"Instant Bassoon Player – Just Add Water!"

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What are the Foundations of Successful Bassoonists?

- Success in bassoon playing is much like a stool with three legs:
  - A properly adjusted reed
  - A bassoon and bocal that are in good working order
  - Accurate fingering charts and appropriate pedagogical materials geared towards the current abilities of the students
- If one of these "legs" are taken away, bassoon playing becomes remarkably difficult.
- If two are taken away, it is almost impossible to build the most basic skills on the instrument.
- If none of these are present, the chances of success on the bassoon are slim to none.
- Sadly, in my nineteen years as a collegiate teacher, the vast majority of students that I have encountered fall into the last two categories where the odds are truly stacked against them.
- The purpose of this clinic is to demonstrate that ***all*** music teachers can successfully introduce the bassoon to beginning students, provided that the three above criteria are present.
- Starting bassoonists can be fun, and it doesn't have to be scary! Bassoonists add much depth to the sound of the concert band, and are an integral part of the wind section of any orchestra.
- Additionally, students that play the bassoon over the course of their school career potentially have the opportunity to participate in select ensembles that can have a very powerful impact on their development, regardless of whether or not they want to major in music.
- Let's get started!!!!!!! Volunteers please!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Embouchure Formation

- Having students whistle, or attempt to whistle, is an excellent way of forming the basic embouchure for the bassoon.
- Hooded sweatshirt/drawstring purse example also works well.
- Pull the corners of the mouth towards the center of the face, making the opening as round/oval as possible. The jaw will be slightly dropped.

- The goal of the bassoon embouchure is to gently hold the reed with equal pressure from all sides of the mouth, not just "north and south" (see Example 1).
- Equal pressure from all sides of the mouth allows the reed opening to be at its maximum, which is the ideal for the majority of bassoon playing.

Crowing the Reed

- To prepare a bassoon reed, immerse the entire reed in water, remove, and place on a surface for 1-2 minutes. This method is more effective than soaking the entire reed in water for several minutes, and actually prepares the reed for performance in a shorter amount of time.
- Insert the soaked reed so that the red part of the lips almost touches the first wire.
- Place the tip of the tongue on the tip of the reed, then, release the tongue letting air into the reed.
- If the reed is properly soaked and adjusted, a mix of three frequencies will occur producing a single pitch (see Example 2 - Tonal Spectrum Diagram). Most of these single pitches range from an Eb to an F.
- These frequencies can be isolated by first blowing a slow air stream and then slowing increasing it. The longer that these three frequencies last with a fast air stream, the more balanced the reed is.
- For the vast majority of bassoon playing, all three frequencies are desired. The exceptions are the extreme low and high registers of the instrument.
- If one frequency dominates the reed's crow, that can lead to specific methods of adjustment, or, using that reed for specific types of repertoire (ex. *Rite of Spring* – Stravinsky vs. *Symphony No. 6* – Tchaikovsky).
- Almost all embouchure issues are due to reeds that are poorly made/adjusted, which means that the facial muscles must compensate for any deficiencies in the reed. In most cases, this happens where bassoon reeds are too thick and/or the aperture is too open.
- If the student can only produce a high pitch on the bassoon reed, then either the bassoon reed is poorly adjusted, or the embouchure is too linear in design.
- Once the student can produce a crow with all three partials, have them sustain that crow for several seconds.
- Once they can sustain the crow, have them move the reed back and forth in the mouth but still sustain the crow. This will show them how relaxed their embouchure needs to be.

Exercises on the Reed and Bocal

- Insert the reed on the bocal and have the student make a sound. It will be some type of a "B" or "C" on top of the bass clef (see Example 3).
- Once they can perform this skill, have them move the reed and bocal back and forth as they did with the reed alone.

- This is a wonderful opportunity to introduce articulation concepts on the bassoon without actually holding the instrument.
- For the vast majority of tonguing on the instrument, articulation is done on the tip of the reed just behind the tip of the tongue.
- "One taste bud on the reed!" Many beginning students use way too much tongue tissue to articulate, which will eventually compromise their tonguing speed and variety of articulation styles.
- Have the student demonstrate legato, staccato, and marcato styles. It is also very important to have them not let anything get in the way of their air (see Example 4).
    - When introducing staccato to the student, be sure that they are not ending the note by placing the tongue against the tip of the reed. The tone should stop by stopping the air with proper abdominal support.
    - The bassoon is capable of producing the shortest staccato of almost any wind instrument (think *Sorcerer's Apprentice*), so care must be taken when playing detached that the sound contains more tongue than tone.
- Once they can accurately demonstrate all of these skills, it is time for the bassoon!
- Habits to avoid – "breath" tonguing, anchor tonguing, excessive jaw movement.
- Elements of a fast single tongue: fast air, straight tongue, using tip of the tongue.

