

The Oboe for Dummies



A Book of Techniques and Exercises for the Oboist by

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Table of Contents

1.	Selecting an Oboe	1
2.	Care and Maintenance.....	2
3.	Breathing.....	5
4.	Assembling the Instrument	6
5.	Posture/Hand Position.....	7
6.	Embouchure	9
7.	Articulation	10
8.	Vibrato	11
9.	The Reed	11
10.	Warm-Up Exercises	15
11.	Fingering Chart	18
12.	Oboe Literature	25
13.	Oboe Players	25
14.	Oboe Resources	26
15.	The Rest of the Family: Oboe d’amore, English Horn, and Bass Oboe.	27
16.	Extended Techniques	28
17.	A (Brief) History of the Oboe.....	30
18.	References.....	31

Selecting an Oboe

The first step a student needs to take when selecting an oboe is to ask an experienced oboe player for help. Many oboe makers try to sell unacceptable instruments to students that don't know what they are doing. An experienced oboist can help determine if the instrument has any hope at all of being decent. Just because the wood is polished and the keys are shiny does not mean the instrument will play well.

There are three levels of conservatory-system oboe models- professional, intermediate, and student. The main differences between each are the inclusion of alternate/trill keys and the material used for the oboe. A student model most likely will be made of plastic and it will be lacking many essential keys, such as:

- the left hand f key
- low b flat key
- left hand c/d trill key,
- f resonance key,
- Ab/Bb trill pitch compensator
- Low B/C# trill
- Eb/Db articulation

I do not recommend buying a student model because these keys are required in oboe literature, and the player will outgrow it in a short period of time. Intermediate models are much more practical as they include these essential keys, and they will satisfy a player's needs until he/she (possibly) decides to become a professional player. Intermediate models are usually made of either plastic or granadilla wood. Professional models are top-of-the-line and the most expensive. They can be made out of various woods such as rosewood and granadilla, and they include many non-essential trill keys, a third octave key, etc.

Below I have listed some brands that consistently produce quality instruments (although, as I said, it is always important to have it checked by a player before buying).

Professional Models	Intermediate Models	Student Models
Fox "Renard"	Renard (Fox)	Conn
Loree	Cabart (Loree)	Bundy
Rigoutat	Rigoutat	Reic (Rigoutat)
Marigaux	Selmer (Soloist)	Signet
Yamaha	Yamaha	Yamaha
Howarth	Lucerne	Lucerne

Care and Maintenance

Every oboe has an intricate system of keys, rods, posts, and screws that must be constantly maintained. A lot of playing or even just a change in the weather can affect the keywork and the instrument itself (depending on what material it is made of). Thus, an oboist must develop a routine of checking his/her instrument every day for loose screws to keep the oboe in adjustment (see next page for a diagram of these adjustments).

Furthermore, the player must swab out the oboe after every playing, especially if the instrument is made of wood. Moisture left in the oboe collects and can clog the tone-holes in addition to being absorbed by the instrument. If the water is absorbed and the oboe becomes very cold, a crack will almost definitely form on the instrument. Water-logged tone-holes have an easy fix- swabbing the instrument or passing a piece of cigarette paper under the key. A cracked instrument, however, is much more difficult and costly to fix since it has to be performed by a professional repairman. The oboe also frequently needs dusted with just a paintbrush; this keeps dust from gathering in the pads and keys, making them stick.

In addition, if an oboe's keys begin sticking it could be from a variety of reasons. The key might just need lubricated with a drop of key oil placed at either end of its rod. It could also be that the key was accidentally bumped and became bent. This would have to be fixed by either an experienced player or a repairman. Lastly, it could just mean that the pad is sticking for some reason and needs to be wiped with a piece of cigarette paper.

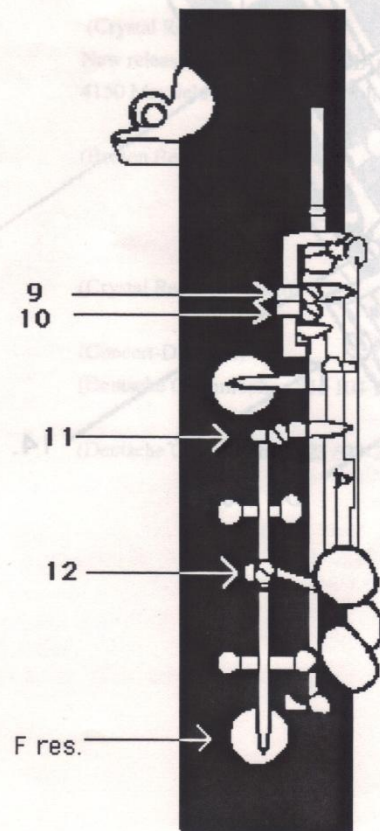
Finally, there are some actions that only need to be completed a couple times per year. With the change of seasons between Fall/Winter and Winter/Spring, the bore of wooden oboes should be wiped with bore oil. This is applied by putting a line of drops on a turkey feather and passing it through the oboe. Also, it is important to note that keys should only be polished once or twice a year, since polishing cloths actually remove the finish of the keys.

Below you will see the common adjustments that oboe players need to constantly make on their oboes to keep them functioning properly. This information is courtesy of Timothy Hertz's book The Fundamentals of Oboe Playing.

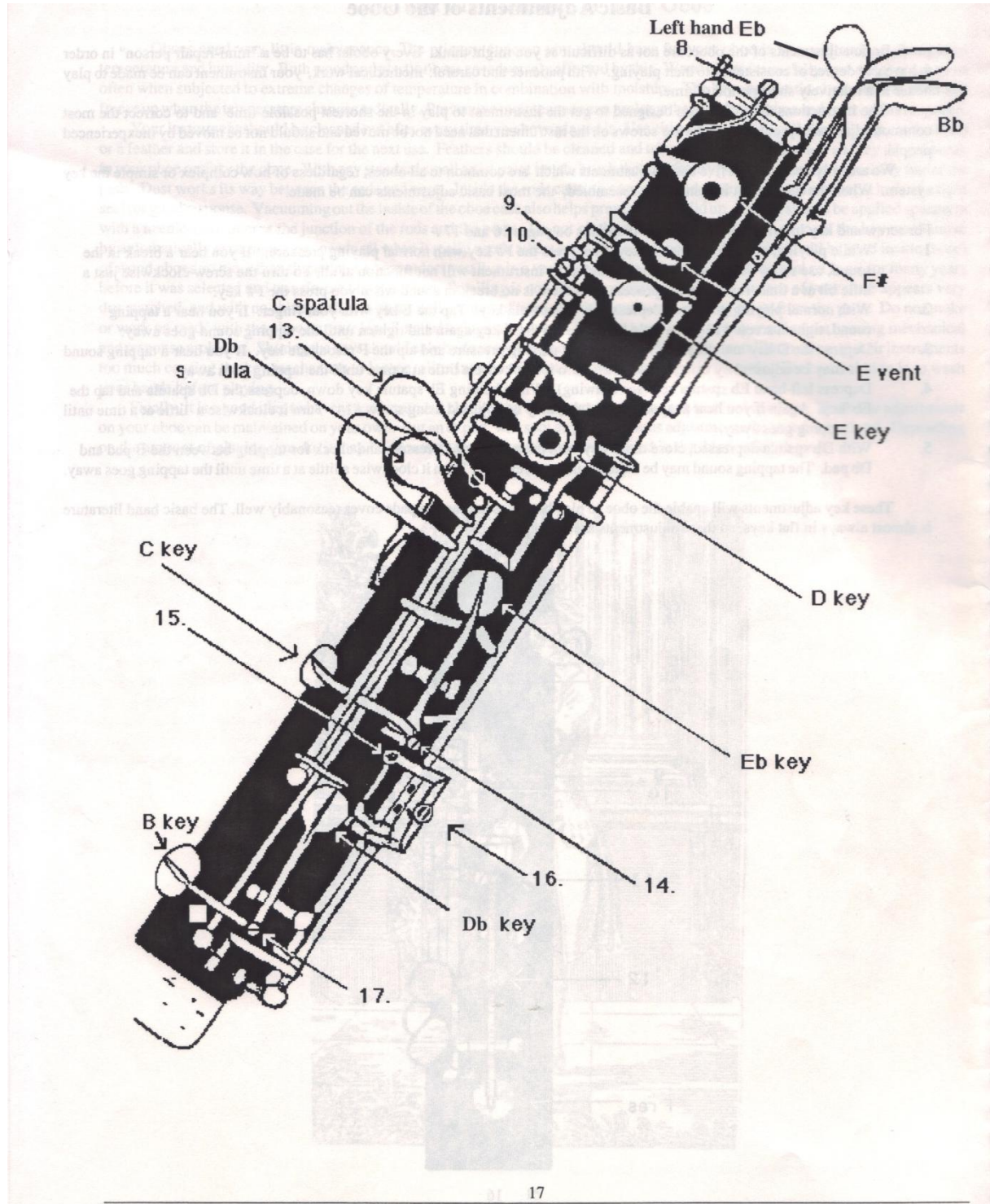
For screw and key information, refer to the diagrams on pages 16 and 17.

