Chapter 1

So You Want to Play the Clarinet

In This Chapter

- Getting past the apparent complexity of the clarinet
- Selecting the right clarinet for you and putting it together
- Engaging your entire body in playing well
- Developing a richer, fuller sound
- Staging productive practices and scoring performance opportunities

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Whenever you approach a totally new experience, the learning curve can seem incredibly steep. You may not know what to expect, and you have no similar experience to form the framework for organizing and processing all the new information you're about to encounter.

This chapter is designed to help with that — to get you past any lingering anxiety you may have over getting started, bring you up to speed on the basics, and assist you in wrapping your brain around what you're about to experience.

You are about to take your first step toward playing one of the most remarkable-sounding musical instruments ever invented. Congratulations!

So, without further ado . . . a one . . . and a two . . . and a three. . . .

Overcoming Tone Hole Anxiety

I love to watch a new clarinet player's face when he sees his clarinet for the first time. The expression is a mix of eagerness and terror — the eager anticipation of learning to play an instrument that sounds so absolutely cool and the terror of seeing all those holes and all that metal.

If you're feeling this way right now, please remain calm. Do not head for the exits. Admittedly, all those holes and all that metal may seem overwhelming at first, but as soon as you get your hands wrapped around your clarinet and

your fingers in position, it all starts to make sense. Having a clear idea of the function of all those holes and metal may be enough to soothe your nerves.

What's with all the holes?

The clarinet is in the woodwind family, but in some ways it acts like it belongs in the string section. The clarinet sound is actually the result of a column of air vibrating inside the clarinet and some distance beyond the end of the instrument. By opening and closing various combinations of tone holes, you change the length of that column of air, just as a guitar player shortens a string on her guitar by pinching the string between her finger and a fret on the neck of the guitar. A change in the length of the vibrating column of air equates with a change in the pitch or frequency of the note. (For more about this column of air thing, check out Chapter 2.)

Thanks to all these tone holes and the register key and other keys, covered in the following section, the clarinet has one of the most extensive ranges of any of the wind instruments. This means the clarinet can play more notes, from low to high, than almost any other wind instrument.

How 'bout all that metal?

The clarinet has a lot of bling, which may appear somewhat intimidating at first. By knowing the purpose of all this metal, you gain a better appreciation of it, and it begins to feel less threatening. The following list accounts for most of the metal:

- The metal insert on the left thumb hole beneath the register key prevents wear and tear and makes a better seal when the thumb closes the hole.
- Keys put certain tone holes within closer reach. When you play the clarinet, your hands pretty much remain stationary as your fingers move. That is, you don't need to move your hands up or down the clarinet very far to reach the keys. This is due to the many keys on the clarinet. Instead of using your fingers to cover or uncover a tone hole, you press keys that are closer to where your hands are, and those keys happen to be metal.
- Metal rings around some keys make it possible to close more tone holes than you have fingers for. The rings are connected to pads that close additional tone holes adjacent to the open tone holes you see.

You may see other parts of the clarinet adorned with metal, too. The ligature that clamps the reed to the mouthpiece is typically made of metal, and you may see rings of metal around the bell (at the end of the clarinet) and near the joints where the parts of the clarinet connect to one another.

Clarinet trivia

Your clarinet is about to become one of your closest friends and companions, so you should know a little something about it — like where it came from, its favorite nickname, and the names of celebrities it has met throughout its existence. Brush up on the following clarinet trivia:

- The invention of the clarinet is commonly credited to Johann Christoph Denner, a renowned instrument maker from Germany in the early eighteenth century.
- The clarinet is the second newest member of the woodwind family. (The saxophone is the newest.)
- Back in her school days, actress Julia Roberts played clarinet in the band.
- Early in the movie *Jaws*, which he also directed, Steven Spielberg has a cameo appearance playing clarinet in an orchestra.
- Handel and Vivaldi are the first of the "great composers" credited with writing music for the clarinet.
- The most famous clarinet solo occurs at the beginning of George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue."
- Musicians commonly call the clarinet by the nickname "the licorice stick."
- The clarinet can't play chords — it plays only one note at a time.
- Former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan performed as a professional clarinet/saxophone player in dance bands.

