

# NAVY BAND CLINIC

UNDERSTANDING OBOE IDIOSYNCRASIES:  
A guide for educators, arrangers and composers

Presented by **Musician 1st Class Joshua Arvizu**





## FROM THE COMMANDING OFFICER

I want to personally thank you for joining us at the Midwest Clinic. Your United States Navy Band proudly represents more than 320,000 Sailors working around the world to keep our nation safe and free.

Today's clinic is presented by Musician 1st Class Joshua Arvizu, a member of the U.S. Navy Concert/Ceremonial Band. The Navy Band is made up of some of the finest musicians our country has to offer, who have not only dedicated their lives to the relentless pursuit of musical perfection, but have also chosen to serve their nation. Please feel free to come up after the clinic to say hello or ask any questions you may have.

Finally, thank you now and always for your support. We in the Navy can't do what we do without you. My hope is this presentation will offer a glimpse into the pride and professionalism our Sailors exhibit each and every day.

Kenneth C. Collins, Captain, USN  
Commanding Officer

## WHERE IT COUNTS. WHEN IT COUNTS.



Supremacy on the waterways of the world will always be critical. Whether it's by way of oceans, canals, rivers or coastal areas, the Navy serves as a guardian for America's freedom and

for defending the life we know. Deployed all around the globe, America's Navy supports the cause of liberty abroad, promotes peace for all humanity, and enables the safe travel of people and goods to meet the expanding demands of globalization.

America's Navy is unique in that it conducts missions on all fronts: in the air, on land and at sea. Fulfilling a broad role that encompasses everything from combat to peacekeeping to humanitarian assistance – in theater, on bases and everywhere from the cockpits of F-18s to the control rooms of nuclear submarines.

Wherever a military presence is needed, the Navy is there. Whenever a situation requires U.S. involvement, the Navy is often the first to deploy, the first to engage and the first to help.

## UNITED STATES NAVY BAND

The United States Navy Band is the premier musical organization of the U.S. Navy. Comprised of six primary performing groups as well as a host of smaller ensembles, "The World's Finest" is capable of playing any style of music in any setting.

Since its inception in 1925, the Navy Band has been entertaining audiences and supporting the Navy with some of the best musicians in the country, performing more than 270 public concerts and 1,300 ceremonies each year. From national concert tours to presidential inaugurals to memorial services at Arlington National Cemetery, the Navy Band proudly represents

the men and women of the largest, most versatile, most capable naval force on the planet today: America's Navy.

The Navy Band is dedicated to the education of younger musicians. The Music in the Schools program features band members presenting clinics, master

classes and recitals at local schools. Every spring, the Concert Band hosts its annual Young Artist Solo Competition.

The United States Navy Band, nationally and internationally, stands for musical and military excellence. Whether performing at Carnegie Hall, the White House or a rural civic auditorium; sharing the stage with Ernest Borgnine, Itzhak Perlman, Branford Marsalis or Vince Gill; or appearing on television programs like "Today," "Meet the Press" and "Good Morning America" and in films like "Clear and Present Danger," the United States Navy Band is constantly reaffirming why they are "The World's Finest."

*The United States Navy Band, nationally and internationally, stands for musical and military excellence.*



WACO, Texas

## NAVY MUSIC

Every year, Navy musicians present 6,000 performances across the United States and around the world, connecting with millions of people. The Navy's 11 bands represent the Navy in a musical capacity by stimulating pride, esprit de corps, retention and recruiting, promoting national and international public relations, and enhancing the prestige of the Navy.

Navy bands **go where ships can't go** to expand and strengthen our network of partners. In a typical year, Navy bands travel to more than 40 countries, helping to improve access and relationships abroad.

Here at home, Sailor musicians play an important role honoring the long and proud tradition of naval service. While traveling all across the country, Navy bands come together with communities to honor and celebrate the service of veterans.

Traveling across the nation and all over the globe, your Navy bands are connecting people from all walks of life to America's Navy.

# UNDERSTANDING OBOE IDIOSYNCRASIES: A guide for educators, arrangers and composers

Notes by Musician 1st Class Josh Arvizu

## I. THE WRITTEN AND PRACTICAL RANGE OF THE OBOE AND ENGLISH HORN

The oboe has ranges that are not necessarily evident, especially when taking into account that the instrument overblows at the octave. I consider the low range of the instrument to be Bb3 to Db4 (figure 1). This range is characterized by being difficult to begin notes and play notes at a soft dynamic. Full control of this range is usually a characteristic of advanced/professional oboe playing. Low/midrange of the oboe is D4 to Ab4 (figure 2). This range is more easily controlled and reliable. It is also the range that has the most dark or covered sound on the instrument. A4 to C5 (figure 3) are odd notes, they are midrange on the instrument, but they have very different open back pressure for the performer. They are also often the most nasal and hardest notes to match to the rest of the instrument in tone color and timbre. Db5 to Eb5 (figure 4) are the half-hole notes and are stuffy and resistant. Oboists will spend many hours practicing the slur between B4 to C#5 to learn to match register timbres and go from one finger on the left hand to all fingers down (much like the A

Practical Range of the Oboe and English Horn



to B natural across the break on the clarinet). Once we get over the half-hole notes the two octave keys come into play. E5 to C6 (figure 5) are the high register notes and are characterized by a piercing clear tone. These notes are the strongest for pushing solo sound out of an ensemble. They are also the notes that are the easiest to manipulate in pitch. Db6 to G6 (figure 6) are the extreme upper register of the instrument and are technically the hardest to learn. Non stepwise slurs are difficult, and the fingerings are awkward.

