

# THE BASS CLARINET

---

A TEACHER'S & PLAYER'S GUIDE

---

Dr. Thomas Reed



**JUPITER**  
EDUCATION SERVICES



Dr. Thomas Reed is Professor of Music and Chair of the Music Department at Ashland University in Ohio, where he has taught since 1984. He currently teaches clarinet and saxophone and was director of the Ashland University Jazz Ensemble for 16 years.

He is Principal Clarinetist of the Ashland Symphony Orchestra and bass clarinetist and saxophonist for the Akron Symphony Orchestra. He has also performed regularly with the Cleveland Jazz

Orchestra, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, the Jazz Unit, and the Blossom Festival Band.

He has been soloist with the Akron, Mansfield, and Ashland Symphonies and performs on CD's from the Akron Symphony, the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and the Paul Ferguson Jazz Orchestra.

He holds the Doctor of Musical Arts in Clarinet from the Ohio State University, the Bachelor of Music Education from the University of Michigan, and the Master of Music in saxophone and clarinet from the University of Akron.

His teachers have included James Pyne and David Bell, clarinet; Donald Sinta, Jim Romeo, and Rich Shanklin, saxophone; Howie Smith and Hank Marr, jazz; and George Pope, flute.

---

---

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BASS CLARINET

Although the bass clarinet and other harmony clarinets are not often solo voices, they add an extremely important dimension to the sound of the band. The full sound of a complete woodwind section is a wonderful asset to a group. It is not satisfactory for the bass sound of a band to be provided only by brass instruments. In softer sections and in sections scored for woodwinds, the low woodwinds add a wonderful richness and resonance to the sound, as well as a desirable reediness.

Of course few bands have a surplus of clarinets, making transfer of Bb clarinet players to bass clarinet difficult. But directors should remember that even small bands could benefit greatly from the addition of even one bass clarinet. Wagner, in his book "Band Scoring" recommends 1 bass clarinet per 8 Bb clarinets, and Smith (1975) recommends 4 bass clarinets to balance 12 Bb clarinets (along with 1 Eb, 2 altos, 1-2 contrabass clarinets, and 2-4 bassoons). The important point is that experts do endorse a strong low woodwind presence.

Bass clarinets have some advantages over other low woodwind instruments (although bands ideally should cover all the parts in the score). Bass clarinets have fewer reed issues, instrument transfer issues and fingering difficulties than bassoons, and can play much softer in the low range than tenor or baritone saxophones. Bass clarinets are also less expensive than bassoons or baritone saxophones in most cases. Of course the bassoon has a greater solo role and is quite essential in advanced band music.

Bass clarinet parts in band music are often very satisfying to play, so students should receive encouragement regarding their important and unique musical role. Thinking of themselves as the basses (and basis?) of the woodwind section is a helpful positive attitude.

The bass clarinets ideally are situated among the clarinets, to enhance the idea of a clarinet choir sound within the band (Colwell and Goolsby, 2002), but proximity to the bassoons and low saxophones is also helpful.

## TRANSFERRING STUDENTS TO THE BASS CLARINET

Because of its size and expense, the bass clarinet is has not often been used as a beginning band instrument. However, directors may wish to investigate including bass clarinet in their beginning programs, possibly in conjunction with a rental program. Some standard beginning band methods have bass clarinet books available, even at the book 1 level.

But let's assume that most bass clarinet players are instrument transfers. Students are commonly transferred to bass clarinet during middle school or high school. There are a number of considerations in transferring students to bass clarinet:

- ***Are suitable instruments available?*** Because most schools provide harmony woodwind instruments for students, it is important that the instruments be of good quality and in good working order. Transferring to an instrument that does not play well can be frustrating. Because the student has little concept of how their new instrument should ideally function, the director has an obligation to assure that the instrument is operable. If students are able to rent or purchase their own bass clarinet, funds are potentially freed up for other needs in the band budget, and the student will be likely to care for the instrument better.
- ***Which instrument should students transfer from?*** Bb Clarinet players are the most obvious choice, because of their affinity with the embouchure and fingering, but saxophonists can make the transition relatively easily. Given the large numbers of saxophone students in many programs, this is often a good possibility. Flute or brass students can also be successful transfers. The teacher should consider which instruments are present in sufficient numbers to allow transfers without harming the overall instrumental balances of the group.
- ***What are desirable attributes for students transferring?*** It is a common mistake to transfer the weakest clarinet players to bass clarinet. Rather I recommend that a relatively strong clarinet or saxophone player transfer to bass clarinet. A good candidate is a student with a firm, properly formed embouchure on saxophone or clarinet, a strong airstream, and good rhythmic

skills to handle the independence of their parts. Students that have these attributes but perhaps lack skill in the upper register or high finger dexterity might find themselves more successful on the bass clarinet than on Bb clarinet or saxophone. Of course the physical stature of the student has an effect; not all middle school students can comfortably play the instrument. Saxophone students that have a strong interest in jazz playing or pit orchestra playing should learn bass clarinet along with other common woodwind doubles.

