

Advice for Beginning and Intermediate Bassoonists: steps to becoming a better player

by Richard Ramey

The day has finally come and you have been anointed to play the bassoon! The music teacher has handed over the coveted instrument, a reed, and a method book along with the admonition about the possible repair or replacement expense if you are not careful! You head home with the sounds of *Sorcerer's Apprentice* and *In the Hall of the Mountain King* dancing in your head. In reality, your first thoughts upon beginning your initial at-home practice will probably be “*how in the world does this thing fit together*” and “*why in the world can't I get a sound of anything not reminiscent of some type of injured livestock?*” “*Now what did they tell me about this reed?*” “*Is this ancient hieroglyphics or a fingering chart?*” You can easily become overwhelmed with thoughts such as “*how will I ever figure this out and still have fun playing music?*” Enter the private bassoon teacher, your own personal trainer with a wealth of bassoon mysteries to unlock with you. All it takes is a dedication to time-honored ways of practicing and you will be on the road to success.

Why do we need a private teacher? We are playing on a very difficult instrument. This is the reason why woodwind players normally begin on a more accessible instrument (the clarinet, flute, or saxophone) before tackling the bassoon. These instruments have a more logical design and fingering system and it is agreed by many educators that bassoon students should get their first wind instrument experience by playing a more mainstream instrument. Another benefit is that this experience will allow the student to produce satisfying results more quickly. Single reeds can be purchased in a variety of strengths to match the level of the player thus the players of these instruments don't have the issues that we, as bassoonists, have with reeds. Of course, commercially made bassoon reeds are available, but they are rarely ready to play out of the box without adjustments by a qualified teacher. Factor in the day-to-day playing and

changing weather that affects reed response and it's quite possible that an unaided student might easily become discouraged to the point of abandoning the instrument.

Even though a large ensemble director will try to help everyone in their group, this person has rightfully put much of their energies into helping sections with larger numbers of players. Unless they themselves are bassoonists, most of them are more knowledgeable about the instruments that make up the larger sections of their ensemble. Private instruction for the beginning bassoonist is of the utmost importance!

You may be lucky to live in a large metropolitan area where there are several bassoon teachers available. But what if you are living in a smaller town or rural area? Help is still available, but many times, you have to be creative in finding a teacher. First, contact your large ensemble director for names of bassoonists in the region who may be available for lessons. Email the bassoon instructors at the community colleges and universities in your area and ask them for the names of their own students who are available for lessons; perhaps, they may even be able to take you as a student. What happens if you can only find a teacher who lives a certain distance away that it is inconvenient for you or your parents? Again, be creative. Take a lesson every two or three weeks to ease the burden of driving to a lesson. Talk with your music friends and see if some of them are interested in taking lessons every week or two. In this case, different parents or older siblings can rotate the driving responsibilities from lesson to lesson. Ask your large ensemble director to talk with other music teachers in the district in order to locate other bassoonists who would like to study privately. A bassoon teacher may be willing to travel to your town one day every week or two in order to teach multiple lessons. Band booster organizations may be willing to fund the cost of some lessons and even help pay the teacher's gas expense to make the arrangement more appealing to the bassoon teacher. These ideas help them with additional income, but more importantly, the ideas help a school and district to build their supply of bassoonists over the long term.

What if you can't afford lessons? Again, be creative. A university bassoon instructor will charge higher fees because of their advanced education and performance

experience. You can reduce this cost by scheduling lessons less frequently. Or ask them for referrals to one of their university students. Every student that comes to these college bassoonists has unique challenges. They can practice their problem-solving skills with these young students. In addition, a bassoon teacher might be willing to barter a service from you (dog walking, house cleaning, yard work, etc.) for the lesson fee. Teachers are always happy to find a dedicated student and most will work with you on the cost.

Whether or not you end up studying with a university instructor or their students, I would recommend that you contact this person and let them know that you play the bassoon. Ask them to send you any handouts they may have; university instructors want to share information with students. They will probably put you on their mailing list so that you receive information on any future double reed activities. Ask the university instructor if they have a bassoon ensemble and if they allow non-university students to sit in. If you are at the intermediate or advanced high school level, most instructors will welcome the additional member to their group. These ensembles play a wealth of literature for this type of chamber ensemble.