Assembly

- Proper position of wing/tenor joint
- Proper position of long joint
- Linkage between long joint and bell – low Bb key
- Insertion, care and transportation of bocal out of the case.
    - Do not put the bocal tip in the wing joint!!!!!!
    - Transport the bocal with the tip in the bell!!!!!
    - Protect the tip!!!!!!
    - A great bocal can improve even the most modest bassoon, so it is important to protect the bocal and keep it clean!

Posture (seated)

- Seat strap versus neck strap
- Different designs of seat strap - hook, cup, others
- Use of crutch in right hand – when and when not to use
- Seat strap is placed at the front quarter of the chair
- Back is supported by the back of the chair – place your hips as far back as possible
- Feet flat on the floor
- Instrument is across the body forming half of an "X"
- Always bring the bassoon to you, not you to the bassoon
- Bassoon is at proper height when the reed touches the space between the player's chin and lower lip as they are looking straight ahead.

- The player should be looking slightly downward at the instrument when the meet the reed.

Beginning Sounds

- Begin with second space C in the bass clef, and gradually introduce the pitches D, E and open F. If the first C is flat, have them firm up the embouchure a bit (see Example 5).
- Gradually slurring one note at a time and then expanding these intervals allows the students to gradually learn the spacing between each tone hole as well as get used to sealing a tone hole with their fingers.
- Using the "fleshiest" part of the fingers is best to seal the tone holes as opposed to coming at the tone hole from a perpendicular angle or drifting towards the top joint of the fingers (this is mostly seen in students that have big hands).
- Remember, this is an 8 foot tube – have them take in some air!
- Breathing concepts – David McGill – *Sound in Motion*
- Once those pitches are mastered, extend the range downward to low F just below the bass clef – C-Bb-C / C-Bb-A-Bb-C / C-Bb-A-G-A-Bb-C / C-Bb-A-G-F-G-A-Bb-C (see Example 6).
- Having quality pedagogical material is CRITICAL to the success of every bassoon student!
- The best book for introducing the bassoon is the *Method for Bassoon* by Julius Weissenborn.

Tuning/Intonation

- Producing a characteristic sound on the bassoon with all of the previously mentioned skills is fundamental for developing intonation on the bassoon.
- In most cases, issues of intonation are really tonal issues in disguise (Eugene Corporon)
- Assuming that the embouchure, reed, bocal, and bassoon are all in working order, intonation is primarily adjusted by changing the size of the vowel inside of the mouth which in turn changes the size of the oral cavity. This will also slightly change the aperture of the reed, which is why a properly made and adjusted reed is critical on the bassoon.
- Moving the bocal does nothing for the intonation of the instrument.
- The intonation tendencies of the bassoon are actually quite predictable, and with practice and a tuner can be learned very efficiently. Long tones with a tuner are critical to success in this area.
- Pedal Bb to F below bass clef: Sharp ("Ah" vowel) most open reed aperture (see Example 7)
    - Taking in less reed can help with intonation as well as extremes in volume and rapid articulation. Since the very sides of the reed are more exposed, the sound will be more "reedy" but much easier to manipulate.
- Low F to A on top of bass clef: reasonably stable with a few exceptions noted below (see Example 8)

