

BASSOON

Performance Notes for 2021-22 All-State Band Auditions

by

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GENERAL PRACTICE SUGGESTIONS FOR ALL GRADE LEVELS

- **More slow practice.** The best thing we can do when learning a new piece – especially one you have a lot of time to learn, like this one – is to practice *very slowly* for a long time (weeks!) focusing on basics: a beautiful tone on every note, good intonation, correct rhythms, following written articulations and dynamics, etc. “Very slowly” means a tempo that feels easy to you, and at which you can play the passage more-or-less perfectly several times in a row; this might initially be as slow as 1/3 or less of your final goal tempo.
- **Enjoy your sound, and sing!** One secret of a beautiful sound is to always enjoy the sound you are making as you play. Practice a vocal approach to the bassoon: pretend you are literally singing as you play, not just blowing air. Your throat should always feel open, like it is at the beginning of a yawn. Fill up the bassoon with air and feel each note resonate in your body.
- **Work on a proper bassoon embouchure.** This is a round, whistle-shaped embouchure with a healthy amount of reed (usually at least 2/3 of the blade) in the mouth. Thinking of a whistle or “kissy face” shape drops your jaw and pushes the corners of your mouth forward: voilà, a bassoon embouchure!
- **Match the sound and volume of the low register in the high register.** Playing in the middle and high registers requires faster, more pressurized air and maintaining a round embouchure (not biting or “smiling”) as you ascend.
- **No tongue-stopped staccatos.** Say “tuh” and not “tut” to make a staccato so the end of the note is resonant and not clipped. You can discover if you are doing this properly by doing a mental “tongue check” after a single staccato note: is your tongue on the reed? It shouldn’t be. This requires a strong burst of air initiated with a punch from your abdominal muscles, like a deep “Santa Claus” laugh. It is OK – indeed, it is necessary – to move your jaw to make round, bouncy staccatos on the bassoon.
- **Plan your breaths carefully and stick to your plan.** Breaths should always make musical sense. Don’t simply breathe when you run out of air; make sure you have enough air to achieve the dynamic and character you need at any moment. Mark in your breaths so you remember where to take them and as a reminder to take good ones.
- **If you don’t know about flicking, learn about it and always do it!** “Flicking,” or depressing left-hand thumb keys to start pitches around middle C that tend to crack or be difficult to sustain, is a crucial part of bassoon technique. To start, I recommend simply holding down the flick key for the duration of these notes – make it a part of your regular fingering. Flick keys are as follows: for A (top line, bass clef), depress the high A key (the key above the C# thumb key); for the neighboring B-flat, B, and C, depress the high C key (the next key higher, two above the C# key).
- **Practice with a metronome.** Once you have learned the notes and rhythms very slowly, use the metronome to work your piece up to tempo, keeping track of the tempos

you reach each day in your music. Before your performance, also practice *without* a metronome to make sure you can sustain the pulse internally.

- **Use a drone to practice in a tonal context.** There are many websites and tuners that can provide a sustained pitch of your choosing. Set one on the tonic (key note) of your etude and play with it. You will be surprised at how much this can help your intonation! Of course, the aid of a tuner is vital to find the tendency of each note. You need to learn where to aim for each pitch on the bassoon – not a single one is in tune! ☺
- **Practice in chunks.** Identify any difficult spots – a single interval, a beat, a measure – and work on them in isolation. Practice an “inch” of music; then add an inch on either side to integrate the chunk into the rest of the piece.
- **Varied practice is crucial.** There are many ways to vary your practice: changing the rhythm of the chunk (opposing dotted rhythms, long-short / short-long, are good to work out knotty passages) and starting on the last note of the chunk and adding one note at a time while maintaining the written rhythms are two suggestions. Ask your band director for more ideas!
- **Music is about communication.** What characters or emotions are communicating? When do they change? What story are you telling? Write one or two adjectives down to describe each section of music. You might also pretend you are dressing up as a character for Halloween! You’ve got to have a clear plan for your piece and practice the plan – you should not try to “wing it” or “feel it” in the moment.
- **Record yourself and play for others.** The feedback and performance experience you get from doing these things is extraordinarily valuable. The best way to practice performing is to perform.
- **Have fun.** Remember, playing music should be fun! Good practicing is hard work, to be sure; but when it’s time for the performance and you’ve worked as hard as you can, it’s time to enjoy the music and the sound you make as you play.

