

CLARINET STACCATO – A WORKBOOK

FOR THE SERIOUS PERFORMER

By Joseph Genna

On the Use of This Book:

It is perfectly natural for you to want to skip over the next few pages and to start to play the exercises. No matter how strong the urge, however, don't go near the exercises or your clarinet until you have read the text of this book thoroughly and digested it. In addition, reread it the first two days that you practice.

Why such a strong warning? Because if you just play through the exercises without knowing how to set the speeds or how long to rest between repetitions you will accomplish nothing. As it is with all self-help books, it is important to read all you can about the goals of the book and the procedure for achieving those goals.

How This Book was Developed:

This is not a theoretical work. It is based on carefully controlled experiments. As exercises evolved, revisions were constantly made, based on the results which a broad spectrum of students achieved. The result is a book unlike any other in the literature of clarinet instruction.

The Elements of a Good Staccato:

For a professional clarinetist the staccato must be well developed in terms of quality, endurance and speed. The relative importance of each of these factors is a matter of personal preference or the type of playing involved.

The Aim of This Book:

Since this book is designed to be used without a teacher, and since the improvement of the quality of staccato is best achieved with a teacher, this book is concerned only with endurance and speed. However, it is essential that the player develop the quality of his staccato before he attempts to speed it up. Increasing the speed of an unpleasant sounding staccato is counterproductive, as the quality of articulation will eventually need to improve, and the exercises will likely need to be performed from scratch to accommodate the changes in how the staccato is produced.

The Tongue Viewed as a Muscle:

Clarinetists gave up the use of the throat to detach notes very early in the history of the clarinet. Today all forms of detachment are performed with the tongue. We are accustomed to thinking of the tongue as a sensory organ, but it is also a muscle, and the whole foundation of this course of study is the concept that this muscle can be trained by applying the same rules as for the training of the biceps, the triceps or the calf muscle. The performance of the tongue can be improved with proper exercise. I emphasize proper because indiscriminate exercise can be at best a waste of time. At worst it can be counterproductive.

Step by Step:

The exercises are organized in “steps”. Each step represents one day’s practice and it is played for five to seven days. If you follow directions carefully, in about one week you will observe greater speed and endurance. When you decide that you have made as much progress as you can on that step, it is time to go on to the next step. Remember that different players need different periods of time to achieve the same goal. Don’t try to rush your progress. There is nothing to be gained by playing through the book in record time. If you feel you need ten days on a given step, then take ten days.

Use of Metronome and Watch:

You must use a metronome to practice at the suggested speeds and you must use a watch to measure the prescribed rest period between repetitions of each step. Don’t try to guess the speeds or estimate the rest periods. It can’t be done. Without a watch or a metronome you’ll soon become over-tired and frustrated. A fundamental law is that the tongue muscle becomes stronger when it is exercised to the point of *moderate* fatigue and then is given a proper rest.

How to Set the Metronome:

Each step has a suggested initial setting. If you feel that this setting is too fast, bring it down as many notches as you think necessary. Having selected your initial setting, play the exercise once, wait one full minute and then repeat the exercise at the next faster setting. Keep doing this until you can’t keep up with the metronome. Now advance to the next setting and play the speed variation of the same exercise. This exercise is exactly the same as the original except that the rests are longer. It is amazing how extending the rests by two or three beats provides enough recuperation for the tongue so that it can deal with the added speed. Keep on advancing the speed on the variation exercise until you can’t keep up with the metronome. At this point you have finished your staccato practice for the day. You may play whatever else you want, but do not practice any more staccato. If you do you will become over-tired and sloppy. You will also bring about a host of difficulties.

Setting the Metronome on Successive Days:

Let us say that you practiced step one for three days, and each day you were able to go from setting 104 to 126. But on the fourth day you were able to go to 132. From this point on you will change your initial setting to 108. In other words, every time you achieve a new speed on a given step, reward yourself the next day by advancing the initial setting. If you don’t make this periodic adjustment you may get too tired to reach the upper speeds.

Using the Complete Range:

This book uses the range from lowest E to the highest G. (You may go higher if your type of playing calls for it.) It is a mistake to practice staccato on only one note or on only one part of the range. You must practice on the whole range because the resistance of the reed is different on each note, and by practicing on all the notes your lip and jaw muscles will unconsciously adapt to each part of the range.

How to Deal with Low Notes:

As you tongue your way down to low E you will find it harder and harder to keep up your speed. The following suggestions will help:

- 1) Strike the reed as close as possible to the tip.
- 2) Use only the very tip of the tongue.
- 3) Project your wind as far out as possible. (Imagine that you are trying to blow a stream of air through a tiny hole in the wall ten feet away from you.)
- 4) Close your jaw muscles more and more as you go down, but don't bite hard.
- 5) Keep your tongue as far back in your mouth as possible.
- 6) Make your notes as short as you can. Listen for complete silence between notes.

