



Music education topics of interest to stimulate motivate and inspire...

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Balancing The Clarinet Section by Dr. James Perone

Music students learn more than music - they learn of life and self-worth. You are a valuable person in the lives of your students. "Don't under-estimate the importance of your work or the responsibility that your job demands; enjoy it"

Clarinetists can present numerous challenges for the band director, from the all-too frequent "I don't have a good reed today," to the question of balance within the clarinet section, whether it be in a quartet for solo and ensemble competition, a clarinet choir or the entire band clarinet section. The acoustical challenges that lead to balance problems are many, but the solutions are really not all that difficult to find. Some of the suggestions might require a rethinking of "the way we've always done it," but they will hopefully lead to a more balanced and better-blended clarinet section.

Many, if not most, balance problems are caused by the simple fact that lower register notes do not project as well as higher register notes. Although I know better, I have on occasion asked, say, the fourth clarinet player in a Bb clarinet quartet to "play out more." The problem created by this attempted solution to the original balance problem is that the fourth clarinet player will tend to be both louder and flatter. Add to this the fact that the lower register tends to be flat to begin with, and we now have worsened a typical tuning problem. (See how the problems snowball?) Possible solutions to this scenario might be: (1) both quiet the upper parts and boost the lower ones a little, rather than boosting the low end a large amount; (2) shuffle the players around to find a better combination of players to parts (the first part doesn't necessarily have to be always played by the All Stater and the fourth by the player who thinks All State only refers to an insurance company); (3) find literature that minimizes their particular problems. Some arrangers and composers seem to be particularly sensitive to the acoustics of the instrument and write accordingly.

The tuning problem described above, by the way, can be greatly minimized by selecting a clarinet model for the section with better-balanced tuning tendencies. Some clarinets have 12ths (from low F to third space C, for example) that are wider than others (remember the problems of a flat low register to a sharp upper register).

Balance problems should actually be easier to solve when dealing with the entire clarinet section or with a clarinet choir. Here, numbers of players can be your friend. Given the projection and tuning problems described above, doesn't it seem logical that you could simply pyramid the numbers of bodies on first, second and third parts to better balance the dynamics of the parts? A personnel balance that's something like three firsts, four seconds, and five thirds would naturally balance better than dividing the 12 players evenly between the parts. I can almost hear the "buts" coming in: "We want to make every player feel like a star. If we follow Perone's personnel recommendations, won't we have three stars and nine wannabes?" My suggestion would be to rotate players around, or to use a seat assignment system similar to some conservatory wind ensembles (probably elsewhere, too) that goes something like this: the best player sits first chair, first clarinet; the second-best sits first chair, second; the third-best sits first chair, third part; and the fourth-best sits second chair, first.

The pattern continues until you have a 3-4-5 balance. If the players' performance levels drop off too greatly after the first couple of players, you can modify the system in a way that fits your situation.

While we are thinking about balance and, by extension, bend, I would like to point out that the pyramid numbers suggested earlier were not random. In my undergraduate days my teacher, David Hite, always emphasized in clarinet choir that two clarinets played in unison will always sound out-of-tune, while three will (except in extreme cases) nearly always blend much better. This is due to another of those annoying little acoustical problems with the clarinet. If you can avoid two on a part, I think you'll notice the difference.

As a clarinetist and clarinet instructor, I am probably walking on dangerous ground with this final suggestion. I have heard a number of fine bands and wind ensembles that have successfully substituted Eb flute for Eb clarinet. Of course, in some band literature, the frequently strident quality of the Eb clarinet is exactly what the composer or arranger wants (for instance, the "Witches Sabbath" from Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* just wouldn't work on Eb flute.) Generally, however, the Eb flute is easier to play in tune, has a mellower sound and can be controlled better in the upper register. You will notice a better blend in pieces with rather high and quiet Eb parts — I recall part of Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy* in which this is quite noticeable. The other advantage of this substitution is that it gives the band director one more Bb clarinet player and helps with an oversupply of flutists. One small word of advice, however; I have enough experience playing flute (yes, even a couple of rehearsals on Eb flute) to suggest that your flute players approach the instrument like a small version of the C flute, not like a big piccolo.

Due to considerations of acoustics and esprit de corps, balancing the clarinet section can be a stressful operation. I hope these ideas about utilizing your personnel are helpful, and will make configuring your clarinet section less like a tightrope walk while leaving you with a balanced, well-proportioned work of art.

Dr. James Perone, Ph.D., is assistant professor of music at Mount Union College, Alliance, Ohio, where he teaches clarinet, woodwind class and a variety of music theory classes. A frequent recitalist, Dr. Perone has also appeared as a soloist with numerous high school, college and community groups, and performed Weber's Concertino, Op. 28 with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra in 1992. He is an Armstrong clarinet artist and clinician.

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