

A beginner's guide to student Clarinets (May 2021)

Although Clarinets are classed as woodwind instruments, most modern student Clarinets are made of plastic or other synthetic materials. Older student instruments and modern advanced student, graduate, and professional instruments are usually made of wood (which helps give them a richer tone).

There are many different sizes of clarinet that make up the Clarinet family. Beginners usually start on the most common member of the family – the 'B flat soprano' Clarinet (although small children might start on a 'Kinder' clarinet – see below) it is so common that people usually just call it *the* Clarinet. Other sizes of Clarinet are best left until the B flat soprano has been mastered.

There have been some attempts by manufacturers to make specific children's versions of the Clarinet either with fewer keys, or of a smaller size, or both – these are usually called 'Kinder' clarinets. Traditionally, children have started Recorder at the age of 7 or 8 before moving onto the Clarinet at age 9 or 10 (if they choose to); a particularly small child might need a special sling to support the weight of a Clarinet. Children who are ultimately interested in playing Saxophone have usually started on the Clarinet (or Flute) until their fingers are big enough to reach all the keys of the Saxophone and they are able to support the weight of the instrument (although the new Trevor James Alpha Sax means they could now move from Recorder straight to Saxophone).

The parts of a (standard) Clarinet

- The **mouthpiece** - onto which the **reed** is fastened using the **ligature**.
- The **barrel** - a short tube to join the mouthpiece to the top joint.
- The **top-joint** - which has a corked **tenon** at either end and a lot of metal **keys** (which are operated by the player so that the **pads** cover or uncover the various **tone-holes** to make different musical notes).
- The **bottom-joint** - which has one corked tenon and also some keys.
- The **bell** - which fits onto the end of the bottom joint.

The metal keys on the Clarinet make up the mechanism of the instrument. The keys are supported between metal pillars on screws or rods. Most of the keys have a wire spring that keeps them held open or held shut. Most of the keys also have a key cup; a pad is glued into the key cup to cover the tone-hole. The keys also have cork or felt glued on to function as a stop so that the keys open the correct amount.

The pads, corks, and felts on the instrument (and also the adhesives which keep these items in place) deteriorate over time. On older or poorer quality instruments the mechanism itself starts to wear and the keys can become loose or jammed. Clarinets need to be regularly serviced to remain in good playing order – if you are considering buying a second-hand instrument then get it checked over before purchase to make sure it is in reasonable condition.

The mouthpiece is the part of the instrument that has most influence on the tuning and tone of an instrument. The reed is held on the mouthpiece by means of a ligature and that can also influence the sound produced.

Although not a part of the instrument there are two other vital accessories – the case and the mouthpiece cap. A good fitting case protects the instrument during transport - a poor fitting case will allow damage to the instrument! The mouthpiece cap protects the mouthpiece if it gets dropped (and it often does) and also protects reeds if they are left fastened to the mouthpiece.

Special Clarinets for children ('Kinder' clarinets)

As stated earlier children usually start Recorder at the age of 7 or 8 before progressing onto the Clarinet at the age of 9 or 10, and there are a number of very good reasons for this: firstly it is best for children to wait until they have their front adult teeth before learning the Clarinet; secondly the Clarinet is significantly heavier than a Recorder and therefore difficult for children to hold; thirdly because a (plastic) Recorder is a far more robust than a Clarinet and will withstand handling by a young child (assembling a clarinet can be difficult for a young child and this is main cause of damage to the instrument); and lastly because a Recorder is a small fraction of the cost of any Clarinet.

That having been said, some young children are just not interested in the Recorder but are fired up by the Clarinet and some manufacturers make 'Kinder' clarinets especially for young children. There are several types of Kinder clarinet currently available.

The smallest, lightest, and cheapest is the plastic keyless '**Dood**' (in the key of C) which is about the size of a descant Recorder but fitted with a reed (technically this isn't actually a clarinet but a primitive Chalameau). This instrument is designed as a starter instrument as an alternative to starting on the Recorder but in all aspects it is not as good as a Recorder – it is more expensive, more difficult to play, less robust, and has a very limited range of notes. Its fingering does not match the clarinet (or any other wind instrument that a child might progress to). The only thing it does have going for it is it is a reed instrument and prepares the child to play a reed instrument – but if the child is inspired to play a particular reed instrument (e.g clarinet) then I would suggest it is better to feed the inspiration by giving the child an instrument that looks and sounds like a clarinet.

