



THE 3 BEST ETUDES TO  
**UNLOCK YOUR  
FINGER DEXTERITY**

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# Introduction

We are concerning ourselves today with these first three etudes from clarinetist and composer Paul Jean Jean's wonderful and practical Vade Mecum, which has been an incomparable resource for clarinetists around the world for almost a century.

These first three etudes focus primarily on hand position and finger dexterity, but I'm also going to encourage you throughout your practice to think about the sound you're making and maintain a good flow of air. All of these exercises will benefit from practice in the biggest room you can find to play in, using as big a sound as possible: nothing aids us in our search for a great clarinet sound more than playing at a loud, consistent volume. This helps to notice any little deviations in the sound and will aid us in producing the beautiful, smooth legati asked for in so much of our amazing repertoire!



While there are translations into English of his opening texts, within the music itself all of the directions are in French, so here's a guide to the words and phrases he uses throughout the studies:

*gauche* = left; M.G. = L.H.

*droite* = right; M.D. = R.H.

*Sans lâcher la clé* – without releasing the key

*Clé* – key

*Avec le médius* = with the middle finger

*soulever* = raise

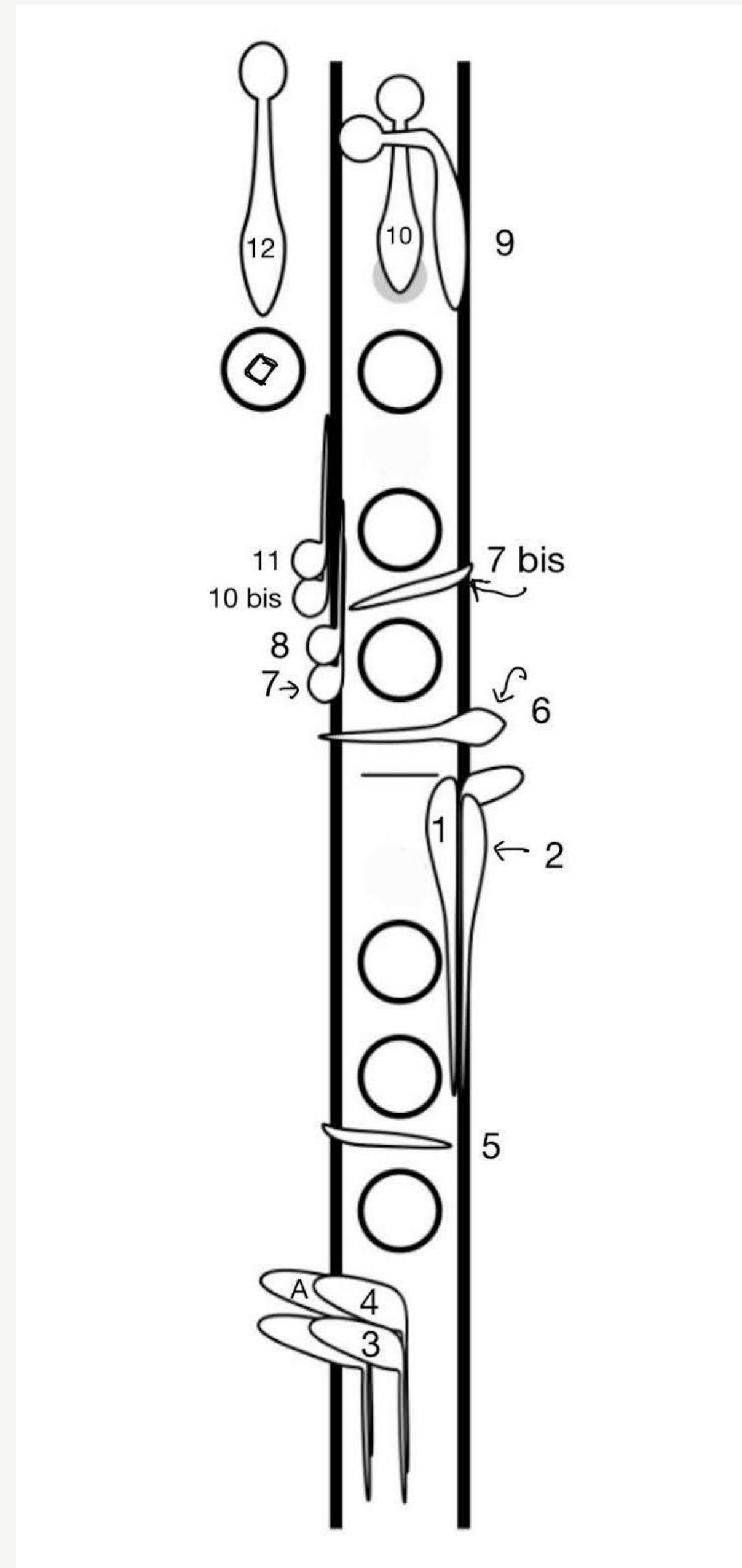
*pouce* = thumb

*et* = and

*ni* = not

He also uses key numbers without providing a diagram showing what those keys are. Here's a fingering chart with his fingering descriptions marked in for you.