Another way to gain valuable information about the bassoon and aid in your progress is by doing a Google search using various keyword combinations. As you locate informational sites about the instrument, establish a routine of visiting one or two of them each week. The International Double Reed Society (idrs.org) is a great source of information about the bassoon. They have a bassoon forum at their site that contains a wealth of information on a variety of bassoon topics. You can visit this forum anytime as a non-member. You can also join this organization as a student and receive their magazine four times a year. The IDRS holds a yearly conference in either the U.S. or at an overseas location. At each conference, there are well over 1000 attendees who hear performances by some of the world's greatest double-reed players; there are also masterclasses in which you can participate, lectures about teaching, making reeds, just about anything. A highlight is the massive exhibit space where most of the major music and double reed companies show their products. There are many instruments, tools, and accessories available for you to try. It's a wonderful opportunity for you to see exactly which bassoon gadget might fit your needs and preferences. Even if you are not in the market for a bassoon at this time, trying an

instrument will give you information about what is out there – incredibly useful for when you do decide to buy.

Up to now, I have suggested ideas on how to educate yourself about the instrument in your journey to becoming a better player but I've left out the most important idea: practice.

The more quality time spent on the instrument, the better you will become.

It is as simple as that.

You don't need to put your other interests aside, dedicating your entire life to the bassoon. You do need, however, to practice regularly (3, 4, or 5 times per week). Always make sure you are taking YOUR tempo in your practice...that is, no faster than you can play cleanly. The tempo that the ensemble director takes in rehearsals is not usually your practice tempo...you have to practice slower in order to clean up passages. Make sure that you always strive for quality (cleanliness of technique) over quantity (speed).

How to Create an Effective Practice Routine

If you are a beginning bassoonist, I realize that you may not take to a practice routine right away. This is especially true if you don't study with a private teacher (with no private teacher, the only person motivating you is yourself). A beginning musician has to work at developing a routine of assembling the instrument and going through a series of practice steps. Most of the time, the student doesn't really know what to practice and for how long. Often, they count instrument assembly and disassembly in their allotted practice time. If you have 1/2-hour set aside to practice, make sure that the time begins after the instrument is assembled, the reed is soaked, and your music is placed on the stand. In a perfect world, all of us would be practicing hours each

day. Professional musicians do practice daily or at least 4-5-6 days a week. I wouldn't expect a beginner to practice 7 days a week (but if you are so motivated, by all means, do it!). You do need to make a commitment to practicing on a regular basis. This takes self discipline. Time on the instrument is the key to getting better and playing more effortlessly.

Your goal as a beginner is to become familiar with a limited range of fingerings and smoothing out the technique of moving from one note to the next (that is, coordinating your fingers, air pressure, and tongue). Regular practice is the key to getting better on the instrument. Each week that you regularly practice, you will be slowly improving – better sound, better technical facility, better range. This is hard to realize from week to week and students can get frustrated because they seemingly don't hear any progress. To counteract this, try the following experiment. Record yourself playing a short piece of music – a couple of lines from your method book, a passage from your ensemble music, or a few scales that you know well (no more than 5 minutes of playing). Label this recording and file it away. At the beginning of each semester, record yourself again. As you listen to the accumulating number of recordings, you will be absolutely surprised at your progress. This will be a major motivational factor to keep going!

The key to effective practicing is to divide a block of time into segments and use these as economically as possible to warm up, practice scales, arpeggios, etudes, solo and ensemble music, and to sight-read. Now if you only have 1/2 hour set aside for practice, you can't fit all of these items in each time. Instead, do a few of them each practice session then alternate through a list of these items practice session to practice session. If you are a beginner, I recommend practicing 30 to 45 minutes every other weekday. This will give you enough time away from the instrument so that practicing doesn't become tedious. At this beginning stage, you are still trying to "take" to the bassoon – trying to get your own motivation to drive your desire to practice. As you become more experienced, try to fit in a weekend practice session and one additional weekday session. Then try to work in a second practice period per day. The idea is to slowly build up a regiment of practice sessions. You accomplish this by not overdoing it in the beginning (this leads to frustration), by having a solid plan for each practice

session (you need to know what to practice and for how long), and by not getting impatient and in a hurry to play fast in each session (don't slop through exercises which avoids clean technique). It is absolutely important to divide your practice time in any given day into at least two parts so that you are not trying to cram everything in one extended length of time. Two 45-minute sessions each day is much more effective than practicing 1-1/2 hours at a time. The latter may lead to frustration and a desire to not practice the next day.

