

# *Always Play Beautifully...*

## *An Approach to Teaching High School Bassoonists*

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My dream is that some day, in the very near future, every bassoonist, young and old, will **always play beautifully**. Yes, **always play beautifully**. After giving the rank beginner a few weeks to figure out some basic skills and get some strength in the embouchure and air stream, I believe that a student can be expected to play with a beautiful sound, a pleasant sense of phrase, and solid rhythm. Can little Joey who has been playing for 2 months sound beautiful on the Mozart Concerto? I doubt it. So our goal, as teachers, should be to choose etudes, scales, ensemble and solo pieces that present just enough challenge to the student to keep things interesting for him, but not so much challenge that he is overwhelmed and cannot clearly see the path to overcoming those challenges. If we choose materials that help our students set small, attainable goals, then we can help them build their skills in a logical and rewarding sequence. *When* their skills are built in this way, their confidence builds along side those skills, because (we have come full circle here) they are able to **always play beautifully**. If the materials chosen for students are too advanced for them to play well consistently, then the inconsistency in their practice and performance is being built in to their pattern of how they play, and how they feel about their playing. In this article, I will present some of my favorite method books and solos, and ideas on how to use them in a logical and rewarding sequence, to cultivate in your students the ability to always play beautifully and to progress as musicians.

I often judge the Texas State Solo and Ensemble Contest, and many an ambitious young bassoonist comes in playing the first movement of the Weber Concerto, or the Mozart Concerto. Frankly, I think there are very few high school students who are ready to play these pieces beautifully. Let's take the first movement of Weber and consider the rare student who is disciplined enough to live by the concept that she needs to start learning a piece slowly, and increase the speed by one metronome notch only when she can perform at the previous notch with a beautiful sound, good pitch and even technique every time through. Suzy, our diligent, talented bassoonist has done this on the Weber, and now, after 3 months of working on the piece, she can play the entire first movement at 92. She has tried it at 96, but she starts to be sloppy, and the high notes get sharp, so 92 is where she can play beautifully. But 92 *sounds* way under tempo, because the character of the music calls for a tempo in the 120 range, and she has heard recordings that are that fast and thinks it sounds so much cooler at that tempo. Her contest performance is next week, and she is now faced with the dilemma of playing it at 92 and aiming for cleanliness at the expense of the musical energy, or she can hike up the tempo and sound sloppy and miss some fast licks altogether. This scenario is even too optimistic because most kids do not have the discipline to keep the tempo slow enough where they can always play it cleanly anyway. They have a fast tempo in mind, and sloppily practice that fast tempo over and over again, only to reinforce the habit of playing sloppily.

Ideally, the well-prepared student will never be faced with the choice of playing cleanly vs. playing a piece up to tempo, because the repertoire chosen for the student is always something that, after ample preparation time and wise practice techniques, the student is able to

perform at a tempo that is desirable for the character of the music. She is also able to play with a beautiful sound throughout, because the repertoire is within her mastered range.

A comment I write frequently as a Texas State Solo and Ensemble judge is, “I don’t think you were ready to work on this very difficult piece. I would have liked to hear you play the Bourdeaux Primier Solo or the Senaille Allegro Spritoso. Working on one of these pieces would have allowed you a better opportunity to play with a beautiful tone and intonation throughout, and to have cleaner technique.” And then I proceed to mark a score of 2, 3 or 4 at the bottom of the page (1 signifying “superior” and 5 signifying “poor”). I would much rather hear an easier piece played beautifully than a hard piece played poorly. I grade based on the quality of the performance. I want to hear musical, stylish playing with a nice sound, and accurate pitch and rhythm. It’s more enjoyable for me the listener, and more beneficial for the musical growth and the confidence of the student.

Let’s imagine that every solo piece ever written were assigned a degree of difficulty number based on demands of range, technique, rhythm, and the musical imagination required to play it effectively. The degree of difficulty numbers will range from 1 to 100, with 1 being assigned to a simple 5 note melody in half notes in the middle range, and 100 being assigned to the very hardest pieces ever written. For bassoon, 100 might be assigned to some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Paris Conservatory pieces with a range from low Bb to the high F that is 3 1/2 octaves above it, brain teaser rhythms, really fast notes with lots of cross fingerings and big intervals. Such pieces are not included on the Texas list of solos, thankfully.

