Clarinet Articulation

Tips from the International Clarinet Associations Pedagogy Committee

INTERNATIONAL CLARINET ASSOCIATION

Who are we?

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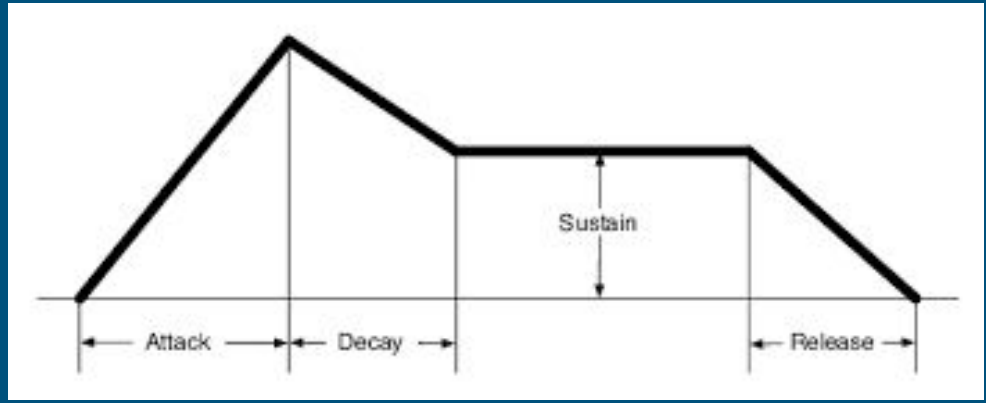
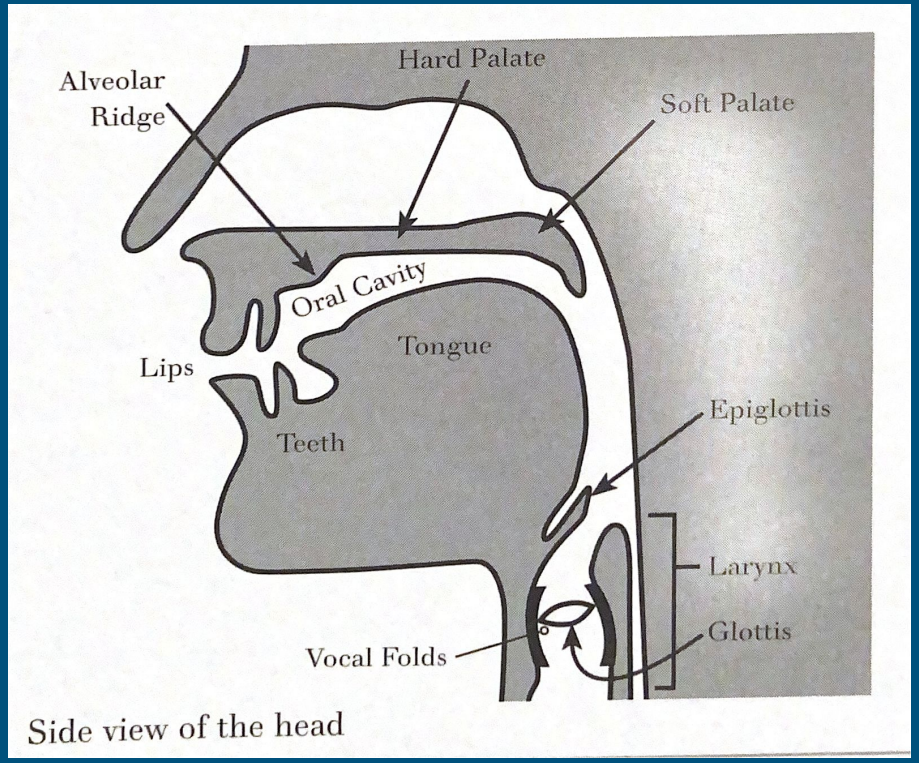
Definitions:
What is articulation and why is it important?

- Parts of a note: Attack, Decay, Sustain, Release
- How we start and end each note is what makes each instrument unique
- Articulation is one of the ways we interpret music
- Like an artist with a blank canvas, silence is our blank canvas and we need to be aware of how we enter and exit silence.

