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A guide to professional and vintage Oboes (May 2026)

Professional Performer Oboes

These instruments are made using the best quality wood (although composite materials and synthetic linings are sometimes used). 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 possibly 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 sometimes undercut and 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 Oboes are fitted with a mechanism that has been manufactured to a higher tolerance than would be seen on a graduate instrument. Pillars are usually fitted to the wood by more secure means and the keys are a better fit to the screws and rods. This means that there is less 'play' on the keys i.e. they do not wobble. With less play in the mechanism the Oboe feels more 'positive' and the pads seat more reliably; also there is less noise from the mechanism and the mechanism lasts longer before it starts to wear.

Often manufacturers make more than one professional model, some manufacturers make their professional models using different woods and this can affect the tone, but primarily the models vary in the additional mechanism that is fitted to the instrument.

A (UK) Graduate instrument will have the following mechanism fitted (at minimum): dual system, plateaux mechanism, semi-automatic octaves and a 3rd Octave key; 2 top-joint trill keys (Lower key - for alternate D and C-D & C#-D trills and Upper trill key for alternate C# and B-C# and C-Db trills); an alternate touch-piece on the bottom-joint linked to the top-joint lower trill; roll-plate for LH1 (for correct fingering of 3rd register C#); spatula for LH1 (to facilitate an A#-B trill with the thumb off); alternate G#; Long F; RH closed forked F vent key-cup (to correct tuning); 'brille' mechanism linking plates for RH2 & 3 to small F# vent key-cup (to correct tuning); a Low B-C link (to make Bb to D and B to D leaps easier) or B-C# link (to make B-C# trill easier and allow independent action of the B key to tune higher register notes); and a bell vent key (to correct tuning).

On a professional instrument additional mechanism (detailed below) is fitted to help tune particular notes or to facilitate particular trills, but which notes and which trills depends on how specific tone holes are covered (by ring, plate, or perforated plate) and what other mechanism is already present. In some instances, certain additional mechanism rules out the possibility of other additional mechanism e.g. an Oboe cannot have a spatula for left finger II and a G# link to plate II.

Gillet conservatoire system (with thumb-plate): this is the common full professional plateaux mechanism with a comprehensive set of additional keys and can be identified by the '**split D**' (see below). The Gillet system has all the mechanism described below; a thumb-plate is added for British players and sometimes the Long F is also added.

A professional model Oboe might not necessarily be fitted with a full Gillet system but instead may have all the Graduate key-work plus the 'third G#' and the banana key (described below).

G# link to plate II: its prime intention is to facilitate the A#-B trill (as an alternative to using the first finger spatula key) - when depressing the LH standard touch piece (or the RH alternate touch piece) the link holds plate 2 closed, so with the thumb on, fingers LH 2/1 can trill A#-B; this link also enables other trills depending on whether plate 3 is perforated and/or a 'third G#' is fitted.

'Third G#' key (or 'side A'): in the UK it is called the 'third G#' because of its location more than its function (it doesn't always sound G#) – in the US it is called the 'side A' because its prime intention is to facilitate a G#-A trill (with thumb on or off); with the third G# touch-piece depressed, LH fingers 3/2 can trill G#-A. The third G# key can also facilitate the trills A-Bb and A#-B depending on which plates are perforated and what other mechanism is present.
Cautionary note: although the third G# key does link (indirectly) with several keys on the top-joint it is only designed to be used either when plate 1 and the LH G# touch-piece are depressed, or when plates 1 and 2 are depressed together (with or without the LH G#); technically the third G# can be used in the sounding of alternate A# and D# notes however, because this puts undue stress on the mechanism, and there are other better ways of achieving these notes, I advise it is not used in this way.

'Split D': the plate for RH3 has an inner plate and an outer ring to assist the tuning the note E in the trill (Low) D#-E: when the LH Eb feather touch-piece is depressed it holds down the outer ring of the RH3 plate – this narrows the aperture of the tone-hole to tune the note E so with LH4 holding the Eb feather touch-piece, RH3 can trill D#-E.

'Banana' key: The Banana C key curves around the plate for RH finger 3 – when the plate and the banana key are depressed the RH little finger can trill C-C#.

Low B-C link or B-C# link (articulated Low C#): an Oboe can have either of these mechanisms but not both, and a Professional Oboe is usually fitted with one or the other. A low B-C link means that when the player closes Low B (or Low Bb) 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 (Bb to D) leaps easier. A low B-C# link means when the player is playing Low C# then s/he can play Low B (or Bb) with the feather keys and this will automatically close the C# key (without the player having to take her/his finger off the C# touch-piece) making a Low B-C# 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# link because on balance it is more useful – and it allows independent use of the Low B key for certain high notes e.g. Eb.
Cautionary note: although a Low B-C link also allows the player to close the C, B, and Bb keys at the same time simply with the use of the left-hand little finger on the Bb feather key touch-piece, this puts a good deal of stress on the mechanism and should generally be avoided.

'Split' bell vent: This assembly is more complicated than the standard bell vent key but is an improvement on the 'tuning correction' function of the vent key – the vent key opens when the low B key is depressed but shuts when low Bb is depressed.

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.

Octave systems: Students studying Oboe at graduate level are expected to use a semi-automatic octave mechanism (plus 3rd register octave key) because although semi-automatic octave keys are generally more cumbersome to use than the single key for the fully **automatic octave system**, the semi-automatic system allows certain alternate and harmonic fingerings that are not achievable on Oboes fitted with an automatic octave system; however some professional players, particularly in Germany and Holland, prefer the automatic octave system (plus 3rd register octave key) indeed Howarth refer to their Oboes fitted with automatic octaves as German system).

Manufacturers of professional Oboes include: Buffet; Bulgheroni (currently unavailable in the UK); Fox/Renard (currently unavailable in the UK); Howarth; Loree; Ludwig Frank (currently unavailable in the UK); Marigaux; Monnig; Patricola (currently unavailable in the UK); Rigoutat; and Yamaha.
No single shop will sell all these instruments (unless some are second-hand instruments) so it would be necessary to visit more than one shop to compare all the instruments available; I recommend visiting Howarth in London and the Oboe shop (Crowthers) in Canterbury. In the case of the French, German, and Italian manufacturers it might be worth visiting the factories and purchasing direct.

Vintage Oboes

There have been many models of Oboe originally intended as student, graduate, or professional instruments that are no longer manufactured. The student models are usually of poor quality; however the graduate and professional models, which were manufactured to higher standards, can still be desirable instruments. These older models of Oboe are sometimes referred to as 'Vintage Oboes'. These older instruments were made with a slightly lower quality mechanism and sometimes their inherent intonation is not as precise as current models however it is the tone that they produce that players are interested in.

Vintage instruments have to be checked for the effects of age. The chief areas that require scrutiny are the wood, the plating on the keys, and the mechanism. The wood ought to be sound (although its exterior surface can show marks etc); the plating ought to be reasonable (although it can be worn); and the mechanism ought to be in a condition that it will be able to operate reasonably well once the instrument is serviced.

The chief concern with Vintage Oboes is the lack of mechanism that would now be considered essential. Vintage professional instruments may now fall into the graduate category due to missing certain parts of mechanism, and likewise instruments previously regarded as graduate models may now be thought of as student models.

Play-testing an oboe before purchase

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 new instruments might not be working as well as they should).

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.

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