    - Second space C# - can be flat if the reed is too long
    - Third space E – can be flat if the reed is too long
    - Fourth line (open) F – tends to be bright and sharp
- A on top of bass clef to second ledger line F: Flat ("Eee" vowel) (See Example 9)
    - This register of the bassoon is the most resonant – the vast majority of the major orchestral excerpts for the bassoon are found here.
    - You will also notice that the instrument becomes more resistant beginning with A on top of the bass clef. Therefore, when playing a passage that utilizes multiple registers of the bassoon, you will need to produce a subtle crescendo for an even sonority.
    - The C# just above the bass clef is sharp when using the proper fingering. The player will need to switch to an "Ah" vowel to voice this pitch a bit lower.
    - E and F above the bass clef are very resistant, and in some cases a harmonic can occur if there is not enough support for those notes. In those cases, slightly decreasing the aperture of the reed will most often fix this problem.
- Second ledger line F# to third space C# (treble clef) – Sharp ("Ah" vowel with increased abdominal support) (see Example 10)
    - The upper register of the bassoon is notorious for having students close the aperture of the reed to facilitate the upper register. While closing the aperture does make the high notes speak a bit easier, tone and intonation are vastly compromised. Finding a balance between abdominal support and embouchure support is key here.
- High D and above: Flat (can close the aperture of the reed) (see Example 11)
- If the overall pitch of the instrument is flat or sharp with these adjustments, finding a shorter or longer bocal will be the best solution.

Tone Production /Vibrato

- Development of a quality "straight" tone is key to a student's success
- Use of long tones with a tuner
- Progressive vibrato exercises (see Example 12)

Advanced Techniques:

Flicking/Venting

- Use of the octave (flick,vent) keys is critical to mastery of the bassoon!
- Use on a, b-flat, b, c and sometimes on d (see Example 13)
    - D can be tongued without the need of a vent key, so only vent the D when slurring up or down to that pitch
- These keys are used when these notes are tongued, slurred up to, or slurred down to
- Exception – when these pitches are approached from a 1/2 hole note, no venting is necessary

- Thumb motion is fluid with specificity to the particular key – the note will not change octaves when the left thumb leaves the whisper key.
- Practice tongued and slurred octaves (see sheet)
- When ascending to the upper octave, changing the vowel to an "Eee" will help with these notes are vented.
- Think about directing your air "through" the interval rather than "to" the interval.
- Be sure that the student completely opens the hole on the wing joint, rather than touching or slightly opening the key.
- When introducing these pitches, present these keys as part of the fingering, rather than something that needs to be added.
- This technique is presented very well in the Weissenborn text, edited by Douglas Spaniol. Every note that requires venting is labeled in this text.
- When you have students approach this technique, insist that they use it!!!!!!!

Specific Technical Issues (see Example 14)

- Use of 1/2 hole
- Resonance key on fourth space G
- Resonance key on e^1 and above
- Fingering for Eb

Instrument Selection

- Moosmann – M20, M22, M24
- Nobel
- Renard 41, 222, 220, 240
- Used instruments:
- Charles Double Reed Company
- Forrests Music
- Kirker Bassoon Repair
- Midwest Musical Imports
- Miller Marketing

Bocal Selection

- Fox 3/Belll/Heckel/Moosmann/Puchner/etc. 2 are the same length – A = 440
- As the numbers go up or down, add/subtract 2 cycles. Ex: Fox 2 – A=442
- When finding a bocal for an instrument, try a bocal that plays 442 as a starting point (ex. Fox 2 or a Heckel 1). If the student, horn or reed is playing a bit flat it will correct the problem.

Instrument Care

- BUY A BOCAL BRUSH
- Wing joint and boot joint swabs
- Paint brush
- Humidifier
- Vacuum case once a month – computer keyboard vacuum works very well
    - If your bassoon starts to develop leaks in the low register, this is often due to a build-up of dust in the case.
- Pivot screws – bicycle grease
- Long screws – lightweight oil
- Keep the instrument in the case!
- When possible, have the instrument serviced on an annual basis

Bocal Care

- Regular use of a bocal brush
- Take care of the bocal tip and hole in the notch
- Do not clean out the hole in the notch!!!
- Do not put the bocal tip in the wing joint!!!
- Transport the bocal with the tip in the bell!!

Reeds

- Proper care and storage – a sturdy box that will allow the reeds to completely dry.
- Altoids box with holes for ventilation lined with a paper towel works very well.
- Whenever possible, rotate your reeds.
- Avoid touching the blades with the fingers
- Tools needed for basic adjustments: sandpaper, plaque, pliers, files (Swiss cut or diamond) and/or a reed knife
- A complete discussion of reed adjustments could take well over one hour in and of itself! For those purposes, I highly recommend Barry Stees' website (www.steesbassoon.com) where he has an excellent troubleshooting guide for reed making.

