

# Woodwind playing tips

by Nicholas Cox

Nicholas Cox was Principal Clarinet of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra between 1992 and 2014, during which time he performed concertos by Copland, Weber, Nielsen, Bruch, Richard Strauss, and Mozart, and recorded the symphonies of Beethoven, Nielsen, Shostakovich and Rachmaninov, and the tone poems of Strauss and Suk. He has also appeared as Guest Principal with the LSO, Philharmonia, Academy of St Martin's, London Sinfonietta, Royal Northern Sinfonia, English National Opera, Royal Opera, Royal Philharmonic, City of Birmingham Symphony, Hallé, and all the BBC Orchestras. Nicholas' profile as a player is also matched by a teaching career of distinction. An RNCM Tutor for over 20 years, many of his former pupils now hold positions in professional orchestras, and in 2006 his Junior RNCM student, Mark Simpson, became the first person to win both the BBC Young Musician and BBC Young Composer of the Year Awards. In addition to his RNCM commitments, Nicholas also gives masterclasses worldwide.

## Breathing

In just the same way as string players need time to prepare their arm movement to put the bow on the string and start the vibration to form a sound, wind and brass players need time to breathe to prepare to play. What the conductor indicates in an upbeat is therefore crucial in their preparation to breathe, articulate and produce the right sound. Remember that any note played is only as good as its preparation. Understanding the basic mechanics of the different wind instruments should help a conductor bring them in and play together.

Appreciating the differences between wind instruments involves understanding what produces the sound and how the players use their air.

To create a sound and vibrate the air inside the flute, the flautist must inhale a large amount of air and blow across the headjoint's aperture. As the headjoint and flute embouchure (pursed lips) offer little resistance, they get through their air quickly, so for flute players the secret is taking the large breaths they need and concealing them (at ties, between articulations and phrase gaps).

Very long phrases are much easier on the oboe (and to some extent the bassoon) as both instruments have double reeds with a small aperture that creates a lot of resistance and therefore uses up the air more slowly. The deep breaths oboists and bassoonists take create the air pressure necessary to get both reeds to buzz and to keep the sound going. This difference in producing the sound/vibration and the speed with which they use their air accounts for the "breathlessness" of flute players (and sometimes their completely unmusical breaking of phrases, though the very best disguise their breaths with immense skill) and the tension in the necks of oboists (who sometimes look like they are about to have a heart attack). Often, the slower usage of air in playing the oboe requires oboists to exhale their stale air at the next opportunity before breathing in again.

Clarinets have one reed attached to a mouthpiece which might suggest to the observer (and sometimes even the players themselves) that they can get away without breathing deeply. Generally, it takes less air pressure and volume of air to get the reed to work on a clarinet and sustain a sound, though the levels of resistance on different instruments and mouthpiece set-ups can vary enormously, especially in younger players still searching for their set-up. Professional players know that making a great sound on the clarinet is only possible with the similar volume of air and air pressure used by their flute and oboe colleagues. The difference is knowing how to use this volume and air pressure.

Unlike the clarinet, the saxophone is generally made of metal. It too has a single reed on a mouthpiece though the design of saxophone and clarinet mouthpieces is very different. The main difference is that the saxophone has a conical bore making its fingering system and mechanics like that of an oboe or flute. It overblows at the octave and is generally the loudest of the wind instruments. With its largely cylindrical bore, the clarinet overblows at the twelfth. The clarinet appeared in the mid-18th Century in various keys of C, B-flat, A, D, and E flat so that it could play in a variety of tonalities with few keys. Actually, the modern (17/18 key) Boehm clarinet has hardly changed in its mechanics since around the 1840s, although the bore shape, tuning, and mouthpieces have developed enormously in the last 160 years.

## Younger wind players

While experience will inform a seasoned professional, younger inexperienced players may be very grateful for a conductor's intimate understanding of a piece especially if you can suggest where a developing player might breathe. I have never forgotten taking a wind sectional on Brahms' *Symphony No. 2* at the Watford School of Music Orchestra in the late 1980s when a 12-year-old David Pyatt (now Principal in the London Philharmonic Orchestra) was Principal Horn. I suggested one breath for the horn solo at the end of the first movement and he immediately played the solo like a seasoned professional. I wasn't at all surprised that, even at his tender age, he went on to win BBC Young Musician a few months later and now has a brilliant career as an orchestral musician and soloist.