Right, let's dive into a few details concerning the individual etudes!



# Etude 1: Special Trills

These trills aren't so much special as they are comprehensive. They cover minor and major 2nds from the low E to the C just above the break – they don't go higher than this as you would be repeating the same fingerings, just with the addition of the register key.

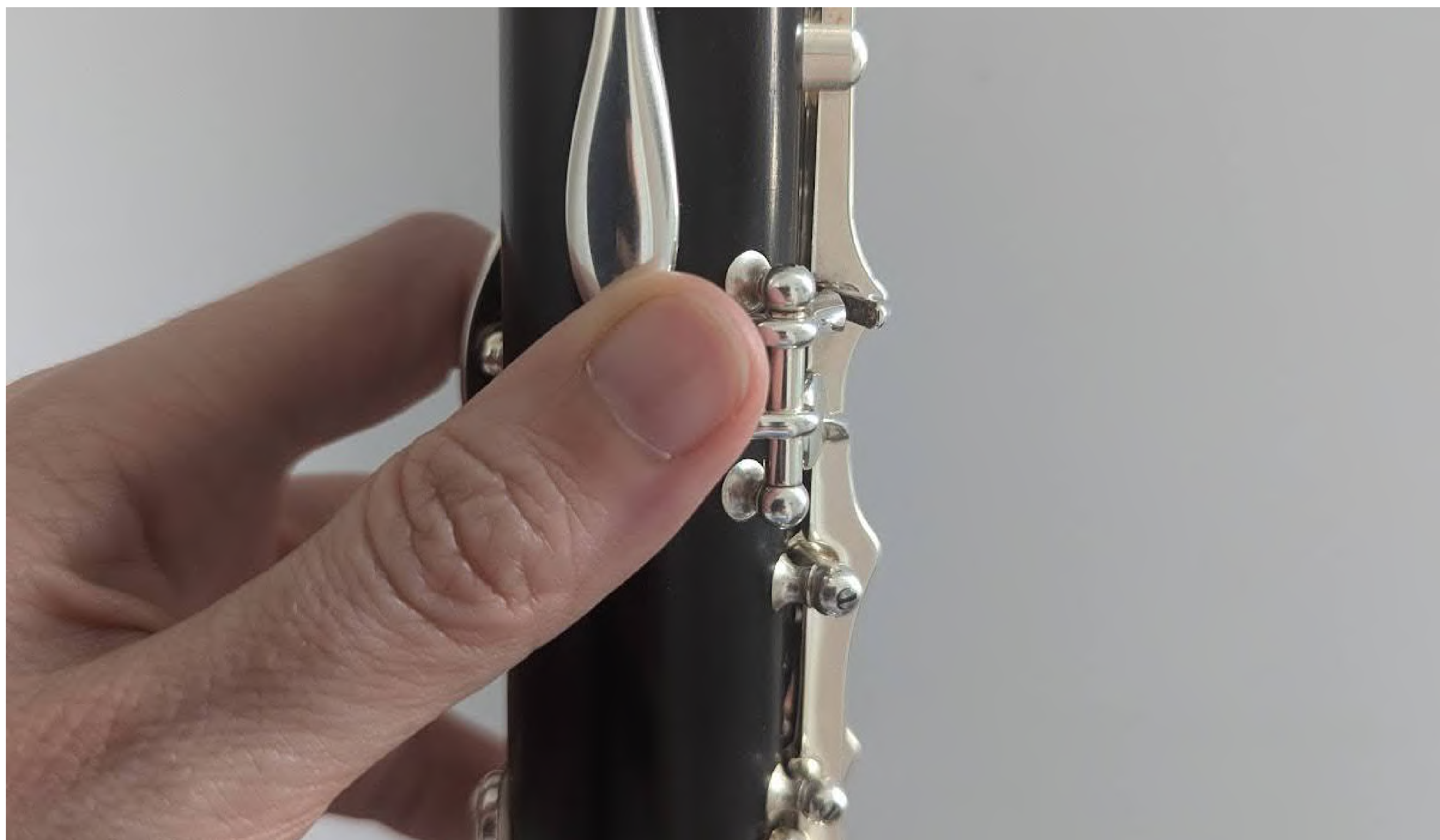
I would advise executing these trills slowly, focusing on your hand position. You might like to try practicing some of these trills either using a mirror (or with your phone on selfie mode), or without actually blowing into the clarinet, so that you might more closely observe the position of your hands. Once you get the hang of the pattern of these trills, you won't need to look at the music, giving you more mental space for observing good hand position.

