



The United States Army Field Band

The Musical Ambassadors of the Army
Washington, DC

Bassoon Basics

by
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EMBOUCHURE

To discuss embouchure, it is first necessary to define the role of the embouchure in tone production. The combination of proper breathing, support, and blowing is fundamental to producing a good tone. Selecting proper equipment, to include the reed, bocal, and instrument, is secondary to the physical elements involved.

The principal function of the embouchure is to seal the reed in the mouth so the air stream can be directed through the bassoon. The embouchure should be formed as naturally as possible. A basic embouchure may be established simply by opening the mouth, inserting the reed, and closing the mouth. The lips must cover the teeth to prevent them from contacting the reed. However, too much lip against the reed inhibits its vibration and adversely affects the sound. No noticeable tension, jaw pressure, or biting should be evident. Slight additional tension will develop naturally. If tension or pressure is consciously applied, it is apt to be overdone. Excessive pressure on the reed will diminish the volume, restrict the resonance, and eliminate some of the overtones that help the tone project and define its character. If embouchure pressure is necessary to make the reed vibrate, either the reed is too stiff—and the blades must be thinned slightly—or inadequate support is being used. Balancing support with resistance is an extremely important consideration in tone production. As long as the air stream and the reed style and strength are properly related, the embouchure should naturally assume the right amount of pressure. If soreness of the lips occurs, the air stream and reed should be adjusted to avoid extreme embouchure pressure.

INTONATION

As has been implied previously, the embouchure must never be used to produce the tone. However, it can be used to some degree to adjust intonation and match note timbre. The reed may be withdrawn slightly from the mouth to play the extreme low notes—the jaw may also be dropped slightly. The reed may be pushed further into the mouth (almost up to the first wire) to play the highest notes.

To help maintain a consistent pitch, the embouchure should be slightly firmer when playing very softly than at louder dynamic levels. This embouchure adjustment is an extremely subtle one and should be considered more a function of the ear than of the embouchure muscles. If a player listens carefully while attempting to produce a correct sound, the necessary adjustments will be made naturally. Any attempt to produce the sound mechanically, without a predetermined concept, can create a musical “Frankenstein”—all the elements of good tone may be present, but they are not fit together properly!

LISTENING

To aid in forming a proper concept of sound and style, performers should listen regularly to recordings of their instrument. Much can be learned about inflection, interpretation, and lyrical phrasing by also listening to the finest singers and world-class performers on any instrument.

TONGUING

The tongue is used to articulate the air stream by acting as a valve. The tip of the tongue touches the reed, preventing it from vibrating. When the tip of the tongue is withdrawn, the reed can vibrate freely, air pressure is maintained, and the note can speak instantly. The motion of the tongue involved in this action is similar to saying “tah,” “dah,” or “tuh.”

Whatever method is used, repeated articulation should match, so that all the notes in a particular passage sound alike (unless varied articulations are specifically indicated). This matching of articulations is often neglected even more than timbre matching.

There are several points concerning tonguing that must be given careful attention. The tongue should touch the reed only enough to interrupt the sound by stopping the reed from vibrating—no more pressure than necessary should be used. The tongue should be removed from the reed only enough to allow it to vibrate freely. Any excess motion detracts from control, precision, and speed. In making the

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initial attack, the tongue stops the reed while the embouchure and air stream are set, then releases the reed, allowing the note to begin. All these things happen in a fraction of a second. The embouchure and air stream must be stabilized at the proper pressure before the tongue is released; otherwise, the note may crack, start out of tune, shift, explode, or simply refuse to speak. The tongue must not be used to force a note to respond, nor should it be used to stop the reed for a long interval while air pressure is built up before making an attack.

Some players anchor the tip of the tongue behind the bottom teeth and push the middle portion

of the tongue forward to articulate. This tongue position detracts from the resonance and focus of the tone. It can adversely affect the position of the reed in the mouth. Too much of the tongue touches more of the reed and a thuddy sound results.

Accents should be made with the diaphragm, not with the tongue. The reed should never be slaptongued or struck. Tongue pressure required to make the strongest *sfz* is hardly more than in playing a legato *mf*. An unresponsive reed, bocal, or instrument inhibits good tonguing. Good reedmaking and proper instrument care can greatly improve many aspects of bassoon playing.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Books on Bassoon

- Bassoon Reed Making* Popkin and Glichman
The Instrumentalist Company
1418 Lake St.
Evanston, IL 60204
- Method For Bassoon* Julius Weissenborn
Carl Fischer, Inc.
62 Cooper Square
New York, NY 1003

Videotape

- Bassoon Basics* United States Army Field Band
Distributed free of charge to music
educators

Scale Supplement

The fifteen major and minor scales make up our musical “ABCs.” Just as a person wishing to read learns the alphabet first, a musician cannot expect to master an instrument without first learning the basic set of scales. By diligently practicing the major scales and all three forms of the minor scales, they will become automatic, just like reading the alphabet. This will make playing, especially sight reading, much easier so that the musician can concentrate towards the ultimate goal—making music!