The next cheapest is the wooden **Jupiter JRS 700 Saxonette 'Chalmeau'** (in the key of C) which is about the size of a descant Recorder but fitted with a reed (this instrument is what it claims to be – a type of Chalumeau). This Chalumeau type instrument is better than the Dood, in that it has fully chromatic range of just over two octaves, however it is still more expensive, more difficult to play, and less robust than a Recorder. It might have a useful role as an instrument to complement Recorders in an ensemble, or as a 'bridge' from Recorder to a reed instrument, however its fingering does not match the clarinet (or any other wind instrument that a child might progress to). If the child is inspired to play a particular reed instrument (e.g clarinet) then I would suggest it is better to feed the inspiration by giving the child an instrument that looks and sounds like a clarinet.

The next cheapest and lightest is the **Nuvo Clarineo (2.0)** clarinet – this is a plastic one-piece clarinet with reduced key-work (the duplicate keys found on a standard clarinet have been removed), that is lightweight, easy to assemble, and in the key of C; it is relatively cheap (at around £120). This is the second generation of Nuvo Clarineo and so is perhaps proving to be popular.

John Packer sell an interesting Kinder clarinet - the **JP125** (at around £2225) – this is an ebonite clarinet in the key of C with reduced key-work; it is not as light as the Nuvo clarinet but is still lighter than a standard clarinet; it is just as difficult to assemble as a standard clarinet but the reduced key-work means the instrument will be more reliable than a standard instrument. Perhaps most importantly it does look like a conventional clarinet, which may give it an advantage over the Nuvo Clarineo.

Elkhart also produce a Kinder clarinet in C (the **Elkhart 100CCL**) at around £190 however this instrument has full key-work making it heavier. There is no advantage having the extra key-work – it will not be used by a beginner and it this only makes the instrument heavier and more vulnerable. This instrument seems not to be currently available in the UK

All the above instruments play in the key of C and although this can be an advantage in many ways, (allowing the clarinet to play the **repertoire** books for Recorder, Flute, Oboe etc), it does mean that these instruments require different **tutor** books and sheet music compared to the standard Bb clarinet and therefore a parent should check with the child's teacher before making a purchase (note: Beginners using a C Clarinet cannot use beginner Recorder or Flute tutor books because tunes that are easy on Flute or Recorder are not necessarily easy on the C clarinet).

The **Kinder Klari** is unusual because it is in Eb. This means it is smaller than the Nuvo Clarineo, the JP125, and the Elkhart C clarinet. It will also be lighter than the Elkhart and JP125 but still not as light as the all plastic Nuvo Clarineo. Like the JP125 the Kinder Klari has simplified key-work. The problem with using a clarinet in Eb is that nearly all tutor books and repertoire books are for the Bb clarinet, and although the child could use these books it would mean the teacher would have difficulty accompanying the child (if the teacher is accompanying on standard Bb clarinet or a piano they would have to transpose the parts), likewise including the child in a school ensemble would require some thought. This instrument seems not to be currently available in the UK

Howarth manufacture two Kinder clarinets – both in (standard) Bb. The first of these clarinets is the **Junior MX** – this is made of ABS resin and has the absolute minimum of the key-work required for a beginner (significantly fewer keys than 'simplified' key-work) this makes the instrument light and durable and easy to maintain. It would have a limited useful lifetime for an individual child because they would need to upgrade fairly soon, but it would be a very good purchase for a school where its reliability would enable a long, low maintenance lifetime as it gets used by beginner after beginner. The other Howarth Kinder clarinet is the **Junior MX plus**, this has more keys (similar to other Kinder clarinets with 'simplified' key-work) enabling it to be used up to grade 3. This instrument would be a better purchase for the individual child as it intended to be used up to grade 3. Both these clarinets come fitted with Howarth's simple-fit ligature – making it easier for the child to fit the reed on and probably reducing the number of broken reeds. I would recommend the **Junior MX plus** for beginners (of any age).