Be aware as a conductor that younger players of all wind instruments might still be addressing breathing and embouchure issues at college level and it is really helpful for conductors to be understanding about these developments in technique.

It is worth trying to get younger players (and occasionally professionals) to take more time to breathe in. Inhalation is normally autonomic, that is, we aren't normally aware of breathing unless we're exercising or doing something like playing a wind instrument that makes us think about it.

Get them to breathe in as if scenting a flower. This will make the player breathe more slowly through their nose so that the olfactory senses at the back of the nose can pick up the scent. The stomach muscles relax allowing the diaphragm to pull air deep into the lungs and the shoulders don't move. Some teachers think breathing through the nose is incorrect for wind players; however, the lesson

learnt in scenting a flower can be highly effective in showing young players how to breathe slowly and deeply. Get them to feel where the air is going in by putting their hand on their stomach. Notice that taking a breath this way takes longer. This might influence how you think about your upbeat and the gestures you give as wind/brass players prepare to play.

Of course, there isn't always time to imagine scenting a flower in the preparation to play, so when it needs to be faster, younger players will often benefit by being shown how to breathe quickly. The 'fight or flight' breath, the 'surprise' or 'shock' breath when the body prepares itself to flee from danger, or gasps in surprise or shock is also a well-known technique. Get them to imagine a surprise and their physical reaction to it (perhaps receiving a surprise gift). The mouth opens, again the stomach muscles relax quickly, and the diaphragm drags air in quickly and deeply. Again, no shoulder movement is really necessary to breath in this way.

The results of pointing out these classic techniques are sometimes startling. Often the sound is immediately fuller, phrases last longer, tuning and articulation issues often improve, and perhaps the young player won't be able to stop smiling! It is important for conductors to know of such techniques, and to ensure their upbeats expounds these ideas of breath, allowing sections to play together. In fact, doing breathing exercises with youth orchestras might be a great way to start a rehearsal.

## Bars for nothing?

Giving 'bars for nothing' is never for nothing and any note played is only as good as its preparation. Of course, even the best conductors want to avoid seeming to beat air before the sound starts, so "bars for nothing" are not popular with conductors. Two very famous conductors found my wish for two preparatory bars at the start of the *Presto* third movement of Shostakovich *Symphony No. 9* baffling until I explained that a relaxed and deep breath was essential to play the tricky opening 16 bar phrase without missing out a note for a breath. One of them had even forgotten the next time we played it and mocked me. The other said in the final rehearsal, "do you really need two bars for nothing?" At which point, I gently reminded him that as a former principal oboist in a London orchestra, he might remember that a long breath is the only way to prepare for a 16-bar solo! His solution was to beat the first of the two bars in small finger movements in front of his body before giving me the actual upbeat bar. This allowed him to avoid beating two bars for nothing visibly and gave me enough time for the slower breath and the best chance of successfully delivering the solo.

Incidentally, the previous movement in this work is marked *Moderato*. There are huge differences in tempi for this movement as can be heard in available recordings. The slower the speed, the more difficult this movement is to breathe and tune; however, the slower speed allows for bigger gaps to take larger breaths. So often the flow of the music provides its own solution to the best tempo - in the case of this movement, the 3/4 bars should be beaten in 1 and the 4/4s in a lilting 2. If the music limps along with the feeling of all the crotchets, the tempo will feel too slow, and the music doesn't flow. Getting the music to flow will often also suggest the best breathing solutions for wind players.

By showing understanding of the physicality of playing at such stressful moments, a conductor can either make a player's life easier or significantly add to the stress. Be smart conductors in such places! Your job is to enable the sound and make lives easier!

## Dovetailing and transposition

Sometimes wind players might have the 2nd player in the section cover their breaths, for instance in the long notes in the clarinet solo of Rachmaninov's *Symphony No.2* slow movement, or the long 2nd clarinet accompaniment solo in Rimsky Korsakov's *Scheherazade* where the 1st might help out. Occasionally a particularly difficult passage might be split between both players to provide some relief and make the passage easier. The only consideration for conductors here is to assess whether the joins are seamless, and the result is artistically acceptable.

