

A beginner's guide to student Oboes (Aug 2021)

Although Oboes are classed as a woodwind instruments, student Oboes may be made of plastic or wood. Professional instruments are usually made of wood (which helps give them a richer tone). The Oboe is a member of a family that is made up of the Oboe, the Cor Anglais, the Oboe d'amore, the Bass Oboe and the Heckelphone. The Oboe (or 'Soprano' Oboe to give it its full name) is the most common member of the family. The Oboe is played by inserting a double reed (a small piece of folded cane) into the top of the instrument and blowing; the player covers or uncovers holes on the instrument to produce notes.

People who start playing the Oboe have usually made significant progress on some other instrument first. The Oboe is played with a double reed (whereas the Clarinet and Saxophone are played with a single reed) and it is difficult to play in tune, so it is best that the player has already developed their 'musical ear' to some extent. Tuition for children is not usually available until secondary school – this is not just because of the difficulty in playing the instrument but because good quality student instruments are expensive (however Howarth have recently started manufacturing a 'Junior' Oboe and this may change the current structure of Oboe tuition – see below).

The parts of an Oboe

- The **top-joint** - it has a narrow metal **socket** at the top end (into which the **reed** fits) and a corked **tenon** at the other end; it also has a lot of **keys**, these are operated by the player so that the various **pads** cover or uncover the **tone-holes** to make different musical notes
- The **bottom-joint** - it has one corked tenon and also has keys.
- The **bell** – it usually has one key and fits onto the bottom of the bottom-joint.

The metal keys on an Oboe make up the mechanism of the instrument. The keys are supported between metal pillars on screws or rods. Most keys have a spring that keeps them held open or held shut. Most of the keys also have a key cup in which there is glued a pad to cover the tone hole. Most of the keys also have cork or felt glued on to function as a stop so that each key opens the correct amount. The part of the key that the player touches to operate the key is called the touch-piece.

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. Oboes 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. Although not a part of the instrument there is one other vital accessory – the **case**. A case that fits well will protect the instrument during transport (a badly fitting case will damage the instrument!).

Special beginner Oboes for children (and adults)

The British firm Howarth manufactures a 'Junior' Oboe (for use up to grade 3 ABRSM; grade 4 Trinity/Guildhall) specifically for primary school children, although this instrument would also appeal to beginners of any age. Usually children have journeyed from Recorder, via Clarinet or Flute, to Oboe, but Howarth's new Junior Oboe is intended to be the step after the Recorder. These Oboes have less key-work (only playing down to Low C) which brings down the cost of the instrument and makes them less vulnerable to damage (a real advantage for instruments used in school) and thus cheaper to maintain.

Although these Junior Oboes do reduce the cost of the 'beginner' Oboe, the greatest problem for the budding Oboe player is actually learning to control the reed – playing an Oboe in tune is significantly more difficult than playing a Flute, Clarinet, or Saxophone in tune, and these Junior Oboes will be just as much of a challenge as any other Oboe from this point of view. It could be argued that a child ought to progress on an easier wind instrument, or on piano/keyboards, to develop their sense of pitch before learning the Oboe. Having said that, these beginner instruments would be useful for the primary school child who already has a good sense of pitch and is drawn to the sound of the Oboe, and I would certainly recommend them for secondary school stock, or as a rental instrument, or as an alternative to a budget priced instrument for a beginner of any age.

The Howarth Junior Oboe is available in two models – one for the UK market and one for the continental market – this is because there are two different Oboe mechanisms and therefore two different teaching systems (Note Howarth also manufacture a Junior Plus+ model but this is also to the continental market).

Continental manufacturers tend only to make children's Oboes for the continental market and therefore their instruments are not suitable for the UK market, however such instruments are occasionally available in this country - from a UK point of view these instruments can be missing essential key-work, for example the Adler 'model 100' children's Oboe has no Thumb-plate which is traditionally considered essential in the UK even for a beginner.

Short-reach Oboes

Retailers often confuse the category 'children's Oboe' with the category 'Oboes for smaller hands' (short-reach Oboes) but they do not mean the same thing! Children's Oboes are simplified Oboes that are lighter in weight and have significantly less key-work making them less vulnerable to damage (and only suitable for beginners). Short-Reach Oboes usually have modifications to the key-work rather than significantly reduced key-work and thus are not significantly lighter and neither are they less vulnerable to damage, they are not actually intended for younger children but for novice players with smaller hands. One example of this confusion is the Loree/Cabart 'Petite Mains', which is promoted as a children's Oboe but is really a short-reach Oboe.

The three short-reach Oboes that were (until relatively recently) available in this country are all to the continental design and therefore from a UK point of view are missing essential key-work (usually either a thumb-plate, a Low Bb key, or specific trills - see 'Variations in Design' below): the Loree/Cabart 'Petite mains' has no Low Bb key; the Buffet 4011 is missing a thumb-plate, Low Bb key, and certain trills; and the Adler 1000 Short-reach Oboe is also missing a thumb-plate, Low Bb key, and certain trills.