- ***Is the student sufficiently motivated?*** Obviously a student is unlikely to have much success in transferring if they are not enthusiastic about the transfer. Especially if the bass clarinet (or any instrument) is seen as a second rate instrument or has a stigma attached, the players are less likely to be successful. Also family support and enthusiasm for the transfer is important, because of possible additional costs, transportation issues, and emotional support.

## PLAYING TECHNIQUES

### ***Tone Production:***

I think of bass clarinet tone production as the front of the clarinet embouchure and the back of the saxophone embouchure.

In other words, the player should use a traditional firm clarinet embouchure with firm corners, a pointed chin, a concave "scoop" between the lips and the chin, and a the lower lip drawn firmly against the teeth (without a smile shape). Just as on the Bb clarinet, the player should sense the fulcrum, or the pressure point of the lower teeth and lip across the reed.

The aspect of bass clarinet tone production that resembles the saxophone involves the back of the tongue, the interior shape of the mouth, and the shape of the throat. These items are collectively known as the voicing. Using a saxophone-like voicing on the bass clarinet means using a more flexible throat position and especially a more open and relaxed throat.

Colwell and Goolsby (2002) state that the bass clarinet should be played with more mouthpiece and a looser embouchure than the Bb clarinet, and that high register squeaks often result from excessive jaw pressure. I do find that some students have too loose of an embouchure on bass clarinet, and some bite excessively. In either case the difficulty may be the lack of a properly formed and firm clarinet or saxophone embouchure before transferring.

Although the range across the break causes difficulty for a number of students, it is important to think of the notes up to the top of the staff as a normal part of the range for high school players. When a student has difficulty with these notes, be sure to check the equipment in addition to the embouchure, support, and voicing issues that may be involved.

### ***Tonal Concept:***

It is unfortunately common for the bass clarinet to be played with a weak and unfocused sound. Although there are a number of potential causes, a weak embouchure, weak airstream, and incorrect voicing are likely factors. The bass clarinet should be played with a tone that is clear and focused, but still warm and resonant. I do think of having a bit of edge to the tone; there is a natural reediness to low woodwind instruments that should not be entirely avoided when in conjunction with a full tone. Additionally all clarinets should use a powerful air stream.

### ***Fingering:***

There are few fingering issues for bass clarinet that are different from clarinet. The most important difference is the extreme upper range. For notes above C#3, the left hand first finger should use the half hole fingering by sliding (not lifting) the first finger down to the lower tab of the key, exposing the small vent hole in the upper part of the key. (Note that on the Bb clarinet the first finger is raised for these notes.) However, on the rare occasion that a student encounters these notes, they should also consider and experiment with the "side" fingerings that are not entirely acceptable on clarinet. Students should also be made aware of the additional note, low Eb that is available on most bass clarinets, and is used in band music. It is fingered with the right pinky on the "extra" key below the E/B key. To enable alternating left and right pinky fingerings, many bass clarinets also have a left Ab/Eb key.

### ***Intonation:***

Bass clarinets are not immune to intonation problems. When a bass clarinetist has intonation problems, through developing a good embouchure and voicing, using a quality mouthpiece and good reeds, the problem can often be minimized. Tuning is usually done either between the neck and body or on the "tuning slide" of a 2-piece neck. On some instruments it is possible to pull out at the center joint of the body to reduce sharpness in the chalumeau register without increasing flatness in the throat tones.

## **EQUIPMENT**

### ***Types of Bass Clarinet:***

There are four basic types of bass clarinet available:

- Synthetic body student instruments with range to low Eb and a single register key (usually one-piece body or semi-permanently joined 2-piece body)
- Wooden intermediate instruments with range to low Eb and often a single register key (including many older wooden instruments).
- Wooden professional instruments with range to low Eb and an automatic double register key.
- Wooden professional instruments with extended range to low C and an automatic double register key.

### ***Necks:***

The angle that the bass clarinet mouthpiece enters the mouth is very important. The steep angle of the clarinet mouthpiece is preferred over the lower angle of the saxophone mouthpiece. Unfortunately many student bass clarinets have a neck that causes the saxophone neck angle. I encourage directors to consider instruments with an acceptable angle (such as the Jupiter model 673BN or most wooden models) or purchase replacement necks with a suitable angle.

### ***Recommendations:***

- Choose an instrument with an angled neck to encourage the clarinet mouthpiece angle.
- Plastic student instruments are not uniformly well made, but good instruments are quite acceptable if properly maintained. One piece or semi-permanently joined bodies avoid some repair

issues. A quality mouthpiece enhances the sound and response of these less expensive instruments.

- Double register keys are preferred despite their tendency to need adjustment. They make notes above the break much easier and improve intonation. The presence of a small key on the neck or a second small key at the very top of the body easily identifies a bass clarinet with a double register key. Realistically, your price range will determine which type of register key you select, since on new instruments only wooden models have the double register key.
- Low C instruments are usually only necessary for professional or advanced college players.
- Other desirable features include undercut tone-holes, in-line trill keys, and a case with secure accessory compartments.