What players often don't appreciate is that perfect joins are normally better achieved where there is an overlap: one player should finish on the downbeat note and not before the barline, meaning there will be at least one note that both players are playing.

It might surprise you that seasoned clarinetists might sometimes be transposing on the wrong instrument. There are several passages in the repertoire when a clarinetist will reach for the other instrument to avoid a clumsy trill or playing in an awkward key. Examples of this are Debussy's *La Mer*, Rimsky Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnole*, Brahms *Symphony No.1* slow movement or opening of the *Symphony No.3*, Ravel's G major *Piano Concerto* slow movement. There are also some pieces with perilously quick changes for clarinet where the best solution might be to transpose the previous passage to avoid being flat or unprepared: Mendelssohn *Symphony No.3* at the end of 1st movement, Borodin *Polovtsian Dances*, Brahms *Symphony No.3* 1st movement. Also be aware that transposition is often slower in younger players. Sometimes as in Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* the outer movements are in A and the slow movement in C so it is customary to transpose the slow movement up a minor 3rd on the A clarinet. This should also make tuning later in the movement easier.

## Basic articulation differences

Again, the four wind instruments are strikingly different when it comes to articulation and this makes playing together and preparing to play slightly different on each instrument. For conductors, the cardinal rule is that the speed of the upbeat should indicate and relate to the tempo of the music. If players get a sense of tempo from the upbeat, this solves many of the issues in playing together. If you think about it, the physical differences between the instruments explain why so many wind groups have difficulties starting together. The oboe, bassoon, and saxophone's lower notes need digging out, while these are easy on the clarinet. A flute's lowest notes are not at all easy to articulate clearly, whereas a clarinet might struggle for subtlety in starting altissimo notes (above written C''').

As with the strings, a precise, but bump-free start in a soft dynamic can be difficult for a wind section. An accent free full forte sound (for instance, the start of Brahms *Symphony No.4* last movement) may require a lot of thought about the preparation. Players will need a big breath to play this in one

phrase but again conductors won't want to give 2 bars preparation. Be prepared to start beating in front of the body, so they have a sense of tempo and enough time to start breathing before the upbeat bar and can therefore avoid an audible gasp just before the start of this movement.

So, the preparation is vital, but conductors also need to be clear where in their downbeat they want the sound to start. The lowest point in downbeats (and often subsequent beats) need to be indicated precisely. Most conductors will also want most subsequent beats to be in the same place so the sense of tempo is communicated. If the point of the downbeat isn't clear, the orchestra will be guessing where to play. Some conductors may favour a click on the downbeat or a point at which the downbeat stops or bounces perhaps. In my experience, the easiest to follow are conductors that keep the beat flowing with a sense of physical movement between beats. If you keep it flowing between beats, this will also indicate tempo and give players more certainty where notes/chords should start. There is a famous YouTube clip of various starts of the finale of Brahms *Symphony No.4* with different orchestras. In many of the versions, the conductor is indicating clear differences in phrasing and articulation that are picked up by the orchestras. My guess is that those who start with a definite accent are perceiving a click at the bottom of the beat and those who are playing this as one long phrase are perceiving more flow between the beats. A matter for discussion perhaps?

Repeating notes and producing a staccato is also a different experience on the different wind instruments. Flutes must stop the air to stop the sound and make a note short. The others have to stop the reed(s) from vibrating to shorten notes. This means the tongue going back to the reed to influence a note's length or the air stopping. Repeating notes is therefore a matter of stopping the reed and then stopping the reed (or how long the tongue is in touch with the reed to form the gap). Very good players make this work successfully. With younger players, note starts and endings can be very abrupt if the tongue comes off or goes back too quickly and without subtlety.