Selecting a Clarinet and Putting it Together

Before you can even think about playing a clarinet, you have to get your hands on one and put it together. The first part is actually the more complicated of the two tasks, because the selection is so wide. You can purchase a new or used clarinet or rent one, and many different stores and individuals sell clarinets. Clarinets are sold at music stores online and off, at garage sales, at auctions, and via classifieds, to name a few of your options.

The following sections touch on these topics and refer you to other chapters in the book where you can find much more information and guidance.

Selecting a clarinet

When you're in the market for a clarinet, you have a lot to think about and many choices to make, as noted in the following list. (Chapter 3, the shopping

chapter, covers most of these choices, except for the first one, which is covered in Chapter 2.) When shopping for a clarinet, take the following factors into consideration:

- **Type of clarinet:** Clarinets don't all sound alike. You can find them in A, B♭ (most common), C, E♭, and other keys. In Chapter 2, I describe the various types and which is likely to be best for someone who's just starting out. I also describe the two different fingering systems used on clarinets, so you don't get stuck with a clarinet you can't use.
- **Quality:** When shopping for a quality instrument, the choice usually falls into one of the following three ranges: starter-upper (for beginners), step up (for intermediate players), and "money is no object" (for professionals). Chapter 3 reveals the differences and trade-offs.
- **Material:** A major factor to consider is the material out of which the clarinet is made. The choices boil down to three: plastic, wood, or greenline (wood/resin composite). All three are good choices, depending on where you're playing, how gentle you are in handling the instrument, and the sound you're looking for. In Chapter 3, I show you how to sort out the material choices.
- **Buying versus renting:** The question of buying or renting a clarinet involves several factors, including budget, the likelihood that the person who's going to be playing it will stick with it, and the actual condition of the instrument. (Turn to Chapter 3 for additional guidance.)
- **New versus used:** A new clarinet is like a new car — as soon as you drive it off the lot, it loses some value — so you can often find good used clarinets at affordable prices. In Chapter 3, I show you where to look and provide guidance on selecting a new clarinet, as well.
- **Accessories:** You can purchase custom parts for your clarinet separately to improve its sound and how well it responds. In Chapter 2 I label the parts of the clarinet, and in Chapter 3 I reveal your options for swapping out parts.

Some assembly (and maintenance) required

The clarinet is not a one-piece instrument. It's comprised of several parts, and you need to put it together properly before you can play it. Putting all the pieces together is child's play (it's only six pieces), but doing it right without breaking something or causing unnecessary wear is a little more involved. Chapter 5 shows you how to assemble your clarinet properly and offers tips and tricks to make the process go as smoothly as possible.

In Chapter 5, you also discover the proper way to clean and store your clarinet, along with some maintenance tips and information on finding a repair technician to help correct wear and tear on the instrument and any damage to it.

Reading and Understanding Musical Notation

Even if you can play by ear, that won't help you much in performing the numerous exercises in this book, because they're all written in musical notation. In short, you must be able to read music. If the clarinet is your second, third, or fourth instrument, chances are good you can already decipher musical notation. You're one step ahead of the game. If you're unable to read music or need a refresher course, hop over to Chapter 4 for a quick primer.

When you're playing any wind instrument, you must be able to not only read music, but also read and interpret *fingering charts* — schematic illustrations that show you the tone holes that must be open and closed to play a particular note. In other words, a fingering chart shows you where to put your fingers. Chapter 7 introduces you to fingering charts and shows you how to finger your first notes. Appendix A provides fingering charts for all the notes in the clarinet's range.

Getting Physical with Your Clarinet

Playing the clarinet gives your entire body a workout, especially if you stand while playing. You must hold your body just so, breathe deeply, use just about every muscle in your mouth to direct airflow into the mouthpiece, use your tongue to launch and separate notes, and use your hands and fingers (and thumbs) to support the weight of the clarinet and play all the notes. I get tired just thinking about it.

Fortunately, with good equipment and proper technique, you won't be wrestling with the clarinet or yourself to play notes, and the physical activity will seem less of a burden and more of a joy. The following sections explain the basics of playing with proper technique. In Chapter 6, I fill in all the details and offer additional guidance and tips.

