

A guide to graduate, professional and vintage Clarinets (Jul 2023)

Graduate Clarinets

'Graduate' is a term used to describe instruments that are a step up from advanced student instruments. They are aimed at students aiming to study beyond grade 8; professional teachers; and the serious amateur performer. Graduate Clarinets are always made of wood and it is usually possible to buy a matching 'A' natural Clarinet to make a pair, (most of the 'Advanced student' instruments are also made of wood but it is not possible to buy a matching 'A' natural instrument - with the exception of the Buffet E11/12 series).

Whereas 'Advanced Student' instruments are basically wooden copies of the manufacturer's plastic student instrument, Graduate instruments are superior instruments, usually with undercut tone holes and a subtler bore design, and thus they produce a better sound. The mechanism on a graduate Clarinet is often built to the same quality as the manufacturer's professional instruments but professional instruments are usually made of a superior grade of wood. It is now common for graduate models to offer the option of an Eb lever (a 4th lever for the left-hand little finger for notes G#/D# [Ab/Eb]) this extra lever is not essential but can be useful on occasion.

The main currently available graduate Clarinets are: the **Backun 'Protégé'**, the **Buffet E13**; the **Hanson T5** (series); the **Leblanc (USA) 511 Serenade** (replacing the 'Bliss' models) the **Selmer (Seles) 'Prologue'**; the **Uebel 'Advantage'**; and the **Yamaha Ycl650**. If a player is used to playing the manufacturer's corresponding student model then they often stick with the same manufacturer, for example players of the old Buffet B12 often progress to the Buffet E13 (possibly via the Buffet E11) however players should consider all available models as potential instruments to progress to.

Professional Performers' Clarinets

These instruments are made using the best quality wood. The wood will go through several stages of quality control: when it is cut into blanks; when it is drilled and turned; when it is bored and reamed; when the tone holes are drilled and undercut; and when the mechanism is fitted. At each stage only the best pieces will be selected for the professional instrument, wood that does not match these exacting standards may still be usable for graduate or advanced student instruments.

A lot of time is spent reaming the bore to the manufacturer's design. Tone-holes are undercut and usually finished by hand to balance the 'voicing' of the instrument; professional instruments should have a consistent tone throughout the entire compass of the instrument and each note should 'speak' easily. Professional Clarinets are fitted with a mechanism that has been manufactured to a higher tolerance than would be seen on a student Clarinet. Pillars are usually fitted to the wood by more secure means and the keys are a better fit to the screws and rods. This means that there is less 'play' on the keys i.e. they do not wobble. With less play in the mechanism the Clarinet feels more 'positive' and the pads seat more reliably, also there is less noise from the mechanism and the mechanism lasts longer before it starts to wear. The keys on a professional Clarinet are finished to a higher standard than on a student Clarinet and better plated (either Nickel or Silver).

Manufacturers often make more than one professional model. These models can vary in terms of their tone - which is due to the wood (or compound material used) and the bore design (including barrel and bell variations); they can vary in terms of their styling - which is due to the wood (or compound material used) and the finish of the key-work (plating etc); and they can vary in terms of the mechanism fitted - there may be extra features like additional keys (the most common being the additional G#/D#(Ab/Eb) lever for left hand little finger) or extra adjustment screws.

The main factory manufacturers of professional clarinets are: **Backun** with the 'Q series' model now being their professional entry level model; **Buffet** with their main three series of professional clarinet based on differences in bore design - the 'R13' series (standard entry level 'R13', 'R13 Prestige', 'Tosca'); the 'RC' series' (standard entry level 'RC', 'RC Prestige', 'Divine'); the 'Gala'

series (standard entry level 'Gala', 'Tradition', and 'Legende'; and 2 other models currently in manufacture – 'Festival' and 'BCXXI' (with low Eb key)); **Hanson** with the T6 series (professional entry level) and the T7 series (with wood and bore options including 'English large bore'); **Patricola** with the 'Virtuoso' range (when available); **RZ** (Rericha-Zlesak) with numerous models; **Selmer (Paris)** with five professional models currently in production, the entry level (**Selmer Seles**) Presence and the **Selmer** Privilege, Recital, Signature and Muse models; **Uebel** with their 6 models 'Reve', 'Preference', 'Romanza', 'Superior', 'Excellence' and 'Zenit'; and **Yamaha** with 3 series' of models - the CX, SE ('VR' and 'artist' models), and CS ('VR', 'VR-asp' and 'G' models). Note that **Leblanc** (owned by Conn-Selmer) now seems to focus on student and harmony clarinets so the professional models 'Concerto' and 'Cadenza' are no longer in production.

It is always worth visiting the manufacturer's own websites to see what models they make and to check the specifications for those models, and bear in mind some shops might have models of clarinet in their stock that are no longer in production.

If a player is used to playing the manufacturer's corresponding student or graduate model then they often stick with the same manufacturer - for example, players of the Buffet E13 often progress to the Buffet R13 or RC models however players should consider all available models as potential instruments to progress to. There are also individual makers making professional Clarinets.

There have been many models of wooden Clarinet originally intended as student, graduate, or professional instruments that are no longer manufactured. The student models are usually of poor quality; however, the graduate and professional models, which were manufactured to higher standards, are still desirable instruments. These older models of wooden Clarinet are sometimes referred to as 'vintage' Clarinets. These instruments may have been made to a slightly lower standard in comparison with today's production methods, and sometimes their intonation is not as precise as current models, however it is the tone that they produce that players are interested in.

Vintage instruments have to be checked for the effects of age. The chief areas that require scrutiny are the wood, the plating on the keys, and the mechanism. The wood should be sound (although its exterior surface will probably show marks etc) and the plating should be reasonable (although it will probably be worn). It may be necessary to get a repairer to investigate the mechanism to see if it will operate reasonably well (once serviced).

Play-testing a Clarinet before purchase

Before testing a new Clarinet it is best for the player to ensure their existing Clarinet is playing well. Commonly players compare a new Clarinet (which should be in good condition) to their own Clarinet (which possibly is not); instead of comparing the quality of the Clarinets they are actually comparing the condition of the two Clarinets. If the player's Clarinet is in good condition (i.e. it fully stripped down and serviced less than a year ago) then they can truly assess the differences between the instruments.

Ensuring their existing instrument is playing well is even more important when testing mouthpieces (and barrels) – a player might select a mouthpiece because it alleviates a problem that would otherwise be solved by having the instrument serviced, what is more, once the instrument is serviced the player might find the mouthpiece disagreeable.

A player who is trying out graduate, professional, or vintage Clarinets will already own a mouthpiece. The player should start by testing a new Clarinet with the manufacturer's recommended mouthpiece (e.g. a Yamaha mouthpiece for a Yamaha instrument) but bear in mind that the particular mouthpiece supplied with the instrument might not have the same tip opening/length of lay as the player's existing mouthpiece. Mouthpieces usually come in a range of tip openings/lengths of lay and the player should request a mouthpiece with a tip opening/length of lay as close as possible to their own mouthpiece – this way the mouthpiece will be correct for the instrument and will feel more or less the same to the player. If the recommended mouthpiece is not available with a tip opening/length of lay similar to the player's existing mouthpiece then the player will have to use the supplied mouthpiece and try harder or softer reeds to compensate for the difference.

If the player's mouthpiece is a professional mouthpiece and its bore happens to match the bore of the barrel of the new instrument then the instrument can be tested with this mouthpiece as well. If the player is having difficulty with the instrument, even if they feel at ease with the mouthpiece, it could be down to how well the instrument is working (bear in mind that sometimes even brand new instruments do not work properly).

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