

Years of Innocence, Ignorance, Neglect and Denial: The Importance of Speaker Key Use on the Bassoon

By Norman Herzberg
Encino, California

This article will chronicle a thirty year journey that led to the inevitable conclusion that speaker keys *must* be adopted as an integral part of technique on the bassoon. In this article I will use the term "speaker" instead of "flick" keys because I agree with others that the word "flick" trivializes their importance. I was one who was ignorant of their value. As a consequence, I found certain technical problems beyond my ability to solve with consistency. My purpose is to persuade those who have questionable and negative attitudes regarding speaker keys to incorporate them in their bassoon technique.

I studied bassoon with three teachers: **Charles Kayser**, who was the contra-bassoonist of the Cleveland Orchestra, **Vincent Pezzi** at the Eastman School of Music, and **Simon Kovar**, who taught many now famous bassoonists privately and at well known music schools. In all the years with these fine teachers who were wonderful people, the use of speaker keys was seldom mentioned and certainly not emphasized. I was unaware of the dangers and pitfalls of neglecting their use until that neglect created unexpected errors on many occasions.

When I was in high school and was a beginner on the bassoon, I became acquainted with the *Concerto* of Mozart. At that stage of my development, the bassoon was no mystery to me. In fact, many times I wondered why it was considered a difficult instrument, and also why people talked of reed problems, I had no such difficulties, and for me, the Mozart *Concerto* certainly was no problem. I prepared the third movement for a solo contest, and I even arranged it for strings. (In those years of the Depression, money was not available for the score and parts, and Xerox was just a small Rochester corporation that manufactured photographic paper and the like.) I performed the piano-accompanied version of the third movement at various assemblies to prepare for the coming competitions. Once, at a performance in a church, after the piano introduction, my first note was a strange squawk instead of the opening Bb. I never had that experience before, and it so unnerved me that I suffered through the whole performance. When I returned home that night, I repeated the opening passage many

times, and I was unable to repeat the sound of that first note. However, that event undermined my confidence in the predictability and the simplicity of playing the bassoon. Now, as I reconstruct that instance, I think it was my first experience with my ignorance of speaker key functions. That ignorance continued throughout my years at Eastman and my studies in New York.

In the late Thirties, I was a member of the National Orchestral Association. It was a training orchestra in New York, and I was studying with **Simon Kovar**. In a series of four concerts, we played thirteen cello concertos with Emanuel Feuermann as soloist. A bassoon solo in the Bloch *Schelomo* Rhapsody¹ for cello and orchestra exposed the high risk of non-use of the speaker keys. I learned how dangerous the consecutive "A's" in the middle register solo for bassoon could be. It was like being on a tightrope without a net! My only remedies were to make my reed softer in the middle of the tip and the sides, extreme caution, and hesitancy. None of them could assure me of the desired results. Inevitably my playing of that solo was cautious and quite inhibited. I "got away with it," but it did little to give me confidence that I would be able to duplicate the feat with certainty. I cannot guarantee that any of the A's spoke with clear attacks. The attacks were probably marred by the clucks that are present and tolerated to this day even in the playing of well-regarded bassoonists and teachers.

1.



My quest for more control of attacks and slurs to and within the middle register lay dormant for many years. I bore my burden of insecurity silently. When I found no certain cure for the dangers in the middle register, I practiced diligently in order to locate the narrow window of opportunity where attacks and slurs to and within the middle register would be certain and clean. Slurs of a minor third and more to the notes in the middle register, as well as attacks of those notes, remained precarious. I tried to fix my reeds and I found that if I lessened their resistance, I could soften many of the clucks in the attacks. In the

case of slurs to the middle register, I tried the speaker keys occasionally, but did not make it a habit. My results, at best, were less noticeable clucks on attacks and more cautious slurs.

My precautions exacted a high price. My attempts at playing freely and musically were diluted by my reservations that bad attacks and problematic slurs would mar the cleanliness of any passage, and thus divert my attention from the music I was trying to play. In contrast, many fine players today are not bothered by such extraneous noise from bad attacks and don't consider them "a big deal!"

After three seasons in the St. Louis Symphony, I joined the Coast Guard Band during WWII. Throughout my years there, I resolved to work on all of the *Concert Studies* of Milde. Although memorization was not my intention, I studied each of them to the extent that, given the first bar, I could play the rest of the etude without the music. However the attack and slur problems remained. At times I practiced attacks on Bb and A so persistently that the other members in the band would mimic me and practice short notes on A and Bb. Since I was stationed in New London, Connecticut, I was close enough to *Hans Moennig* to enlist his help. His remedy was to enlarge the smaller hole of the pair of holes at the bottom of the butt joint that are closed when you play G. It did not help, and the pitch of A and Bb became sharper. I was becoming more sensitive to middle register clucks and I was doing my best to avoid them by using softer reeds and by playing very cautiously.

