

Single or Double Lip?

by Ralph McLane

(Ralph McLane attended the New England Conservatory in Boston and later studied the clarinet with Gaston Hamelin in Paris. He has been solo clarinetist with the Philadelphia Orchestra since 1943, and has played the Mozart Clarinet Concerto with that Orchestra five times. Previously, he was first clarinet with the Mutual and Columbia Broadcasting Orchestras with whom he appeared as soloist a score of times. He is now a faculty member of the Curtis Institute. The following material is a condensation of a chapter from the book Mr. McLane is now writing. Ed.)

When the upper teeth are resting on top of the mouthpiece and the lower lip is covering the bottom teeth, this is commonly known as a single embouchure. When the upper lip covers the upper teeth it is called a double embouchure. Most clarinetists in this country use a single embouchure.

All woodwind and brass instruments must be played with a double embouchure, except the clarinet with its family of single reed instruments. All good flute, oboe, horn, and brass players develop muscular control of the lip and mouth region. A single reed instrument is the only one which can be played with a minimum of lip or embouchure development. Jaw pressure in both single and double lip is necessary to control the reed. However, too much lower jaw pressure pinches or chokes the vibration of the reed. The single embouchure permits the player to exert more pressure from both the lower jaw and lip than he needs. The double embouchure prevents the player from choking or pinching the reed — due to the resulting pain or sore lip. With development it becomes a very sensitive gauge of lip pressure.

The teeth marks on the mouthpiece of a player who uses a single embouchure

are the visible evidence of pinching. Needless to say, his tone, ease of playing, and intonation sometimes suffer. The really fine French clarinetists play with a double embouchure. Their method of practicing scales develops the muscles in both the upper and lower lip region to a very high degree. Practice slowly thirds, perfect chords, and all intervals, constantly thinking of each interval before you play it. Progress will be slow, but the embouchure will respond, and eventually will automatically prepare and support the change in lip pressure and resistance of the reed before each interval, whether it is one tone, or an octave or more.

You cannot develop the lower part of the embouchure and not the upper. Feel the area where the reed rests on the lower lip of a player who uses a single embouchure — it is usually flabby, not firm. A very well developed embouchure looks firm and is so, thus requiring the minimum of jaw pressure.

Simply stretching the upper lip over the teeth does not mean you have a double embouchure. An embouchure can be developed only over a long period of constant practice, and with the proper guidance. I know of many fine clarinetists who play beautifully with a single embouchure, but I maintain that their control and ease of playing would improve with a double embouchure. Naturally, this improvement would enable them to play even more beautifully.

I should like to dispel the notion that the double embouchure has less endurance than the single. I play many hours each day, and practice standing up. I feel that it is a matter of muscular development and habit acquired through correct practice.

In practicing scales we work to get evenness of fingers, smoothness of legato, quality of tone, etc. These are all important results, but secondary benefits — the primary benefits being muscular development of the embouchure, diaphragm and fingers. The routine practice of a fighter is comparable. He skips rope, does road work, etc., each day. These are his scales. The primary benefits for him are muscular development, control, and good coordination. One should always know the goal to be arrived at before commencing to practice.

Playing with a single embouchure is a short cut; but the hard work thus by-passed would give better results. However, this is only one factor of several which contribute to the fine playing of an artist. What a person has to say artistically, and the ability to command all of his talents in executing his conception are prime factors in the artist's make-up. Caruso once said that the first requisite for an artist is the ability to make performance, even of the most difficult passages, sound easy. I believe that the thought and practice of the principles I have mentioned will help a player to reach the goal of effortless playing.

Before closing I should like to sum up the benefits of a double embouchure:

1. It is a very sensitive gauge of lip and jaw pressure.
2. It makes for greater ease in playing.
3. Drawing the upper lip down over the teeth opens the oral chamber, or sound box resonator, which produces a free, fuller, and more mellow tone. Different shadings of tone are made with greater ease.
4. It automatically supports the tone from one interval to another.
5. It allows adjustments in intonation without changing the quality of tone. Holds pitch in forte passages.
6. One can take more mouthpiece in the mouth with complete control.
7. Endurance is just as good after good muscular development. One should practice standing up at all times.

There are some players whose upper teeth formation prevents them from stretching the lip over the teeth. Excellent results can be gotten by using the upper lip in conjunction with the teeth—using the lip as a prop to keep the teeth off the mouthpiece as much as possible. This will develop the top embouchure to a certain extent, as well as force the lower lip to do more work, thereby developing its strength and endurance. There are no advantages which the single embouchure has over the double. Moreover, one can adjust almost immediately to a single embouchure, but only time, patience and practice can achieve the goal of a developed embouchure.

I do not claim that this is the only way to get good results; I do say it is a way to improve upon good results.

(Note: The following studies are used by Mr. McLane in his teaching at the Curtis Institute: Klose: Method; Rose: complete studies; Baermann: Paris IV and V of Method; Hamelin: Scales; Polatschek: Advanced Studies; and the "Classical Studies" transcribed by Himie Voxman.)