You'll be able to find a complete guide for developing a great hand position on tonebase Clarinet, but I'll give you a few things to think about here:

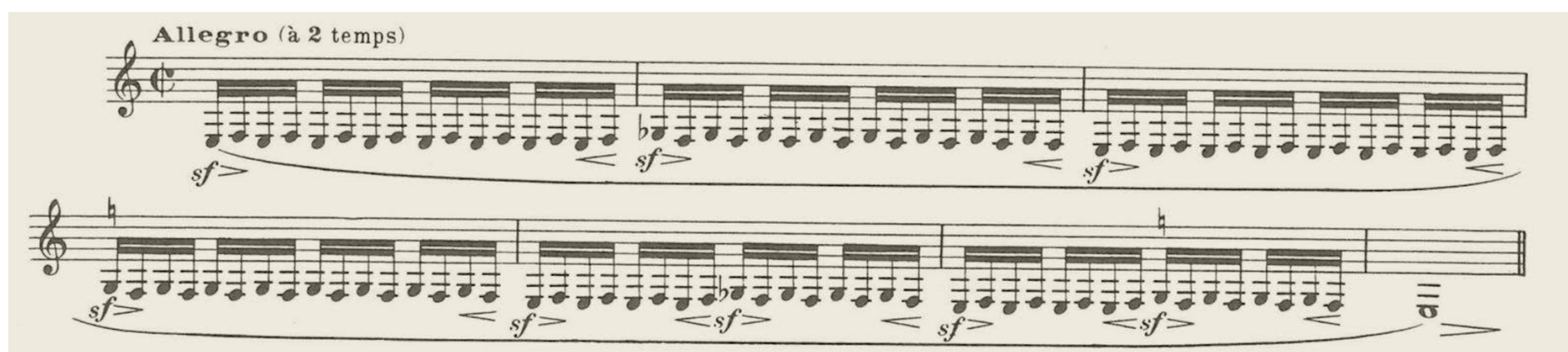
1. Both hands should exhibit a three-point curve, i.e., both knuckles of each of your fingers should be bent slightly.



2. If you are struggling with the curvature of your left pinky, check the position of your left thumb. It should be pointing between the register key and the beam of the thumb key. If it's sitting horizontally, the rest of your hand will immediately be positioned too high and you will have to straighten your pinky to reach the keys.



Once you feel reasonably confident with your hand position, set your metronome to 60, and begin practicing. It's important with these trills to remain mindful, even though they can get boring quite quickly: you want to listen for evenness of execution and a constant tone throughout. So much of the mechanism of playing the clarinet is contained within the practice of these trills, so it's worth taking some time every day to practice them.



*(Full exercises notated at the end of this PDF)*

Jean Jean writes crescendi as you arrive at the change of note but I would suggest first practicing all of these trills at your loudest dynamic. There is nothing more important for developing your tone than practicing at loud dynamics, and I highly recommend taking any chance you get to do so in big rooms: really fill that room with your fluid, beautiful trills!

Halfway down the last page of these trills, he writes above a Cb to Bb trill “ne déplacer que le pouce et l’index (M.G.)”, meaning “only move the thumb and index finger (L.H.)”. I find that to have good intonation on the Bb, it’s necessary to *also* release the middle finger of the left hand, but try it out and see what works for you.

From here, you can gradually increase the speed, but I would recommend occasionally reverting to the slowest speed to check in with your tone, breathing, and hand position.

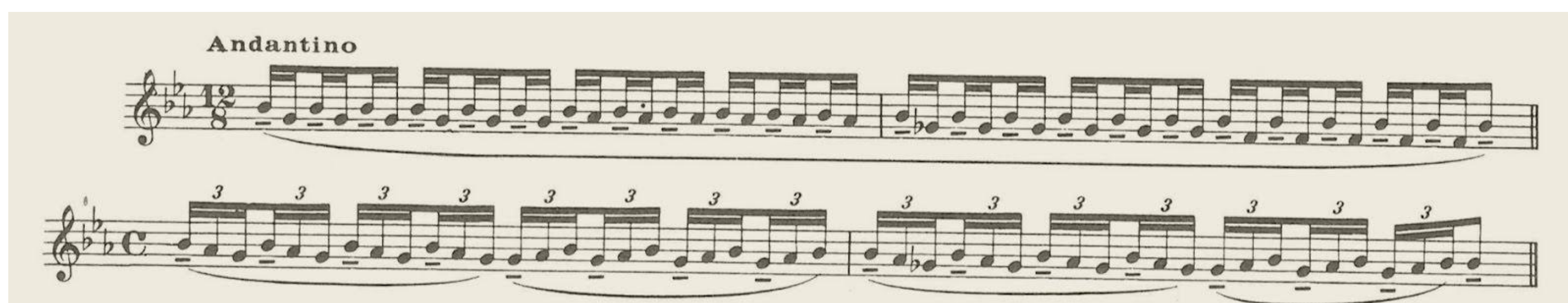
# Etude 2: Special Work for the Left Hand

Now that you've worked on the position of your left hand through your trill exercises, you will see the benefits of that work as you improve the strength and dexterity of your left hand through this etude.

Every line of this etude offers unique challenges so I would recommend from the beginning to take each line as it comes, rather than trying to or assuming that if you can play the first line, you will be able to tackle the whole etude at once. It is also very long, and I feel it's more important to tackle a few lines, working on the challenges associated with those lines, than to bash through the whole thing, rushing and developing bad habits.