When I returned to the Symphony after the war, I bore the perpetual burdens of uncertainties about reeds, bassoon playing, and conductors. They were the necessary curses in my attempts to master the bassoon. With regard to the difficulties in the middle register of which I speak, two searing experiences stay in my memory. One concerned the *Fourth Symphony* of Beethoven. In a performance, I was doing very well in the fast solo in the last movement until I descended the staccato scale² that starts on high G. When I came to the A below, I got a squawk that was an E (or thereabouts) that had no place in the passage. What a horrible disappointment and embarrassing moment that was! Again, I blamed it on poor preparation, a reed not quite good enough, and the tension of the moment.

2.



The second experience, the most devastating by far, occurred in a recording session in which the orchestra recorded the Prokofiev *Classical Symphony*. During those years, the master was recorded on a wax disc and there was no such thing as intercutting or splicing. To make matters worse, when there was a replay of what we had recorded in order to listen to the results, we could hear it just once, because the recording on the wax disc was ruined by playing it. We would listen to one side, correct what was required, and try to make a good disc. During those recording sessions, our conductor was a "basket case" because he had to be a conductor and was unable to "sell" the performance by means of his choreography. There was no doubt in my mind that he was hearing our performance of parts of the piece for the first time.

When I heard the only replay of the first movement in our recording session of the *Classical Symphony*, I was mortified to hear that the quarter note arpeggios beginning on A in the first movement solo bassoon part³ started with a cluck each time and there was no A at all! I was playing the note very short so that there was insufficient time for the real note to finally sound. The croak was taking up all the time allotted to the A! It was years too late to figure out what to do, and in the panic of the moment, I had to suffer and bear it. Added to my suffering was the knowledge that even if I begged for a retake, I had no way of improving my part. My panic in those sessions were complicated by the frustration and hysterical antics of a conductor who was having his own problems. The record was issued and, mercifully, it did not remain in the catalog very long. Many years later I told a class at USC about that session, and the following week a student said he had found the recording in a second hand store. I was shattered until he said that the record of the first movement was missing!

3.



I left the symphony in the early Fifties to work in the motion picture recording studios in Los Angeles. As I began to record, I was somewhat surprised to see, as well as hear, the bassoonists make extensive and consistent use of the speaker keys. What fascinated me was they they never would play A, Bb, B natural, C and D in the middle register without simultaneously using the A speaker key for A, the high C key for Bb, for B natural, and for C, and the high D key for D. To

add to my amazement, they had no difficulties with technical passages. Their left thumbs were as agile as any other finger on their hands! They certainly were not "thumb-tied"!

The replays in the studios are made on highly sensitive equipment which reproduces and amplifies every sound on the stage. We were criticized for key noise, breathing too loudly, and playing that was not clean. Recording for films with replays being heard on large speakers and very sensitive equipment is nerve-racking, because the last thing tolerated in any scoring session are difficulties due to execution on the part of a performer. Uncertainties such as those being discussed in this paper became major hurdles for me.

During the early Sixties, I had an experience that finally convinced me about the necessity of using the speaker keys. I was asked by a colleague to try a bassoon owned by the music school of one of the Los Angeles area universities. He brought it to my house and I

could not play middle A cleanly no matter how careful I was. The only way I could improve the A was to hold the A speaker key down all the time. I never had that experience before, and my playing skills were unable to deal with it. The Bb was also insecure without the A or C speaker key.


At that time, I had two Heckel bassoons on order. On April 15, 1964, I had written to Herr Groffy, who was the head of the Heckel concern, and told him of the difficulties with the A and Bb I had experienced for so many years, and of my concern that I would receive faulty instruments. I never asked him about the other three notes, B, C, and D. Groffy answered as follows:⁴

"I observed, that sometimes bassoon-players are playing the A and Bb without *touching just shortly* the A-octave-key. But, if you are looking in a fingering table, you must learn, that the octave key is designed too. It goes without, but then you have a reed, which is more strong."

4.

16712 Chaplin
Encino, Calif.
April 15, 1964.

Dear Mr. Groffy,

Be sure that the "A" and "Bb"  speak easily. Lately I have tried some Heckel bassoons where these notes cannot be sustained or attacked.

WILHELM 1851/1956 HECKEL & C.

Möbels- & Musikinstrumenten-Fabrik · Diebrich AM RHEIN · Wiesbaden

Mr.

Norman HERZBERG
16712 Chaplin

ENCINO / California

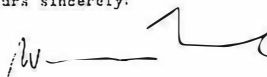
U S A

WIESBADEN-DIEBRICH, den May 5, 1964

Dear Mr. Herzberg !