At the start of each semester, plan regular weekly practice sessions as if you were taking them as a class. That is, write these times in your weekly schedule so you can visually see them and in this way, you will have more of a desire to honor these times. If possible, try to get in practice sessions while you are at school rather than waiting until the evening to start. You are more tired at night and will have a tendency to not practice. Skipping a practice session is much easier than skipping a study session for one of your classes. We usually don't have exams on a regular basis to test our progress on the bassoon (although, those studying privately do have regular lessons to prepare these can be thought of as assignments or exams). With classes, you have regularly-assigned readings and homework, and must study for quizzes and tests all giving you much more immediate feedback on how you are progressing in a particular class. If you compare that to the bassoon, seeing progress on the instrument takes more time. This is why I suggest recording yourself every semester so you'll have an aural record of your progress and be motivated to continue practice by what you hear on those recordings.

The location of your practice sessions should be free from distraction. In school practice rooms, face away from the window in the door or place a piece of paper over the glass. An exposed window can be a distraction for you as people walk by. If someone interrupts you, make the interruption quick and get back to work. At home, try to have a permanent location designated for your practice sessions; have a chair and stand permanently set in that location. Choose a room that is furthest from the center of family activity, an area where you will be left alone, with no external distractions. Turn off your phone incoming calls and texts are a distraction. Make

sure that the light is adequate so that you can see your music. Do use a music stand and not just the flat surface of a desk or opened bassoon case so you can play with proper posture.

Have all of your equipment available in one location (your main practice room) at all times so you aren't constantly having to look for these before practicing. This equipment includes: instrument, reeds, water container for reeds, music chromatic tuner, metronome, several sharpened pencils (with good erasers). If you know how to adjust reeds, add a portable high-intensity light and reed tools to the list. The final item would be a portable digital recorder so that you can record yourself every week and critique your playing. Purchase a small accessory bag to hold your music and other equipment so that you only have to transport the bag and your instrument from location to location.

Now, you've gathered your equipment and blocked out weekly practice time, you may be thinking: *"What exactly am I going to practice? There is so much material!"* As bassoonists we must put scales and arpeggios at the top of the list. Practicing these sporadically and without an organized plan is like a runner trying to do a marathon with little training – it will be incredibly difficult on the body and mind, and will take forever to run (or more appropriately, walk) the course. Likewise, you can play any type of scale right now but it will probably be very slow and the technique from note to note will not be clean. Organize your plan of practicing scales and arpeggios.

After considering the practice of scales and arpeggios (that is, working on your technique), you may have private lesson material, audition material, solo and chamber music, large ensemble material, and sight-reading to practice. This is a daunting list for sure, but organizing it into timed segments and moving from one item to the next, will be the key to steady growth of your skills. Organization of your practice session is crucial whether you are a beginner or accomplished player.

Suggested Practice Schedules

beginner practice schedule (suggested minimum):

1/2-hour each session, twice a day for 4 days a week. This gives you 4 hours of individual practice per week.

Practice before school (arriving early to school, or if needed, practice at home; this requires getting up earlier!); also practice another time during the school day. Try to get this practicing done by the end of the school day so you can concentrate on other activities and homework at night. Discipline is the key! There are times when I don't have the desire to practice. But once I get the instrument out and start practicing about 5 or 10 minutes into the session I am motivated to keep going and the time goes by quickly. You'll experience days like, but get in there and get your time done for the day.

intermediate level practice schedule (suggested minimum):

1 hour each session, twice a day for 5 days per week. Try to practice during the school day. This gives you 10 hours per week on the instrument in individual practice.

advanced high school practice schedule (suggested minimum):

1 hour each session, twice a day for 6 days per week. This give you 12 hours per week on the instrument in individual practice.

