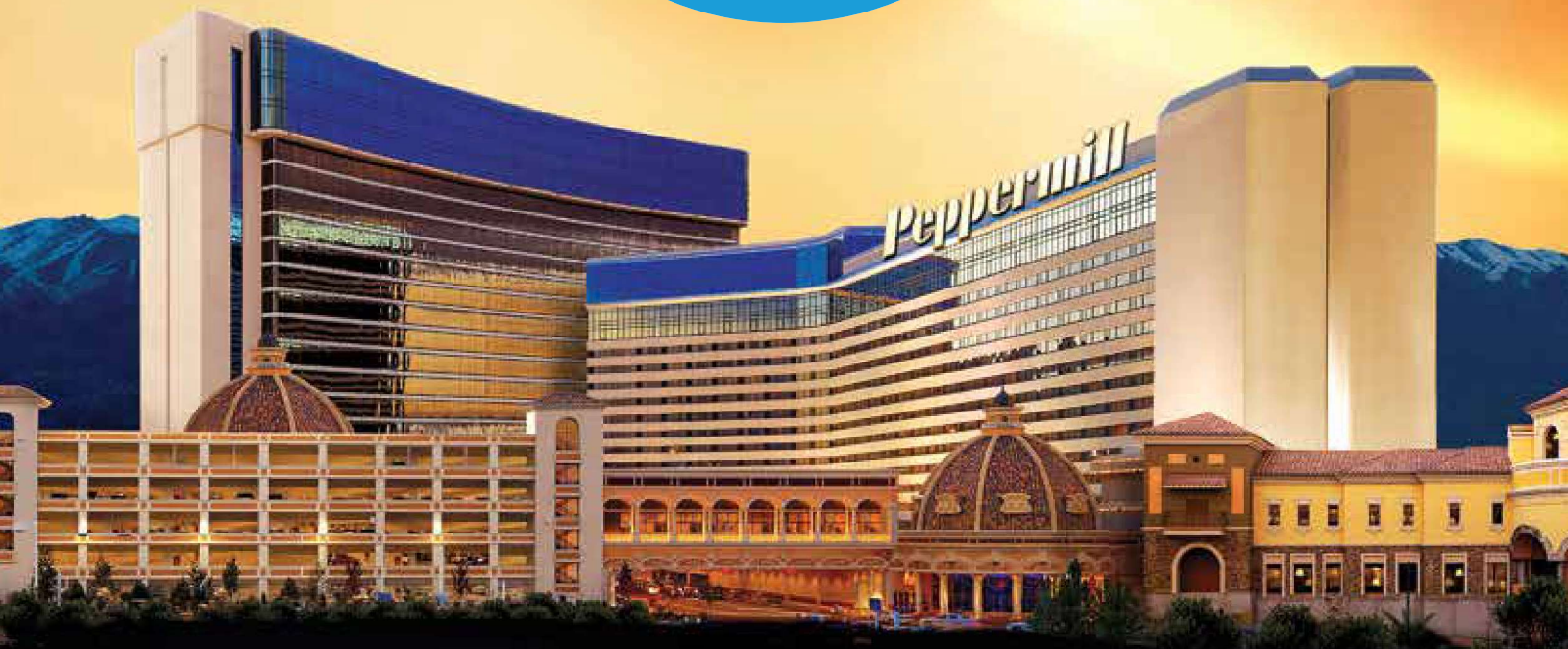


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THE REED-ABOVE EMBOUCHURE, THEN AND NOW

by Gregorio Paone

*For this purpose it's necessary to demonstrate what is the best way to hold a mouthpiece, with the reed above or below.*¹ – Ferdinando Sebastiani

Ferdinando Sebastiani (1803-1860) posed this question in 1855 regarding the correct way of playing the clarinet.² The performer in 2021 does not feel that raising this problem is necessary anymore, since everybody plays with the reed-below embouchure and this problem seems to have been solved in the past. However, a historical perspective is needed to properly dig into this issue and to estimate its relevance today.

The clarinet embouchure has always faced many issues. While a double reed instrument must play with both lips, one on each side of the reed, the clarinet, being a single reed instrument, can play in many positions: with the upper teeth on the mouthpiece and bottom lip on the reed, the upper lip on the mouthpiece and bottom lip on the reed, the upper lip on the reed and bottom lip on the mouthpiece and upper lip on the reed and bottom teeth on the mouthpiece, although there does not seem to be evidence of this latter position.

