THE HERMES EXPERIMENT

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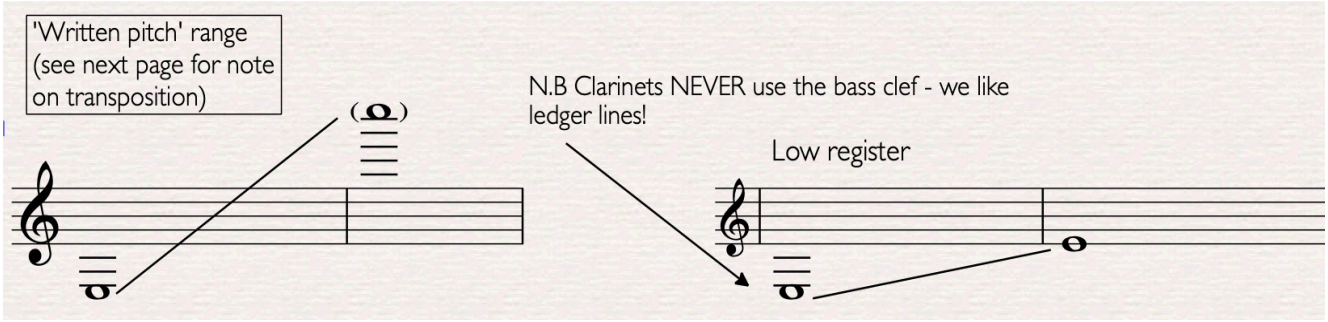
SONG Virtual Composition Project 2021
Writing for the Clarinet: Summary Handout

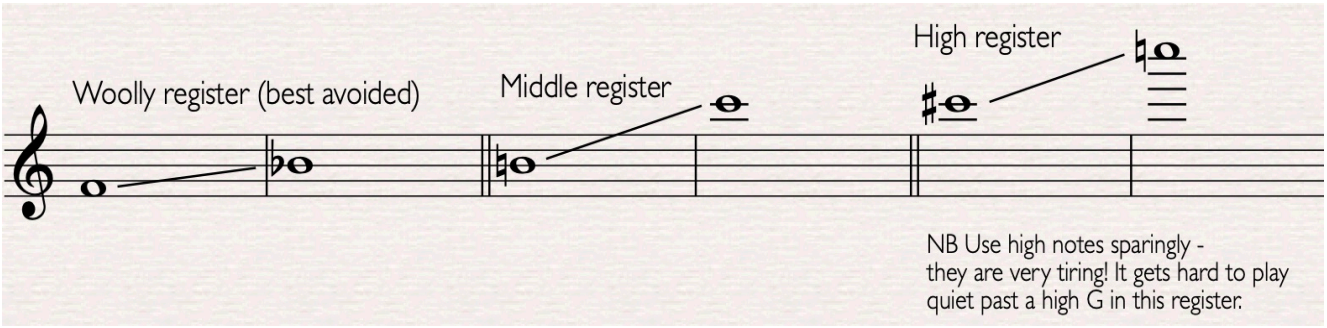
The clarinet is one of the most versatile wind instruments. Below is a guide to the basics of writing for the clarinet, along with some simple 'extended techniques' for special effects.

General Notes

- The clarinet has a range from a low D anywhere up to a high B. The low register sounds dark and mellow, the middle register warm, rich, and melodic, and the high register shrill and penetrating

- There are also some notes in between the low and middle registers that sound fairly woolly - avoid these if at all possible (there is sometimes a marked difference in timbre between these notes and those surrounding them)





