

Developing Good Habits for Playing Oboe

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Having trouble with that technical passage? Take a deep breath, release tension in your neck, back, arms, fingers, legs, knees, feet, and stand with both feet on the floor sharing equal weight. Try that passage again.

Almost without fail, the passage improves. I'm not a magician, but some students would humorously like to believe that I am. While the above suggestion may seem like a magic trick to a student who instantly improves a passage in a lesson, it's really a running commentary on body use awareness and how we often get in the way of ourselves.

You see, what we do as oboists can roughly be divided into two categories: the physical and the creative. Both are highly intertwined to create exquisite music, and each must be constantly nurtured. A good physical sense and great technique alone without highly developed musical ideas creates the oboe "jock," ready to amaze audiences with the speed and ease of their Pasculli pieces but leaves the audience hungry for well-conceived musical expression. On the flip side, a creative soul who has great ideas yet poor technique from excess tension is like a frustrated stroke victim who has so much to say but lacks the ability to communicate effectively.

As a teacher, I'm constantly balancing attention to the physical and creative forces in weekly lessons and long-term over semesters and years with students. As a performer, I'm always seeking new experiences that add depth to my creative musical ideas and exploring and expanding my physical awareness and abilities during practice sessions and beyond. This journey makes what I do both endlessly fascinating and challenging to me and I feel so lucky to have the opportunity to make this my profession.

I like to bring students to the path of physical awareness from their very first lessons. I'd like to think that a master golf pro or any fine coach would do the very same thing. Good use of your body is something that starts with the very first time we hold an oboe and breathe musical sound into it. This awareness and establishment of practicing proper body use is something that over time develops into great habits that allows our bodies to express our creative ideas with ease.

The information below is extracted from a handout that I give to students. I hope you'll find some of it helpful for you, your students, and your teaching.

Developing Good Physical Habits for Playing Oboe

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Habits are something that we repeatedly do, usually without thinking. Good habits are best learned by consciously repeating a positive action until it becomes a mostly unconscious experience. Bad habits, however, often develop through careless repetition but are usually extremely difficult to break. A teacher can encourage a student to develop positive habits and identify bad habits that should be replaced, but it is the responsibility of YOU THE STUDENT to make a change. You must bring awareness to your actions and thoughts and take the effort to develop good habits of oboe playing. Take time to think about HOW you play your oboe every time you begin playing a note and this repeated action and awareness eventually develops into GOOD habits over time to continually serve you as you advance.

Whether in a lesson, rehearsal or practice session, be kind and patient with yourself and notice the following:

1. If you are sitting, allow your feet to rest **flat** on the floor.
 - If you are tall, sit up and towards the back of your chair.
 - If your legs are short, sit towards the edge of the chair so that your feet touch the floor.
2. If you are standing, allow your feet and knees to be relaxed, not locked.
 - Your feet should be approximately at hip width with your weight distributed equally on each foot.
 - Frequently bring your awareness to this, and notice if you've shifted your weight to one foot or the other.
3. Think simple alignment: Your neck should be released and your ears should be over your shoulders and hips.
 - Avoid slouching where your back is rounded and your head is in front of your body.
 - Practice in front of a mirror and notice what your tendencies are. Then read the first sentence of #3 again and allow your body to make changes if needed.
4. Arms should hang loosely and comfortably from your shoulders.
 - Your elbows do not need to stick out when you play the oboe nor do they need to be "held" close to the body.
 - Practice in front of a mirror and notice what your tendencies are. Then read the first sentence of #4 again and allow your body to make changes if needed.
5. Make sure your head is not bent down.

- Allow your neck to be free so you can keep your chin up and eyes looking straight ahead.
- If you have to look down to see your music, simply raise your music stand higher.
- Practice in front of a mirror and notice what your tendencies are. Then read the first sentence of #5 again and allow your body to make changes if needed.

6. Bring the oboe to YOU, instead of bringing yourself to your oboe.

- Notice: do you usually bring your neck forward to put the reed on your lips?
- If yes, read the first sentence of #6 once more.
- Keep your head released and balanced on the top of your spine as you bring the reed to your lips. Think about this EACH time that you bring the oboe reed to your lips—especially when making & testing reeds!

7. Develop good habits of hand position.

- Allow your hands and all fingers to be gently curved
- If your ring finger and pinky finger are straight in order to reach the keys, gently turn your wrist down so that your fingers are now curved and positioned closer to the keys.
- The pads of your fingertips should cover the holes on the keys—pay special attention to covering the holes on the third finger keys of both the top and bottom joint.
- Only use the pressure necessary to hold the key down—no “slapping” of keys

8. Before you play a note, think about how to begin a note from silence:

1. Place the reed tip just inside your lips.
2. Place your tongue on the tip of the reed.
3. Begin blowing your air.
4. Release your tongue from the reed.

Keep this list on your music stand to help you remember the good habits you want to develop.