If you are working on improving your control of the first register break, you will find the first 8 lines of this exercise helpful for developing good finger control. You'll find a great course on how to develop your control of the two register breaks on tonebase Clarinet, and these first exercises form a small part of that, so here's your chance to get a step ahead on that course!

Right from the start you are working on finger rolls when you get to the Bb to Gb tremolo in measure two: here, it might again make sense to practice with a mirror: you want your finger to slide quickly from the A key to that first hole, making sure that the fleshiest part of your finger really smooshes into that hole.



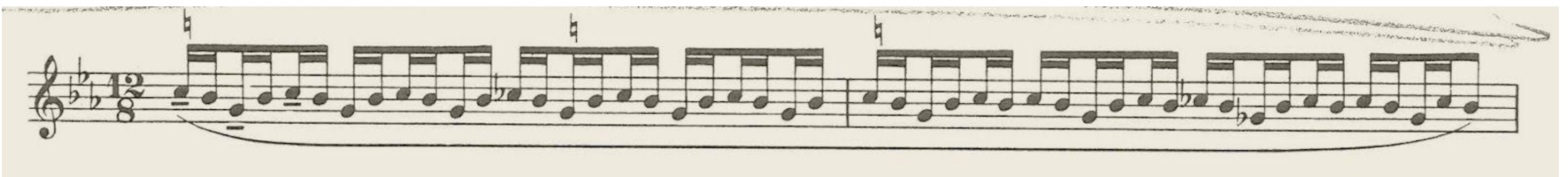
Jean Jean extends this work, by giving us some big leaps to play, particularly in lines 3–6. In line 6, he asks for challenging leaps between throat Bb and the octave below; here you're going to really work on this roll in the bigger context of these leaps. Just imagine how this practice is going to help you as you work towards a smooth chromatic scale across the break!



Speaking of chromaticism, he introduces more of that in line 7: make sure you're using your chromatic side F# keys: these first two beats can easily get muddled so again, practice slowly, use this time to really turn on your ears and listen for a controlled, smooth legato.



A nice technique for practicing the fifth line on the second page of this study is to actually leave your right hand down. Only your pinky finger needs to change, from the C key to the B key – the only point this doesn't work is when you arrive at the Gb (as then having your right hand down will make that Gb very flat!). This can really help if you are working on crossing the break: try to make sure that you aren't changing anything in your embouchure or throat (again, the mirror is your friend!).



Jean Jean goes on in this etude to give you exercises for every possible movement of that left hand. There is a lifetime of technique work here, so take it slow and try to just enjoy the time with the instrument.

Once you get to the Meno section, prioritise the movement of your left hand as you're crossing the break: in most of these patterns you will be able to keep all of your right hand on the keys, minimising any movement in that hand whatsoever.

# Etude 2: Special Work for the Right Hand

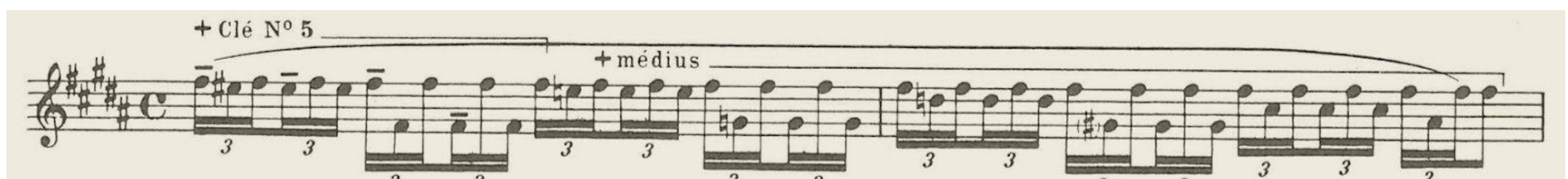
While working on these exercises for the right hand, try to think about relaxation through the palm. A nice way to practice this is to take a tennis ball (or a raquet ball, if you've got a smaller hand than me!), and place it into the palm of your hand. Don't grip it, don't even really hold it, just palm the ball and see how naturally it fits there, without any strain. From here you can also notice how beautifully and naturally the fingers are curved.

When you're practicing the first four lines of this exercise, go back to thinking about the fleshy part of your finger smooshing into the tone holes as you execute these increasingly large intervals. On the third line, note how Jean Jean asks you to switch between using the chromatic F# key (Clé No. 5) and your middle finger F# (médius), helping you to develop real facility with these two chromatic keys.

When you reach the C# at the end of the first line, you'll feel some extra resistance from the clarinet, so this is a real opportunity to breathe into that, trying to make the F#-D# as fluid and legato as the F#-C#.