### ***Mouthpieces:***

The main consideration with bass clarinet mouthpieces is their condition. Most brands of mouthpiece play acceptably, but worn out or damaged mouthpieces do hinder good playing. A mouthpiece upgrade is usually a worthwhile expenditure. Common brands include Selmer, VanDoren, and Schreiber. Hand made or hand finished mouthpieces such as Fobes, Pyne, Hawkins, Morgan, or Garrett are also worth consideration.

### ***Reeds:***

A medium strength reed, such as a 2.5, 3.0 or 3.5 is best in most cases. As with Bb clarinet, premium reeds such as VanDoren give somewhat better results but are more expensive. Synthetic reeds are becoming more popular, but usually have tone issues. I recommend comparing the tone of a synthetic reed with a cane reed to determine if the tone is acceptable. Most players will use a slightly softer reed for bass clarinet compared to Bb clarinet.

### ***The Floor Peg and the Neck Strap:***

The bass clarinet can be supported with a floor peg and/or a neck strap. I recommend the use of the floor peg in all cases. The floor peg can be used with or without a neck strap, but using a neck strap alone does not promote good instrument position and posture. Repairing or replacing a broken floor peg is a worthwhile expenditure.

### ***Cases:***

Keeping cases in good repair can reduce repair issues. There is a tendency for the interior blocking to come loose, allowing the instrument to move excessively when the case is handled. Accessory compartment lids should close properly so items can't move around in the case. The floor peg in particular has potential to damage the instrument if not secured. Sometimes a replacement case is a good solution.

### ***Care Issues:***

Although bass clarinets are large instruments, they are often fragile and are particularly susceptible to key problems. Urging students to treat the instrument carefully especially during assembly and disassembly is important. I believe that the bass clarinet, more so than other instruments, is prone to damage from laying the instrument on its side.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Colwell and Goolsby, *The Teaching of Instrumental Music*, 3rd ed., Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2002.

Smith, "The Performing Band," in Robinson and Middleton, *The Complete School Band Program*, Parker, West Nyack, NY, 1975.

Wagner, *Band Scoring*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1960.

## RESOURCES

Drapkin, *Symphonic Repertoire for the Bass Clarinetist*, Roncorp, Cherry Hill, NJ, 1979.

The standard book of orchestral excerpts. For advanced students.

Hegvik, *Melodic Etudes; A Lyric Approach to the Clarinet*, Edmunds, WA, et cetera productions, 2004.

An easy level etude book for clarinet that would work well for bass clarinet.

Lamb, *Classic Festival Solos* (Bass Clarinet book), Belwin-Mills, 1992.

A good collection of easy to medium solo with accompaniment.

OMEA *Solo and Ensemble Adjudicated Event Music*, 10th ed., 1998.

Ohio's list of required pieces for Solo and Ensemble Contest is useful.

Saunders and Siennicki, *Understanding the Low Clarinets*, Shawnee Press, Delaware Water Gap, PA, 1972.

Text, exercises, solos, and etudes for high school level instrument transfers.

Volta, *La Clarinette Basse*, IMD, Paris, 1993.

An advanced etude book and complete guide to bass clarinet technique.

Voxman, *Concert and Contest Repertoire for Bb Bass Clarinet*, Rubank/Hal Leonard, 1973.

A good collection of intermediate and advanced solos with accompaniment.

Weissenborn/Rhoads, *Advanced Studies*, San Antonio, Southern Music, 1973.

A good high school and college level etude book.

## Jupiter has the Bass Clarinet to suit your needs

"The Jupiter 673BN Bass Clarinet is a solid, well constructed instrument that can be played in a concert band, jazz band, recording studio, or provide a unique alternative for the improving soloist."

**Dr. Thom Mason,**  
Artist and Jupiter Clinician  
Founder, Department of Jazz Studies and Studio Music  
University of Southern California



### 673BN Bass Clarinet

- ABS Resin body
- Undercut tone holes
- In-line trill keys
- Adjustable floor peg
- Forged nickel silver keys
- Low Eb on bell
- One section case



"Thanks to our local Jupiter dealer, students can now reasonably obtain their own quality bass clarinet. Having their own instrument for home practice builds better players and allows us to use the budget for additional necessities."

**Greg Fox,**  
Band Director  
Stoller Middle School  
Beaverton, Oregon





**JUPITER**<sup>®</sup>  
EDUCATION SERVICES

For more information regarding  
Jupiter instruments  
or clinics, visit us at  
**[www.jupitermusic.com](http://www.jupitermusic.com)**

**JUPITER**<sup>®</sup>  
*World Class Quality*

Jupiter Band Instruments, Inc. • PO Box 90249 • Austin, TX 78709  
(512) 288-7400 • [bi@jupitermusic.com](mailto:bi@jupitermusic.com)