

# **Taming the Wild Oboe:**

## **A Manual for Oboe Pedagogy**

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This booklet focuses on the issues of oboe playing that are most relevant to directors of student ensembles. I begin with the foundations for successful oboe playing: posture, breathing, embouchure and articulation. I follow this with a discussion of the most common playing problems experienced by young oboists, what physical symptoms an ensemble director can look out for, and exercises to help correct each issue. By staying mindful of these principles in their own playing, students can develop a more polished and professional tone and execution. My aim is to create a resource for both teachers and students to help young oboists get started with good technique, equipping them for future success.



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## About the Author:

I joined the faculty at the Tennessee Technological University's School of Music in 2017, teaching oboe, music theory and aural techniques. As part of my work at TN Tech I am also the principal oboist of the Bryan Symphony Orchestra and a member of the Cumberland Quintet. Before starting at TN Tech, I was a lecturer at San José State University in San José, California for twelve years. I taught oboe and a wide range of courses at SJSU, primarily in music theory and ear training, as well as music history and music technology. I have also taught at Santa Clara University, Chabot College, and Southeastern Oklahoma State University. I earned Bachelor's degrees in biology and music from the University of Idaho as a student of Dr. Carol Padgham Albrecht, and Master's and DMA degrees in oboe performance from the University of North Texas, where I studied with Dr. Charles Veazey. My [doctoral research](#) focused on characterizing the relationship between air pressure and loudness during oboe performance.

While in California, I was a member of the Stanford Woodwind Quintet and the Santa Cruz Symphony, and I also performed regularly with orchestras around the San Francisco Bay Area. Before moving to California, I was a freelance musician in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area while in graduate school, where I performed with many orchestras in that region, including one season as acting principal oboe of the Abilene Philharmonic Orchestra. In addition to my university and orchestral work, I keep busy as a recitalist, music coach, clinician, instrument repair technician, reed maker and private lesson teacher. I strive to make oboe playing more accessible for students of all ages.

As a teacher both of university students as well as younger private students, I bring my background in the sciences to the study and teaching of the oboe. My teaching style focuses on drawing out each student's individual and unique 'voice' on their instrument, and on the application of observational skills and correct knowledge of physiology to help make informed choices about how to play the oboe. My students receive thorough grounding in many areas of additional study that help inform and enable masterful performance and teaching: pedagogy, the application of music theory to performance, oboe maintenance and repair, and detailed and precise study of reed making. The goal of the oboist should be to have the oboe do exactly what you intend in exactly the way you intend, with greatest efficiency of effort on the part of the musician. To accomplish this, I teach my students to carefully observe and understand how and why they are producing their current sound, and to take targeted steps to grow toward a characteristic tone, polished musicianship and the ability to function independently as a successful professional.

If I can ever be of help to you or your oboe students, please contact me at any time at [madduci@tntech.edu](mailto:madduci@tntech.edu). Information about TN Tech's oboe studio and recordings of my recent live performances can be found at <https://www.michaeladduci.com>. You can also follow the TN Tech oboe studio on Facebook: [@TNTechOboe](#).

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## Introduction – Thoughts about the process of learning the oboe.

- I. The oboe has some particular quirks and challenges that can be difficult for a student just starting out. Whenever possible, it is best for young oboists to have a private teacher providing regular coaching and feedback.
  - a. Example: the oboe can produce very crisp articulations, so we generally need to exaggerate legato and de-emphasize staccato in our playing.
  - b. Example: the oboe does not excel at playing large leaps, so special training is needed to make leaps respond well.
- II. The majority of problems experienced by oboists come from a lack of proper air support.
  - a. “More air” doesn’t necessarily mean a greater volume of air – it can mean a more-supported air column. The correct use of air is at least as important as the amount of air being used.
  - b. We need a stable, supported air column: to play connected, musically-shaped phrases; to play appropriate “just enough” articulations; to play with good intonation and tone.
  - c. Good air support: an inward and upward force supplied by the abdominal muscles.
- III. Articulation and air movement are not mutually exclusive activities.
  - a. Before introducing articulation to beginners, make sure they are able to play slurred passages with good connection between notes and a constant air stream.
  - b. Articulation is a demarcation of where the note begins and ends. The air column continues underneath the articulation. Example: thumb over a garden hose.
- IV. Above all, the desired result is smooth execution. Young players need to actively and consciously work to eliminate bumps from their sound.
  - a. These can come from a shaky air column, from a shaky embouchure, from not keeping the reed in a consistent place within the embouchure, from not sitting still, from overly-aggressive articulation, and so on.
- V. The best starting notes for the oboe are “middle” B, A and G, followed by adding the right hand to move down to F#, E and D. Then introduce the half hole and octave keys. G major is an ideal first scale – it sits nicely in the midrange of the oboe and follows the instrument’s natural scale. Whenever possible, avoid starting oboes in F or B-flat Major, as there are many awkward finger patterns in those keys.

The next section will explain the four basic skills needed for oboe playing: how to hold the instrument, how to breathe, what to do with the lips (embouchure), and what to do with the tongue (articulation).