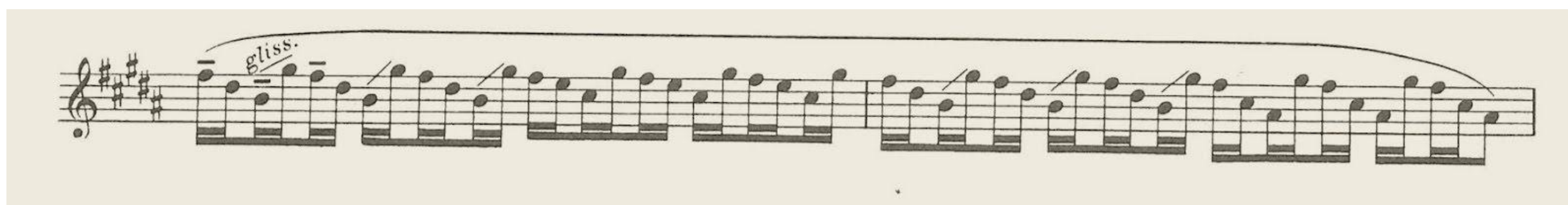


For line 5, I would once again go back to the mirror; when you execute the leap from the F# in your clarion range to the octave below, check to make sure that nothing is moving and your chin is staying nice and flat.

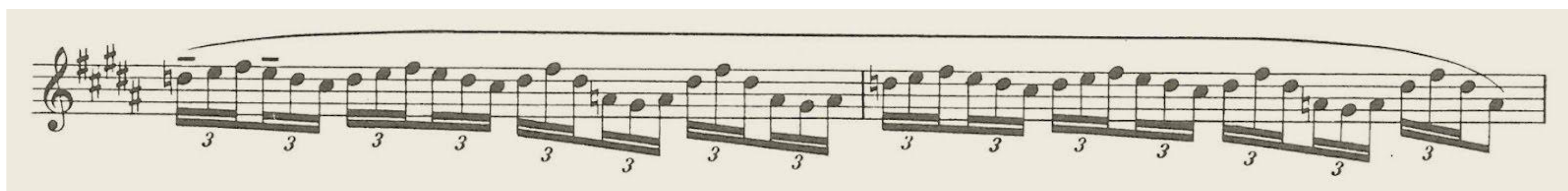


Please also do note that there is a mistake in the edition, where the last line at the bottom of this page is then repeated at the top of the next page (the same error is repeated again at the bottom of page 11).

On the third line of the second page, Jean Jean writes 'gliss' between the B and the G# – he doesn't intend an actual glissando, here he's pointing out the particular challenge of moving from the left hand B (which you've had to take unless you have a clarinet with a right hand D#) to the G# above. It's a little tricky to describe in text how to do this movement (which is why I'm so excited that soon we'll be able to show you this and so much more on tonebase!), but you just need to experiment a little bit with a fast sliding motion between these two keys.



When you're practising the 10th line on the second page of these studies, keep your right hand down when playing the A to G# triplets at the end of both measures.



Jean Jean goes on in this etude to give you exercises for every possible movement of that left hand. There is a lifetime of technique work here, so take it slow and try to just enjoy the time with the instrument.

Once you get to the Meno section, prioritise the movement of your left hand as you're crossing the break: in most of these patterns you will be able to keep all of your right hand on the keys, minimising any movement in that hand whatsoever.

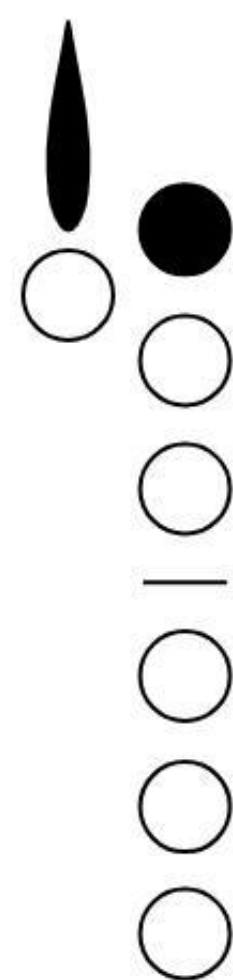
In the first line of the *Meno* section, Jean Jean writes '+ médius' for the A#. If you've not used this fingering before, it might be a bit confusing, but it's one of the few 'cheat' fingerings for that pitch.

For this fingering to work it is important that your clarinet is in good working order (this one not working can often be the first sign that things aren't working as they should) and your bridge key should be perfectly aligned between the two joints of the instrument.

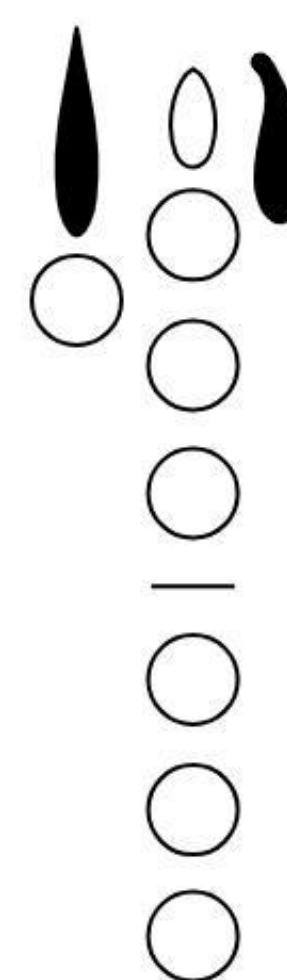


On the following lines of the *Meno* section, there are three other 'cheat' fingerings for the high C#, D and D# that you might find come in handy to facilitate quick movements – these fingerings are not in tune, but once you have worked up the speed you will find that you can't tell. The C# and D# fingerings I'll show in diagrams below but the D is the same as your open G – i.e., no fingers are down!