1. While playing, press down the G# key, then press the F# key with normal playing pressure. If you hear a break in the sound, use screw #8. If screw #8 is too tight, the instrument will not function at all, so turn the screw clockwise just a little bit at a time, repeating the process until there is no break in sound when you press the F# key.
2. With normal playing pressure, depress the "C" spatula key. Tap the E key with your finger. If you hear a tapping sound, tighten screw #13 just a little bit. Then tap the E key again and tighten until the tapping sound goes away.
3. Depress the D key and the F# key with normal playing pressure and tap the F resonance key. If you hear a tapping sound this may be adjusted by using screw #12. Turn it clockwise a little at a time until the tapping goes away.
4. Depress left-hand Eb spatula key (see drawing). While holding Eb spatula key down, depress the Db spatula and tap the Eb key. Again if you hear a tapping sound this may be adjusted using screw #14. Turn it clockwise a little at a time until the tapping goes away.
5. With Db spatula depressed, close the B key with normal playing pressure and check for tapping between the B pad and Db pad. The tapping sound may be adjusted using screw #17. Turn it clockwise a little at a time until the tapping goes away.

These key adjustments will enable the oboe to play better, assuming the pads cover reasonably well. The basic band literature is almost always in flat keys, so these adjustments are essential.



See next page for Lower Joint Diagram



Breathing

Breathing is the most fundamental part to playing the oboe. In order to produce a quality sound on the oboe, the player must use a steady consistent airstream. Think of your windpipe like a hose; the air needs to flow straight through it with constant pressure and without interruption until it hits the reed.

When taking in air, the player needs to remember to breathe “low.” The diaphragm should be activated, making the lower abdomen and back expand outward as the air enters the body. This low breath can be accomplished through several exercises. The player can make a “ha ha” and feel their diaphragm become activated. Afterwards, the player can attempt to always recreate this feeling when taking in air. Also, the player can intake air while forming an “oh” vowel (the point being an open throat).

To learn how to expel the air, the player should consider their body like a toothpaste tube. The air should fill up the entire body, and then it should be expelled by using force from the bottom (like squeezing a toothpaste tube). The player can also come to understand how to use proper breath support by quickly forcing all his/her air out on a “shhh.” This resistance is similar to the resistance a player will experience on a reed.

As the oboist begins playing longer phrases, he/she will notice that they feel the need to breathe even though they still have air to put through his/her instrument. This “stale” air is carbon dioxide that needs to be expelled so fresh oxygen can enter the body. Thus, the player needs to take a **double action breath**, where he/she lets out the old air and then takes in new air. Another option for the player is to plan out in the music where some stale breath can be expelled before taking in a new breath sometime later.

Assembling the Instrument

When putting together the oboe, the player needs to be very careful with the keys. As you have already learned, the keys are quite delicate and easily bent. Thus, when putting the joints together, try to put your hands on the areas where there is the least number of rods to bend (See below). Also, try to keep the corks well greased with cork grease, so there isn't too much pressure that needs applied to fit the instrument together. The joints should be attached with a twisting motion, **not** by pushing straight down.

1. Put the bell on the lower joint first



2. Then connect the upper joint



It is also very important that the player be aware of the three connections between the joints. The upper joint has two rods that need to connect on either side of the lower joint (See below). The lower joint has just one connection with the bell (See below).



Posture/Hand Position

Another key part to breathing is the player's posture. If the player slumps over or contorts his/her neck, they put a "kink" in their airstream (similar to twisting a hose). Thus, the body needs to be in an upright position, held up as though a string is holding the player up from the top of his/her head. When sitting, the player needs to keep both feet flat on the floor, while holding the upper half of the body as though the player was standing. (See pictures below)

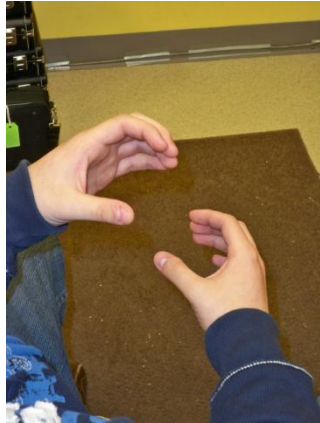
Correct



Incorrect



When the oboe is brought to the mouth, it should be held at about a 45 degree angle, although this will vary slightly based on the person. The most important thing is that the best sound is found by experimenting.



To hold the instrument, the hands should be curved into c shapes, with the pads of the fingers on the keys (not the tips).



The right hand thumb should be placed under the thumbrest at the bottom half of the nail, and the left hand thumb should rest just below the octave key.

While playing the fingers should move as little as possible, and tension must be kept out of the body in order to accomplish fast technique. Just remember to **let your air do the work.**

Embouchure

Like everything else about the oboe, the embouchure needs to have as little tension as possible. Tension forces the blood out of the lips and causes the lips to eventually lose control in exhaustion. The mouth should be thought of like a pouch or change-purse; the lips themselves are not tense, but the areas around the lips are (such as above, below, and at the corners). Furthermore, the mouth should be formed into an “ah” shape with the jaw lowered. This keeps the mouth and throat open and produces a darker sound. Picture a snooty British butler; the oboist’s mouth should have those same characteristic turned-down corners and dropped jaw.

The reed’s placement on the lips is equally as important as the mouth’s formation. The reed must be held as far out of the mouth as possible; so the player can control the very tip (See picture below). This is essential since the tip is the thinnest part of the reed and thereby the most easily controlled. In addition, to keep a stable pitch and tone, the reed must be held against the bottom lip. It may help the player to think of placing the tip on the bottom lip like a head on a pillow. This will help to learn how far out of the mouth the reed needs to be along with the fact that it must stay on the lower lip.

Correct



The player needs to be aware that while playing their jaw will move. In order to accomplish wide intervals, fast articulations, etc. the player needs to accommodate by moving his/her jaw; this motion will begin to occur naturally as the player learns each note. However, beginning players need to watch that they don’t also move the reed farther into their mouth, start to smile, or start to bite down on the reed (See picture below). This all leads to tension and less control.

INCORRECT



Articulation

Every sound on the oboe should be started by touching the tongue to the tip of the reed, starting the air, and then releasing the tongue. This creates a clear, stable pitch with proper air support from the very beginning. In this way, the tongue acts as a sort of release valve for the air. The player should then stop the note with either a cutoff of air or the articulation for the next note. Thus, notes on the oboe should **NEVER** be stopped by the tongue itself unless it's starting a new note.

For basic articulation, the oboe player should articulate by touching the tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed. It might help for the player to think of saying "too" or "doo" into the reed. When tonguing rapid passages, the tongue should be light and move no more than necessary. The most important thing is to remember to keep the airstream consistent, since the force of the air helps to move the tongue.