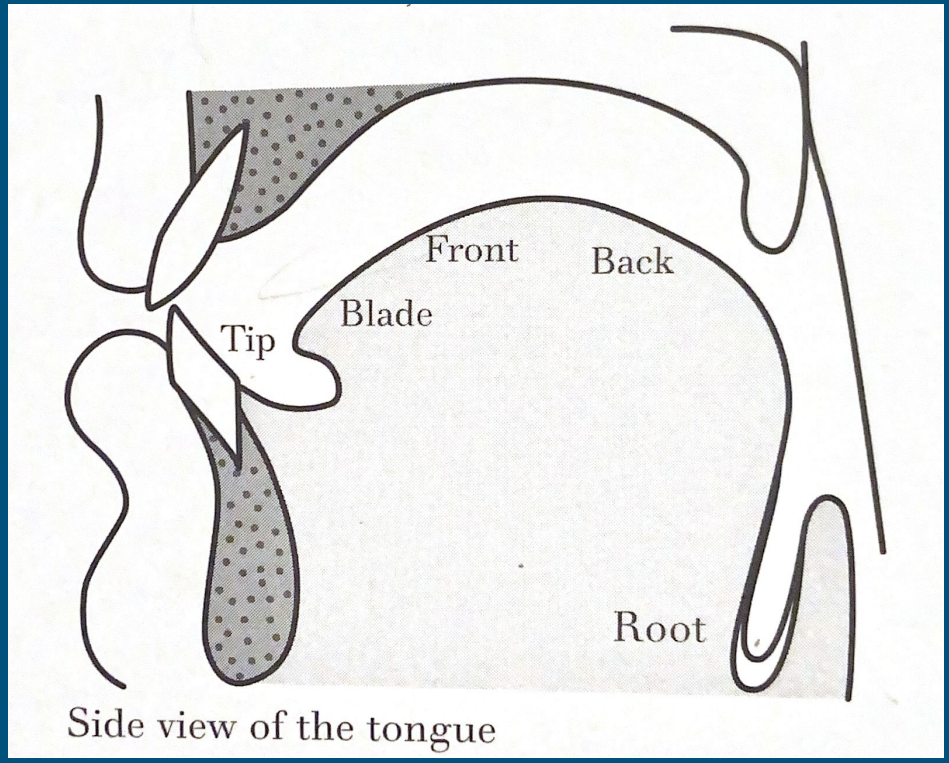


Lingual Awareness: Parts of the Tongue

Diagram source:
Paul Harris, *The Clarinet* (2022)



Side view of the head



Side view of the tongue

The Tongue

Consists of 9 muscles

- 5 Extrinsic: controls global movements, attaches the tongue to external structures
- 4 Intrinsic: controls fine movements and shapes within the tongue
- Allow complex motion and shapes
  - Swallowing
  - Speech
  - ...Clarinet!
- Muscular Hydrostat
  - The tongue can change shape, but not volume

Prerequisites: Embouchure Basics

Use a mirror - It is our best tool!

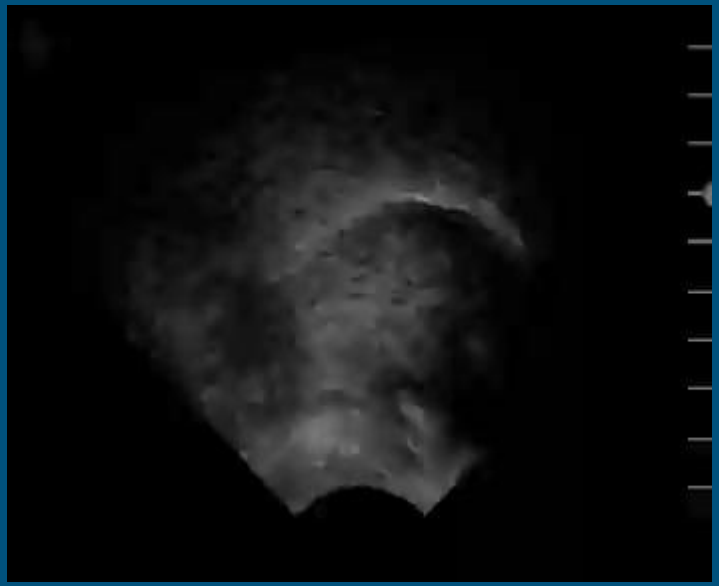
1. Bottom lip against teeth (the bottom lip should not disappear)
2. Point chin – (look for the chin valley)
3. Top teeth sit on top of the mouthpiece
4. Corners in – (look for dimples)
5. 30-45 degree angle
6. Right-hand thumb pushes up (feel this pressure against the top teeth to keep horn secure)

Your students should be able to make a basic clarinet embouchure *away* from the instrument. First use a straw, then move to the mouthpiece and barrel.

