

The clarinet – a guide to graduate, professional and vintage instruments

Graduate Clarinets

"Graduate" is a term used to describe instruments that are a step up from advanced student instruments but not quite professional 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 Clarinets are always made of wood and it is possible to buy a matching "A" natural Clarinet to make a pair, (most advanced student instruments are made of wood but it is not possible to buy a matching "A" natural instrument - with the exception of the Buffet E11 series).

Whereas "Advanced Student" instruments are basically wooden copies of the manufacturer's plastic student instrument, Graduate instruments are superior instruments, often with undercut tone holes and a more subtle bore design, and thus they produce a better sound. The mechanism on a graduate Clarinet is often built to the same quality as the manufacturer's professional instruments but professional instruments are usually made of a superior grade of wood. The main graduate Clarinets are the Buffet E13; the Leblanc Esprit; and the Yamaha Ycl650. If a player is used to playing the manufacturer's corresponding student model then usually they stick with the same manufacturer, for example players of the Buffet B12 progress to the Buffet E13. Players who have not played on the manufacturer's student models should consider all three models as potential instruments to progress to.

Professional Clarinets

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 advanced student instruments.

A lot of time is spent reaming the bore to the manufacturer's design. Tone-holes are usually 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 Clarinets are fitted with a mechanism that has been manufactured to a higher tolerance than would be seen on a student Clarinet. 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 Clarinet 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. The keys on a professional Clarinet are finished to a higher standard than on a student Clarinet and better plated (either Nickel or Silver).

Often manufacturers make more than one professional model. The models vary primarily in the tone they produce but also some have extra features like additional keys (the most common being the additional G#/D#(Ab/Eb) lever for left hand little finger). The main factory manufacturers are: Buffet with the R13, RC, and Prestige models; Howarth with two different bore designs; Leblanc with the Concerto and Opus models; Selmer (Paris) with 5 current models and several older models; and Yamaha with the CS and CX models. There are also individual makers making professional Clarinets.

If a player is used to playing the manufacturer's corresponding student or graduate model then they usually stick with the same manufacturer - for example, players of the Buffet E13 progress to the Buffet R13/RC/Prestige. Players who have not played on the manufacturer's student or graduate models, but instead have been playing on obsolete older models should consider all modern makes as potential instruments to progress to in the search for one that produces the tone they desire.

Vintage Clarinets

There have been many models of wooden Clarinet 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, are still desirable instruments.

These older models of wooden Clarinet are sometimes referred to as "vintage" Clarinets. These instruments were made with a slightly lower quality mechanism and sometimes their 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 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.

Play-testing a Clarinet before purchase

Before testing a new Clarinet it is best for the player to ensure their existing Clarinet is playing well. Commonly players compare a new Clarinet (which should be in good condition) to their own Clarinet (which is not); instead of comparing Clarinets they are actually comparing the condition of the two Clarinets. If the player's Clarinet is in good condition (i.e. it fully serviced less than a year ago) then they can truly assess the differences between the Clarinets.

Ensuring their existing instrument is playing well is even more important when testing mouthpieces – a player might select a mouthpiece 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 mouthpiece disagreeable.

A player trying out graduate, professional, or vintage Clarinets will already own a mouthpiece. The player should test the new Clarinet with the manufacturer's recommended mouthpiece (e.g. a Yamaha mouthpiece for a Yamaha instrument) but bear in mind that the particular mouthpiece supplied with the instrument might not have the same tip opening/length of lay as the player's existing mouthpiece. Mouthpieces usually come in a range of tip openings/lengths of lay and the player should request a mouthpiece with a tip opening/length of lay as close as possible to their own mouthpiece – this way the mouthpiece will be correct for the instrument and will feel more or less the same to the player. If the recommended mouthpiece is not available with a tip opening/length of lay similar to the player's existing mouthpiece then the player will have to use the supplied mouthpiece and try harder or softer reeds to compensate for the difference.

If the player's mouthpiece is a professional mouthpiece and its bore happens to match the bore of the barrel of the new instrument then the instrument can be tested with this mouthpiece as well.

If the player is having difficulty with the instrument, even if they feel at ease with the mouthpiece, it could be down to how well the instrument is working (bear in mind that sometimes even brand new instruments do not work properly).