As a player becomes more advanced he/she may notice that stopping a note with just the breath often leads to a drop in pitch. This is unavoidable since the air support is dying away. Thus, a technique called **tapering** needs to occur. Tapering is when the oboist closes his/her mouth while dying away on a note. This closes the tip as the breath support lags, neutralizing the flattening of the pitch. This technique is used for everything from a slow decrescendo to moderately fast staccato notes. In faster sections it looks a little like the player is "chewing" on the reed. *However, it is very important the player remembers to keep the reed firmly planted in the bottom lip while performing this motion.*

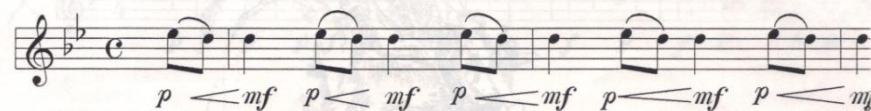
Below are some effective exercises from Timothy Hurtz's book The Fundamentals of Oboe Playing (Used with permission). Mr. Hurtz is the Associate Professor of Oboe at Penn State University.



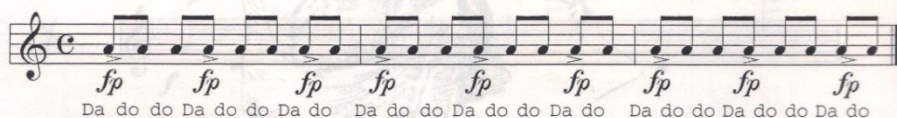
The use of accents can help the tongue relax allowing it to move quicker and freer. Accents also help increase the amount of air behind the tongue at the beginning of phrases with rapidly tongued notes.



Legato tonguing is more of a challenge for air use than tongue use. Again, fast air speed and good support make legato tonguing more connected and facile. This "Mozart" exercise will help the air/tongue coordination.



Finally, the use of "jazz"-type patterns can help loosen up the tongue for legato tonguing passages.



Vibrato

Vibrato is a technique that is considered an essential part to the modern oboe's sound; it gives an expressivity and vocal quality to the oboe's tone. Vibrato should be taught as soon as possible, so the oboe player can develop a characteristic tone on the instrument. While many types of vibrato exist, the **breath vibrato** is considered the only acceptable technique for the oboe. This can be taught through a variety of exercises. The student could play a long note while repeatedly saying "ha" into the reed. Also, the player could pant like a dog and then attempt to do the same thing while playing a note. Whistling fast sixteenth notes on a single pitch is a great way to locate the muscle involved with vibrato; the player will hear a grunting sound and feel the muscle tensing and relaxing.

After the player has discovered his/her vibrato, then the player needs to learn to control it. Depending on the music, faster and slower vibratos are required, sometimes shifting between the two. The final goal is to be as expressive and vocal-like as possible.

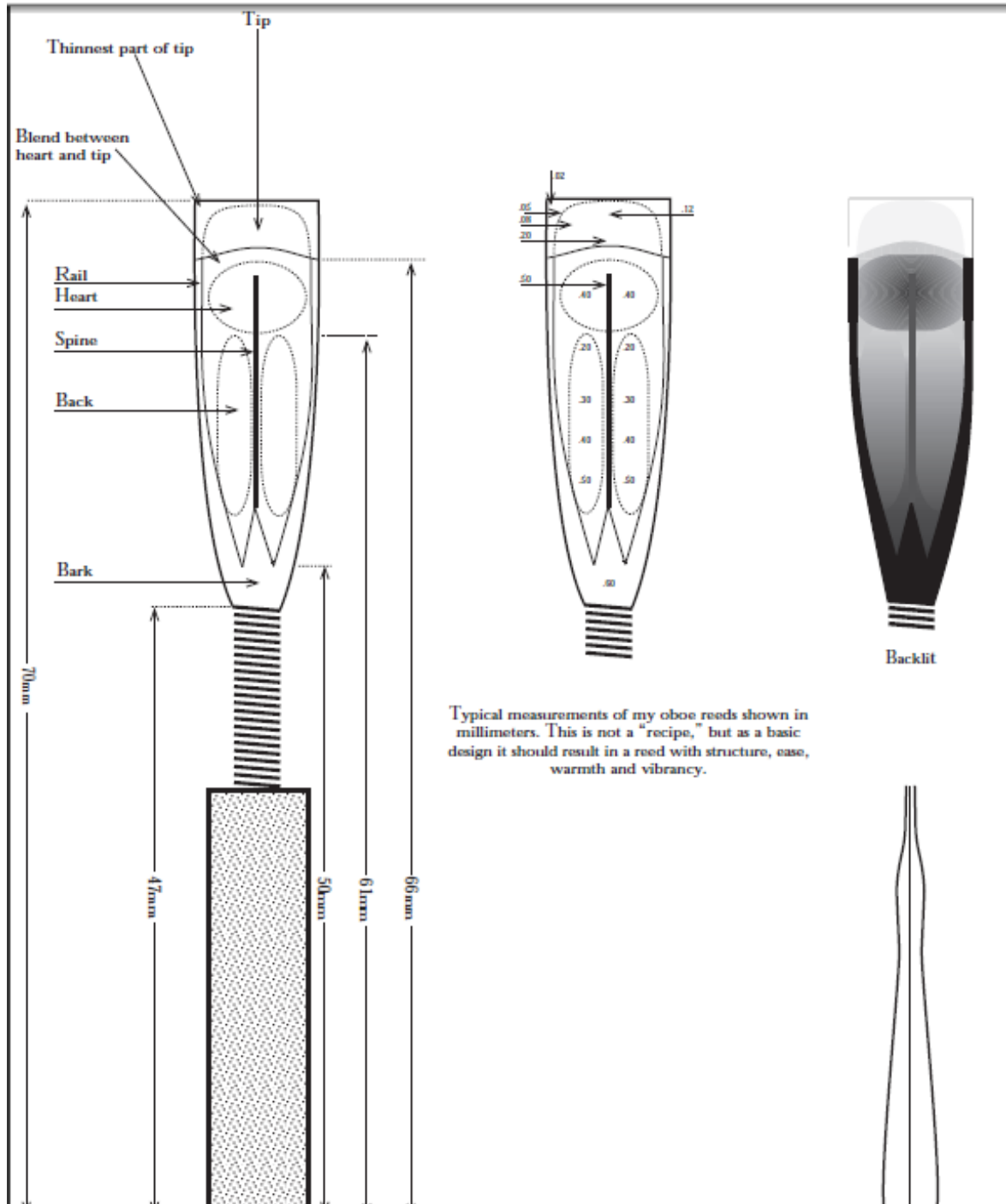
The Reed

Oboe reeds are fickle, delicate, short-lived, and high maintenance. In other words they are the biggest pain in the neck about playing this instrument. The reed is created to be in tune and produce a nice tone. Thus, a good oboe player needs to be able to make and adjust his/her own reeds to suit his/her own oboe and embouchure.

Reeds must be soaked in either the mouth or warm water, depending on how big the tip's opening is. Water makes the cane expand more, opening the reed up more than just saliva. However, it is also possible to "oversoak" the reed, filling up the cane with so much water that it doesn't vibrate easily.

Oboe reeds have three main sections, the tip, heart and windows. The tip is thinnest because it starts the vibration, so it must be the freest to move. This makes the reed responsive (able to start vibrating with just a little air). The heart is the thickest part of the reed; it serves to slow down the quick vibrations from the tip, darkening the sound. The connection between the tip and heart has a huge effect on the tone and responsiveness of the reed. If this connection is too much like a cliff, the reed will be dark but unresponsive. If the connection is too much of a ramp, the tone will be bright and honky. Thus, a balance between the two must be sought. The player might also notice that the connection appears to be an upside down "U"; this helps the vibrations to pass through the heart instead of just suddenly stopping. The last section, the windows, is the thinned section from the back of the heart to the very back of the reed. This allows the vibration to travel easily from the heart through the instrument. The back also determines how easily the low register notes are produced since the entire reed vibrates when producing them.

The reed also has two other parts, the spine and rails. The spine is a thick line of cane that goes down the middle of the reed, helping to keep it from collapsing. The rails are the thick, unshaved edges of the reed that help to keep it sealed.



This is a diagram of oboist Martin Schuring's reeds. Although it's a tad on the scientific side, the basic outlines and length are correct.

This may seem like a lot of information to take in at once. To be honest it is, and it takes a lot of practice to really become proficient at reedmaking. It may help to think of the reed like a road; it is divided into two lanes and the vibrations are the streetcars. After getting a great start at the tip, the streetcars hit a speedbump at the heart and have to slow down. Then the cars can begin travelling fast again once they reach the windows.

