GOOD OBOE TONE

A GUIDE FOR BAND DIRECTORS AND THEIR OBOE STUDENTS

Playing oboe can feel easy and sound amazing!

Good Oboe Tone

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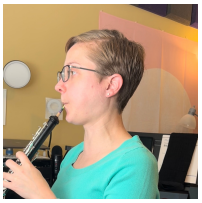
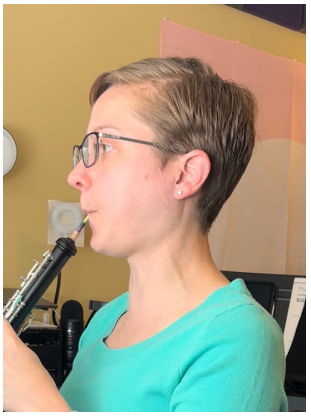


Who is this for?



This Guide is for Band Directors and their oboe students who have been playing oboe for 6 months or longer.

The written instructions will enable Band Directors to explore different aspects of tone 1X1 or in small groups with oboe students.

The video links provide my demonstration of the different concepts.

WHAT IS GOOD TONE?

Before we can talk about improving tone, we have to establish what makes "good tone" on the oboe.

Let's recognize that tone is somewhat subjective, and different audiences will enjoy the tone of different players. That said, there are a few standard elements all oboists can work to include in their sound:

- Openness or full or round shape of sound
- Singing or resonant quality
- Complexity or depth of sound

I encourage you to start using the words above when discussing tone. "Bad Tone" doesn't describe what you're missing, and doesn't give you guidelines on specific aspects of your sound to change.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Things that can influence your tone

FUNDAMENTAL TONE COLOR COMES FROM THE AIR, THE REED, AND THE INSTRUMENT.
SOME VARIABLES CAN'T BE EASILY CHANGED.

The tone color available to a student can be determined by the reed that they are using. Age of reed, general intonation of reed, brand/maker of reed all dictate small changes in tone color.

I encourage students to keep trying different brands of reeds until they find the ones that work out of the box, play in tune, feel comfortable, and have the desired dynamic range. Experimentation with different brands can be discouraging, but it's totally normal!

The material of the oboe has an influence on the tone produced while playing it. There is a noticeable change in tone color by merely changing from a plastic (or resin or composite) instrument to a wood instrument - even one that's half wood or has a lined upper joint.

Exercise 1:

FAST AIR

THE PRINCIPLES:

In order to make sound comfortably, the students' air stream must be fast enough to vibrate the two blades of the reeds together. Without enough air speed, students may be prone to squeezing the reed with their lips which makes the reed less able to vibrate, and requires more air to play!

Objective: Student uses less embouchure pressure on the reed, and works on blowing their air faster.
Side effect: Greater ease when playing, and a more vibrant, open sound.

THE EXERCISE:

1. Ask the student to play and hold half-hole D their normal way. (This is a really resonant note, and fairly stable in intonation, so they'll be able to let go of the reed with their lips without too much wild intonation change.)
2. Ask the student to play and hold half-hole D again, this time with a looser embouchure and faster air. It may take a few times for them to be able to use a looser embouchure and faster air at the same time.
   - Words/phrases to try: "Do 10% less work with your lips, and make your air 10% faster", "Your lips just hold the reed in place, and your air goes super fast", "Can you use faster air and less mouth pressure on the reed?"
3. Compare and contrast the difference in sound between the first way (their normal embouchure) and the second way (more air speed, less mouth pressure)
   - Words to use when talking about how this step will sound: vibrant, open, full.
4. Compare and contrast the difference in what they feel making the sound between the first and the second note.
   - Hopefully they feel less effort with the lips, and may have to use more effort when blowing to achieve faster air.
5. Repeat the exercise using the second embouchure/air adjustment again a few times, until the student can identify the changes in feeling and sound.
6. Practice the skill: I recommend assigning long tones or a long sustained passage without many moving notes to practice this skill. They just need to do 2 repetitions per practice session while trying for faster air and less embouchure pressure for the skill to start becoming easier.

Exercise 2:

FORWARD AIR

THE PRINCIPLES:

The angle at which air enters the reed has an effect on the tone and ease of playing. This is determined by both the angle that the reed enters the mouth, AND whether the student is blowing across the reed or down it. For American oboists (we play Long Scrape Reeds), blowing across the tip of the reed will produce more ease, and a more robust, open, and free tone color. Blowing across the reed maintains a faster air stream than blowing down the oboe.

Objective: Student blows across the reed, not down the oboe.
Side effect: A bigger potential dynamic range. The student may play louder at first, until they understand that the amount of air they blow across the reed determines their dynamic. Over time, it's easier to play soft and in tune by blowing across the reed rather than down it: blowing across the reed helps to maintain a fast air stream and thus stay in tune.

THE EXERCISE:

1. Use any note the student is comfortable with. (I still like half-hole D because it's resonant and stable) Ask the student to play and hold that note.
2. On the second repetition, instruct the student to pick a spot on the wall in front of them at their eye level. Then have them play and hold the note again, this time directing their air towards that spot they've picked out. It may take a few tries for them to be able to keep their air pointed straight ahead.
3. Compare and contrast the sound of each repetition.
4. Compare and contrast the feeling of each repetition.
5. Repeat the exercise until the student can identify the ideal sound and what physical thing they have to change to retain that sound and air direction.
6. Practice the skill: I recommend assigning long tones or a long sustained passage without many moving notes to practice this skill. They just need to do 2 repetitions of the long tone or passage while focusing on air direction to reinforce this skill.