Each scale below should be played slowly at first, ensuring that each note is played correctly. Gradually work for speed, but do not rush. Use a metronome whenever possible to guarantee evenness and a steady tempo. The player should practice difficult scales twice as often as easy ones to develop competence in all keys. As skills increase, change rhythmic patterns and increase tempos. Advanced players can still use scales to work on intonation, technique, range, and dynamics.

Use the following patterns one at a time or in combination to get even more benefit from scale practice:

A

D

B

E

C

F

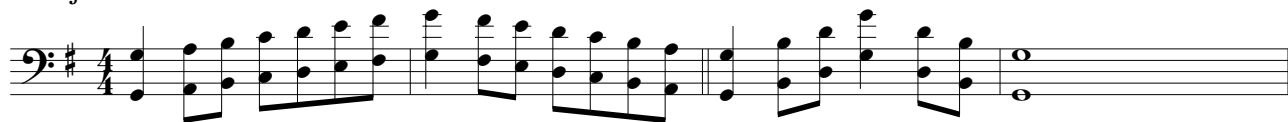
C Major

A natural minor A harmonic minor

A melodic minor

Scale Supplement

G Major



E natural minor

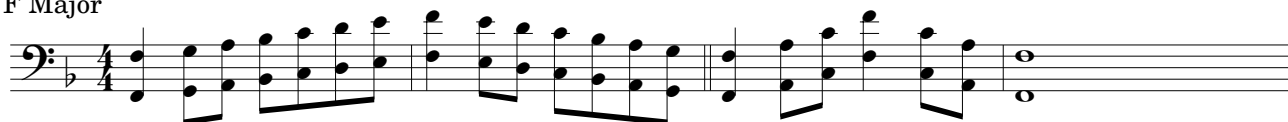
E harmonic minor



E melodic minor



F Major

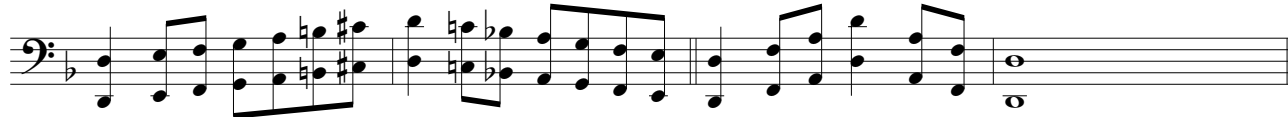


D natural minor

D harmonic minor



D melodic minor



D Major

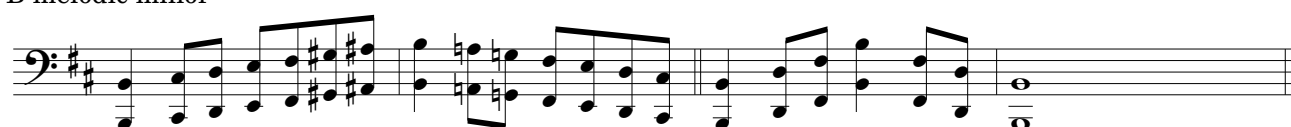


B natural minor

B harmonic minor



B melodic minor

