THE BASS CLARINETIST’S PEDAGOGICAL GUIDE TO EXCERPTS
FROM THE WIND BAND LITERATURE

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Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2015

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Student clarinet performers often encounter bass clarinet for the first time in a high school or university wind ensemble, so it is logical for clarinet pedagogues to encourage and assist their students in learning this wind band literature. In addition to becoming familiar with this oft performed repertoire, students will develop a set of specialized bass clarinet skills that one cannot learn on soprano clarinet. These skills include increased air capacity and support, timbre consistency in differing registers, intonation tendencies of the lower instrument, voicing flexibility, right hand thumb dexterity for keys that do not exist on soprano clarinet, technical facility for eleven pinky keys (as opposed to the seven pinky keys on a typical soprano clarinet0, and effective altissimo fingerings. The purpose, then, of this document is to provide a performance guide for select bass clarinet solo excerpts from the wind band literature and to provide supplemental exercises intended to help students acquire the specialized bass clarinet skill set they will need in order to perform the selected excerpts successfully. The solos discussed in this document are excerpted from H. Owen Reed’s *La Fiesta Mexicana*, Florent Schmitt’s *Dionysiaques*, Percy Grainger’s *Lincolnshire Posy*, Frank Ticheli’s *Blue Shades*, William Bolcom’s *First Symphony for Band*, and Andrew Rindfleisch’s *The Light Fantastic.*
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my teachers, Dr. Cole, Dr. Scott, and Dr. Rohwer, for their guidance, and my husband, Jorge Cruz, for his unending support. I am also very appreciative of the publishing companies who gave me permission to reproduce the musical excerpts from several incredible works for wind band, including Alfred Publishing Co., Manhattan Beach Music, Edward B. Marks Music Company Classical, and Manzo Music. All other reproduced excerpts are public domain.
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*Example 4.12: Half-Hole Altissimo Exercise*
CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The bass clarinet is one of the most versatile wind instruments in existence. With an incredibly large range that spans as low as a bassoon and as high as the middle register of a flute, the bass clarinet is apt for use by composers of modern music. It has a raw forte power and a subtlety of pianissimo that only a member of the clarinet family can achieve. The technical prowess of the bass clarinet rivals that of any woodwind, and the rich tenor quality of its tone color can easily imitate the sound of a cello.

Though its potential for soloistic virtuosity is evident, the bass clarinet is largely considered an auxiliary instrument and is often begrudgingly played by the lower-ranking members of a clarinet section. Certainly it is no secret that middle school band directors often assign bass clarinet to players in beginning classes who are not able to handle the more demanding soprano clarinet parts. Fortunately, the bass clarinet does have its champions. Virtuosi like Harry Sparnaay, Michael Lowenstern, Denis Smylie, and Eric Dolphy have made advocacy for the bass clarinet an easy argument. These players, and many others, have increased the literature for and the awareness of the instrument exponentially in the last half-century. Incredible as these artists’ accomplishments are, however, there is still only a handful of pedagogical materials for bass clarinetists who dream of achieving similar greatness.

This lack of materials presents a problem for both players and pedagogues. Students who wish to play bass clarinet need to acquire a more specialized skill set on the instrument that one simply does not learn by playing soprano clarinet, and though the pedagogical literature surrounding bass clarinet is of excellent quality, it is small in scope. Because of this
disconnect between pedagogical supply and educational demand, there is a certain fear surrounding bass clarinet. Older players may never have been exposed to the instrument before their collegiate career, and many see learning to play the bass clarinet as a mountain that is too difficult to climb through self-teaching.

Once those fears are overcome, however, mastery of the bass clarinet is an excellent professional move for any clarinetist. Indeed, many entry-level jobs for clarinetists in symphonies and pit orchestras, such as becoming an extra member of a section or a member of a substitute call list, require bass clarinet proficiency. The solo literature for bass clarinet is growing steadily, and the orchestral writing for the instrument is superb, but there is a wealth of excellent bass clarinet repertoire that has yet to be discussed or analyzed academically: the wind band literature.

Student clarinet performers often encounter bass clarinet for the first time in a high school or university wind ensemble, so it is logical for clarinet pedagogues to encourage and assist their students in learning this wind band literature. In addition to becoming familiar with this oft performed repertoire, students will develop a set of specialized bass clarinet skills that one cannot learn on soprano clarinet. These skills include increased air capacity and support, timbre consistency in differing registers, intonation tendencies of the lower instrument, voicing flexibility, right hand thumb dexterity for keys that do not exist on soprano clarinet, technical facility for eleven pinky keys (as opposed to the seven pinky keys on a typical soprano clarinet), and effective altissimo fingerings. This set of skills is generally agreed upon as the main criteria for effective bass clarinet playing by performing professionals in the field and pedagogues alike, and for this reason these skills should be analyzed academically. The purpose, then, of this
document is to provide a performance guide for select bass clarinet solo excerpts from the wind band literature and to provide supplemental exercises intended to help students acquire the specialized bass clarinet skill set they will need in order to perform the selected excerpts successfully. Not only can this document serve as a practice aid for student bass clarinetists (as they are much more likely to play bass clarinet in the context of a wind ensemble than in a solo recital setting), but it may also be useful pedagogical material for soprano clarinet teachers who have bass clarinet students. The existing pedagogical material for bass clarinet, as will be discussed in the following section, is small in scope and more resources are sorely needed. In addition, this document may be useful for professional clarinetists who wish to expand their skill set to include bass clarinet playing; the two collections of audition excerpts that are available for bass clarinet are limited to the orchestral repertoire and offer no performance advice. For those taking auditions for bass clarinet spots in professional and military bands, this document may be a highly valuable resource.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

One cannot discuss bass clarinet pedagogy without mentioning Jean-Marc Volta’s *The Bass Clarinet* (1996). Volta created a method book that is reminiscent of the renowned Hyacinthe Klosé *Method for Clarinet*; it flows with sophisticated prose as if a teacher were addressing a student. Volta has served as the principal bass clarinetist of the French National Orchestra since 1977. The concepts addressed in Volta’s book are grounded in both orchestral performance and traditional techniques, making it accessible to those beginning on the instrument. Volta provides detailed descriptions of how to execute bass clarinet techniques and uses vivid metaphors and imagery to add meaning to the dryness of a technique book. Though this method is both useful and interesting, it has its drawbacks. First, it is somewhat cumbersome to read because the only existing edition has each paragraph translated into both French and English. Second, Volta’s fingering charts and exercises are outdated because they reference a bass clarinet with only two thumb keys, while most recently manufactured models of bass clarinets have three.