**C#**



**D#**



# Conclusion

As you can see, there's something to talk about and work on in every line of these fantastic studies, and I hope you can see what a difference they will make to your finger dexterity and overall technique. In general I would say that with the right and left hand etudes, the quality of your legato and your airflow is even more important than the speed you can play these at, so take them slow and learn to love them: you'll be working on these for your entire clarinet life!

I look forward to hearing about how these are going for you and to meeting you soon in the tonebase community forums!

## About the Author

Born in Canada, clarinetist and Clarinet Lead for tonebase, Heather Roche, lives in London. Recently referred to as “The Queen of Extended Techniques” and “a figurehead for contemporary music performance practice” on BBC Radio 3, she appears regularly as a soloist and chamber musician at European festivals, including the London Contemporary Music Festival, Acht Brücken (Cologne), Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik (Germany), Musica Nova (Helsinki), MusikFest (Berlin), BachFest (Leipzig), Manifeste (Paris), etc.



She was a founding member the Cologne-based ensemble, hand werk, and currently plays with Apartment House (London). She has a longstanding duo collaboration with the German accordionist Eva Zöllner, with whom she has recently performed at the Venice Biennale and Mixtur Festival (Barcelona), as well as on tour in Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and Sweden. She has also worked with the Musikfabrik (Cologne), the WDR Symphony Orchestra (Cologne), the London Symphony Orchestra, the London Sinfonietta, Mimitabu (Sweden), and the Riot Ensemble (London), among others.

She wrote her doctoral thesis at the University of Huddersfield and her blog on writing for the clarinet attracts 90,000 viewers each year. Her debut solo CD, Ptelea, is out on HCR/NMC, and her CD featuring the clarinet works of Christopher Fox, Headlong, appears on Métier. She also records regularly for the another timbre label.

# tonebase Clarinet – Coming Summer '24

We hope you have enjoyed this guide on finger dexterity! Ready for more helpful clarinet resources?

Stay tuned for the release of tonebase Clarinet! Over the next few months, we'll be sharing updates ahead of the launch including new artists added our roster, courses we're filming, and more. Whether you play professionally or just for your own enjoyment, there's going to be something for you on tonebase!

Feel free to write to [team@tonebase.co](mailto:team@tonebase.co) with questions, comments, or corrections. We can't wait to share with you all what we've been working on!



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# VADE-MECUM DU CLARINETTISTE

## SIX ÉTUDES SPÉCIALES

pour l'assouplissement rapide des doigts et de la langue.



PAUL JEANJEAN

### I. - TRILLES SPÉCIAUX

A exécuter une première fois à 4 temps (Poco Andante:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ) et une deuxième fois à 2 temps (Allegro:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ).

Observer bien exactement les nuances.

Le doigté indiqué n'est pas toujours celui que l'on devrait prendre pour triller, mais il répond au but réel de cet exercice qui consiste à délier tous les doigts.

Reprises facultatives toutes les 7 mesures.

#### I. - SPECIAL TRILLS

To be executed on a first occasion at 4 measures (Poco Andante:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ) and a second occasion at 2 measures (Allegro:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ).

Pay very careful attention for reproducing gradations exactly.

The fingering indicated is not always that which ought to be taken for trilling, but it answers the real aim of the exercise, that is, it loosens all the fingers.

Optional repeats every 7 bars.

#### I. - TRINOS ESPECIALES

Ejecútense la primera vez en 4 tiempos (Poco Andante:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ) y la segunda vez en 2 tiempos (Allegro:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ).

Obsérvense bien los matices.

La pulsación indicada no es siempre la que debiera emplearse para trillar, pero satisface el verdadero fin de este ejercicio que consiste en dar soltura a los dedos.

Repetición voluntaria cada 7 compases.

#### I. - SPEZIELLE TRILLER

Das erste Mal im Viervierteltakt zu üben (Poco Andante:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ). Ein zweites Mal im Zweivierteltakt zu üben (Allegro:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ).

Man beachte die Feinheiten ganz genau.

Der vorgeschriebene Fingersatz entspricht nicht immer demjenigen, welcher zum Trillern angewendet werden sollte, er erfüllt jedoch den wirklichen Zweck dieser Uebung, alle Finger zu lockern.

Fakultative Wiederholung nach jeweils 7 Takten.

#### I. - TRILLI SPECIALI

Da eseguirsi la prima volta a quattro tempi (Poco Andante:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ) ed una seconda volta a 2 tempi (Allegro:  $\text{♩} = 60$ ).

Si raccomanda d'osservare scrupolosamente le gradazioni.

