

How to Improve as a Clarinetist

By Renee Muir

Regular, effective practice

Natural talent will only take you so far. Remember, it is not always the most talented clarinetist that sits first-chair, but the one who works the hardest in the practice room and is the most prepared.

- It is best if you can practice Mon-Fri; but if your schedule doesn't permit 5 days of practice, fit in as many as you can. You should strive to get in a 30-60min practice session.
- Practice smart: as you practice an exercise, always practice in "chunks"; break exercises into sections (e.g.: 2-4 measures) and practice slowly enough so as not to make mistakes. Once you have gotten the first chunk under your fingers, move on to the next chunk, etc. Remember, "practice" does not "make perfect;" "Practice makes permanent. PERFECT practice makes perfect."
- Don't neglect your warm-up: before diving in to your etude exercises, take 10 min. to warm up with technique: scales, arpeggios, long tones, tonguing, etc.

Use a tuner, metronome, & drone

It is the use of these tools that separates the professionals from the amateurs.

- It is impossible to attain steady *internal rhythm* and accurate *internal pitch* without the use of a metronome and tuner.
- If you have a smartphone or device, download the TONAL ENERGY App. It's ~\$5.00, but it's the best \$5 bucks you could invest as a musician. It has a metronome, tuner, drone, and recording capabilities.
- Tuner: during your daily practice sessions – once you have warmed up – tune. Even though you are practicing alone, if you practice "in tune" you will develop a more accurate internal pitch. Clarinetist should tune their "long" B, open G, middle E, low B and high B.
- Metronome: when chunking a practice exercise, find a metronome setting slow enough that enables you to play the passage rhythmically/note accurately. Play the chunk 2-3 times accurately before bumping up the tempo.
- Drone: this is useful during your warm-up especially. Pick a scale or arpeggio (i.e. C) and turn on an octave "C" pitch (or an open fifth: C+G) and play each interval in the scale, listening to see if each interval is in tune (you can also turn on the tuner while you play/use the drone to see if you are in tune).

Sight reading

The only way to get better at sight reading is to do it. Each time you get ready to practice a new exercise, focus on the first read-through as a "sight reading" exercise.

- When looking at a new exercise and preparing to sight read, follow these steps: 1) look at time signature, 2) check key signature, 3) tempo marking, 4) scan exercise for any funky rhythms, accidentals, etc.
- Select a reasonable tempo in your head. Usually this will be based off of the fastest notes in the exercise (e.g.: sixteenth notes).
- Once you begin, DO NOT go back and repeat/fix spots that you missed. The point of sight reading is to play from the beginning to the end without stopping or going back to fix things. Playing without stopping or fixing is an important (if not THE most important part) of practicing sight reading.

Listening

There is more to being a good clarinetist than just a fast tongue and fast fingers (i.e. technique). The clarinetists that end up being the ones that get paid (or just asked to play) are the ones that also *sound* good.

- If you only ever listen to yourself (or your peers) play, that is the only reference for a “clarinet sound” you will have. Thus, it is important to listen to recordings of professional clarinetist. Some recommendations include Martin Fröst, Sabine Meyer, Julian Bliss, and Emma Johnson.
- Listen to different types of clarinet playing, such as solos (concerti), orchestral works, chamber music, etc. If you do not have CDs of clarinet music, YouTube has endless resources of quality recordings.

Private instruction

If you are serious about becoming proficient on the clarinet, there is only so much you can teach yourself regarding fingerings, hand position, tonguing, etc. At some point, you will need a private clarinet instructor to teach you the finer nuances of advanced clarinet technique.

- Taking lessons is an investment of time, effort, and money. But if the clarinet is something you are passionate about (and potentially want to pursue in college and beyond), then taking regular private lessons is a must.
- Take lessons from a CLARINETIST. Places to look for a teacher are local high schools or colleges with a music program, local symphonies, or private studios in your area. If there is no clarinet teacher in your area, at least try and take lessons from a woodwind player – preferably a saxophonist.
- If you are close to the Cincinnati area and are interested in taking clarinet lessons, feel free to contact Renee Muir. Lesson and contact information are available on her website: reneemuir.com.