The *Bass Clarinet Scale Book* (2003) by Martin Arnold fills some of the gaps existing in Volta’s method book. Arnold provides 151 practice mechanisms intended to create dexterity in the thumb and pinky fingers and also includes extended scale exercises reminiscent of those included in Carl Baermann’s method intended for soprano clarinet. Arnold’s book is a *tour de force* for technique, and he increases the difficulty level of the initial mechanisms later in the book by writing some of the exercises in bass clef, fostering an invaluable transposition skill for bass clarinetists hoping to play with an orchestra. If practiced regularly, the exercises in this
scale book can give a bass clarinetist the fluidity of technique necessary for a professional career. One of the few failings of this book is that it only makes use of the bottom two octaves of the bass clarinet, rarely going above the staff. Even the earliest examples of bass clarinet writing ascend into the high clarion and altissimo registers. Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* is perhaps the best-known example of this. In order to facilitate scale technique through all registers, a player would need to extend all exercises up at least two octaves in their head. While this practice is not entirely uncommon in clarinet technique books, it is an annoyance nonetheless. The true limitation with this book, however, lies in its lack of musical examples or etudes. There is no help given to the burgeoning bass clarinetist in the areas of musical phrasing, articulation, contrasting stylistic characters, or even common repertoire. Useful though this book is, it is purely mechanical.

Both Volta’s and Arnold’s books approach bass clarinet technique from a tonal, orchestral perspective. Many more method books for bass clarinet focus on this instrument as a harbinger of new music, including Henri Bok’s *New Techniques for the Bass Clarinet*. Written in 1989, this book is an extensive guide to contemporary techniques for bass clarinet and features circular breathing, multiphonics, microtones, and flutter tonguing, amongst other topics. Bok is a distinguished bass clarinetist, and many of the musical examples he cites when discussing these techniques come from solo works he himself commissioned and performs regularly.

Another commonly-cited guide to contemporary techniques for bass clarinetists is Michael Richards’ *The Bass Clarinet of the Twenty-First Century*. Written in 1995 as an extension of his previous work, *The Clarinet of the Twenty-First Century*, this useful book features an extensive fingering chart for bass clarinet that includes both quartertone scales and tremolo
fingerings. Though less extensive than Bok’s work, it is invaluable to those performing modern music.

It would be remiss not to mention the hybrid book, *The Bass Clarinet: A Personal History*, by Harry Sparnaay. Sparnaay begins his book with a detailed introduction to the bass clarinet and its history. He explains the complicated and varied notational systems that beginning bass clarinetists often have difficulty deciphering and includes a useful extreme-altissimo fingering chart. Sparnaay provides yet another guide to extended techniques and completes his book with a list of bass clarinetists and composers of bass clarinet music. Though Sparnaay’s book is inherently valuable, it is typically used on a case-by-case basis for those who wish to play “new music” bass clarinet solo pieces. Regretfully, many of the compositions listed and explained in this book are no longer performed.

These method books are excellent resources for aspiring bass clarinetists. There are less traditional resources that are equally valid, and are used much more frequently by a younger generation of students. Michael Lowenstern has extensive pedagogical information available on his website: www.earspasm.com. He has pedagogically-themed blog posts with entries ranging from “How to Slap Tongue” to “Why You Squeak on the Bass Clarinet”; a YouTube series entitled *So You Want to Be a Bass Clarinetist*; and an easily accessible forum in which anyone in the world can ask questions about bass clarinet techniques or equipment and receive a response in a matter of minutes. Michael Lowenstern has certainly found a way to use the Internet to bass clarinetists’ advantage. There are limitations to this forum, however. This well-intentioned pedagogical style does not necessarily work effectively for everyone. Lowenstern’s casual style of imitative teaching is sometimes difficult to grasp in a one-sided
YouTube video because it lacks especially detailed instruction. I have often tried to incorporate Lowenstern’s videos into my private lesson instruction, and while some students are able to imitate his actions in the videos easily, many are bewildered and quickly become frustrated when they cannot achieve results in the two-minute time span of the video.

Regarding bass clarinet excerpt books, there are two of substantive value. Michael Drapkin’s series in three volumes entitled *Symphonic Repertoire for the Bass Clarinet* is an essential item for any bass clarinetist seeking orchestral employment. Drapkin compiled standard solo and tutti passages commonly requested in orchestral auditions. Though this is an excellent resource, no pedagogical explanations or performance tips are included. Another indispensable orchestral bass clarinet excerpt book is a selection of excerpts from Wagner’s works entitled *Orchestral Excerpts from Operas and Concert Works for Clarinet and Bass clarinet*, edited by Frederick Hinze. Like Drapkin’s work, there is no performance advice in this book. Each of these bass excerpt books consists solely of orchestral music; there are no references that address wind band repertoire.

Currently, there are only five dissertations that focus primarily on bass clarinet. In 1990, Thomas Aber’s dissertation, *A History of the Bass Clarinet as an Orchestral and Solo Instrument in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, began the academic dialogue in favor of the bass clarinet as a stand-alone solo instrument; this resource provides an extensive bibliography of works that include bass clarinet. Daniel Paprocki’s *Chamber Music with Bass Clarinet* (2000) is an annotated bibliography of the chamber literature for bass clarinet.