JUNIOR BAND: Audition Solo 1A, *Animato*, quarter = 100

What do *animato* and *con spirito* mean? It is crucial that you play this movement with those complementary characters in mind in the outer sections, bars 1-9 and pickups to 18 to the end. This can be reflected in round, bouncy staccatos (see my notes about playing staccatos properly, above). The *cantabile* middle section, pickups to measure 8 through the downbeat of measure 17, provides musical contrast: it is sweetly singing. Go for a gentle sound.

Many of the staccato passages in this etude include notes that should either be flicked (like A, B-flat, and C) or half-holed correctly (G) so they don’t crack. (If you are not sure what flicking is, please see my comments above). Listen carefully for cracking on these pitches – unfortunately, we can get used to its occurrence – and fix it! Speaking of half-hole G: make sure to always add your resonance key, the low E-flat key (the top key played by the left-hand pinky) to help lower the pitch.

Your judge will most certainly be listening for the contrasting dynamics and articulations indicated throughout this etude. I like to think of dynamics on a number scale from 1-6, where 1 is as soft as you can play, and 6 is as loud as possible. The beginning might be a 2, then – perhaps the character here is “sneaky” and spirited – moving to a fuller 4 at the *mezzo forte* and a 5 or even 6 starting with the pickups to measure 8, which begin a passage you can really sing through. Come back to a 2 at measure 10 ... and so on.

As you play both softly and loudly, sustain your support by pushing with your abdominal muscles. This is called “support,” or “supporting your sound.” Go for a big dynamic contrast,

but remember that even the softest parts of this piece must be beautiful and singing – soft passages should not sound tentative or thin, so don't play so softly that your tone suffers. Intonation can be tricky in the cantabile section, in particular; make sure to tune the octaves that are outlined in bars 10-12 and 14-16. Ending "b" (the all-state ending) also includes octaves to tune in every bar, 26-29.

For more individualized help with this etude and to play a mock audition, consider coming to USC's All-State Double Reed Day on Saturday, December 1. For details, see the link on the all-state website. And feel free to send me an email if you have any questions: mharley@mozart.sc.edu. Best wishes!

CLINIC BAND: Audition Solo 2A, *Allegretto con spirito*, quarter = 104

This etude is an energetic but deliberately-paced march. This character can be achieved by maintaining a steady tempo and by paying careful attention to the piece's great variety of articulation, from the accented notes that open the work to the staccatos, tenutos, and "carrot" accents (very short, hard accents) that enliven other portions of the etude.

As you practice these different types of articulation, make sure they are all made *with the air* as well as the tongue. (See my notes above in the "general practice suggestions" for how to pull off a proper, round staccato). We play a *wind instrument*, not a "tongue instrument" or "embouchure instrument," and it is crucial to always have good air that generates precisely the sort of articulation or line you are trying to achieve and allows your tongue and mouth to stay relaxed.

You might notice that this etude is dominated by a single main idea, or motive: an ascending triad (three-note chord) delineated with accents. This idea begins the piece by outlining an E-flat major chord (notes 1, 2, and 4) and returns many times. Can you count how many? Do you notice how it occurs in varied form in the "a" (regional) and "b" (all-state) endings? Make sure your interpretation of this basic idea is consistent throughout!