4.) I observed, that sometimes Bassoon-players are playing the a and bb without *touching just shortly* the A-octave-key. But, if you are looking in a fingering-table, you must learn, that the octave-key is designed too. You are right sometimes it goes without, but than you have a reed, which is more strong.

For to day with best regards !
Yours sincerely:



(Wilhelm Heckel)

Handwritten signatures of various Heckel employees

Throughout my correspondence over many years with Herr Groffy, I had difficulty with his convoluted English. It took quite an effort to get his meaning. Yet, I had to admire his willingness to explain himself in words and syntax that were foreign to his native language. Just in case you do not quite understand the passage from his letter to me in 1964, he is telling me that the A octave key (I am calling it a speaker key) is designed to be touched quickly for A and Bb. He goes further by referring to the fingering chart. He adds that it is possible to omit the A octave key, but the reed must be able to compensate for it. I think he really means the reed must be weak and not strong. I doubted his message about the use of the A octave key, and I took the chance that my new instruments would not be as bad as the one I had tried.

When I receive my bassoon in 1966, I found them to be much better than the very "defective" one that led to my inquiry to Groffy. Fred Moritz, who was the first bassoonist in the Los Angeles Symphony at the time, heard that I had received two new Heckels and asked me to bring them to his house so that he could try them.

I took my new Heckels to Moritz, but before we inspected them, he wanted me to hear tapes of his playing. Fred was not shy, retiring, or modest, and I was duly impressed by what I heard. Then we took up each of the two bassoons I had just received. They are in the 10000 series. Before playing them, he insisted on measuring every hole on each instrument. Gradually, the mystery of the difficult bassoon I had tried began to be solved.

Fred had his own system of measurements for each hole on the Heckel bassoon, with the exception of one. He told me he agreed with Heckel solely on the size of the open F hole. Whenever Fred ordered a bassoon from Heckel, Groffy was instructed to use only Fred's measurements.⁵ Heckel gives customers exactly what they want, even when Heckel disagrees. Moritz insisted that A normally had to be played with the A thumb key held down all the time, so there was no difficulty playing it clearly as far as his system of playing was concerned. The difficult bassoon from the music school that had alarmed me was made with the Moritz tuning, and Fred was the bassoon teacher at that university.

There were many notes where Fred was trying to correct the intonation. Each of his alterations led to another until the whole bassoon was involved. The hole size differences may have led to my difficulty with the A, since I

had not seen or heard of keeping the thumb down on the A speaker key for the full length of the note. In the case of the Moritz tuning, it was a necessity. However, many European players do hold the speaker keys down the full length of the note, even though the bassoon tuning has not been altered.

I proceeded to play my new instruments for Moritz. As soon as I started to play, he emphatically insisted that I was cracking the notes in the middle register. I was very careful in playing for him, and I denied that the notes cracked on the attack. I played the common excerpts that included slurred and staccato passages. With the playing of each excerpt, Fred became more vehement and insistent. Since I had not come to him for a lesson, I stood my ground and denied the cracking to which he objected. We never resolved our strong differences at that time. After both of us tried the bassoons further, we parted with me muttering under my breath.

When I got home, I resolved to discover what Fred was talking about. I have always felt that one should not be influenced by the manner of the criticism, but by its substance. After closely listening to my playing, the light began to dawn. He was right! The end of thirty years of innocence, ignorance, neglect, and denial was at hand! What I had been taking for a normal attack on the notes in the middle register *included* the cluck that should never have been there! Once I cleaned up the attack on the A with its appropriate speaker key, the Bb had the same defect. I fixed the Bb with the high C key, and so on until I was using the proper speaker keys for A, Bb, B natural, C, and D.

As my ability to use the speaker keys increased, I found that I had developed security on any attack or slur at any dynamic in or to the middle register without making my reeds pay for it. The window of opportunity to attack and slur to the middle register opened wide! I became able to execute slurs cleanly, and attack the critical notes we are speaking of with assurance and with no hesitation or trepidation. I found that my left little finger whisper key, which I had added while studying with Mr. Pezzi, aided my speaker key technique immeasurably because it freed my thumb to get to the speaker keys. My scope of dynamics was enlarged because there was no danger in slurs, and no need to be cautious with attacks on notes in the middle register.

I had already developed a series of fundamental exercises that included scales with

5.

HECKEL

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GEGRÜNDET 1881

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BIEBRICH am Rhein - Wiesbaden
Stettiner Straße 7

Mr.

DEUTSCHES WARZENZEICHEN HECKEL USA TRADEMARK REG.

Norman Herzberg

16712 Chaplin

ENCINO, Calif. 91316

USA.

Tag June 12th 1968

Dear Mr. Herzberg!