Two later dissertations are performance guides to specific solo works: John Leopould’s 2009 dissertation, *The Interloping Beguiler: For Bass Clarinet and Orchestra*, and Matthew
Miracle’s 2012 dissertation, *Three Newly Commissioned Works for Bass Clarinet: A Recording and Performance Practice Guide*. The most recent dissertation, and the most useful resource this author has encountered for bass clarinet, is Brian Thomas Ebert’s *Integrated Exercises for Clarinet and Bass Clarinet*, completed in 2012. Ebert created technical exercises that can be played on both clarinet and bass clarinet to increase facility for those performers wishing to double on both instruments.

In summary, there are a few valuable resources for bass clarinetists: technical method books, collections of orchestral bass clarinet parts, and dissertations concerning performance practice for a select few pieces of music. However, the method books lack aspects of training musicality, the orchestral collections lack performance advice or even details of historical context, and there is nothing concerning the wind band repertoire. There is a need for a reference that provides what these resources lack: a venue for teaching both technique and musicality through the lens of often performed works. This document aims to assemble such a resource in order to provide a pedagogical guide to excerpts from the wind band literature for bass clarinet that includes performance advice, historical and aesthetic context of the works listed, and technical exercises that will allow the reader to not only perform the selected solos with excellence but to play the bass clarinet itself with excellence.
CHAPTER 3

GENERAL PEDAGOGICAL ADVICE

Many clarinetists first encounter the bass clarinet in the context of a wind ensemble. Accomplished soprano clarinetists find themselves assigned to bass clarinet parts for a number of reasons, and it can be an intimidating experience, particularly for someone with little to no experience on the lower instrument. If a player can succeed in mastering the bass clarinet, however, they can have a rewarding horizon of musical experiences ahead of them. Many entry-level jobs in this profession require bass clarinet skill, and the incredible parts that are being written for bass clarinet in the band literature are reason enough to start practicing. The reality is that there are different skills a player must develop in order to be successful on bass clarinet that cannot be learned on soprano clarinet. ¹ This chapter will address some basic pedagogical concepts one must master for effective bass clarinet performance.

A successful bass clarinetist must become familiar with his or her instrument. Most likely, first time players will be using a school-owned instrument that may be in a state of disrepair, so it is wise to be prepared for maintenance issues. Determining which key moves which lever is a simple yet worthwhile exercise; if a player has familiarity with the key mechanisms, he or she will be better able to identify the cause in the event something goes wrong. With a basic idea of how the mechanism functions, players gain respect for the complexity and fragility of such mechanisms. The bass clarinet’s key work system depends on the functionality of several long metal rods, some of which are up to two feet in length; these are easily bent during assembly of the instrument. When assembling the instrument, one must

make sure to place the palms of the hands on the backside of the instrument where there are no keys, grasping the joints in places where the fingers would normally press keys on the instrument. This allows the player to avoid putting pressure on the long rods, preventing many adjustment problems that would occur if these long rods were inadvertently bent. After disassembly, the player should store the bass clarinet in its case with the keys facing upwards. One must not lay the case with the key work towards the ground, as this will put unwanted pressure on more fragile mechanisms, causing the instrument to go out of proper adjustment.²

Next, a player must invest in a personal mouthpiece. All efforts applied to embouchure and voicing work are useless if a player switches mouthpieces as they switch horns. Owning a mouthpiece is essential. Regarding bass clarinet reeds, it is common to go down half a size or more in strength from that typically used for soprano clarinet performance. Of course, this is subject to the mouthpiece facing and specifications, so this rule is certainly not universal. However, proper voicing and appropriate ranges of volume are nearly impossible to achieve with a reed that is too resistant.³

Once this equipment is established, one should make sure the instrument is as closely in tune as possible. The player must play every single note with a tuner and write down the instrument’s intonation tendencies. If any notes are 10 cents or more out of tune, there may be a solution: most newer models of bass clarinets have intonation adjustment screws that almost anyone can operate (Figure 3.1). Not all bass clarinets have adjustment screws, but if an instrument does have these features, one should understand how they work.

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
Adjustment screws are tiny screws that control the pad heights on the bass clarinet that, in turn, control intonation. These screws are easily accessible with a small screwdriver and are simple to manipulate. If a note is sharp, one must find the corresponding adjustment screw for that key and screw clockwise to push the screw inward towards the pad cup. The pad height will be closer to the clarinet, making the note lower in pitch. Conversely, if a note is flat, one must screw counterclockwise to raise the pad height, and the note will become higher in pitch. For knowledgeable clarinetists, experimenting with adjustment screws is not something a repairperson needs to supervise as long as one is cautious. One should execute only a single turn or less at a time, and think logically and carefully about which key heights affect which notes. Each change in key height can have an effect on notes above and below the principal note a key primarily operates. One must remember that any number of chain reactions can occur because of each adjustment one makes to the instrument. Often, one must make sacrifices in terms of tone quality to achieve desirable intonation; for example, in order to bring a chalumeau B down enough in pitch, the note can become stuffy because the key pad is quite

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4 Ibid.
close to the tone hole. The player must weigh these options and decide what aspect is most important to his or her own playing. Compromise is the key to success in this arena.

After addressing these concerns and assuming the instrument is in playing condition, the player has a final aspect to consider before practicing or performing: neck style. There are two basic varieties of bass clarinet necks: those that enter the mouth at a “flat” angle and those that enter at a “steep” angle. The flatter style neck (Figure 3.2) is often more comfortable for saxophone players switching to bass clarinet because the mouthpiece entry angle is similar to that of an alto saxophone.

![Figure 3.2: "Flat” Angled Neck](image)

Unfortunately, there are inherent voicing problems if the bass clarinet is played with a saxophone mouthpiece entry angle, and the player is severely limited in terms of volume and range. To rectify this, players whose bass clarinets have flat necks usually change the playing position of their instrument from perpendicular to the ground to a more acute angle by shifting the bell of the instrument back between their feet and under their body. This changes the mouthpiece entry angle to be more like that of a soprano clarinet. Obviously, this changes the balance point of the instrument; therefore, these players must use a neck strap to keep the
instrument upright. Steeply angled necks (Figure 3.3), in contrast, naturally create a mouthpiece entry angle similar to that of soprano clarinet.