## Part One: Basic Pedagogy

### Posture and Playing Position

- I. The foundational principle of good oboe playing is to stay relaxed, except for where tension is needed (only in the lips and stomach). Relaxed posture and hand position results in relaxed breathing and articulation. Avoiding unneeded muscle tension makes a more efficient player who tires less easily and is less prone to injury.
- II. Posture: stand (or sit) tall and relaxed, but not “straight” – too tense. Demo: Stretch your arms over the head and reach for the ceiling, then lower arms to your sides. Memorize this feeling.
  - a. Shoulders are centered over the spine: back and down, not raised (shrugging) or forward.
  - b. Rib cage is at rest, but not collapsed; rib cage is not actively being expanded.
  - c. When sitting down, maintain the open and elevated feeling described above while sitting – don’t allow your body to collapse or slump once in the chair.
  - d. Playing position – hold the oboe at around a 45° angle (aim the oboe bell at the kneecaps), with the head tilted downward only slightly if at all. Bring the oboe to your mouth; don’t bring your head down to reach the oboe.
- III. Hand position: correct position decreases tension and increases note accuracy and speed.
  - a. Support the oboe with the right thumb. Balance with right index finger and the mouth. The left hand does not support the instrument – keep it free to move.
  - b. Keep the fingers round, and the palms close to the instrument (neither extended nor cramped – pretend you are holding a golf ball in each palm and keeping it against the oboe). The pads of the fingertips, not the knuckles or the actual fingertips themselves, are used to touch the keys.
  - c. Press the keys, don’t slam them closed; keep the fingers close to the keys they operate. Don’t lift way up or let fingers “wander.” Pinky fingers should stay above their key stacks – no lifting the instrument from below.
- IV. Some specific hand placement issues:
  - a. First octave key: left thumb. It rests on the oboe just below the key, but when using it a lot, let the thumb “float” over the key instead. It is not needed to balance the oboe.
  - b. Half hole: the left index finger rolls downward to open and upward to close the half hole. Don’t let your students slide onto the half hole or lift their finger off the key and put it back down – too slow!
  - c. Low D key: the only open-ring key. Student oboes often have a closed key instead. Small fingers may have trouble sealing the open key entirely. This is also a problem for smaller hands if the oboe has a hole in the G key (left hand third finger).
  - d. Short pinkies: younger or smaller students may have trouble reaching the left-hand pinky keys (particularly left F and left E-flat). Encourage them to swing their wrist down towards the floor slightly, so that their left hand is perpendicular to the oboe instead of angling upward. This will extend the reach of the left pinky.
  - e. Biceps/Triceps opposition problems: beginning students are often not able to hold the oboe steady – it slowly creeps upward pushing the reed further and further into the mouth. This problem corrects itself with awareness and experience.

## Breathing

### I. Inhalation.

- a. Breathing in should be a natural gesture, never gasp for air. Strive to take as silent a breath as possible given the circumstances – this helps decrease muscle tension.
- b. Inhale by expanding the abdominal region. The stomach area may visibly expand.
- c. The chest should remain relatively still, and the shoulders or rib cage should not rise up when breathing in.
  - i. Chest breathing produces a thin, airy tone quality. Abdominal breathing contributes to a warmer, darker sound.
- d. The oboist does not need to take a “full” breath. By breathing abdominally and leaving the chest relatively unexpanded, enough air is taken in and the proper structures are in place for a supported exhalation.
  - i. Oboists breathe in because they need oxygen, not because they have run out of air for playing (like a trombonist might). They will often need to use some breath marks to exhale, rather than inhaling all the time. Only take in as much air as is needed to get to the next breathing spot.

### II. Exhalation.

- a. To play the oboe, exhale using the abdominal muscles to push inward and upward against the chest cavity. This exerts upward pressure on the lungs and generates the controlled air column necessary to vibrate the reed.
  - i. However, avoid an isometric tightening of all of the stomach muscles – this feels different, like grunting. This restricts the flow of air and will limit sound output.
- b. The diaphragm, like all muscles, only contracts in one direction, when we inhale. It is not used to exhale actively, we need our abdominal muscles for that.
- c. Avoid using the chest muscles to exhale – it can cause the throat to tighten, and it contributes to a tight, dull sound. For example, try talking while contracting the chest muscles – this action will have the same effect on oboe tone quality.
- d. The throat always stays relaxed. Strive to control the oboe from only two points – the abdomen and the lips. Eliminate all tension between those two areas.
- e. Use a focused, narrow or “cold” air stream. The reed is the gate, not the destination – aim the air stream beyond it, through the instrument and out to the audience.
  - i. I have my students practice blowing a pinwheel held at arm’s length. If they can’t do that, they are not blowing fast enough for oboe playing.

### III. Air pressure.

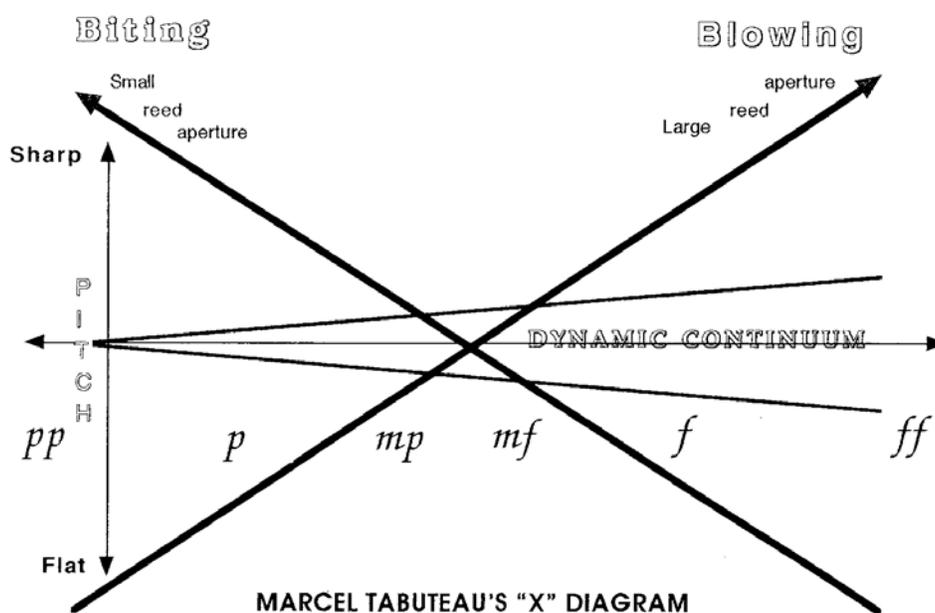
- a. A research project from 1971 tested air pressure generation in oboists. Before the test, players estimated that the oboe required anywhere from 20 to 90 pounds per square inch (PSI) of air pressure. When tested, no one could generate more than 4 PSI, and while playing the oboe the test subjects used less than 2 PSI.
- b. Later research has shown that the oboe is not a “high pressure” instrument. It does always require higher than normal air pressure (compared to talking, for example). However, the trumpet is capable of much higher maximum pressures, although it also frequently uses lower air pressure than the oboe as well.

- c. Oboists have a sensation of “high” pressure because they are blowing constantly, but only a small amount of air is being released from the body. Also, harder reeds cause an increased sensation of pressure. Students should practice taking half breaths instead of full breaths, and they should use less resistant reeds.