Random Thoughts and Observations

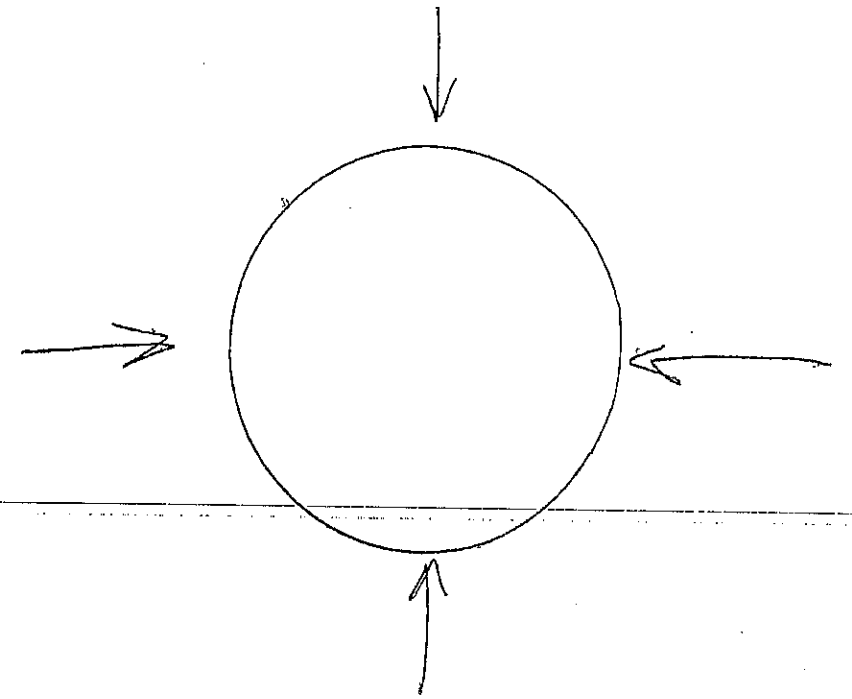
- Consider starting a cd library for every instrument – modeling
- Take advantage of articles and resources now online
    - Music and the Bassoon – Kristen Wolfe Jensen – U. of Texas
- Take advantage of resources in your area – bassoon teachers are lonely!! ☺

- A small investment of time can pay huge dividends for your ensemble

Great Resources for Bassoon Players

- Barrick Stees – Co-principal Bassoon, Cleveland Orchestra
- Charles Double Reeds – instruments, great reeds!
- Clark Double Reeds – great reeds!
- Forrests Music – instruments, reeds, equipment
- Fox Products - "Let's Play Bassoon" fingering chart!
- Midwest Musical Imports – instruments, great reeds!
- Miller Marketing – instruments, great reeds!
- West Double Reeds – great reeds!
- Vidger Bassoon Reeds – great reeds!

