

AMERICAN ICONS OF BASSOON PEDAGOGY: Questionnaire

1. Please list your bassoon teachers.

Bassoon Teacher	Where studied	Dates of study
_K. David Van Hoesen	Eastman School of Music	1977-1981

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2. Your name: \_Barrick Stees\_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_47\_\_\_\_  
Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_Musician\_\_\_\_\_ Gender:  
\_\_\_\_Male\_\_\_\_\_

3. Your teaching positions held (add additional lines as needed)

\_\_\_\_Cleveland Institute \_\_\_\_\_Dates \_2002-present \_  
University of Akron\_\_\_\_\_ Dates 2004 - present  
\_\_\_\_Michigan State University\_\_\_\_\_ \_Dates 1991-2002\_\_

4. Playing positions held (add additional lines as needed).

Assistant Principal Bassoon, Cleveland Orchestra\_\_Dates \_2001-present  
Principal Bassoon, Hartford Symphony\_\_\_\_\_Dates 1987-1991\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ Dates \_\_\_\_\_

5. Please describe how each of the teachers listed above influenced you as a bassoonist/musician. Be as specific as possible. (Feel free to add space as needed).

*Van Hoesen opened my eyes and ears to the wonders of the world of classical music in a way that no one has before or after. He helped me to understand why we hold certain pieces and certain composers in high regard by revealing their genius.*

*He got me to listen to music for other instruments, especially violin to gain inspiration and compare to passages for the bassoon in the orchestral repertoire. He felt that the bassoon repertoire was of lesser quality and that there was a lot to be gained from listening to and learning from the repertoire for other instruments. Comparison and imitation helped me integrate my playing into the orchestra more readily and made me more aware of the score and what was going on around me while playing.*

*His personality influenced me greatly. I still hear his voice and his words when I go over certain pieces. He was a very polite and courteous person in public and private. He was extremely good at getting along with difficult colleagues. I learned a lot about how to be diplomatic from watching him work with others.*

6. How did each of your teachers approach the following subjects? Please include descriptions/explanations used, exercises provided, as well as additional information you think important.

a) Vibrato *Van Hoesen encouraged us to listen to great string players such as Heifetz, Milstein, Perlman, etc. to develop a sound concept of vibrato. He felt that vibrato should be*

*flexible in amplitude and frequency depending upon the register you play in and the demands of the music (the role of the bassoonist at any particular point in the score). He did not advocate a constant use of vibrato. He taught us to use vibrato to activate notes of long duration and to ease large interval slurs.*

#### **b) Tone/Intonation**

*Tone: He didn't push his students to develop tone quality that made each of us sound the same. Instead, he had a way of getting us to make the kind of sound we wanted by helping us define our concept of tone. This was done with him mainly by his suggestions for great string players' recordings and by his playing for us. He did not play in the lessons very often, but when he did, it was incredibly beautiful and always for instructive purposes -- never to show off!*

*He stressed a tone that had great clarity and focus, instead of power and force. He believed that focus and clarity would get the sound out in the seats when needed and provide a good basis for pitch matching by those playing with you. He helped us with reedmaking and equipment choices by gently nudging us in this direction.*

*Specific instructions he gave for a good tone: lower the Adam's Apple to open the throat and create more resonance. Along with good abdominal support, keep the rib cage open and the sternum a bit raised, esp. in the tenor range for better resonance.*

*I believe he always took a full breath regardless of the length of phrase, dynamic or register of the passage. The extra support gained by an expanded trunk helps especially with extremes: "pp", "FF", low and high passages.*

*Intonation: The key to playing in tune for Van Hoesen was always to go for the ring or the "sweet spot" in the center of a pitch. Given a good bassoon he felt you would always be very close if not right in tune. This was valuable in concerts and rehearsals in which you couldn't use a tuner without offending your colleagues. It built independence from the tuner and taught you to listen and feel with your lips for the right pitch.*

*He always had a 12-window Stroboconn tuner on in the studio. He would often glance over while I was playing to see how my pitch was. Always stressed A=440 and helped me fight sharpness with the adoption of a loose embouchure and an open throat. He made us aware of certain registers of the bassoon that were routinely out of tune (low register, sharp - tenor range, flat, etc.) and encouraged us to assume they would always be that way and take a proactive approach through setting up properly before playing those notes. He also did a lot of work with me on focus and speed of the airstream to improve pitch.*

*He showed us how timbre and register have an important role in perception of good intonation, especially while he was coaching us in chamber music. He liked to use his arrangements of Bach Chorales for woodwind quintet to build the ensemble's sense of good pitch.*

*He didn't like to play with his students to help with pitch, however! He said they always played out of tune!*

#### c) Finger technique

*He stressed that I keep my fingers as close to the instrument as possible when moving them. Keeping fingers and hands free from stress and tension, reducing motion and effort, etc. He worked on technique by stressing slow practice with metronome, changing rhythms, etc. He taught us to use a relaxed finger technique for lyrical, smooth legato playing that almost looked lazy sometimes. The gentle interaction of finger/tonehole and finger/key gives a smooth legato. For technical passages he urged us to snap the fingers more.*