We know very well Mr. Moritz from L.A., as just in earlier times, when we still did not know you ourselves, he visited us nearly each year in our plant. In all this time he is the one of the two Heckel-players who are preferring their own tone-hole-diameters. These diameters he is changing from one order to the other, and you can state yourself how difficult and staining all nerves for us it is to work with him. As his changed tone-holes are in general the result of his special embouchure and his own reeds, you can imagine yourself how difficult it is for each pupil to consider later on with foreign influences or as in your case opposite.

But one thing you must consider: For us the orderer is decisive although we know sometimes the coherences.

With best regards

Yours



different articulations, long tones, and intervals of thirds, fourths, and fifths. I practiced them diligently because, with the exception of rhythm, most of music is made up of:

1-consecutive notes, therefore one practices scales

2-skips, therefore one must practice intervals

3-held notes, which necessitate the practicing of long tones.

My goals were to perfect the intonation, response, evenness of tone, evenness of resonance, varied dynamics, and clean, incisive, unfettered attacks. Much more is involved in the exercises I developed, but in a fundamental way, the exercises, if done correctly, call attention to the various flaws that set the agenda for daily practice. Compulsory use of the speaker keys in the middle register unquestionably assures clean attacks, and secures slurs that had previously been uncertain. Practicing the speaker key long tones with attacks at varied dynamics, piano to

forte, relieved me of the concern that the note might have the cluck before the note sounded.

Of course I have adopted the mandatory use of the speaker keys for all of my students. I should add that, with the exception of students of my former students, practically all of those who came to study with me had not been previously taught to use the speaker keys. Students from the East studied, as I had, with eastern teachers. To this day, neglect of the consistent use of speaker keys remains one obvious characteristic in the playing of many eastern students and performers. I know. I was one of them.

The rule of speaker key use is: *the proper speaker key must be considered part of the fingering of the note you wish to play, and it must be opened simultaneously with the fingering of the note.* Thus, as an example, the fingering for A includes the speaker key above the left thumb C#, which must be opened

simultaneously with the fingering, and then quickly allowed to close while the A sounds. Some players may prefer keeping the applicable keys open for the length of the note. If the note is to be short, it is not necessary to release the speaker key. This applies to every articulation on the five speaker key notes. If any one of the notes is to be held pianissimo, the key can be kept depressed. Don't offer an excuse about the effect on the intonation — the adjustment you might have to make in your embouchure is minor. It is no more than those you have to make for other notes on the bassoon.

I want to add a suggestion before going further. One way of helping the A if its speaker key is held down, is the installation of an extension to the A speaker key cup to connect with the whisper key rod that closes the whisper key pad. If you hold the A key down, any small adjustment for the intonation that might be necessary can be lessened. A bonus for the

installation of the A tab key to the whisper key rod is that high A and Bb speak with more certainty and are easier to sustain, as well as to attack pianissimo.

Whenever you descend from a distance of a fifth or more to middle Ab or G, application of the A speaker key used simultaneously with the fingering for Ab or G, and its quick release so that it will not distort the tone or intonation, will assure a clean slur to the middle Ab or to the middle G. The interval E or Eb above the staff to middle Ab or G are good examples. In addition, the approach from below at an interval of a minor third or more to middle Ab with the same use of the A speaker key, will assure the slur. As an example, I am thinking of the first two notes⁶ of the bassoon solo, Eb to Ab, in the middle section of the second movement of the Beethoven *Fifth Symphony* where the bassoon repeats part of the theme alone after the clarinet plays it. Use of the A speaker key will eliminate some embarrassing accidents on the slur Eb to the Ab.

6.



One more example that dramatically illustrates the necessity for speaker key expertise and facility, occurs in the last part of the first movement of the Hummel *Concerto*. There are three bars of sixteenth notes of fast octaves beginning on low F⁷. You can lock the whisper key and use the speaker keys exclusively to get the upper octave note. In this instance, you must use the full C# fingering for the upper octave (to overcome the closed whisper key) and not the left-handed one. The only problem remaining is to get the octave E quickly and cleanly. I tighten my embouchure for the upper E note, and use the thumb C# key with the upper E fingering. I have heard the Hummel passage played staccato. Would the non-believers in speaker keys like a real challenge? Try it staccato!

7.



The technique of playing clean seamless slurs with assurance is afforded an additional advantage by speaker key use. Without the use of the speaker keys, slurs have to be "felt" as they are made. As a result, there may be a diminution of breath pressure in the slur while

playing it. This translates into a momentary diminuendo until the note being approached begins to sound. When it is safely reached, usually there is an attempt to resume the volume. The result is a lack of intensity in the phrase and a resultant weakening of the line. On the other hand, the use of the speaker keys in slurs assures that the note being approached will be attained with assurance, without feeling for it, and therefore pressure can be used during the slur. This maintains the volume of tone in the melodic line without any further precautions. A simpler explanation of what I mean is that you can safely put a subtle crescendo in the slur. Otherwise, without the use of the keys, slurs to and within the middle register of more than a minor third can be cautious and hazardous. The slurs down into the middle register are also a problem. Try slurring from upper E or F to middle A without the A speaker key and then with it. Consider the first two notes of *Una Furtiva Lagrima*⁸ as well as the repeat of the phrase a half tone higher. In both cases the high C speaker key can be used.