## II. OBOE TECHNIQUE

Oboe technique can be clunky compared with the other wind instruments. We have many



cross fingerings, and a half hole and two octave keys to learn to use. This doesn't mean an oboe is not an agile instrument, it just means that it can take time to learn to master. Students are often at a disadvantage when learning because student instruments (which are less expensive) usually have fewer keys. The first picture below shows a typical student model instrument followed by the typical professional instrument. As you can see the student instrument has far fewer keys which obviously effects its ability to perform advanced technical passage work.

Worth talking about here are trills and tremolos. The oboe's chromatic design is ideal for scales, but rapid movement back and forth between notes can be tricky or impossible in the low register and the extreme high register. Bb3 to B3 is an impossible-to-control trill because it requires a rapid finger sliding. C4 to Db4 is a difficult trill because it requires both the D hole and a key called the banana key to be closed simultaneously by the ring finger of the right hand while trilling with your right pinky finger. I've found the musical success rate to be a bit

Tremolo	Written	Explanation
Bb3-D4		Sluggish awkward two-finger tremolo
B3-D4		Sluggish awkward two-finger tremolo
B3-D#4 Cb4- Eb4		Not possible
C#4- E#4 Db4-F4		Sluggish awkward two-finger tremolo
G4-A#4 G4-Bb4		Awkward coordination of left and right hand
G#4- B#4 Ab4-C5		Awkward coordination of left and right hand
A4-C5		Awkward coordination of left and right hand
A4-C#5		Not possible
A#4- C#5 Bb4- Db5		Not possible

Tremolo	Written	Explanation
Bb4-D5		Possible with a trill key and awkward coordination of left and right hand (tuning will not be good on the D)
B4-D#5 Cb5- Eb5		Not possible
C5-E5		Possible but with awkward left and right hand coordination
C#5- E#5 Db5-F5		Not possible
G5-Bb5		Possible but with awkward left and right hand coordination
G#5- B#5 Ab5-C6		Awkward coordination of left and right hand
A5-C6		Awkward coordination of left and right hand
B5-D6		The only tremolo I can think of that is possible involving a note above C#6

low on this particular trill. Other than those two trills, most trills can be executed without too much difficulty. I would caution against writing a trill at a soft dynamic in the extreme upper register since the lessening of the air stream can cause the notes to crack or bark.

Depending on the effect a composer is going for, I would use oboe tremolos sparingly if trying to create a shimmering string type effect. Especially if trying to include the more difficult tremolos I have outlined below. As with trills, a tremolo in the extreme upper register, especially at a soft dynamic range, is not recommended.

### III. MUSICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The extreme registers of the oboe are the most difficult to master, and still pose risk of failure to more advanced players. Low register oboe in a soft passage is quite difficult and I would ask a composer or arranger to consider revoicing when possible. Here is Percy Grainger's "Irish Tune from County Derry" which is an example of a very common, but difficult, low note oboe usage.



A slur down from a mid-range note can mitigate the difficulty and help improve the success rate of a low and soft note when necessary. However an initial attack or a decrescendo of a note below D4 is among the harder to command requirements of an oboe player.

As with the extreme low register of the oboe, the extreme high register of the oboe is difficult to control dynamically. This extreme upper range (above D6) is often used to double flute parts. The oboe is just not as agile in this range since the fingerings are very awkward. As you can see, E6 and F6 require either a double pinky fingering or an awkward palm key. I do not recommend ever exceeding the note G6. Notes are possible above that, but they are not reliable. Also worth mentioning is that upward slurs above D6 become more difficult the wider the interval because of the voicing differences between the notes.

Now is a good time to discuss the English horn. The English horn has many of the same technical issues that the oboe does. I will say that because of the larger bore of the English horn it has an easier time in the extreme low register and a more difficult time in the extreme upper register than the oboe does. One common issue for the English horn performer is the solo



usage of the instrument. It has been fairly common over the history of the instrument for composers to write for the instrument as if a performer is doubling. Often times this is the case, but I would recommend writing in sections so that the performer can warm up the instrument and make sure the reed has not dried out. This famous Largo from Antonín Dvořák's "New World Symphony" is a great example of how to stress out your English horn player. The first time English horn appears in the score of this great work is in the famous solo part. So a player has ten minutes of a symphony to sit through before playing one of the most famous solos ever written! In all fairness I and every other English horn player that I know that has ever performed this piece transposes the louder ending section of the first movement to give peace of mind.

