An Interview with
Stephen Williamson
Principal Clarinetist of the Chicago Symphony

By John Thomson

The son of a band director, Chicago Symphony Orchestra principal clarinetist Stephen Williamson began playing clarinet at age nine. "My older brother picked the trumpet when he started band, and I wanted to play the trumpet more than you could possibly imagine. I knew so much more about the trumpet than any other instrument, and I had many recordings of great trumpet players. However, my father didn't want us to play the same instrument. He pointed out that if we both played the trumpet, we would be competing against each other all through high school, and he didn't want us to be competitive against each other.

"I understood that but really wanted to play jazz, so I immediately announced that I would instead choose the saxophone. I think his eyes started to twitch a little bit, but he let me try. The first song I learned was Happy Birthday, *so that I could play it for my uncle's upcoming birthday. As soon as I finished playing for my uncle, my dad patted me on back and said, 'Sounds great son. You know, if you play the saxophone, you can also play the clarinet. It has mostly the same fingerings, although it has register key instead of an octave key. You know what, it's really difficult. Maybe it's too hard for you.' He threw the line out, and I took the bait. A day or two later, my father came back home with a clarinet. I started playing out of a method book he gave me and never looked back. In the end, I never did play much jazz."*

When did you know you wanted to play the clarinet for a living?

Although I was hooked from the beginning, there was another moment when real passion for the clarinet started. My dad was an adjudicator for All-State and received audition tapes from region and area candidates. I remember one clarinetist's tape with an incredible sound and flawless technique. This tape was the made by the son of the head band director at the University of Wyoming; he ended up attending the Curtis Institute. I wanted to sound just like that, and this was inspiration for me when I was practicing.

I was not a gifted clarinetist; I had to work hard. However, it was an outlet for me – something for which I could see the progress. For whatever reason this became my passion. My parents would have to pull me away to eat dinner or go to bed. I wanted to keep getting better. I didn't know what it meant to be a professional clarinetist or play in an orchestra, but I wanted to play the clarinet for a living.

How do you achieve an even tone through all the registers of the clarinet?

The most important register of the clarinet is the chalumeau register. The lowest register of the clarinet is the basis for all the overtones and fundamentals in a clarinet's tone. I instruct students that when selecting a reed, they should test the sound in the chalumeau register. The sound should be rich and full, with clarity, warmth, and deep resonance. The laws of physics dictate that the sound will thin out in the higher registers of the instrument. The chalumeau register must be as deep and full as possible so the clarion and altissimo registers are full as well.

The amount of air pressure you use and the amount of resistance built into your setup are important. Sometimes students change their embouchure as they go into other registers, but this is a big mistake. Keep the same musculature in the embouchure from the lowest register to the highest register. There are things that change, but they are internal.

In the days that I started playing the clarinet, and even before, we were told to smile when playing. Smiling makes the chin straighter and flatter but does not compensate for likely air leaks. Pulling in the corners of the mouth produces a perfect circle of pressure, not just on the bottom lip, but all around the mouthpiece.

It is becoming more common that people who play with single-lip embouchure, as I do, practice double-lip embouchure on a daily basis. There were and are still some great clarinetists who play with double-lip embouchure. Richard Stoltzman, Harold Wright, and David Weber played with double-lip embouchure, as did Ralph McLane, who produced the most beautiful sounds ever made on the clarinet. Today, we go back to these recordings religiously to emulate the beautiful qualities of the double-lip embouchure.

I think it is important for students today to learn how to play with double-lip embouchure as well as single-lip embouchure. The best voicing possible on the clarinet occurs with a double-lip embouchure. You will never have an air leak, because the lips seal everything. Go back and forth between double- and single-lip embouchure, and the result is a naturally forming ideal embouchure. I encourage students to try double lip at an early age because it eradicates air leaks.

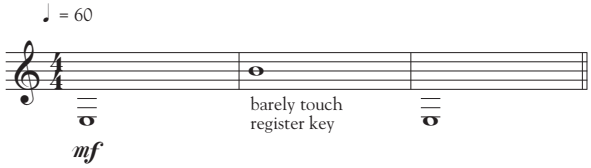
It also helps you find the absolute sweet spot for where the bottom lip meets the reed on the mouthpiece. Some people play on the lip and have done well, but most of the time, I find that where the skin meets the lip tissue is the optimal place to produce the most resonant sound on the clarinet. It is farther back than many people think they should roll.