![Figure 3.3: “Steep” Angled Neck](image)

Because this angle is achieved through curvature in the neck, the player can keep the instrument upright, perpendicular to the ground. No neck strap is needed because the weight of the instrument is balanced on the floor peg. Some players may still prefer to shift the weight of the instrument back by putting the floor peg underneath their body and using a neck strap, as described with the “flatter” neck style playing position. This is particularly true for players with shorter arms and smaller hands. The correct playing position, then, is determined in equal parts by neck style and the player’s body proportions. The player should sit upright without tension and bring the instrument towards his or her body into a comfortable position that creates a soprano-like mouthpiece entry angle, regardless of whether the instrument ends up perpendicular to the ground or at an acute angle. Also, there are many varieties of “steep” and “flat” necks, and it is possible to find bass clarinet necks with every angle in between. The crucial idea, then, is to determine which playing position is appropriate for the equipment a player possesses.
CHAPTER 4

PEDAGOGICAL AND PERFORMANCE GUIDE TO EXCERPTS

This document contributes to the continued academic interest in bass clarinet pedagogy and performance excellence by examining selected solo excerpts from the wind band literature in depth. The list of compositions selected for this study was chosen after consultation with bass clarinet professionals active in the Dallas/Fort Worth performance community, including active members of the 531st Air National Guard Band of the Gulf Coast. This chapter provides background information regarding the compositions and composers mentioned, as well as the musical context of the solos. Most importantly, this chapter provides musical examples of the significant sections of each composition and gives detailed advice about how to perform them effectively. In addition to their relevance in professional auditions, the chosen excerpts have been specifically selected because each one showcases one or more bass clarinet specialized skills. The skills and excerpts will be paired as such: air support—La Fiesta Mexicana by Herbert Owen Reed; timbre consistency—Dionysiaques by Florent Schmitt; intonation—Lincolnshire Posy by Percy Grainger; voicing—Blue Shades by Frank Ticheli; thumb and extended pinky keys—First Symphony for Band by William Bolcom; and altissimo—The Light Fantastic by Andrew Rindfleisch. This chapter discusses each specialized skill and provides a technical exercise for each excerpt that was designed to help players acquire proficiency in said skills.

There are many more difficult and exposed solos in the wind band literature that this document does not address, and many of these solos occur even within the pieces referenced. The excerpts that are examined, however, have been chosen because they require skills that one cannot obtain through proficiency on soprano clarinet. As stated before, the bass clarinet
requires a different skill set from that of soprano clarinet, and this fact is often overlooked when players and pedagogues approach the bass clarinet for the first time. Each excerpt is accompanied by original exercises that can allow performers to attain these special skills if practiced regularly. The specialized bass clarinet skill that is discussed along with the excerpts include (in this order) air support, timbre consistency throughout registers, intonation, voicing, short articulation, thumb dexterity, altissimo control.

4.1 Air Support: La Fiesta Mexicana, Herbert Owen Reed

The initial consideration when striving for bass clarinet mastery is proper air support. More air and stronger support are necessary on bass than for soprano clarinet because the air must travel a much longer distance down the bigger instrument. The resistance a new player will encounter is significant, so developing an unshakable air column is crucial to bass clarinet mastery. When practicing, it is advisable for the player to begin with long tones. The following exercise (Example 4.1) addresses elements one must master.

Example 4.1: Long Tones

First, the player should start this exercise at the tempo of quarter = 72 and work progressively to a slower tempo of quarter = 52 in order to develop the ability to steadily hold notes as long as possible. The player should focus on supporting from the lowest, strongest place in the abdominal core, and take in deep breaths and sustain to capacity every time. One
should play with the fullest sound possible during this exercise, and a hint of edginess in the sound is a desirable effect. Soprano clarinetists usually have no trouble playing soft on bass clarinet; the new skill to assimilate is sheer volume of sound. One must be prepared to take in more mouthpiece than may initially feel comfortable. The player must find the place where the reed leaves the curve of the mouthpiece and set the bottom lip there. The bass clarinet sound can be both vibrant and brilliant, and long tone practice is the ideal way to develop a refined sound concept.

H. Owen Reed’s *La Fiesta Mexicana* contains one of the most iconic bass clarinet solos in the wind band literature. This work was composed in 1954, after the composer spent time in Mexico and was inspired to capture the exciting sounds of the local culture.⁵ *La Fiesta Mexicana* is a programmatic work. The first movement, *Prelude and Aztec Dance*, begins with a chorus of church bells tolling for the beginning of a religious festival. As the bells fade away, the bass clarinet solo begins with a somber, primordial sound that hearkens to a time before Catholicism became widespread in the region.

At rehearsal number one, the bass clarinet enters with a jarringly accented *forte* note in the low register (Example 4.2). To add an even deeper quality to this shock, the score calls for this solo to be doubled on Bb contrabass an octave below if the ensemble’s instrumentation allows. This moment is exceptionally dramatic if played correctly; it is intended to conjure dark images of the mighty Aztec warrior culture. To attain the necessary strength of the musical character and to be heard in the low register, the player has to generate a tremendous volume of sound.

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Example 4.2: Measures 1-62, mvt. I: Prelude and Aztec Dance from La Fiesta Mexicana by H. Owen Reed

When performing the solo in La Fiesta Mexicana, one must take full capacity, low breaths and exhale while engaging the core persistently with firm lower abdominal muscles as in the long tone exercise above. The accented notes require forceful air behind crisp articulation, but one should be careful to reserve enough air to make it through the phrases. Rests are placed well, and the player should be able to complete each phrase in a single breath. If performed in tandem with the Bb contrabass, however, players will likely need breaths in bar 48 before beat two and in bar 58 before beat two since the larger instrument will need to breathe more often and the two players should be consistent. These are also acceptable places to breathe if the player is unable to play the phrases in entirety without sacrificing dynamics or tone quality. One must avoid tapering the phrases on the E’s of the triplets; the music is meant to sound powerful, not elegant, so the player must drive the sound perpetually through the completion of the phrase. Phrases should be completed with strength, using diminuendo only where marked. Such style will assist in a portrayal of an ominous character. In many works, the sound of the bass clarinet alludes to an ill-omened atmosphere, so understanding how to construct “the sinister” is a crucial aspect of performing on the instrument. If a player has not
developed the kind of air support that portrays strength or power, this quality of performance will be lost.