IV. Throat shape.

- a. Fiberoptic camera images have shown that the throat is in a relaxed position with the larynx lowered throughout the oboe’s entire range of dynamics and registers.
- b. The tongue is generally low and forward in the mouth at all times. Each individual places their tongue differently but should maintain that placement constantly.
  - i. This contrasts with the clarinet, where throat shape and tongue position play a critical role in voicing the various registers. The oboist uses the lips and air pressure for voicing, not the throat or tongue (except in extreme circumstances).
- c. Remember – the oboe is controlled by the abdomen and the lips. Keep the throat relaxed.
  - i. Avoid telling students to actively “open” their throat, as they may learn to play in a tense fashion. The throat is not expanded – it is relaxed.

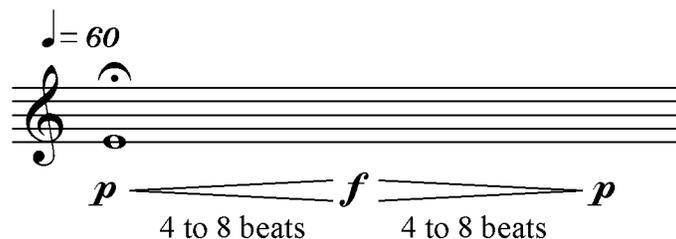
V. Dynamic contrast is a balance between lip pressure and air pressure.



- a. Marcel Tabuteau’s “X” diagram. As volume increases, you increase your air stream and open the reed by releasing embouchure pressure. To play quietly, you hold the reed more firmly (smaller aperture) and decrease your air stream (quantity, **not** pressure!). [My research](http://iii.library.unt.edu/record=b4332221~S12) (http://iii.library.unt.edu/record=b4332221~S12) shows that oboists should use the same amount of air pressure to play both loud and soft. The decrease in air volume during a decrescendo is controlled by the vocal cords, allowing the player to continue blowing with high pressure while reducing the amount of air entering the reed.
  - i. The vocal cords’ control of air flow should be trained as an involuntary response – students should **not** try to use their throat to control dynamics. They should practice decrescendo exercises while concentrating on keeping their blowing

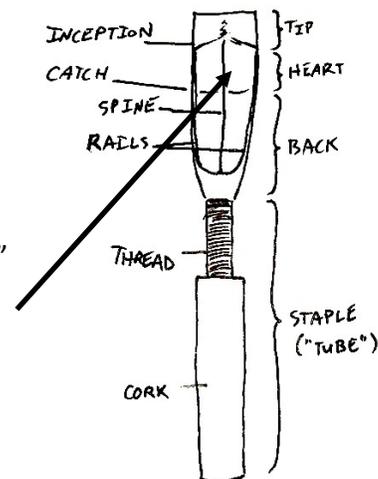
pressure up. If we set the correct conditions (“play softer but still blow firmly”), the body will find the ideal way to perform the task for us.

- b. Long tone exercise: play an eight-beat crescendo and decrescendo on notes in different registers. Learn to balance the embouchure and air components of dynamic control so that the pitch (intonation) stays constant from soft to loud and back, and so that the tone stays steady (no wobbling or unusual noises) throughout the exercise.



## Embouchure

- I. The lips cushion the reed and impose an order on its natural vibration. This allows the oboist to control the volume and tone quality with the lips.
  - a. At least half of the red area of both lips should be kept in contact with the reed. Keep the lips centered on the “heart” of the reed (see diagram at right).
  - b. The embouchure should be small. Think of pulling the drawstring of a bag – all the edges tuck in evenly. The embouchure is firm, but we are not biting the reed to force it to play. The firmness of the embouchure is directed all around the reed, controlling its tone but still allowing it to speak.



- II. Forming the embouchure.
  - a. First, without the reed. Stand in front of a mirror and say the word “Moo.” Hold it out – look what happens to your mouth. Alternatively, use the “Drinking Straw Method” – put the very tip of your little finger in your mouth like a straw. Create suction as if drinking from the straw – the mouth naturally draws inward around your finger.
    - i. The chin should be flat. This happens when the corners of the mouth tuck in, while slightly pushing the lips together. The muscle at the base of the chin moves downward to help. Do not push “upward” with the bottom lip, causing the chin to scrunch up.
    - ii. The sides of the mouth move in toward the center, producing a narrow embouchure. The lips are between the reed and the teeth, on both sides.
    - iii. The teeth need to be apart – there should be a thumb’s worth of space between top and bottom teeth, even for very high notes.

- b. Now with the reed.
  - i. Rest the heart of the reed on the bottom lip and close the mouth. Keeping the lips “attached” to the heart, roll (don’t slide) the reed inward until about half of the red part of the lips is tucked inside. There should be symmetry between the top and bottom lip – the same amount of lip rolled in on both sides of the reed.
  - ii. This puts the control surface of the reed (the heart) in contact with the muscles that control the lips. From here, the reed can be rolled in or out for pitch. Each reed will have a placement that sounds best.
  - iii. If the reed is pushed too far into the mouth (the lips are close to the thread), the tone will be harsh, loud and difficult to control.
  - iv. If the reed is not in the mouth far enough (the lips are very close to the tip), the oboist will tend to collapse the reed with their embouchure, resulting in little or no volume with a dull tone. Watch for “biters” who look like they are working very hard but who are not producing any sound!
- c. Avoid an embouchure that looks like a smile or spreads out to the sides. Keep the corners pulled in towards the center. Do your work where the reed is – not with the cheeks.
- d. Some students will not have a long enough upper lip to fully roll it under their teeth. This will create a slightly fuzzier, brassier sound. Have them tuck it in as much as they can. If a student truly has an upper lip that is too short to get over the top teeth, this is the one reason I might discourage someone from playing the oboe and direct them towards another instrument.

### III. Summary.

- a. The red part of the lips is placed on the heart of the reed.
- b. The mouth is generally drawn inward like a drawstring, keeping the embouchure small and round. Don’t let the corners move out to the sides, creating a smile.
- c. The chin is flat and down.
- d. “The lips are up, the jaw is down.” In other words: the lips, not the teeth, cushion the reed. Keep a small, centered embouchure and then lower the jaw, keeping the lips in the same place. Keeping the chin down accomplishes this. Imagine leaving enough space to fit your thumb between your teeth, and then use the lips to close the gap. This helps avoid biting tendencies.

## Articulation

### I. Introduction.

- a. Beginners should start out by slurring to learn how to control the air and keep the reed vibrating between notes. If articulation is introduced too soon, they will develop a very choppy tone, because once they apply the tongue they will forget to keep blowing.
- b. Again, it is important to not let the air stream collapse in between each note just because you are separating the notes with your tongue. If an oboist is not using a continuous air stream, the reed will stop vibrating when they move between notes, and the tone will stop suddenly. Encourage them to blow over or through the change of note, linking the two notes together with air. Think about legato first, then add strength or separation as needed... but even staccato oboe playing requires a continuously supported airstream.

