BASSOON

Performance Notes for 2012-2013 All-State Band Auditions
by
DR. MICHAEL HARLEY
Professor of Bassoon
University of South Carolina

JUNIOR BAND: Practical Method for Bassoon / Weissenborn / Fischer // p. 30,
“Allegro Moderato”, (p. 29 of the Cundy-Bettony edition), play to
fermata, no repeats; quarter note = 100.

The Italian character marking at the start of this piece, con energico (“with energy”) is
important, and gives us a sense of what the music should communicate. Make the staccato
notes short, round, and bouncy (stop the sound with your air and embouchure, not your
tongue), and think of using active, “energized” air throughout. Be sure to sit up when you
play – do not slouch against the back of the chair – and you will notice your sound has
increased vitality. Notes without staccatos (such as the quarter notes in measure 5, and
corresponding spots throughout the piece) should be sustained and full, always leading to
the next downbeat.

Dynamic contrast is an important ingredient in any successful performance. My students are
often surprised at how much one has to “overdo” this aspect of playing to make it sound
convincing. Here, make sure that your fortes are big and full – and then go for a
tremendous amount of contrast in the piano section beginning with the pick-ups to m. 11 and
in the final diminuendo. When you play softly, still keep etude's energetic character idea in
mind and support the sound: one can play piano with a great deal of intensity.

One has some fingering decisions to make in this etude. You may know that there are two
equally-used fingerings for F-sharp on the bassoon, one using the right hand pinky and the
other using the right hand thumb. Whenever possible, I use my pinky for the second-line F-
sharp (which helps lower and darken a very sharp, bright note), and thumb for the F-sharp
below the staff. To stabilize the E-flats in this passage, or any relatively slow one, make sure
to add “helping keys” to your forked left-hand fingering of 1 and 3: depress the top key
played by your left hand pinky (the low E-flat key, also called the “resonance key”), and also
add your right hand B-flat key and second (middle) finger. Finally, to help the pitch and
stability of half-hole G, which is typically sharp, make sure to always add the resonance key.

I’d like to mention something unrelated to this etude, specifically, but which you might be
interested in: the Weissenborn method has recently been published in an excellent new
edition, which contains improved commentaries, illustrative photos, and new exercises that
fill in some of the gaps in the original book. I highly recommend it: The New Weissenborn
This etude is a study in articulation. Try to differentiate between an accent, a staccato, and the “wedge” mark. In this style of music the wedge usually means a sharp but heavy staccato with strong, short attack – dry and without the bounce we try to give normal staccato notes. Throughout this etude, remember that the tongue should never work too hard, but rather float on top of a consistent stream of pressurized air. The better support you have, the easier fast tonguing and different sorts of articulation will be. The way one stops staccato notes is particularly important; stop the notes with your air and embouchure, not your tongue (say “tuh” instead of “tut”) so they sound round and resonant.

While the accents that fill this etude suite its “furious” character, it is important to note that they also serve an important structural function: the accents help bring out implied melodies, which sometimes (as in mm. 5-7 and 17-19) are simple, stepwise scale patterns. Make sure you play them full value to bring out this melody and contrast with the shorter staccatos and wedges. It is helpful to practice only the accented notes (leave out the sixteenths, and maintain the quarter-note rhythmic structure of the melody) in order to help shape and clarify the melody, work against the bassoon’s tendency to play softer in the register around middle C, solidify intonation, and achieve a proper accent that is created by the breath and not the tongue. Remember: the bassoon is a “wind instrument,” not a “tongue instrument”!

There are no crescendos or diminuendos marked here – in fact, the sole dynamic indication in this piece is a lone forte at the beginning. While this and the important character marking Allegro furioso tell us the general sound, energy level, and mood of the piece, the lack of further markings doesn’t mean we should play without dynamic contrast and musical shaping. One way to shape music in a way that seems natural and organic is to follow natural up/down shape of the music with the use of dynamics. For example, a crescendo following the rising lines in mm. 9-17 and 21-25 is entirely appropriate and makes the piece even more dramatic. (Remember that to start a successful crescendo after playing forte you must back off in dynamic, or you’ll have nowhere to go!)

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beat per bar instead of two will result in smoother, longer musical lines. Once the music is learned you can practice this feeling by setting your metronome at 42, for example, if your final tempo is quarter = 84.

Speaking of practicing hints: in order to improve technique, try practicing every other note rather than every note. For instance, in the difficult passage at the beginning of the third line, try practicing just the first, third, fifth, and seventh notes of the measure, making them eighth notes. A downward scale pattern will emerge, allowing your fingers a frame of reference to which they can return. Also, try using dotted rhythms to train your finger muscles slowly but exactly, rather than glossing over difficulties. You will need to spend extra time working very slowly on the bars that contain the highest notes in the piece, mm. 19 and 23. Remember: if you are making frequent mistakes, you are practicing too fast! Be patient and give yourself plenty of time to learn these passages.

There are so many shapes one can bring out in this etude that are not indicated with dynamics, crescendo and decrescendo markings, or phrase markings. This is always the case with music: a composer cannot possibly notate all the nuances that bring a piece to life, “off the page,” and communicate something of the music – and of ourselves – to the audience. The shape of the music itself – both of smaller gestures and longer lines – can often inspire dynamic choices. For example, the pick-up sixteenths that begin each bar-long downward gesture at the opening indicate to me movement into a strong but elegant downbeat, as in a dance, followed by a decrescendo as the line descends. And the two long, scalar ascents in lines three and four beg to be started softly – perhaps very softly! – and carried upwards with a gentle crescendo.

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