Assuming the proper posture

Most of what you need to do to assume the proper posture for playing the clarinet is to follow your mother's advice — stand up straight, don't slouch, and hold your shoulders back. Do all that in a natural and relaxed way, and you're halfway home.

To get all the way home, keep your chin up. This serves two purposes. First, it prevents you from looking like a mope. Second, it keeps your airway more open. Think of your airway as a garden hose. Bend that hose in half, and you

cut the water flow to a trickle. Keep the hose straight, and water gushes out. To play the full range of notes on your clarinet, you need unrestricted airflow. You don't get that when your chin is down and your windpipe is pinched off.

Try it yourself. Breathe with your chin up and then try breathing with it down, almost touching your chest. Unless you're an anatomical anomaly, you breathe much more feely with your chin up.

To encourage good posture, raise your music stand so the top of the sheet music is at eye level. The music at the top is almost impossible to read if you let your chin drop or start slouching. You have to sit up (or stand up) straight!

Learning to breathe — correctly this time

As soon as you're born, the doctor flips you upside down and slaps you on the fanny, so you take a big, deep breath and start wailing like a fire truck. If that's how things went down after you were born, that was probably the deepest breath you ever took. Kids naturally breathe deeply. If you're like most people, from that point on your breathing has become more and more shallow. To play the clarinet well, you must break the bad breathing habits you've acquired over the years and rediscover how to breathe properly.

Breathing properly means breathing with your diaphragm rather than with your shoulders. Here's a quick way to check whether you're breathing properly:

1. **Lie flat on your back.**
2. **Lay this book on your stomach.**
3. **Breathe deeply, keeping an eye on the book and taking note of any other movement, such as in your shoulders.**

If the book moved up and down, and your back and shoulders remained stationary, you're in pretty good shape in terms of deep breathing, assuming you keep this up when you're standing or sitting. If the book didn't move but your back and shoulders did, don't worry. I show you how to fix this in Chapter 6, and how to breathe even more deeply if you happened to pass this preliminary test.

Holding your mouth just right

It looks soooo easy. You just stick the mouthpiece in your mouth and blow. Unfortunately, there's more to it than that. To get any sound to come out of a clarinet and to produce a quality sound, you must form and maintain proper *embouchure* — a fancy French word that describes how you form your mouth

around the mouthpiece of a wind instrument. Proper embouchure forms a good seal around the mouthpiece, so no air leaks out when you blow, and it allows part of the reed to vibrate freely inside your mouth.

Here are the basics of proper embouchure for the clarinet:

- Your lower teeth and lip join forces to create a very narrow ledge on which the clarinet's reed rests. Smiling with your lower lip stretches the lip tightly against your lower teeth with only a fractional amount of your lower lip over your teeth. You don't talk with your lower lip inside your mouth, so don't play the clarinet that way either.
- You rotate your jaw forward so when you close your mouth around the mouthpiece you have about a half inch of reed inside your mouth. (In Chapter 6, I show you a trick to ensure you have the proper amount of reed in your mouth.)
- Your upper teeth press down on the top of the mouthpiece slightly farther back on the mouthpiece than your lower teeth. This creates a teeter-totter effect, resulting in pressure on the reed from the lower lip to commence reed vibration. See "Squeezing out notes by applying a little leverage," a little later in this chapter, for an explanation of how this works.
- Your lips seal around the mouthpiece to prevent air from escaping as you blow. Frowning with your upper lip helps make this seal.

Maintaining proper embouchure is crucial, so spend some time on this in Chapter 6.

Delivering fast air

Air is to the clarinet as gas is to a car engine. Fast-moving air makes the reed vibrate, which produces sound. No vibration, no sound. In addition, you use fast air to accent notes (make them louder) and create crescendos for transitioning from lower notes, which you can produce with slower air, to higher notes that require faster air. The speed of the air also contributes significantly to producing good tone (see the later section "Developing a Richer Tone").