Hanson have started marketing a plateau clarinet (the **Hanson 'no squeak'** Bb clarinet) as a Kinder clarinet and there is some merit to this. A plateau clarinet has 'plates' instead of 'rings' above 5 of the open holes and this does make it easier for a child (or an adult) to play the instrument. They also supply the clarinet in a long case so the instrument does not have to be assembled and dis-assembled which is a very good idea as the act of assembling and dis-assembling the instrument is the main cause of damage to the instrument. The instrument is in Bb and has standard fingering but would be a little heavier than a standard 'Ring' clarinet, also when it does need repair it will be more costly as it has extra pads and mechanism compared to the standard 'ring system' clarinet. Although this is marketed as a Kinder clarinet it would be of much more interest to the elderly player who is starting to develop arthritis.

Variations in design

Modern Clarinets vary little in the design of the mechanism (with the exception of the Kinder instruments described above) so they all feel more or less the same to the beginner (although the positioning of the keys for the little finger on each hand does vary). They can vary in tuning to some degree – with poorer quality instruments being difficult to play in tune. The 'bore' of the instrument does vary slightly so there is a difference in tone between different makes and model of Clarinet. There are only four aspects of design that really vary from the point of view of a beginner:

Plating: the mechanism is either nickel or silver-plated. Silver plating looks nicer if kept clean and the player's fingers are slightly less likely to slip off the keys, however it is not as hard wearing as nickel plate.

Finish: on most student instruments the plastic finish is glossy, on some it is matt or satin or brushed wood effect.

Thumb-rest: the Clarinet rests on the player's right hand thumb when being played, and the position of the thumb-rest influences how the right hand fingers reach the keys. Most Clarinets now have a thumb-rest that is adjustable (by the player) which is an advantage – particularly for growing hands. For the vast majority of (adult) players the fixed thumb-rest is already in the best position for their hand, but if it isn't then it is possible to a repairer to re-position it or to fit an adjustable thumb-rest.

Position of little finger keys: the position of the touch-pieces for the little fingers of each hand does vary and whilst this is not an issue for most people it can be for some (if they have unusually short or long little fingers); this is actually more of an issue for adult beginners who have less flexibility in their hands. It is difficult to decide as a beginner if the little finger keys are in a good position because a beginner cannot play the instrument – but it is worth a beginner holding the instrument to see if the little fingers can operate the keys without twisting the hand to do so.

In addition to the four aspects of design listed above there is one other aspect of design that was not previously considered relevant to the beginner, but now that the manufacturer **Hanson** is marketing a **plateaux clarinet** as a beginner's instrument it does need consideration. On a standard '**ring system**' clarinet there are seven open holes which are covered by the thumb and six fingers (6 of these holes have a 'ring' which the fingers depress when covering the holes). On a plateaux (or 'plate system' clarinet) there are no open holes – the thumb and fingers depress plates containing pads to seal the holes. The plateaux design was not intended for beginners (it was intended to help with tuning for more advanced players) but it is easier for a beginner to play a plateaux clarinet than a 'ring system' clarinet, however a plateaux clarinet has a good deal more mechanism which is vulnerable in the hands of a beginner. I do recommend plateaux clarinets for experience players who are losing mobility or strength in their fingers, but I cannot vouch for the Hanson clarinet as I have not seen one yet.

Categories of student instruments

Student instruments can be divided into five categories.

Budget student instruments: these are models that are often sold on-line or by local retailers who do not specialize in music. They are much cheaper than the recognized brands and often cheaper even than second-hand standard student instruments. This is because these new instruments are of poor quality and will have a very limited lifetime, either because they will soon need repair (but many repairers will not work on these cheaper instruments) or they simply do not meet the needs of any but the complete beginner. Some budget instruments are of reasonable quality for the price, but there is no 'brand consistency' so it is impossible to recommend any particular make or model. Some music shops stamp their own brand name on imported budget instruments.

Old student instruments: there are hundreds of models of student clarinet that have been manufactured over the years but are no longer in production – many of these instruments were well made and can be suitable up to grade 5 and perhaps higher if they are in good condition.

Standard student instruments: these are models manufactured within the last 15 years. They are reasonably well made and are suitable for a beginner.