The Proper Strength of the Reed:

Under ordinary circumstances one plays best with a reed which is neither too stiff nor too soft. In dealing with rapid staccato this choice becomes much more critical and you have less leeway. If your reed is too stiff, a legato passage in the low register is not affected too much (although the tone may suffer). A staccato passage, on the other hand, may become completely impossible at high speeds. If you find that to be the case, scrape the reed to soften it just enough so that you can execute the passage. If you take off too much cane you will lose effectiveness at the upper end of the scale. Conversely, if you find your reed is too soft to play the upper notes, clip the reed to stiffen it. Again, if you clip off too much, you will lose effectiveness at the lower end.

Remember that a stiff reed favors the upper notes at the expense of the lower notes; a soft reed favors the lower notes at the expense of the upper notes.

The Importance of Short Staccato:

The very fastest staccato is best achieved if each note is kept as short as possible. Place the tip of the tongue on the tip of the reed. Withdraw the tongue rapidly and then replace it on the reed, as if to pronounce the syllable "tut". Record the C major scale (two octaves) at your fastest speed and listen carefully. Between the notes there should be very clear periods of perfect silence. If each period of silence doesn't have a very sudden beginning and a very abrupt end, keep practicing shortness until it sounds perfect.

The Importance of Fatigue:

Without fatigue there can be no improvement. When you experience fatigue in any muscle, important chemical changes are taking place. As soon as you rest, the muscle begins to recuperate. It is a fundamental law that a muscle which has been exercised to the point of moderate fatigue will recover and become stronger than it was originally. This means that the tongue can strike the reed faster and for a longer period of time before tiring.

Measure Your Progress:

It is a good idea to keep a diary of your practice sessions. It is the best way to measure your progress. If you rely on your memory you may reach the conclusion that you are a hopeless case or that you are ready for the New York Philharmonic Symphony, neither of which judgments is probably true. Notice that a diary has been provided at the end of this book. Each day when you finish practicing be sure to turn to the diary and note the date and the speeds you reached that day.

Daily Practice:

The best results are attained if your practice is a daily activity. Ideally it is best not to miss a day of practice, but in this less than ideal world sometimes one just can't get to it. Practice as often as possible, preferably at the same hour each day. If you miss a day or two it will take you longer to reach your goal. Don't brood over it. You'll reach your goal. But try not to miss more than two consecutive days of practice. The results may frustrate you.

Why Such Simple Reading?

You will notice that the exercises are very simple to read. There are no accidentals and no unpredictable intervals. It was decided to keep the reading at the easiest possible level. Difficult reading would have been an unwelcome distraction. A good rule in writing instructional material is to concentrate only on the skill in question and to eliminate all other factors whenever possible. The purpose of this book, after all, is not to improve your sight-reading. It is to improve your staccato. If you tried to improve both at the same time you would probably fail at both.

Now to Start the Daily Routine:

If you have read this text carefully you are now ready to start your daily practice.

- 1) Have your metronome, a watch and a pencil handy.
- 2) Select a reed which is neither too stiff nor too soft.
- 3) Warm up for about five minutes. Play the full range of the instrument.
- 4) Select your initial metronome setting for step one. The suggested setting is 104. If that is too fast to produce a clear staccato throughout the range, select a slower setting. Don't select a faster setting or else you will not get any endurance practice.
- 5) Play step one at the selected speed. Now rest one full minute, advance to the next setting and repeat the exercise. Continue to do this until you can't keep up with the metronome.
- 6) Now play the speed variation of step one. Continue to advance the speed, always resting one full minute each time you change the setting. When you can't keep up with the metronome, cease practicing staccato for the day. Continue to practice if you like, but don't practice staccato exercises.
- 7) Note your entry in the diary at the end of the book.
- 8) On successive days remember to raise the initial setting each time you make a speed record the previous day.

- 9) As you get to about step seven you will notice that the phrases are getting longer and that you cannot reach the top speeds of the earlier exercises. That means that on the higher steps you will be getting more endurance practice and less speed practice. In order to rectify this it is recommended that you have a daily review practice for speed. Continue to rest one full minute between exercises, and now go backwards toward step one, playing only once each speed variation at the highest speed recorded in your diary. You will eventually break your own speed records not once, but several times.

And now, one final word: This system of study was worked out with the participation of many students and some professionals. You have here the method that worked best with most of them. It is very probably that there are many variations of this system not yet thought of, some of which might work out better for you. After you have had some experience with this course of study try out some of your own approaches. You can be your best teacher, and it can be lots of fun. Just one reminder – Record it all in your diary.

Good luck!