Il tasto indicato non è sempre quello, che si dovrebbe esegui-  
re per trillare, ma esso risponde al vero scopo di quest'esercizio che è quello di snodare tutte le dita.

Riprese facoltative ogni 7 misure.

#### Allegro (à 2 temps)

**+ à droite**

**+ sans lâcher la clé N° 4 (SOL #)**

**+ sans lâcher la clé N° 4 (LA b)**

**+ sans lâcher la clé N° 4 (SOL #)**

**+ Clé N° 5 (M. D.)**

**+ Clé N° 5**      **+ avec le médius (M. D.)**      **+ Clé N° 5**      **Clé N° 5 +**

**+ sans lâcher la clé N° 5, ni soulever l'index (M. D.)**      **+ médius**      **+ Clé N° 5**      **+ sans lâcher la clé N° 5**

The page contains ten systems of musical notation, each consisting of two staves. The exercises are marked with 'sf' (sforzando) and include various fingering and technique instructions in French. The exercises involve chromatic scales and specific key changes (clés). The instructions are as follows:

- System 1: **+ à droite**
- System 2: **+ sans lâcher la clé N° 4 (SOL #)**
- System 3: **+ sans lâcher la clé N° 4 (LA b)**
- System 4: **+ sans lâcher la clé N° 4 (SOL #)**
- System 5: **+ Clé N° 5 (M. D.)**
- System 6: **+ Clé N° 5**      **+ avec le médius (M. D.)**      **+ Clé N° 5**      **Clé N° 5 +**
- System 7: **+ sans lâcher la clé N° 5, ni soulever l'index (M. D.)**      **+ médius**      **+ Clé N° 5**      **+ sans lâcher la clé N° 5**
- System 8: (No instruction)
- System 9: (No instruction)
- System 10: (No instruction)

+ sans lâcher la clé N° 6 (Do# M. G.)  
 + Clé N° 7, sans lâcher la clé N° 6 (Réb)  
 + sans lâcher la clé N° 6 (Do#) + Clé N° 7 (M. D.)  
 + Clé N° 7<sup>bis</sup> (M. G.) + index (M. D.) + Clé N° 7 (M. D.)  
 + sans lâcher la clé N° 7 + Clé N° 7 + index + Clé N° 7  
 + index  
 + en soulevant le pouce  
 + Clés N° 7 et 8 (M. D.)  
 + à vide  
 + Clés N° 7 et 8 (M. D.) + index (M. G.) + Clés N° 7 et 8  
 + sans lâcher les clés N° 7 et 8 + Clés N° 7 et 8 + index + Clés N° 7 et 8 + sans lâcher les clés N° 7 et 8

+ Clé N° 10 index (M. G.)  
 + avec la 1<sup>re</sup> phalange de l'index (M. G.)  
 sans lâcher la clé N° 9 (2<sup>e</sup> phalange)  
 + avec le pouce et l'index (M. G.)  
 + avec la 1<sup>re</sup> phalange de l'index (M. G.)  
 sans lâcher la clé N° 9 (2<sup>e</sup> phalange) + avec le pouce et l'index (M. G.)  
 + ne déplacer que le pouce et l'index (M. G.)  
 + ne déplacer que le pouce et l'index (M. G.)  
 + avec le pouce et l'index (M. G.)  
 (3 et 1)(3 et 1)  
 (3 et 1)(3 et 1)  
 + sans lâcher la clé N° 1 (M. G.)  
 + sans lâcher la clé N° 3 (M. D.)

## II. TRAVAIL SPÉCIAL DE LA MAIN GAUCHE

Le pouce et l'index de la main gauche seront ici particulièrement exercés car de leur souplesse et de leur agilité dépend toute bonne exécution.

Observer soigneusement l'*inflexion-liée* marquée par un *tiret* sur certaines notes pour souligner mieux les divisions alternativement binaires ou ternaires des temps et permettre un contrôle rigoureux du mouvement des doigts.

Reprises facultatives toutes les deux mesures.

### II. SPECIAL WORK FOR THE LEFT HAND

In this particular case the thumb and first finger of the left hand will be particularly exercised because all good execution depends on their agility and suppleness.

Pay particular attention to the *tied-inflexion* marked by a *dash* on certain notes to emphasize the alternative binary or ternary divisions of the time better and enable a strict control of the movement of the fingers.

Optional repeats every two bars.

### II. TRABAJO ESPECIAL DE LA MANO IZQUIERDA

El pulgar y el índice de la mano izquierda se ejercerán particularmente en este caso, pues de su agilidad y suavidad depende toda buena ejecución.

Se observará meticulosamente la *inflexión-ligada* marcada con un guión encima de ciertas notas para hacer resaltar más las divisiones alternadamente binarias o ternarias de los tiempos y permitir riguroso dominio del movimiento de los dedos.

Repetición voluntaria cada dos compases.

### II. SONDERÜBUNG FÜR DIE LINKE HAND

Diese Übung beansprucht insbesondere den Daumen und den Zeigefinger der linken Hand, deren Gelenkigkeit und Geschmeidigkeit Vorbedingung für jedes gute Spiel ist.