8.

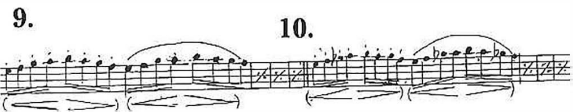


To further illustrate the benefits of the use of speaker keys, play a C major scale slurred over the full range of the bassoon, *paying special attention to keeping the dynamics constant over the whole range*. In this instance, choose mezzo forte as the dynamic. To maintain the dynamic, there must be a subtle crescendo as the scale ascends because the bassoon has a tendency to become softer as you get to the higher notes, unless you compensate for it. The resistance increases as you play into the higher register, thus a slight crescendo is required to maintain the volume of tone. Another reason to make the subtle crescendo to the higher register is that the fingerings we must use to play the higher notes are cross fingerings, and do not speak quickly unless we use more air pressure when we play them. A simple means of providing more air pressure is to play with a subtle crescendo. Those who do not use speaker keys *should not* in this instance, apply them. Now that you have a baseline dynamic of mezzo forte *over the whole scale and the return to the original note*, play the scale mezzo forte and staccato. In trying this experiment, increase the speed each time, so that you will not be able to prepare the attacks cautiously. Listen to the attacks and consider

whether you play the sensitive notes softer to avoid the clucks. Those who do advocate only occasional use of speaker keys are playing “Russian Roulette”.

Try staccatos on A. When you play A with its speaker key, be sure the speaker key is timed precisely with the fingering and the tongue, letting the key off as soon as the A sounds, or you can hold it down the length of the note. Make the staccato short, in order that the pitch of the A will have to be immediate. A very short note without the speaker key will expose the cluck. Remember my experience with the *Classical Symphony*. If there is a prior cluck, there will be no time for the A. Alternate the fingering with and without the A speaker key. There will be a noticeable difference in the attack between the two fingerings. The speaker key will not permit anything but the A and it will sound immediately. Without the speaker key, the attack will be flawed by a cluck. After trying this procedure on A, try the other speaker key notes in the same manner. Once bassoonists become accustomed to the sound of a clean, immediate response, they will be sensitive to clucks, and eliminate them by adopting the use of the keys.

Now try playing the five notes in the C major scale staccato in the middle register from G to D and back. Play them as a loop⁹ — in sixteenthths, G, A, B, C, D, C, B, A, G, A, B, C, D, C, etc. Play with the slight crescendo I have mentioned, and alternate playing each sequence, one time staccato and one time slurred. *There must be constant volume whether the notes are slurred or whether they are played with short staccatos.* Repeat the pattern and increase the speed each time. Play loops that include Bb, C, and D¹⁰. How secure do you feel without speaker keys on the staccatos?



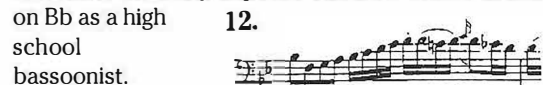
There is another seldom used speaker key on the wing joint. It is the C# key. It assures slurs to the Eb above the staff both from above and below. Because slurring down from high Ab to Eb sometimes is risky, and the Eb often does not come cleanly, the use of the C# key very quickly on the down slur makes Eb certain. You can even risk playing it forte! There is a caveat. You must time the C# so that it will not interfere with the intonation of the Eb. Holding on to the C# key will make the Eb too high, so it must be released immediately upon fingering the Eb. Try

the slur from high Ab to the Eb just above the staff.

I want to make a special comment about middle C. The cluck on it when you do not use the speaker key tends to be very subtle in the soft dynamics, but it is there. In those dynamics the high C speaker key use gives the note a more focussed sound and immediate response. A good example of the necessity for the high C speaker key on middle C, played at mezzo forte or louder, can be demonstrated by using the passage for three bassoons in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.¹¹ The part of the passage to which I refer is the passage for three bassoons soli just prior to the beginning of the descending scale at the end of the passage. There are seven middle C's before starting the staccato scale that ends on low C. Tonguing the middle C without its speaker key produces a C harmonic an octave lower. When you hear three bassoonists neglecting to hold the C speaker key down, the lower octave becomes quite prominent. You might say that the three bassoons sound like six bassoons!