When making a reed the oboe player needs to remember certain principles about oboe reeds and the cane from which they are made. Oboe reeds need to “crow” octave Cs in order to be in tune. **Crowing** occurs when a player puts the reed in his/her mouth almost up to the threads and blows with no tension in the lips. The crow occurs because the tip and back are vibrating at two different frequencies. Furthermore, when shaving the reed the oboist needs to be aware that this cane removal almost always makes the reed flatter. Cutting the reed’s tip is the only reliable way to raise the pitch (since the reed is being made shorter).

In order to begin reed-making, the oboe player needs to have a standard set of tools. From any oboe store, the student will need to order a beveled knife, wooden (or metal) plaque, wood cutting block, (prestini) mandrel, and staples (47mm). From any hardware/department store, the oboist will need to buy a sharpening stone, nylon thread, nail polish, and razors. These are all essential to the reed-making process, beginning with tying and ending with a finished reed. The cane the beginning oboist will need to order is medium-hard gouged, shaped, and folded (GSF) cane.

Below I have provided a trouble-shooting guide for when making reeds. It includes the most common problems a player will encounter when reed-making and gives some more in-depth explanations for the solutions.

Problem	Solution	Why?
Reed crows sharp	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take some cane off the sides of the tip 2. Lower the windows 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Removing cane lowers the pitch 2. This allows more of the reed to vibrate, increasing the length
Reed crows flat	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cut the tip 2. Shave the entire reed (sometimes) 3. Shave a LITTLE off the spine 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This shortens the reed, raising the pitch 2. This (sometimes) helps collapse the reed, decreasing the space inside 3. See above
Reed is unresponsive (doesn't start easily)	Thin the front of the tip	The tip is thinner, so it vibrates easier
Reed feels “stuffy” (starts easily, but takes a lot of air)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Shave the connection between the heart and 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The vibration starts at the tip and hits a

<p>to play)</p>	<p>tip</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Shave the entire reed 3. Make sure the heart is proportional to the rest of the reed; the windows might need to be moved up a little 	<p>“wall” at the heart. The connection needs to be more graduated to allow the vibration to pass through</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. The entire reed is thinner, so it vibrates easier 3. The heart is the thickest part of the reed; if it is too long, it will cause the reed to be unresponsive
<p>Reed is too bright</p>	<p>Cut the tip</p>	<p>A reed is bright because too much of the thin tip is vibrating in proportion to the rest of the reed</p>
<p>High register notes are unstable</p>	<p>Shave the sides of the heart</p>	
<p>Harsh low register notes</p>	<p>Shave the windows</p>	<p>The lowest notes require the back of the reed to vibrate; shaving the back will make it more responsive</p>
<p>Opening is too small</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Soak the reed in warm water 2. Shave the back of the reed (This is risky) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Water is more effective at opening up a reed than saliva 2. This will (sometimes) make the back of the reed collapse, opening up the tip
<p>Opening is too large</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Massage the back of the reed while holding the tip closed 2. Soak the reed in your mouth 3. Shave the entire reed 4. If there is a spine in the tip, shave it 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This will put pressure on the reed, working it closed 2. Saliva doesn't open the reed up as much as water 3. Sometimes the reed is so thick, it keeps the tip open; shaving the entire reed will help it collapse 4. The spine would be forcing the tip to stay open
<p>Reed feels unstable</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make sure all the areas of the reed (windows, 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The reed's stability depends on the entire

- heart, tip) are even on both sides of the reed
- 2. Dig in the back of the windows, making sure they end in the same place on both sides

- reed vibrating the same on both sides
- 2. This more clearly defines how long the reed is

Warm-Up Exercises

Before performing on the oboe (or any instrument), it is very important that a player warm-up. This helps the player find the right embouchure/mouth formation, and it helps the instrument itself warm up (a cold instrument is always flat). A good routine is to begin with reed exercises before moving to playing on the horn. Below you will see a series of exercises from Timothy Hurtz that will be helpful for every player, from beginner to professional

Reed Exercises

The "Siren"

After placing the reed in your mouth, hold the cork of the reed with your thumb and first finger. Start the sound by dropping the jaw and change the pitch by moving the jaw up and down. Work for as wide a pitch range as possible, always maintaining a forte dynamic.



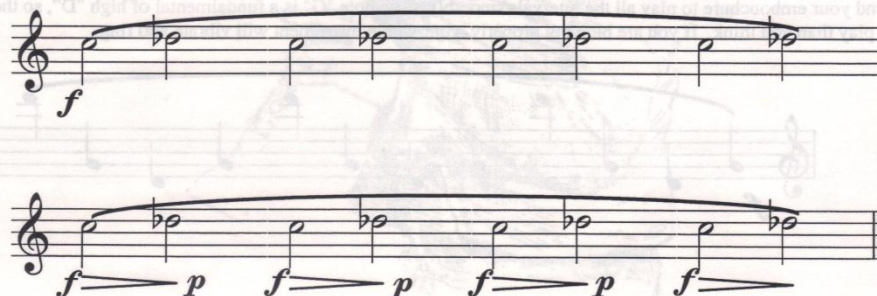
The "Start and Stop"

After achieving a very irritating siren, separate notes at the end of the siren by starting and stopping the sound with your jaw opening and closing the tip of the reed. Maintain a forte volume.



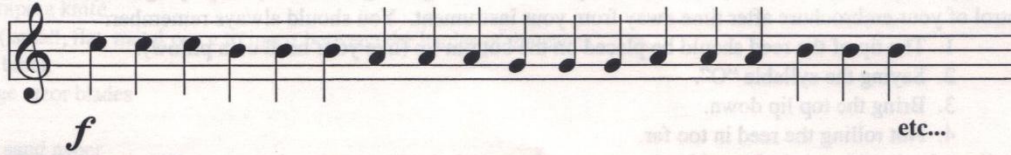
The "Pitch Bender"

After placing the reed in your mouth, hold the cork of the reed with your thumb and first finger. Find a "C" (8va c1) on the reed; now slur between a C and a D-flat back and forth by moving your jaw, without accenting. Look for a consistent tone quality without losing volume while changing pitch. After this is achieved, accent the bottom note (C) and diminuendo while slurring up to D-flat.

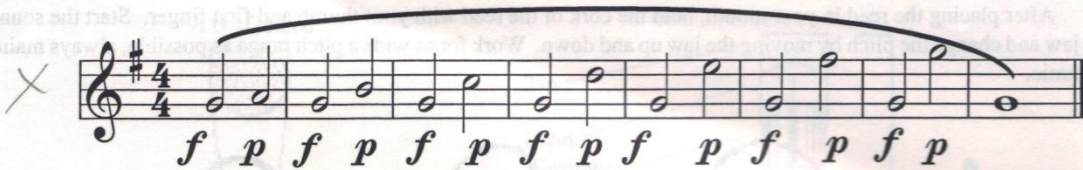


Exercises on the Oboe

All of the following exercises should be played in order! Start by playing the notes with lip articulation only. Your volume should be forte and the articulation precise.



Play this G major exercise using a lot of jaw motion. Watch yourself in the mirror as you play! Work for a consistent, fast stream of air. Make smooth connections between the notes. The idea is to warm up; so start with a crude sound and then refine it.



Use this exercise as a way to really get your air moving! The E-flat acts as a stabilizer for your hand position. All the other notes should be almost totally unsupported. Use the left over air from the E-flat to play the rest of the phrase.

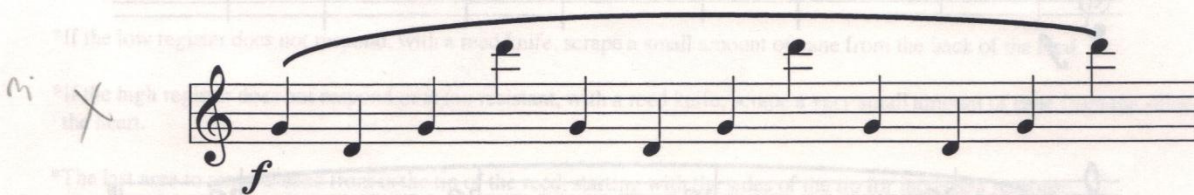
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1.



