

Oboe Miscellany (June 2022)

The Oboe is unusual among the orchestral woodwinds in that there is no single standard version of the instrument. This is because the modern Oboe has developed in a more piece-meal fashion than other woodwind instruments; in comparison the Clarinet and Flute were more-or-less completely re-designed almost overnight and a standard version of each instrument was widely accepted relatively quickly. The piece-meal development of the Oboe has meant different models of Oboe utilise different pieces of mechanism to tune certain notes and enable certain trills.

Another factor leading to the variety of models available is that the Oboe originated at the beginning of the Baroque period, and therefore the Oboe repertoire is arguably more extensive than for any other woodwind instrument: an Oboist playing Baroque music on a modern instrument needs many of the additional trill keys to be able to perform the elaborate ornamentation of the period; whereas an Oboist performing mainly Classical and Romantic works might not require all the extra trill keys available (the orchestral Flute and Clarinet originated in the Classical period when ornamentation became simpler - the Flute taking over from the Recorder of the Baroque period).

Baroque and Classical Oboes

Baroque Oboes developed from the Renaissance Shawm. The earliest Oboes were made in three sections and had three keys (a 'great' key to play Low C and two side keys to play Eb - so the instrument could be played left or right-handed). Low C# could not be played on these early instruments but otherwise the instrument was chromatic for just over two octaves (up to at least D6 if not F6). As the Oboe developed more keys were added (including a Low C# key). Oboes existed in various sizes for consorts and mixed consorts.

Oboe	-6 fingers sounds D; Lowest note referred to as C sounding C4 (middle C). Also called the Soprano Oboe;
Oboe D'amore	-6 fingers sounds B; Lowest note is referred to as C sounding A3 (A below middle C); played with a crook. An antecedent of the Cor Anglais - contemporaneously referred to as the Alto of the family whereas today's Oboe D'amore is the mezzo-soprano of the modern Oboe family.
Tenor Oboe (in F)	-6 fingers sounds G; Lowest note is referred to as C sounding F3 (F below middle C) a 5 th lower than written; played with a crook; has flared bell. Another antecedent of the modern Cor Anglais, which is referred to as the Alto member of the modern Oboe family.
Oboe da Caccia (in F)	-6 fingers sounds G; Lowest note is referred to as C sounding F3 (F below middle C). Curved instrument with flared brass bell, used in Baroque music but never progressed into the Classical era because the instrument could not be readily improved.
Baritone Oboe	-6 fingers sounds D; Lowest note referred to as C sounding C3 (Octave below middle C). The modern equivalent is the Bass Oboe.
Basse de Hautbois	-6 fingers sounds D; lowest note referred to as C sounding C2 (two octaves below middle C). Also called 'Basse de Cromorne'. French composers in the Baroque period scored for this instrument although no examples exist - it was described as having a tone distinct from a Bassoon (which would otherwise play the part) it seems to be what would today be called a contra-bass Oboe.

Nineteenth century developments

The Classical period Oboe developed in two separate directions in the nineteenth century. French makers narrowed the bore and thinned the walls of the instrument producing a distinctly different sound to that of the German instrument, whilst German makers developed a highly advanced key system. The **Viennese Oboe** came about as a combination of the French bore and German key mechanism and this is still used today.

Historical examples of the many different developments in Oboe design can still be found including various complex German 'simple system' Oboes and the first four systems that the **Triebert** family developed; some of the Triebert systems were developed in conjunction with Apollon Barret (who invented the speaker key and the side Bb/C key among other keys) and so some models of Oboe are described as 'Barret system' although there does not seem to be a particular archetypal **Barret system Oboe** (Triebert system 4 has a Barret action key to play C and Bb; in system 5 this key is now only a trill key to trill C and Bb).

Boehm's flute innovations influenced the development of the Triebert Oboe systems but crucially the Triebert system Oboes did not relocate the tone-holes as Boehm had done on the flute. True **Boehm system Oboes** also exist and although these were popular with military bands in Europe from the 1850s onwards they were considered too bright and loud for classical music and ultimately fell out of favour as military bands decreased in number and their woodwind sections became dominated by Saxophones and Clarinets.

'**Sax Oboes**' appeared in the US in 1929 in an attempt to cash in on the Saxophone craze. The French (Triebert) style Oboe was fitted with a mechanism that had the styling of Saxophone key-work and enabled Sax players to use Sax fingering on the Oboe and therefore easily double on the Oboe; but these 'Sax Oboes' were a failure partly due to the difference in embouchure and partly due to the arrival of the Economic Depression.

The '**Heckelphone**' was invented by the Heckel family and debuted in 1904 after an initial idea by Richard Wagner in 1889 who wanted a stronger Oboe like sound for the middle register of a large orchestral sound (presumably feeling this was not achieved sufficiently by the Bass Oboe). The Heckelphone is a double reed instrument and is a member of the Oboe family but each size of Heckelphone has a wider bore than the corresponding size of Oboe (e.g the bore of the Bass Oboe is twice the cross-sectional area of the Soprano Oboe, whereas the bore of the [Bass] Heckelphone is twice the diameter of the Soprano bore diameter – resulting in an even larger cross-sectional area). The standard Heckelphone is too powerful for a chamber ensemble unless fitted with an alternative 'muting' bell. Although originally conceived as solely a Bass instrument smaller sizes were made (see below) but only the original Bass size achieved any sort of success and even this is rarely heard today.