Example 1



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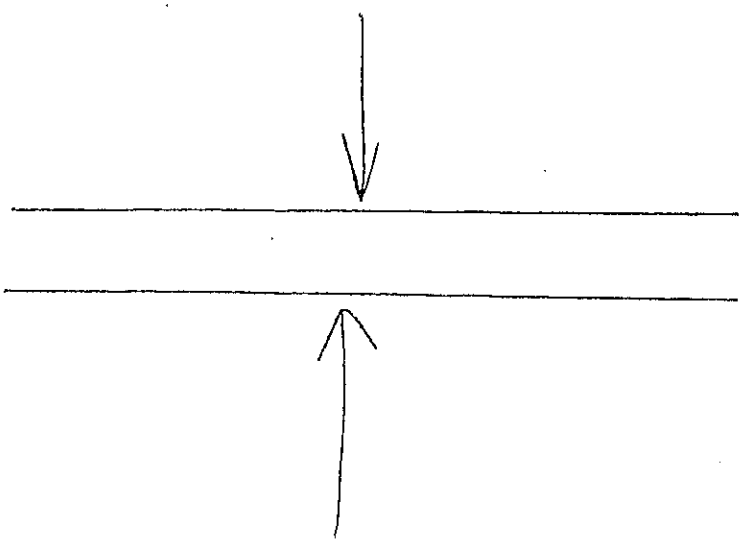
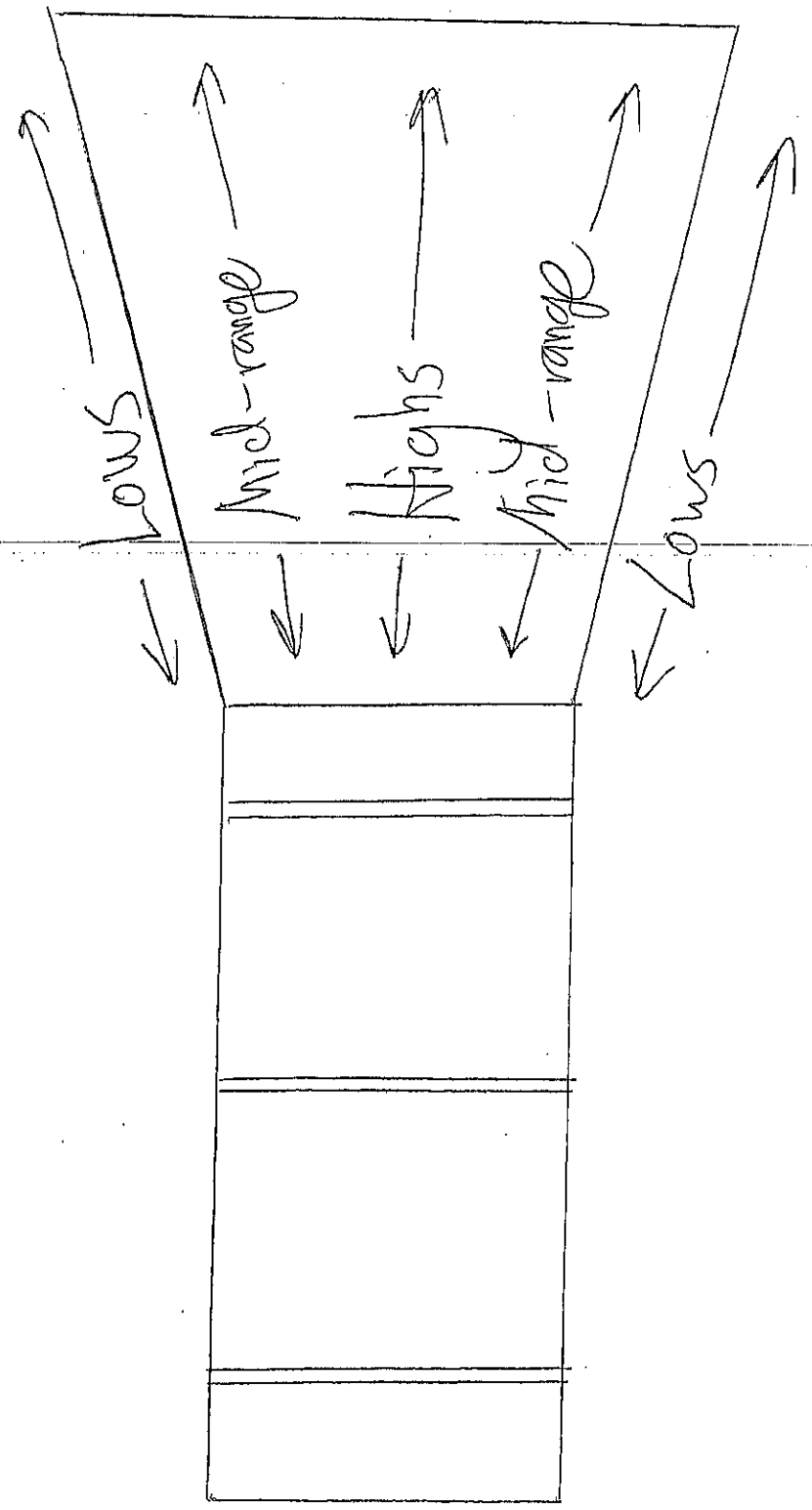
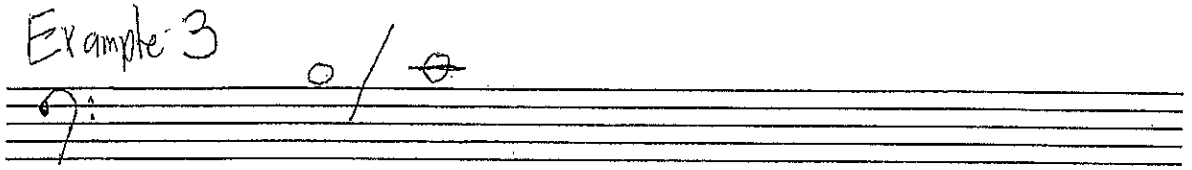