Two components contribute to producing fast air — breath support and the shape of the inside of your mouth. You need to breathe deeply to supply a sufficient volume of air, and then position your tongue to drive a concentrated stream of air at the reed. With the front of your tongue raised up like someone lifted it up with a pencil, hiss like a snake to establish the proper tongue position. This pushes the air more forcefully at the reed.

Don't let your cheeks puff out. Your cheeks should press against your teeth.

Squeezing out notes by applying a little leverage

As explained earlier in the section "Holding your mouth just right," your lower lip functions as a narrow ledge on which the reed rests. This forms a teeter-totter with the clarinet. Your upper teeth sit on the very short end of the teeter-totter while the entire length of the clarinet extending beyond your lower teeth is on the other end.

If you hold the clarinet up, so it sticks straight out from your mouth, your lower lip applies very little upward pressure to the reed. If you blow, no sound comes out. As you lower the clarinet (bringing it closer to your body), while keeping your upper teeth and lower lip stationary, your lower lip applies more upward pressure to the reed, pushing it nearer to the mouthpiece. At a certain point, when the reed is close enough to the mouthpiece, physics takes over and the reed begins to vibrate. The sound is usually best when the clarinet is at about a 30-degree angle to your body.

You don't apply pressure to the reed by biting the mouthpiece. Your teeth remain stationary as you lower the clarinet. This gives you much more control over applying incremental changes in upward pressure (leverage) to the reed.

Getting your fingers into the action

Reed vibration vibrates the column of air inside the clarinet, producing sound but not producing individual notes. To play notes, you must get your fingers into the action. Your fingers press keys and seal off tone holes in various combinations to produce notes. As explained earlier, in the section "What's with all the holes?" opening tone holes changes the length of the vibrating column of air, which results in notes of different pitches.

Fingerings can be quite complex. On a piano, all you do is tap one key with a single, solitary finger to play any given note. On the clarinet, any number of fingers can be called into action to play a note. In addition, you can play some notes on the clarinet with different fingerings, which can come in handy when you're moving from one note to another — an alternate fingering may provide your fingers with a shorter or more convenient route to the next note.

Because fingerings on the clarinet are complex, I spread out their coverage. Chapter 7 presents basic fingerings for some mid-range notes. In Chapter 8, you add to your repertoire to significantly expand the range of notes you can play. In Chapter 10, you head higher with the altissimo notes and discover some alternate fingerings to help with awkward transitions between these higher notes. Chapter 13 reveals even more alternate fingerings.

Transitioning between notes: Slurring, tonguing, and more

You can play notes with or without spaces between them by slurring (no spaces) and tonguing (spaces). You also use tonguing to launch notes. In the following sections, you find out what slurring and tonguing are all about.

In language, *articulation* refers to using articulatory organs, including the tongue and lips, to shape sounds that make up words. In music, *articulation* is the shaping of notes, and includes tonguing, slurring, and accenting notes.

Slurring for smooth transitions

Slurring simply means running the notes together. Take a deep breath and then pronounce a string of vowels without stopping your flow of air: AyyyyEeeeelyyyyOhhhh. You're clearly saying different letters, but without any space between them. That's slurring in a nutshell. Chapter 9 covers the topic in greater detail, and Chapter 4 shows you how to tell when to slur by looking at your sheet music.

Tonguing to launch notes

Tonguing consists of touching the tip of your tongue to the very tip of the reed, which either keeps the reed from starting to vibrate or, for a fleeting moment, stops its vibration. To launch notes with your tongue, you keep your tongue on the reed, supply some air, and release your tongue. It's just like saying the letter "T" followed by a hiss. Try it: Focusing on what your tongue does, say "T-heeee."

With tonguing, less is more. Slight upward pressure is all that's required to press the tip of the reed against the tip rail of the mouthpiece and stop vibration. Aiming your tongue at the tip rail rather than the reed, as explained in Chapter 9, is the best approach.

Tonguing to add space between notes

You create space between notes by tonguing to stop reed vibration, not by stopping airflow. Airflow should be constant as you move from note to note, speeding up or slowing down but never stopping except when you need to inhale. Tonguing comes in two styles:

- **Legato:** *Legato* (literally meaning "tied together") uses very little space between notes, giving a passage of music a sing-song quality.
- **Staccato:** *Staccato* (literally meaning "detached") is a style that gives more definition to each individual note by adding space between the notes.