## II. Structure.

- a. The inside of the mouth has an “ah” shape, not an “ee” – the tongue is forward and down, and the jaw is down. Remember to leave space between the upper and lower teeth – control the reed with the lips, not the jaw.
- b. The tip of the tongue strikes the tip of the reed. Think of the syllable “Ta.” Watch for students articulating elsewhere on the reed or on the roof of the mouth – this gives a dull, unclear articulation. Line up the articulation with the finger movements, so that the notes speak on time.
  - i. In reality, since the reed is angled upward in the mouth, the tongue will be approaching the reed from below. Therefore, an area just behind the tip of the tongue on the top side contacts the reed, and the bottom blade of the reed naturally gets contacted first. However, this is probably too much information for a beginning student.
  - ii. We articulate by moving just the tip of the tongue, not the entire tongue – think of “tapping” on the reed to show where each new note begins. If students are lunging at the reed with their entire tongue, their articulation will be heavy and late. If they are doing this, you will see a lot of muscle movement in the throat.

## Conclusion

The four key pedagogical areas of posture, breathing, embouchure and articulation must be clearly explained and carefully practiced. Be on the lookout for students who are struggling with one or more of these issues. It is possible to play the oboe without correct fundamentals, but students will eventually have to break and correct these bad habits later in their career – which takes a lot longer and is more frustrating than doing it right from the beginning. It is worth stating again the importance of helping young oboists find a qualified private teacher to study with.

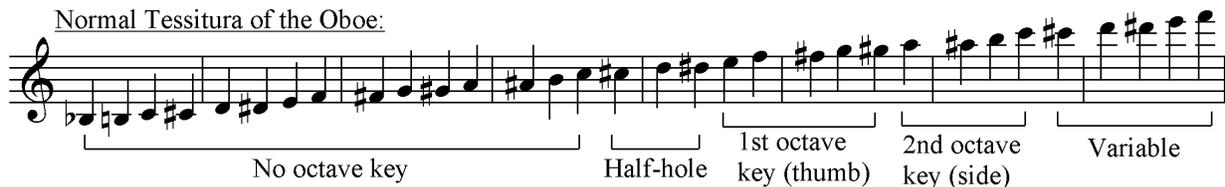
The next section of this document will address several common mistakes that young oboists make, with exercises designed to correct these problems.

## Part Two: Common Issues for Young Oboists

Many young oboists have an incorrect approach to five specific musical tasks. These tasks are addressed below with a “prescription” of exercises and remedies for each. Play them slowly in front of a mirror, while watching and listening carefully!

### Issue 1: Hand Position (The Half-Hole)

- I. The half-hole is an octave key. It must be used alone, not together with other octave keys.
  - a. The half-hole is used only for the notes middle C-sharp, middle D, and middle E-flat.
  - b. Some notes in the extreme high range also use the half hole.



- II. The rest position for the left index finger is on the upper portion of the key – covering the tone hole.
  - a. To open the half-hole vent, rotate the left index finger downward (towards the floor) from the 2<sup>nd</sup> knuckle. The whole hand does not move, and the wrist does not rotate – the index finger moves alone.
  - b. To close the half-hole, rotate upward from the 2<sup>nd</sup> knuckle.
  - c. Practice this rolling motion on a pencil, and then on the oboe without playing.
- III. Many students use at least one of three popular, but incorrect, methods for “half-holing.”
  - a. Bad Habit #1: Operating the correct procedure in reverse (resting the main part of the fingertip on the half-hole plate, and then rolling up to close the half-hole).
  - b. Bad Habit #2: Lifting the finger up and down when operating the half-hole.
  - c. Bad Habit #3: Sliding the fingertip up and down the key to open and close the half-hole.

### IV. Some fingering exercises for strengthening the half-hole motion:

♩ = 40, then 60, then 80, 100, 120, etc.



repeat each measure's pattern continuously until the note change is clean before changing tempo.

### V. Other troublesome finger changes:

♩ = 40, then 60, 80, 100, 120, etc.

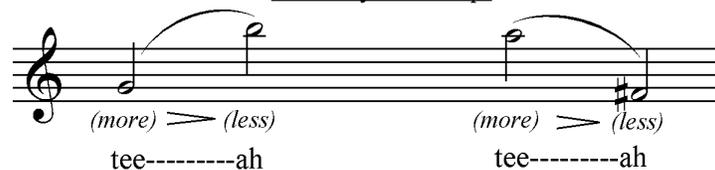


repeat each measure's pattern continuously until the note change is clean before changing tempo.

Issue 2: Air Support (Voicing Leaps)

- I. When playing a wide leap (greater than a third), the oboe itself tends to apply an accent to the destination note of the leap (up or down).
- II. Also, when leaping the oboist also tends to overcompensate for the destination note, creating an unwanted emphasis or “splatter.”
- III. Smooth execution is the goal – even timbre throughout the entire range of the oboe. We should eliminate bumps, unnecessary accents and unplanned color changes from our playing.
  - a. The top note of an upward leap, or the bottom note of a downward leap, already has an accent based on its position in the musical line. This is enough to get the point across – no extra accent on the part of the player or the instrument is necessary.
- IV. To compensate for the oboe’s and oboist’s tendencies, the player should make a minor adjustment in approach to create a leap where both notes have the same intensity:
  - a. The player should treat the first note of the leap as a springboard, using it to generate the energy necessary to play the second note of the leap.
  - b. For an upward leap, prepare the leap from below; for a downward leap, prepare the leap from above. Put a slight emphasis on the first note and slightly diminish the second note.
    - i. Think about releasing the second note, rather than attacking it.
  - c. This happens the moment the second note is played, and it should be entirely internal. No decrescendo should be heard. To the listener, both notes should sound the same. The oboist is making an internal, technical action to produce this effect. The result should be heard, not the process.
- V. When done correctly, we hear a leap where both notes sound the same in terms of volume, intensity, response and timbre.

