

HOW TO BUY AN OBOE

By Robert Botti

I remember being offered the choice of an instrument in elementary school. The violin was interesting, but my mother already played far better than I could have ever hoped to. The trumpet was heroic and quite appropriate for my adolescence, but alas I had braces and was told that I would never be able to practice without inflicting further injury to my already sore mouth. The flute and clarinet were, of course, the ubiquitous options, but even back then it seemed like the world had enough of both of them to go around. Then, someone finally mentioned the oboe. What was it? What did it sound like? After only playing a short while, I became intrigued with and enchanted by the oboe's unique qualities, from the intractability of its double reed to the poignant piquancy of its sound.

Background

The most lyrical and vocal of the woodwinds, the oboe can sing and soar soulfully above the thicker textures of the orchestra. The name in French, hautbois, literally means "high wood." Shepherds of the first millennium used what was in fact the earliest ancestor of the oboe to call their herds over highlands and pastures — a scene hauntingly portrayed by Richard Wagner in his opera "Tristan und Isolde." Medieval times show the shawm family of double-reed instruments as prominent in outdoor ceremonial music. Its considerable volume made it far too loud to be played indoors or alongside any other instruments without rendering them completely inaudible. An indoor shawm was deemed desirable, primarily as an enhancement to strings. In the mid-17th century, two French court musicians, Jacques Hotteterre and Michel Philidor, created the instrument that would come to be called the oboe.

The new instrument retained the conical bore of its ancestry but little else. Early oboes had seven finger holes, only two keys, and a range of barely two octaves upward from middle C. Its sweet tone, flexibility and pastoral quality were embraced by musicians of the period and before long, it was not uncommon for the courts to carry a full complement of 16 or more. The music written for double reed bands of the Renaissance surely capture the character unique to these ensembles. By the end of the 17th century, composers were eager to exploit the oboe and, after the violin, it became the leading solo instrument of the time. Vivaldi, Handel, Albinoni and Marcello all wrote important concertos for the instrument that remain staples in the repertoire (Handel and Marcello both played the oboe themselves). But no mention of the Baroque period can be complete without citing Johann Sebastian Bach. He remains to date the most prolific composer for the oboe and probably the one who understood it best. The lines and passages throughout his works helped shape the development of the instrument as it began to evolve into the modern oboe.

Bach also favored other members of the oboe family, including the oboe d'amore and oboe da caccia. The oboe da caccia is thought to be the ancestor of the English horn or cor anglais. Ironically, the English horn is neither English nor a horn. It is pitched in F and sounds a fifth lower than the oboe. The oboe d'amore is pitched in A and sounds a minor third lower than the oboe.

Today there remain numerous styles of oboe playing throughout the world. Most of these are identifiable by their country of origin in much the same way as one is able to identify a French, German or American accent. The famed Marcel Tabuteau, former principal oboe of the Philadelphia Orchestra, is widely considered to be the father of the American school of oboe playing. Most prominent players of the 20th century from North America studied with him or had teachers who did.

Getting Started on the Oboe

It is not uncommon for many oboe novices to have begun their musical lives on other instruments. This generally does not prove to be a problem early on, especially when considering that the oboe's fingering system is much the same as that of the flute, saxophone, or recorder. But it is important that the beginner start on an instrument that is in good working condition. An aspiring player can acquire many poor habits while trying to compensate for inconsistencies in the instrument. Of course, the other complicating variable is the reed itself. Unlike the clarinet or saxophone, the oboe has no mouthpiece. The reed is actually a single piece of cane from a bamboo-like plant, *Arundo donax*, folded in half and tied to a cork staple. It is then shaved to facilitate vibration. For a young player to develop, it is imperative that the reed vibrate easily and is able to be played in tune. A competent teacher should be able to help with the making of a reed that cooperates in this manner. Any player that becomes more serious about the oboe will inevitably be



introduced to the fine art of reed-making. As one develops as a player, so must one's ability to make good reeds. It is impossible to play well without them.

Having the proper oboe and reed in place will make getting started a lot easier and the production of a good tone a lot more fun. With adequate attention given to wind production and embouchure (placement and shape of the mouth on the reed), progress should be felt and heard relatively soon. It also helps immensely for a young player to hear the oboe played well. A student should take advantage of any opportunity to hear it performed in concert. And, of course, recordings are a resource that a musician can ill afford to be without. Training the ear to recognize what one should be striving for is vital to the developing player. An aural image or reference point can often be the best teacher.

What to Look For

When looking to buy an oboe, a number of factors should be considered. Student oboes generally are made of plastic. The better ones will be hand-reamed, a process that greatly improves the intonation of the instrument. A prospective buyer should inquire if there are any keys that have not been included with the model. For example, less expensive oboes may not have a left-hand F or E-flat key. These keys are important in developing technical proficiency; oboes without them are not recommended for any player other than early beginners. Another key that may not be included on some models is the low B-C-sharp "banana" key. However, this key is not critical because it is rarely used, even by professionals.

Professional oboes are generally made of wood, although there are some very good plastic models that have been hand-bored. Wood offers a flexibility and variability in tone quality and color that plastic will never be able to equal. But wooden oboes expand and contract especially with changes in temperature and humidity, often leading to a crack in the top joint. The severity of the repair depends upon how big the crack is and where it is located. For this reason, plastic oboes have become more popular, even for professionals, when performing outside.

A used oboe can be a good choice with many advantages. It may allow you to consider a better instrument for the same price as a new one of lesser quality. Also, a used wooden oboe is not as susceptible to cracking because the wood has had a chance to age and is therefore more stable. That doesn't mean that it didn't crack when it was newer though, so be sure to have any used oboe looked at by a reliable person before buying it. If it has cracked and was repaired properly, the oboe may still be in very good playing condition.

New and used oboes can be bought directly from dealers throughout the country. It is quite common for dealers to send oboes to prospective buyers. Make sure there is a trial period that will allow the player adequate time to make a sound decision. A warranty and service are generally included for a prescribed period. Be sure to understand how long the warranty lasts and whether it includes repairs or cracks. An advantage of purchasing a new instrument is that some dealers of better instruments will replace the top joint if it cracks within the warranty period. This is a much more common practice than it used to be and quite important considering that, more often than not, oboes crack.

It has been said that the oboe is "the ill wind that blows no good." With a little forethought, one need not encounter the instrument this way. Hector Berlioz wrote, "The oboe is a vehicle for melody, pastoral by nature, full of tenderness, naïve gracefulness, untroubled innocence, silent joy, optimally portrayed in the cantabile." May your song sing through the oboe as Pan's did through his reed pipe!

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Editor's Note: "How to Buy an Oboe" continues our series of instructional guides on the principal band and orchestral instruments. SBO grants permission to photocopy and distribute the article to both students and parents.