4.2 Timbre Consistency: *Dionysiaques*, Florent Schmitt

Another challenging aspect of bass clarinet mastery is creating consistency of timbre in all registers. The upper partials of the bass clarinet have been, and continue to be, a difficult area for instrument makers to navigate. The clarion register in particular is problematic in terms of voicing, intonation, and consistency of timbre. Over the course of the instrument’s history, manufacturers used a variety of approaches to remedy these issues. Most bass clarinets made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even some bass clarinets on the market today, have one register vent (like the soprano clarinet) to aid in producing upper partials. This system presents the most difficulty in terms of voicing in the lower clarion, and the throat tone B-flat can be rather stuffy. More commonly produced by contemporary manufacturers are the doubly vented instruments. Earlier incarnations of the double register vent system necessitated two register keys. The player would depress one register key for clarion B through E-flat that opened a vent located lower on the instrument, and another register key would be used to open a vent higher on the instrument for E and above. This system allowed for a clearer throat tone B-flat and ease of voicing in the lower clarion. Obviously this presented difficulty in terms of left thumb technique, but some players were, and continue to be, successful with this manual register mechanism. Most recently manufactured bass clarinets, however, feature a double automatic register mechanism (Figure 4.1). This system only requires the use of one register key, and the different vents are opened based on a mechanism under the key operated by the right hand ring finger.
When clarion B-natural through E-flat notes are fingered, the lower register vent on the upper joint is opened, and when the player lifts the right hand ring finger for E-natural and above, the register vent on the neck is automatically opened. The higher vent is located on the neck of the instrument and the lower is located on the left side of the upper joint. The difference in the placement of these vents on the instrument causes some notes to sound fuzzy or dull while others are overly bright. These timbre inconsistencies are difficult to reconcile, but an accomplished player must know how to adjust in order to make all notes sound as similar as possible. In order to make a stuffy note clearer, some make the mistake of increasing embouchure pressure, causing the note to sound pinched. This will usually lead to voicing problems because the instrument will often jump up a partial and squeak. Similarly, as a novice bass clarinetist ascends to a clarion E-natural, (activating the register vent on the neck), the notes sound significantly clearer and the player will instinctively relax the embouchure or back

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off on air, again causing unnecessary voicing problems and squeaking. The key to overcoming these difficulties is to strive for continuity of sound through consistent air support, constant abdominal core engagement, and compensation for the more resistant notes by blowing in such a way that every note is expected to be a resistant note. If one relaxes on the notes that are naturally clear, the longer-tubed notes (those which open the lower register vent) will always sound stuffy and have a different tonal color. If the player blows for all the notes in the same way, as much air as is needed for the most resistant note on the instrument, then they will achieve a consistent timbre in all registers.

The player can use this timbre consistency exercise (Example 4.2b) to experiment with creating a consistent tone quality for all registers of the instrument.

Example 4.3: Timbre Consistency Exercise

The exercise begins on the most resistant note on the bass clarinet, B-natural, and oscillates between notes that open the lower register vent and those that open the upper vent. In addition to consistent air and a firm embouchure, finding a compromised oral cavity shape to make the dissimilar-feeling notes sound similar is the goal. The player should slur the notes in this exercise initially, but eventually he or she can practice articulating all the notes. This sort of tongue movement can alter the stability and tone quality of the note, so it is important to learn
to keep the oral cavity shape the same, even when articulating. One should change the articulation style from *legato*, to accented, to *staccato*, or to *stacatissimo* during this exercise if an added challenge is desired.

Florence Schmitt’s *Dionysiaques*, one of the staples of the wind band repertoire, features a bass clarinet solo that calls for an expert level of timbre consistency. Composed in approximately 1914, *Dionysiaques* features a chromatic flurry of escalating gestures that climax in wild intensity. Though it is not specifically programmatic, the title suggests a scene of the followers of Dionysius participating in some reckless activity.⁷

As if the composer was aware of the difficulty of timbre consistency on the bass clarinet, the solo before rehearsal 8 is actually written out for two bass clarinetists (Example 4.4) so as to mask the obvious breaks in register and tone color.

![Example 4.4: Measures 40-46 from *Dionysiaques* by Florent Schmitt](image)

Modern performance practice dictates that a single player should play the entire solo (Example 4.5). This practice is preferable because it prevents any interruption in the legato line that might occur due to inconsistencies between the two players’ sounds. However, it is also more difficult for a single player because the soloist must not let the differences in registers interrupt the line.

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Example 4.5: *Dionysiaques* Solo Written Out for a Single Player

As in the exercise above, the player should find a place of compromise in terms of abdominal support, air speed, and voicing so that all notes have the same color and quality. The marked *decrescendos* are intended as dovetail gestures to mask the entrances and exits when two players perform this solo, but when one bass clarinetist is playing all of it, he or she should hairpin appropriately, not fall away in dynamics before sustained notes. In fact, it would be quite musically satisfying if the player were to increase intensity through the moving notes. In example 4.2d, suggested hairpins are marked above the passage, while the original dovetail gestures from the score are marked below. The entire solo is a gradual *diminuendo* from *forte* to *pianissimo*, but the player has the flexibility to create ebb and flow in dynamics within this longer gesture. The player must be careful not to drop off in dynamics too quickly, however, as the last two notes of the solo (clarion C and B) are highly resistant notes. One must remember to “blow for the resistant note” as in the timbre consistency exercise. The last note of the bass clarinet solo is a handoff to a clarinet line, so the note must be audible and dovetailed into the next player’s sound.

