

## 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)

'Written pitch' range  
(see next page for note on transposition)

N.B Clarinets NEVER use the bass clef - we like ledger lines!

Low register

The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef. A box labeled 'Written pitch' range (see next page for note on transposition) points to a note on a ledger line below the staff. Another note on a ledger line is shown further to the right. A label 'N.B Clarinets NEVER use the bass clef - we like ledger lines!' points to the staff. The 'Low register' is indicated by a note on a ledger line.

Woolly register (best avoided)

Middle register

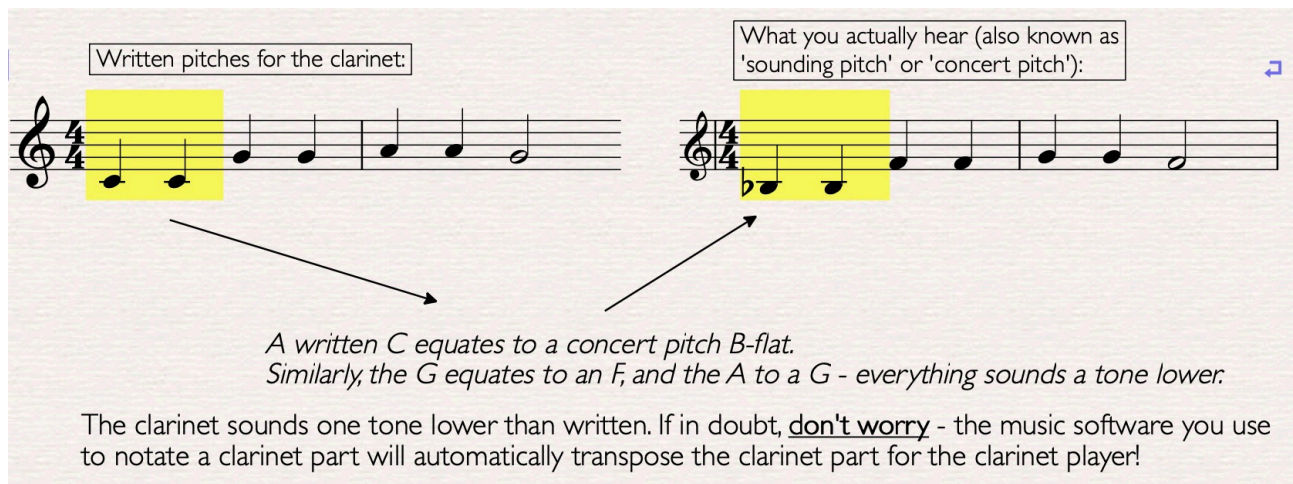
High register

NB Use high notes sparingly - they are very tiring! It gets hard to play quiet past a high G in this register.

The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef. The 'Woolly register (best avoided)' is indicated by a note on a ledger line. The 'Middle register' is indicated by a note on the first line. The 'High register' is indicated by a note on the second line. A note on the third line is also shown. A label 'NB Use high notes sparingly - they are very tiring! It gets hard to play quiet past a high G in this register.' points to the high register.

## 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



Written pitches for the clarinet:

What you actually hear (also known as 'sounding pitch' or 'concert pitch'):

A written C equates to a concert pitch B-flat.  
Similarly, the G equates to an F, and the A to a G - everything sounds a tone lower.

The clarinet sounds one tone lower than written. If in doubt, **don't worry** - the music software you use to notate a clarinet part will automatically transpose the clarinet part for the clarinet player!

## 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

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

Not very interesting (no articulation)

Don't forget to add dynamics!

*mf*

More interesting (lots of articulation)

### 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 clarinetist to stop playing air noise and go back to playing real notes.

air noise

*pp* *ff* *pp*

ord.

*mp*

The 'ord.' tells the clarinet player to stop making air noise and go back to normal notes



## 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.

General glissando range:

Glissandos below this D are impossible, so avoid writing these!

Examples:

Writing 'gliss.' and using a line will tell the player to glissando

ff

gliss.

fff

p

mp

pp

## Percussion

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

Andantino

p

mf

pp sub.

f key clicks

key rattle

Use a crossed notehead and write 'key clicks' to tell the clarinet player to use this effect

## 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.

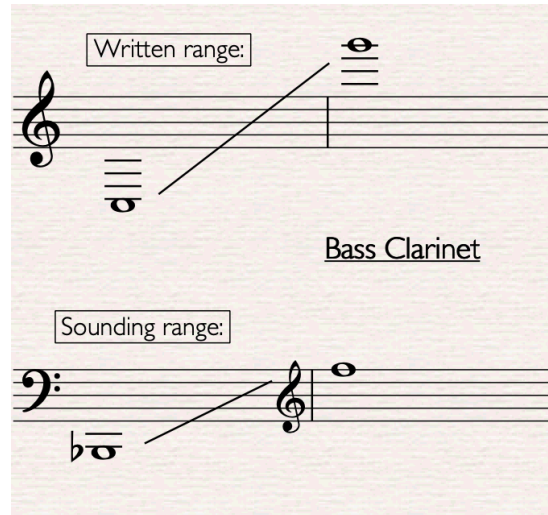
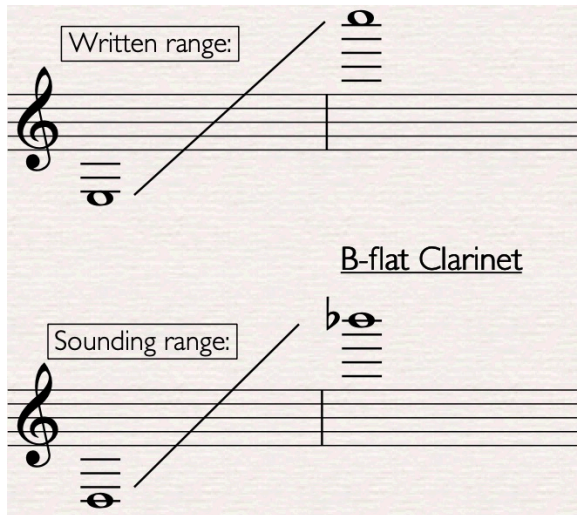
mp

f

Tremolo lines = fluttertongue

### Bass Clarinet

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



*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.