Premium student instruments: these are models manufactured within the last 15 years. They are very well made and are suitable up to grade 8 (when in good condition). The most popular models are the Yamaha YCL255s (previously 250) and the Buffet Prodigé (previously B12).

Advanced student instruments: these are usually wooden versions of the premium student models. The wood enhances the feel and tone of the instrument.

Manufacturers and models of student instruments

There have been dozens of different manufacturers and hundreds of different models over the years. I particularly recommend the following established brands.

Buffet (Crampon): Buffet Clarinets are well made and are very popular with teachers and players alike. The current (premium) student model is **Prodige** replacing the B12 which has been around for a long time (although this model is still available in some shops). The latest version of their advanced student model is the **E12F** which seems to be an alternative rather than a replacement for their longstanding E11 model. The only problem with Buffet instruments is that they are often not set up well when leaving the factory so I strongly recommend Buffet instruments are purchased from a shop with a repair facility so that you know the instrument has been checked before sale.

Backun: Backun are a relatively new Canadian manufacturer that has quickly earned a reputation for innovative design and manufacture. The company has worked with Leblanc and Antigua to design new clarinets and has also manufactured its own graduate and professional instruments, it entered the student market with the **Alpha** model (available with either nickel-plated or silver-plated keys) and now has introduced the **Beta** model for advanced students (and the Protégé model as a graduate instrument).

Howarth: Howarth is a well-respected English manufacturer and its shop in London is a centre for Clarinet and Oboe players in the UK. Howarth have recently started producing two Kinder clarinets in addition to their student **Academy** clarinet. Although lumped in with other 'Kinder' clarinets the **Junior MX plus** is suitable for beginners (of any age).

Jupiter: Jupiter is a brand name owned by KHS music instrument Co. The Jupiter brand is reliable and includes a range of quality student instruments. The clarinets are well made and are growing in popularity. There are various Jupiter student models; the **JCL700sQ** (premium student model) replaces the JCL637 and the **JCL750sQ** (advanced student model) replaces the JCL737.

Leblanc: Leblanc was originally a French company and has a long history of quality instrument manufacture, it is now owned by the Conn-Selmer group and the manufacture of student instruments (the Leblanc 'Bliss' 200 and 300 series models) has moved to the US. The Leblanc 'Bliss' 300 series models are currently unavailable in the UK but the 200 series is available in two editions – the **JB200** for advanced students, and the **LB200** aimed at graduates.

Odyssey: These instruments seem to vary in quality a great deal and it may be that the three different ranges ('Debut', 'Premiere', and 'Symphonique') are manufactured at different sites– I certainly would not recommend their 'Debut' range (which includes the OCL120 clarinet) – but some instruments in their premium range and symphonic range are good.

Yamaha: Yamaha student Clarinets are very well made and are very popular with teachers and players alike. The current Yamaha (premium) student model is the **YCL255s**; the advanced student models are the **YCL450s** and the **YCL450m** which has the bore of the (wood) top-joint lined with ABS plastic to prevent cracking (and arguably enhance the tone).

Uebel: Uebel are an experienced and respected long-standing German manufacturer that has only recently began making Clarinets for the British market. They entered the market with is the 'Classic' which is aimed at advanced students, but have now introduced the cheaper 'Etude' which is a premium model clarinet.

Play-testing a Clarinet before purchase

For a complete beginner this is impossible because the player won't be able to produce a sound. If the player has been playing for 2 or 3 months and can produce a reasonably reliable sound then it is worth getting the player to try the instrument before purchasing because the player might find one instrument easier than another; this is largely down to the mouthpiece and reed.

Each make and model of student Clarinet should be supplied with its matching mouthpiece (e.g. Yamaha instruments should have a Yamaha mouthpiece). Student Clarinet mouthpieces are not radically different from each other but they may feel a bit different to what the player is used to.

It is important that a player tests an instrument with the correct reed strength. The player will have got used to a particular reed strength for the mouthpiece they have been learning on, however that reed strength might not be suitable for the mouthpiece of the instrument that they are considering buying. If the player finds the instrument hard to blow, or squeaky, they should try playing it with a reed that is a grade softer or a grade harder than what they are used to.

If the player is still having difficulty with the instrument it could be down to how well the instrument is working (bear in mind that even brand new instruments sometimes do not work properly).

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