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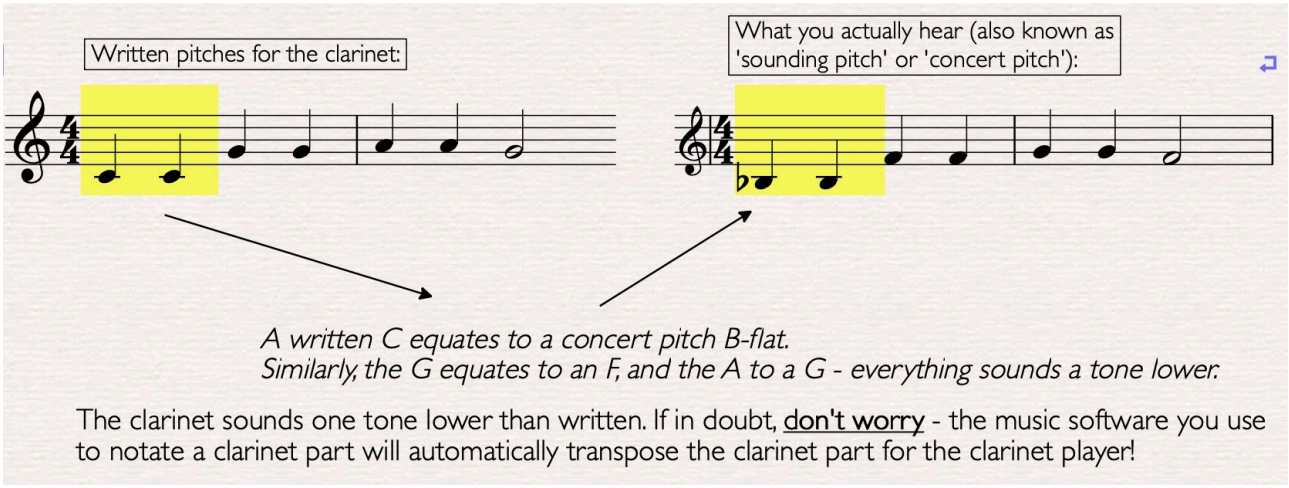
Transposition

- The clarinet is a transposing instrument. This means that if a clarinet and a different instrument, such as a piano, play the same written note (such as a middle C) the clarinet will make a different pitch to the piano

- We say that the clarinet is an instrument 'in B-flat'. All this means is that if a clarinet plays a written C in its part, it would actually sound like a B-flat. Look at the below example: the first note the clarinet plays is a written C; however, this will actually sound like a B-flat



Articulation

- Clarinettists are used to reading lots of different styles of articulation:
  - Dots (staccatos) make the notes short
  - Long lines (slurs/legatos) make the notes joined up and smooth
  - Lines over individual notes (tenutos) make a stronger, fuller sound
  - Accents over individual notes (this symbol >) give a sharp attack to the note

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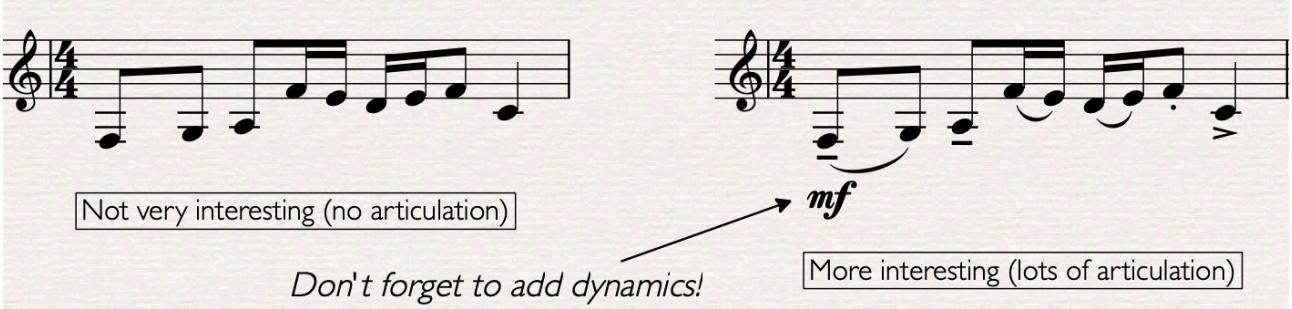
Experiment to see how many different sounds you can get the clarinet to make!



