

The Oboe – a beginner’s guide to student instruments

Although Oboes are classed as a woodwind instruments, student Oboes may be made of plastic or wood. Professional instruments are usually made of wood (which helps give them a richer tone). The Oboe is a member of a family that is made up of the Oboe, the Cor Anglais, the Oboe d’amore, the Bass Oboe and the Heckelphone. The Oboe (or “Soprano” Oboe to give it its full name) is the most common member of the family. The Oboe is played by inserting a double reed (a small piece of folded cane) into the top of the instrument and blowing; the player covers or uncovers holes on the instrument to produce notes.

People who start playing the Oboe have usually made significant progress on some other instrument first. The Oboe is played with a double reed (whereas the Clarinet and Saxophone are played with a single reed) and it is difficult to play in tune, so it is best that the player has already developed their “musical ear” to some extent. Tuition for children is not usually available until secondary school – this is not just because of the difficulty in playing the instrument but because good quality student instruments are expensive (however Howarth have recently started manufacturing a “Junior Oboe” and this may change the current structure of Oboe tuition – see below).

The parts of an Oboe

- The **top-joint** - it has a narrow metal **socket** at the top end (into which the **reed** fits) and a corked **tenon** at the other end; it also has a lot of **keys**, these are operated by the player so that the various **pads** cover or uncover the **tone-holes** to make different musical notes
- The **bottom-joint** - it has one corked tenon and also has keys.
- The **bell** – it has one key and fits onto the bottom of the bottom-joint.

The metal keys on an Oboe make up the mechanism of the instrument. The keys are supported between metal pillars on screws or rods. Most keys have a wire spring that keeps them held open or held shut. Most of the keys also have a key cup in which there is glued a pad to cover the tone hole. Most of the keys also have cork or felt glued on to function as a stop so that each key opens the correct amount.

The pads, corks, and felts on the instrument (and also the adhesives which keep these items in place) deteriorate over time. On older or poorer quality instruments the mechanism itself starts to wear and the keys can become loose or jammed. Oboes need to be regularly serviced to remain in good playing order – if you are considering buying a second-hand instrument then get it checked over before purchase to make sure it is in reasonable condition.

Although not a part of the instrument there is one other vital accessory – the **case**. A case that fits well will protect the instrument during transport (a badly fitting case will damage the instrument!).

Special beginner Oboes for children (and adults)

Recently Howarth has started manufacturing Oboes (for use up to grade 3) specifically for primary school children, although they would also appeal to beginners of any age. Usually children have journeyed from Recorder, via Clarinet or Flute, to Oboe, but Howarth’s new “Junior Oboe” is intended to be the step after the Recorder. These Oboes have the minimum of key-work (only playing down to Low C) which brings down the cost of the instrument and makes them less vulnerable to damage (a real advantage for instruments used in school) and thus cheaper to maintain.

Although these Junior Oboes significantly reduce the cost of the beginner Oboe, the greatest problem for the budding Oboe player is actually learning to control the reed to play in tune – playing an Oboe in tune is significantly more difficult than playing a Flute, Clarinet or Saxophone in tune, and these “Junior Oboes” will be just as much of a challenge as any other Oboe. It could be argued that a child ought to progress on an easier wind instrument, or on piano/keyboards, to develop their sense of pitch before learning the Oboe. Having said that, these beginner instruments would be useful for the primary school child who already has a good sense of pitch and is drawn to the sound of the Oboe, and I would certainly recommend them for secondary school stock or as an alternative to a budget priced instrument for a beginner of any age.

Categories of student instruments

Student instruments (capable of playing the full range of notes from Low Bb to the A three octaves above) can be divided into four main categories:

Budget student instruments: these models are much cheaper than the recognized brands and often cheaper even than second-hand student instruments. These new instruments are usually of poor quality and will have a limited lifetime, either because they will soon need repair (but many repairers will not work on these cheaper instruments) or they simply do not meet the needs of any but the complete beginner. Some budget instruments are of reasonable quality for the price, but there is no “brand consistency” so it is impossible to recommend any particular make or model.