It is not helpful to tell wind players to tongue or articulate harder (as some brass players might suggest), as this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what happens in articulating a wind instrument. The action is not an attacking motion of the tongue but rather involves taking the tongue off the reed to allow it to vibrate before stopping it with the tongue. If they do this too abruptly, it is as if they have got the scissors out and chopped it to bits. Even repeated notes need to have a sense of belonging to each other. Most experienced players will start notes with a little tongue and have learnt to play the start of notes with subtlety. Flutes and clarinets can ease the start of notes without the tongue. Oboes and bassoons find this more difficult. My advice to conductors is, 'don't suggest a change of technique, just describe or sing the length you want.' If it's not short enough, ask them to play shorter. If they don't match each other, try to find an appropriate length for everyone to match. This might be different for each instrument – easier to be clear for the oboe and bassoon, but trickier for the clarinet and flute depending on the register, their age and ability.

Areas where articulation becomes difficult are the lower notes on the oboe, bassoon or saxophone where getting the reeds to work is the main problem, and the higher registers on the flute and clarinet which take more physical effort, more airflow to keep the airway open, and sometimes a different technique. In faster passages, flute, oboe and bassoon can be reliably expected to double or triple tongue (vocalise *dugudugu* or *dugududugudu*) but not all clarinets, even these days, can double tongue, so playing very fast articulation is difficult for some of them.

This can result in different needs in the same piece: clarinets will prefer Mendelssohn's *Scherzo* from *Midsummer Night's Dream* slower, as the articulation is then manageable, whereas the principal flute will want it faster, so they don't run out of breath in their long, articulated solo towards the end. Listen to the variety of different tempi in recorded versions - I seem to remember Claudio Abbado with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra was perilously quick - whereas someone like Klemperer or Sir Charles Groves might be more stately. In the same way, a leader (violin) might want the *spiccato* in *Capriccio Espagnole* to be faster (for their bouncing bow) while the clarinet may want a more sedate tempo to negotiate the 32nd notes. The finale of Beethoven's *4th Symphony* will be double tongued with ease by the solo bassoonist, but the clarinet will be sweating if the tempo is faster than 152bpm especially if they can't double tongue (though this clarinet solo is doubled by the strings so slurring some of the 16<sup>th</sup> notes is certainly possible)! Other snippets of advice: don't give second oboists a hard time in Dvorak. Articulating the piano low notes he wrote for oboe is difficult at the best of times, but do feel free to give flute players a hard time if they split their articulation on Ds (8ve and tone above middle C)! Even the best players are not immune to this. Notice that articulation on the oboe seems to influence its intonation - some oboists play sharper when articulating quickly. But also be understanding in Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra* solo - most oboists find this a challenge.

## All together now

One of the privileges of being an orchestral musician for almost forty years has been working with some truly great but very different conductors. This includes memories of Karajan changing the sound of the European Union Youth Orchestra in the first few minutes of the very first rehearsal (possibly as a result of the heightened concentration levels); the thrill of playing Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin* or *Daphnis and Chloé* with Abbado; the terror of playing *Tod und Verklärung* with Solti; the challenge of playing period instruments in Beethoven's *Eroica* with Norrington; the privilege of performing Smetana's *Má Vlast* with Libor Pesek at the Prague Spring Festival; the ecstatic charge of playing under Dudamel; the exhilaration of playing Shostakovich with Petrenko or Rostropovich; the precision of Maazel's stick technique; the satisfaction of playing Vaughan Williams or Elgar with Tod Handley; the wonder of playing Sibelius with Rattle; and the experience of working with Sir Neville Marriner, Sir Charles Mackerras or Neeme Järvi in the recording studio. This is just a handful of key memories. All these conductors had/have their own style, character, and rehearsal technique.

What is often tricky in some orchestras is knowing when to start notes where orchestras have their own style and have got used to playing behind the beat. If an orchestra plays behind the beat, they still manage to play together but it can be very difficult for a new player to know what is going on. Often it is a question of following the body language of the leader or oboe or flute but for a guest conductor this can be very confusing. Happily, this doesn't seem to happen quite as much these days, but budding conductors should know that professional orchestras do not take kindly to being told how to play (after all, they have been doing it a lot longer than most of you) and if they have a style, particularly of playing behind the beat, there is little a guest can do by pointing this out. Work with their style and gradually mould it. Then if they like you, you may have them playing on the beat in no time!