By playing a double-lip embouchure, clarinetists learn that the top teeth should meet the bottom teeth perfectly and a 90-degree angle to the clarinet. The mouth should look like a perfect C, but tilted. I often find that people with single-lip embouchure take too little mouthpiece in. Also, their top teeth sit too close to the tip of the mouthpiece. It is as if they are afraid to take more inside.

Although we strive for an optimal embouchure that does not change, it must be an embouchure that does everything that it is supposed to do in all registers. People might bite too hard, use too little bottom lip pressure, or not use enough corners of their embouchure to seal the air. There are multiple facets to developing a great embouchure, but once the embouchure is settled, clarinetists realize that even this is not enough. You must have a relentless airstream. In that relentless airstream, you find that every note through the clarinet speaks a certain way. An embouchure is the common ground that can allow all of them to feel as unified and as even as possible.

What are your favorite warmup exercises?

I do not have much of a warm up, but there are two exercises I do almost every day. The first and most important is an overtone series exercise designed to develop the richest low register that you can and then go into the harmonics of the clarinet. Start on low E, playing a deep and resonant mezzo forte – nothing softer than that – and hold that low note for four beats at 60 to the quarter note. Then, barely touch the register key with the thumb. The aim is to pop out the twelfth without holding the register key down. Hold the twelfth for four beats, then come back down to the fundamental again for another four beats. The dynamic should remain mezzo forte, and there should be no diminuendo. I am working to control the clarinet so that I will be intentionally making the pitch change when I need it to rather than by mistake.



I go up chromatically all the way to written F4. Low E, F, F♯, G, and G♯ are the most difficult harmonics to get because the more holes that are closed, the more resistant the clarinet becomes. Everybody talks about going over the break, which is going from B♭ to B♮. As soon as you hit that B♮, it feels like you're fighting against the entire world. In response, rather than change my embouchure, but I expand my throat and raise the back of my tongue as far as up as I can go. That reduces the resistance of the B.

If clarinet students cannot get this on the low E, I have them start on C. Then we work our way down. It is far better to start with what you can do than to try to make a mountain out of a molehill. With elementary, junior high, or high school students it is probably better to start this exercise on a C and down chromatically.

This harmonic exercise ultimately teaches how to play the clarinet without the register key. I have this deep resonant voicing already; the register key only helps me with intonation. I'm just voicing everything.

I also play a chromatic exercise starting on low E and going all the way to C7. I play every note with one pulsation of air as softly as possible. I do not use the tongue to articulate. I have a stream of slow air going the entire time, similar to what you hear when someone blows through the horn to warm it up, but greatly reduced. Then I give a soft puff of air, which must be fast enough to make the reed vibrate. Once the reed vibrates, you should hear the desired tone.

This exercise trains players to feel the resistance of each note. Every note on the instrument has a diffferent resistance and voicing, so not only am I giving a pulsation of air for each note, I also either expand or change tongue position for every note as well.

An E♭ clarinetist might have to rest for multiple movements before coming in on a high E at pianissimo. I know exactly how that note feels, because I've practiced feeling the resistance of every note.

One thing the clarinet does well is play softly. Most of the time, clarinets are the instruments that try to emulate string players, because strings can play softer than anyone. String players can feel the vibrations of each note. I wanted to take it one step further and be able to come in on any note on the clarinet as softly as possible and do so exactly when I want.

What causes squeaks?