Test your embouchure by playing a few upper G's with just your lip articulation. Once you have an easy response and a good sound quality, then begin this g minor exercise. Try for more expression on the F#. Adding the low "b" key to the middle "f#" sometimes helps stabilize the pitch on that note.



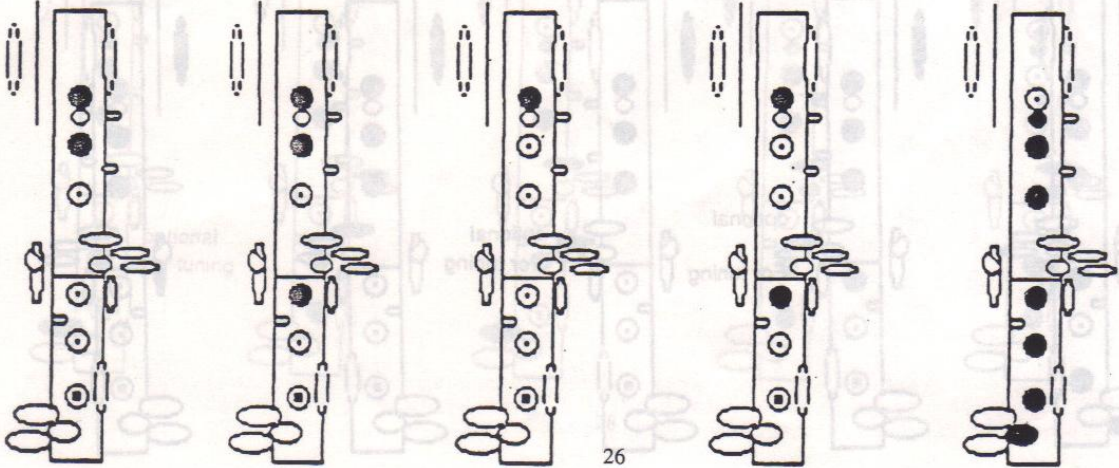
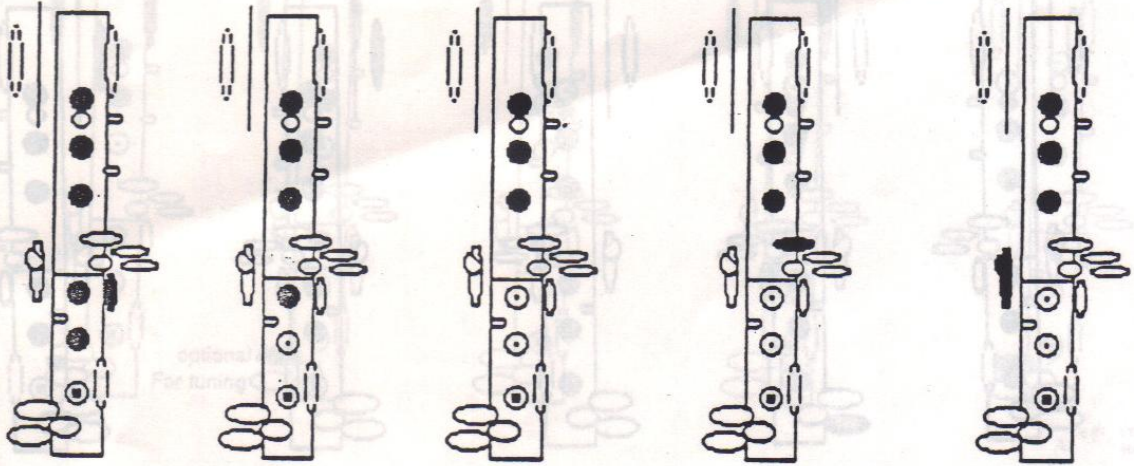
Bend your embouchure to play all the intervals smoothly. The note "G" is a fundamental of high "D", so the note really is easier to play than you think. If you are blowing properly, your whole instrument will vibrate and ring.

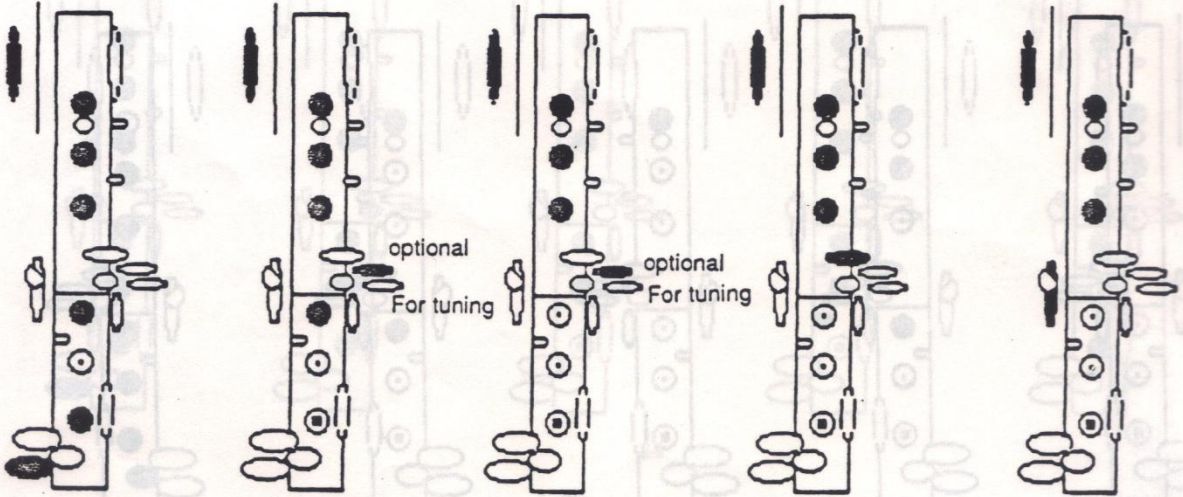
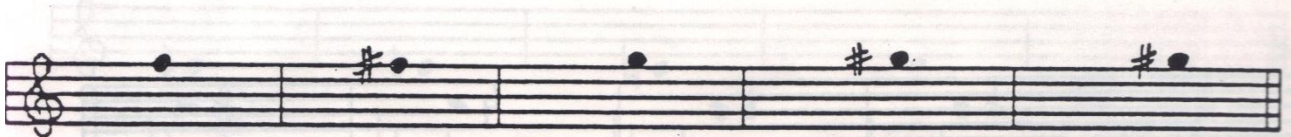
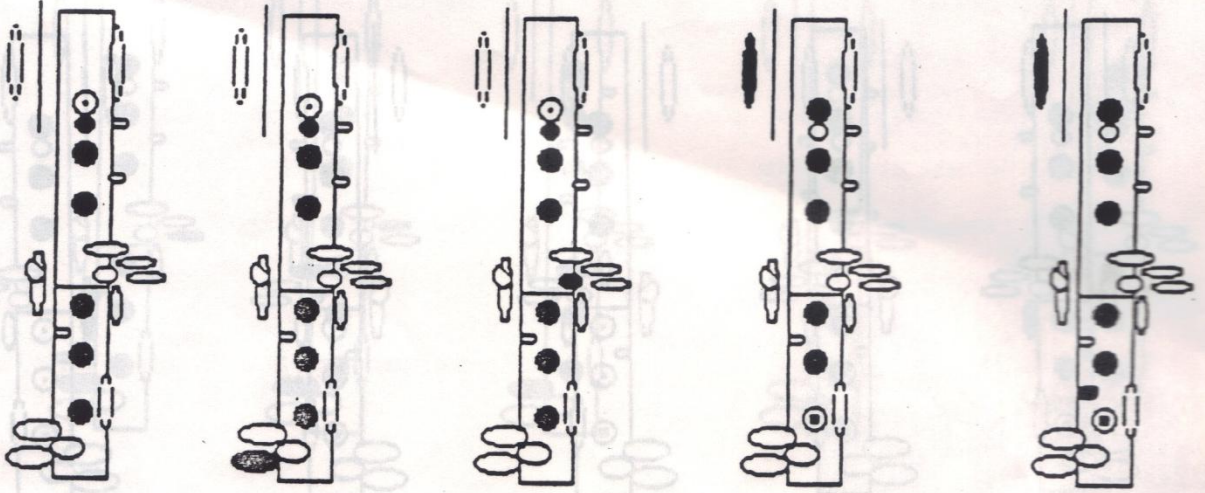
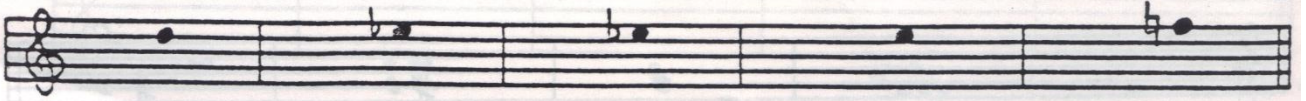