Of course, clarity is not always desirable in a conductor and some conductors seem to have developed styles that seek to disguise the alchemy of conducting. Think of Gergiev's wobbly hands or Rostdyestvensky's eyebrow movements. Some at one time or another have limiting physical difficulties. I remember Sir Charles Mackerras's difficulties after shoulder surgery or Prince Francesco D'Avalos, who hired the Philharmonia Orchestra regularly to record Martucci. During one recording session, this conductor required cortisone injections to free up his shoulder and he was clearly in pain. Clarity may be something desirable in front of an orchestra, but if you are too clear in the opera house, the orchestra will play on the beat but the chorus will be a little behind the orchestra (simply because of the distance) and soloists might even be behind that, unless they are very good. So with or without monitor screens in opera houses, the conductor's job is to understand this and be ahead of the chorus enough that they sing in time, but not too far ahead of the orchestra (or they will be ahead of everyone else). Whoever you have in front of you, the orchestral player's job is to play together as a team. Even if a conductor is trying to bamboozle you or camouflage what they are doing, there is normally something rhythmic about what they are doing which should help (with Rostdyestvensky it could indeed be an eyebrow movement or a glint in his eye!)

One way of encouraging orchestras to play together is to make it clear you are breathing with them. This is essential in passages such as the end of Strauss's *Four Last Songs* where the long phrases seem to go on for an eternity and all wind players will be looking forward to the next breath. Make allowances for the orchestra's breaths in your performance and do not attempt to get them to shorten the gaps or it will adversely affect ensemble. Other slow sustained passages that spring to mind where breathing with the orchestra is essential, are the *Prelude* to Wagner's Parsifal, the *Prelude* of Elgar's Dream of Gerontius (also essential to talk about blend with the clarinets, horns, and violas) and the slow movement of Beethoven *Symphony No.9*.

## Conducting Style

There are pretty good guidelines these days on what is required in a beat and how to conduct. Percussionists and brass players tend to favour conductors with a clear 'click' to the beat as they often have to coordinate a percussive sound or articulate a chord together at a precise moment. Strings and wind can often ease their way in without a definite start to the sound (though oboes and bassoons might struggle with this), however the whole orchestra needs to play together, particularly in acoustics where distance is a problem like the Royal Albert Hall in London. In such venues, if the orchestra can't rely on the conductor anticipating a piano soloist in a Concerto, it is critical for the orchestral players to be able to see the soloist's hands themselves.

Addressing the general style of conducting and what it conveys, I have learnt that the movement of the hands/arms should be continuous and fluid to show the progress from beat to beat and hence the tempo. For some types of music (particularly contemporary music and for accents), a 'click' can also be very useful, but if the beat stops with each click, the tempo is more difficult to convey. This might also explain why some conductors find doing an *accelerando* or *rallentando* so difficult. Such timekeepers are not very helpful conductors. Click or no click, still most important is having a defined lowest point to each beat (not below the music stand!) and fluid enough movement between each beat that there is a clear sense of tempo.

## Tuning

In professional orchestras, a conductor might gently suggest a group try a passage on their own after the rehearsal if the tuning is not optimal. Don't make an issue of this in front of the orchestra! Wind players hate to be embarrassed in front of colleagues. There are lots of stories of conductors embarrassing individuals in wind sections by pointing up or down with their fingers. In one famous story, a conductor pointed to the third flute and said "higher" to which greeting the player responded, "Oh hiya!" Often, it's enough to repeat the section and get players to listen in a different context or dynamic rather than criticise individuals. Rarely with professional orchestras will it be necessary to tune a chord note by note or section by section.

In younger groups building up a wind/brass chord may be more appropriate. This can be down to the instruments themselves simply not playing very well in tune, poor reed choice, or inadequate technique. In my experience in professional orchestras, it is often the second players who are crucial determinants of where the pitch of the group sits. You may think that building a chord up from the bottom could be effective but often the issue might be the 2nd bassoonist's lowest note is flat; the 1st might be sharp in the tenor range; the 2nd clarinet at the bottom of the clarinet (E or F for instance) might be flat; the 1st in the clarino range (written B<sup>''</sup> to C<sup>'''</sup>) might be sharp (or if they are playing *forte*, possibly flat!); the 2nd oboe on the lowest notes might be flat; the 1st oboe will insist (as the guardian of tuning!) that they are beyond reproach (don't believe them!); the 2nd flute is often pretty reliable (having given up the pretence of wanting to be a soloist); and the 1st flute (always an aspiring soloist) just wants to be heard to shine, and so might play about a quarter tone sharp all the time.