#### d) Articulation

*This was one of his most original contributions to bassoon pedagogy, in my opinion. He learned a lot about articulation from Robert Sprenkle, the Eastman oboe professor at the time and from his study of the great violinists. Articulation always started with the tongue on the reed. He taught, as oboists do, to tongue on or near the corner of the reed tip -- not straight on. This gave the tone a chance to bloom without being covered by tongue/reed noise and gave clarity to the*

*pitch from the very beginning of the note. He didn't like many European bassoonists due to the blunt or sharp style of articulation they often use. It was the speed and strength of the tongue release from the reed along with the appropriate breath support and follow through that made the articulation appropriate for the needs of the music.*

*The placement of the tongue on the reed (corner, off center, or completely contacting whole width of tip) gave a wonderful variety to the articulation, much like a string player using just a few bow hairs, most of the bow hair or all of the bow across the string.*

*He also advocated stopping the tone by returning the tongue to the reed, especially during phrases that involved a series of short or separated notes. He used the tongue stop in a variety of ways to suit the needs of the music. The tongue could return abruptly and quickly for a Stravinsky staccato, or use the tongue stop very delicately to give a subtle taper to separated notes. This last technique helped match the decay rate of naturally resonant instruments such as the piano or cello. He used to say that a pizzicato was actually a pretty long note length with a very drastic but lengthy taper.*

*Like many teachers of his generation, he didn't teach double tonguing unless you had a very slow tongue. He could double tongue quite well, though. He used single tonguing speed in auditions for Eastman to accept or deny admission. He would often focus on the speeds several clicks below a player's fastest tonguing speed, noticing that young players often had trouble with consistency and cleanliness in this range, e.g., quarter=104, 108.*

*To improve tonguing speed and quality, he used the metronome and stressed attention to the airstream, lightness of tongue and using the minimum of motion needed for the tongue to successfully articulate.*

#### e) Reed-making

*Van Hoesen taught reed making classes sporadically during my time at Eastman. I think he preferred to do this one-on-one and did more of this with us in private lessons. He was always*

*trying new ideas; especially Skinner's which were just becoming known at that time (1970's). He used a rather light scrape and a short reed compared to most. This fit well with his embouchure and style of blowing the bassoon. He favored a very relaxed, flexible embouchure combined with lots of abdominal breath support. Often bassoonists who studied with other teachers would try my set-up and say that it played sharp. I think this was on purpose. He wanted the reed to be such that almost any pressure from the embouchure would cause the pitch to rise. This virtually forced the bassoonist to play with a relaxed embouchure to avoid sharpness. The resultant open tip gave maximum vibrancy to the sound of the reed.*

*We had a reed room with a Pfeifer double barrel profiler and a dial indicator. This gave us some independence. The profiler was set to profile .003-.005" thicker than an average finished reed. Thus, there was always some finishing to be done, but not so much that it became guess work. We used a dial indicator regularly and stuck to the numbers. He did not expressly encourage this, but always remarked that almost all reeds needed to have the first 3/8" from the tip measure almost exactly the same. The profiler removed quite a lot of cane from the sides of the reed, giving a well-defined spine to the profile right away. Cane was to be soaked for several hours. Those pieces that sank within an hour were marked and usually made quite good reeds. Those that floated after several hours of soaking were of poor quality.*

*Reeds were shaped with his own shape made by Pfeifer. Rieger makes a pretty good copy of this, but it's a little wider at the throat (Rieger shape #13). This shape worked well on a lot of different kinds of bassoons. It offers a nice compromise between flair and straight taper, wide throat, narrow throat, etc. It offers a great focus to the sound and especially good tenor and high register playing.*

*New reeds were to be rested after playing for 10-15 minutes on the first try. He played slow scales and broken arpeggios (see music in bass clef staff on handout) to check for blade balance and smoothness of response in changing registers. He discouraged playing technical passages and high register on new reeds. His focus was on learning how to blow the new reed and finding the ring in the sound.*

*Reeds were then rested for a week if possible (this was true for the drying rack stage as well - - two weeks minimum before wrapping).*

*He always tried for a multiphonic crow with the predominant pitch of F (first space, treble clef). The pitch of the reed told you a lot about the relative hardness of the reed (higher than F was too hard -- you could continue scraping; lower was too soft) and its pitch on the bassoon (higher=sharper, lower=flatter)*

#### f) Musicianship

*This was one of his strong points. He always taught the music first, then the bassoon. It was never just a craft with him. For instance, we always learned to play technical passages and etudes with a clear sense of phrasing, even if it was just a scale. He spent great parts of the lessons with me on style, helping me to learn to differentiate between a Mozart style, a Brahms style and style in Stravinsky, for instance.*

*Van Hoesen was excellent at stressing incredible attention to detail in addition to making sure the overall impression or the big picture was effective. His painstaking ear and patience with me as I slowly began to hear the things he was hearing was remarkable.*

