

A guide to advanced student and graduate Oboes (May 2026)

Advanced student Oboes

Advanced student Oboes are for students above grade 5. These Oboes will have more key-work than a standard student instrument and this is intended to allow alternate fingerings for various notes and make certain notes (trills in particular) easier to play; also, the instrument may have a better tone.

A 'standard' student instrument will have the following mechanism fitted (at minimum): simple system octave keys; thumb-plate mechanism; 1 (lower) trill (for alternate D, and C/D & C#/D trills) on top-joint; roll-plate for LH1 (for correct fingering of 3rd register C#); spatula for LH1 (to facilitate an A#/B trill with the thumb off); Barret side key (for A/Bb and B/C trills) unless the instrument is a conservatoire or dual system Oboe; feather keys for Low Bb, B and Eb; forked F vent key-cup linked to ring or plate for RH2; 'brille' mechanism linking rings or plates for RH2 & 3 to small F# vent key-cup. Advanced student instruments will have additional mechanism as described below.

Plateaux mechanism: this means all the tone-holes covered by the first three fingers on each hand are covered by plates that the fingers press down on (some of these plates may have a small hole – a 'perforation'). Perforated plates must be fitted with cork pads but the un-perforated plates should also be fitted with cork pads - these pads seat better than the common 'bladder skin' pads, last longer, and give a better feel to the instrument. Plateaux mechanism improves the tuning of certain notes on the instrument and it is easier for the player to keep their fingers on the plates to cover the tone-holes than to cover the tone-holes with the 'pads' of their fingers as on a ring system Oboe – this is particularly an issue when they use the little finger keys because sometimes their other fingers slide off the tone-holes and so the instrument squeaks.

Semi-automatic Octave system: whereas standard student instruments have a 'simple' octave mechanism (with two independently operated keys) advanced student instruments have a semi-automatic mechanism (where the two keys are linked) making it easier to use the octave keys.

Top-joint (upper and lower) trill keys: the lower trill key (which is usually present on all Oboes) functions as an alternate D and to facilitate the trills C/D and C#/D; and the upper trill key, which is present on all advanced student Oboes, functions as an alternate C# and to facilitate the trills B/C# and C/Db. Together the two trill keys can produce an alternate D# and in practice the player may find each trill key may be used to facilitate the trills and alternate fingerings for other notes (the tuning of these two trill keys is affected by the vent height of LH plate I).

Alternate touch-piece for Top-Joint lower trill key: on advanced student instruments there is an alternative touch-piece on the bottom-joint which links with the top-joint lower trill key.

I recommend that players visit the website www.wfg.woodwind.org/oboe/ to see how the extra key-work helps facilitate particular notes and trills.

Graduate Oboes

'Graduate' is a term used to describe instruments that are a step up from advanced student instruments. They are aimed at students studying beyond grade 8, the serious amateur performer, and as a 'work-horse' instrument for professional teachers. Graduate Oboes are usually made of wood (see below) and have more key-work than an advanced student instrument and this is intended to facilitate more alternate fingerings and make even more notes (trills in particular) easier to play (indeed in some cases the amount of key-work fitted matches some professional models). Graduate Oboes also have a better tone than student instruments.

Although Graduate and Professional Oboes used to always be made of a particular wood (African Blackwood, aka Grenadilla, aka Mpingo) this dwindling resource has meant a move to other woods (such as Mopane) and also the increased use of synthetic materials. It has been common for some time for the top-joint to be lined with a synthetic material (said to prevent cracking).

There is no 'standard' key-work for graduate Oboes but most models will have the mechanism described below in addition to that found on an advanced student instrument.

Third (Register) Octave key: in addition to the semi-automatic octave mechanism, Graduate Oboes have a third octave key (this key sometimes has a locking screw to lock it shut until the player has advanced to the stage of being able to use it). This additional key helps the sounding of the 3rd register notes. There is no obvious place to fit this additional touch-piece onto the instrument because the thumb-plate is in the way, so different manufacturers have located it in different positions.

Dual thumb-plate and conservatoire mechanism: British players use the thumb-plate mechanism to sound the left-hand notes B \flat and C and the 'Barret key' for trilling these notes using the side of finger RH1. Graduate and professional models usually have the conservatoire mechanism fitted (and therefore no Barret key) so the player can still use RH1 for trilling the notes A/B \flat and B/C (but by pressing down the first plate on the bottom-joint rather than using the side of the finger), the absence of the Barret key allows other key-work to be fitted (in particular an alternate right-hand G \sharp). Conservatoire and dual system Oboes require the F vent key-cup to rest in a closed position to correct the conservatoire B \flat tuning (on thumb-plate Oboes this key rests in an open position) so an extra piece of mechanism the '**closed fork F vent**' is fitted to these instruments.