Anatomy of a Leap:



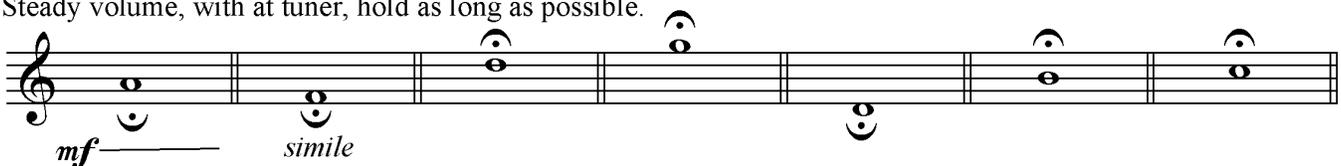
- VI. Sample exercise for practicing upward leaps:
  - a. Play slowly, paying attention to each note and to the result of each leap.



### Issue 3: Embouchure (Excessive Biting, or “Muscling” the Reed)

- I. A major source of embouchure problems is using biting or jaw pressure to control the reed.
  - a. This is partly (or mostly) a reed-related issue.
    - i. A very hard reed requires too much lip/jaw force. This limits the player’s expressive capacity.
    - ii. A very soft reed will often feel loose or buzzy, tricking the student into using too much lip/jaw force to tame the sound. However, soft reeds will collapse under the forces applied by a “biter.”
    - iii. An ideal reed is soft but not squawky – it has its own internal resistance, so the player can relax and use less external (applied) resistance, without worrying about bad tone: you can “trust” this kind of reed.
- II. The function of the embouchure is to warm and darken the reed’s natural vibration.
  - a. A good embouchure is necessary both for good intonation and for beautiful tone quality.
  - b. To accomplish this, the embouchure must cushion and support the reed, not “muscle” it.
- III. Building an embouchure:
  - a. About half of the red part of each lip should be rolled in on top of the teeth on both sides. The embouchure should be symmetrical – both lips should be rolled in the same amount.
  - b. There should be a thumb’s worth of space between the upper and lower teeth.
  - c. The skin on top of the chin should be flat and flexed downward (the famous “flat chin”). This is a symptom of a correct embouchure, not a cause of it. It comes along with item b.
  - d. The corners of the mouth should be directed towards the center.
  - e. No smiles. The embouchure should be small because the reed is small. Keep it narrow, so the muscular energy is directed to where it will be of the most use.
- IV. Three quick ways to visualize an embouchure.
  - a. Say “Moo” – sustaining this sound produces the narrow corners and flat chin nicely. All you have to do now is roll the lips in over the teeth.
  - b. Whistling – whistle a steady tone, high in your range, and you get the same result.
  - c. Drinking – apply suction to your little finger as if it were a drinking straw.
- V. Exercises for developing a correct embouchure:
  - a. On the reed alone, hold out a steady pitch as long as possible (any pitch). Use a tuner. Hold very still and eliminate any quivering in the tone. Keep intonation and volume constant. Unstable tone could be due to variations in embouchure or in the air column.
  - b. On the reed alone, play simple tunes like “Hot Cross Buns.” Aim for discrete, stable pitches.
  - c. On the oboe, play a note (any pitch) for as long as possible. Use a tuner. Hold very still and eliminate any quivering in the tone. Keep intonation and volume constant.

Steady volume, with at tuner, hold as long as possible.



- d. Repeat the exercise above, this time adding the element of dynamic contrast. Play a long crescendo-decrescendo, keeping the intonation constant. Use a tuner!
- i. This requires a balance between air pressure and embouchure pressure.

Keep tone and pitch steady. Start as soft as possible, slowly grow as loud as possible, slowly decay to nothing.

- e. Use the E minor arpeggio exercise below to emphasize the embouchure's role in tone quality, and the air stream's role in intonation.
- i. First, hold out the low E at the beginning of the exercise. While playing this note, think about what a correct embouchure feels like. Make the necessary adjustments, relax, and listen to the tone deepen and open up.
- ii. While still on the same breath (don't interrupt the exercise), slowly play the arpeggio, slurred, up and down, finishing on low E again. The final E should have the same depth and resonance as the first E.
- iii. Only minor embouchure adjustments are necessary to play the higher notes – the main effort should come from the air column.
1. Play the exercise once without any adjustment for register.
  2. Play the exercise again, using increased air pressure for the high notes.
  3. Play the exercise again, adding small embouchure adjustments if necessary.
- iv. Often the high register is flat, especially for students, or they bite the reed to prevent being flat. When I play the interval of an octave, here is where I feel the change happening to be in tune on the high note:
1. 85% increase air support.
  2. 10% tucking the reed in slightly to raise the pitch. Don't slide the reed in, that will change tone quality. "Tucking" or "rolling" in means the lips stay on the same part of the reed, but we push inward on our embouchure with the reed. This is better than biting, because we don't get tired and the sound doesn't get thin.
  3. 5% closing the jaw, only for very high notes like high Bb or C, and only if absolutely necessary for intonation.

*Slowly!*

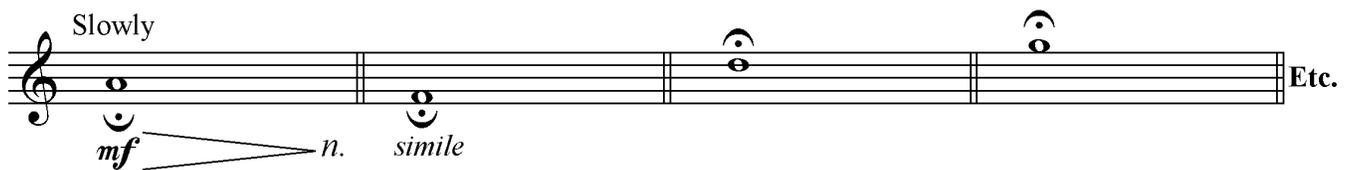
#### Issue 4: Articulation (Explosive Attacks)