To tongue faster, instead of "T-heeee," you use a D word, like "Deh" or "Dih," so your tongue spends less time on the reed, as explained in Chapter 14.

Adding accents and crescendos

Although you maintain airflow when transitioning between notes, you must often speed up the airflow to add accents and crescendos:

- **Accent:** An *accent* adds emphasis to a particular note, suddenly increasing its volume.
- **Crescendo:** A *crescendo* increases the speed of the airflow more gradually to ramp up to an accent or transition to a note of a higher pitch. (Higher notes require faster air.)

Developing a Richer Tone

To be a decent clarinet player, you must play in tune. To become an outstanding clarinet player, you must play in tune *and* produce a great *tone* — a full, rich sound. In the following sections, I introduce you to the four ingredients of great tone and discuss several additional topics that contribute to producing a quality sound.

Recognizing the four ingredients of great tone

All musicians, including clarinetists, are expected to play in tune, but each produces a unique tone that varies according to the type and quality of the instrument and what the musician adds through her skills, talent, and technique. Even though tone is unique to each individual and the clarinet she plays, great tone is always the result of mixing the following four ingredients, as explained in Chapter 11:

- **Amplitude:** Amplitude is a function of air volume and reed vibration. Without sufficient air volume, the reed remains still, and the clarinet silent.
- **Pitch:** Pitch is a function of leverage, discussed earlier in this chapter in the section "Squeezing out notes by applying a little leverage." As you apply leverage, you essentially shift the clarinet into gear and initiate reed vibration. To a large extent, how much leverage you apply controls the pitch, assuming your clarinet is in tune and your reed is in good working order. (See "Perfecting your reed," later in this chapter.)

- **Color:** Color adds brightness to the tone by enriching it with *overtones* — higher harmonics that resonate with the fundamental frequency (pitch) of the note. Adding color to your tone requires fast air to produce those overtones. If you're breathing properly and maintaining proper tongue position, delivering fast air is not a major challenge.
- **Focus:** Focus helps project the sound by keeping it narrowed to an intense beam. To focus the sound, you make very minor adjustments to your embouchure, shifting your top teeth back slightly and/or increasing your upper lip support.

Playing loudly, softly, and in between

You can play the clarinet in a soft whisper, something you can't do with most other wind instruments. As a result, many composers write music for the clarinet that includes passages that must be played *sotto voce* (very softly).

Contrary to what you may assume, playing soft requires more air, not less, so the clarinet can project that softer sound far enough out into the audience to be heard. In Chapter 11, I reveal techniques for playing in a whisper that everyone can hear.

Adding some special effects: Vibrato, glisses, and bends

Over the years, innovative clarinet players have developed ways to make the clarinet produce sounds it was never designed to produce. To add another dimension to your sound, consider adding these special effects to your repertoire, as discussed in Chapter 12:

- **Vibrato:** *Vibrato* is the undulating effect you often hear when listening to singers hit and hold a note. You can produce the same effect on the clarinet with jaw vibrato (sometimes called lip vibrato) or glottal vibrato. With *jaw vibrato,* the much more common of the two, you subtly move your lower jaw up and down quickly to change pressure on the reed. With *glottal vibrato,* you blow harder or more softly alternately to create the pulses within notes.
- **Glissandos and smears:** These are alternate ways of transitioning between notes. A typical *glissando* ("gliss" for short), consists of parts of scales with some chromatic notes added into the mix. (Chromatic notes are the sharps and flats between notes — the black keys on a piano.) A

smear is a type of glissando in which you slide from one note to the next. The very beginning of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" best exemplifies the sound of a smear.

- **Bends and scoops:** A *bend* occurs inside a note, lowering its pitch and then raising it back up to pitch. A *scoop* occurs at the very beginning of a note, starting the note at a lower pitch and then raising it up to pitch.

