Playing Double Reeds:
It’s as Easy as 1, 2, 3!

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The Basics

1. **Air.** Teach your students how to manage their air and their overall tone quality and intonation will improve.

2. **Embouchure.** Focus on the shape and your double reed students will go from bright and reedy to dark and beautiful.

3. **Intonation.** There are quick and easy fixes to help intonation on both the oboe and bassoon.

How can I sound better and play better in tune?

Playing a double reed instrument can be embarrassing or exhilarating. Most often, it is a little bit of both! Do you get frustrated with how you sound? Have you run out of ideas on how to improve your sound? Do you constantly feel like you are out of tune with the other members of your ensemble? Never fear! The Double Reed “Beths“ of Central Michigan University are here to give you the hands-on tools that will get set up for success! The solutions are often very simple, so read on and try our tips. Playing oboe and bassoon is actually not as difficult as you think!
Air

“Air support is the foundation of all great wind playing, especially when playing double reeds.”

Oboe

1. **Activate the air.** Air should always be in motion and spin through the oboe, just like a bow drawn across a violin’s strings.

2. **Exhale!** Learn to exhale. Not all the air goes through the reed and dead air leads to dizziness.

3. **Yawn.** A nice, gentle yawn creates the optimum inhale and properly expands the rib cage.

Bassoon

1. **Air.** The bassoon is a big instrument. It needs big air! Blow to meet the resistance.

2. **Don’t be a hero!** Take more breaths if you need to do so when playing a musical phrase.

3. **Try this:** Play “C,” relax embouchure and lip note down to sound a “B.” Blow the pitch back up to C using air pressure only (no embouchure). *That’s how much air it takes to play bassoon!*

Stand 1 ft. away from a wall. Place a piece of paper on the wall and in front of your mouth. Using only your air, blow enough air to hold the paper in place. Now take a small step back and repeat.
“Corners forward, drop your jaw, and cushion that reed!”

**Oboe**

1. **Say “yo.”** Imagine an anteater! Provide any visual image that illustrates keeping the corners of the mouth forward.

2. **Cushion the reed with your lips.** Roll both top and bottom lips over teeth and cushion the reed (like pillows) as you imagine the “ooo.”

3. **Drop your jaw.** Imagine you are closing your mouth around an orange. Keeping the jaw down helps prevent biting on the reed.

**Bassoon**

1. **Say “yo”** to drop your jaw and create a round embouchure.

2. **Cushion the reed with your lips.** Let lips roll in a bit with the reed (no granny lips!).

3. **Drop your jaw.** Imagine you have a mouthful of really hot potatoes. Keeping the jaw down also helps to create a rich dark tone.

To Do:
Try sipping thick yogurt through a straw. Doing this (without your teeth on the straw) creates the right embouchure shape.
Oboe

Clean Crow. The reed must crow clean octave “Cs” in order to play in tune.

Check the instrument angle. If the oboe is too close to the body (like a clarinet) or too high (like a trumpet), the overall intonation will suffer.

Check embouchure & air support. Sharpness is a symptom of biting, smiling, or too much reed in the mouth. Flatness is a symptom of a loose embouchure, not enough reed in the mouth and using poor air support. (It’s a delicate balancing act!)

Messy Crow. Rumbling is good! You need all the different pitches in the crow to produce the wide range of notes on the bassoon.

Sitting pretty. Use a seat strap and angle the bassoon across the body. Right hip to left shoulder and the reed should hit just below the bottom lip.

The upper register takes guts! Playing a C to C# on the reed and bocal alone simulates the same amount of air pressure and embouchure strength required to play in tune in the upper register.

To Do:
Invest in a tuner and learn how to use it. Long tones are your friend! (Your ears will thank you!)

RESOURCES
- Oboe reeds (www.reedreviews.net)
- Fox Products Corporation (www.foxproducts.com)
- International Double Reed Society (www.idrs.org)
- Trevco Music (www.trevcomusic.com)