Academic sources provide evidence of what has been common for the clarinet embouchure in past centuries:

Cursory examination of late 18th-century methods written by clarinetists ... yields clear instructions to play with the reed on top. Of the early 18th-century method books, the well-known fingering chart for the two-keyed clarinet in Majer's *Museum musicum teoretico practicum* (Swabisch Hall, 1732) shows that the late 18th-century methods continue a tradition established in the early part of the century, since Majer's depiction is also of a clarinet arranged to be played with the reed against the upper lip.³

However, Johann Georg Heinrich Backofen's *Anweisung zur Klarinette nebst einer kurzer*

Abhandlung uber das Basset-horn (Leipzig, c.1802) states,

By the way, whether it is better while playing to place the reed against the upper or lower lip – which clarinetists call on top or underneath – I have no preference. I have heard good people play in both manners. Here, what one is used to is most important.⁴

Backofen also provides interesting evidence of the coexistence of both ways of approaching the clarinet between the 18th and 19th centuries:

Although the English and French preferred playing with the reed against the upper lip, both reed positions have been shown to have been used in France and elsewhere on the continent. There is an abundance of additional information relevant to this area, yet further analysis would only yield the same conclusion: both reed positions were used. ... In playing Mozart's or Beethoven's works for clarinet on the instruments of their time, we should try as much as possible to reproduce the music as the composers might have heard it. Here reed position is not controversial: one reed position is no more "authentic" than the other.⁵

An article written by Ingrid Elizabeth Pearson demonstrates that this trend was going to change in the following years:

Beginning with the publication of Muller's *Gamme pour la nouvelle Clarinette inventée par lui* in c1812, the portrayal of the reed-below embouchure on a far greater number of clarinets with more advanced keywork suggests that this technique found

favour more quickly with professional players. This thesis is confirmed in reports by Christian Friedrich Michaelis and Gottfried Weber which call for the adoption of the reed-below technique amongst dilettante players.⁶

However, in Italy the reed-above embouchure lasted longer:

Documented reed-above players existed mainly in the north, in Milan, and in Naples and Palermo in the south. Benedetto Carulli (1797-1877) was the principal clarinetist at La Scala as well as the Professor of clarinet at the Milan Conservatorio. Carulli's most famous pupil was Ernesto Cavallini, who achieved notoriety for his reed-above performances on a six-keyed clarinet, at a time, when regardless of reed position, most other clarinetists were using thirteen-keyed instruments. [...] Such was the popularity of the reed-above embouchure in southern Italy that it became known as 'la scuola Napoletana'. [...] It is highly likely that this southern Italian reed-above tradition stemmed from the practice of folk musicians, many of whom are still active in the regions of Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily.⁷

It is important to consider as well the difference between tonguing and articulation. Today we commonly use these words as synonyms; this happens because in modern playing, tonguing is almost the only technique used to produce different articulations. However, in past centuries tonguing was only one of the techniques used to articulate the sound:

Documentary source materials from previous eras suggest that tongued articulation was certainly not the only method used by clarinetists. Roeser's *Essai* is the oldest extant treatise to mention chest articulation, then a necessary by-product of the reed-above embouchure. That the throat was also used in the separation of notes was noted by later reed-above advocates, including Vanderhagen and Lefèvre, as well as Backofen. Since one of the earliest reports of tongued articulation occurred in the same Vanderhagen tutor, we can be fairly certain that contemporary players mixed articulations according to the demands of the music. Just as articulatory nuances have become more uniform throughout the clarinet's lifetime, the way in which these are notated has undergone a similar development.⁸

This last quote testifies to how the reed-above embouchure used to lead the performer to develop different articulations, such as the throat articulation or the chest articulation. These ways to articulate were abandoned when the reed-below embouchure became the most common, probably because they were more tiring than regular tonguing. However, trying to articulate the sound with these techniques can help the performer to explore these effects and colors. This will likely result in a wider palette of colors and effects in the mind, which can then be reproduced with regular tonguing and embouchure.

It is appropriate at this point that we turn our attention to a few primary sources. The first source to consider is the *Méthode*



Untitled painting by P. Krämer (late 18th century); Mödling, private collection.

pour l'enseignement de la clarinette à anneaux mobiles et de celle à 13 clefs by Hyacinthe Eléonore Klosé (1808-1880). His contribution cannot be ignored, as Klosé's legacy is huge even today.

