

“Vent” to get rid of bassoon note frustrations!

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Do you find that your bassoon student struggles to get the pitches, A3 through D4, to speak clearly and cleanly when articulated? Even after your student uses the appropriate amount of air pressure and correct embouchure, is a rough, uneven sound preceding the actual note? If so, there is a way to fix it!

In the bassoon world, it is not as if we do not have enough to worry about in the realm of normal finger technique. Not only are our fingers dutifully employed, but also our two thumbs, which are responsible for overseeing up to thirteen keys. For C#3, the left thumb depresses three keys at once! Trained bassoon instructors often prescribe a traditional technique called “flicking” to cure notes that “crack” when articulated. Flicking involves the simultaneous pressing and releasing of a left hand thumb key (such as the high A key—see Plate 1) when one of these troublesome notes is articulated. Synchronization of tongue, air pressure, and thumb key must occur in order for the note to speak cleanly. In more technical passages, this technique is almost impossible to master for the developing student. In many cases, the student just gives up on flicking altogether, settling for the rough sound these notes present when articulated.

But, there is a way to avoid the frustrations that flicking inflicts upon developing bassoonists. Another technique, for which I strongly advocate, is called venting. Venting is related to flicking, as both techniques require use of the left hand thumb keys (see Plate 1 high A, high C, and high D); however, with venting, the student depresses one of the left hand thumb keys for the entire duration of the note. Basically, these thumb keys become a part of the fingering. When I start a beginning student on bassoon or encounter a student who possesses flicking problems, I teach the fingerings of A3-C4 to include the thumb keys (see Plates 2-5 for fingerings using these keys). Usually, the most troublesome notes are A3 (see below for note reference in staff) and Bb3, so I spend a great deal of time enforcing venting with these notes. I also introduce using a vent fingering for D4, if a student has issues in certain passages with the note speaking cleanly. An instance where I find venting especially helpful is in a situation where a student has a fast, tongued passage with notes A3-C4 (see Plate 7) in succession. Instead of flicking each time a note is articulated, the student can hold a single thumb key while tonguing these notes. Immediately, the cleanliness of sound is improved. Yet, it is important to note for instruments in poor working condition or of an older, more obscure make of bassoon, this system may not work. Furthermore, for most bassoons, thumb keys will alter the pitch of notes A3 through D4. It is possible that some bassoons will even present more drastic tuning changes than usual in these notes when venting is used. Nonetheless, pitch is most noticeable in vented notes of a longer rhythmic duration. If your students encounter tuning issues while venting, they should adjust accordingly by increasing/decreasing space (depending on the tuning tendency) in the back of the oral cavity and/or adjusting the tongue’s height in the mouth. Additionally, students should play these notes as long tones with a tuner to practice stabilizing and sustaining them while holding down these thumb keys. With practice, your students can improve the altered pitch of these notes when vented.

After successfully employing this venting technique, a student will play these usually troublesome notes cleanly when articulated. If they already know how to flick, this will give them another tool to help fix their sound. Regardless, if this system is dutifully implemented, you and your student will no longer have to suffer with rough, “barky” sounding notes in ensemble or solo passages in this area of the bassoon!



Plate 1: Left Thumb Key Names on the Bassoon*

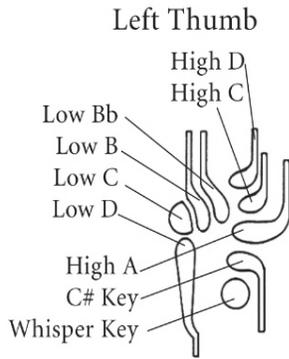


Plate 2: Fingering for A3 with Left Thumb Key

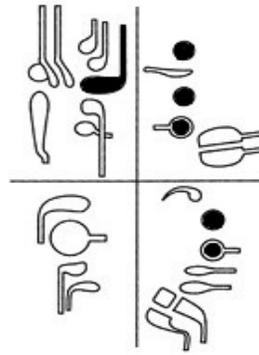


Plate 3: Fingering for Bb3 with Left Thumb Key

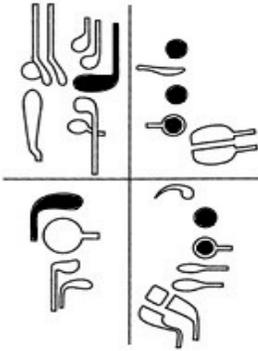


Plate 4: Fingering for B3 with Left Thumb Key

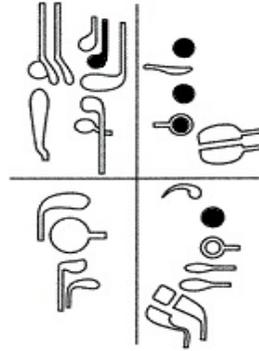


Plate 5: Fingering for C4 with Left Thumb Key

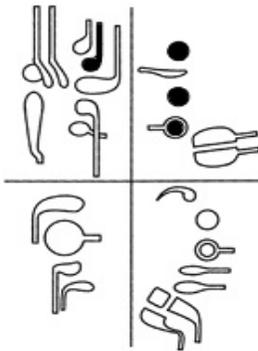


Plate 6: Fingering for D4 with Left Thumb Key*

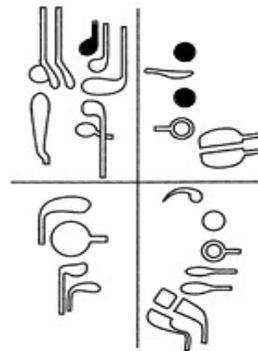
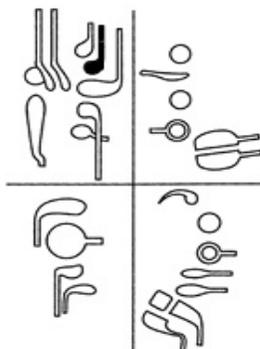


Plate 7: *Universal Vent Key*—can be held down for A3-C4 on **most** bassoons!



*Note: Some bassoons are not equipped with a high D key. If this causes a problem, have the student use more air pressure, employ a firmer embouchure (round tension, opposed to “biting” tension), and move the reed farther into his/her mouth to improve the D’s response. Also, make sure the bocal’s vent hole is clean.

Fingering plate source: creative commons