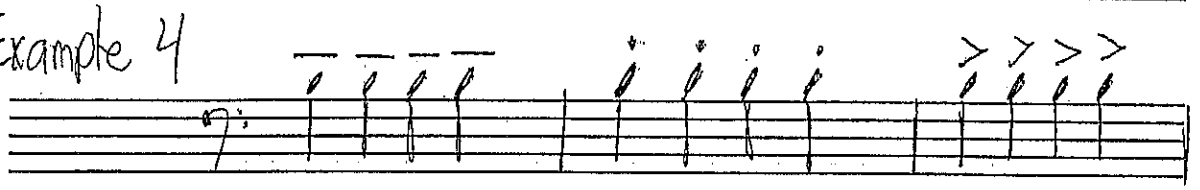
Example 2



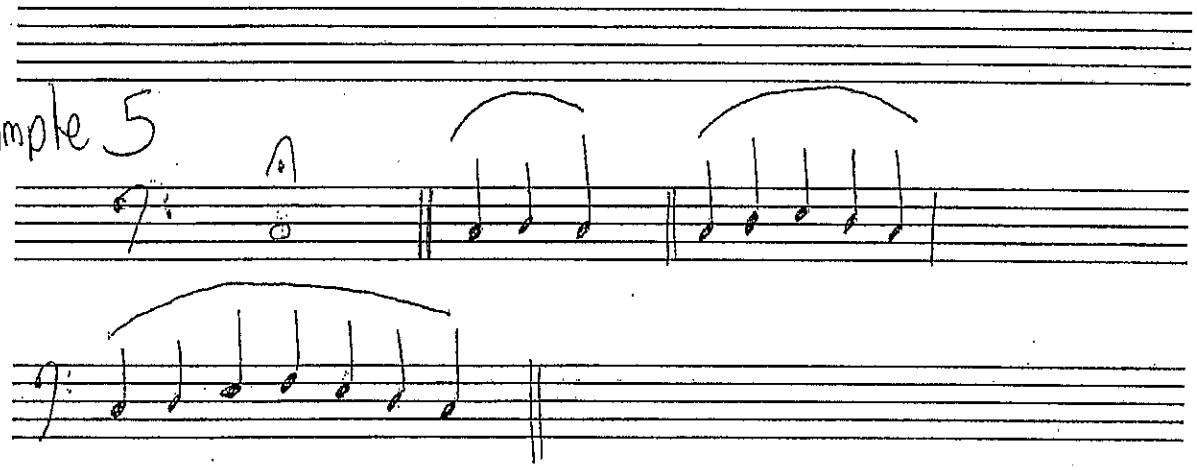
Example 3



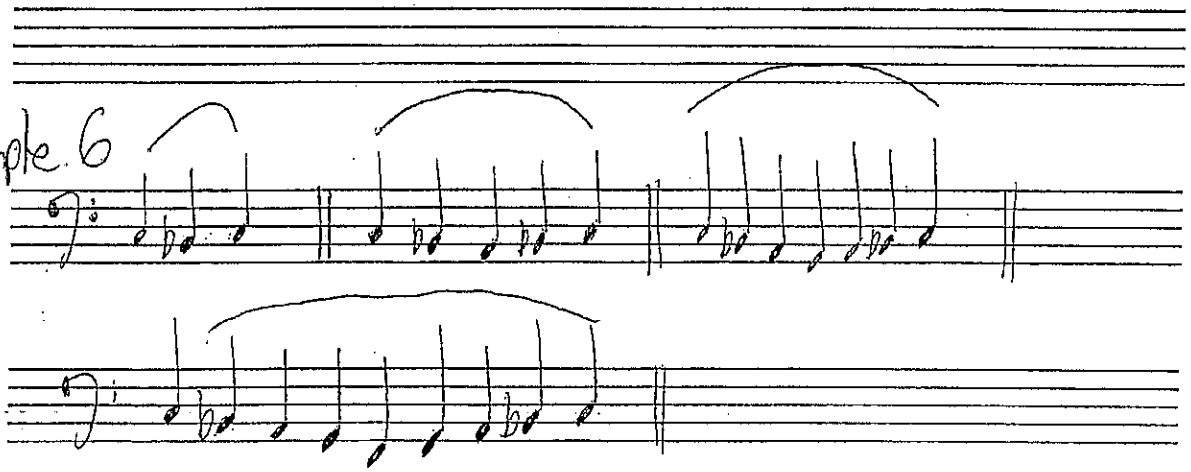
Example 4



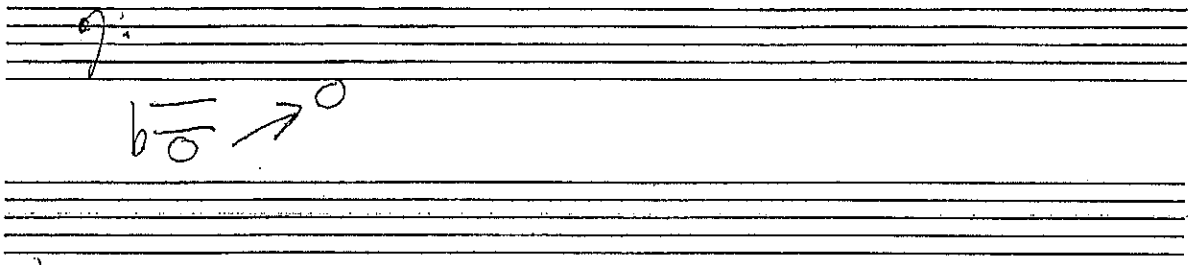
Example 5