Klosé's *Méthode*, after a brief historical introduction on the clarinet and its evolution, provides a table of fingerings and some interesting sections:

- *Des Qualités et de l'Étendue de la Clarinette* (Qualities and Extension of the Clarinet)
- *Position du Corps des Mains et des Doigts* (Position of the Body, of the Hands and of the Fingers)
- *Du Bec et de l'Anche* (The Mouthpiece and the Reed)
- *De l'avantage de jouer l'anche en dessous* (The Advantage of Playing with the Reed Below)
- *Position du Bec dans la Bouche* (Position of the Mouthpiece in the Mouth)
- *De l'Embouchure* (The Embouchure)
- *Du Son et de la manière de le produire* (The Sound and how to Produce it)

The section titled "The Advantage of Playing with the Reed Below" proves that Klosé was aware of the reed-above position,



Gennaro Maldarelli, *Portrait du compositeur Ferdinando Sebastiani* (1836)

and he tries to justify his choice to advocate the reed-below position. Klosé makes the following point:

From the reed-below position the following three advantages result:

- 1 You obtain a much sweeter and more pleasant sound
- 2 The tongue is naturally placed under the reed, and it has more ease in articulation
- 3 This manner of playing has more grace, has advantages in the performance and is significantly less tiring.⁹

Another important source is the method written by Carl Baermann (1810-1885). His legacy is important, especially in the German clarinet school. However, his method is popular even outside Germany and is still used in the United States. Both Klosé and Baermann are unquestionably important and influential in the modern way of playing the clarinet.

Baermann advocates the reed-below position, and he clearly states that the reed-above position is not convenient.

There is a class of clarinetists that play with the reed turned up, although I cannot ascribe any good reason for such a method of tone-production. Whoever considers the structure of the mouth must become convinced without delay that this method is a wrong one for the following reasons: The stronger or weaker pressure of

the lip on the reed is of the utmost importance for the production of tone; every degree of pressure acts so decisively on tonal color and articulation that the finished artist will ultimately experience that every tone, properly speaking, has its own embouchure, though this of course, is an enigma to beginners. Now, then, how is it possible to master all these finer shadings with the upper part of the head and its lips, since that part is utterly motionless! Motion is possible only for the lower jaw of the human head, and it is on that account that the reed should be turned down, to be managed by the lower lip. Moreover, the stroke of the tongue (staccato) is of great importance. It is impossible to give the three varieties of staccato – the sharp, the soft and the tied – with proper distinctness, if the tongue, instead of encountering the reed, infringes on the rigid mass of the inverted upper part of the mouthpiece. Therefore, I say, “Down with the reed to the underlip.”¹⁰

We can see that there have been a variety of published methods that have accepted both ways of playing the clarinet, and other sources which strongly recommend the reed-below position. There aren't many sources that strongly encourage the reed-above position, except the following source: Ferdinando Sebastiani's *Metodo per clarinetto*, stored in the library of Conservatorio San Pietro a Majella.

The first part of the *Metodo per Clarinetto* is addressed to beginners, exploring the instrument in many aspects: the history of the instrument, its construction and how to play it. In his preface, Sebastiani explains his motivation to write a book. He thinks that the Neapolitan clarinet school reached a level comparable to the great French tradition, with whom Sebastiani dealt to a great extent. Sebastiani, professor at Collegio di S. Sebastiano, wanted to record his methods for himself, for his students, and to make a legacy of his school. He suggests comparing his *Metodo* with Lefèvre's *Méthode de clarinette*, which he considers a great method. The fact that Sebastiani mentions Lefèvre means that he was aware of the French school of clarinet; however, Lefèvre adopted the reed-above playing position and this demonstrates why Sebastiani considered his book a good source.¹¹

After the preface is the chapter *Nozioni Preliminari* (Preliminary Notions), divided into the following subsections: *Cenno storico del Clarinetto* (Historical Note on the Clarinet); *Forma del Clarinetto e modo di suonarlo* (Shape of the Clarinet and How to Play it); *Dell'imbocatura* (The Embouchure); *Del becco* (The Mouthpiece); *Dell'ancia e modo di farla* (The Reed and How to Make it); *Del modo di tenere il Becco nella bocca* (How to Hold the Mouthpiece in the Mouth).

The first section of interest is *Dell'imbocatura*. This section questions the posture of the clarinetist, a long-term debate that is still relevant today. According to Sebastiani, the best quality of the clarinet is its sound, which depends mostly on how you place your lips on the bottom of the instrument. The author confirms that even a good musical attitude can be ruined by a bad embouchure which produces a bad sound.¹² Sebastiani talks about multiple



From Ferdinando Sebastiani, *Metodo per clarinetto* (1855), p. 28.

variables in the production of the sound, such as the mouthpiece, the reed, how to make reeds, and the embouchure.

