

## The Bassoon - a guide to graduate, professional and vintage instruments

### Graduate Bassoons

"Graduate" is a term used to describe instruments that are a step up from student instruments but are not professional level instruments. They are aimed at students studying music at college and players who want a serious instrument but don't want to stretch to the expense of a professional instrument. Graduate Bassoons are usually made of wood (with the exception of the Fox III and IV models).

Graduate Bassoons have a crook lock and high D key as standard (constituting the common 25 keyed instrument) and they often have the "double C" key on the Long joint and an Eb trill on the Wing joint (for left hand finger 3) as well; they will also have most of the design features (described in the article on student Bassoon design) which reduce problems with the mechanism and body of the instrument such as: locked pillars, tenon rings, metal-lined boot-joint socket, plastic-lined bore, and lined tone-holes.

They may also have some of the following extra mechanism: high E on Wing joint (for a left hand finger); high F on wing joint (for a left hand finger); Right hand thumb key to trill Ab/Bb; C#/D# linkage on Bass joint to ease movement of fingers between touch-pieces; high A to Whisper key linkage; extra rollers on various keys. Note that the location of the high E, F, and E/F# trill touch-pieces varies from one Bassoon to another.

The main Graduate Bassoons available in the UK are made by: **Adler, Fox/Renard, Monnig, Moosman, Schreiber, Takeda, and Wolf**. Fox manufacture their graduate and professional models with a long bore (standard length) or a short bore (approximately 7mm–10mm shorter than the standard length). The Long bore instrument is said to have better intonation and a warm round tone making it blend well for chamber and orchestral work, the short bore is said to have a more open tone quality and more flexibility and is more suitable to solo work; some players say that the difference is subjective and depends more on the bocal that is used. Fox also manufacture "thick walled" instrument which enables the instrument to have larger tone-holes and a more powerful sound.

Any particular model of Bassoon by any manufacturer may exist in slightly different versions according to where the instrument is sold and so instruments bearing the same model name or number are not always identical! When comparing prices of instruments it is important to determine exactly what the specification of the instrument is.

### Professional Bassoons

These instruments are made using the best quality wood. 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 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 usually 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 Bassoons are fitted with a mechanism that has been manufactured to a higher tolerance than would be seen on cheaper instruments. This means that there is less "play" on the keys i.e. they do not wobble. With less play in the mechanism the instrument feels more "positive" and the pads seat more reliably; also there is less noise from the mechanism and the mechanism last longer before it starts to wear.

Professional instruments will have all of the design features which reduce problems with the mechanism and body of the instrument such as: locked pillars, tenon rings, metal-lined boot-joint socket, plastic-lined bore, and lined tone-holes. In addition to the keys that can be found on a Graduate instrument there can be other additional mechanism such as extra trill keys, extra linkages and extra touch-pieces - indeed the manufacturer Heckel boast that if a customer can describe an additional piece of mechanism that they want then the Heckel factory will make it for them.

The main manufacturers of professional instruments available through retailers in the UK are **Fox/Renard, Monnig, Moosman, Puchner** and **Yamaha**. The most prestigious name in Bassoon manufacture is still **Heckel** and their Bassoons have to be ordered direct from their factory in Germany.

## **Vintage Bassoons**

Unlike other woodwind instruments the tone of a Bassoon is thought to improve as the instrument ages, this is said to be because the Maple hardens over time. These older models of Bassoon are sometimes referred to as "Vintage Bassoons". The mechanism on these instruments may be of a slightly lower "build quality" mechanism compared to today's instruments and sometimes their intonation is not as good as today's instruments however it is the tone that they produce that players are interested in.

Vintage instruments have to be checked for the effects of age. Bassoons are usually made of Maple, which is softer than the Blackwood usually used to make other woodwind instruments, and they tend to have a shorter lifespan than other woodwind instruments unless well looked after. The chief areas that require scrutiny are the wood (particularly at the bottom of the Boot Joint), the plating on the keys, and the mechanism. The wood should be sound (although its exterior surface can show marks etc); the plating should be reasonable (although it will be worn); and the mechanism, once serviced, should operate reasonably well.