Old student instruments: these can be between 20 and 50 years old. They are usually of poor quality with poor tuning and tone and can be missing what are now considered essential parts of mechanism. An old student instrument that is in reasonable condition (and most are not) can be acceptable for a beginner but it will become essential for the player to upgrade to a modern student sooner or later (certainly once grade 3 has been reached). If a school has Oboes in its stock of instruments they will almost certainly be old student instruments.

Standard student instruments: these are basic student instruments that are suitable up to grade 6 and they must have the following key-work: thumb-plate; Barret side key for A/Bb and B/C trills; simple system octave keys; forked F vent; Low B and Bb keys; 1 trill (C/D) on top-joint; roll-plate for Left-hand finger 1; and spatula for left hand finger 1 to facilitate an A#/B trill (with the thumb off). I recommend the Buffet Artist (4121) but other instruments available include: Howarth S10B, Schreiber 7130, Ward & Winterbourn TW1 or 1a.

Advanced student instruments: these instruments are intended to go to grade 8 and beyond and will have the following key-work (if not more) in addition to the above: plateaux keys; semi-automatic octave keys; C#/D# trill on top-joint; alternate C/D trill on bottom joint (linked to top joint C/D trill). I recommend the Buffet 4151 but other instruments available include: Howarth S20; Sound Alchemy Alpha; Ward & Winterbourn TW3a.

Variations in design

Oboes vary a great deal in the design of the mechanism but at a student level the key-work is fairly standard (as listed above). Below are some other aspects of design to consider:

Thumb-plate mechanism: British players play on Oboes that have a thumb-plate mechanism to play certain notes (as opposed to continental players who use the **conservatoire** mechanism) and teachers will expect beginners to learn the thumb-plate system. If you are buying a new instrument from abroad or a second-hand instrument make sure that the instrument has a thumb-plate or is dual system (fitted with both thumb-plate and conservatoire mechanism).

Plating: keys are either nickel or silver-plated; silver-plate looks nicer if kept clean and the player's fingers are slightly less likely to slip off a key, however it is not as hard wearing as nickel-plate.

Wood or plastic: at student level this is secondary to the instrument having all the essential mechanism and having a reasonable tuning and tone. A wood instrument is not necessarily better than a plastic instrument. Some instruments are made of wood but have a plastic-lined bore, this reduces the risk of cracks occurring in the wood.

Manufacturers and models of student instruments

There have been dozens of different manufacturers and hundreds of different models over the years. The following brands of student instrument are currently available:

Buffet: Buffet is a Brand name formerly owned by Boosey and Hawkes. Buffet Oboes are well made and are very popular with teachers and players alike although the availability of their student Oboes can be a problem (note there also exists a brand called the 'Buffet Evette' which not made by the Buffet factory – it is lower quality old student Oboe and I do not recommend it).

Howarth: Howarth is an English manufacturer and its shop in London is the centre for Oboe players in the UK. Howarth produce a range of Oboes from beginner models to professional models. The London shop stocks a very good range of graduate and professional Oboes but only Howarth's own student instruments.

Schreiber: Schreiber are a German company that has a long history of manufacturing quality instruments although they have only recently started producing Oboes for the UK market.

Sound Alchemy: These are actually Italian (Bulgheroni) Oboes that are tweaked in the UK and sold through Crowthers in Canterbury. Bulgheroni are a respected make.

Ward & Winterbourn: This is an English company that has been producing Oboes for over thirty years.

Yamaha: Yamaha is a very successful brand and Yamaha Oboes are well made however the student model (YOB241B-30) only plays down to Low B instead of the standard Low Bb and therefore is not popular with teachers, and the next model in the range (YOB431B) is a graduate instrument.

Play-testing an Oboe before purchase

For a complete beginner this is impossible because the player won't be able to produce a sound. If the player has already made progress on an old student instrument and can produce a reliable sound then it is worth getting the player to try the instrument before purchasing because the player might prefer the tone of one instrument over another and also find one instrument easier than another. It is important that a player tests an instrument with their own selection of reeds they have built up whilst learning to play.

If the player can produce a reliable sound they 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 they are trying out it could be down to how well the instrument is working (bear in mind that even brand new instruments might not be working well).