Categories of student instruments

Student instruments (capable of playing the full range of notes from Low Bb to the A three octaves above) can be divided into four main categories:

Budget student instruments: these models are much cheaper than the recognized brands and often cheaper even than second-hand student instruments. These new instruments are usually of poor quality and will have a 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 usually there is no 'brand consistency' so it is impossible to recommend any particular make or model.

Old student instruments: these can be between 20 and 50 years old and include makes such as Boosey and Hawkes, Buescher, Buisson, Corton, Elkhart, Evette, Lafleur, Lintone, Louis, and Selmer USA. These instruments are often of poor quality with poor tuning and tone and can be missing what are now considered essential parts of mechanism, but an old student instrument that is in reasonable condition is acceptable for a beginner (but it will become essential for the player to upgrade to a modern student sooner or later - certainly once grade 3 has been reached). If a school has Oboes in its stock of instruments, they will almost certainly be old student instruments.

Standard student instruments: these are basic student instruments that are suitable up to grade 6. I recommend the Yamaha YOB241B-30 (UK) which is in fact an advanced student instrument and therefore has a much higher spec, but is very good value at roughly the same price as the competing models in this category - the Buffet 4131 Prodigie and the Howarth S10. (Important: do not confuse this with the Yamaha YOB241B which does not have a Low Bb key which is required for grade 5). Another suitable instrument is the Schreiber 7130 (TP) but this currently unavailable (except second-hand) in the UK.

Advanced student instruments: these instruments are intended to go to grade 8 and beyond and will have extra key-work compared to a standard student instrument in addition to the above (refer to the information sheet about advanced student and graduate instruments). Again I recommend the Yamaha YOB431B-30, but other suitable instruments include: the Buffet 4151 and the Howarth S20(TP). Other suitable instruments which are not currently available as new in the UK but may be available second-hand are: the Bulgheroni FB-091/TP; the Fox/Renard 333 protégé; the Patricola PT SB1 (TP); and the Schreiber 7150.

Variations in design

Oboes can vary a great deal in the design of the mechanism but on a standard student instrument the key-work is fairly uniform. Below are some other aspects of instrument design to consider:

Thumb-plate mechanism: British players traditionally play on Oboes that have a thumb-plate mechanism to play certain notes (as opposed to continental players who use the **conservatoire** mechanism) and therefore UK teachers prefer beginners to learn the thumb-plate system. If you are buying a new instrument from abroad or a second-hand instrument then make sure that the instrument has a thumb-plate or is fitted with both thumb-plate and conservatoire mechanism (**dual system**).

Tone-hole covering: the first three fingers on both hands are used to press down directly or indirectly on the six main tone-holes in the instrument. Depending on the design of the instrument each of these tone-holes will be covered by a 'plate', (possibly perforated with a small hole), or a 'ring', or nothing at all. Plates are best for two reasons: firstly the plates open to a set height (the vent height) and this helps tune various notes; secondly it is easier for the player to keep their fingers on the plates to cover the tone-holes than it is for them to cover the tone-holes with the 'pads' of their fingers - this is particularly an issue when they use the little finger keys because their other fingers can slide off the tone-holes they are covering which makes the instrument squeak. Basically, the more holes that are covered by plates the better the instrument (unless it is a budget instrument). All current new standard student instruments have plates (also known as 'plateaux mechanism').

Wood or plastic: at student level this is secondary to the instrument having all the essential mechanism and having a reasonable tuning and tone. A wood instrument is not necessarily better than a plastic instrument. Some instruments are made of wood but have a plastic-lined bore; this reduces the risk of cracks occurring in the wood.

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

Essential key-work

All new student Oboes (with the exception of the special beginner Oboes discussed above) will have all the mechanism required - but if you are buying an old second-hand student Oboe make sure that it has all the mechanism listed below.

Top joint (lower) trill key: the touch-piece is for LH finger 3 and the key cup is located 20mm (centre to centre) above the LH finger 1 tone-hole. This trill key is usually present on all Oboes; it can be used as an alternative D and in particular to sound the trills: C/D; C#/D. When two trill keys are present this is the lower trill key. The tuning of these trills depends on the setting of the 1st finger roll plate (see below) and the player should test what trills are actually sounded when using these keys.

Top joint 1st finger roll plate: the 'roll plate' is a touch-piece extension of the LH finger 1 plate towards the second finger tone hole. The plate must be set to the required vent height for the player (preferably by means of an adjusting screw) because whereas a novice player lifts LH finger 1 to sound the second register, a more advanced player rolls finger 1 forward for 2nd register C#/D/Eb and all 3rd register notes (except C# when the player lifts the first finger for correct tuning); the vent height of this plate can be set low for beginners and set high when the player advances. The vent height of this plate has a direct effect on the tuning of the 'open' c# (all fingers off – sometimes used as an alternate fingering or in trills) and on the tuning of the two trill keys, so the player should test what trills are actually sounded when using these keys if the vent height of the 1st finger roll plate is changed. This roll plate feature is sometimes missing on old student instruments but it is considered standard on modern student instruments.