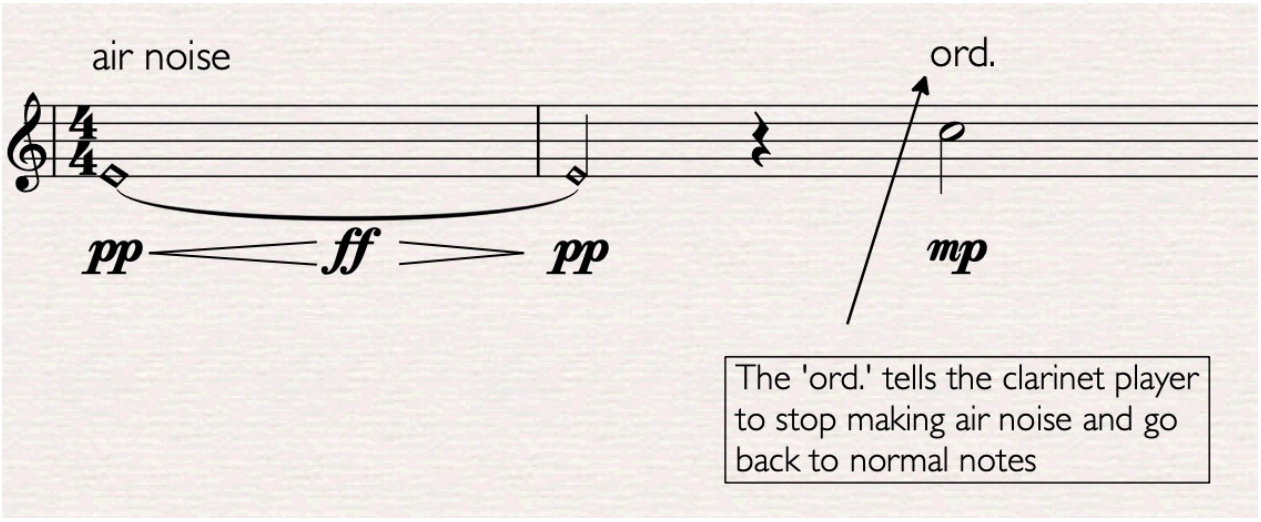
Extended techniques

Air sounds

People often forget that wind players can simply breathe down their instrument without playing actual notes to create an effect. Bear in mind this is very quiet, and won't be heard above a general dynamic of *mp*.

You can notate these with a diamond notehead or similar - if you cannot do this, then simply writing 'air noise' will be enough.

Make sure to write 'ord.' (short for 'ordinary') when you want the clarinettist to stop playing air noise and go back to playing real notes.



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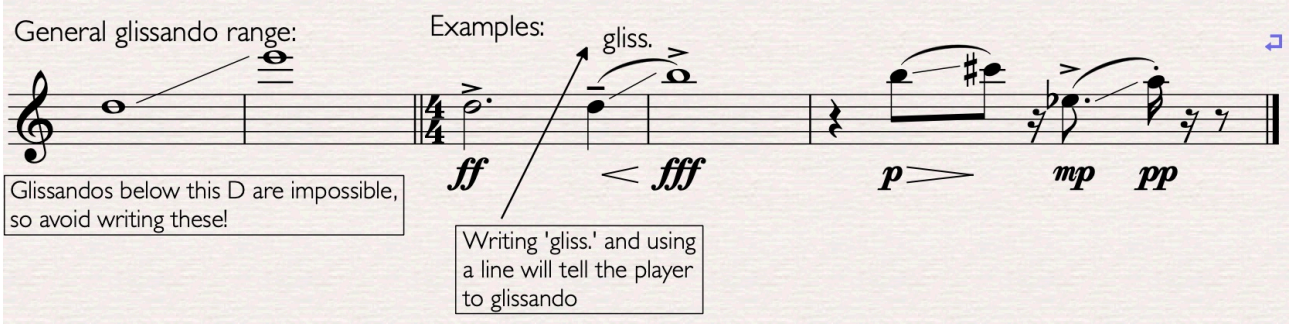
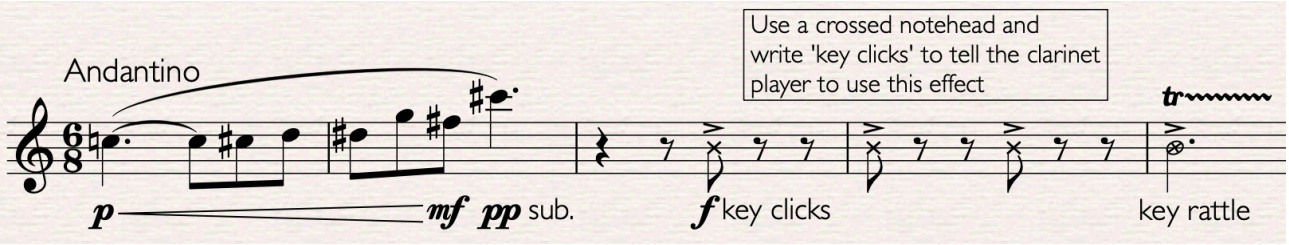
Glissando

While air sounds are subtle and delicate, glissandi are often far from this! The best clarinet glissandi are loud and fast, made by sliding fingers off the keys. However, some glissandi can also work quietly, but be wary that these can be difficult to achieve.