*His approach to phrasing began with making sure you could play with a homogenous sound throughout the range of the instrument. When this was secure you could make intelligent phrasing decisions without any unconscious emphases or de-emphases. He liked to keep things as simple as possible. When the phrase went up in pitch, crescendo; when down, decrescendo, etc.*

#### g) Rhythm

*Another strongpoint with him. He usually conducted us while we played, helping us to get used to the idea that we would play with someone beating time in the job world all the time. He even conducted rubato. He had a natural approach to rubato. His idea about rubato was that it should be predictable at all points; almost plotable as a curve on a graph. This sounds mechanical, but when done well really doesn't come off that way.*

*He was also unique in my experience with holds and unmetred rests in contemporary music. He would always try to give a number of beats to a hold to make it have a beginning, middle and end, even if the beat wasn't the same pulse as the steady music that preceded it. With unmetred rests or pauses in music he would also try to assign timings to it to make it part of the whole as well.*

*He worked a lot on rhythms that did not go with the pulse such as tied notes and dotted rhythms. The way you played a tied note and how you recovered from it needed to be included in the sense of good rhythm. Dotted notes were to be played with special care so that they added to the style of the music whether it was flowing, pesante or martial in character.*

#### h) Posture and Support of instrument

*He stressed playing with a very open torso. Rib cage out, slight arch in the small of the back, shoulders down and back. The rib cage was like a large bellows. He demonstrated this well, having a large rib cage. Head was erect, neck lengthened so that the embouchure met the reed straight on.*

#### i) Hand position

*Don't remember him dealing much with this.*

#### j) Other



7. Please answer the following questions regarding recitals presented as a student.

a) How many recitals did you present?

*I gave five solo recitals during my undergrad*

b) At what level of education were you for each recital?

*1 freshman, 2 sophomore, 1 junior and 1 senior recital*

c) Were these recitals required for your degree?

*Only the senior recital was required.*

d) How was recital repertoire selected (teacher's choice/ student's choice / mutual input and discussion)?

*I came in with suggestions and he usually approved them. I don't remember him telling me I wasn't ready to play something.*

8. How did your teacher(s) help you prepare for auditions? How did you determine when to start taking non-school related auditions (teacher's choice / student's choice / mutual input and discussion)?

*He always heard excerpts in the lessons. I decided to start taking auditions during my sophomore year (much too early!!)*

9. Did your teacher(s) help you to become an independent musician, able to learn new pieces on your own? If so, how was this achieved?

*The bassoonists in the studio and the students at Eastman in general at that time were incredibly self-motivated. I rarely run into students like this today, even at CIM. We noticed what each other was playing in lessons, what others were struggling with. He encouraged the younger students to seek out older ones for help outside the lessons.*

*We learned to become independent through the good examples set for us by the upperclassmen. For me those included Judy Leclair, George Sakakeeny, Betsy Sturdevant, and Felicia Foland!*

*Also, he was able to teach with a more hands-off style than can often be afforded today. There were no teacher evaluations to be filled out by the students each semester, no peer group visiting lessons given by new teachers to spy on the teaching, promotion and tenure was a much simpler process. Thus, there was more independence. I know Van Hoesen also felt that if a student wasn't self-motivated there was little chance of success in the orchestral world, so he didn't get involved in shouting, negative criticism or other activities that teachers can resort to when*

*frustrated by students. He just figured that some would cut it and some would not and it wasn't his fault if they didn't. He already had a marvelous track record by the time I studied with him.*

10. What etudes did you study as an undergraduate? As a graduate student? Did your teacher determine which etudes you were to study?

*He did require the Milde 25 Studies in all Keys and the Concert Studies. Much time was spent on these. I sought out other etude books after finishing with these and would bring them in.*

11. What solo material did you study as an undergraduate? As a graduate student? How much freedom were you allowed in selecting your solo repertoire?

*I was allowed much freedom. Again, the bassoonists would all know who was playing what. If I didn't know a piece that someone else was playing, I made it my business to learn it, even if just informally.*

*Mozart Concerto, both Weber solo pieces, several Paris Conservatoire pieces, Vivaldi, Fasch, Etler, Hindemith, Osborne, Bach Cello Suites and some transcriptions.*

12. If your teacher chose your music for you, were you told the reason for each selection? If so, do you remember any of the reasons behind the selections? Please share them if possible.

*He never chose music for me.*

13. What technical exercises/scales were emphasized and/or required? Was there a speed requirement for scales?

*See attached. I added a great deal to this on my own. No speed required. If uneven, then he used a metronome in the lessons. If too slow, we played them faster.*

14. How often did you have lessons with each teacher? How long did the lessons last? Were students encouraged to observe lessons of other students?

*Weekly lessons for one hour. Occasionally he would give an extra lesson before a recital or an audition. I often entered the studio a few minutes before the previous lesson was ending, but never observed a whole lesson.*

15. What do you think is most important to know about your former teachers?

*Van Hoesen taught the music first, the bassoon second. He led by example. He is a very proud, but gentle man. He taught with a quiet, sure confidence that was inspiring. He never scolded, but could be firm and demanding. He had a way of helping you play your best without spoon feeding you or dictating his ideas.*