- I. Symptoms: A thudding or squawking noise at the start of articulated notes, often accompanied by notes starting after the beat. You may hear more “tongue” than “note.”
- II. Causes: This generally comes from a too-strong tongue strike on the reed, combined with not enough air pressure to start the reed vibrating.
  - a. Hard or unresponsive reeds can also contribute to this problem.
  - b. Students who do not use enough air will make up for it by over-articulating to get the sound started. This gives a marcato sound to every tongued note.
- III. Solution: Start the tone by “releasing” the air rather than by “attacking” the reed.
  - a. For the first articulation after a rest), plug the reed opening with the tongue. Build up air pressure against this blockage – think about blocking a running water hose with your thumb (the water is there, ready to shoot out the instant you take your thumb away). When enough air pressure is ready for the reed to speak, simply release the tongue to start the sound. This gives a much quieter, more reliable articulation.
  - b. For articulations within an existing phrase, remember to keep the air moving between the notes. For many oboe students, once articulation is introduced, they forget about their air column. This creates a series of short, choppy sounds. Play across the change of note to create a smoother phrase.
    - i. Encourage a lighter articulation with more use of air to cross the note change. The air column should be sustained even when playing articulated notes, not just when slurring. Avoid “puffing” articulation, where the air column is started and stopped for every note (sounds like “ha ha ha ha”).
    - ii. There is a physical distance (horizontal and vertical) between notes on the page. This distance must be bridged by the air column or the notes will be disconnected.
- IV. Exercise: practice using the lightest possible articulation by repeatedly tonguing the same note, until the articulation is just barely audible. Then, add a little more force. This is all that is needed for unaccented notes.
  - a. Try thinking of the syllable “da” rather than “ta” – a softer sound. However, articulation should still take place between the tip of the tongue and the tip of the reed.
- V. Remind your students that the oboe reed is very small, so it only takes a small amount of tongue force to get the articulation you want. This is particularly important for students who have switched over from flute or clarinet, where a more vigorous articulation is needed.

## Issue 5: Articulation (Choppy Releases)

- I. Symptoms: the oboist ends notes very abruptly, and/or the pitch sags at the end of the note.
- II. Causes: The student is stopping their air stream at the end of the note before the note is finished resonating.
  - a. They could be stopping their air pressure generation – not blowing at all.
  - b. They could be stopping the flow of air by closing their vocal folds, or by blocking the reed with their tongue.
- III. This breaks up the phrase into individual “note-lets.” There is little or no sense of musical line, and the ends of notes sound jarring or out of character for the music.
- IV. Solution: Again, keep the air moving between notes, and to play across the change of note.
  - a. For articulations within an existing phrase, the same steps described on the previous page will address this problem.
  - b. For notes that are followed by a rest, for the last note before taking a breath, and for the final note of a phrase, the air column must be sustained until after the note has been released. Encourage the student to think of releasing “upward” or “outward” rather than letting the note fall “downward.” Finish the note before relaxing the stomach, stopping the air or breathing.
- V. Exercises:
  - a. Long Decrescendo. On any note, start mezzo forte and gradually decrescendo to nothing. Try to get as soft as possible (to nothing, if possible) before the tone stops.

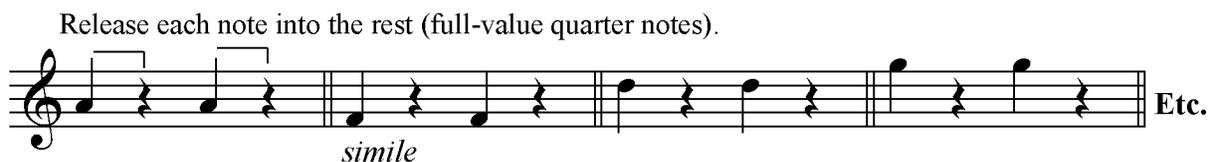
Slowly



*mf* *n.* *simile* Etc.

- b. Short Tapers. Practice tapering into the rest. This is an extension of the above exercise, except there is no audible decrescendo – it is all compressed into the final millisecond of the note.
  - i. Play the note at mezzo forte, and then quickly taper into the rest. Keep the pitch up, and don't release your air support until after the tone has stopped. Release “outward.”

Release each note into the rest (full-value quarter notes).



*simile* Etc.

The final section of this document covers instruments and reeds.

## **Part 3: Equipment**

### **The Instrument**

- I. General thoughts.
  - a. I always recommend that serious students, even beginners, start with an intermediate level instrument (see below). Yamaha beginner oboes are acceptable but will need to be quickly replaced as the student progresses. It would be better to rent one of these until the student grows out of it, then buy the better one.
  - b. In general, plastic instruments are better for young students than wooden ones, and they survive long term use and storage better. Professional quality instruments should be reserved for the more advanced or more serious students. Many intermediate wooden instruments can come with a plastic top joint instead, which helps against cracking but still preserves the sound of a wooden instrument.
  - c. Try to only buy student oboes that have the covered (“plateau”) keys (avoid open-ring oboes), and have at least the low B-flat key, left hand F key and forked F resonance key. Advanced students will also need the articulated C-sharp key and a split-ring D key.
  - d. Parents will try to buy an oboe from a pawn shop, antique shop, Amazon, Wal-Mart, Costco or eBay. Do your best to discourage this.
  - e. Always have a professional oboist check any instrument you are considering, especially any used oboe. All of the reputable double reed shops will send instruments out for a 1-2 week trial period, so you shouldn’t ever have to buy an oboe without being able to try it first. See my list of suggested suppliers at the end of this booklet.
- II. To rent or to buy?
  - a. I recommend having new oboists rent an instrument for a semester or two to make sure the student will stick with it. It is rarely worth the money to buy a beginner-level oboe, because they student will grow out of it so quickly and their resale value is low.
  - b. Serious students should purchase an intermediate-level instrument as soon as possible so their growth is not restricted by their equipment.
  - c. Conservatory/professional level instruments will be required for students entering college as music majors, but it might be best to wait and let their college oboe instructor have input on any instrument purchase.
  - d. When buying an oboe, it is best to contact a reputable double-reed supplier rather than a general music retailer. The same is true for repair shops.
- III. New or used oboes?
  - a. New oboes are great, but they have break-in issues to consider. Used oboes can be more economical, but when buying a used oboe, I would avoid any oboe that is more than 10 years old, and again, don’t buy any oboe that you can’t try first.
  - b. Do not buy used instruments that have been badly cracked and then pinned.
- IV. Make and model recommendations.
  - a. For beginning students:
    - i. The days of low cost, introductory-level plastic oboes are over. Even the most basic oboe costs around \$3000, but this type of instrument sounds bad and lacks

the proper keys described above. I recommend skipping directly to the Intermediate phase (see b., below), so that students can have a better experience when learning the instrument. Intermediate oboes have a better sound quality and haven't cut corners on keywork.

ii. If you must start with a beginner oboe, the **Fox/Renard 333** and the **Yamaha YOB-241** are the only two I can honestly recommend. They are adequate, but even the most indifferent student will grow out of them in a few months. The Fox 333 has more intermediate-style keywork and so it would be useful for longer. I don't recommend that students buy these instruments – rent them for a while, then move on to something better.