4.3  **Intonation: Lincolnshire Posy, Percy Grainger**

Intonation is a difficult skill to master on the bass clarinet for new players, simply because many clarinetists are not acclimated to listening closely to pitches that are so low.
Many new players may assume that the intonation tendencies of the bass clarinet will be the same as soprano clarinet; unfortunately, this is not the case. In fact, several well-known tendencies of the soprano instrument are opposite those of the bass. For example “open G” is quite a flat note for many bass clarinet players. It is common for bass clarinetists to add the bottom two side keys with the right hand to bring the pitch up on this note. This can be avoided, however, because flatness in the throat tones and other left hand notes is often a product of the neck joint being pulled out too far. Players will attempt to reduce the sharpness of the entire instrument by pulling out at the neck, but unfortunately this only affects the notes played with the left hand and makes little change to longer-tube notes like B-natural. This kind of overall intonation should be monitored through use of the adjustment screws as mentioned in Chapter 3: General Pedagogical Advice. If the instrument is generally in tune with itself in the first place, one can avoid extremities of intonation problems. There will always be difficult notes, for example throat tones A through B-flat will always be sharp, but there are a few things one can do to bring the pitch down.

The soprano clarinet player’s instinct to bring these notes down may be to put down the fingers of the right hand using resonance fingerings, but because the bass instrument is larger, those keys are much too far away from the tone holes opened by A through B-flat to be of any real impact. Resonance fingerings on the bass clarinet must include keys depressed by the left hand. Shading with the left thumb is an option that provides some control for A and A-flat if the passage in question does not require much finger work.

An exercise one can practice to become familiar with the bass clarinet’s intonation tendencies is this altered long tone exercise (Example 4.6). In this exercise, the player will hold
a single throat tone while altering resonance-fingering possibilities every half note. This exercise should be practiced with a tuner so that the player can find the most effective and in-tune resonance fingerings possible for his or her instrument.

Example 4.6: Resonance Fingering Exercise
This excerpt from Percy Grainger’s *Lincolnshire Posy* (Example 4.7) is notoriously demanding in the realm of intonation. This work is based on folk songs from Lincolnshire that Grainger recorded and notated himself whilst traveling the English countryside. The third movement, “Rufford Park Poachers” (Poaching Song) is based on a folksong that tells the bloody tale of a gang of poachers who are ambushed by a small number of local gamekeepers. The tale ends in death for one unlucky soul.8

Example 4.7: Measures 1-18, mvt. III: *Rufford Park Poachers from Lincolnshire Posy* by Percy Grainger

The opening solo of this movement is challenging to perform because there are several odd meter changes, and pairs of two voices in cannon only two eighth notes apart. These pairs of voices are exactly three octaves apart. Even for players with a fastidious perception of intonation, hearing the accuracy of such a wide interval is an arduous task. To compound the level of complexity, Grainger composed two different versions of the opening to “Rufford Park Poachers.” Version A is intended for a flugelhorn solo with piccolo, solo clarinet, E-flat clarinet, and bass clarinet in the opening cannon, and version B is intended for a soprano saxophone

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solo with piccolo, oboe, alto clarinet, and bassoon in the opening canon. Grainger strongly preferred version B because of his love for the saxophone, but in his time a soprano instrument was not a staple of most bands and skilled soprano saxophone players were even more rare. Today these instruments are ubiquitous in the band world, and most directors choose to play version B. That being said, alto clarinets have lost their favor in the band world since Grainger’s time and operational instruments are often hard to find. Therefore, the general performance practice of “Rufford Park Poachers” is to play version B with the bass clarinet reading the alto clarinet cues that conveniently appear in the bass clarinet part.

To perform this excerpt successfully the player must guard against sharpness in the throat tone A. Depressing the thumb F key while opening the A key is a surprisingly effective tactic, as it is simple to finger and can bring the pitch down 15-20 cents. One can keep the thumb key depressed for Bb as well, since it is much more effective than any of the front side resonance fingerings. If necessary, the player can add the two side keys to open G in order to bring the pitch up. These resonance fingerings should be practiced slowly in order to facilitate smooth transitions between these awkwardly-fingered notes in order to avoid audible key popping or other disturbances to the legato line. The true intonation test of this opening occurs in the eighth note pick up to measure 8: the A-D interval should sound like a perfect fourth, and if the A’s are too high, the condensed interval will be obvious here.

4.4 Voicing: *Blue Shades*, Frank Ticheli

Another skill fundamental to bass clarinet performance is optimal use of voicing. Voicing refers to a combination of embouchure consistency, air speed, and oral cavity shape. The aspect of bass clarinet voicing that is most different from soprano clarinet is tongue position.
Generally tongue position is lower on the bass clarinet, and positions or syllables that are often discouraged on soprano clarinet are perfectly acceptable on bass.

Bass clarinet players need not be apprehensive about using an “oh” or “ah” syllable to add depth and color, especially in lower registers. Similarly, when approaching the upper clarion, a slightly lower tongue position (specifically the back of the tongue) will likely be more successful than the high, forward “ee” syllable that is often suggested for characteristic soprano clarinet tone. If tongue position is too high and forward inside the oral cavity, the bass clarinet may skip up to higher partials causing a squeak. Something closer to an “oo” tongue position will typically be more stable. Everyone will have different success with different tongue positions, so there is no “correct” answer as to which syllable to use. The important thing is to experiment with different voicings in order to find what is most effective in each register.

This exercise (Example 4.8) is an excellent venue for discovering effective oral cavity shapes. When practicing this exercise, one should have a heightened awareness of the embouchure formation, tongue position, air speed, and support from the beginning of the first note. Once those voicing aspects feel comfortable, the player is instructed to slide the thumb off the register key.

Example 4.8: Voicing Exercise
If all the aspects of voicing are correct, the upper partial will continue to speak. If a lower partial creeps in, sounding with a grunt, something is incorrect. The player can manipulate tongue position, air speed, embouchure formation, and general oral cavity shape in such a way to keep the higher partial. Once the lower grunt disappears, the player has found the correct voicing.

An excerpt from the wind band literature that is particularly treacherous for voicing issues is from Frank Ticheli’s *Blue Shades*. (Example 4.9) This piece is heavily influenced by the genre of Blues, and the melodic material frequently contains “blue” notes of flatted thirds, fifths, and sevenths. Ticheli remarked in his program notes for the piece, “Blue Shades burlesques some of the clichés from the Big Band era, not as a mockery of those conventions, but as a tribute. ..[it] recalls the atmosphere of a dark, smoky blues haunt.”