If Suzy, our hypothetical 9<sup>th</sup> grade, hard working bassoonist, has been playing material with a degree of difficulty of 19, and she has been playing it beautifully on a consistent basis – of course she has – all of her musical mentors have been choosing appropriate repertoire and

reinforcing concepts of **always playing beautifully**. So, she *performs* her piece of 19 degrees of difficulty. Her teacher then assigns the next solo piece, etude and scale from the 20-22 range of degree of difficulty. She will then be presented with a few new challenges – maybe extending her range by 1 note, tackling a new rhythm, and maybe facing a tempo slightly faster than her last piece. With these new challenges, setting the bar just one baby step higher than before, the new material in the 20-22 degree of difficulty range is well within her grasp (assuming she starts slowly, has small, attainable goals for each practice session, and she **always plays beautifully** as she prepares it).

Now, once she has mastered and performed the 20-22 level piece beautifully, she is *not* necessarily ready to move on to a level 23 piece. There might be *different* skills in the 20-22 level range that she needs to address – perhaps playing in different keys, or with different rhythmic challenges. She should, by all means, continue to hone her skills and **always play beautifully** in the 20-22 range until she is ready to **always play beautifully** in material of a higher degree of difficulty.

I like the idea of using a method book with younger players, at least through 10<sup>th</sup> grade, if not all the way through high school. I'll use Henry Paine's BASSOON STUDENT as an example of a good method book. There are 3 volumes, levels 1, 2, and 3. Level 1 is for rank beginners, so by the time they start high school, students would probably be in level 2 or 3. In all three volumes, each page represents a weekly lesson with 4-8 examples ranging from a warm-up, through some technical examples, and ending with a beautiful melody. The examples are short, so they do not seem insurmountable at first glance, and their purposes are clear – integrating a new note into the technique, or drilling a new rhythm. With succinct assignments like this, the student gets excited about starting new material every week, and can readily see positive results

from working on it – “Hey, I’m getting pretty good at that new note, F”. Each lesson in the book ends with either a folk melody, or one by Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky or the likes, providing the student with artistic fulfillment. At the end of a rewarding week of experiencing his daily progress on this well designed material, he gets to show off for his teacher, and hopefully receive praise for a job well done, along with some constructive criticisms and guidance that will further enhance his benefit from the material. Then, Yay!!! He is promoted to the next weekly lesson with an inspiring sense of accomplishment, and a few new, but graspable challenges for the coming week.

Here are some examples of what I like from volume 2 of Paine’s series. On page 12, there is valuable practice of dotted eighth –sixteenth by tonguing the subdivisions. There are little sound diagrams illustrating articulation and note shapes (p.5). On page 34, here’s the lesson for the week. We start with a slow warm-up with the new note, low B. In examples 2 and 3, we have some technical work incorporating that new note. Line 4 is a chromatic scale with the instruction, “Slowly – then try for speed”. Although this instruction does not tell the whole story about how to build the tempo one metronome notch at a time, to practice the scale in fragments and in different articulations and rhythms, and to **sound beautiful** through that entire process, it is succinct, and will remind the student of those other good habits that you are reinforcing in every lesson and rehearsal. Then, number 5, we get to indulge in a gorgeous melody by Mozart.

Let’s compare assigning lessons like this to a 9<sup>th</sup> grader, instead of requiring that poor ninth grader to learn the REGION or ALL-STATE AUDITION music. In most cases (we will exclude the exceptionally precocious child for this argument) when you present a ninth grader with the Region Audition Music, he will be seeing tenor clef for the first time, he’ll be faced with notes in the extreme low and high range of the bassoon for the first time, he’ll have the required

tempos slapped on the top of the page and the technique required is so many steps beyond what he ever had to do in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. On our degree of difficulty scale of 1-100, the region etudes in Texas tend to fall in the 80-90 range. Up to this point, the student had comfortably, and pedagogically appropriately encountered material in the, oh, 15-30 range of difficulty. EEEK! How many ninth graders, faced with the region etudes, have run home in tears to the parents saying, “I’m a horrible bassoonist! I hate music! I want to quit!” What a shame that the material expected of them is so daunting that they would feel so discouraged, and start to dislike something they have loved so much until now. Many of those ninth graders will little by little hack away at the etudes, make some progress, and do the audition, and some will even make region band. My argument is, that if they had been allowed to continue doing weekly lessons in a well designed method book through 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and maybe 10<sup>th</sup>, they would be better players by 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and they would be more in love with music. To make such a sudden large leap in the degree of difficulty of material, they are learning bad habits just to get through it. That’s where the pinched, sharp high notes come from, or the technique that is fast but uneven and with a bad sound, etc. And, by being indoctrinated so young into the “YOU WILL AUDITION FOR REGION” mentality, the sloppy technique, bad sound, poor intonation and inattention to musical issues become the habits that they continue to reinforce. With weekly lessons, the goals are smaller and therefore easier to achieve, keeping our little bassoonists happy and fulfilled, and making a habit of **sounding good all the time** – a habit that will stay with them when they finally are ready to tackle the region etudes.