A typical 1/2-hour session should consist of the following:

- 5 minutes warm up (long tones on 1 note)
- 15 minutes selected scales/arpeggios
- 10 minutes lesson material or ensemble material
- end of session plan what you will practice in the next session

A typical 1-hour session should consist of the following:

- 5 minutes warm up (long tones on 1 note)
- 20 minutes selected scales/arpeggios
- 15 minutes lesson material
- 5 minutes tuning practice
- 10 minutes ensemble material
- 5 minutes sight-reading
- end of session plan what you will practice in the next session

Of course, you will need to adjust the times for each segment of a session depending on the amount of music you have for ensembles and lessons. As you get closer to an ensemble performance, you may need to prioritize so that more time is given to the performance that is closest on your musical horizon. However, you must practice scales/arpeggios every time you practice since they are truly the building block of strong technique.

Additional Steps to Development

Use your tuner and metronome regularly. Get to the point where you consider them your friends! These are tools that will keep you honest; they will give you instant feedback on if you are playing with a steady tempo and if you play in tune. Always

have your tuner on your stand and turned on so you can occasionally check a note's intonation. Always play a note while not looking at the tuner then look at the results on the tuner. This regular testing of your pitch is how you develop an "ear" for intonation. Other factors affecting your intonation while practicing are your embouchure and the room's temperature. As you practice, your embouchure become fatigued; your practice room may be hot initially and it will certainly increase in temperature as you practice. Both factors will contribute to higher pitches. Checking a few notes during a practice session allows you to concentrate on developing better intonation in all physical settings.

Once you have worked out technical spots in an etude, play it through in its entirety with a metronome. This will tell you if you are keeping a steady tempo. Many slower pieces of music are played in a more flexible tempo than faster etudes; this helps to create more emotion. For these slower etudes, you won't need such exacting metronome practice. The metronome is also helpful when you want to work out a short technical section in an etude. In this instance, pick a few notes of a passage that give you trouble, set the metronome to a very slow tempo, and play the notes, looping them to the beginning (that is, continue playing the notes over and over without stopping). After ten times of playing them perfect (this assumes a very slow tempo!), increase the metronome's speed by 2-3 beats per minute and loop the passage again. This is the **ONLY** way to learn a technical passage correctly the first time. You have to break down these passages into a small number of notes, then master this mini passage before moving on to the next mini passage. Play each bar slowly enough that it is perfect or near perfect **EACH TIME!** If you can't do this, slow the tempo down even more (so slow that it seems ridiculous; then repeat each measure 10 times). Playing a passage in any way other than this, with clean technique, will program technical flaws into your brain and fingers. Yes, this process does take time. Yes, there is less instant gratification. But be patient...you will be surprised at how well you have mastered the etude if you use this technique. With every piece of music that you master, you improve your technique much more because the work accomplished for that particular piece, stays "in your fingers," ready to be applied to a future etude. Conversely, if you practice sloppily, this inaccurate playing will stay in your fingers as well!

Warming up is very important. This gets the breathing and embouchure muscles ready to play in varying dynamics and ranges. Time is always a factor here, so I recommend keeping the warm-up short. Play 1 or 2 long tones then move on to your work on scales and arpeggios. Always keep track of time so you can fit most of the various segments in your practice session. It is very effective to break your practicing into 2 sessions per day. If you can't do this, then practice as much as you can. Remember: REGULAR PRACTICE is the answer to improving your technique on bassoon

Sight-read every day. Sight-reading develops one's ability to focus when performing. Most auditions feature a sight-reading component, so in order to score well on this part, you have to practice sight-reading *before* the audition. Visit your local music store and purchase a few bass clef method books (for cello, trombone, or bassoon). Each day, plan to sight-read 5 minutes. You can choose to read 2 or 3 lines on the page or the entire page. Mark the music that you have sight-read that day so you don't come back to it in a future session.