The modern Oboe

Excepting Austria, where the Viennese Oboe is still played, the two common current systems of Oboe found worldwide are based on the two final French models originated by Triebert in the Nineteenth century. The first of these is the Thumb-plate system (Triebert system 5) which is common in Britain and other Commonwealth countries; and the second of these is the Conservatoire system (Triebert system 6) which is common in mainland Europe. There is not a standard version of either of these Triebert system Oboes; generally the more expensive the instrument the more keys it has!

Thumb-plate system: the thumb-plate is normally kept depressed. The thumb is removed to sound Bb when A is fingered and to sound C when B is fingered. There is also the Barret side key operated by RH finger 1, which acts as a trill for A/Bb and B/C when the thumb-plate is kept depressed. The simplest suitable covering system for thumb-plate Oboes is: I perforated plate, II ring, III uncovered, IV ring (with bridge arm for articulated G#), V ring (linked to F vent), VI ring. Preferably hole V has a perforated plate to correct top D (3rd register) and sometimes hole IV has a plain plate. A plateau (or covered) thumb-plate model has plates substituted for the rings (with hole V having a perforated plate) to make it easier to play. Professional or dual system oboes may have rings, plates, perforated plates or a combination, copying parts of the 'Gillet' system (a refinement

of the Triebert system in which finger holes I to V are covered by plates or perforated plates and finger VI has a double ring key).

Conservatoire system: on the Conservatoire system the mechanism for sounding Bb and C is via tone hole IV; this is covered by RH finger 1 to sound Bb when A is fingered, and C, when B is fingered. The Barret side key is unnecessary. The F vent is normally closed and opens only for cross-fingered F. Older style Conservatoire Oboes have perforated plates for holes I and V (and sometimes a plain plate for hole IV) and rings for the other holes, whereas modern conservatoire Oboes usually have plain plates instead rings. Professional Conservatoire and dual system oboes may have a full Gillet system of plates or only parts of the system (The full Gillet system has perforated plates for holes I, II, III, V and VI, and a plain plate for hole IV to match, hole VI has a double ring sometimes referred to as a split D, there is also some additional mechanism).

Dual system: the two systems are sometimes combined. British manufacturers often make thumb-plate models with additional Conservatoire mechanism (sometimes by adapting the Barret side key to correspond with the finger IV key). Foreign manufacturers sometimes make Conservatoire models with an additional thumb-plate (but no Barret side key as this is not necessary). Also some Oboes have been adapted by repairers in various ways.

The modern Oboe family

Only the soprano Oboe and the Cor Anglais are now found commonly but the whole modern family is shown below.

Piccolo Heckelphone (in F)	-6 fingers sounds G; lowest note referred to as B (sounding E4). Only a few made; intended for the large late Romantic orchestras, more powerful sounding than the Piccolo Oboe
Piccolo Oboe (in F)	-6 fingers sounds G; lowest note referred to as Bb (sounding Eb4 above middle C). referred to as the 'Oboe Musette'. Loree and Marigaux both make this instrument; it has been used in contemporary music and film scores
Piccolo Heckelphone (in Eb)	-6 fingers sounds F; lowest note referred to as B (sounding D4). Commissioned by Richard Strauss for his work 'Eine Alpensinfonie' but not used. Also called the 'Terz- Heckelphone'
Piccolo Oboe (in Eb)	-6 fingers sounds F; lowest note referred to as Bb (sounding Db4 above middle C). Also referred to as the 'Oboe Musette'. Made by Patricola; it has been used in contemporary music and film scores.
Oboe	-6 fingers sounds D; lowest note referred to as Bb (sounding Bb3 below middle C). Also called the soprano Oboe
Oboe D'amore (in A)	-6 fingers sounds B; lowest note is referred to as B sounding (G#3 below middle C) Thumb-plate, Conservatoire, or dual action but traditionally no bottom Bb key; played with a crook. Referred to as the mezzo-soprano of the modern Oboe family.
Cor Anglais (in F)	-6 fingers sounds G; usual lowest note is referred to as B (sounding E3 below middle C) sounds a 5 th lower than written; Thumb-plate, Conservatoire, or dual action; traditionally no bottom Bb key but sometimes available; played with a crook. Referred to as the alto member of the modern Oboe family.
Bass Oboe (in C)	-6 fingers sounds D; usual lowest note is referred to as B (sounding B2 an octave below the soprano Oboe) some instruments available with extension to Bb. Written in treble clef therefore sounds octave lower than written. Has been made with upturned bell but usually straight or Bulbous. Played with crook like a Bassoon. Loree's redesigned bass Oboe was called a 'Baryton Hautbois' by Loree but composers referred to it as a bass Oboe, or sometimes a tenor Oboe (Aulos Quartet).
Heckelphone (in C)	-6 fingers sounds D; lowest note is referred to as A (sounding A2) via a thumb key for the right hand. Used by Wagner, Strauss etc. Some early composers for the instrument incorrectly refer to the Heckelphone as the bass Oboe. A modification of the instrument where 4 extra low keys are added to reach F2 so the instrument can

play the Heckelphone part in Strauss' Eine Alpensinfonie has been built and has been called a 'Lupophone'.

Contra-Bass -6 fingers sounds D; lowest note is referred to as B (sounding B1 two octaves below the soprano Oboe). This instrument has been made form time to time but is not in common use because it would compete with the well established Bassoon; also called (in C) the 'double bass' Oboe.

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