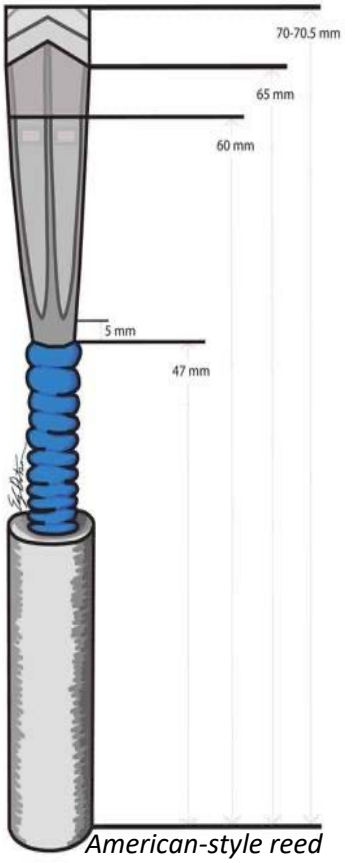
- Reed quality, instrument quality, embouchure, and proper air support directly affect tone.
- Listen to recordings of leading oboists to become familiar with good oboe playing and mature oboe sounds.
- Focus on developing and mastering the fundamentals of oboe playing. Over time you will develop and refine your tone.
- Adding vibrato down the road will make a big difference and often develops naturally, but it is not recommended to teach this concept to beginning oboists.

Reeds & Instruments

<u>Top Tip</u>: You get what you pay for.

Reeds

- Basic concepts:
  - Reed should crow a C in octaves.
  - Average length is 70mm.
  - Response should be easy.
  - Sides of the reed should seal.
  - Tip opening should be eye shaped.
  - Symmetrical design is important for stability.
  - Staples (metal tubes with cork) are reusable if they are 47mm in length. Simply cut the thread (with a razor blade) and remove it along with the cane.
  - Oboists should have a minimum of five working reeds that they use on a rotating basis. These should be kept in a quality ventilated reed case.
  - The reed will go "crazy" with the smallest amount of change in humidity and temperature. The more warm and humid it is, the more open and hard a reed will feel. If it is cold and dry, the reed can feel thin and closed.



American-style reed

- American-style reeds:
  - Should have roughly the same features and measurements of diagram.
  - Known as long scrape, with a "W" shape.
- European-style reeds:
  - Often will use wire.
  - Known as short scrape, with a "U" shape.
  - Easily available online. These may be the cheapest option but they should be avoided because they're intended for a different playing technique.
- Suppliers:
  - Try a variety of brands to find what works best for your student. If you can produce a good tone, chances are the student will be able to as well.
  - Reeds handmade by American professional oboists are usually best. The average cost ranges between $25 and $30 per reed. A convenient place to shop for

professionally handmade reeds is Midwest Musical Imports, which carry reeds made by about 20 different American oboists (though they might not always have reeds in stock from every maker): https://www.mmimports.com/product-category/oboe-accessories/oboe-reeds/

- Beginners, who are more prone to damaging/breaking reeds, might consider purchasing less expensive machine-made reeds.
- Never buy soft reeds or plastic reeds (though Légère is getting close!). Medium-soft to medium hard reeds are generally a good strength. They can still be adjusted if needed.
- The two most popular "store bought" brands are Jones and Emerald.
- Jones:
  - The Jones 101 Oboe Reed (**red** thread) is intended for beginners, according to their website each reed is tuned to A=440hz and individually tested and adjusted by hand. It retails on their website for $23.99, though you may find them for less elsewhere.
  - The Jones Artist Oboe Reed (**purple** thread) is intended for the intermediate to advanced player. They are adjusted and play tested throughout the full range of the instrument. It retails on their website for $31.99, though you may find them for less elsewhere.
  - Don't use their Euro Scrape Oboe Reed.
- Emerald:
  - Emerald Oboe Reed (**green** thread) is intended for beginners and retails on their website for $11.75.
  - Emerald Artist Oboe Reed (**black** thread) is intended for the more advanced player and retails on their website for $12.75.

Instruments

- Basic concepts:
  - You get what you pay for.
  - Instrument must have left F key! Some brands will offer a student/beginner model without left F key. This is an essential fingering that all oboists need to grow up with. It is not fair that students who eventually upgrade to an oboe with left F will have to retrain themselves how to play the oboe. This is a problem I frequently encounter at the college level.
  - Oboe must be in good working order. Oboes, especially old or poorly maintained instruments often are out of adjustment, have leaky/worn pads, or have cracks.
- Choose from reputable brands. If there's a brand you're curious about or haven't heard of ask an oboist, research, and try to find out more information about the manufacturer.

- Used oboes are a great option if you're on a tight budget.
- Synthetic or composite materials are a good option, especially if temperature and humidity are a concern. Some brands offer a synthetic top join, or a lined top joint, paired with a wooden middle joint and bell.
- Top brands (in alphabetical order):
    - Buffet
    - Bulgheroni
    - Cabart
    - Covey
    - Fossati
    - Fox
    - Howarth
    - Laubin
    - Lorée
    - Marigaux
    - Patricola
    - Yamaha

Resources

- Oboe Adjustment Guide: http://carlosoboe.com/oboe-adjustment-guide/
- Forums @ IDRS: https://www.idrs.org/forums/