Squeaks are common and happen even to the greatest clarinetists. There are a number of causes. Water in a key will sometimes cause a squeak, as will misfingering something. Squeaks are often caused by the throat and tongue position. Articulating with a tongue position that is too low can cause a squeak. The tongue's main job is to get out of the way, because it only has one percent to do with technique. Technique is all air and voicing; the tongue is your worst enemy if you let it become too heavy or tense or let it get in the way of the airstream. If you are not in the right voicing for a note, you might hit another partial, which is why the best way to avoid them is to practice that harmonic exercise. We are human beings, not machines. It is expected that something occasionally will go wrong, but the more that you practice, the easier it gets. I always try to teach my students

Prior to coming to Chicago, Williamson was the principal clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic (2013-14 season) as well as principal clarinetist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra (2003-11). Williamson was the grand prize winner of the 1994 Boosey & Hawkes/Buffet Crampon First Annual North American Clarinet Competition. Other past awards include the Concert Artists Guild Competition as well as the Coleman International Chamber Music Competition. He received his Bachelor's degree and Performer's Certificate from the Eastman School of Music, and his Master's degree from the Juilliard School. As a Fulbright Scholar, he furthered his studies at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, where he collaborated with various members of the Berlin Philharmonic. His past teachers include Peter Rieckhoff, Charles Neidich, Kenneth Grant, and Michael Webster.

photo by Todd Rosenberg Photography

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to identify passages likely to produce squeaks, such as slurring from high register to low and back and forth. It is easy to squeak in passages like that.

What are the keys to getting a good sound in the altissimo register?

Anytime you have to play in the high register of the clarinet, take it down two octaves and practice phrasing it beautifully. Whenever I am articulating in the highest register of the clarinet, I play more tenuto than in any of the other registers of the clarinet. The tongue is more noticeable when you articulate short in the highest register of the clarinet, so I like to play longer. The music becomes more lyrical, and you are less likely to play abrasively. You will rarely need to play above a mezzo forte in the altissimo register of the clarinet. It will carry.

What made you choose the mouthpiece and ligature that you use?

I was trying to incorporate a resistance in the mouthpiece and reed that would help me expand my dynamic range. I want the softest dynamic levels to carry and to avoid spreading the tone at loud volumes. Finding the right combination of reed, ligature, and mouthpiece was important in my development. I play a Pyne mouthpiece with a Bonade nickel-plated ligature. I use the least expensive ligature available, but I crank them so tightly that I buy a new one every three months or so. This set-up requires a great deal of air.

If you learn to use more air, you widen the range of your technique and palette of colors. Musicians in junior high, high school, and even college would do well to stop grabbing the next hot thing on the market. I would ask each of them whether they were using enough air.

The most important thing clarinetists can do in their early development is to find something that is stable, and has good intonation, and requires a bit of work on the player's part to develop a stronger airstream. Once you develop that, you can start to branch out into whatever you want.

One bad habit I hear from people coming up the ranks is not using air properly. Players try to get by with lighter reeds and less air but cannot understand why they lack a deep, rich tone or why their sound does not carry in a big hall. People without great air and great air capacity do not get past the first round of auditions, even if they play everything technically perfectly.

What are some of your favorite orchestra repertoire selections? The selections that you look forward most to playing?

I love everything written by Beethoven, Mozart, and Brahms, and I love all the operas by Puccini and Verdi. It took almost ten years at the Met to start recycling into some of the standard operas. I have only been in the symphonic world for six to seven years, so there is still a lot of repertoire that is new to me. For example, last year was the first time I played the Bartok Concerto for Orchestra. I auditioned many times on these excerpts, but to play the piece in its entirety was a thrill. it is like a new lease on life, I'm learning all this great repertoire that I love and grew up listening to, but some of it is still new to me.

Is there any repertoire that you do not look forward to playing?

I have a hard time playing minimalistic music. I often find that such music is written either on a synthesizer or through a computer without regard for a human player's physical ability. Physically, tendonitis and issues of repetitive disorder are so common, and I wish that composers like that would understand that there's a threshold to the physicality of being a human being as opposed to the computer they used to write the piece. I avoid it when possible to preserve my career.

As a performer in a large ensemble, what are the most important qualities of a good conductor?

The most important role that the conductor can have is truly understanding the ensemble – knowing what is within their grasp and what is not. As a teacher, I have to be similarly careful about the repertoire I choose for students. I want it to be engaging, something that will make them better players, and within their ability. I might love a difficult piece, but I will not program it if it is out of

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an ensemble's grasp. If it is somewhat in their grasp and I have enough time to work with them, then we will try it.