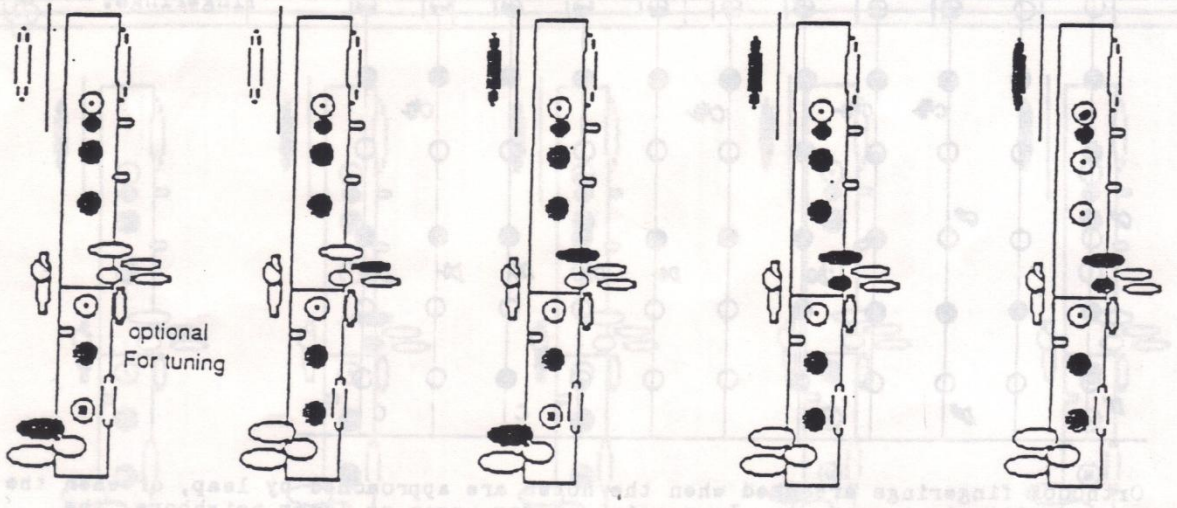
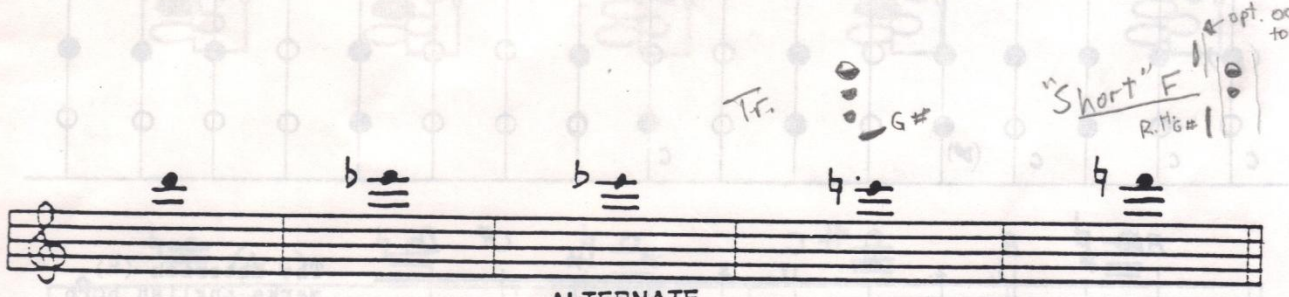
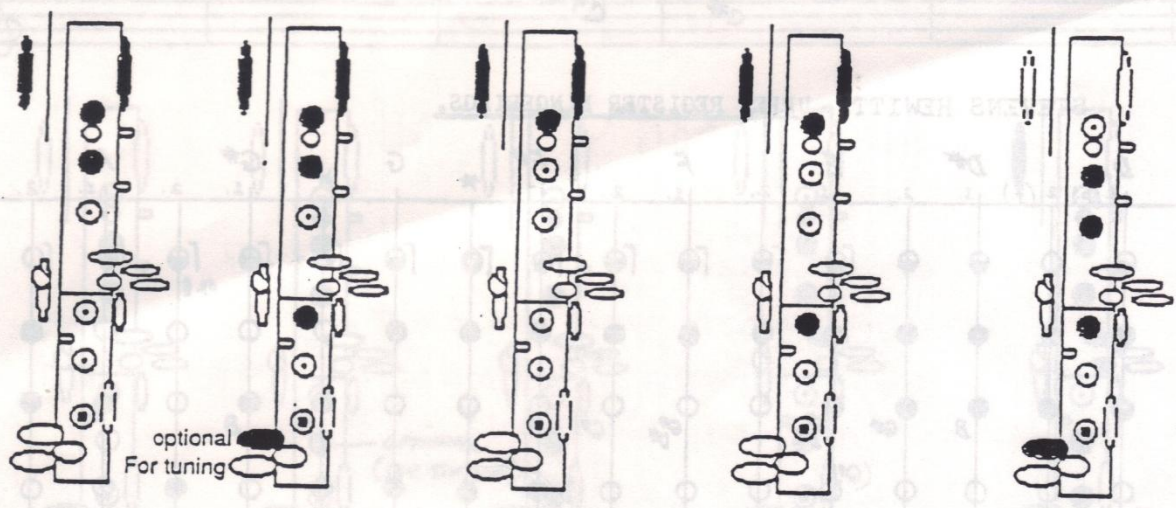
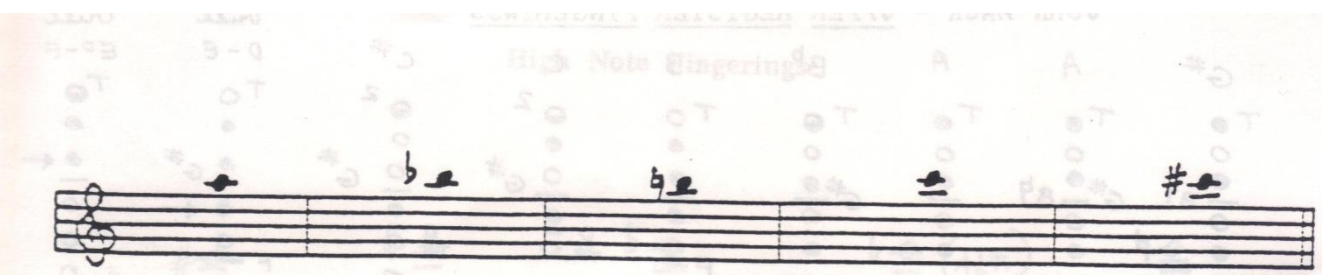
Fingering Chart

This is the fingering chart from Professor Hurtz's book The Fundamentals of Oboe Playing.
(Used with permission).

The image displays two oboe fingering charts. Each chart consists of a musical staff at the top and five diagrams of the oboe body below it. The diagrams show the placement of fingers on the keys, indicated by black dots. The first chart shows fingerings for notes B, B-flat, C, C-sharp, and D. The second chart shows fingerings for notes E, F, F-sharp, G, and G-sharp. The diagrams are arranged in a row, corresponding to the notes on the staff above them.