Cranking up your tongue and finger speed

Clarinet music varies in tempo and may require you to play certain passages very quickly. To play such a passage well, you need to really know the music, practice it until your fingers and tongue know it, and engage your tongue and fingers in daily speed training exercises:

- **Speeding up your tongue:** Tonguing notes faster creates less space between them, resulting in faster play. Keeping the air flowing and your tongue relaxed are key. Check out Chapter 14 for additional suggestions.
- **Speeding up your fingers:** As you practice a piece, you can naturally play it faster and faster, because your fingers know where they need to be for each note. You can also increase your speed by improving finger strength and coordination, as explained in Chapter 14.

Devote a portion of every practice session to playing fast. This improves your ability to play well at any speed.

Tweaking your clarinet into tune

Whether you're playing alone, in a duet, or in an ensemble, keep your clarinet in tune. In addition to helping you blend in with the band, the process of tuning your clarinet trains your inner ear to recognize proper pitch.

Changing the pitch of a clarinet is relatively easy. All you do is pull out on the barrel while twisting it back and forth to widen the space between the barrel and the upper joint. You can make more minor adjustments by pulling the mouthpiece out from the barrel slightly or pulling the upper and lower joints apart ever so slightly. All of these adjustments increase the length of the clarinet, which changes its pitch.

The actual tuning process is fairly involved, so I spend an entire chapter on it. In Chapter 15, I show you how to warm up a cold clarinet before tuning it, tune it by ear or with an electronic tuner, make minor adjustments during a performance, and compensate for any quirky pitch tendencies your clarinet may have by using alternate fingerings and other tricks.

Perfecting your reed

Reed vibration generates the base sound the clarinet uses to produce various notes. No vibration, no sound. The reed is a very sensitive instrument, so minor problems with it can cause major problems for you and your sound. Fortunately, because the reed is made of cane (a wood-like material), you can make adjustments to it by removing tiny amounts of cane to bring the reed back into balance. Even brand new reeds require adjustments.

Repairing and refining a reed serves a dual purpose:

- **It makes the reed more responsive.** A well-tuned reed — like a well-tuned car engine — responds faster and with less effort when you give it gas. In the case of the clarinet, the gas happens to be the air you blow into the mouthpiece. With a responsive reed, you don't have to blow so hard to make it vibrate.
- **It improves the sound.** A defective or poorly adjusted reed produces a weak, wheezy sound, if it produces any sound at all. One or two very minor adjustments often result in major improvement in sound quality.

Chapter 17 shows you how to identify "talented" reeds — reeds that are good candidates you can make even better. You also discover how to test and diagnose a "sick" reed, gather the tools to fix it, and perform minor surgery to cure its ills.

Mastering the Two P's: Practice and Performance

This book contains everything you need to start playing the clarinet and to play it well. What it doesn't contain is the practice you must do to reinforce the skills and techniques presented in the book. Nor does it include an ensemble and a stage for your future performances. However, I've included the next best things — guidance on how to make your practice sessions most productive and suggestions on how to track down people to play with and places to perform.

Engaging in productive practice

Regular, well-focused practices — six days a week for at least a half hour each session — are crucial in learning specific pieces, retaining what you've learned in this book and elsewhere, and keeping yourself in shape to play your clarinet. Without practice, your fingers tend to become less limber and

less coordinated, you're more likely to fall into shallow breathing practices, and you tend to forget stuff.

Chapter 16 assists you in establishing a practice routine that's not all work and no play. I provide guidance on the types of exercises and short pieces most valuable in honing your technique. And I provide a list of additional resources (mostly sheet music) designed specifically to help you maintain your enthusiasm for the clarinet while sharpening your skills.

Stepping up on stage

Music is a joyful pursuit to be shared, so when you feel ready, consider stepping on stage and sharing your music with a live audience. Nothing motivates or challenges you more than having to prepare a piece to play in front of others. In addition, performance puts you in contact with other musicians who can share everything they've learned in their musical careers.

If you're in school and your school has a music program complete with a band, you have ready opportunities to perform. If you're out of school, tracking down performance opportunities poses a more daunting challenge. In Chapter 18, I provide some leads, encourage you to take the stage, and assist you in overcoming any pre-performance anxiety.