Before sight-reading, look at the music and ask yourself the following questions:

What is the time signature? What is the key signature? What is the tempo? [if metronome markings are not given, the tempo is usually indicated with an Italian word at the beginning of the piece; know what these terms mean] What is the beginning dynamic and are there any major dynamic changes later on? What mood is the music trying to portray? [you can judge this by how active the rhythm seems to be] What is the basic rhythm throughout the piece? [does it consist mainly of quarters, eights, sixteenths, or a combination?] Are there any difficult rhythmic sections? Are there any key changes? Are there any meter changes? Are there repeats?

Whatever tempo indication is given, play a conservative tempo within that general tempo range. Remember that you will always miss notes ALWAYS. Don't worry about this. The point of sight-reading is to judge how much you can FOCUS as you play, how much of the GENERAL NATURE of the piece you can grasp, and whether

you can KEEP GOING when mistakes are made. *You will never feel confident at sight-reading unless you practice it regularly.*

Keep a practice log. I always have a practice log sitting on my music stand. Each page shows a month. As I practice each day, I write down the start and stop times, then add up my total practice time for that day and enter it in the log. During my practice sessions, I will stop a few times to attend to various unrelated duties. When I do, I note the stop time; when I resume practicing, I note the start time. At the end of the day, I will add up the total time that I practiced. When I look at my practice log for the month, I can be assured that the amount of time listed is actual time playing the instrument. One of the advantages of keeping a practice log is that it keeps you honest and motivated to practice. Each month starts with an empty log and the goal, of course, is to fill up every day (or many days) with an amount of time. When I am not able to practice, I can look at this log and feel guilty for seeing blank spaces...this motivates me to do better for the next day. Save these practice logs so you can look back over many months (and years) and compare how much you have progressed on the instrument with the amount of time you have practiced (or not practiced).

Make sure that your instrument is in good working order. This is very important! Most young students will start on an instrument provided by the school. Many times, these instruments are not in good working order because of limited school budgets. Ask your ensemble director when the instrument was last examined by a repair person. If you notice problems on the instrument and the ensemble director is not able to get them fixed, have it repaired yourself. Your parents can justify this expense because the school is providing a very expensive instrument to you for no or a very nominal monthly rental charge. A proper working instrument will allow you to progress at a faster rate. I have had students who started in junior high on an inferior school instrument and learned to get around its problems to some extent. These students then bought their own instrument and were shocked at how easy it was to play. Notes were much easier to produce at a soft dynamic and certain problem notes sounded better in tune. The keywork seemed to move effortlessly. Having an instrument in good shape will give you a much better learning experience. If you are unsure if your instrument is the problem, make sure you ask your private lesson teacher to try it and

analyze what repairs might be needed. When you take the instrument to a repair person, it helps if you can document specific problems that they should address.

Keep a lesson notebook. When you begin private study, carry a notebook to record important information learned in the lesson. This information should be written down immediately after each lesson so you don't forget what was said. Your notebook will come in handy during the time between lessons when you encounter a technical or musical problem or think of a question to ask your teacher at the next lesson. Also have your notebook out during the lesson and make shorthand notes about ideas presented by your teacher. When you make entries in this book on a weekly basis, it becomes a journal of your progress throughout your years of high school and college. I still have my lesson notebooks from college and refer to them from time to time when I want to zero in on how a concept was originally presented by my teachers. Ask the teacher if you can record a lesson and listen to your playing a couple of times as part of your practice regimen. Perhaps there was an explanation that wasn't perfectly clear and hearing the presentation again via the audio can help to solidify it in your mind.

Develop your sense of intonation. There are specific tools available to help you develop your "ear," or sense of intonation. Your chromatic tuner is a good place to start. Make sure that you get a tuner or tuner app that can sound a pitch in addition to showing your pitch on a meter. Sound a pitch on the tuner and then try to play this pitch on the bassoon. Your goal is to get it perfectly in tune. How will you know when it is? By getting rid of the "beats." Play the pitch flat or sharp to the tuner's note. You should hear a rapid "wah-wah" pattern in the sound; these are the beats. As you adjust to get closer to the tuner pitch (by upward pressure of the lower jaw to raise the pitch or by lowering your jaw to lower the pitch), this wah-wah sound becomes slower, finally stopping when the two pitches match. Change to a new tuner pitch and try to match this new note. The goal is to try to match the tuner's pitch immediately; if you don't, then try to match it as quickly as possible. Over time, you'll learn to hear and feel the pitch from within before you play it on the bassoon.

