Let's Play

Oboe

By Catherine Paulu
Updated by Grover Schiltz

Catherine Dufford Paulu

Catherine Dufford Paulu (deceased) was a graduate of the Eastman School of Music where she was a member of the original Eastman Wind Ensemble, and the principal oboist in the early recordings of that group. She was also a member of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra. For twelve seasons she was principal oboist of the Oklahoma City Symphony Orchestra.

Grover Schiltz

In 1959, Grover Schiltz joined the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as assistant principal oboe, moving to English horn in 1964. In prior years he played in the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Grant Park Symphony and toured with the Boston Pops. He also played with the St. Louis Sinfonietta and spent three years as a principal oboist of the Kansas City Philharmonic.

Schiltz is active in chamber music ensembles in the Chicago area including the Chicago Symphony Winds. He has taught oboe and baroque performance practice at Northwestern University and serves on the faculty at Roosevelt University and the University of Illinois Circle Campus. He currently teaches oboe and English horn privately.

Introduction:

This booklet has been prepared for the band and orchestra director who must teach the oboe but is not an accomplished oboist.

These suggestions are intended to cover some of the important points to be considered when starting a student on the oboe, maintaining the instrument and adjusting the reeds. The fingering chart is basic and is sufficiently complete to be used with any Fox or Renard oboe, and with almost any other Lorée style oboe.

Index

Starting the Student on Oboe

The student may start directly on the oboe or may transfer from another instrument. However, a prior experience on piano or another instrument is a great advantage.

The student who already has a basic knowledge of rhythm and notation is better able to concentrate on the specific problems of the oboe and the reed.

The hand positions do not require a large stretch. The embouchure can adapt to both small and large lips. Larger lips seem to adapt more easily than thin lips. Many students make good progress even with braces on their teeth.

When a student is in late elementary or junior high school, it is an ideal time for them to start the oboe. It's important that the student be mature enough to handle both the instrument and the reed with care. Careful handling of the reed is basic, or both the student and the teacher will be continually frustrated!

Photo by Bev Schiltz

Assembly and Care of the Oboe

UPPER JOINT

1. Cradle the upper joint in left hand.

LOWER JOINT

2. Place right thumb on the E key of the second joint. Carefully maneuver the two parts together, gently pushing in a clockwise direction until the bridge mechanism is properly aligned.

BELL

3. Hold the lower end of the lower joint in your left hand. Place your right thumb on the Bell key. Push and twist the bell into the lower joint.

- Always soak the reed while putting the oboe together (see section *Soaking the Reed*).
- Cradle the upper joint in the left hand. Place the right thumb on the E key of the second joint and carefully maneuver the two parts together, gently pushing and in a clockwise direction until the bridge mechanism is properly aligned. Be careful not to bump the "arm" above the F# key.
- Place the right thumb on the bell key. This holds it up and out of the way while pushing and twisting the bell into the lower joint. (Left-handed people should reverse hands in the assembly procedures).
- The reed is put in last. It will work best when pushed all the way to the stopping shoulder.
- When putting the oboe away, put the reed into the reed case first. To separate the oboe, reverse the assembly procedures. Always clean out the oboe with a soft cloth swab, a Fox silk swab or a turkey feather. If using a swab, be sure to drop the weight into the large end of the upper joint. A Fox silk swab should be pulled all the way through the upper joint, but if a soft cloth swab is used, it should be pulled until slightly snug and then removed from the large end. It is extremely important to avoid wedging a cloth swab in the small end of the upper joint.
- Never subject the wooden oboe to any extremes of temperature. To reduce the chance of cracking the body, the instrument should be allowed to warm to room temperature before playing it. To prevent dust and lint from settling into the mechanism, it is important to frequently dust the mechanism. A soft watercolor brush is ideal for this. The joints of the key mechanism should be oiled every few months. A capillary oiler works very well. However, too much oil is worse than none at all. Too much oil can cause the pads to stick. If the joints are too tight, use a little cork grease to make it assemble more easily.

Embouchure

Photo by Bev Schiltz

The oboe embouchure is formed between the teeth, not in front of them. In forming a proper embouchure, the tip of the reed is positioned midway on the lower lip. As a breath is taken, the lower lip is rolled in over the lower teeth. The upper lip is pulled down and in over the upper teeth, producing a double lip embouchure.