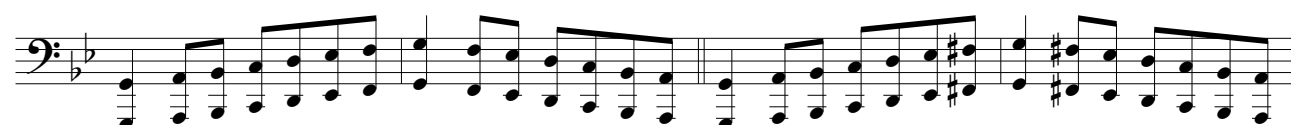


Bb Major

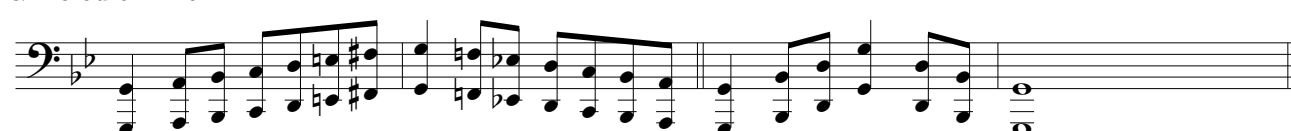


G natural minor

G harmonic minor



G melodic minor



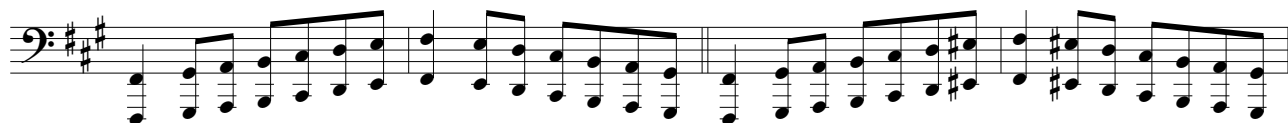
Scale Supplement

A Major



F# natural minor

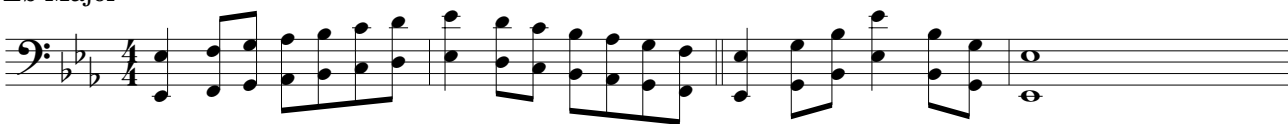
F# harmonic minor



F# melodic minor



Eb Major



C natural minor

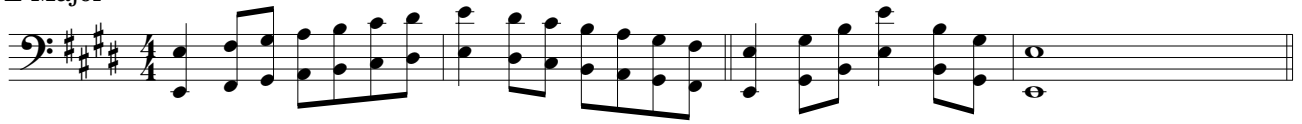
C harmonic minor



C melodic minor



E Major



C# natural minor

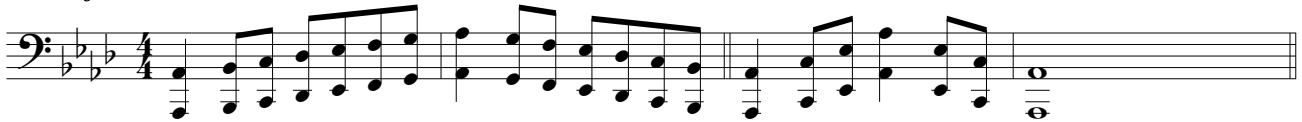
C# harmonic minor



C# melodic minor

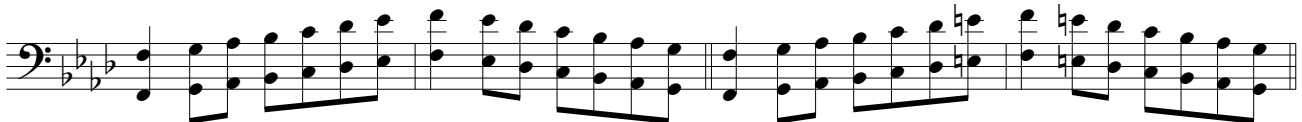


Ab Major

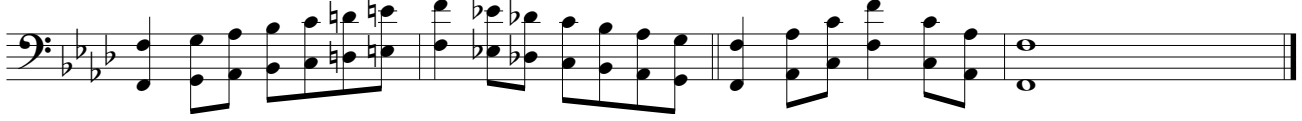


F natural minor

F harmonic minor



F melodic minor



Scale Supplement

B Major

Musical notation for the B Major scale in bass clef, 4/4 time signature. The scale is written in two measures: the first measure contains the ascending scale (B2, C#3, D#3, E4, F#4, G#4, A5, B5), and the second measure contains the descending scale (B5, A5, G#4, F#4, E4, D#3, C#3, B2). The piece concludes with a whole note chord of B major (B2, D#3, F#4).