A colleague uses the half hole on A. He is a wonderful player, but I am told that the half hole is essential with his key system, because his A speaker key is connected to the thumb C# key, thus making its (the A key) use as a single key impossible. I am told further that he uses nothing on Bb and depends on his way of "blowing" the note. He is an outstanding player, and I have some excellent tapes of his performances. In discussing one of his recital performances, I called his attention to his clucks in the middle register on the tape he sent me. He admitted that he missed some of those notes. I do wonder whether his use of softer attacks was a way of trying to minimize the faults of speaker key non-use. A student agreed to try the half hole on A technique, and he also agreed to the elimination of speaker key use. After about a year of serious consideration, the student abandoned that system. Another of his students, who became a member of my class, did beautifully with the speaker keys. He won a wonderful position, and he sent me a recording of a performance of the Mozart *Concerto*. He reverted to the A half hole technique on the ascending scale in the sixth bar of the concerto of Mozart.¹² The squawk on the A reminded me of my experience when I first heard it on Bb as a high



The minimizing and evasion of the use of speaker keys by performers and teachers alike, leads me to recount some instances of the penalties such attitudes produce. I have been told that a contender for a bassoon position in a recognized orchestra was playing behind a curtain, and was eliminated by one of the committee persons after playing two notes. Can you guess what composition was being played?¹³

13.



After another audition, I was called by another disappointed contender who was eliminated. He was told by the committee that he was rejected because of his bad attacks that resulted from his non-use of the speaker keys. He was a graduate of a famous school of music and wanted to know how to use the speaker keys! I explained them to him on the phone!

I have heard countless performances by famous bassoonists that are marred by bad attacks. I have a CD where the performer plays two notes — A and Bb — staccato, unaccompanied, in the Dvorak *Scherzo Capriccioso*. They sound like two “croaks.” He is one of the most prestigious players in our profession.

I heard a radio performance of the Shostakovich *First Symphony* where, in the Scherzo's bassoon solo passage, both A's that precede the “G#’s”¹⁴ were smashed.

14.

II, 5 Allegro 2 = 122



Recently, I heard a recorded rebroadcast performance of the Beethoven *Fourth Symphony*. In the famous solo passage in the finale, the first two groups of sixteenthths consisting of Bb's and A's were a mess.¹⁵

15.



On another program consisting of recordings, I recall some smashed notes in one of the solos in the wonderful bassoon part of *The Three Cornered Hat*. As in the case of my recording of the *Classical Symphony*, I am unable to locate the record. It was made by the same prestigious bassoonist I have mentioned earlier.

Many years ago, a bassoonist in an American orchestra was called to task for cracking the A in the two eighth note solo in the first movement of

the *Pastoral Symphony*.¹⁶ The eighth notes are D to A and the conductor asked why the A was unclear. The bassoonist was quite dismayed and complained to me about it. I know that his training did not include use of the speaker keys.

16. SOLO



In 1990 I visited the Munich International Competition for bassoonists under the age of thirty and a similar competition in Prague in 1991. The playing in the later rounds in both competitions was a revelation. Although it is difficult to compare the players I heard in Europe with those I have heard in the United States — professionals as well as students — I think that the bassoon playing by some of the German and French trained bassoonists in the competitions was superior to what we are accustomed to in this country. Their command of the instrument was impressive, and I did not hear the bad middle register attacks that are so prevalent in this country. Many competitors were students from the classes of Turkovic and Thunemann. One has only to listen to the CD's from those well known teachers and soloists to hear the clean attacks that we should eliminate. I am certain of Turkovic's speaker key use, as well as Thunemann's.

My attention has been called to a series of recent discussions on the Internet regarding the use of speaker keys. They began on March 6, 1995 with, “I thought that I would start everybody thinking this week with a bit of technique contemplation”. After some short remarks where he describes the practices of others, he continues “Others (myself included) religiously depress the flick keys (I prefer to call them *speaker keys* to avoid “flicking” connotations) whenever I play notes from the fifth line A to D above the bass clef staff. This includes when slurring to and from these notes, articulating them, or even just sustaining them. I find all cracking is essentially eliminated when I stick to my guns with this philosophy and that holding the speaker keys down allows me to really sink into these notes.” To which I add — BRAVO!!!

One player said that he uses the keys as insurance. “For non-slurred notes, i.e. attacks, generally I don't need the ‘flick’ keys, but I do let my thumb ‘ride’ the key.” He continues, “If I feel that there is any chance that the attack won't come out, or that the note may begin to have a multiphonic, all I have to do is depress the thumb slightly and the problem disappears.” Obviously he pulls the trigger

with confidence until he “feels” the bullet is in the chamber! I find it interesting that this player has a “feeling” whether or not the attack will “come out.” My reaction to his “feeling” a note not yet played is that he uses the “Russian Roulette” theory.

