

Bassoon Embouchure and Intonation

by Susan Hess

Are you tired of intonation problems? Although a poorly adjusted bassoon or a bad reed may cause these problems, a major source of intonation problems is a bad embouchure. What is an embouchure? According to Webster's dictionary, an embouchure is "the shaping of the lips, tongue, etc., in producing a musical tone..." The key word in this definition is "musical tone." The embouchure (along with breath support) is the foundation of our tone production and has a major impact on the evenness of tone and intonation.

Tightness is the most common problem with a bassoonist's embouchure. This tightness creates too much pressure on the reed and decreases its vibration. This results in a tight and pinched sound with the overall pitch being too sharp. What causes this tightness? Usually clamping your teeth down on the reed (biting the reed) results in closing off the opening of reed and decreasing the vibrations. The vibrations are what produce the sound, and therefore it is detrimental to restrict these vibrations.

What is the proper embouchure and how do you form it? A loose embouchure with even pressure around the reed is the ideal embouchure (Fig. 1). Begin by looking in the mirror. Say "moo" or "oh" or try yawning. Notice that your jaw is elongated and that there is a space between your top and bottom molars (you can feel this with your tongue). Now that you have your mouth in the "moo" or yawning position, try drawing the corners of your mouth towards your front teeth as if you are going to whistle. This should result in a tightening of the corners of your mouth; make sure your top and bottom lips are still loose. The reason for tightening the corners of your mouth is to counteract the biting tendency with an inward pressure. This helps to create an even pressure all around the reed. A helpful phrase to remember is "**maintain your corners.**"

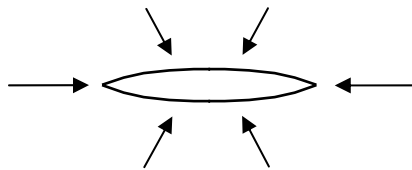


Fig. 1

The next step in building your embouchure is to incorporate a slight overbite. The upper lip should be close to the first wire of the reed. The lower lip should be behind the upper lip. There should not be too much flesh of the lip lying on top of the blade of the reed. The lips should be loosely curled under, as opposed to pursed, to create a cushion between the teeth and the reed. The best way to practice this is in front of a mirror, first, with your reed alone, then, with your reed on your instrument. If you have problems with the fleshy part of your lip showing, use the reed as it enters your mouth to drag your lips under your teeth (Fig. 2).

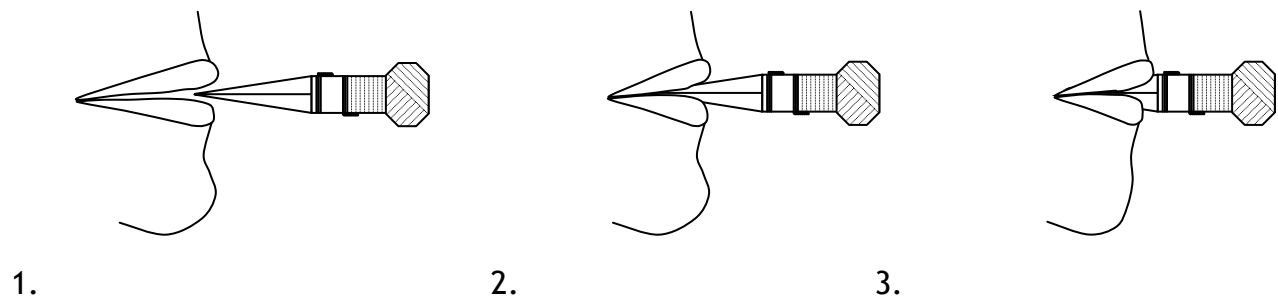


Fig. 2

Exercises:

1. Practice long tones. Play an F major scale, starting on low F, one octave, **very, very** slowly (whole notes or longer). While holding each note, experiment with your embouchure, trying to find the roundest and darkest tone. Use a mirror so that you can visualize exactly what you are doing. You can't be too loose (unless air is escaping)!
2. Practice with a mirror. Try to be aware of when you slip back to a tighter embouchure. Don't be surprised if your lips and cheeks get tired. Loose doesn't mean easy and lazy. You are using new muscles, so take it slow and easy.
3. Think about maintaining your corners to create equal pressure on the reed.
4. Practice with a tuner. Borrow your band director's tuner or purchase one of your own. Play around with your embouchure until the notes are in tune.

Good luck on your new embouchure! Just be patient and the results should please you. If you have any questions, feel free to call me at 208-885-6232 or e-mail me at shess@uidaho.edu.

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