One last tip for English horn writing: please allow adequate time for a switch between instruments if composing or arranging a work with a part that is intentionally written for a doubler.

#### IV. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

One of my favorite things to do when I get a part for just a single oboe, when there are multiple performers on said part, is to figure out harmonies to add to enhance the arrangement. I think this is a skill that band directors or teachers could encourage or help students develop. First, it is obviously important to know when these additional harmonies should be used. For example, a Tower of Power arrangement for concert band might be an appropriate place for individual creativity whereas one of Holst's suites might be a place to follow what is written.

**Malaguena**  
*Extreme and Variations*  
The United States Navy Band

Ernesto Lecuona  
arr. Jerry Ascione

Oboe 2

Subdivided  
1 Player

Oboe 2

**Malaguena**

Ernesto Lecuona  
arr. Jerry Ascione

$\text{♩} = 66$

6

9 Much Faster  $\text{♩} = 152$

11

14

15

20

27

7

35

10

rit. a tempo

61 Trombone cadenza Slow  $\text{♩} = 66$

Transposition can be a very powerful tool. I know that a goal as a musician is to always be able to read music fluently no matter the key, but when learning music quickly, sometimes viewing it through a different lens can help. Bands generally perform in flat keys because of all of the Bb and Eb instruments that make up a larger number of performers than instruments in C like the oboe. Here is an arrangement of Ernesto Lecuona's "Malaguena" that the Navy Band regularly performs and it is a great example of how viewing a piece through a

different transposition can make it easier for your performers to digest. The first example is the original part in Db and the second version is a part transposed into A that, for the oboe, is much easier to read.

The hallmark of the oboe is its ability to perform long singing solos. However, much like the other wind instruments, the oboe performer needs breaks to recover. Parts with few breaks such as marches are very taxing. Since a march is a staple piece of the wind band it is worthwhile for band directors to know that choosing breaks or spotting each other is often necessary for the oboe performer. Take this example of the Sousa march, "The High School Cadets." It is about two and a half minutes of continues playing which is not a realistic expectation.

**5 THE HIGH SCHOOL CADETS.**

1st and 2nd OBOES MARCH SOUSA.

1888

15785-10 1/8 Carl Fischer, New York.

**13 Joyce's 71st N.Y. Reg't March**

1st & 2nd Oboes BOYER-LAKE

27821-11 Carl Fischer, Inc., New York

Also, many marches are written as a double part on a single page. It is much easier to read a single line of music and single parts lessen the possibility of mistakes from misread notes. You can see on the following example how the close proximity of notes makes quick reading of the parts especially the second part difficult. Separate parts are always appreciated!

Finally, we have an exercise our band went through last year doing a transcription of Michael Torke's "Javelin." The original is in the key of A major so not very good for the Bb and Eb instruments.

Oboe 1

# Javelin

Michael Torke (1994)

**Presto** ♩ = 132

The musical score is written for Oboe 1 in treble clef, with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 2/4 time signature. The tempo is marked 'Presto' with a quarter note equal to 132 beats per minute. The score consists of five staves of music. The first staff begins with a dynamic of *p* and ends with *mf*. The second staff starts at measure 7 with a dynamic of *p*, moves to *mp* in measure 10, and returns to *p* in measure 13. A measure rest of 6 measures is indicated between measures 13 and 18. The third staff starts at measure 18 with a dynamic of *f*. The fourth staff starts at measure 24 with a dynamic of *p*, moves to *f* in measure 26, and returns to *p* in measure 28 with a *cresc.* marking. The fifth staff starts at measure 31 with a dynamic of *f* and ends with *ff*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

*p* *mf*

7 *p* *mp* 6 *p*

18 *f*

24 *p* *f* *p cresc.*

31 *f* *ff*

Musician 1st Class Chris Buchanan's first version moves the piece down a half step to Ab Major. This makes it a much more manageable undertaking for the transposing instruments, but complicates it for the non-transposing instruments.

Oboe 1

# Javelin

Michael Torke (1994)  
Trans. C. Buchanan (2016)

**Presto** ♩ = 132

*p* *mf*

7 *p* *mp* *p* **6**

18 *f* *p*

25 **A** *f* *p* *cresc.*

32 *f* *ff* **B**

Finally, we were able to settle on the key of G major. You may ask, "Why not go up a step to Bb major?" Then that really makes the upward register for all of the instruments much more difficult. Transposing much further down in key bottoms out the low registers for many of the instruments. Luckily, the key of G major works and here is what the first few measures look like transposed in the final performance version.

Oboe 1

## Javelin

Michael Torke (1994)  
Trans. C. Buchanan (2016)

**Presto** ♩ = 132

1

7

19

25 **A**

32 **B**

*p* *mf*

*p* *mp* *p*

*f* *p*

*f* *p* *cresc.*

*f* *ff*

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