Technique is not built on taking any chances with predictions. It is built on the solid foundation of assurance. For that reason I think that use of the speaker keys is compulsory and, I repeat, an essential part of the fingering. One should not “sneak up on speaker keys”, “roll over them”, or use the “pass over” practice, where the thumb becomes a “magic wand.” There is no need to be surreptitious or ashamed that you employ them. They should be used intentionally, with consistency and purpose, since they are *speaker* keys and not *sneaker* keys.

In the same Internet discussion, another performer and teacher advocates the practice of trimming the reed to eliminate the chance of cracking the notes — A, Bb, B, C and D. He weakens his reeds for five notes on an instrument that encompasses three and one half octaves, and any one of the five can be a loose cannon in spite of his trimming. By weakening the reed for those five notes, he sacrifices the louder, fuller dynamic range required in the orchestras of today. Such practices in trimming reeds inevitably lead to a high register that is weaker, less dependable and restrictive. Weakened reeds do not solve the problems because there is still no assurance that the cracks won’t happen. To my way of thinking his solution is a terrible price to pay. Remember my sad experience in the St. Louis recording! I note that this performer and teacher states that his trimming is to assure “comfortable” articulation on the critical notes, and that it “improves articulation in the low register.” It can, but I repeat, the bassoon must respond to the gamut of musical demands over three and a half octaves. I took that route for about thirty years, and the dead ends were numerous, worrisome and embarrassing. He says, “I am willing to be convinced to the contrary (about his advocacy of non-use of the speaker keys), if someone can show me the necessity of adding to the already considerable technical difficulty of the instrument.” He teaches and he, as well as his students, might be convinced by my experiences and this article. It may be that a habit of many years is hard to overcome. However, I did it after thirty years; moreover, the rewards do merit the effort.

Speaker keys assure that articulated notes are far more predictable. Slurs can be made with certainty. They do not have to be denied their fullness due to the caution that comes from lack of speaker key use. Speaker keys, rather than being encumbrances, are liberating factors because one can concentrate on the music without the concern that there may be a bullet in the chamber! Besides, if you know how and what to practice (practice is crucial; there is no alternative), as well as how and what to listen for, consistent use of speaker keys is not difficult to master. They add clarity to one’s playing by keeping the clucks and missed slurs from sullyng the clean execution of passages. Nevertheless, do not sell short the ability to use the speaker keys by trying to learn them in just a few minutes. If you practice their use faithfully for at least a month, I think you will continue using them.

Practicing is the task of exposing faults, weaknesses, and difficulties, and overcoming them. Yet many bassoonists will accept the flawed playing that results from the denial of speaker key use. Perhaps they prefer the “Russian Roulette” method, using them only when they guess that the clucks may occur.

The search for methods to simplify the technical difficulties of playing the bassoon tantalizes every bassoonist. Articles and books are written about alternate fingerings, extra keys, plastic reeds, etc. Many “easier” ways to play the bassoon must be weighed against the side effects of short cuts. Acceptance of poor problematic substitutes for the use of speaker keys, and the denial of the resultant clucks, takes a toll from those aspects of fine bassoon playing that are necessary for clean artistic performances. Substitutes fall short of the perfection we seek, and they unsuccessfully attempt to circumvent the purpose of the speaker keys. Since there is no productive alternative to the consistent use of the speaker keys, practicing some form of the fundamentals that this article suggests will help incorporate them in bassoon technique.

Within the large groups of students and professionals who don’t use speaker keys, many don’t even hear the clucks. Worse yet, there are those who do hear them and delude themselves into thinking that they can get away with the clucks because the audience does not hear them! In my opinion, that is the ultimate denial! Unfortunately, there are bassoonists who denigrate the use of the keys, some who say they are too much trouble or overemphasized,

others who teach students that they are unnecessary, as well as many who offer other excuses to disregard them. Bassoonists who have espoused alternative methods and dodged the proven orthodoxy should finally adopt the necessity of proper speaker key use in playing and teaching.

All performers want to present their playing and the music in its best light. Certainly the use of speaker keys is an essential part of that mission. The technical problems to which I have referred have occurred in past performances, are occurring in present performances, and unless proper changes in teaching are made, will occur in future bassoon playing. The positive productive remedies about which I have written have yet to be adopted by a very large segment of bassoonists, both professionals and students. Unless professional performers and teachers adopt speaker key use, it is inevitable that many bassoonists in this country will be denied knowledge of an essential requirement for unblemished bassoon playing.

We who play and teach this magnificent instrument do it an injustice if we think or expect that it is necessary for bassoon players to receive a special exemption to excuse noisy attacks on some notes, and to use caution on some slurs, simply because they do not wish to employ the proper fingerings. Who granted certain bassoonists a special dispensation to crack notes with impunity? I know of no other instrument for which such an exemption has been granted. How ironic it is that some of the peers of our profession refuse to employ the methods that can assure its parity with the other instruments. They excuse themselves and others when they commit the violations in technique with the same nonsensical excuses; "it is no big deal", "it's overemphasized", "if I feel it is going to happen, I'll avoid it", "no one can hear it", ad nauseam. What music has been written that indicates cracked attacks or missed slurs?