When properly done, just the tip of the reed should be felt by the tongue inside the lips. The corners of the lips should not be pulled outward, but focused inward. Using the word "home", the circular concept of a good embouchure can be visualized. Care must be taken not to have pockets of air between cheeks or lips and the teeth.

The embouchure must be thought of as "live". It must function to control pitch, dynamics and tone color. In the upper octave, the lips and reed are rolled in slightly to control pitch. The lips are opened slightly for increase in dynamics. The amount of reed behind the lips is important in determining tone color. Too much insertion of the reed results in a shrill, bright tone. The reed is easiest to control at the tip, where the cane is thinnest.

Care must be taken in the choice of the reed. Too strong a reed opening will cause the lips to tire quickly, resulting in a loss of control. Conversely, a weak reed may lack a good dynamic range or a tone with good projection.

Normally, the instrument is held at a 45 degree angle from the body. However, since not all of us have the same facial structure and dental alignment, it is useful to experiment a bit, raising or lowering the instrument slightly, to achieve the best tonal result.

Photo by Bev Schiltz

The embouchure cannot function properly unless a strong, focused stream of air provides a steady resonant tone. A good embouchure should help the performer in the goal of true musical excellence.

Soaking the Reed

Dip the reed in water, shake off the excess water and let it stand for about two minutes before playing on it. It is not necessary to soak the reed by letting it stand in water. Saliva works well too.

Reed Cases

It is important to have a reed case that supports the reed in such a way that nothing can damage the delicate tip. It should also allow for air circulation around the reed to keep it dry when not in use. There are commercial reed cases available or cases can be made by the student. Do not use the plastic tubes in which some commercial reeds are packaged as reed cases, unless some holes are provided to permit drying of the reed.

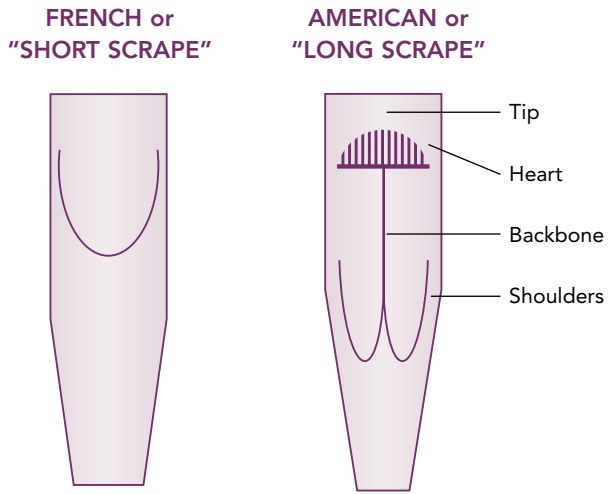
The Commercial Reed

Serious students of the oboe will begin learning the reed making process as soon as they are old enough and careful enough to manage the necessary tools. If reeds are not available from a private teacher or local player, attempt to purchase the American or "long scrape" reed.

While the French scrape is more easily obtained, there are a variety of "long scrape" style reeds available. Almost all professional oboists in the United States now use some variation of the "long scrape". The thinner, shorter tip may be more fragile, but the pleasant tone quality they produce will make the extra care the reed takes very worthwhile.

The grading of oboe reeds as soft, medium or hard has little relationship to the fact and varies from one manufacturer to another. Many commercial reeds are too soft. Try reeds from several manufacturers to determine which is most consistent and best suited to your instrument and style of playing.

There should be some "resistance" in the reed to enable the player to play with good breath support.



Adjusting the Commercial Oboe Reed

It is important to know the techniques used in adjusting commercial reeds.

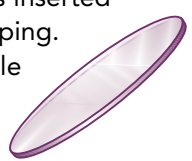
The following four pieces of simple equipment are essential for students to begin adjusting reeds:

A SHARP KNIFE:

A sharp knife for scraping the reed is the most important tool. It can be purchased from reed making suppliers or handmade. The blade may be either hollow ground or with a beveled edge. A sharpening stone and honing oil are also important. It is necessary to keep the knife-edge sharp and free from nicks.

PLAQUE:

The plaque is a small piece of metal that is inserted between the blades of the reed while scraping. It supports the blades. Plaques are available commercially or they can be handmade from a single-edge razor blade.



CUTTING BLOCK:

The cutting block is used to support the tip of the reed while clipping it with the knife. They are available commercially or can be handmade from a piece of hardwood that has been smoothly sanded to eliminate all grooves.