Spatula for LH2: This touch-piece is no longer required for its original purpose (due to other mechanism on the instrument now being standard) and nearly all the notes produced by the use of this spatula are more easily achieved in other ways, but it still has one obscure function and that is to enable an A5 to C6 tremolo fingering. This touch-piece is found on all instruments from standard student to professional but I suspect it is rarely, if ever, used; presumably, from a manufacturing point of view, because the small key-cup and spatula assembly for RH2 is identical to that for RH1 it is easier for manufacturers to continue making both parts in the same way rather than have a different the production process for the two keys.

The alternate G \sharp : Graduate instruments have an alternate right-hand touch-piece on the top-joint to sound G \sharp and to facilitate G \sharp -A trills with RH1.

The Long F (or 4th Feather key): Graduate instruments have an alternate touch-piece on the bottom-joint (for the LH little finger) that links to the (short) F key on the bottom joint. This alternate touch-piece was not part of the original full 'Gillet' Oboe mechanism and so is not present on older instruments.

Low B-C link or B-C \sharp link (articulated Low C \sharp): an Oboe can have either of these mechanisms but not both, and a Graduate Oboe is usually fitted with one or the other. A low B-C link means that when the player closes Low B (or Low B \flat) the C key is automatically closed (so the player does not have to depress the C touch-piece when playing these notes) making a B to D (and B \flat to D) leaps easier. A low B-C \sharp link means when the player is playing Low C \sharp then they can play Low B (or B \flat) with the feather keys and this will automatically close the C \sharp key (without the player having to take her/his finger off the C \sharp touch-piece) making a Low B-C \sharp trill easier. Both mechanisms serve to reduce the need to use both little fingers at the same time. Conservatoire Oboes tend to have the B-C \sharp link because on balance it is more useful – and it allows independent use of the Low B key for certain high notes e.g. E \flat .

Cautionary note: although a Low B-C link also allows the player to close the C, B, and B \flat keys at the same time simply with the use of the left-hand little finger on the B \flat feather key touch-piece – this puts a good deal of stress on the mechanism and should generally be avoided.

Bell vent (also called Resonance key): this is a small key attached to the Low B \flat key on the Bell and brings the note into true pitch (which otherwise has to be 'lipped in' by the player) however it is said to compromise the tuning of the 2nd register E, F, F \sharp , and G.

Again, I recommend that players visit the website www.wfg.woodwind.org/oboe/ to see how the extra key-work helps facilitate particular notes and trills.

Models of Oboe available new in the UK

The graduate Oboes currently available (new) in the UK are: the Bulgheroni '896' model (Cons version); the Cabart/Loree (Dual) '74' model; the Howarth 'S40', 'S50', and 'HL' models; the Lan Mei Oboe (Cons); the Marigaux-Strasser '701 standard' model (TP version); the Rigoutat-Riec 'standard' model (Cons); and the Yamaha 'YOB431' (Dual) and 'YOB431M' (Dual) models.

No single shop will sell all the instruments listed above (unless some are second-hand instruments) so it would be necessary to visit more than one shop to compare all the instruments available; I would recommend starting at 'Howarth' in London and also visiting 'the Oboe shop' (Crowthers) in Canterbury, and 'Dawkes' in Maidenhead.

There has been a marked reduction in Oboes available in the UK in the last few years, but it is possible to import (new) instruments and some older popular models may be available second-hand. If a player is used to playing a manufacturer's student model, then usually they stick with the same manufacturer; for example, players of the Howarth S10 or S20 might progress to the Howarth S40C. Players who have not played on one of the main manufacturer's student models should consider all models as potential instruments to progress to.

Play-testing an oboe before purchase

If the player is currently using a *modern* student instrument or a graduate instrument, and is trying out new graduate or professional Oboes, then it is best for the player to ensure their existing instrument is playing well. Commonly players compare a new Oboe (which should be in good condition) to their own Oboe (which often is not); instead of comparing Oboes they are actually comparing the condition of the two Oboes. If the player's Oboe is in good condition (i.e. it was fully serviced less than a year ago) then they can truly assess the differences between the instruments.

If the player is currently using an *old* student Oboe and is now trying out graduate instruments then the condition of the student Oboe is irrelevant and the player should focus on comparing different graduate models because any graduate instrument is going to be a significant leap in quality.

Ensuring a player's existing instrument is playing well is also important when testing reeds – a player might select a reed 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 reed disagreeable.

The player should try out new instruments with their existing reeds and for 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 that they are trying out it could be down to how well that instrument is working (bear in mind that even a new instrument might not be working well if it has not been 'set up' prior to sale).

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