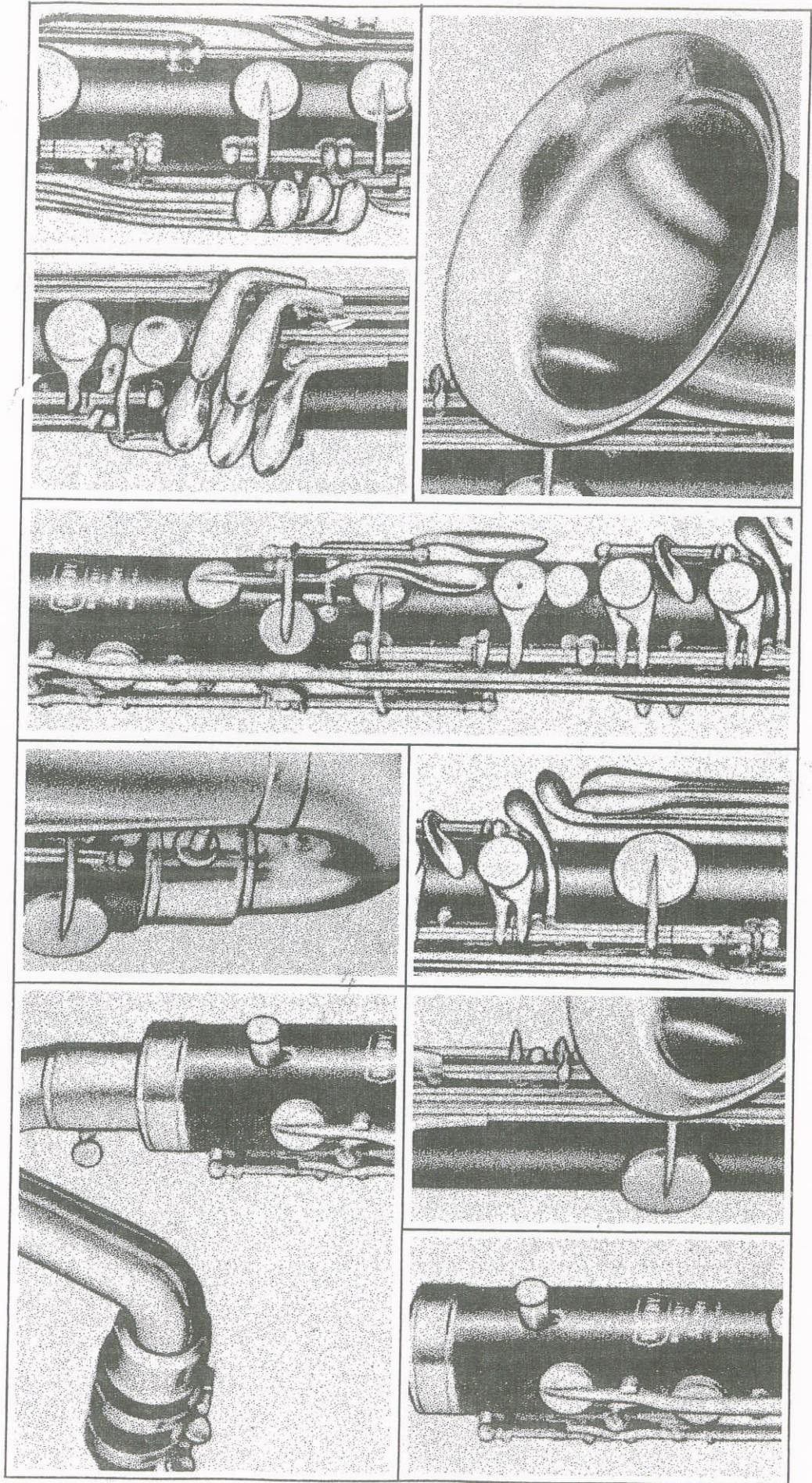


# The Teacher's Guide to the Alto, Bass and Contrabass Clarinets

by Dr. Donald E. McCathren  
Duquesne University Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania





## Introduction

One of the most significant musical achievements of the 20th century has been the perfection and mass production of the alto, bass and contrabass clarinets. The impact these instruments are having on the music of today is significant indeed. They promise to play an even more important role in the wind music of the future. The alto, bass and contrabass clarinets have unlimited possibilities as solo instruments, in combination with other instruments in chamber music, in the clarinet choir, in the orchestra, and especially as members of the modern wind band.

Composers and arrangers are constantly making more and more interesting use of these instruments. With the advent of the "symphony of winds" concept of band instrumentation and the growing popularity of both the clarinet and woodwind choirs, our most important task is to develop players capable of obtaining the musical results that composers and arrangers are beginning to expect from these remarkable instruments.

## Selecting the Player

In past years, the idea was established that if a student was not a good B $\flat$  soprano clarinet player, he should be given an alto, bass or contrabass clarinet to play. This is a fallacy. The same qualities of musical sensitivity, diligence, initiative, love of music, and intelligence that will make it possible for a student to become a fine B $\flat$  soprano clarinet player are also necessary for a fine player on the alto, bass or contrabass clarinet.

It is important that the student chosen to play one of these instruments be motivated to want to play it. This means that these instruments must be glamorized. Talking about their importance, playing phonograph recordings which feature these instruments, and having soloists perform on them will do much to develop a climate where students will want to play the alto, bass and contrabass clarinets. The recording "Contest Solos for the Clarinet Family" in the Selmer educational record series features

solos played on all of these instruments. It is highly recommended to develop interest in them and also to develop a concept of how they should sound.

It is practical to start beginners on these instruments, for the plateau keys make them easier to finger than the B $\flat$  soprano open hole clarinet. However, since the keys are larger on the alto, bass or contrabass clarinet, it is a good idea to select a student with large strong hands. It is also helpful if the student enjoys the lower sounds of the musical scale. Students who do start on the alto, bass, or contrabass clarinet avoid many problems experienced by students that transfer from the B $\flat$  soprano clarinet. It is an excellent idea to rotate clarinet players in the high school and college band so that each of them can have one or two years of playing on the alto, bass or contrabass clarinet in the band. This experience will usually improve the student's ability to play the B $\flat$  soprano clarinet as well.

It is important to the success of the alto, bass or contrabass clarinet that players be urged to take private lessons. Private instruction, section rehearsals, and rehearsals in small groups where individual correction and attention can be given to the student are very helpful. Without doubt, one of the greatest motivations for a player is to have him involved in studying a solo. Scheduling a public performance for the soloist will provide additional incentive for growth and improvement.

Spending a lot of time working on one piece, or even one passage, will do much to develop technique. Too many times young players play a lot of music but do not really practice any of it. The result is that they progress very slowly. Correct, diligent practice can result in amazing technical growth and improvement. A solo often provides the motivation for this kind of practice.

## Common Errors in Playing the Lower Clarinets

My observations of a great many players of the alto, bass and contrabass clarinet have revealed several errors that seem almost universal. Among these are:

1. Embouchure too tight