

Introduction to the English Horn

Barbara Stetter

Like flutists doubling on piccolo, oboists can expect to be called upon at some point in their career to play English horn. Also known as the *cor anglais*, the English horn is a transposing instrument pitched in F, a perfect fifth lower than the oboe (which is a C instrument), and is approximately one-and-a-half times the oboe's length. It is the alto member of the oboe family and, due to its pear-shaped bell, has a more covered timbre than the oboe.

The Instrument

Obtaining an instrument that works well and plays in tune is the first order of business. Unlike the oboe, there are few student-model English horns on the market. Buying one is an expensive proposition, so many students and school programs rely on borrowing or renting an instrument from a professional player in their area. Sometimes, university music departments are willing to loan or rent instruments to high-school programs. It is also possible to rent from instrument suppliers. If you are buying a used English horn and are not certain of the instrument's condition, don't hesitate to get advice from a professional oboist.

A professional will be able to test the intonation and responsiveness of the instrument in question, while assessing its over-all condition. English horns tend to stay in service much longer than oboes, and a thirty-year-old instrument could be an excellent addition to a high-school or college program. The larger bore and the sparse use the instrument gets tend to make the English horn less sensitive to cracking, shrinking of bore size, and other minute changes.

Reeds

As with the oboe, the lips should be equally placed around the upper and lower blades of the reed, maintaining a comfortable angle. English horn reeds are slightly larger, not as finished as oboe reeds, and have a wire around the two blades. Oboe reeds have a very thin tip and a defined "heart" in the center of the reed. The English horn reed does not have such distinctly defined areas. The tip is thicker, the heart is lighter, and the back of the reed is also thicker. The approach to scraping an English horn reed is generally closer to that of bassoonists than of oboists. It is best for novice English-horn players to purchase reeds from a professional musician.

Bocals

Also unlike oboe reeds, English horn reeds have no cork. They are attached to a bocal which is inserted into the instrument, as with bassoons. Some professional English-horn reeds have a small ring of tubing at the end of the reed. The tube is placed directly on the bocal until it is firmly in place. This piece of tubing not only creates an air-tight seal between the bocal and the reed, it keeps the reed from slipping out while playing the instrument. (See Figure 2 and Appendix 1 below.)

Most bocals are made of silver and brass, and come in multiple lengths numbered one to three, with No. 1 being the shortest and No. 3 the



Figures 1 & 2. The English Horn, 2 reeds with tubing, and a bocal.

longest. They also have varying bore sizes. The standard bocal is a No. 2, made of silver or silver-plated brass, in a medium bore. Bocals also have slightly different curves which place the reed at different angles in one's mouth. One can choose the curve, bore size, and length which suits one best.

Bocals affect almost every aspect of playing: tone quality, pitch, response, and projection. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to the bocal that is used with a particular instrument. Not all bocals are created equal, or are right for everyone, so each player should test a variety of bocals from several manufacturers. Bocals are not overly expensive, and most music stores will allow you to try them before purchasing.

A few signs that a bocal may not be good are:

- Lack of resonance and focus, particularly on high notes;
- Pitch instability (usually flatness) on notes above the staff (high G to C), with G-sharp usually being the worst;
- Inability to keep the pitch from sagging when trying to *decrescendo* on third-space C and C-sharp.

Playing the English Horn

Treat the English horn as a different instrument from the oboe. It requires more air, and more reed should be taken into the mouth. If one tries to play English horn with an oboe embouchure, the sound will be stuffy, thin, and out of tune. Don't be shy. Blow!

While the fingerings are familiar to oboists, it will still require lots of practice to get used to the English horn. Unlike the oboe, the half-hole system (left-hand index finger) is divided into two keys, and is a little more difficult to operate than the half-hole on the oboe. Another difference is the lowest note – a B-natural on the English horn *versus* the oboe's low B-flat.

One of the biggest differences between the English horn and the oboe is the weight. The heavier English horn can take getting used to, and young

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players should be cautioned to stop playing if the right arm becomes uncomfortable or painful while holding the English horn. Students should be encouraged to use a stretchy neck strap to help support the instrument and take the weight off the right arm.

According to Jacqueline Leclair, assistant professor of oboe at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, “A big challenge is *intonation*. Someone going to English horn needs to spend a *huge* amount of time with the tuner because all tuning tendencies of the English horn are different from those of the oboe. Thus, the habits for adjusting pitch an oboist has developed will make him/her wildly out of tune on the English horn.”

