

A guide to graduate, professional and vintage Bassoons (Aug 2019)

Graduate Bassoons

'Graduate' is a term used to describe instruments that are a step up from student instruments but are not professional level instruments. They are aimed at students studying beyond grade 8, professional teachers, and the serious amateur performer.

Graduate Bassoons are usually made of wood (with the exception of the Fox III and IV models) and have a crook lock key and high D key as well as all the alternate keys and trill keys of a standard student instrument (including the alternative G# key on the back of the boot joint, the alternative F# and Bb keys on the front of the boot joint, the 2nd register C# trill key on the front of the boot joint, the 2nd finger F# trill key on the front of the wing joint, and the vented Eb operated by left hand finger III via a link to the Thumb C# key) – this amounts to the common 25 keyed instrument. In addition, these instruments often have a 'double C' key on the Long joint – this is not usually counted as an extra key because it is just an extra touch-piece that has been added to the already existing Low C key.

Graduate instruments will also have most of the design features (described in the article on student Bassoon design) which reduce problems with the mechanism and body of the instrument such as: locked pillars, tenon rings, metal-lined boot-joint socket, plastic-lined bore, and lined tone-holes.

They may also have some of the following extra mechanism: high E on Wing joint (for a left hand finger); high F on wing joint (for a left hand finger); high F#/G # trill on the Wing joint (for a left hand finger); Eb trill on Wing joint (for a left hand finger) – note some retailers confuse this with the vented Eb; right hand thumb key to trill Ab/Bb; C#/D# linkage on Bass joint to ease movement of fingers between touch-pieces; high A to crook key linkage. Note that the location of the high E, F, and E/F# trill touch-pieces varies from one Bassoon to another.

Graduate Bassoons often have a greater number of 'rollers' than student instruments (although there is no such thing as a standard number of rollers on a student instrument). These rollers are fitted to the touch-pieces of adjacent keys to ease the movement of the thumb or finger from one key to another

The following manufacturers graduate Bassoons are currently available in the UK: **Adler, Fox/Renard, Kronalt, Mollenhauer, Monnig, Moosman, Puchner, Schreiber, and Wolf.**

Fox are unique in manufacturing their graduate and professional models with a long bore (standard length) or a short bore (approximately 7mm–10mm shorter than the standard length). The Long bore instrument is said to have better intonation and a warm round tone making it blend well for chamber and orchestral work, the short bore is said to have a more open tone quality and more flexibility and is more suitable to solo work; some players say that the difference is subjective and depends more on the bocal that is used. Fox also manufacture a 'thick walled' instrument which enables the instrument to have larger tone-holes and a more powerful sound.

Any particular model of Bassoon by any manufacturer may exist in slightly different versions according to where the instrument is sold and so instruments bearing the same model name or number are not always identical! When comparing prices of instruments it is important to determine exactly what the specification of the instrument is and the only truly reliable way is to examine the Bassoon yourself (or possibly to ask the retailer to take some photos of the actual instrument they have in stock and send them to you). Do not rely on retailers' descriptions – these are very often incorrect; do not rely on website photos – they are frequently photos of the wrong model, even manufacturers' own websites can be incorrect.

Professional Performers' Bassoons

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 student instruments.

A lot of time is spent reaming the bore to the manufacturer's design. Tone holes are 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 Bassoons are fitted with a mechanism that has been manufactured to a higher tolerance than would be seen on less expensive instruments. This means that there is less 'play' on the keys i.e. they do not wobble. With less play in the mechanism the instrument feels more 'positive' and the pads seat more reliably; also there is less noise from the mechanism and the mechanism last longer before it starts to wear.

Professional instruments will have all of the design features which reduce problems with the mechanism and body of the instrument such as: locked pillars, tenon rings, metal-lined boot-joint socket, plastic-lined bore, and lined tone-holes. In addition to the keys that can be found on a graduate instrument there can be other additional mechanism such as extra trill keys, extra linkages and extra touch-pieces - indeed the manufacturer Heckel boast that if a customer can describe an additional piece of mechanism that they want then the Heckel factory will make it for them.

The following manufacturers professional Bassoons are currently available in the UK: **Fox/Renard, Monnig, Moosman, Puchner, Schreiber,** and **Yamaha**. The most prestigious name in Bassoon manufacture is still **Heckel** but their Bassoons have to be ordered direct from their factory in Germany.

Vintage Bassoons

Unlike other woodwind instruments the tone of a Bassoon is thought to improve as the instrument ages, this is said to be because the Maple hardens over time. These older models of Bassoon are sometimes referred to as 'Vintage Bassoons'. The mechanism on these instruments may be of a slightly lower 'build quality' mechanism compared to today's instruments and sometimes their intonation is not as inherently good as today's instruments however it is the tone that they produce that players are interested in.

Vintage instruments have to be checked for the effects of age. Bassoons are usually made of Maple, and although this wood does harden with age it is still significantly softer than the Blackwood usually used to make other woodwind instruments and so more prone to wear and tear; Bassoons tend to have a shorter lifespan than other woodwind instruments unless well looked after. The chief areas that require scrutiny are the wood (particularly at the bottom of the Boot Joint where water damage can occur), the plating on the keys, and the mechanism (particularly if affected by loose pillars which can twist over time due to the softness of Maple). The wood should be sound (although it is acceptable for the finish to show some wear and tear, it should not be denaturing); the plating should be reasonable (although it will be worn); and the mechanism, once serviced, should operate reasonably well.

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