#3. Spinning Air – The Tumbleweed Analogy

About the Author

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I always tell the kids that I work with, “if you take one thing from this clinic today, it is this: ‘a sound that is full, focused, and resonant, is in-tune about 90% of the time’”. The approach to putting air into the clarinet is just as important as how much air is being put into the clarinet. Just blowing a big column of air will not do it: it has to be focused and fast.

What to instruct: Begin by having them play C1 as a section. It will more than likely be unfocused, weak, and out of tune. Then, tell them to imagine “a tiny tumbleweed” inside their mouthpiece. When the wind blows in the desert, the air moves along and knocks the tumbleweed, but it doesn’t necessarily make it spin. I the wind is unfocused, it just picks up the tumbleweed. If the air is really fast and focused, and catches the tip of the tumbleweed, it spins it fast and in one direction. Also, it doesn’t matter if you have all your fingers down (more resistance encourages more air from the student) or none of the fingers down (less resistance usually encourages less air from the student), you will need to spin the tumbleweed at the same rate all the time. Walk across the room (while they are still facing you) and have them visualize blowing the tumbleweed all the way out of their bells and rolling it across the room to your feet. Do this while they play the same C1. Use some sort of hand gesture that they will understand to have them spin air. Work on this principle until the section has a richer, fuller, more unified sound.

Reinforcement techniques: I take a very simple scale (Eb concert for clarinet) and have them play it four notes at a time, slowly. However, I do not use a particular tempo. I have them play until the sound settles and work on “evolving” or “leading” to the next note of the scale. Work on the idea of spinning air “in-between” the notes, as well as on the notes themselves. Splitting the scale up into four notes will be easy. If you repeat F2 (Eb concert) on the top of the 1st octave, you can go up another octave four notes at a time as well. Again, this is a sound building exercise and is great to get them in the mindset of blowing fast, focused air with a particular mental image.