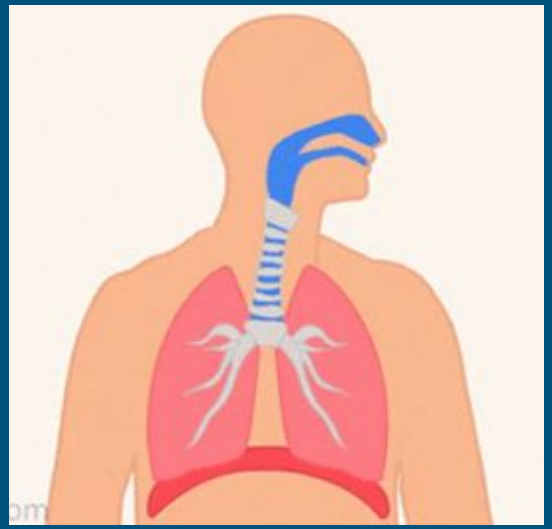
Prerequisites: Inner Embouchure/Voicing

- What happens inside the mouth is critical for successful performance
- Tongue position affects the acoustic interaction between the vocal tract and the clarinet–a system separate from air and articulation
- The tongue is dynamic, not static, especially above E5
- Proper tongue position allows us to play the full range of the instrument with flexible intonation, characteristic tone quality, and numerous special effects

This is what it looks like (tip on right)



Prerequisites: Air



- Air is at the core of clarinet playing!
- Air and tongue are independent but cooperative.
- How to take a healthy breath:
  - Hold your hand with the pointer finger across your open mouth
  - Ensuring you are grounded, take a deep breath and listen for a “noisy, low-pitched sound”
  - After inhaling, move the hand approximately 8 inches away from the face
  - Blow a steady and supported air stream toward your hand
  - Always *breathe to expand*, rather than focusing on the expansion itself

The Basics: Tip to Tip

Tongue placement on the reed is critical for clarity and speed.

- Tip of the tongue touches the edge of the reed
- Touching too low can cause pitch issues and “junky” articulation
- Touching too high is rarely a problem if the mouthpiece is at an appropriate angle.

Three initial steps:

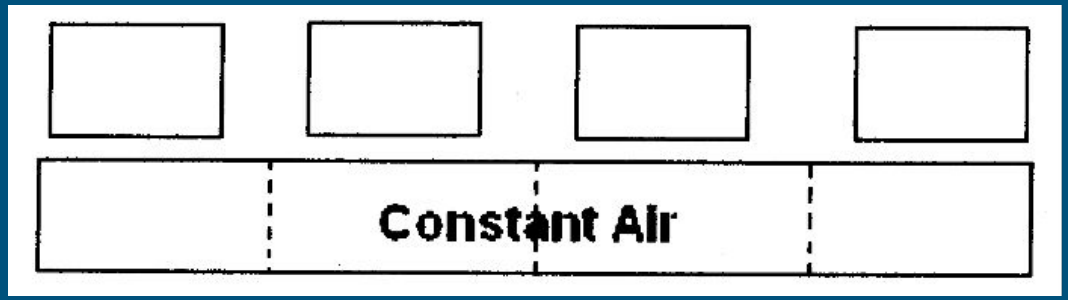
1. Identify the tip of the tongue
2. Identify the edge of the reed
3. LOTS of target practice!

Stages of Starting Notes

1. First, identify the tip of your tongue.
    a. Use a fingernail to scratch the tip of your tongue, preferably in front of a mirror. Is this where you thought it was? Is it where you make contact with the reed?
    b. Many people think their tongue tip is further back than it really is.
2. Stick out your tongue and place the tip of your reed on your tip that you just identified.
3. Bring your mouthpiece into your mouth *without removing your tongue from the reed or moving it*. Repeat this step a few times.
4. Form your embouchure.
5. Compress your air as if you are about to play.
6. Release the reed so you can blow that compressed air through the clarinet.

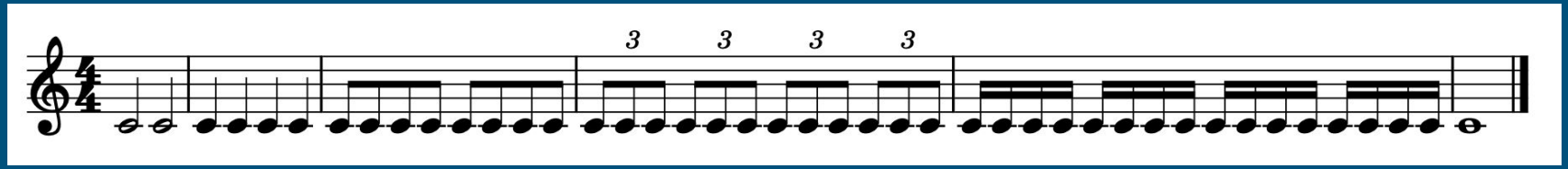
Let’s incorporate this!

