

General practice suggestions for all grade levels

- *More slow practice.* The best thing we can do when learning a new piece – especially one you have a lot of time to learn, like this one – is to practice very slowly for a long time (weeks!) focusing on basics: a beautiful tone on every note, good intonation, correct rhythms, following written articulations and dynamics, etc. "Very slowly" means a tempo that feels easy to you, and at which you can play the passage more-or-less perfectly several times in a row; this might initially be as slow as 1/3 or less of your final goal tempo.
- *Enjoy your sound, and sing!* One secret of a beautiful sound is to always enjoy the sound you are making as you play. Practice a vocal approach to the bassoon: pretend you are literally singing as you play, not just blowing air. Your throat should always feel open, like it is at the beginning of a yawn. Fill up the bassoon with air and feel each note resonate in your body.
- *Work on a proper bassoon embouchure.* This is a round, whistle-shaped embouchure with a healthy amount of reed (usually at least 2/3 of the blade) in the mouth. Thinking of a whistle or "kissy face" shape drops your jaw and pushes the corners of your mouth forward: voilà, a bassoon embouchure!
- *Match the sound and volume of the low register in the high register.* Playing in the middle and high registers requires faster, more pressurized air and maintaining a round embouchure (not biting or "smiling") as you ascend.
- *No tongue-stopped staccatos.* Say "tuh" and not "tut" to make a staccato so the end of the note is resonant and not clipped. You can discover if you are doing this properly by doing a mental "tongue check" after a single staccato note: is your tongue on the reed? It shouldn't be. This requires a strong burst of air initiated with a punch from your abdominal muscles, like a deep "Santa Claus" laugh. It is OK – indeed, it is necessary – to move your jaw to make round, bouncy staccatos on the bassoon.
- *Plan your breaths carefully and stick to your plan.* Breaths should always make musical sense. Don't simply breathe when you run out of air; make sure you have enough air to achieve the dynamic and character you need at any moment. Mark in your breaths so you remember where to take them and as a reminder to take good ones.
- *If you don't know about flicking, learn about it and always do it!* "Flicking," or depressing left-hand thumb keys to start pitches around middle C that tend to crack or be difficult to sustain, is a crucial part of bassoon technique. To start, I recommend simply holding down the flick key for the duration of these notes – make it a part of your regular fingering. Flick keys are as follows: for A (top line, bass clef), depress the high A key (the key above the C# thumb key); for the neighboring B-flat, B, and C, depress the high C key (the next key higher, two above the C# key).
- *Practice with a metronome.* Once you have learned the notes and rhythms very slowly, use the metronome to work your piece up to tempo, keeping track of the tempos you reach each day in your music. Before your performance, also practice without a metronome to make sure you can sustain the pulse internally.
- *Use a drone to practice in a tonal context.* There are many websites and tuners that can provide a sustained pitch of your choosing. Set one on the tonic (key note) of your etude and play with it. You will be surprised at how much this can help your intonation! Of

course, the aid of a tuner is vital to find the tendency of each note. You need to learn where to aim for each pitch on the bassoon – not a single one is in tune!

- *Practice in chunks.* Identify any difficult spots – a single interval, a beat, a measure – and work on them in isolation. Practice an "inch" of music; then add an inch on either side to integrate the chunk into the rest of the piece.
- *Varied practice is crucial.* There are many ways to vary your practice: changing the rhythm of the chunk (opposing dotted rhythms, long-short / short-long, are good to work out knotty passages) and starting on the last note of the chunk and adding one note at a time while maintaining the written rhythms are two suggestions. Ask your band director for more ideas!
- *Music is about communication.* What characters or emotions are communicating? When do they change? What story are you telling? Write one or two adjectives down to describe each section of music. You might also pretend you are dressing up as a character for Halloween! You've got to have a clear plan for your piece and practice the plan – you should not try to "wing it" or "feel it" in the moment.
- *Record yourself and play for others.* The feedback and performance experience you get from doing these things is extraordinarily valuable. The best way to practice performing is to perform.
- *Have fun.* Remember, playing music should be fun! Good practicing is hard work, to be sure; but when it's time for the performance and you've worked as hard as you can, it's time to enjoy the music and the sound you make as you play.