Spatula touch-piece on top-joint finger 1 key: this is a small metal bar soldered to the side of the key directly below the LH finger 1 plate and is usually present on all Oboes. This spatula enables the player to play an A#-B trill - this is an essential touch-piece on student Oboes fitted with ring keys, but on Oboes fitted with plates (throughout) this trill can be achieved with other fingerings.

Barret key: the touch-piece is located at the bottom of the top-joint and is operated by the side of the first finger on the right hand – it connects with the small key cups directly below left hand fingers 2 and 3. It is an essential key on Thumb-plate Oboes but is not required on Conservatoire or Dual system Oboes. It is primarily used to trill A-Bb and B-C (it can facilitate other trills depending on what other key-work is fitted).

Feather key mechanism with Low B & Bb keys: this comprises a set of three touch-pieces (similar to a fleur-de-Lys) for the LH little finger and is fitted at the top of the bottom joint – it is rare to see an Oboe without these but occasionally they crop up. The outside touch-piece closes the bottom Bb and B key cups together, the middle touch-piece closes the bottom B key only, and the inside touch-piece is an alternate touch piece to open the Eb key (which can be over-ridden and closed by Low C and C# keys). A low Bb key is required for grade 5 ABRSM and Trinity/Guildhall.

F vent key: this does not have a touch-piece because it is operated indirectly by right hand finger 2, the F vent key cup is fitted halfway down the side of the bottom joint and helps tune the 'cross-fingered' F note. It is now considered an essential piece of mechanism but it is fairly common for old student instruments not to have this piece of mechanism (in which case the player has to depress either the LH finger 4 Eb touch-piece or the RH finger 4 Eb touch-piece whilst playing the cross-fingered F to tune the note).

Right hand 'brille' mechanism: this does not have a touch-piece because it is operated indirectly by right hand fingers 2 or 3 (and also Low C), the key cup is located between RH fingers 1 and 2. The small tone-hole that the key cup covers helps tune the note F# and also helps tune certain high notes. This mechanism is usually present on all Oboes.

Manufacturers and models of student instruments

There have been dozens of different manufacturers and hundreds of different models over the years. The following manufacturers are the most well-known but in some cases their instruments are not currently available new in UK market, although some of their instruments will be available second-hand.

Buffet: Buffet Oboes are well made and are very popular with teachers and players alike (note there also exists a brand called the 'Buffet Evette' which is not made by the Buffet factory – it is lower quality old student Oboe and I do not recommend it). Buffet's current (standard) student model is the 'Prodige' (4131).

Bulgheroni: Bulgheroni is an Italian company and is a respected manufacturer producing a range of instruments from student to professional.

Fox/Renard: this is an American company founded by Hugo Fox which has been manufacturing instruments for over 50 years. The name 'Fox' is used for student Oboes and 'Renard' (the French for Fox) for more advanced models. After the closure of their main dealer in the UK these instruments are not currently available new in the UK.

Howarth: Howarth is an English manufacturer and its shop in London is a centre for Oboe players in the UK. Howarth produce a range of Oboes from beginner models to professional models. The London shop stocks a very good range of graduate and professional Oboes but in the student range it only stocks Howarth's own student instruments. Howarth Oboes are also available from other retailers in the UK. Their range of instruments is from absolute beginner to professional.

Patricola: Patricola is another well respected Italian company - it was started in the 1970s and manufactures Oboes and clarinets.

Schreiber: Schreiber are a German company that has a long history of manufacturing quality instruments. Their Oboes were until recently available from retailers in the UK. Their range of instruments starts with the Schreiber 7130 which is a standard student.

Yamaha: Yamaha is a very successful brand and Yamaha Oboes are well made. They have altered the specifications of their models significantly over the years (so second-hand models may have major differences compared to current models) but their range now starts with the YOB241B-30 which is an advanced student model although it is priced to compete with standard student instruments.

Renting an instrument

Renting an Oboe can be a good option for a beginner; this is partly because Oboes are expensive instruments and partly because a player who progresses on the instrument is likely to have to upgrade at least once if not twice as they improve. I advise that you rent a new instrument (some shops rent out second-hand instruments but these can be in poor condition). With regard to renting an Oboe for a child: as well as looking at the widely available standard instruments available to rent from many music shops, also consider renting the Howarth Junior Oboe - from Howarth in London.

Play-testing an Oboe before purchase

For a complete beginner this is impossible because the player won't be able to produce a sound. If the player has already made progress on an old student instrument and can produce a reliable sound then it is worth the player trying the instrument before purchasing because the player might prefer the tone of one instrument over another, and also might find one instrument easier to play than another.

When testing an instrument the player should use their own existing reeds, and during the testing process the player should make sure the vent height of LH plate 1 is the same as on their current instrument. The player should select models of Oboe that have the key-work they require and then compare the tone, tuning, and ease of playing of each instrument.

If the player is having difficulty with a particular instrument they are trying out, it could be down to how well the instrument is working (bear in mind that even brand-new instruments might not be working well if they have not been 'set up' prior to sale).

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