Tr. G \sharp
"Short" F
R.H.#1
opt. octave to raise pitch

ALTERNATE

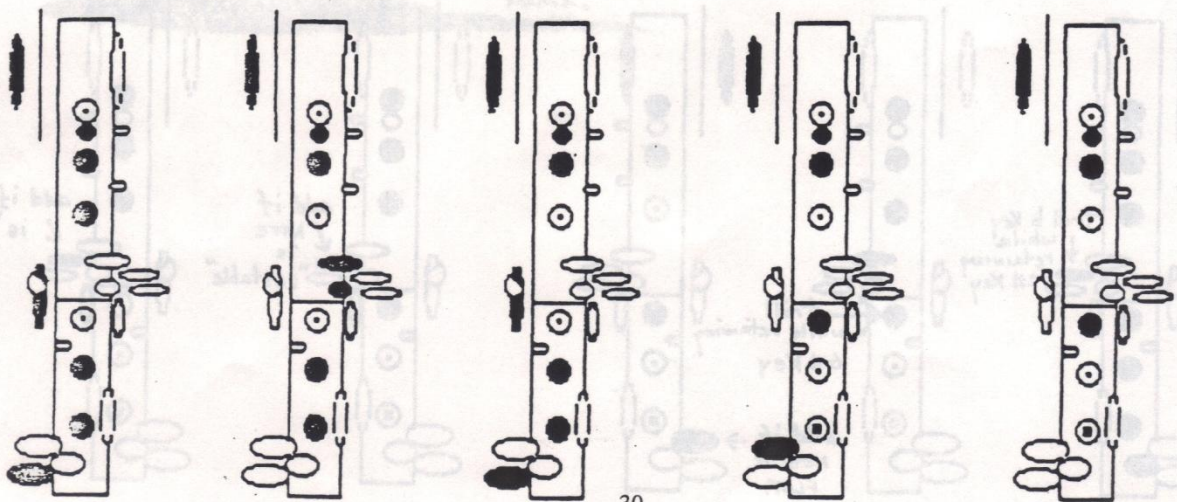
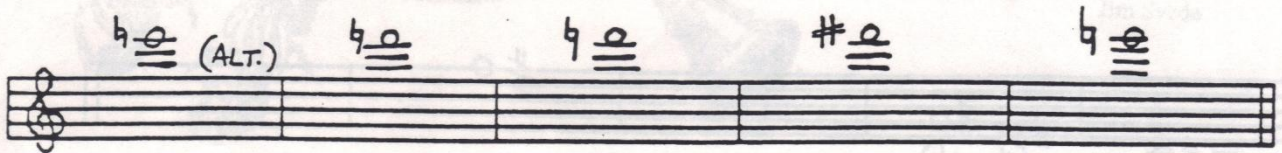
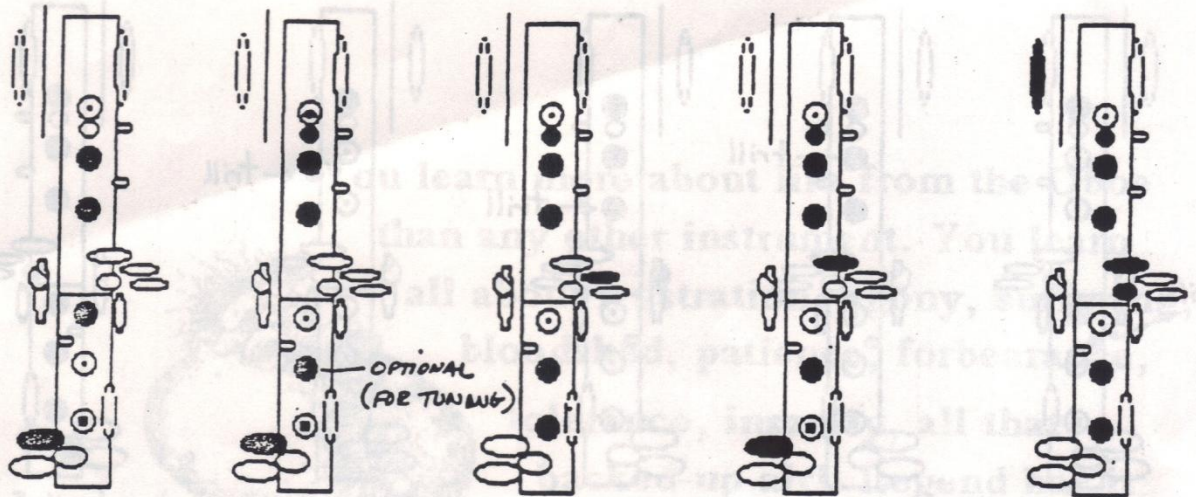
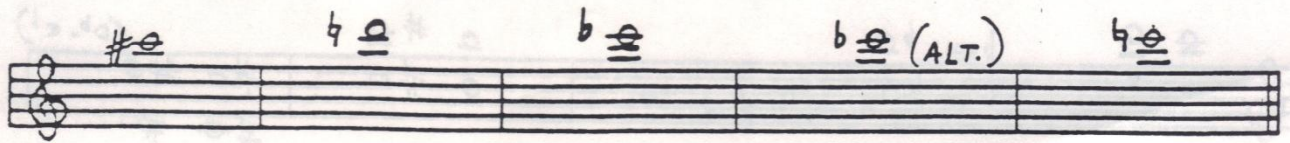
JOHN MACK - UPPER REGISTER FINGERINGS

STEVENS HEWITT - UPPER REGISTER FINGERINGS.

The asterisk (*) marks English horn fingerings.

Orthodox fingerings are used when the notes are approached by leap, or when the tone quality is important. In passing or for upper or lower neighbors, the secondary fingerings will make any passage feasible.

When learning an exercise slowly, use both sets of fingerings, abandoning the first only when the faster tempos begin to make the first set sound obviously clumsy.



Oboe Literature

As you will learn in the history section of this book, the oboe has been around for a long time. Thus, the oboe has repertoire from every era since the Baroque period, and new material is written all the time. Below I have listed some of the more popular pieces from the oboe literature and organized them by level.

Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
Albinoni Sonatas	Saint-Saëns Sonata	Mozart Concerto in C
72 Oboe Solos (Belwin)	Bellini Concerto in E flat	Mozart Quartet in F
	Albinoni Concerto in d minor	Strauss Concerto
	Telemann Concerti/Sonatas	Poulenc Sonata
	Telemann Fantasies	Poulenc Trio
	Handel Concerto Grosso #8 in B flat	Britten 6 Metamorphoses after Ovid
	Bach (J. C.) Air Cantabile	Schumann Three Romances
	Marcello Concerto in D	Vaughan Williams Concerto
	Ravel Pièce en Forme de Habanera	Beethoven Trios (2)

Oboe Players

In order to really develop a great tone quality, the oboe student needs to have an idea of what they want to sound like. This can only come from listening to other oboists, deciding which you like, and then trying to emulate them. Below is a list of prominent oboists from the past and today that are worth listening to.

American

Ray Still

Robert Bloom

John Mack

John de Lancie

Harold Gomberg

Roger Cole

Alex Klein

Richard Woodhams

Foreign

Albrecht Mayer

Heinz Holliger

Hansjorg Schellenberger

Oboe Resources

Oboe Cane	Oboe Cane & Reeds www.stuart-dunkel.com/ocr/index.htm
Reed-Making Supplies	RDG Woodwinds Los Angeles, CA www.rdgwoodwinds.com
	Chudnow Woodwinds Napa, CA www.mcwoboe.com
	Forrests Music Berkley, CA www.forrestsmusic.com
	Edmund Nielsen Woodwinds Villa Park, IL www.nielsen-woodwinds.com
Oboe Repertoire	EBLE Music Store Iowa City, Iowa www.eble.com/store/
	Edwin F. Kalmus & Co., Inc. Boca Raton, FL www.kalmus-music.com
	TrevCo Music Tallevast, FL www.trevcomusic.com
Oboe Articles	International Double Reed Society www.idrs.org

The Rest of the Family: Oboe d'amore, English Horn, and Bass Oboe

Like the clarinets and the saxophones, the oboe has other instruments in its family. These instruments all have basically the same fingerings, although they transpose to different keys.

The oboe d'amore is the mezzo instrument of the family, pitched in A (sounding a minor third lower than notated). It is relatively rare to find in most literature, although it is still being written into contemporary works. This instrument had a relatively short-lived popularity in the Baroque (especially with J. S. Bach) before falling into disuse. It had a resurrection of sorts in the late nineteenth century and has continued to be used. The instrument has a slightly mellower tone than the oboe thanks to the rounded bell and deeper pitch.