1. Both the Fox and the Yamaha currently cost around \$3000, which is more expensive than my favorite intermediate oboe!
2. Beginner oboes have little resale value, and they aren't useful as backup oboes, because they are so much worse than whatever instrument the student regularly uses.
3. Brands to avoid: Bundy, Conn, Jupiter, Linton, Selmer, many others. Plus, avoid any unfamiliar French or Italian sounding brand names.

b. For intermediate students:

i. Students who show continued interest and ability should move away from their beginner oboes as soon as possible. For this age group my recommendation is the **Tiery J10** (a student oboe made by Fossati, a French oboe maker). The other main intermediate oboe, very popular in the United States, is the **Fox/Renard 330**.

1. **Tiery J10**: this is the superior-quality oboe in this category. It is less expensive than the Fox 330 and has more keywork and a better tone quality. It is available in an all-wood version and can be purchased with a plastic top joint (my recommendation for school-owned instruments). I try to get my own young students on to this oboe as soon as possible, skipping beginner instruments if they can. The J10 would still be acceptable for a student entering college as a music major, though they would need to replace it soon after starting their degree. (*Purchase price ~\$2900, available primarily from River City Reeds, in San Antonio, TX - gillian@rivercityreeds.com*)
2. **Fox/Renard 330**: this is still the most popular intermediate oboe in the US, but I prefer the Tiery J10 as described above. The Fox 330 is made all of plastic, has all necessary keys, and a good sound. It would be useful through the end of high school but should not be taken to college. (*Purchase price ~ \$3700 – much more than the Tiery J10 which is a superior instrument*).

- a. There are other, more advanced Fox instruments available (the Fox 300 and 400), but they are prohibitively expensive: at least \$6000. For this price, you can buy an excellent professional oboe that will sound much better, so I don't recommend advancing up the Fox line beyond the 330.

3. Once a student upgrades to a professional level oboe, I would recommend keeping their intermediate instrument as a backup, for outdoor performances or for when their new oboe is in for repairs.

c. For advanced students:

- i. Students using a Tiery J10 will likely be content with it through high school and into college. Students with a Fox 330 will outgrow it sooner, as the tone is not as polished as the J10's.
- ii. Those students who are truly serious about pursuing the oboe as a career need a professional level instrument. Prices for new oboes in this category start at around \$8000.
- iii. The **Lorée** brand has been the professional standard in the US for a very long time, but in the last 10-15 years many other high-quality brands have risen to challenge Lorée, for example **Howarth, Bulgheroni, Yamaha, Fossati, Rigoutat, Marigaux, Covey**, and many others. The decision on which oboe to buy should be made in consultation with the student's private oboe teacher. If the student is not taking lessons, it might be better to wait until starting college and let their major professor help with this decision.

- d. **My own students** start with the Tiery J10 and then graduate to a Loree (model c+3, AK bore) or Howarth (model LXV or XL) if/when they reach a level requiring a professional instrument. This time may come during high school or during college; some students are fine with the Tiery J10 forever.

V. Advice for Directors:

- a. If you have the luxury of purchasing new oboes for your school, I would recommend buying either Tiery J10s with the plastic top joint (preferred) or Fox/Renard 330s (all plastic) for your school instrument collection. These plastic instruments will stand up to a lot more abuse (physical carelessness, temperature extremes, and long periods of disuse) than wooden oboes, and will require less maintenance. The top joint is the most prone to cracking, so a wooden bottom joint is usually safe.
- b. You might consider owning a good quality professional oboe or two for your star players, but I would put my emphasis on building a stable of reliable instruments first.
- c. I would not recommend spending your budget on starter oboes like the Yamaha/Selmer instruments. The Tiery oboe is better, and less expensive.

VI. Maintaining your Instruments:

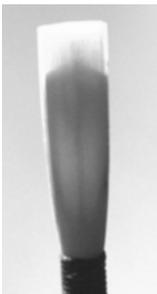
- a. Oboes require regular fine-tuning of the mechanism. This should be done by a competent oboe teacher (but many teachers prefer not to work on instruments) or by a trained, **oboe-specific** repair professional. In an ideal world, your oboes should be tuned up at least once a year.
  - i. In the middle Tennessee area, I strongly recommend Jason Onks at Onks Woodwind Specialists in Smyrna (<https://www.onksws.com/>).
  - ii. The typical music store offers repair services, but generally they do not specialize in oboe. It takes an oboist to keep an oboe working at its best.

- iii. You can inspect your oboes periodically and tighten any loose screws that do not point into the body of the instrument. These are the screws that run parallel to the oboe and hold the rods in place. They should be snug, but not over-tight. Never tighten or loosen a screw that points into the oboe unless you are sure of what you are doing.

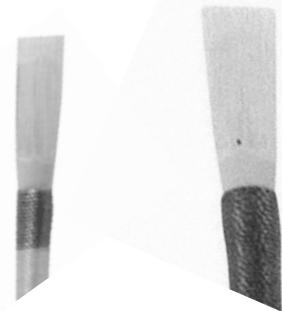
## The Reed

- I. General thoughts.
  - a. The reed is the primary factor determining intonation, tone quality, dynamic range, and technical execution. This is one of the main reasons why every oboe student really does need a private teacher.
    - i. Students need very high quality, easy-blowing reeds with thin tips so they do not learn to bite on hard, resistant reeds.
    - ii. Encourage your serious oboists to begin learning the reed making process in their lessons. It will take many years to master but starting early can't hurt.
  - b. What you can do is to exercise some influence over where your students get their reeds.
    - i. The best reeds will be hand made by an actual professional oboist/reed maker. They are expensive. The worst reeds will be machine-made, but they will be cheap.
    - ii. If your students have a teacher, that individual will either be making reeds for them or providing them with their own recommended reed source.
    - iii. If for some reason private lessons aren't possible for your students, then you should try to form a relationship with a high-quality local player who can make reeds for students in your classes.
    - iv. The students should be responsible for obtaining reeds from your source. Avoid stockpiling reeds on their behalf, as a reed loses quality the longer it sits without being used.
  - c. There are good individual reed makers out there with their own shops (see the list of suppliers at the end of this packet). Avoid purchasing reeds from commercial sources such as music stores or EBay. Commercial reeds (even hand-finished ones) are not a viable solution. They will not play well "out of the box," and must be adjusted to fit the student, the oboe, and the climate anyway. Try and find reeds that are made and sold by an individual, not a brand or company.
- II. General guidelines for finding decent reeds.
  - a. Expect to pay anywhere from \$20-40 for a good reed. Reeds that cost \$10 or less are generally not a good bargain.
  - b. Try to avoid mass-produced, brand name reeds. Of all the brand-name reeds, **K.GE** reeds are probably the most reliable. Many online retailers sell them; look for medium-soft US-style student reeds.
  - c. Avoid all oboe reeds that have a wire (wire on English horn reeds is fine) or that have "goldbeater's skin" (that clear filmy substance) wrapped around the thread-to-cane junction.

