

CLARINET EMOUCHURE REPAIRS: A SAGA OF CRUMPLED CHINS, COLLAPSED JAWS AND BUCKLED LIPS

by Ruth Bonetti

In the Friday afternoon graveyard lesson slot, the new clarinet teacher, Mr. Crotchet, cast an evil eye over Amanda's chin. He pronounced a campaign on her embouchure.

She staggered away, bewildered by talk of collapsed chins, tight jaws and buckled lips. After all, her orthodontist hadn't noticed them during two years' tortured appointments.

Being the lead clarinetist and star pupil, Amanda struggled to point her chin during the first of her two practices that week. Then gave up. It seemed impossible -- and, indeed it was, for her bottom lip was securely pinned inside her mouth by her even, orthodontist-shaped bottom teeth and further clamped down by mouthpiece and reed.

Besides, why bother? When she played *The Entertainer* at last term's concert did a crumpled chin stop the audience applause?

Next lesson, Mr. Crotchet was not impressed. His eye-rolling and sighs were agony for both student and teacher as weeks dragged into months on a rigid diet of long notes and slow scales. After agony developed into aggro, Amanda escaped onto a baritone sax. Far more cool. Besides, Mr. Crotchet was not obsessed about saxophone embouchures, or maybe he was more engrossed in planning his new career in IT.

By the time the replacement teacher, Ms. Quaver, took over, most of the lead clarinetists were lost to the netball team. Looking for scope through old band photos, she discovered Amanda in a lead clarinet chair. She decided to coerce Amanda back onto her first -- and preferred -- instrument if she would just adjust that baritone embouchure.

Ms. Quaver had herself endured the ordeal of embouchure-fixing not so long ago at music college. She remembered that feeling of incomprehensible fog in trying to change a habit she could not really see. She knew that fixing an embouchure must be the worst phase of insecurity a clarinet student ever faces. She sympathised that students felt threatened by change.

So Ms. Quaver planned her battle tactics. She warmed up her prey with introductory getting-to-know-you-isn't-this-fun lessons, playing duets. Which enabled her to show off her rounded warm tone. There had to be good reasons why Amanda would play better if she changed her embouchure.

"Amanda," she begins her onslaught conversationally. "Do you happen to suffer from sore lips? Inside the bottom lip especially?" Amanda does, indeed.

"Aha. I'm not surprised." Nodding sagely.

Thinks: now I'll compare chins, like those weight-loss advertisements which show photographs of before-and-after. Ms.Q. waves an aural carrot before Amanda's ears.

She demonstrates a phrase, played with a grotesque, flabby chin. Asks: How does this sound? Flat? Woozy?

Then Ms. Quaver plays the same phrase with her best pointy, stretched chin.

"Which sound and tuning do you prefer?" she asks casually. She rests her case.

Before Amanda has time to sense her tactics or to resist, Ms. Quaver throws several everyday, natural ideas at her to locate those crucial 'stretch' muscles:

"Can you whistle?" Amanda can't. "Never mind. Forget that one."

She produces a thick shake straw (courtesy of Macca's) from her bag. "Imagine you're drinking through this." (Sometimes this works, but many purse and pucker their lips to drink.) Amanda is one of the latter.

Never mind. Let's try another tack. Ms. Quaver produces a bubble pipe from her bag, instructs Amanda to blow bubbles. Amanda squirms. This is too juvenile.

"Okay, try this one. Imagine how you'd blow a note across a bottle." Amanda waits for a beer bottle to appear, is disappointed.

"Or have you ever played a note on a flute or trumpet?" Amanda hasn't.

She has just realised that she is emmeshed in the dreaded Embouchure Bivouac.

Thinks longingly of her bari sax. Looks at the clock.

But Ms. Quaver retrieves her interest with her *pièce de résistance*. She removes her clarinet barrel and blows an unashamedly loud raspberry through it.

"Here, you blow on the other end, so we don't share germs. Now you can tell your mother you blew raspberries at your new teacher, hee hee."

That certainly produced good results. But Ms. Quaver has even more tricks to reinforce her advantage.

"Okay, let's try saying 'oo' or 'er' – or 'dude'" (Ms. Quaver prides herself on being cool.) "Hey, say 'cool.'"

Amanda can't resist smiling at the poor teacher's misguided efforts at hip jargon.

Ms. Quaver pounces. "See!" (triumphantly) "That's great! Your chin is beautifully stretched. A smile gives you a perfect pointy chin! Easy, isn't it? No, just smile. If you overdo it with a grin, the air escapes out the corners of your lips. Clarinetists have to be positive, fun people. Heh, heh."

Ms. Quaver reaches for the practice notebook to draw profile portraits of her 'before' and a preferred 'after' chin. They discuss which idea 'clicks' for Amanda so she feels the difference between a stretched chin and a collapsed one.

Knowing that anything seen is easier to remember and absorb, she busily sets up two mirrors at right angles. Wishes again she could afford a video camera.

She writes a message in the notebook, hoping to enlist parent reinforcement during the week until next lesson. And reminds herself to telephone the mother warning that Amanda will need support. All students feel insecure if they're not sure what to do.

The bell rings, but she tries one last desperate attempt to fix an impression clear enough to last for a week. "Listen, Amanda, and watch my chin while I play pitch-bends. D'you hear how the pitch sags when my chin does? You can rescue it with your smile muscles. You try. Exaggerate with really gross pitch-bends, have fun with them. Good luck!"

As Amanda throws her clarinet in the case, still drippy, and escapes to the relative safety of a History class, Ms. Quaver sighs.

I didn't have time to tell her about how to make a habit of it all. Never mind, we'll do that next lesson.

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Byline

About Ruth Bonetti

Ruth Bonetti writes a complimentary fortnightly E-Zine for teachers: *Music Educators' Energiser* and the weekly *MusoMotivator* (nominal charge). Those interested to receive this can sign up at <http://ruthbonetti.com> or by emailing ruth@ruthbonetti.com

Her recent books *Confident Music Performance; Fix the fear of facing an audience* and *Practice is a Dirty Word; How to clean up your act* (Words and Music) are available at www.RuthBonetti.com

She compiled the method *Enjoy Playing the Clarinet* (Oxford University Press) and was Editorial Consultant for the AMEB Clarinet Grade.

Ruth's music and speaking career, helping musicians and speakers to perform with confidence, has taken her around Australia, Europe (speaking German, French and Swedish) and the United States, where her seminars were repeated by popular demand, and she was invited to return the next year.

Her presentation topics include:

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PO Box 422 The Gap Queensland 4061 Australia

Phone: +61 7 3300 2286

Mobile/cell phone: (61) (0)411 782 404 Fax. +61 7 3300 5786

ruth@ruthbonetti.com

www.RuthBonetti.com

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