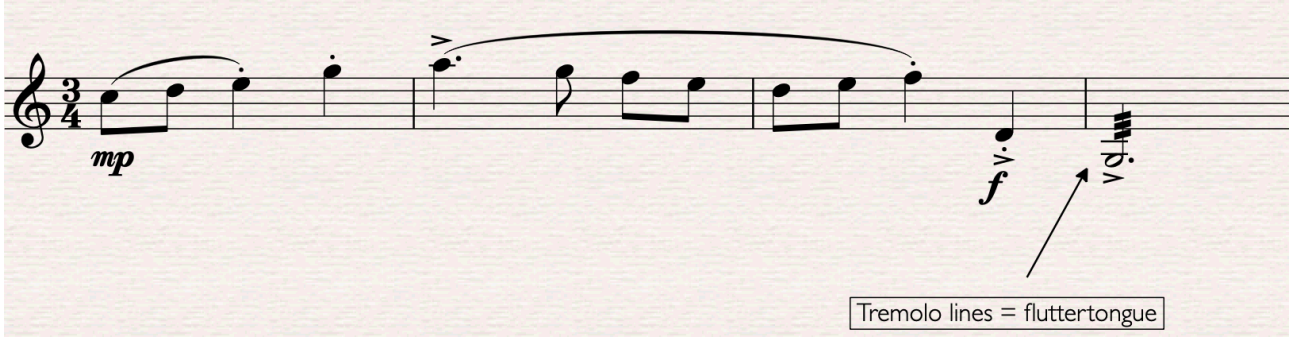
Percussion

Clarinets can hit the keys with their fingers to achieve a percussion effect. Use a crossed notehead to notate percussion effects.



Fluttertongue

This creates a buzzing sound by the clarinet player rolling their Rs while playing. You notate fluttertongue with tremolo lines on the stem of the note.



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Bass Clarinet

- The bass clarinet uses the same notation as the clarinet - it just sounds an octave lower (see below for comparison):

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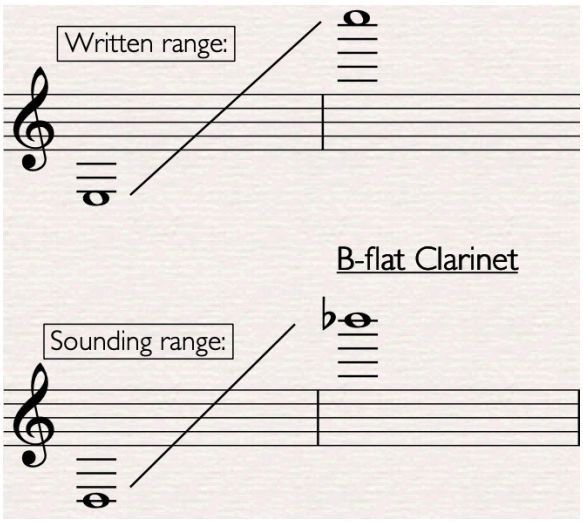

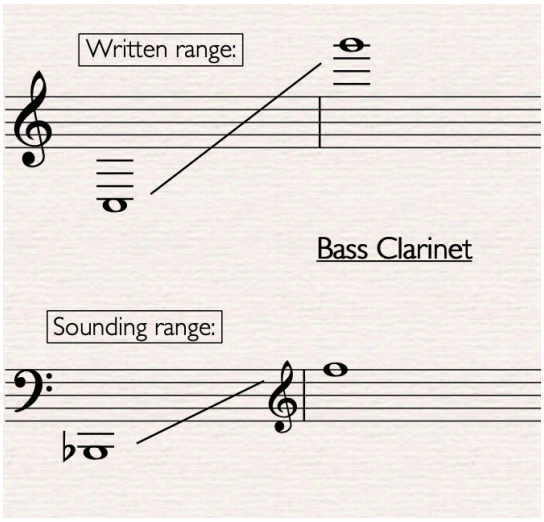

Note that the bass clarinet also has some extra low notes - it can play down to a low C as opposed to the E on the B-flat clarinet. Beware that the bass clarinet's upper range isn't as high as the B-flat clarinet's.

- If you write for both bass clarinet and B-flat clarinet, make sure to give the performer enough time to change instruments (to put one down and pick the other one up!) About 10 seconds is usually enough.