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The Four Bassoon Fundamentals

This is an introduction to what is most important to sounding good on a wind instrument: using the wind!

I talk a lot about "fundamentals," these are just the different physical processes that we manipulate to create sound on the instrument. I divide these into four basic skills:

- The breath
- The abdominal support
- The voicing in the mouth and throat
- The embouchure around the reed

These elements are used in every aspect of playing the instrument. Time invested developing control over these will yield great improvements in everything you play. Because of this, I teach my students to begin every day with dedicated time for these in the form of a **Daily Routine.** (For the full Daily Routine, see the handout by that name)

The Breath- consists of two parts: an exhale and an inhale.

> The exhale should empty all of the old air from your lungs, and release tension in your body—relax!
>
> The inhale should completely fill your lungs, and as the air reaches the bottom of your lungs starts to engage the abs
>
> A good inhale can happen either slowly or fast, depending on the character of the music and how much time there is to breathe
>
> A good fast inhale has a sound that naturally diminuendos—this means that your lungs are actually full and the inhalation wasn't prematurely stopped

The Abdominal Support- your abs are the muscles that control how the air moves into the instrument

> Try pushing in on your stomach with your right hand while you play the bassoon with your left, can you push against your hand with your abs?
>
> Can you feel your obliques and lower back muscles too? All three types can support the air together
>
> The *volume* (or amount) of air moved through the instrument determines your dynamic volume. The speed of that air determines tone quality. That is why it is so easy to have a full tone at a loud dynamic, moving a large volume of air through a tiny aperture like a bassoon reed automatically creates a fast airstream.
>
> It is much harder to have a fast airstream at a soft dynamic, this is where the abdominals come into play. By engaging them outward you can increase the air speed and improve the tone quality at all dynamic levels.

The Voicing- like putting your thumb over a hose, the position of your throat and tongue shape how fast the air moves through them—**and** affects your pitch and resonance!

> Put one hand on your throat and yawn, can you feel it open and relax? Try playing a low note with that position.

Can you sing middle C above the staff? Try playing that note with the same voicing as when you sang it.

If you play a note with the same position in your oral cavity as if you were singing it, it will naturally be more in tune, with a fuller sound.

This is true even for notes outside of your range! Pretend to sing a low C, feel how ridiculously open you would have to be to sing that note. Now play it with that same position.

Another aspect of the voicing is your vowel shape. Sing a progression of uh-oh-ah-ay-ee on a single pitch. As your move to higher syllables, your tongue moves higher in your mouth, the higher your tongue is, the smaller (and sharper) your oral cavity is, and the faster you airstream tends to move over it. Generally, the higher you play on the instrument, the higher your voicing should be.

Vowel shape also affects tone color, using a lower syllable will flatten and darken the sound. Increase the abdominal support to raise the pitch while keeping the darker sound.

The Embouchure- your lips affect how the reed vibrates!

The reed is the real instrument, your bassoon is just a very expensive amplification device. Because of this, the reed deserves great care and attention independent of your practice time!

The lips should add supporting pressure to the reed from all sides evenly, the goal is to cushion and support it without choking off vibrations

This is easy to do on the top and bottom but hard to do on the sides

So focus on the sides! Bring in the corners like you're saying "ooh"

How far to roll your lips in or out depends on how big your lips are, what range of the instrument you're playing, and on the reed itself, be flexible!

The Daily Routine

While all of these elements should be considered in every aspect of your playing, improvents to your control over them happen best with focused attention. I begin each day by working on a "Daily Routine" of basic exercises that allow me to devote all attention to these fundamentals. These are transposed into a key of the day, younger students benefit from spending more time in a key (perhaps one or two keys of the week) in order to really dig into their physical processes.

The Daily Routine should be practiced with a metronome and tuner at all points. Visual tuners and drones bother have their merits, incorporate both into your regimen. The daily routine should also be performed in front of a mirror to check in on: the shape of the embouchure, tension manifesting in the shoulders or neck, and the lightness and closeness of the fingers to the instrument.

The two most important exercises are included here, for the full routine see its dedicated handout.

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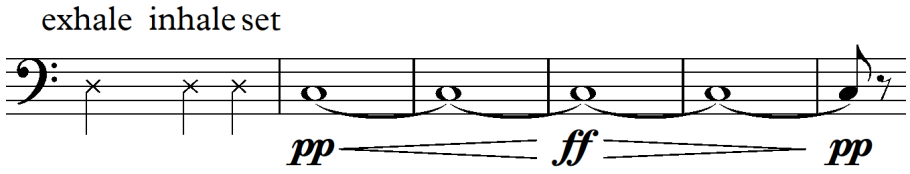
The Long Tone

This is the most fundamental act of playing a wind instrument—and what all other playing should be based on.

The goal is to develop control of the air stream and support systems while engaging the abs and releasing tension in other parts of the body. Begin by establishing the habit of giving a full measure to prepare the sound, taking two beats to slowly exhale and release tension, one beat to inhale *a full dynamic breath that leads to a relaxed throat and engaged abdominals*, and engaging the embouchure, abdominals, and air stream with the tongue resting on the reed. Gently release the tongue on beat one to begin the sound.

Try to make an absolutely smooth crescendo and diminuendo for the entire note

Work with a visual tuner to hold the note in tune at all dynamics and work for a steady rate of crescendo and diminuendo. Repeat in all octaves.



1. **The 1-2-3-4-5-1 Drill**

Building on the skills developed on the long tone, this exercise adds a layer of slow note changes. Try to keep the airstream and support exactly as they were in the long tone: moving your fingers does not affect them. Crescendo evenly to scale degree 5, then diminuendo over four beats as softly as possible to still make the slur back to scale degree 1.

Work with a visual tuner to hold all notes in tune at all dynamics and work for a steady rate of crescendo and diminuendo. Alternatively, a drone may be used to reinforce aural tuning and the placement of each note in the context of a key. Repeat in all octaves.