

Clarinet Mouthpieces and the Young Student

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Many years ago, some well-meaning but ill-informed educator put forth the notion that the ideal clarinet mouthpiece on which to start a young student was the Vandoren B45. It would be interesting to know if this individual was, in fact, a professional clarinetist or not, but I suspect we will never know the answer to that question. It does seem ironic that to my knowledge there is not a single clarinetist playing in a major orchestra in the United States today who is using a Vandoren B45 mouthpiece! There are some playing Vandoren mouthpieces, but a different model than the B45. There is a reason for this. The Vandoren B45 mouthpiece is one of the most open facings that the Vandoren factory produces. As most American clarinetists understand, this style of mouthpiece, open facing with a softer reed, makes it more difficult for the musician to produce the centered, compact, dark, and warm sound that is the goal of most American orchestral clarinetists.

The problem is not with the Vandoren Company. They are the leading manufacturer of professional quality woodwind mouthpieces in the world. The problem is simply that the Vandoren B45 mouthpiece is not the ideal choice for the young student for several reasons. First, the young student needs a mouthpiece/reed combination that will provide as much stability of pitch and center to the sound as possible due to the lack of a fully developed embouchure. Secondly, it would seem logical that as teachers, we would want the young student to use equipment from the very beginning that would best enable them to achieve those tonal qualities sought after by most American band and orchestra clarinetist.

The more open facing of the B45 mouthpiece, with the necessary softer reed needed to play the more open facing, creates a very flexible, and for the young student, hard to control situation. Many times this leads to the development of bad habits, such as "biting," which left uncorrected will seriously hamper future progress.

If the teacher wants to have the young student play a Vandoren mouthpiece, a much better choice would be such models as the 5RV, the 5RV Lyre, or even possibly the M15 or M30. These are all mouthpieces with a closer tip opening that can use a stronger reed, give the young student a much greater stability of pitch and tonal focus, and promote good playing habits early on.

The path I would set forth is one that has been traveled by the vast majority of educators and professional clarinetists in this country for the past seventy to one hundred years. This approach uses a mouthpiece with a closer tip opening and a stronger reed to match. The resulting combination gives both the professional and the young student alike the stability of pitch, good embouchure formation, and a warm rich sound that has been called the "American School of Clarinet Playing."