Another great tool for intonation training is a tuning CD. There are a few of them on the market but the best one, in my opinion, is *The Tuning CD* (available online). This

tool contains harmonically-rich recorded pitches, each pitch lasting 3-4 minutes. The initial idea is to practice matching pitches. But you can do much more such as tuning the interval of an octave (F up to F), the 5th (F up to C), the 4th (F up to Bb), the major 3rd (F up to A), the major 6th (F up to D), the minor 3rd (F up to Ab), and the minor 7th (F up to Eb). these are the intervals contained in the music that you play each day. Some of these intervals are easier to hear in tune (the octave and 5th); some are harder to hear in tune (the 4th, major and minor 3rds and minor 7th). It is imperative for bassoonists to be able to adjust these pitches in tune while playing.

When tuning vertical harmonies, the tuning of a specific interval will be slightly different than another interval due to their acoustical tendencies. For example, when sounding 1 pitch on the tuner or tuning CD, we assume that this pitch is at the center of the tuner's meter (known as "440"; the pitch A, above the staff, sounds at 440 cycles per second). When playing the 5th of a chord, you must play it slightly sharp to the base sounding pitch for it to sound in tune (that is, for the beats to disappear).

Literally, if the tuner is calibrated to "440" and it sounds the base note of G, you will play the 5th above G the note D slightly above "440" (slightly above the center of the meter). The 4th is played slightly flat to the pitch on the tuner for it to sound in tune (no beats). Major 3rds are played very flat to the sounding pitch in order to sound in tune to our ears. Minor 3rd are played sharp to the sounding pitch. Minor 7ths are played flat to the sounding pitch. This is explained in more detail by the accompanying material with a tuning CD.

As you get better at hearing pitches before playing them, you can use the tuner in another way to better improve your ability to play in tune. Determine the key of the piece you are practicing (or the key of a short section) and sound that base pitch on the tuner. Now play the music while this tuner note is sounding and try to tune various intervals as they happen. This works best for slow melodies. For example, if the piece is in A Major, sound an A on the tuner and slowly play the melody around this ever-present pitch, exactly what you need to do in a real performance.

If you are a beginning student on bassoon, concentrate only on learning new fingerings, scales, and arpeggios very slowly. The tuning practice can be added in a few months.

Listen to accomplished bassoonists and different styles of music that use bassoon.

Knowing a good bassoon sound is important in your development. Start making a collection of recorded bassoonists. My favorites are Klaus Thunemann and Dag Jensen but there are many, many other great bassoonists. If you join the International Double Reed Society, you will have access to video of past bassoon competitions where you can hear up-and-coming bassoonists play standard works for the instrument. If you are interested in the bassoon's use in alternate styles of music, check out the recordings by jazz bassoonists Michael Rabinowitz, Paul Hanson, and Janet Grice. A group called The Clogs has recorded several CDs that use bassoon as an integral part of the ensemble. Their music falls somewhere in the folk/rock/world music category. Collecting some of these recordings will definitely inspire you to sound like those players and to think of the bassoon in a different way.

Practice with another bassoonist. As much as we try not to think this way, practicing can be monotonous. Break up this monotony by occasionally practicing scales and arpeggios with another bassoonist at your school. If both of you have upcoming auditions or are working out of the same lesson book, you can play audition material or etudes together. Playing with another person helps you concentrate more on the music...many a musician has learned to sight-read by doing extensive duo work with friends.

Although the bassoon is a challenging instrument, it is also a very rewarding one. To reap the ultimate rewards of a musician, one must be comfortable enough with the mechanics of playing the instrument to actually have fun. This is attained by having regular practice sessions (organized, of course, so that many facets of playing are addressed) and to seek out the advice of accomplished bassoonists and other musicians through lessons, listening, and reading. May you have many happy years and pleasant memories of playing the bassoon!