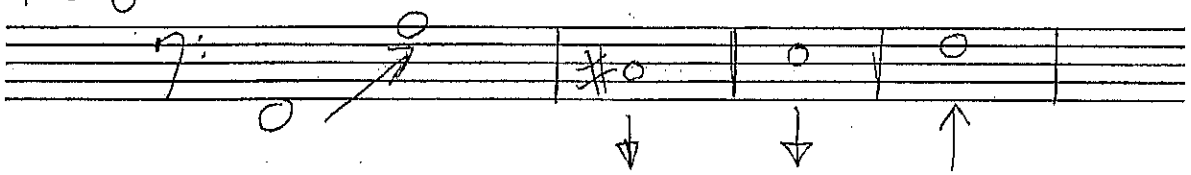
Example 6



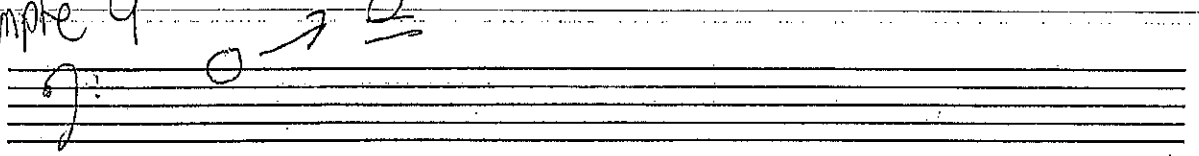
Example 7



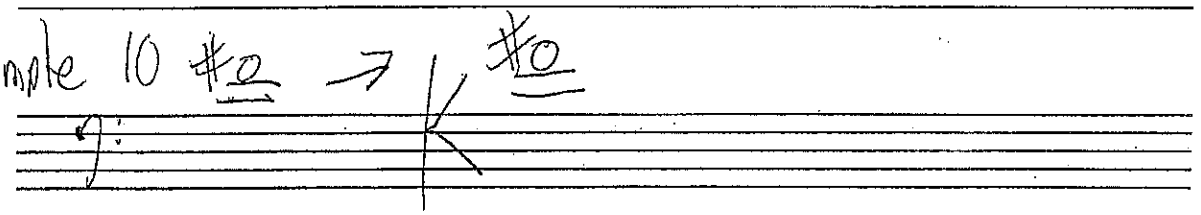
Example 8



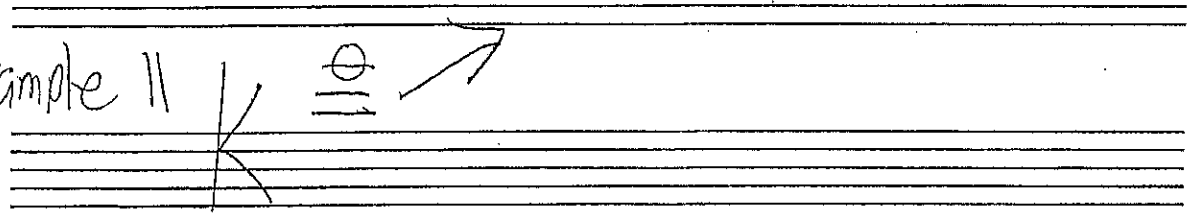