- d. Avoid reeds that do not seal when dry, meaning that the two blades of the reed do not touch each other on both sides, all the way from the thread up to the very tip.
- e. Avoid plastic or “fibercane” reeds. Légère reeds have not been perfected for oboe yet, and they cost way too much to be truly useful.
- f. A good reed will be a combination of smooth surfaces and defined regions. The tip will have a definite upside-down V or U shape. The best reeds have a tip where the sides are slightly thinner than the center.

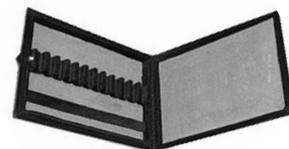


- i. The example on the left is a professional reed. Note the structure of the tip (the thinnest portion, at the top of the reed). Professional reeds may be chunky or may not look beautiful. Machine-made reeds are often perfectly smooth, showing no sign of human contact. The two examples on the right are commercial reeds. The tip of a commercial reed tends to be a flat, straight line. This is partly why these reeds sound like kazoos.



### III. Reed care.

- a. Before playing, a reed will need to be soaked in lukewarm water for 1-10 minutes, depending on its age. New reeds take less time to soak. Cold water makes them open up too far; warmer water works faster than cold. Hot water should be avoided, as should water out of the refrigerated drinking fountain.
  - i. Encourage students to brush their teeth, or at least to rinse out their mouth, before playing. This will help their reeds to last longer, especially if band rehearsal is right after lunch.
- b. Oboe reeds are not as durable as clarinet or saxophone reeds. They wear out quickly and should be replaced often. Students should be purchasing at least 3 per month. If the reeds are rotated, they will last longer, but they do not have a long shelf life and will deteriorate if not played on.
  - iv. Ideally, reeds should be replaced at least every two weeks, or even more frequently if used heavily. Beginners will often nurse along dying reeds because they are soft and comfortable, but this trains a lazy embouchure.
- b. Storage: Do not store reeds in their plastic shipping tubes. The cotton breaks down the tip from being put in and taken out repeatedly, and the reed never dries out after use. Have students buy a reed case from a double-reed store. Mandrel-style reed cases (see example, below left) should be avoided, as they allow the reeds to move around and can damage the tips. Look for ribbon-style reed cases instead (below right). If the case is plastic, drill some holes in it to allow the reeds to “breathe.”



**Appendix: Oboe Resources**  
(lists are in alphabetical order)

**Recommended Reading List**

- Caswell, Daryl. *Reed Knife Sharpening: A Guide for Reed Makers*, 2d ed. Calgary: Landwell Reed Knives, Inc., 1994.
- Hinson, Amy, "Oboes for Idgets," 2005, <<http://www.ddorian.com/idgets/index.htm>>.
- Light, Jay. *The Oboe Reed Book: A Straight-Talking Guide to Making and Understanding Oboe Reeds*. Des Moines: J. Light, 1983.
- Mack, John. "Effective Guidance for the Young Oboist." *The Journal of the International Double Reed Society* 2 (1974):25-37.
- Nelson, Scott A. *Breathing for Musicians*. Winchester, Virginia: Reinhardt & Still Publishers, 1999.
- Robinson, Joseph. "Oboists, Exhale Before Playing." *The Double Reed* 10, no. 3 (1987): 16-19.
- Schuring, Martin. *Oboe Art & Method*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Van Cleve, Libby. *Oboe Unbound: Contemporary Techniques*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- Weber, David B., and Ferald B. Capps. *The Reed Maker's Manual: Step-by-Step Instructions for Making Oboe and English Horn Reeds*. Phoenix: The Reed Maker's Manual, 1990.

**Recommended Recording List**

- Peter Cooper. "Whispers of the Past," Summit Classical (2000)
- Elaine Douvas. "Boston Records Presents Elaine Douvas," Boston Records (2003)
- Rebecca Henderson. "... Is But a Dream," Boston Records (2004)
- Michael Henschel. "20<sup>th</sup> Century French Wind Trios," Cedille Records (1998)
- Alex Klein. "Strauss: Wind Concertos," Teldec (2001)
- **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED:** Johanna Cox Pennington, "Orion Nocturne," Albany Records (2018)
- Joseph Robinson. "New York Legends: Oboe," Cala Records (1998)

## **Partial List of Double Reed Suppliers**

This list is in alphabetical order. I have had good experiences dealing with these shops; there are many other good shops out there!

Bjorklund Reedworks – Chicago, Illinois (oboe reeds)

<http://www.bjorklundreedworks.com/>

Forrests Music – Berkeley, California

<http://www.forrestsmusic.com/>

Hodge Products, Inc. – Roseland, Virginia

<http://www.hodgeproductsinc.com/>

Mark Chudnow Woodwinds – Napa, California

<http://www.mcwoboe.com/>

Midwest Musical Imports – Minneapolis, Minnesota

<http://www.mmimports.com/>

North Texas Oboe Reeds and Cane – Dallas, Texas (oboe reeds)

<http://www.oboereedstore.com/>

Onks Woodwind Specialists – Smyrna, Tennessee (oboe repair)

<https://www.onksws.com/>

RDG Woodwinds, Inc. – Los Angeles, California

<http://www.rdgwoodwinds.com/>

River City Reeds – San Antonio, Texas (source for Fossati/Tiery oboes)

<http://www.rivercityreeds.com/>

TrevCo-Varner Music – Lake Worth, Florida (oboe sheet music)

<http://www.trevcomusic.com/>