Strive to play the English horn with the same facility and flexibility as on the oboe. Don't restrict your repertoire to only music written for the English horn. Use oboe method books and studies as well as orchestral excerpts. (See Appendixes 2, 3, and 4 below.) The English horn has also been used as a jazz and pop instrument, and the best-known artist in these genres is Paul McCandless, who has played English horn and oboe with the Paul Winter Consort (see <www.livingmusic.com>) and the jazz quartet, Oregon (<www.oregonband.com>).

Most high-school band directors are unfamiliar with double-reed instruments, and uncomfortable especially when dealing with the English horn. Be sure to give support and encouragement to your oboists who are willing to try the English horn. Be patient! It will take time for a student to develop a nice sound on the instrument, and gain the confidence necessary to be comfortable in an ensemble setting. Although it is primarily used as a solo instrument in exposed passages, it can add a positive and welcome sound to ensembles, as well as being an enriching experience for student oboists.

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Appendix 1. Bocal Makers

Thomas Hiniker; A. Laubin, Inc.; Lickman; Lorée; Ross.

Appendix 2. English Horn Solos in the Orchestra

Hector Berlioz, *Harold in Italy; Roman Carnival Overt.*; *Symphonie Fantastique*
Gaetano Donizetti, *Concertino for English Horn* (piano reduction available)
César Frank, *Symphony in D minor*
Maurice Ravel, *Piano Concerto in G major* (Movement II)
Giacchino Rossini, *William Tell Overture*
Jean Sibelius, *The Swan of Tuonela*
Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*
Richard Wagner, *Tristan and Isolde*

Appendix 3. Solo Music for English Horn

Pachelbel Canon, arr. Daniel Dorff, Theodore Presser Co. #PR114412310.
Quiet City, Aaron Copland, ed. by J. B. Kennedy. Boosey & Hawkes

#M051101801.

Solos for the English Horn Player (with piano accomp.), ed. Thomas Stacey & P. Thomas (medium to medium-difficult). G. Schirmer #ED2988.
Vade Mecum of the Oboist (230 Technical & Orchestral Studies for Oboe & English horn), ed. Albert Andraud. Southern Music Co. #SOB412.
She Weeps Over Rahoon, Eric Whitacre (treble chorus with English horn & piano). Walton Music #WJMS1003.
The Maiden and the Nightingale, Enrique Granados, ed. by Isidor Philipp (for Oboe and English horn solo). International Music Co. #IM.1452.

Appendix 4. Suggested Listening

Plaintive Melody: Music for English Horn, Thomas Stacey. Delos Records #DE 3318.
20th Century Music for English Horn and Oboe, Carolyn Hove & Gloria Cheng. Works by Hindemith, Salonen, Marvin, Persichetti, Carter, et al. Crystal Records #UPC 00941473282-8.
Music for Stage and Screen, Laurence Thorstenberg & Boston Pops Orch., cond. John Williams. Music by Copland, Williams. Sony #074646414729.
English Horn & Oboe D'Amore, Julie Ann Giacobassi & San Francisco Sym. Fish Creek Music CD #102.
Orchestral Excerpts for the English Horn, Julie Ann Giacobassi, Fish Creek Music CD #101.
Ascending to Superlatives, Carolyn Hove & Los Angeles Philharmonic. Crystal Records #UPC 00941473292-7.
Crossing, Oregon. ECM Records #ECM 1291.
Best of the Vanguard Years, Oregon. Vanguard Records #PTY 530 56.
Live At Yoshi's, Oregon. Intuition Music & Media Records #INT 3299 2.



Barbara Stetter instituted a band program in the Glace Bay (NS) schools in 1973. Now there are four concert bands as well as jazz bands and choral and guitar ensembles in Grades 4-12 that have played across Canada and the U.S., including a performance by the High School Band at Carnegie Hall, in her hometown of New York, in 1997.

Still active as an oboist and clinician, Barb received the NSBA Distinguished Band Director's Award in 2007, and was honoured by the Cape Breton International Drum Festival in 2008 for her contribution to music in Cape Breton. Barb has previously served on the executive boards of the NSMEA, NSBA, and the NS Provincial Honor Band, and is currently president of the NSBA, Secretary of the CBA, and co-ordinator of the annual Cape Breton Regional MusicFest. This year she will also guest conduct the NS Jr. Wind Ensemble.

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