

EMBOUCHURE LEAKING

Tips for plugging the leak

Have you ever gone back stage after a theatrical performance to greet the actors? You may notice how grotesque they look with stage makeup still on. Due to the fact that humans are naturally near-sighted it is necessary to exaggerate certain features of the face with makeup to convey character and expression from the stage to the seats.

The same holds true for musical performances. Those who heard the great violinist Jascha Heifetz up close said there was a surprising amount of non-musical sound in his playing associated with bow and instrument noise. However, this was not noticed in the seats.

For the bassoonist, performing a *marcato* articulation in a large auditorium may require what up close sounds like an exaggerated, heavy articulation. Likewise, executing an exuberant "*sfz*" attack in the low register may require an embouchure loose enough that a small amount of air leaks at the beginning of the note. An accomplished bassoonist will take care that none of this extra effort or noise is noticed by the listener. However, leaking air by habit around the embouchure can detract from the effect of a performance.

A. Description of the problem

The audible leaking of air around the embouchure is a common problem for bassoonists. However, leaking air around the embouchure while playing is mostly unnecessary and can be very distracting for the player and listener.

Some fallacies about embouchure leaking:

1. "It can't be heard past a few feet."
2. "It helps me get a full tone."
3. "It proves I'm using good breath support."

Some bassoonists are so used to leaking that they do not even hear it! When, by chance, they do not leak they often feel something is missing from the sound. It is a bit like the bassoonist who has become so used to a noisy key mechanism that, after quieting the key action, feels the sound is now smaller. They have gotten used to the noise and no longer find it objectionable.

Embouchure leaking often begins in the high school or early college period. It can coincide with a stage in which the player is trying to stop biting and using the jaw to hold the reed in the mouth. At this point the muscles of the lips are often not developed enough to substitute for the holding with the jaw. Therefore, the muscles tire quickly and collapse, causing air to escape.

Another cause of leaking is the lack of involvement of the corners of the mouth in making a seal around the reed. Pulling the corners back or rolling the lips in too much over the teeth can result in leaking.

Leaking can also be caused by an exaggerated overbite. The lips may not actually meet near the corners of the reed, causing a breach. Since most people have a natural overbite, it is not usually necessary to affect one. Many young players overdo the overbite because they've been told that's correct on the bassoon. This can lead to a dull, leaky tone.

Simple over-blowing can cause leaking. Flooding the reed with too much air will not result in a bigger or more projecting tone. In fact, the opposite can be true. Try a crescendo on a C# in the staff. This note is especially sensitive to over blowing. At a certain point in the crescendo the tone will actually get smaller. The player must use the amount and speed of air that is appropriate for the demands of the music; no more, no less. For an excellent view on the topic of over-blowing, see the article by C. Robert Reinert, "Breathe, Don't Blow" in the Double Reed Magazine Vol. 21, No. 3, 1998.

B. Some Solutions

Simple awareness may be the easiest way to solve the problem. Listening to a recording of your playing can be revealing -- a bit like discovering you have bad breath! You'll never want to sound that way again and will do what it takes to correct the problem.

Some students aren't resourceful enough to be able to stop leaking on their own. For them I suggest the following:

- Practice articulating a short, loud note in all ranges. Isolating a single note should allow the student to focus on sealing the reed completely with the lips. Listen for any escape of sound. Be careful not to over-correct! Don't accept a choked tone! Use only the amount of embouchure pressure necessary for a good seal for a pitch that is in tune and sounds good.
- Do the same thing with a sustained tone. Watch for the good characteristics listed above. Gradually add more notes, a scale, a phrase, etc.
- For those who tend to bite the reed, long tones provide a great opportunity to build the lip muscles independent of the jaw or larger facial muscles that often substitute during biting.
- To build greater awareness of the role played by the corners of the mouth in sealing the lips around the reed, the player can try to play with the reed twisted on the bocal 90° from normal. In other words, the edges of the blades should point up and down instead of left and right. Although uncomfortable, the player will have to bring the corners way in just to seal enough to get a sound out of the reed in this position.

The teacher and student can also examine these aspects:

- Look to see if the overbite is excessive. The lower jaw should stagger under the upper with little or no extra effort from the player.
- The amount of red showing on both lips when making the embouchure could be wrong for the student. The skin of the lips provides a unique friction that, if positioned on the reed correctly, need not be accompanied by much embouchure pressure to make the seal. Check to see if enough lip is contacting the blade of the reed or if too much lip is rolled over the teeth. Remember that each person's lips are shaped differently, so what looks good to the teacher from a distance may not always be correct for that particular student. There is no "textbook" embouchure from a visual standpoint.
- A reed that is too light or too heavy in scrape, or a tip that is too open or too closed can cause leaking. To a lesser extent this can be true with equipment that is too responsive or too stuffy. The player should encounter a pleasant resistance when playing the bassoon.

In conclusion, the bassoonist must consider at all times how performance is perceived by an audience either real or imagined. We play music for others to enjoy, after all. The integrity of the product is all-important. When given a choice audiences, audition committees, colleagues and teachers will choose a sound that is beautiful in its purity and richness, unencumbered by extraneous noise.