The third volume of the Paine books is labeled “Advanced Intermediate”, and takes the range up to high G – so most students will be ready to graduate from this series in 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup>

grade. At that point, they can move on to either Das Fagot, or Melodious and Progressive Studies, described below.

Das Fagot (The Bassoon) by Werner Seltmann and Gunter Angerhofer is a six-volume method with all the verbal material in English translation as well as the original German. The first three volumes contain progressive weekly lessons. Volume 4 contains duets arranged progressively from very easy to advanced. Volume 5 is made up of solo pieces with piano, also arranged progressively, and Volume 6 is about the contrabassoon. If you were a band director, but not a bassoonist, Volume 1 would be great to have for the explanations it includes about the parts of the instrument, embouchure, breathing, etc. Volume 3 addresses reed making in an extensive yet accessible way.

The lessons in Volume 1 progress much more quickly than the ones in the Paine, and assume right away that the student can read time signatures like 6/8 and 9/4. For the real beginner, this system would not be good, unless they have had piano lessons and read music quite well. A student who has graduated from the Paine series might progress to lesson 20 or so in Das Fagot. Just like the Paine, each weekly lesson in the Seltmann/Angerhofer, begins with long tones, proceeds to a technical study, and then several interesting etudes, some of which are atonal, and quite funky.

Melodious and Progressive Studies by Alan Hawkins is not arranged into weekly lessons, but rather into categories of material. It would be easy enough to assign a well-rounded lesson by choosing an example from each of the following sections: Major and Minor Scales, Speaker Key (flick key) Exercises, Velocity Studies, Five Etudes by Bordogni (or one of the other featured composers: Ozi, Demnitz, Lee, and Nocentini) and Eight Duets from Orchestral Masterworks.

The etude composers included here all write very melodiously, so these are quite beautiful, appealing little pieces.

These three series are all excellent EXCEPT that their fingering charts not good. There are so many bad published fingering charts for bassoon that list fingerings, even in the easier ranges, that I would never dream of using because the pitch and tone quality are unsatisfactory. The best published chart I have found is the Foundations for Superior Performance, Bassoon Full Range Fingering and Trill Chart by Richard Williams and Jeff King (Kjos). It includes basic fingerings as well as a trill chart. There's no reason kids should learn incorrect fingerings and not sound as good as they can *now*; *and* have to spend the time changing fingerings later if they get serious about the instrument.

The 15 pieces listed on the chart below are all from Texas' University Interscholastic League list of solos. I chose these specific pieces because I feel they are all good pieces of music, worth playing. *I* have enjoyed playing them all, and, well, I've done plenty of pieces in the 90-100 degree of difficulty range. The pieces here have plenty of challenges, but if appropriately assigned, ought to be within the abilities of most high school bassoonists to **play beautifully**. The numbers in the range indication refer to the bassoon range specifically where Bb1 is low Bb, Bb2 is the second octave Bb, etc. The "UIL CLASS" digit refers to the Texas classification range of 1 to 3 where 1 is for advanced players and 3 for beginners.

The accompaniments to these pieces should all be playable by a good high school pianist. The "Piano Part" column in the chart refers to level of high school player required to perform the part. Many students do not have a virtuoso in their community, and if they do, that person might not have the time and energy to devote to playing with young players. This is another reason to avoid the major concertos where the orchestral reductions are quite difficult. Even though Vivace

and Smart Music are excellent tools for helping students to hear the full texture of their pieces, I do think it is important for them to work with a real human being to get the full collaborative experience. It is important that students realize that performing a sonata or concerto is about playing *with* someone else, not about being *followed*. *Following* implies being right behind someone else. The point is to play *together* as equal partners. There is a social aspect to music – the idea of working together to create a thing of beauty, and a computer just cannot fill that role.

