

HOW TO BUY A BASS OR ALTO CLARINET

By Dr. Edwin Riley

Adolph Sax, the inventor of the saxophone, designed the bass clarinet in its present form in 1838. The earlier forms, which tended to be serpentine, date back as early as 1772. Adolph Sax made the main body a straight tube, and bent back both the bell and mouthpiece so that the player could reach the keys more easily. Today the bass clarinet is used in both band and orchestra, but the alto clarinet, which was invented in the late 1800s, is used primarily as a band instrument.

WHO PLAYS BASS OR ALTO CLARINETS?

Usually players do not start on the alto or bass clarinet. They typically start on the Bb soprano clarinet and change to alto or bass clarinet after several years. This allows a student to become familiar with all the fingerings and registers on the soprano clarinet. The change is easy because the fingerings are the same on the alto and bass clarinets as they are on the Bb soprano clarinet. Waiting several years also allows for middle school players to physically grow taller which makes it easier to play these larger clarinets — especially the bass clarinet. Actually the alto and bass clarinets have a playing feel more like the alto and tenor saxophones than that of the Bb soprano clarinet. So, it would be very easy to change from saxophone to either alto or bass clarinet although this is not the usual tradition.

The alto and bass clarinets are considered harmony clarinets, and they are the most frequently used harmony clarinets in bands today. The complete list of clarinets used in bands and wind ensembles includes:

- Eb clarinet
- Bb soprano clarinet
- Eb alto clarinet
- Bb bass clarinet
- Eb contra alto clarinet
- Bb contra bass clarinet

All of these clarinets are considered harmony clarinets except the Bb soprano clarinet. There are several other soprano clarinets pitched in D, C and A, which are used in the orchestra. Orchestral clarinetists use both Bb and A soprano clarinets, and if they play opera they usually have a C clarinet. Sometimes the orchestral player who plays Eb clarinet will also use a D clarinet pitched a half-step higher.

An instrument's pitch (Bb, Eb, C, A, etc.) indicates what concert pitch sounds when the instrument reads a written "C." So a Bb bass clarinet playing a written "C" will sound a concert Bb one octave below the Bb soprano clarinet. The Eb alto clarinet playing a written "C" sounds a concert Eb one octave below the Eb soprano clarinet.

PICKING OUT AN INSTRUMENT

The most important things to look for in a good alto or bass clarinet are the same as with other woodwind instruments: good tone quality, evenness of scale, and good intonation. It is also important to make sure that all the pads are seating properly. Usually a repair shop at the music dealer checks over an instrument, but bass clarinets and alto clarinets tend to go out of adjustment very easily, so it is important to check. This is even more important if one is considering a used instrument. Also, when using mail-order, an instrument can be out of adjustment from shipping.

LOW E-FLAT OR LOW C BASS CLARINET?

In the professional wood bass clarinets, there are two models: one which goes down to written low Eb and one which goes down three more chromatic steps to written low C. The low C model lists for considerably more than the low Eb model, but it should be considered for the more developed band programs, which play music on the most advanced levels. Although the standard classic band repertoire rarely uses the extended range, at least one-third of the most recent advanced high school and college band repertoire makes use of this extended range. One can always cover these notes in another instrument, but if one



needs the extended range and the low C instrument is within the budget, it should definitely be considered.

One word of warning: The main tube of the low C bass clarinet is longer and it is difficult for someone who is short to sit and play this instrument.

WHO SHOULD PICK OUT THE INSTRUMENT?

It is best to have a professional or experienced player pick out the alto or bass clarinet. The next best thing would be to have several instruments to choose from. The experienced player has a good idea what the best instruments play like. The less experienced player generally can only tell what is "better" by comparing different instruments.

The low register of both alto and bass clarinets is fairly easy to play, but it takes time and experience to correctly play the second register of both instruments. To make an accurate judgment on any alto or bass clarinet, the player needs to be able to play comfortably in the second register with a full resonant sound that matches the low register. Without this playing maturity it is harder to judge the overall evenness of scale, intonation, and fullness of sound of an alto or bass clarinet.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Care and Handling: The plastic clarinets are much more rugged and can withstand more abuse from students who take less care in assembly than a professional would give. The professional models have silver-plated keys, as opposed to nickel-plated keys on the plastic models. Nickel-plated keys are stiffer than silver-plated keys and are less likely to bend out of adjustment. Also, the key levers are longer and the trill keys more exposed on the professional models. Longer levers are easier to bend out of adjustment.

Use: If there is any outdoor use of the instrument, then the plastic clarinet is much more preferable. Any extreme change in either temperature or humidity will tend to cause a wooden clarinet to crack.

Mouthpiece: If one decides to buy a plastic alto or bass clarinet, I would strongly recommend buying or trading up to a professional mouthpiece. The quality of the professional mouthpiece is significantly better for relatively little difference in price. It is always important to consider value when buying an instrument.

The professional wooden clarinets are obviously better-playing instruments with better sound, more even scales, better intonation, etc., but are they worth four to five times as much as a plastic instrument? It is very important to understand that professional instruments are more likely to go out of adjustment with casual or abusive handling and they should not be subjected to extremes in temperature or humidity. As with most purchases, one should buy the type of instrument best suited for his or her needs. If a selection is available, it would be very good to play both the professional and the plastic alto or bass clarinet side by side to compare the differences. Then it would be easy to decide which one was the better value. Of course, if one needs a bass clarinet with extended range to low C there is only one choice.

Dr. Edwin Riley is a nationally known recitalist, soloist and clinician. He received his B.M. and M.S. degrees from The Juilliard School of Music and his D.M.A. degree from the University of Iowa. Formerly, Dr. Riley played in the American Symphony under Leopold Stokowski and was principal clarinetist in the Cedar Rapids Symphony in Iowa. He also played clarinet in the Atlanta Opera Orchestra. Presently he plays principal clarinet in the Columbus Symphony and the Georgia Sinfonia in Atlanta. He also plays assistant principal/second clarinet in the Greensboro Symphony and plays regularly as a substitute for the North Carolina Symphony. Dr. Riley has been a national clinician with the Selmer Company since 1979.

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