

# Let Freedom Ring... Thanks to OBOFIT<sup>®</sup>

Andrea Ridilla

Andrea is not only an oboe professor (Miami University), but also inventor and author, so has taken special interest reviewing this recent device for Double Reed News.



Welcome to the OboFit, an innovative new member of the oboe world that teaches what words fail to express. Italian oboist Lukas Runggaldier from Ortisei in the Bolzano region of Italy has created a twenty-first-century embouchure trainer for developing a more resonant tone.

A beautiful oboe tone is like a creation of nature. It is organic. Just as a crystal resonates from the frequencies of nature, the unencumbered vibrations of an oboe reed metamorphose into the very soul of the instrument. But how difficult it is to let go and 'allow' these vibrations to be unencumbered. And how much more challenging it can be to communicate this to young players. I have always wished: if only there were a device to teach this!

What is a correct embouchure, and is there just one answer? The answer is no; we are all built differently. But there are guidelines. When students come to me

with perceived embouchure problems, I first address respiration. One of my former teachers, the late Arnold Jacobs<sup>1</sup> said: 'An ineffective embouchure is frequently the lips reacting to a bad set of circumstances and failing. It is simply cause and effect.'<sup>2</sup> Air is the key. An embouchure starved of air will make any wind player sound bad. But what causes an oboist to be so deprived of air?

The oboe reed must have constant access to air. There may not be enough air due to inadequate breathing or support. Or, perhaps air is not able to reach the reed as a result of biting with the teeth, pinching with tight lips, or stretching the lips into a smile. In all of these cases the reed's vibrations would be compromised. An effective oboe embouchure is one that allows the double reed to vibrate, at the same time permitting the oboist to control the reed opening for the manipulation of

several important variables: focus, register changes, dynamics, colour, and micro-pitch adjustments. The embouchure should be neither permissive nor a control freak.

The lips are like acrobats and can take on many shapes and sizes. In embouchure anatomy class we address lips, teeth, bite alignment or misalignment, oral cavity shape, and air. For my preferred embouchure, I teach my students to bring the corners of their lips in towards two imaginary vertical lines descending from the middle of each nostril, and then form a circle around the reed with the lip tissue between these lines. The size of this circle will change depending upon the variables listed above. It is also critical that this circle is flexible. The smaller the circle becomes, the further forward the lips will project. Pinched lip pressure against the reed is bound to stifle vibrations and may even compress the intercellular spaces of the reed.





The teeth are the architecture of the embouchure. They play an important role but they should not support the reed or the pitch. This is called biting and causes the tone instantly to become inorganic. It is the lips – and lips alone – that bring beauty and control to the oboe tone.

OboFit to the Rescue! Lukas Runggaldier's device is a wish come true for embouchure training. He was inspired

to design the OboFit by the well-known Canadian oboist Louise Pellerin, professor at the Zurich University of the Arts. During her studies with Heinz Holliger, Louise had been looking for solutions for a more effective embouchure and had inserted coffee stir sticks into the corners of her mouth as ring muscle reinforcers. Louise's idea of coffee stir sticks are my imaginary lines.

Lukas moved forward with Louise's concept and, after two years of research, came up with the OboFit. He explains that the OboFit also serves as a playing angle optimiser and can correct or prevent posture misconceptions at an early stage. Air refractions on the reed are minimised, having a positive effect on the tone as well as intonation. Strengthening the embouchure ring muscle – the orbicularis oris – is extremely important for oboists. The main functioning muscle of the embouchure, it surrounds the oboe reed like a warm blanket, deftly exhibiting control and allowing freedom of vibration. The OboFit is ideal for enhancing the function of this muscle as well as for releasing the biting muscles.

Due to irregular practice sessions, long rehearsals and other factors, oboists may lose the sensitivity, flexibility and strength of the embouchure muscles. Practising with the OboFit helps to educate the subconscious mind to set these new techniques into automatic function.

This pedagogical device is in the form of a trident, with two wings of wood, or composite material, framing the reed. The reed is inserted at the top of the tube. The length and width adjustment of the OboFit allow for flexibility and the ergonomics may be adjusted to any jaw width or lip-mouth size, independent of the embouchure and the length of a cork staple. The OboFit helps to release the wrong muscles that 'grab' the reed. Lower support muscles instantly begin to do their job.

Professor David Walter at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris has celebrated the invention of the OboFit saying: 'It gives me a new life on oboe as I can really use my power without lip weaknesses!'

Professor Nick Deutsch, Professor of Oboe at the Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy University of Music and Theatre in Leipzig says: 'I am confident OboFit will become a vital tool for all oboists wishing to optimise a correct physiological setup, allowing a smooth interaction between the breathing apparatus, the lip muscles, vocal tract, tongue and soft palate, which in turn will maximise the possibility of expression through the instrument.'<sup>3</sup>

The Obofit is available in several models, including professional and student. For more details see: [www.obofit.it](http://www.obofit.it)

## Endnotes

- 1 Legendary Solo Tuba of the Chicago Symphony and pioneer of respiratory physiology in wind playing.
- 2 Brian Frederiksen, Arnold Jacobs: Song and Wind (USA: Windsong Press Limited, 1996), 122.
- 3 Lukas Runggaldier, 'OboFit references,' OBOFIT®, accessed 27th April 2023, [www.obofit.it/?lang=en](http://www.obofit.it/?lang=en).

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