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The Art of Slurring

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This article appeared in with the following Editor's Note:

"Readers of SYMPHONY are well acquainted with Mr. Bonade through reading his monthly feature column, 'Scoring for Woods.' That Mr. Bonade is an authority on the clarinet is amply demonstrated by the fact that over a third of the solo clarinetists of our major symphony orchestras are his former students."

Slurring on the clarinet has always been, in my estimation, the greatest problem for the artist wishing to phrase and sing beautifully on his instrument. The root of this problem is the "single" reed vibrating against the hard surface of the lay of the mouthpiece. Anyone can notice that players of the oboe or bassoon have more facilities for sustaining the tone, while playing a phrase, without distorting the real sound of their respective instruments. When an oboist plays forte it sounds like an oboe. When the clarinetist plays very loud, it takes a lot of skill and flexibility of embouchure to keep the quality of tone true as in a mezzo forte. The single reed is a great help in fast passages. The pressure of the teeth on the upper part of the mouthpiece gives a solid grip, and consequently steadies the embouchure when the fast motion of the fingers would otherwise unbalance the instrument in the mouth. But when it comes to slow phrasing passages, the upper unvibrating part is a handicap that a good clarinetist has to overcome with his own skill.

For a flexible tone and for properly sustaining tone, the first principle is to bear in mind that one gets tone by making the reed vibrate—not by blowing loud and in an uncontrolled fashion. Therefore the structure of the reed, its build, must be scientifically correct to produce the vibrations, although squeezed by the lip. The reed vibrates in the mouth, but also vibrates under the lower lip where it is controlled. The reed under the lip must be flexible to allow ore or less pressure according to the amount of wind going forth into the clarinet. An overly strong lip (having too much resistance) is good when playing forte or double forte, but will give a fuzzy tone in a piano passage, even if the tip of the reed is thin. But in the opposite way, if the reed is too thin at the tip, the player will squeak when playing staccato, and so on, until one learns to play a well-balanced reed.

Now that we have investigated the reed structure, and considering that a reed is well built, the next step in acquiring a well-balanced tone is the wind pressure. When playing an interval of more than a fifth, an inexperienced player will usually sound like "jumping the skip," meaning by this expression that the space between the two notes is bare of tone—that the tone is not carried over from one note to the other. This occurs because of lack of wind pressure when the fingers are moving. The inside of the interval is what is important. What is "between" the notes makes the slur of the interval; not the starting note and the finishing note. One can get a good example of what I am explaining by singing full voice an octave or a fifth. One will discover that the voice, which is the most perfect instrument of all, makes a perfect slur of any interval, because one would not stop between notes or choke his voice in that slurring. Yet that is exactly what happens when an inexperienced player tries to slur slowly from one note to another, especially on larger intervals. The main reason is that the greatest defect of clarinet players is choking the reed when playing piano by pinching it too much and relaxing when playing forte. The exact contrary should take place. The reed should be pressed hard when a lot of wind is used, and relaxed when playing piano in order not to prevent the reed from vibrating.

Next in line is the motion of the fingers on the instrument. In other words, when phrasing one should take as much care as possible to avoid the "slap" of the fingers on the instrument. For my taste, the worst thing that can happen, detracting from otherwise good playing or phrasing, is to hear more finger action than actual

sound, and this applies to all woodwind instruments. What is more beautiful than to hear a well-phrased solo played seemingly without effort? A phrase should be like a song, as though produced by a divine voice, without any reminder of the difficulties the player has to cope with. Of course, I have to admit that at certain times, the physical side of the instrument is quite impossible to hide; but if the player has the desire to make his sound as close as possible to perfection, then a great deal has already been achieved. This desire is what will keep one forever improving; trying to reach the unreachable perfection.