Example 9



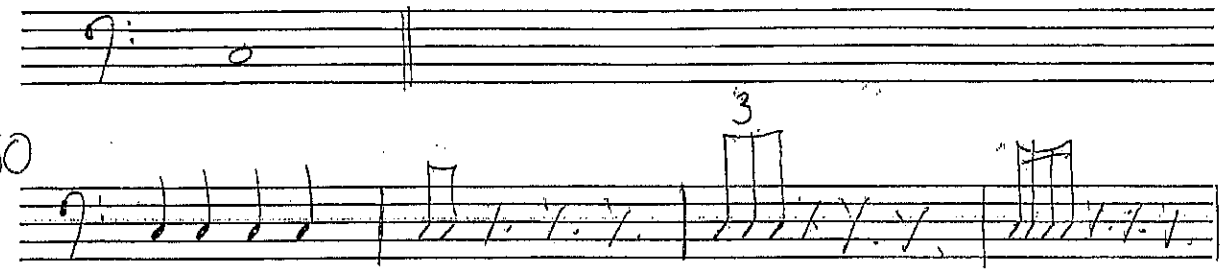
Example 10



Example 11



Example 12 "No"



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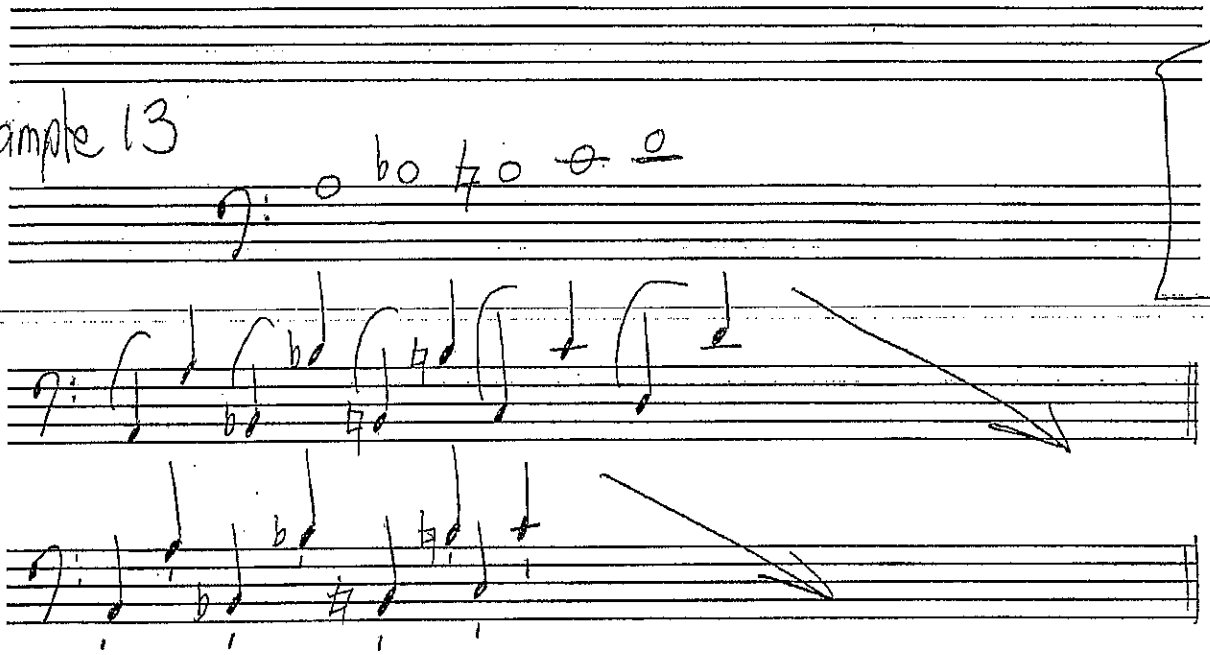
Example 13



Example 14