



Clarinet Note Studio

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A Guide to Mastering Speed on the Clarinet

As a professional clarinetist and music teacher, I understand the allure of playing fast on the clarinet. Whether you're a beginner looking to build your skills or an advanced player aiming to reach new heights, mastering speed requires a combination of technique, practice, coordination, and control. Here are some essential tips and exercises to help you play fast on the clarinet precisely and expressively.

1. Establish a Solid Foundation

Before diving into speed, ensure you have a solid foundation in the fundamentals of clarinet playing. Work on your embouchure, breath support, and finger technique. A strong foundation will provide the stability necessary for playing fast passages accurately. I remember taking a cooking class devoted to knife skills many years ago, and the man next to me was so focused on chopping the vegetables as fast as he could without learning the proper knife technique first. Not only was this novice not concentrating on the right thing, but it was also dangerous! Be careful with a knife and with clarinet technique; it will only set you forward.

2. Practice Scales

I recommend that my students play through all major and minor scales, arpeggios, and scales in thirds (working from either the Klosé and/or Baermann Method books). It's not enough to play through the scales but rather focus on the evenness of the fingers and the sound through the various clarinet registers.

3. Know basic music theory

You may have heard this before, but music is different patterns of all the major and minor scales and arpeggios. That's why there's typically a huge emphasis put on learning and memorizing all of your major and minor scales, arpeggios, dominant 7, diminished 7, arpeggios, scales in thirds, and so on, in your lessons. It's not just to torture you but to make sight reading and learning music easier. The faster you can recognize what you're playing, the quicker you can start working on increasing speed.

4. Use a Metronome

Using a metronome, or as I like to call it, "The Truth Teller," is an essential tool in developing faster techniques. A metronome is an invaluable tool for developing speed. Set it at a comfortable tempo and practice the passage until you can play it flawlessly. Gradually increase the metronome speed, challenging yourself to maintain accuracy and control. This gradual progression will help build muscle memory and coordination. If you still need help to hear if

you're playing passages correctly during your practice sessions, try recording yourself playing with the metronome and going back to listen to the take. You can learn a lot about yourself by doing this regularly.

5. Subdivision is your Friend

Sometimes, it's not that you aren't playing fast but that you suffer from sloppy subdivision. Subdivision plays a vital role in establishing precision, maintaining rhythmic stability, navigating complex patterns, and fostering expressive and coordinated performances. As one of my former teachers would always tell me, people can hear whether you're subdividing or not; they may not be able to verbalize it, but they can hear that something is off. Practice verbalizing the subdivision for a specific passage, then tapping out the subdivision, and finally playing the passage on the clarinet.

6. Finger Exercises

As the great Ted Oien says, "The more patterns you know, the easier music will become." Here are a few books that you could use to start building your knowledge bank of finger exercises. Of course, the Klosé Method for clarinet is a must-have for all clarinetists. It has a ton of finger exercises. I like the Jean-Jean Vade Mecum for clarinet. If you've ever taken piano, chances are you've played the Hanon Exercises. You'll like this Hanon Piano Exercises transcribed for clarinet, in *Hand in Hand with Hanon* by Buddy DeFranco (out of print as of this publishing date, but can be found at libraries across the United States at <http://www.worldcat.org>). And if you feel like you've exhausted the clarinet repertoire, you can move over into the flute world of exercise books. I have the Trevor Wye Book 2, which runs through many finger exercises. The flute doesn't go as low as the clarinet, but you can transpose the exercises down an octave where applicable.

7. Balance Point: Holding the instrument up/hand position

It's important to mention that how you hold up the clarinet and your hand position can make it easier or more challenging to master speed on the instrument. So, our balance points on the clarinet are our right thumb and our embouchure, so if we're not holding the instrument up with our thumb, it can cause the hand position to go out of alignment, which can slow down our technique or cause unevenness in finger technique. If the clarinet is too heavy, you can use a neck strap to lighten the load.

8. Isolate/Break Down Challenging Passages

Identify specific passages in the music that are challenging for you. Isolate these sections and practice them separately. Break them into smaller fragments, focusing on the technical aspects needing improvement. Once you feel confident with each fragment, gradually piece them back together.

I have a video and pdf of learning difficult music fast note groupings and rhythmic patterns. You can also try isolating a phrase and then playing the passage backward.

9. Target Practice

I am trying to remember where I learned about this technique. I might have read it in a book about athletic drills, but I started incorporating this in my practice and using it with my students. The idea is if you're having trouble with a passage of music, or you're just not consistent when

you come to the exact phrase or spot in music, consider incorporating what I call "target practice". This is where you take the passage and attempt to play it ten times in a row with no mistakes. If you make a mistake, you'll have to return to the first time out of 10 and work your way back up. This may take some time initially, but in my experience, it cements that musical passage in your muscle memory, and you're training your brain to make a connection that a specific passage is not an issue for you anymore.

10. Practice Regularly

Consistent practice is critical to developing speed on the clarinet. Dedicate focused practice sessions to improve your finger dexterity and overall technique. Start slowly and gradually increase the tempo as you become more comfortable with the passages.

11. Memorize

If I'm having trouble with a passage in music, I will spend some time and commit to memorizing the phrase. Memorizing doesn't come naturally to me, but I'll spend time analyzing what key I'm in, what scale or arpeggio I am playing, and how this fits into the piece's overall structure. Can I hear or sing back the phrase to myself, or can I visualize a particular measure note-for-note? You might have to analyze what type of learner you are: Visual, Auditory, Tactile, or Kinesthetic.

Take the quiz here to discover what type of learner you are:

<http://www.educationplanner.org/students/self-assessments/learning-styles-quiz.shtml>

12. Practice Transitions

Sometimes, in music, you can work on isolating a specific passage and get it to the point where it's ready to go for a lesson or performance, only to crash and burn when the time comes. That's why I find it helpful to work on the passage and the transitional material surrounding that difficult passage. Knowing how you enter and exit a difficult passage is very important.

Sometimes, when your focus is just on the difficult pattern, your brain is so hyper-focused on that one thing that when you come out of it, it loses focus, and you can make dumb mistakes.