Exercise 3:

FOCUSED AIR

Caution: Use this exercise if the student has good grasp of playing with dynamic contrast and can confidently play in the second octave.

THE PRINCIPLES:

Focused air is faster, more concentrated, and can help promote ease of playing as well as a more characteristic tone color. This concept is especially helpful for students whose sound is fuzzy or muffled, or who are having a hard time keeping consistent tone color through their dynamic range.

Objective: Student develops awareness of and ability to maintain a focal point of air within their mouth cavity as they play.
Side Effect: The student's tone color will become more consistent through the full range of the instrument, and during dynamic changes.

THE EXERCISE:

1. Start by having the student pick a note they're comfortable with. (Preferably a note that's in the staff at first). Before they play and hold that note, instruct them to imagine and feel their air coming to a focal point inside their mouth.
- Words to use to represent the focal point: a big marshmallow, a golf ball, a sphere of spinning air
2. Ask the student to repeat the exercise until they can really feel the focal point somewhere inside their mouth. Once they've found it, discuss where in the mouth cavity they feel the focal point.
3. Compare and contrast the sound produced when the student can feel the focal point to when they don't think about the focal point at all. What changes in the sound? What changes (if anything) in their embouchure? What sound do they (or you) like best?
- OPTIONAL: If the student hasn't found the sound they'd like (or that you'd like), experiment with how far forward or back the focal point sits. Generally, the closer to the teeth you move the focal point, the faster the air will spin. The exact placement of the focal point is a matter of preference, I recommend students set it in a place where it's somewhat easy to maintain.
4. Using the focal point that gets them their preferred sound, using the same note as before, ask the student to play a slow decrescendo from forte to piano. The student should keep the focal point throughout the entire decrescendo, and pay attention to what happen if they lose the focal point, and what changes in the sound at that point.
5. Practice the skill: The student should use the focal point imagery in their practice time. It's especially helpful when applied to slow, slurred scale practice and long tone </>/></> practice, or very exposed solos.

Exercise 3 for Beginners:

FUNNELED AIR

THE PRINCIPLES:

To achieve consistently fast air, it's very helpful to think of the mouth cavity as a funnel shape. This will create an open feeling in the back of the mouth, and a narrowing in the front of the mouth to funnel (focus) the air.

This broader approach to focusing air centers on encouraging the student to use a funneled shape of the inside of their mouth.

Objective: Student uses a funneled shape in the inside of their mouth when they play.
Side Effect: Student's air will be more consistently fast, and a little more focused. Fast air contributes to ease of playing. Focused air contributes to overall tone and ability to play throughout the full range of the instrument and with a large dynamic range.

VIDEOS

Exercise 1: Fast Air

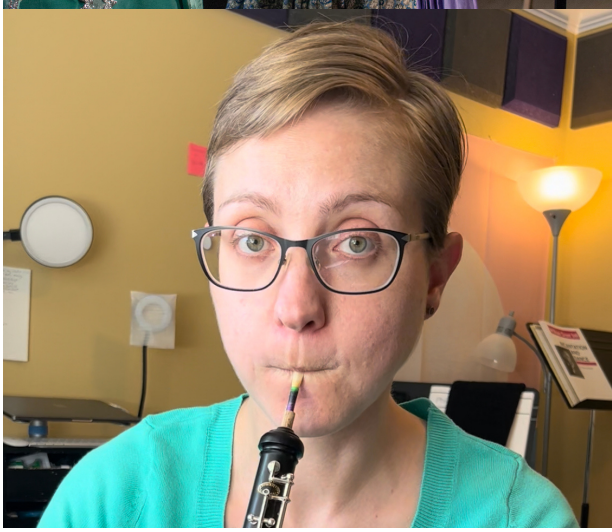
Exercise 2: Forward Air

Exercise 3: Focused Air

Each Exercise above is hyperlinked to the Unlisted YouTube video demonstrating the exercise.

Presented by:

Alli Gessner



Alli Gessner plays and teaches oboe and English horn. She earned her Master's in oboe performance from DePaul University in 2010 where she studied with Jelena Dirks. Since her recent move to San Jose, CA, she's performed with Bay Area groups including the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra, Oakland Symphony, Stockton Symphony, Sacramento Philharmonic, Symphony Silicon Valley, and One Found Sound ensemble. From 2012-17 she held the Second Oboe and English Horn chair of the Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra, as well as performing as substitute oboe and English horn for orchestras throughout Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Iowa.

Alli also loves to play chamber music, performing in small groups of 2-10 musicians. Teaching is another of Alli's passions. She maintains an active teaching schedule of students aged 9-adult. When not playing or teaching the oboe, Alli enjoys yoga, hiking, and watching or reading science fiction. You can find Alli online at www.OboeAlli.com and as "Your Oboe Auntie" on Instagram and TikTok, @OboeAlli.

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