Follow the indicated dynamic markings carefully. I think it is helpful to achieve effective, well-paced crescendos in measures 5-7 and 9-12 by thinking of the music in "stair-step" chunks, each of which is slightly louder. In this way, your dynamic follows the ascending structural note groupings – a single idea repeated at higher and higher pitch levels. In the first passage, measure 5 is the first chunk; the next begins with the pickup to measure 6; the next with the pickup to measure 7. In the second passage, the chunks start with measure 9; pickup to measure 10; and (in a small alteration of the established pattern) two pickups before measure 11. This last passage crescendos to the very end, leading us into the forte *marziale* passage.

The rhythms in this etude's contrasting cantabile section (bars 17-20) can be tricky. Make sure to play an eighth note (and not a triplet eighth) at the end of measures 17 and 19. Subdividing is the key to good rhythm; here you have to move abruptly from dividing the beat in twos (as in measures 17 and 19) to threes (measures 18 and 20). The all-state "b" ending also includes two vs. three divisions at the end. You can practice this by setting a metronome to define the beat and alternating between articulated twos and threes ("ice cream, pine-ap-ple"!) on a single pitch.

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SENIOR BAND: Audition Solo 3A, *Allegretto grazioso*, dotted quarter = 63

This is a fun etude to play! It provides a great deal of musical contrast in a short amount of time, and because it is (mostly) in our favorite key of F major, lies well for the instrument.

To clearly delineate the different musical characters that pass by – all within the context of *allegretto grazioso*, or “a little fast (but not too fast!), gracefully” – one might start with a little analysis to divide the piece into its main thematic areas. The first portion, comprised of two four-bar phrases which relate to each other like a “question” (bars 1-4) and an “answer” (bars 5-8) flows along in F major. The next section, marked *scherzando* (joking, playful) and in D minor for tonal contrast, moves from soft, comical staccato gestures through sustained lines to settle upon a single idea that twirls about and is repeated in three different octaves (bars 16, 17, and 18) before bringing this middle portion to a close. (Make sure to follow the composer’s instructions and avoid slowing in bar 19!) The final section, beginning pickup to measure 21, brings the work to an end and harkens back to both the first part (it returns to in F major and includes similar rhythms and passagework) and middle section (note, for example, the return of the bouncy staccatos, now forte, in the second-to-last bar of both “a” and “b” endings).

Don’t let your tonguing interfere with larger musical shapes. Too hard of a tongue in at the beginning of slurred chunks – for example, the B-flat in measure 2, A in measure 3, or F on the last eighth-note of measure 6 – does not fit the movement’s graceful character and interrupts the line. Think of tonguing “on the air”: imagine your air as a strong breeze that holds a flag straight away from a flagpole. The air should never drop to let the flag fall, even as your tongue gently touches the reed to articulate notes. In quick, tongued passages, such as the ascending scale in measure 5, a legato tongue is particularly important to help us relax and to minimize the time our tongue spends on the reed.

Relaxed, even fingers will also help make this etude sound graceful and flowing. Practice very slowly with a metronome for a long time before moving up the tempo (see my general practice suggestions, above), and avoid the tendency to rush. Interestingly, we typically do not have a problem moving our fingers quickly enough to play rapid passages! Rather, the tendency is to move them *too* quickly or in an uncoordinated, uneven manner. Imagine you are gently squeezing an orange; this can help keep your fingers relaxed, gently curved, and close to the keys.

A couple of rhythms in this etude can be particularly tricky: for example, note the surprising short-long rhythm that begins measure 14 and, in the “a” (regional) ending, measure 25. Subdivision is the key to performing any rhythm correctly: in this work the beat is “compound,” meaning it is a dotted note, in this case a dotted quarter, divided into three parts (6/8 does not have six beats per bar – it has two!) Make sure you are feeling the underlying eighth notes to pull off measure 15, which should sound smoothly syncopated (ONE-two-THREE-four-FIVE-six) against the prevailing meter (ONE-two-three-FOUR-five-six).

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