The next lowest instrument is the English horn or cor anglais. This is the alto instrument of the family and it is pitched in F (sounding a perfect fifth lower than notated). This instrument is much more commonly used than the oboe d'amore, appearing in many works ever since the Baroque. Many times the second oboist in the orchestra must switch instruments and double on English Horn in the same piece. Like the oboe d'amore, the English horn has a very sweet, mellow tone that resembles the human voice.

The lowest and rarest instrument in the oboe family, the bass oboe plays a full octave lower than written. It also has a deep, rich tone like its two higher counterparts but it appears in music even less frequently than the oboe d'amore. It's most famous usage is probably in Holst's "The Planets." It has virtually no solo pieces for itself. However, contemporary composers have not forgotten the instrument, and like the oboe d'amore it continues to be written into modern scores.



The members of the oboe family (from left to right): Soprano oboe (not mentioned), oboe, oboe d'amore, Cor anglais, and bass oboe.

Extended Techniques

The techniques shown below are special skills that are not necessarily essential to playing the oboe. Several of them, like flutter tonguing and pitch bends, are relatively new compositional effects being written by contemporary composers. Thus, only after mastering the fundamental skills mentioned previously should an oboe student begin to try and master these techniques.

Multiple Tonguing- There are two types of multiple tonguing, double tonguing and triple tonguing. Both involve a rapid “see-saw” motion in tongue for articulation, allowing the oboist to articulate passages much faster and easier than with a single tongue (normal articulation). To perform this technique, the player first says “tuh” or “duh” on the reed, touching the tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed as usual. Then the player says “kuh” or “guh,” touching the back area of the tongue to the hard palate in the mouth. The double tonguing pattern is “tuh-kuh” or “duh-guh” while the triple tonguing pattern is “tuh-tuh-kuh” or “tuh-kuh-tuh.” (whichever feels more comfortable).

The beginner should start this technique very slowly on a single held note (such as middle d). First, the “kuh” articulation must be strengthened since this will feel very unnatural at first. To practice it, just say “kuh” into the reed very slowly, focusing on trying to make it sound like a single tonguing articulation. Next, the player should add in the “tuh” sound and alternate it slowly with the “kuh” sound, again focusing on making the articulations sound the same. Lastly, the player continues to speed up the process until they have mastered the technique.

Don’t fear if this feels awkward at first and seems impossible. In time and practice, the technique will come to you. It may help for you to think of rapidly saying “Kitty, kitty, kitty” into the reed, as though you were calling your cat. Otherwise have patience with the above practice routine and you will be able to use multiple tonguing.

Flutter Tonguing- This technique creates a growling sound on the oboe, and it is caused by a rapid flapping of the tongue. There two ways of producing it, either with the tip of the tongue or in the back of the throat. To use the tip of the tongue, the player must imagine rolling an r while playing the reed. This is accomplished by rapidly blowing air between the tongue and the hard palate. The tongue will flap against the roof of the mouth, causing the growl. At the same time the oboe player must let air escape around the reed or there won’t be enough air velocity to make the tongue flap.

To use the back of the throat, the player must be able to produce a growl in the back of his/her throat by rapidly pushing air. This is the more preferred method of flutter tonguing since the player can keep a good embouchure around the reed. It keeps a more centered tone while still creating the effect.

Multiphonics- These are effects where two notes want to sound at the same time on the oboe. For woodwinds, there are two ways of producing them, using special fingerings and singing a note while playing. A good example for the oboe is to finger a low C# and then lift the first finger of the right hand. There are also various others. However, the singing technique is very difficult because the reed offers so much resistance and it is hard to push enough air through to actually sing. If the player finds they can manage to produce it, usually singing a third or fifth of the note being played creates the most pleasant multiphonic sound.

Pitch Bends- These are exactly what they sound like; the oboe player makes the pitch of a note go drastically up or (more frequently) down. This is performed the same way the player performs the “siren” exercise; drop or raise the jaw to make the pitch go in the direction desired.

Circular Breathing- This is a very advanced technique that some people claim anyone can learn. It is a method of breathing that allows the player to take in air while still producing a note on the oboe. Theoretically, this technique is easiest to do on our instrument because the resistance allows a little bit of air to keep a note going while the air intake is performed.

In order to do this technique, the player needs to store a supply of air in his/her mouth. This supply is then pushed out with the tongue and/or cheeks while new air is taken in through the nose. To become comfortable with this, the player should first try the action with no instrument. Just practice this push of air **while** taking in air; it is very important that the two happen simultaneously. If it helps, the player should think of leading the action with the air intake. After this is mastered the player can add the oboe and try it on a single long note. Just keep practicing and like multiple tonguing it will begin to feel more natural.

Harmonic Fingerings- These are basically alternate fingering for notes on the oboe. They are produced by adding a key (like the octave key) to another regular fingering. What is basically happening is the added key is making the oboe jump to another harmonic in the series (review your high school physics book to figure out what this means). These harmonic notes have a very different color from the regular notes, often being thinner and quieter. These fingerings are used at the discretion of the oboe player in music where they are appropriate.

A very common harmonic fingering is adding the side octave key to low D; this produces a high A (second octave). This addition of the side octave key also works for the rest of the low register notes. Another common one is the removal of the right hand middle finger from middle Db; this produces the note an octave higher.

A (Brief) History of the Oboe

The oboe's origins trace back to the thirteenth-century shawms of Europe and debatably even further back into ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Israel. These instruments had wide double reeds that were taken entirely into the mouth, producing a powerful, strident sound (Burgess 17). They also were made of a single piece of wood with a long bell and usually six or seven tone-holes. These early shawms were mainly used for outdoor processions, and they were often compared to the trumpet. Over time, musicians discovered that they could produce lighter tones that were more suitable for indoor concert playing by pulling the reed out of their mouth to the very tip; this gave them more control of tone, pitch, and dynamic. This change occurred in the seventeenth century with the French "hautboy." According to Burgess and Haynes, two distinguished oboist-musicologists,

"The modern notion of what the oboe is, and what it is expected to do, was born in the seventeenth century. In fact, the seventeenth century can be seen as the most experimental period in the history of the instrument. . . While the instrument's physical form changed, an even more fundamental mutation took place in the idea of the instrument's character and role. The hautboy's new function was that of a soloist and orchestral collaborator, and this job description has remained valid up to the present day."

This hautboy is considered to be the direct ancestor of the modern oboe, as it was the first treble double reed to be used as an orchestral instrument. The hautboy physically differed from the shawms by its shortened bell, narrowed side-walls, and newly-positioned tone holes (Burgess 29). The instrument was also divided into two sections by a joint between the player's hands and was typically made out of boxwood, although ebony, ivory, and fruitwoods were also used. Brass was used for the keys and reed staple (tube on which the reed is tied), and the woodwind typically only had two to three keys (Burgess 33). Furthermore, the new hautboy had smaller tone-holes, giving it a softer and "darker" sound that blended better with other instruments. This also had the effect of making notes unstable between registers, allowing a player to easily jump between two octaves with just his/her breath and lips (Burgess 33). From Louis XIV's court in France, the hautboy branched out, spreading into ensembles throughout Europe; after this point, instrument-makers internationally began experimenting with the hautboy until around 1800, when most players shifted to the keyed oboe (Burgess 58). The most fundamental change for this keyed oboe was its tone-holes for each chromatic note of the scale. Finally, the oboe conservatoire was developed in France in the latter half of the nineteenth century; it had much a much simpler key system from the earlier keyed oboe. This simplification allowed the instrument to vibrate easier without all the obstructions from wooden key-mounts and metal saddles; it instead utilized rods and posts to hold the keys and rings over the tone holes to help with sealing. Also, octave keys were included on these new models to facilitate jumping between octaves.

With just a few more years and minor adjustments, the conservatoire ("conservatory" in America) oboe became the standard oboe that has lasted to the present day. Naturally, instrument makers continue to make minute changes since perfection is impossible, yet for the most part the oboe has reached the height of its potential.

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