Junior Bassoon: Audition solo 1B, Allegretto

This solo alternates between smooth, flowing passages and music that is bouncy and full of spirit. To achieve a singing line, as in the two phrases that start the piece (measures 1-5 and 6-9), you have to have plenty of air and keep the air moving forward constantly. So make sure to take a full, low, relaxed breath at the beginning of the piece and before each phrase, and work with the muscles in your stomach to create a stream of air that feels “pressurized.”

It is important to distinguish between slurs and phrases: measures 1-5 comprise one phrase (one musical thought, like a sentence) even though there are two different slur markings within it. So it is best not to breath after the F in measure 3 (really measure 2, but here the first pickup beats are numbered as a measure). Rather, move the air through the F and smoothly tongue the G on beat three – the phrase continues until its goal, the B-flat on beat one of bar 5. Another spot like this, where you should avoid breathing and connect slurred music within a longer phrase, occurs in measure 19.

The main technical pitfalls in this etude are the constant crossing of the bassoon’s “break” between F and G and the use of a lot of notes at the top of the staff (like B-flat) that ideally need to be flicked in order to speak properly (I’ve written some notes about flicking in my general comments, above). Be careful that you maintain a curved left-hand index finger with the tip of your finger, near the fingernail, on the hole; when moving from F to G you’ve got to land right on a half-hole, which takes some practice. Faster air on the G and higher notes in the

second octave is necessary for these pitches to have a full sound. Proper fingerings are, of course, very important: use your resonance key (left-hand pinky, top key) on half-hole G, use the whisper key on G and below, and make sure you do are *not* depressing the whisper key on A and above!

In addition to good technique, rhythm, and intonation, you will be evaluated on your ability to achieve the written dynamic contrasts and character changes in this piece. Make sure when you play *mezzo forte* and *forte* (which appears just once, measures 27-28) you really feel like you are working hard to achieve a nice full sound; likewise, when you play *mezzo piano* or *piano*, work to play softly, still with a beautiful, singing sound of course! If you don't know it, look up the translation of the Italian "dolce" and "con spirito" – these are big clues as to the etude's two prevailing musical characters. You've got to literally try to feel these emotions as you play in order for them to come across!

Practice well, and feel free to contact me if you have any questions!

Clinic Bassoon: Audition Solo 2B, Allegro spiritoso

This solo maintains a buoyant, spirited character throughout. In both your preparation and in the audition itself, it will be vitally important to have this idea clearly in mind before you start playing. The staccato eighths that pepper the solo throughout are crucial ways you can achieve a sense of buoyancy and joy: really make them bouncy, and do not stop them with your tongue! (See my notes on playing a proper staccato in the general comments, above).

Rhythmic accuracy is important in any context; this etude, in particular, has some rhythmic challenges. Some are perhaps obvious: moving smoothly between eighths and triplets, as in measures 3, 11, 14, 20, 25, and 26; coming off of downbeat quarter and eighth rests properly, as in bars 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16, 21, 25, and 26 (for this, you've got to really feel the downbeat in your body, like a bass drum pounding "boom" to start these measures). One that may not be so obvious is the tendency you will probably have to rush. This is something I noticed myself when I recorded this piece! Be particularly careful to lay back and feel nice and steady in measures 5, 7, 17-18, and 27-28. Practicing with a metronome helps, of course; but at some point you need to take charge of the pulse without a metronome, so try recording this etude and then clapping along as you listen.