Conductors should know how to use their time wisely. Keeping the ensemble engaged is important, and part of that is knowing whether something should be done in sectionals or during full rehearsal. If you're working on a passage with just the flutes or the percussion section but it applies to the entire ensemble, then rehearse it in front of the ensemble. If it is just individual question that can be addressed somewhere else, then that should also be kept in mind as well.

Great conductors learn how to stay out of the way. Conductors at any level can be guilty of overconducting – making larger gestures when a small one would be the better choice to get the proper sound, the attention, and the right musical atmosphere to come through. Sometimes, I think it is difficult for conductors to understand that if something isn't together, conducting more broadly makes it worse.

One helpful thing conductors can do is make ensemble members aware of distance. In a large enough group or a large enough performance venue, ensemble members in the back are sometimes unable to hear the beginnings of notes at the front of a stage. They need to know not just that they are behind, but exactly how far behind they are. Have members of the brass or percussion section come to front where the conductor is and listen to what is happening, so they all get a chance to hear what the conductor hears.

What recommendations would you make to band and orchestra directors?

Strongly advocate getting students into private lessons and make sure that students are going to reputable teachers who agree with your fundamental teaching. The aim is not to turn these students into child prodigies, but rather to make sure they do not develop bad habits from the beginning. I think it is difficult for a director to assess every student for all of the little things that need to be worked on from the podium.

Do not think that the students without money cannot get a private teacher. You would be surprised at how many musicians, including me, are willing to teach for no pay if we see the passion and the desire in a student. That is what it means to be a musician. You have to be generous with whatever gift you have, and you have to give. People think they cannot go study with someone because of what lessons can cost. Never assume anything; always hope that the spirit of generosity will take precedence.

Competition is good when it is helps students develop as players and gain the self-confidence that comes with feeling good about what they did. There is no greater competitor in a person's life than himself. Teach students to compete against their best. Get them trying to do better than what they just did. Find a happy medium between congratulating them and knowing when to push. This can sometimes get lost in a fog of pride.

What advice would you offer students as they prepare for a career as a professional musician?

Never forget why you want to be a musician. Even if I did not have the position that I have, I think I would still be a musician. I just know that is who I am inside. I think as long as we remember the joy that being a musician brings, not just to yourself but to others, you will begin to understand that there are many roads to being a musician, and not all of them are traditional.

My woodwind quintet won the Concert Artists Guild Competition in 1995 or 1996 in New York. One of the other groups that won was a contemporary ensemble called Eighth Blackbird. They are still off and running and have won Grammy awards. They did it by thinking outside the box. They commissioned works from new composers but also learned how to compose themselves. Eighth Blackbird also found instruments that haven't been heard before in this country and figured out how to play them.

If the will and the passion are there, it is going to happen. I look back and remember how passionate my dad was every day. He was so excited to get to school to rehearse the band. He was so excited to see the charts he designed for the marching band, to see how things were going to play out on the field. He loved every aspect of being a band director, including the moments that students would come into his office and sort of spill their guts about their life. Everyone loved to be around him.

My dad wasn't the best conductor in the world; he would be the first to admit it. Students loved how passionate he was about what he was doing. He had good ears and he could say what he wanted to happen. Even if he couldn't show it, he could say what he wanted and we were able to do it.

What have you learned on the job that you did not learn in college?

Before winning the job at the Met I played on Broadway and took studio work. What I found in these contexts is that while you have to be an outstanding player, it is equally important to be a decent human being. One of the only ways to learn how to play well with others is by playing chamber music. How do you adjust when somebody is ten cents sharp on a note, or incredibly flat, or responds late on entrances? If they are in front of you, go with what is in front of you. If people are playing louder instruments and they are behind the beat, go with the louder instruments. You have to learn how to get the best performance out of something by being flexible, compatible, considerate, and understanding that we are all human beings. These things are not taught in school.

Never say no to a performance opportunity. Whether it's playing in a nursing home, if it's going out on the street and playing for someone, or something for no pay, the one thing that I never did was say no, and I think this is one of the most important character-building benefits of being a musician. Our role as musicians is to give unconditionally. □

John Thomson was director of bands at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois for many years and is currently an adjunct professor at Roosevelt University. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Carnegie Mellon University. Thomson is a contributing editor and new music reviewer for The Instrumentalist.