As you can see, there are some real gems in the bassoon repertoire that are very accessible to young, developing players. Students have the rest of their lives to learn the biggies like Mozart and Weber, so what's the hurry? Finding materials for students that set the bar just one millimeter higher allows them to maintain excellent skills while building new ones, and will, in the long run, help them to become the best players that they can be. In the meantime, they will be artistically satisfied and will have plenty of confidence, because they have been guided to **always play beautifully.**

## BASSOON METHOD BOOKS

| Title                                    | Composer/Editor                       | Publisher                                   | Comments   |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Bassoon Student</i>                   | Henry Paine                           | Belwin                                      | Three volumes in weekly lessons. Level 3 is appropriate for eighth and ninth graders. Each lesson contains a warm-up, some technical practice, and an appealing folk or classical melody. The progression of new notes, meters, and rhythms is very logical.   |
| <i>Das Fagot</i>                         | Werner Seltmann,<br>Gunter Angerhofer | V.E.B Deutscher Verlag<br>fur Music Leipzig | Vols. 1-3 contain weekly lessons with warm-up, technical etudes and melodies. Many 20th century examples. Book 1 progresses very quickly and its verbal explanations about the instrument, embouchure, breathing, etc. are excellent. Vol. 3 explains reed making. Vol. 4 has progressive duets. Vol. 5 has progressive solos with piano. Vol. 6 is for the contrabassoon. |
| <i>Melodious and Progressive Studies</i> | Alan Hawkins                          | Southern Music                              | Book 1 is appropriate for the Intermediate to Advanced high school and college player. It contains sections of duets, melodious etudes by appealing composers, velocity studies and other technical studies.   |

## BASSOON SOLOS

| Title  | Composer                                   | UIL Class | Piano Part                                   | Range   | Comments  |
|--|--|-----------|--|---|---|
| <i>Adagio/Bassoon Solos Vol. 2</i>               | F. Devienne/<br>Ed. Waterhouse             | I.        | Easy   | B $\flat$ 1 to A $\flat$ 3                        | Classical. 2/4 in 4.                                  |
| <i>Suite</i>                                     | Richard Faith                              | I.        | Advanced                                     | D $\sharp$ 1 to C4<br>(4 movements go only to A3. | 20th Century Mostly Bass Clef. Some Tenor.            |
| <i>Romanze</i>                                   | Klughardt                                  | II.       | Advanced                                     | F1 to A $\flat$ 3                                 | Romantic. All Bass Clef.                              |
| <i>The Young Bassoonist</i> (Selections 1, 3, 4) | Arr. Sidney Lawton (Bach, Telemann, Faure) | II.       | Intermediate                                 | D1 to F3  | All Bass Clef.  |
| <i>Suite of Pieces</i>                           | Boismortier                                | I.        | Advanced/<br>Intermediate                    | D1 to G3  | Baroque. Includes suggested Ornaments. All Bass Clef. |
| <i>Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann</i>  | Davis                                      | I.        | Advanced/<br>Intermediate                    | B $\flat$ 1 to C4                                 | Mostly Bass Clef. One bar tenor clef.                 |
| <i>Song without Words</i>                        | Weissenborn                                | II.       | Intermediate                                 | C1 to A3  | Romantic<br>All Bass Clef                             |
| <i>Adagio/ Solos for the Bassoon Player</i>      | Beethoven/<br>Schoenbach                   | I.        | Intermediate<br>(If some notes are left-out) | F1 to G3  | Classic/Romantic<br>All Bass Clef                     |
| <i>Allegro Spiritoso</i>                         | Senaille                                   | I.        | Intermediate                                 | E1 to G3  | Baroque.<br>All Bass Clef.                            |

| Title   | Composer                  | UIL Class | Piano Part                | Range                        | Comments                           |
|---|---------------------------|-----------|---------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Premier Solo</i>   | Bourdeau                  | I.        | Advanced/<br>Intermediate | B $\flat$ 1 to C4            | Romantic.<br>All Bass Clef.        |
| <i>Introduction and Hornpipe</i>                              | Francis Baines            | II.       | Intermediate              | C $\sharp$ 1 to F $\sharp$ 3 | 20th Century.<br>All Bass Clef.    |
| <i>Romanza<br/>Appassionata</i>                               | C.M. von Weber            | I.        | Advanced/<br>Intermediate | C1 to A3                     | All Bass Clef.                     |
| <i>Bouree I and III/<br/>Solos for the<br/>Bassoon Player</i> | J. S. Bach/<br>Schoenbach | II.       | Intermediate              | E1 to F3                     | All Bass Clef.                     |
| <i>Romance</i>  | Weissborn                 | I.        | Intermediate              | E $\flat$ 1 to C4            | Romantic. Bass and Tenor<br>Clefs. |
| <i>Sonata in b<br/>minor, Op. 5,<br/>No.8</i>                 | Corelli                   | I.        | Intermediate              | D1 to A3                     | Baroque. Bass and Tenor<br>Clefs.  |