Being aware of these undercurrents is essential for a budding conductor but being drawn into trying to tune a chord with an experienced orchestra can be fraught with difficulty. Either things will magically improve, or the conductor's ears or transposition will come under scrutiny and you might be found out by a well-placed question. Sometimes such basic issues can even infect the finest professional orchestras. Listen for example to Karajan's recordings with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra from the 1970s (with flute and strings playing in unison?), the London Philharmonic Orchestra from the late 1980s/ early 1990s, or some of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra's Beethoven recordings with Rattle. No names of players mentioned!

I well remember a tour of Germany with the London Symphony Orchestra in the 1980s when their usual second flute Martin Parry wasn't there. Martin was so reliable as a guardian of tuning in the then London Symphony Orchestra that they had problems when he wasn't playing. In the Philharmonia during the same years, the pitch in the wind seemed to start a little above 440hz and was allowed to rise a bit. This approach also seemed to work. At the time, I simply made a note of the different barrel length adjustments needed to play in tune with each band.

Perilous passages for tuning are the opening and ending of Mendelssohn's *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the ending of Rimsky Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. If you have difficulties with a professional band getting this in tune, suggest first that they play it a more comfortable dynamic before attempting the written dynamic. You can often then fix tuning imbalances by identifying differences in dynamic (or relative dynamic). Then you might suggest that certain pitches could be

a little louder to fix things (or if you have noticed someone is really out of tune, you can have a quiet word after the rehearsal to avoid making it an issue in front of the orchestra). With a younger orchestra it may be necessary to build up the chord. In which case start with the most reliably in tune fifth and work outwards, rather than starting with the bass and working upwards.

Be sensitive to issues of tuning. In different halls and temperatures tuning can be very tricky. On tour in Germany with a 440hz Orchestra (probably post-Brexit a thing of the past but who knows?), make sure the tuning of pianos is sympathetic. If the piano is at 444hz, many of the wind players might need to make major adjustments (different reeds, crooks, headjoints or even instruments) just to play in tune.

## Issues of style

There are tell-tale signs of whether a conductor has prepared his scores. Not being aware of a group held on a chord at a pause before the next upbeat shows the conductor hasn't really thought when to bring off the held chord or how that relates to the next passage. Interpreting ornaments is also fraught with difficulties. Some conductors are seen as period specialists but actually know very little about ornamentation and sources. It is not enough (as one very well-known conductor did) when asked about the style of appoggiaturas in Mozart to refer to a recording of Harnoncourt and not answer the question. In other words, a recorded legacy is not evidence of knowledge of style, only of a lazy conductor. Read your Leopold Mozart, Quantz, Turk etc.

These days in conducting Classical music, it is important to understand the basics of the style (the hierarchy of the bar, bowing style for strings, articulation as an analogy for classical rhetoric, and classical phrasing). There are great books these days on HIP (Historically Informed Performance). If you end up working with professionals, you will at some point come across a very informed player who knows more about style than you, so if you're keen on the Fritz Steinbach parts of Brahms symphonies, show that you have researched them. If you don't know about the use of wedge *staccato* in Beethoven symphonies in Jonathan del Mar's editions, don't guess, find out about them. Similarly, if you're booked for a Viennese concert, listen to Viennese orchestras playing waltzes so that you can communicate an understanding of Viennese style. There will almost always be a young player or players who are not informed about some aspect of style, or who may never have played a piece before.