Example 4.9: Measures 268-290 from *Blue Shades* by Frank Ticheli. Reproduced with permission from Manhattan Beach Music Company.

The first phrase marked solo is a continuation of the soprano clarinet line, so the players must appropriately dovetail to mask the handoff. The expressive atmosphere desired is a sultry one as the contrabass clarinet continues this line, making way for the bass clarinet solo in

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measure 284. The player must begin this section with a confident tenuto accent and crescendo as marked with the rise of the line. The interval between the last B-flat of the triplet to the E-flat downbeat of the next bar should be emphasized and placed, making sure the intonation is a true perfect fourth. Rubato is appropriate since the bass clarinet has the only moving line, but one must make sure the rhythmic relationship between sixteenth notes and triplets is perceptible.

The second phrase of this solo extends higher into the tessitura and should be more intense in volume. The first F-sharp of this phrase should have more presence than the opening D-sharp of the earlier phrase. The player needs a fast air speed for the notes in the two-beat triplet of measure 289, and must maintain optimal support all the way through the clarion A. This diminuendo is inevitably where players squeak because they think they are in the proverbial clear. However, one must maintain consistent and stable voicing all the way to the completion of the phrase.

4.5 Thumb and Extended Pinky Keys: *First Symphony for Band*, William Bolcom

The most foreign aspect of bass clarinet proficiency for soprano clarinet players is technical mastery of the lower extended range. The bass clarinet has more keys than the soprano clarinet, and the keys operate bigger, more resistant mechanisms than soprano players may expect. Student model bass clarinets typically descend to a low E-flat by adding only one pinky key to the right hand. Gaining facility for this single key is not terribly difficult. However, most professional model bass clarinets extend to low C by adding several keys for both pinkies and two or three keys for the right hand thumb, depending on the model and brand of the instrument.
These “box drill” style exercises (Example 4.10) are intended to aid in gaining technical facility on these additional keys.

Example 4.10: "Box Drill" Exercise

These exercises start by alternating between a note using a pinky key and chalumeau G. The pattern circles each of the keys clockwise, then counterclockwise, and finally in a zig-zag pattern. Though these exercises are designed for instruments with low C, one could easily adapt them for various arrangements of key sets by following the pattern sequence mentioned above. The player must relax the muscles in the hands, play with as little tension as possible, and try to make efficient, healthy movements with nice curvature in the fingers to develop fluidity and strength.

One piece for band containing these difficult finger passages is William Bolcom’s First Symphony for Band (Example 4.11). According to the composer, this work is inspired by John Corigliano’s Circus Maximus, and it is a mournful, fuming work. The first movement, Ô tempora
ô mores, is described by Bolcom as “a tragic and forceful protest, laments our dark time.”¹⁰

Example 4.11: Measures 1-19, mvt. I: Ô tempora ô mores from First Symphony for Band by William Bolcom

The piece begins with a majority of the band playing in unison rhythm. It is extremely loud. Earplugs are recommended. The bass clarinet enters in measure 11 at the beginning of the second statement of the opening theme. This time the unison rhythm is piano, so exaggerating the contrast in dynamic is necessary to capture an unambiguous difference in these two statements. The solo in measure 14, however, should stand out abruptly. It is intended to sound wild. The staccato marks must not be taken too literally; the thirty-second notes are so quick that the shortness of the notes will be achieved by lightly and crisply tonguing them. The player can create the sforzando effect with a fast burst of air on the initial E-flat in measure 14. It may be tempting to finger the low D in measure 14 with a thumb key but because the previous note is a G-sharp that should be played in the right hand, the player may not be as accurate with the right thumb at this tempo. It would be prudent to finger the

low D with the left pinky key if the instrument allows.

The player should place the pinkies over the appropriate keys for these two notes during the rests in measure 13 before the solo begins to ensure success since the initial E-flat and G-sharp will be fingered the same. The player may also use this technique in measure 15, placing the left pinky on the D key and the right pinky on the E-flat key. The low C-sharp must be fingered with the thumb, so this combination of keys should facilitate smooth and quick movements. One should take care that each of the interjection motives have a *sforzando* shape that is similar to the first instance in measure 15, gradually increasing the dynamic and intensity as indicated. The *molto crescendo* in measure 18 is important transitional material to measure 19 where the rest of the ensemble joins in the rhythmic unison similar to that at the beginning, so the bass clarinet solo is vital in the build up of dramatic energy to this climactic moment.

4.6 **Altissimo: The Light Fantastic, Andrew Rindfleisch**

The most advanced bass clarinet skill this document addresses is playing in the altissimo register. To play effectively in the highest register of the bass clarinet, one must successfully develop and execute many of the concepts previously discussed (air support, timbre consistency, optimal voicing, and intonation sensitivity).

There are essentially two sets of fingerings for altissimo C-sharp through F: “half-hole” fingerings and “overblown” fingerings. The half-hole fingerings (Figure 4.2) are similar to those of soprano clarinet with one exception: the left index finger continues to depress its key, sliding down in a half-hole position exposing the small hole in the center of the key (Figure 4.3). This is unlike the soprano clarinet fingerings that require the left index finger to completely leave the key.
Exercise 4.12 offers a venue to practice this new half-hole technique. As the player goes over the break to and from the altissimo, he or she must remember to use solid air support and find proper voicings for the different notes. During this exercise, the player will notice that achieving timbre consistency is difficult, as the half-hole notes tend to sound covered and sometimes weak. For this reason, these half-hole fingerings should be used sparingly. They are excellent for *pianissimo* passages and in tutti passages with soprano instruments in which the bass player intends to blend with others’ sounds. However, the use of these fingerings is difficult to justify.
in solo passages that require *mezzo forte* or louder dynamics, timbre consistency, projection, or quick finger work. As one could imagine, using the half-hole fingerings during rapid technical passages presents quite a problem. For these reasons, the overblown fingerings are generally a better standard choice for altissimo notes.

