

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

Graduate Oboes

"Graduate" is a term used to describe instruments that are a step up from advanced student instruments but below the level of 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 Oboes are made of wood and have extra mechanism fitted (as detailed below) intended to make certain notes (trills in particular) easier to play; indeed in some cases the amount of key-work fitted matches some professional models. There is no "standard" key-work for graduate Oboes but all models are dual system (thumb-plate and conservatoire) and have plateaux mechanism; a semi-automatic Octave system with a third Octave key; a "long" F; an alternate G# for right-hand; and a Bell vent key. As well as the extra key-work the graduate Oboes enable the player achieve a better tone.

Plateaux mechanism: this means all holes covered by the first three fingers on each hand are covered by plates that the fingers press down on (these plates may have a small hole – a "perforation"). Whereas this is available on some student instruments it is expected as standard on graduate instruments. The plates should be fitted with cork pads (which seat better and give a better feel to the instrument) and it is essential that plate 1 for LH finger one has a roll plate (an extension of the plate towards the second finger tone hole) and can be adjusted to the required vent height for the player. This is because whereas a student player lifts LH finger 1 to sound the second register, a graduate player should roll finger 1 forward for 2nd register C#/D/Eb and all 3rd register notes (except C# when they should lift the first finger for the correct tuning). The vent height can be set low for student players and set high when the player advances.

Third (Register) Octave key: whereas standard student instruments have a "simple" octave mechanism (two independently operated keys) and advanced student instruments have a semi-automatic mechanism (the two keys are linked); Graduate Oboes have a semi-automatic octave mechanism and 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 – it is difficult to fit the touch-piece onto the instrument because the thumb-plate is in the way and different manufacturers have located it in different positions.

Fully Automatic Octaves: 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 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).

Dual thumb-plate and conservatoire mechanism: British players use the thumb-plate mechanism to sound the left-hand notes Bb and C and the "Barret key" for trilling these notes using the side of the first finger of the right hand. Graduate and professional models usually have the conservatoire mechanism fitted (and therefore no Barret key) so that the player can use this as an alternative - particularly for trilling the notes (A/Bb and B/C), the absence of the Barret key allows other key-work to be fitted (in particular an alternate right-hand G#).

Standard trill keys and alternate touch-pieces: the left hand (C/D) and (C#/D#) trill keys and the alternate touch-piece for the right hand on the bottom joint that links to the left hand first trill (note that the tuning of these trills is affected by the setting of LH plate I) are standard on advanced student instruments, as is the spatula for the left hand finger 1 to facilitate an A#/B trill (with the thumb off). Graduate instruments also have an alternate key for the LH little finger (called the long F or the 4th feather key) that links to the F key on the bottom joint and an alternate right hand touch-piece for G# to facilitate G#/A trills with the right hand first finger.

Low B/C link or B/C# link (articulated Low C#): 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 Bb) the C key is automatically closed (so the player does not have to depress the C touch-piece when playing these notes). 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 lose the C# key without the player having to take her/his finger off the C# touch-piece. Both mechanisms serve to reduce the need to use both little fingers at the same time. Conservatoire Oboes tend to have the Low B/C# link because it allows independent use of the Low B key for certain high notes e.g. Eb.

Bell vent: this is a small key attached to the Low Bb 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#, and G.

The main graduate Oboes currently available in the UK are: Cabart standard model 74 (by Loree); Tiery E40 (by Fosatti); Howarth models S40C and S45C; Patricola PT SB1 TP; Rigoutat-Riec standard model (plus thumb-plate and 3rd Octave key); Sound alchemy Legato (by Bulgheroni); Strasser-Marigaux standard model 801 (dual system with 3rd Octave key); and the Yamaha YOB431 model. No single shop will sell all these instruments (unless they are second-hand instruments) so it would be necessary to visit more than one shop to compare all the instruments available, but I recommend starting at Howarth in London.

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 S10B 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.

Professional Oboes

These instruments are made using the best quality wood (although composite materials and plastic 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 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 often 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 here 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 (the common additional mechanism is detailed below). The additional mechanism 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.

Spatula for left hand finger II:

This facilitates two trills: a G/A# trill - with the thumb off and the left-hand finger II holding down the spatula, fingers III/II can trill G/A#; and a Bb/C trill - with the thumb off and both fingers I and II closing their respective spatula keys, fingers II/I can trill Bb/C. Some players find spatula keys awkward to use.

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 left hand standard touch piece (or the right hand alternate touch piece) the link holds plate II closed, so, with the thumb on, fingers II/I can trill A#/B; this link also enables other trills depending on whether plate III is perforated and/or a "3rd G#" is fitted.

"Third G#" key: named after its location more than its function (because it doesn't always sound G#) - its prime intention is to facilitate the G#/A trill (as an alternative to using the second finger spatula key) - with thumb on or off, and the "3rd G#" touch-piece depressed, fingers III/II can trill G#/A. The 3rd G# key can also facilitate the trills A/Bb and A#/B depending on which plates are perforated and what other mechanism is present (note that although this key does correspond with several keys on the top-joint it is only designed to be used either when plate I and the left hand G# touch-piece are depressed, or when plates I and II are depressed together (with or without the left hand G#).

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#.

"Split" bell vent: This assembly is more complicated than the standard bell vent key and is an improvement on the tuning - the vent key opens when the low B key is depressed but shuts when low Bb is depressed.

Gillet conservatoire system (with thumb-plate): this is the common full professional plateau mechanism with a comprehensive set of additional keys and can be identified by the "split D" (the plate for (RH) finger VI has an inner plate and an outer ring to assist the tuning in trills using D#/Eb). The thumb-plate is added for British players. Sometimes the Long F is also added

A professional model might not be fitted with a full Gillet system but instead have all Graduate key-work plus the "third G#" and the banana key.

Makes of professional Oboe available in the UK are: Buffet; Fosatti; Fox (Renard); Howarth; Loree; Marigaux; Patricola; Puchner; Rigoutat; Sound Alchemy (Bulgheroni); and Yamaha. No single shop will sell all these instruments (unless they are second-hand instruments) so it would be necessary to visit more than one shop to compare all the instruments available, but I recommend starting at Howarth in London. In the case of the French 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 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.

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 mechanism and likewise instruments previously regarded as graduate models may now be thought of as student models.

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 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).