The other subsection of interest is *Del modo di tenere il Becco nella bocca*, in which Sebastiani suggests playing with a reed-above embouchure. He recommends that neither the reed nor the mouthpiece should touch the teeth, advocating then for a double-lip embouchure, similar to that of double-reed players.

Why should the reed be placed facing up? Sebastiani's argument claims that since the upper jaw is fixed, it is the stronger part of the mouth and should compensate for the weakest part of the clarinet material, which is the reed. On the contrary, the lower jaw is mobile, the weaker, and should be compensated by the strongest part of the material, which is the mouthpiece. Moreover, if the reed faces the palate it has more space to vibrate, while facing down, it can be obstructed by the tongue. He argues that a lot of *coloriti* are possible if the reed faces the palate because the tongue is more agile if moved from the bottom to the top than the opposite.¹³ This idea is exactly the opposite of what Baermann advocates.

This brief comparison among primary and secondary sources that give different interpretations about this issue leads me to the conclusion that the reed-above embouchure is a technique that deserves to be known. I would suggest every curious player give the reed-above

embouchure a try. I personally tried it and I found some interesting advantages for the modern performer. First, trying to play with this kind of embouchure helps us understand historically how articulation sounded when this way of approaching the instrument was more popular. The articulation obtained this way is different and may be less spontaneous at first, but it is richer in variety and keeping in your mind this variety is, in my opinion, essential when forging your style as a performer, historical or not. Moreover, as Luc Jackman noted in *The Clarinet*, "the advantage of approaching the early clarinet with an unfamiliar embouchure technique is the reduction of possible modern bias (desire to obtain a sound similar to the modern clarinet)."¹⁴

The second advantage is banally practical. Playing with the reed above is less spontaneous and needs more consistent air support and more gentle tonguing, while the reed-below "forgives" much more in this sense. If one can play well with the reed-above position, returning to your normal posture will exhibit a fuller and easier sound and means of articulation.

Clarinetists who chose to play with the reed-below embouchure centuries ago were in touch with people who played the other manner. Most players probably tried this method and were able to take the good points of both ways. For this reason, every historically informed performer should try this embouchure, and modern performers should consider trying it as well. They can fulfill their curiosity, exit their comfort zone and find some interesting insights. ❖

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ferdinando Sebastiani, *Metodo per Clarinetto* (Naples: Stabilimento Musicale Partenopeo, 1855), 7, translated by the author.
- 2 For further information, see Adriano Amore, "Ferdinando Sebastiani and the Neapolitan School of Clarinet," *The Clarinet* 35, no. 1 (December 2007), 42-43.
- 3 T. Eric Hoeprich, "Clarinet Reed Position in the 18th Century," *Early Music* 12, no. 1 (1984): 49.
- 4 Johann G.H. Backofen, *Anweisung zur Klarinette nebst einer kurzen Abhandlung über das Bassett-Horn* (Leipzig, 1803), 4, translated by T. Eric Hoeprich in "Clarinet Reed Position

in the 18th Century," *Early Music* 12, no. 1 (1984): 50.

- 5 Hoeprich, "Clarinet Reed Position in the 18th Century," 50.
- 6 Ingrid Elizabeth Pearson, "Ferdinando Sebastiani, Gennaro Bosa and the Clarinet in Nineteenth-Century Naples," *The Galpin Society Journal* 60 (2007): 204.
- 7 Ingrid Elizabeth Pearson, "The Reed-above Embouchure: Fact or Fallacy," *Australian Clarinet and Saxophone* 2/2 (1999): 9-10.
- 8 Colin Lawson, *The Early Clarinet. A Practical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 48.
- 9 Hyacinthe Eléonore Klosé, *Méthode pour servir à l'Enseignement de la Clarinette à Anneaux Mobiles* (Paris, 1843), 3, translated by the author.
- 10 Carl Baermann, *Complete Method for Clarinet*, edited by Gustave Langenus (New York: Carl Fischer, 1958), 6.
- 11 Ferdinando Sebastiani, *Metodo per Clarinetto* (Naples: Stabilimento Musicale Partenopeo, 1855), 4.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 14 Luc Jackman, "Early Clarinet Pedagogy for Modern Performers, Part I: Introduction and Sound Production," *The Clarinet* 33, no. 1 (December 2005): 72.

ABOUT THE WRITER



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