Example 4.12: Half-Hole Altissimo Exercise

The overblown fingerings (Figure 4.4) are achieved by voicing a higher partial for a fingering whose fundamental pitch is in the throat tone register. Voicing the higher partial of an “open” G fingering produces an altissimo D, throat tone A-flat produces E-flat, and so on. Though these overblown fingerings are possible to achieve on soprano clarinet, they are seldom used because they are characteristically flat. On bass clarinet, however, these fingerings are in tune, speak easily, have a similar timbre character to the upper clarion, and are generally easier to voice. For these reasons, the use of overblown fingerings as default altissimo is highly recommended when possible. This fingering pattern only works from altissimo C-sharp to E,
though, as the overblown throat tone B-flat fingering produces an altissimo F that is too flat to be usable.

Figure 4.4: Overblown Fingerings

Exercise 4.13 will allow the player to practice voicing these overblown notes. The first half of the exercise makes the player focus on lifting the left thumb off the back thumb key and register key to achieve the overblown fingerings, since this may initially be awkward for the soprano player who may expect to keep his or her thumb firmly planted for altissimo notes.

Example 4.13: Overblown Altissimo Exercise

The second half of the exercise focuses on the player’s ability to voice the different partials, first articulating a throat tone note, and then, keeping the fingering the same, voicing the altissimo counterpart. The goal of this exercise is to ensure that the player is able to control
which note speaks based on voicing alone. If the exercise is initially too difficult, the player may add the register key to the altissimo notes in order to aid response. For example, the player would finger throat tone F-sharp with only the left index finger, and then the player would finger altissimo C-sharp with the left index finger and the register key (without the back thumb key). This practice is only recommended to help the player find the appropriate voicings and not for regular use, however; adding the register key to the overblown fingerings can often make them too sharp. The player should eventually learn to voice the overblown notes without the crutch of the register key.

An example of excellent writing for bass clarinet in the altissimo register is the third movement from Andrew Rindfleish’s *The Light Fantastic* (Example 4.14). The title of this work plays on the expression “to trip the light fantastic,” a euphemism for “going dancing.” Each of the three movements features both solos and excellent tutti writing for the bass clarinet. However the third movement could easily be confused with a bass clarinet concerto since the instrument is showcased to such a great extent. Entitled *Do the Hustle*, this movement is based on the disco classic popularized by dance culture in the 1970s. The rhythms of this piece are lifted directly from the popular song, and the bass clarinetist acts as the dominant expressive voice throughout the movement.11

The movement begins with sporadic bell tones in the brass interrupted by “hustle” rhythmic figures in the woodwinds, and the bass clarinet enters as the introduction comes to an initial climax in bars 39-41. Incredibly, the bass clarinet is scored in the same register as the high brass in these measures.

Example 4.14: Measures 39-73, mvt. III: *Do the Hustle* from *The Light Fantastic* by Andrew Rindfleisch
Appropriate fingerings for these extreme altissimo notes can be found in Appendix A: Altissimo Fingering Chart. As the full band drops out in bar 42, the bass clarinet is left alone on the altissimo A’s. If performed properly, the audience will likely experience a sense of surprise at the ability of the bass clarinet to play in such a range.

In bars 43 and 44, the altissimo D should be fingered as an overblown note for both ease of technique and bright tone color. The F-natural in bar 44 must be fingered with the half-hole fingering, and then the player can switch back to the overblown D. Bar 47 is indicated to be aggressive and funky, and the best way to achieve this sound is with heavy air accents on the low E’s, keeping the jaw as open as possible to allow the reed to vibrate as much as possible.

The player must be careful not to clip the clarion D’s in bar 47 with the tongue, as this will likely cause the next low E overblow a partial too high. The player should think of the E as a beginning rather than the D as an ending. To facilitate a clean, heavy accent on the following low E’s, the player can use an aggressive “TAH” articulation. During the large interval jumps in the bars that follow, this process should be repeated, and the player must be careful to keep the jaw open, as if every note were a low E. This will prevent squeaking or lack of response from the lower notes. The player must observe the molto sfzp-crescendo markings on the long notes in bars 51 and 53, so that the style is consistent with that of the pop music that inspired this movement.

The glissandi up to the altissimo F’s in bars 57 and 59 should be executed with voicing and not as a portamento, just as one would on soprano clarinet. In measures 61 and following, the player is required to switch from a half-hole altissimo note to a regularly fingered note, so the soloist must take caution to accurately cover the small hole with the left index finger.
thoroughly when required. The grace note C-sharp in measure 67 should be fingered with an
overblown fingering, to achieve the brazen color required in this solo, and the D should be
overblown as well. If the player struggles to keep the correct partial during the *molto sfzp-
crescendo* figure, they can add the register key to the overblown notes for safety. Though it will
make the notes sharp, it will ensure the proper partial comes out.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

The bass clarinet is an instrument of both expressive power and subtlety, and it deserves to be studied in the realm of musical academia. The instrument is often neglected in clarinetists’ performance educations, unfortunately, due to a lack of both pedagogical materials and student-level appropriate solo literature. There are phenomena in the wind band literature, however, that provide solo performance opportunities for beginning bass clarinetists that are both artistically satisfying and appropriate for pedagogical use. Since the playing in a wind band is generally a bass clarinetist’s first encounter with the instrument, it is logical that students interested in the instrument should study this valuable set of literature.

The bass clarinet is significantly different than the soprano clarinet, and thus its pedagogy should differ appropriately. There are several specialized skills that players must master before they will gain proficiency on the bass clarinet: increased air support, timbre consistency in all registers, awareness of intonation tendencies, appropriate voicing, facility on the extended pinky and thumb keys, and suitable fingering choices in the altissimo register. This document addresses all these concerns, and through practicing the provided exercises along with the wind band excerpts, a player will be able to successfully and confidently perform on the bass clarinet. Equally, pedagogues with students interested in playing bass clarinet can use these materials as structured lesson plans to effectively teach the instrument.
APPENDIX

ALTISSIMO FINGERING CHART
REFERENCES


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