## Blend in a wind section

In understanding the role blend and colour have within a wind section, an appreciation of how sections of music relate to each other and how appropriate tonal variation is in achieving this is essential. A passage like the opening of the second movement of Brahms *Violin Concerto* relies on the balance and blend of the wind chords, and the quality of the principal oboe's melody. It will also be essential to breath together in this movement. For continuity issues an example is the finale of Brahms *Symphony No.4* which is a set of variations where continuity is required to keep the music flowing. If the first flute is given so much freedom in their solo passage of the 3/2 section, that, by

lengthening every appoggiatura and overdoing the vibrato and romanticism in each phrase, the tempo effectively stops, the poor clarinet variation which follows can appear unduly cool and banal in comparison, and continuity is harder to achieve. Here a conductor has to rein in the flute's luscious appoggiatura just to keep a semblance of tempo going. Similarly in Kodaly's *Dances of Galanta*, if the clarinetist gets slower and slower in their *Verbunkos* melody, when the strings come in again and the tempo takes off, it becomes all too obvious that the clarinetist has been allowed to be indulgent in slowing the tempo down. It's a conductor's job to keep tempos moving. If a tempo seemed on the slow side, the former Principal Flute of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Colin Chambers, would openly ask, 'Is this your rehearsal tempo?!'

Often a passage of music seems to require less or no vibrato from either flute, oboe or strings. I well remember the impact of hearing Elgar's *Symphony No.1* played by the South German Radio Orchestra under Roger Norrington at the Proms a few years ago and being struck that the absence of vibrato in the strings made melodic lines cleaner and textures clearer. Playing with less vibrato might also be appropriate where Brahms distinguishes between *dolce* (let the music speak for itself) and *espressivo* (imbue the music with something) – compare for instance the first and second subjects (opening and letter B) in the third movement of his first symphony. Brahms rarely marked *dolce ed espressivo*, though the end of the slow movement in the fourth symphony is marked *dolce ma espressivo* in the clarinet. In movement 2 (fig C) of the third symphony, the second subject is a wonderful 8ve unison passage for clarinet and bassoon marked *espressivo dolce*. It is as if Brahms wants both colours to play as one here and it is worth encouraging both players to match each other's sound to produce this effect. When it works, this passage is one of Brahms' tingle-factor moments! Don't be afraid to experiment with this particularly if the flute or oboe player has a wide and unvaried vibrato.

Blend between clarinet (generally not much vibrato these days) and flute, oboe or bassoon for whom vibrato is often a crucial part of their expressive equipment requires delicate handling. I often cite the differences of wind colour in London orchestras in the 1970s and 80s. During the 80s, the wide, dark, Germanic sounding oboe of John Anderson was paired with the warm, dark English clarinet sound of Colin Bradbury (an ex-teacher of mine) in the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Later when John moved to the Philharmonia section, his sound was matched more successfully by the more focussed but equally colourful clarinet of John McCaw. Similarly in the London Symphony Orchestra during the 80s, the focused English oboe sound of Tony Camden contrasted and complemented Jack Brymer's warm and colourful Boosey and Hawkes 1010 clarinet. This suggests there might be an ideal blend of oboe and clarinet sounds worth aiming for in a wind section. Whatever their tonal balance, conductors should be aware that blend between instruments in some registers can be tricky. For example, after the long clarinet solo in Shostakovich's *Symphony No.9, Moderato* movement, there is a long sustained and high passage where oboe and clarinet have to play in unison. Here it is important that the oboe doesn't use too much vibrato and that the two players work together to blend their sounds and fix any tuning issues.

## What orchestral players hate

- Conductors using final rehearsals or any rehearsals just for their own needs and not thinking about what the musicians need to rehearse.
- Conductors who needlessly use all of the final rehearsal to play everything through without considering the cumulative physical impact on players before a concert. This applies mostly to projects where the music is well rehearsed and there has been adequate rehearsal time. Obviously for on-the-day concerts with just one three hour rehearsal, use all of the time sensibly!
- Conductors who don't explain short and long beats in 5/8, 7/8, or tempo changes in the first rehearsal. Knowing what to expect from a conductor in the first rehearsal of an unfamiliar piece will make reading it for the first time much easier for everyone. In contemporary pieces, musicians will be reassured if you give them as much information as you can to help them read and perform the music.
- Martinets – conductors from the George Szell School of Conducting Etiquette, who attempt to produce results by threatening musicians. Happily, there are fewer of these around these days (though there are still some difficult personalities) and they generally don't have the right to 'hire and fire', but most musicians can tell stories of unpleasant individuals they have encountered on the podium.
- Conductors whose upbeat bears no relation to the tempo...