Properly timed and executed breaths are a crucial part of playing any wind instrument. Make sure not to simply play until you run out of air: breathe with enough frequency so you always have the amount of air you need to make the sound you want to make! Sometimes, though, I have to fight the tendency to breathe simply because I see a rest in the music. Ideally, breaths should occur in places that work well musically, as any breath can disrupt the musical line or phrase. For example, don't breathe after the downbeat of measure 4; rather, wait until the phrase ends and take a nice breath on the first beat of bar 5. Other places that you'll need to decide where beathing works best for you include bars 9-10 (do you need to breath during any

of these rests? If you do, the downbeat of measure 10 is best), bar 16 (make sure you get a good breath before, and not after, the F on beat 4, since it belongs to the next phrase), and, in the “b” ending, bars 25-26 (do you need to breath on the downbeat of bar 26? At the end of bar 26? Can you tell what I do on the recording?)

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Senior Bassoon: Audition Solo 3B, Andante cantabile / Allegro agitato

This etude provides a wonderful opportunity to showcase (I could have used the word “test,” but let’s look at this positively, shall we!) your ability to play both slow, controlled, lyrical music and dramatic, rhythmically tricky technical passages. The two contrasting sections are connected by key (E minor) and some subtle melodic and rhythmic similarities (note, for example, the rhythm of two sixteenths followed by an eighth that occurs in both bars 7-8 and 31-32, or the dotted rhythms of bar 3 and bars 13, 17, 26, and 33). However, by and large they can be treated and practiced like two entirely different little solos, each with its own distinct character and musical ideas.

In the singing “Andante cantabile” section, make sure to use a legato tongue to connect slurred passages that occur within the same phrase (for example, make a smooth connection between the low E and D# in bar 1). Intonation can be tricky, as the melody traverses a very wide range within the span of just a few measures; spot check, in particular, important structural notes like low E, second-line B, D# in the staff, and high G. (Fingering hints: add your low C# key to lower the pitch of low E, which is usually quite sharp; finger D# in the staff 1-3-4 / 2 B-flat; always use your whisper key on high G). Try practicing this entire section with an E drone (you can find one online or on a app like Tonal Energy) to play within a pitch context – or purchase and use the piano accompaniments and duet versions these etudes come with!

Make decisions about breathing that work well musically and allow you to have enough air to make the sound and volume you desire (strive for a large dynamic range!) I breathe every two bars until the final phrase (so, after bar 2, 4, 6, and on beat 2 of measure 8). Good breathing is especially important so you have enough air to make a really full crescendo as you climb the melodic staircase of measures 7-9 – the overall goal here, I think, is the downbeat of bar 9, at which point you may choose to slowly get softer as the line descends. It may help you to calibrate this crescendo and decrescendo by thinking of the music in discreet units (for example, bar 7 beats 1-3; then pickups to bar 8 and beat one of that bar; etc.), each getting slightly louder as the line rises and softer as it falls. To pull off a good crescendo you can’t begin too loudly, so start measure 7 relatively softly!

A significant challenge of the dramatic “Allegro agitato” section is the 5/8 meter that begins and ends it. Note that the eighths are grouped either 3+2 or 2+3 (do you know where the 2+3 bars are in each phrase, and what large-scale pattern this creates?). As such, 5/8 is called an “asymmetrical meter” since is felt – and would be conducted – in two beats of unequal length.

Try conducting along in a two-pattern (shaped like the letter V, out – in) as you say steady numbers at the speed of the eighth notes: in the 3+2 bars, this would be ONE-two-three FOUR-five / ONE-two-three FOUR-five etc. The crucial thing to remember when transitioning between 5/8 and 4/4 in bars 18-19, 24-25, and 30-31 is that the speed of the eighths remains perfectly steady. You can try setting a metronome at this speed – this is 232 if you reach the marked tempo goal, though of course you'll want to start much more slowly – and singing the rhythms, then playing them, to make sure the eighth-note divisions of the beat are constant throughout.

The accents and staccatos that pervade all but the *cantabile* section of the “Allegro agitato” enliven the music and help it achieve its dramatic, fiery character. Really go for each accent, and to make the accents stand out, play notes *without* an accent relatively lightly. Remember that the bassoon is called a wind instrument and not a “tongue instrument”; accents and staccatos at this speed are done primarily with punches of air from your gut rather than an overly-heavy tongue.

Practice well, and feel free to contact me if you have any questions!