Man beachte insbesondere die auf gewissen Noten durch einen kurzen *Bindestrich* angedeutete *gebundene Vortrags - Art* zur besseren Markierung der abwechselnd doppelten oder dreifachen Teilung der Tempi. (binäre oder ternäre Tempi).

Fakultative Wiederholung nach jeweils zwei Takten.

### II. ESERCIZIO SPECIALE DELLA MANO SINISTRA

Il pollice e l'indice della mano sinistra vengono esercitati qui in modo speciale, perchè ogni buona esecuzione dipende dalla loro agilità.

Si raccomanda d'osservare scrupolosamente l'*inflessione legata* segnata da un *tiretto* su determinate note per marcare meglio le divisioni alternativamente binarie o ternarie dei tempi e permettere un controllo rigoroso del movimento delle dita.

Riprese facoltative ogni due misure.

#### Andantino

D'une manière générale, soulevez le moins de doigts possible pour l'émission du Si $\flat$ , deuxième registre.  
 + sans soulever la clé N° 9 etc. etc. + avec le pouce et les 2 index

Clé N° 9 +

+ Clé N° 5 (M.D.)

$\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 72$ 



**Meno** (Décomposez)



8

*a Tempo*

*+ médius (M. D.)*

A. L. 17,190

### III.—TRAVAIL SPÉCIAL DE LA MAIN DROITE

Préparation générale à toutes sortes de traits difficiles résultant de l'emploi des 8 clés actionnées par les petits doigts.

Mêmes remarques d'exécution que pour l'Exercice N° 2 et reprises toutes les deux mesures.

### III.—SPECIAL WORK FOR THE RIGHT HAND

General preparation for all sorts of difficult passages resulting from the use of 8 keys actuated by the little fingers.

Same remarks as for execution of Exercise N<sup>o</sup> 2 and repeats every two bars.

### III.\_TRABAJO ESPECIAL DE LA MANO DERECHA

Preparación general para toda clase de trozos difíciles resultantes del empleo de las 8 llaves accionadas por los dedos meñiques.

Iguals observacions dades per el exercici N<sup>o</sup> 2 y repetició cada dos compasses.

### III. — SONDERÜBUNG FÜR DIE RECHTE HAND

Allgemeine Vorbereitung auf alle möglichen schwierigen Stellen, die durch Betätigung der 8 Klappen vermittelt der kleinen Finger entstehen.

Gleiche Bemerkungen hinsichtlich der Ausführung wie unter N<sup>o</sup> 2 und Wiederholungen nach jeweils zwei Takten.

### III. — ESERCIZIO SPECIALE DELLA MANO DESTRA

Preparazione generale ad ogni sorta di passi difficili risultanti dall'impiego delle 8 chiavi azionate dai mignoli.

Medesime osservazioni che per l'Esercizio N° 4 per quanto concerne l'esecuzione.

66

## Andantino

Les Feuilles mortes

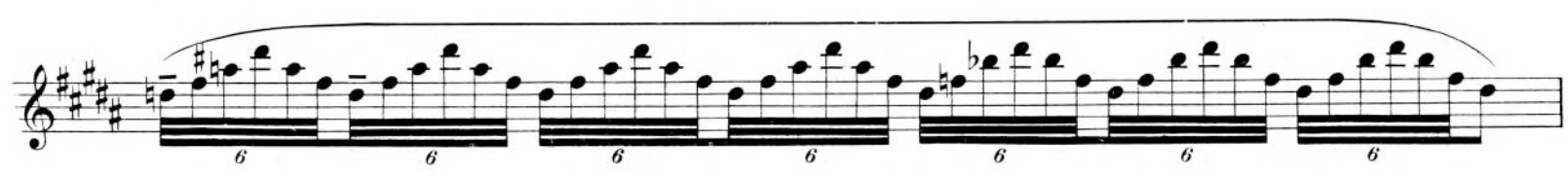
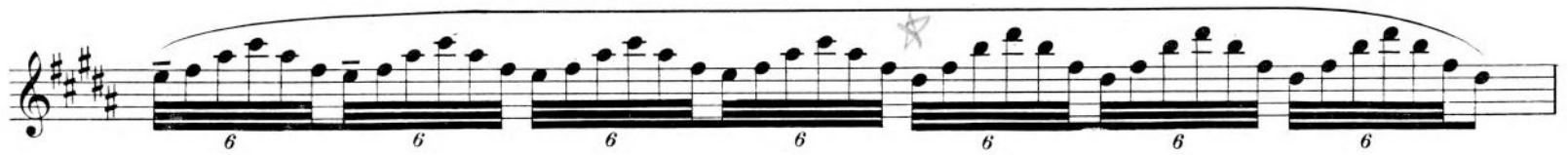
Les feuilles mortes, d'automne, tombent sur les tombes.

Index + Clé N° 5      idem      idem      + Clé N° 5

+ Clé A (M. D.)



+ médius (M. D.)



I<sup>o</sup> Tempo