This paper has been a chronicle of my own progression to speaker key use. I had been aware of the problem and frustrated by it for many years. When I tried to solve it, the solution was literally under my left thumb!

In the Number 17, 1989 issue of the *IDRS Journal*, I wrote an article about auditions. I made a statement to the effect that if the present incumbent bassoonists had to face today's competition, a large proportion of them might not be able to keep their positions. I have also cited two cases in which

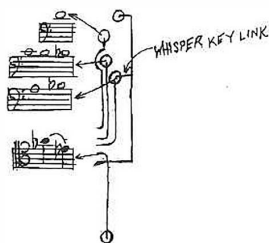
the audition candidates were eliminated partly because of the lack of speaker key use. The highly regarded professionals in this country know these hazards exist. They themselves, in some of their playing, ignore the pitfalls, and then deny the necessity of correcting the faults that occur.

It has been to my benefit and my privilege to be the mentor of some of the outstanding bassoonists in this country. In fact, in the last ten year period of my teaching at the University of Southern California School of Music, every one of my students who graduated, save one, are now employed full-time bassoonists. The majority are in symphony orchestras, and two are doing well in the free-lance field here. Their positions in orchestras have been secured through competitive auditions. In some instances, they have been the only ones selected for the final rounds. In one audition, three out of the four finalists were from my studio. Obviously, the fine qualities in their bassoon playing have been recognized by conductors and committees. One of the first of many important technical necessities for each of them is their fulfillment of my speaker key requirements. I monitored their use of the keys very closely, and when they practiced correctly they acquired the habit. As I have also stated, the use of those keys enabled the students to gain technical assurance, expand their dynamic range, and free their reeds from the additional burden of being trimmed for five notes.

Those of us who teach, bring to our students the accumulated knowledge of many years of experience. Certainly students profit from that acquired knowledge and do not have to spend the years we have spent in gaining it. Even if we think speaker key infractions are minor or forgivable, the least we can do is to insist that our students use the speaker keys properly, so that these future performers can play without the handicaps I have mentioned. They will certainly deserve more serious consideration when they compete for a position. As teachers, it is our responsibility to help them eliminate years of ignorance, neglect, and denial. If we fulfill that responsibility, our students' speaker key failings can no longer be deemed innocent.

I have often told my students that one cannot write with precision and meaning without a strong foundation in grammar and a well developed vocabulary. Similarly, proper

use of the speaker keys is required in order to express musical ideas with subtlety, clarity, purity, and eloquence.



I wish to pay tribute to Fred Moritz. He was an excellent player, and I had the chance to play beside him for many of the Bruno Walter recordings that we made in Hollywood with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. I learned quite a bit from those sessions, both from Bruno Walter as well as Fred Moritz. Moritz's playing was immaculate, consistent and musical. He had no difficulties with any part of the vast repertoire we recorded. If you ever get a chance to hear the Beethoven's *Fourth* he made with Bruno Walter, (I was not on that recording) you will hear perfection in the last movement. His double tonguing was the equal of any bassoonist I have ever heard, and he was doing it long before most other bassoonists had even considered it. I think Fred was the prime advocate and influence for the use of speaker keys in the West. It is a pity that those of us who studied in the East were not acquainted with the bassoon playing of Fred Moritz. When Fred retired at the age of seventy-five, he played an excellent performance of the Mozart that still meets today's standards. ❖

About the Author ...

[IDRS honorary member, Norman Herzberg, is professor emeritus from the University of Southern California, a former studio musician and one of the most important American bassoon teachers of this century. ED]

A Footnote by Ronald Klimko

I would just like to add my total support to Norman Herzberg's excellent thesis for total speaker key usage. When I studied French bassoon in France, I learned that the French system requires one to hold down speaker keys *every time* these middle-register notes are played, no matter how fast or slow! I also learned of the French complete distaste for the cracking they clearly hear in *most* American bassoonists' playing. I *still* was slow to convert. When I finally did, I used Allard's old scale studies and was surprised how easy it was to learn to hold down the speaker keys for all middle register notes. What a security it is! It's well worth the effort to learn. I sincerely believe that American bassoonists will begin to compete equally with other countries in international competition only when they *complete* their technical growth by careful and conscientious speaker key usage. Try it. It's easier than you think!

(NOTE: For another well-voiced opinion on venting, see the excellent letter from **Arthur Weisberg** in the Letters to the Editors elsewhere in this issue. ED)