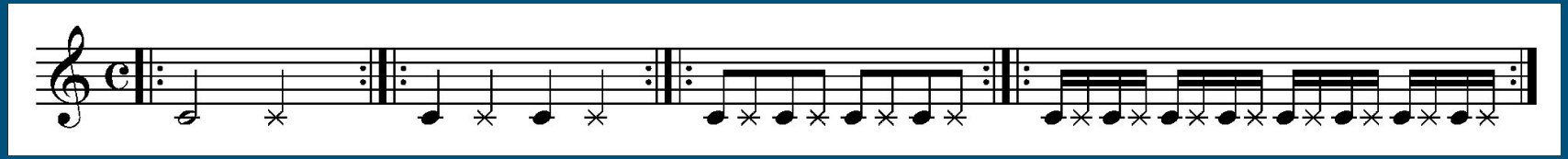
- Using barrel/mouthpiece on a (roughly) concert F# sustain a long note with no pitch fluctuations.
- Then have them touch the tip of their tongue to the tip of the reed under one breath - this is legato!
- Listen for consistent air and pitch bends



Articulation Styles: Legato

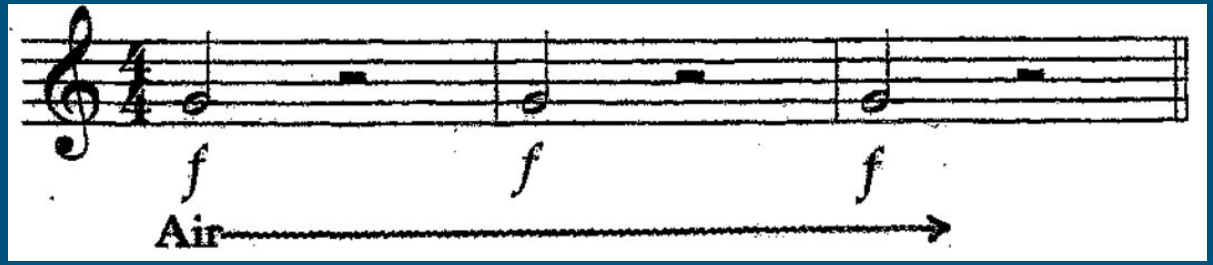
- Smooth legato is grounded in air support and flow: think “connected air”
- The tongue functions similarly to a stone lightly skipping across a flowing river
- 2 basic ways of practicing legato:
  - Single (repeated) notes
    - “Long Stroke”
    - Interruptions exercise
  - Changing notes
    - 5-note patterns





Articulation Style: Staccato

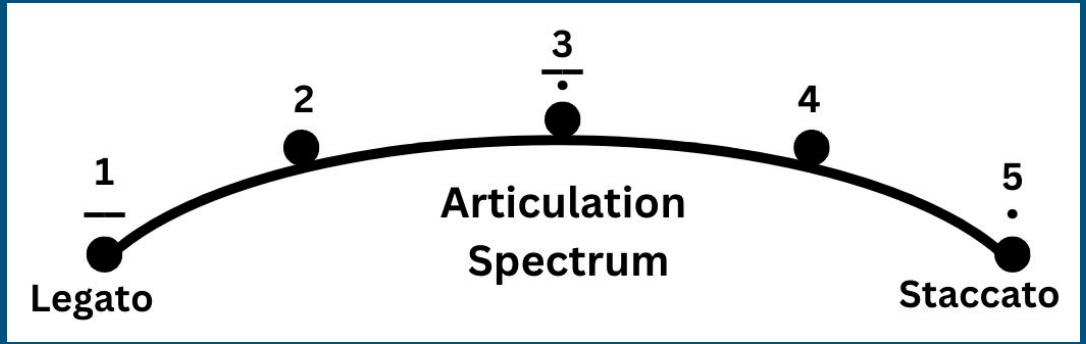
- The tongue should start on the reed, with the airstream pressurized behind the tongue and the embouchure engaged.
- To initiate the sound, pull the tip of the tongue off the tip of the reed. If the airstream is pressurized and the embouchure is engaged, the note should respond immediately.
- To stop the sound, the tip of the tongue returns to the tip of the reed. To play a very short note, the tongue returns to the reed almost as soon as it leaves!