G# natural minor

G# harmonic minor

Musical notation for the G# natural and G# harmonic minor scales in bass clef, 4/4 time signature. The first measure shows the ascending G# natural minor scale (G#2, A3, B3, C#4, D4, E4, F#4, G#4). The second measure shows the ascending G# harmonic minor scale (G#2, A3, B3, C#4, D4, E4, F#4, G#4, A5, B5). The third measure shows the descending G# harmonic minor scale (B5, A5, G#4, F#4, E4, D4, C#4, B3, A3, G#2). The piece concludes with a whole note chord of G# minor (G#2, B3, D4).

G# melodic minor

Musical notation for the G# melodic minor scale in bass clef, 4/4 time signature. The first measure shows the ascending G# melodic minor scale (G#2, A3, B3, C#4, D4, E4, F#4, G#4). The second measure shows the descending G# melodic minor scale (B5, A5, G#4, F#4, E4, D4, C#4, B3, A3, G#2). The piece concludes with a whole note chord of G# minor (G#2, B3, D4).

Db Major

Musical notation for the Db Major scale in bass clef, 4/4 time signature. The scale is written in two measures: the first measure contains the ascending scale (Db2, Eb3, Fb3, Gb3, Ab3, Bb3, C4, Db4), and the second measure contains the descending scale (Db4, C4, Bb3, Ab3, Gb3, Fb3, Eb3, Db2). The piece concludes with a whole note chord of Db major (Db2, Fb3, Ab3).

Bb natural minor

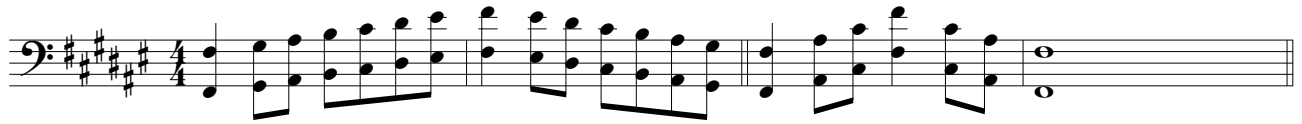
Bb harmonic minor

Musical notation for the Bb natural and Bb harmonic minor scales in bass clef, 4/4 time signature. The first measure shows the ascending Bb natural minor scale (Bb2, C3, D3, Eb3, E4, F4, G4, Ab4). The second measure shows the ascending Bb harmonic minor scale (Bb2, C3, D3, Eb3, E4, F4, G4, Ab4, Bb5, C5). The third measure shows the descending Bb harmonic minor scale (C5, Bb5, Ab4, G4, F4, E4, Eb3, D3, C3, Bb2). The piece concludes with a whole note chord of Bb minor (Bb2, D3, F4).

Bb melodic minor

Musical notation for the Bb melodic minor scale in bass clef, 4/4 time signature. The first measure shows the ascending Bb melodic minor scale (Bb2, C3, D3, Eb3, E4, F4, G4, Ab4). The second measure shows the descending Bb melodic minor scale (C5, Bb5, Ab4, G4, F4, E4, Eb3, D3, C3, Bb2). The piece concludes with a whole note chord of Bb minor (Bb2, D3, F4).

F# Major

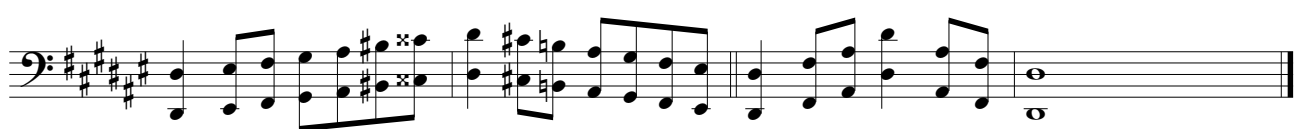


D# natural minor

D# harmonic minor



D# melodic minor

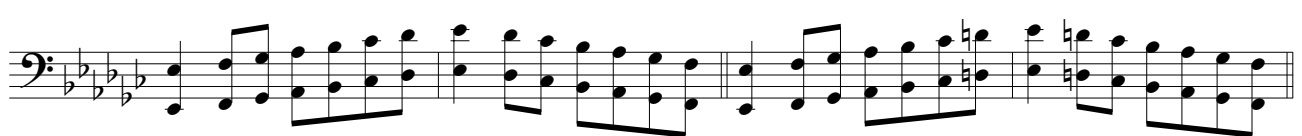


Gb Major



Eb natural minor

Eb harmonic minor



Eb melodic minor



Scale Supplement

C# Major

A# natural minor

A# harmonic minor

A# melodic minor

Cb Major

Ab natural minor

Ab harmonic minor

Ab melodic minor