



The U.S. Military Academy Band

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Tips for better bassoon playing

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The cumbersome technical nature of the bassoon can be overcome through careful work.

A good basic hand position has the fingers extended over the tone holes with the little fingers maintaining contact with the keys, preventing the other fingers from straying too far from the instrument. Finger technique should be smooth and accurate, without noisy pounding of the keys. It is far better to learn a difficult technical passage at a slow speed and move it up gradually than it is to play too fast too soon, causing some misplayed notes or other mistakes that will ultimately have to be unlearned. Also, playing slowly will expose unwanted sounds or notes such as the A natural that occurs between A-flat and B-flat. Work to achieve a smooth, precise key exchange, then increase the tempo.

Practice scales regularly to establish and maintain a strong technique. Vary the articulations used by combining staccato, legato, and slurs. Watch the curve of the bocal when tonguing. If there is any movement, you are probably tonguing too hard. For more complete technical independence, practice the scales with varied articulations in thirds and fourths. Try to focus on the extreme high register of the bassoon because acquiring a facile technique in this range can be problematic. Even though the embouchure must be firm to play the highest range, open the throat to allow the tone to resonate.

As with any instrument, there will always be troublesome notes to tune on the bassoon. Even the most experienced musicians may find they have become physically accustomed to hearing a particular note played sharp or flat because they've relied on the "feel" of the note in the embouchure. It is then necessary for the musician to overcome this particular "feel" for the note and make prescribed changes to accommodate the pitch. Careful, slow playing with a tuner or piano can be used to isolate these notes.

Remember that the care and protection of the instrument and reeds will reduce the frustrations of the performer as well as the conductor. Never leave the instrument in a place where it may be knocked or bumped. Use a drop swab to wipe out the inside after each playing session. Do not eat immediately before or during playing because the food residue will collect inside the bocal and reed, causing tone, response, and pitch problems. Store reeds in a protective case that allows air to circulate around them. Alternating the use of at least two good quality reeds will prolong the life of each.

This article provided courtesy of the [U.S. Military Academy Band](#) at West Point, New York