End the half notes with the tongue!

Tools to talk about note length

- Similar to string bowings, articulation is an **expressive parameter** that we can adjust to suit our musical needs.
- Articulation length is determined by how long the tongue is on the reed.
  - The tongue is on the reed for very little time for Legato, and much more time for staccato.
- As we get shorter, we need to apply slightly more pressure to stop the reed's vibrations.
- Tempo, style, other factors determine the quality of articulation. Notation does not always reflect the intended or appropriate articulation style.
- This table is a great teaching tool to determine how short/long students think they are playing



Troubleshooting

The four most important questions that need to be asked of every clarinetist—as a remedy for specific issues or as a check-up—are these:

- What part of the tongue is touching the reed?
- What part of the reed are you touching with your tongue?
- What is the air doing?
- What is the tongue doing?

Troubleshooting: Common Problems

Symptom	Problem	Solution
“Dirty” articulation	Too much tongue touching the reed; tongue touching too low on reed; reed too high	Tip-to-tip articulation style; regular practice; adjust reed to align with mouthpiece tip.
Cannot articulate above staff	Too much tongue movement, tongue touching too low on reed	Maintain a more constant tongue shape (think vowels) during articulation; reinforce tip-to-tip tongue-reed contact
Slow articulation	Stopping air, too much tongue movement, not enough practice	Maintain constant air pressure—the tongue stops the reed not the air; maintain arched tongue shape; regular articulation practice
Subtones, especially above staff	Tongue touching too low on reed, incorrect tongue shape	Tip-to-tip articulation style; address voicing/tongue position

Troubleshooting continued…

Symptom	Problem	Solution
Pitch scooping	Embouchure “chewing,” tongue touching too low on reed, excess tongue motion	Keep embouchure still (use mirror); reinforce tip-to-tip tongue-reed contact; maintain a more constant tongue shape (think vowels) during articulation
Slow tongue speed, upper register lacks clarity or is grunty/unstable	The entire tongue is moving	Look at the base of the throat for ‘bullfrogging’ there should be no movement. Use mirror and only move the front 1/3 of the tongue. Like speaking dee dee dee.
Coughing sound or throat sound at the starts of notes	Glottal articulation - using the throat to cough out notes!	Tip-to-tip articulation style; regular practice. Reinforce tip-to-tip tongue-reed contact. Have them listen for it - many students can’t hear the difference.
Unnecessary movement in the bottom lip or embouchure	Potential anchor tonguing, setup might be too resistant	Marker test to confirm anchor tonguing; Reinforce tip-to-tip tongue-reed contact. Reed strength is dependent on the mouthpiece, not the level of the player!

The Bigger Picture: Tongue-Tied to Expression!

- Similar to string bowings, articulation is an **expressive parameter** that we adjust to suit our musical needs.

- Mastery of tonguing fundamentals is essential to produce clean, articulate, and expressive performances.

I Have to Practice Articulation? YES!

Develop a routine…and stick to it!
5-15 mins a day is really all you need!

- Proper technique — Tip-to-tip
- Speed — Start slow and build up over time
- Style — Articulation spectrum!
- Range — Low notes respond differently than higher notes
- Tongue/Finger Coordination

Everyone’s oral cavity, jaw, tongue, and mouth are different.

Treat the tongue as any other muscle: articulation is a skill that must be developed & maintained.

Resources

Exercises for Daily Articulation Practice

Staccato

- Daniel Bonade, *The Clarinetist's Compendium*
  - Taking it further - Slow Synchro Motion

Endurance

- Joseph Genna, *A Workbook for the Serious Performer*
- Reginald Kell, *17 Staccato Studies*

Speed

- Kal Opperman - Chromatic Exercise (from Larry Guy's *Articulation Development for Clarinetists*)
- Howard Klug, *The Clarinet Doctor* - page on bursts
- Gustave Langenus, *Complete Method for Clarinet*, book 3, pg. 22

Additional Resources

- Larry Guy, *Articulation Development for Clarinetists*
- Fred Ormand, *Fundamentals for Fine Clarinet Playing*
- Kelly Burke, *Clarinet Warm Ups: Materials for the Contemporary Clarinetist*
- Paul Harris, *The Clarinet: The Ultimate Companion to Clarinet Playing*

Questions?

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