FISHSKIN:

Commercially, fishskin is called "Goldbeaters Skin". It is used to seal the sides of the reed without adding weight to the reed. Added weight will inhibit the reed's vibrating qualities. A reed must not leak air below the portion that is in the mouth. Cut a strip of fishskin about 1½" by 1/4". While slightly moistened, pull the strip of fish-skin tightly around the reed, starting midway or less up the reed. Pull tightly around the reed spiraling down-ward until it overlaps the top of the winding thread. Do not over moisten. If the fishskin is too wet it will shrivel up and disappear. A little practice is necessary to handle it correctly.

Pitch of the Reed

Pitch of the reed is determined by:

1. **LENGTH** of the reed – The reed should play in tune when it is inserted into the oboe to the stopping point. 70-72mm is a good average total reed length for most instruments and players.
2. **OPENING** of the reed is equally important. Reed openings can be easily adjusted.

A reed that is too open will usually play flat. A reed which has a too-closed opening will tend to be sharper in pitch. Old and worn-out reeds become more closed and become too sharp in pitch.

The opening of the reed is an important factor for other reasons as well. If a reed is too open, players are forced to "bite", whether they are aware of it or not, and the embouchure will quickly fatigue. If the reed is too-closed, it is impossible to blow into it with adequate breath support.

Too open

Too closed

Correct opening

Tips for Solving Specific Reed Problems:

A. IF THE REED IS TOO SHARP –

1. The reed may be too short. Scrape a little more wood from the back of the reed.
2. The reed opening is too closed. There is no remedy for correcting this. One may apply wire, but this can have an adverse affect on the vibrating qualities of the reed.
3. The reed can be pulled out of the instrument a small amount before it adversely affects the intonation of the instrument.

B. IF REED IS TOO FLAT –

1. Check to see if the reed is split. A cracked/split reed is often flat.
2. The reed is tool long. Cut off the reed about 1mm or less. Thin just the end of the reed tip to make it respond. If it is still flat, repeat this procedure a few times. It is sometimes necessary to cut off the entire tip and scrape a new one in order to make the reed respond.
3. Cane is too wide. Making the reed shorter might compensate.
4. Opening is too large. If it seems to respond well, try holding the tip of the well-soaked reed closed for several seconds between the fingers. This will weaken the reed slightly. Repeat this procedure a few times. If unsuccessful, it will be necessary to scrape the shoulders a slight amount.

C. THE REED IS STIFF, STUFFY OR SLOW TO RESPOND –

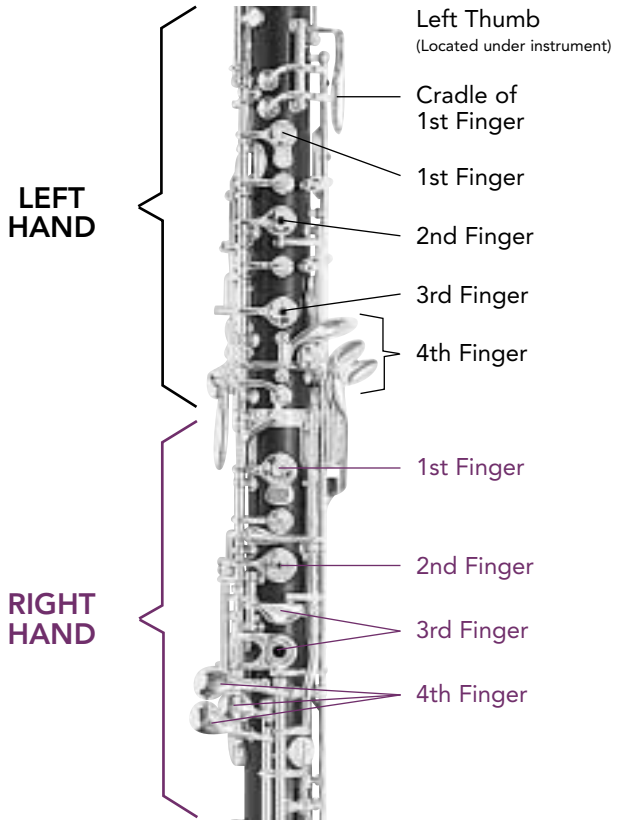
1. Make the very end of the reed tip thinner.
2. Remove a little wood from behind the reed tip.
3. If it appears that the back is still too thick, scrape a bit more off, particularly if the low notes do not respond. Be careful not to remove the "backbone" or the reed will become flat, or the octaves will be flat, forcing the player to "bite".

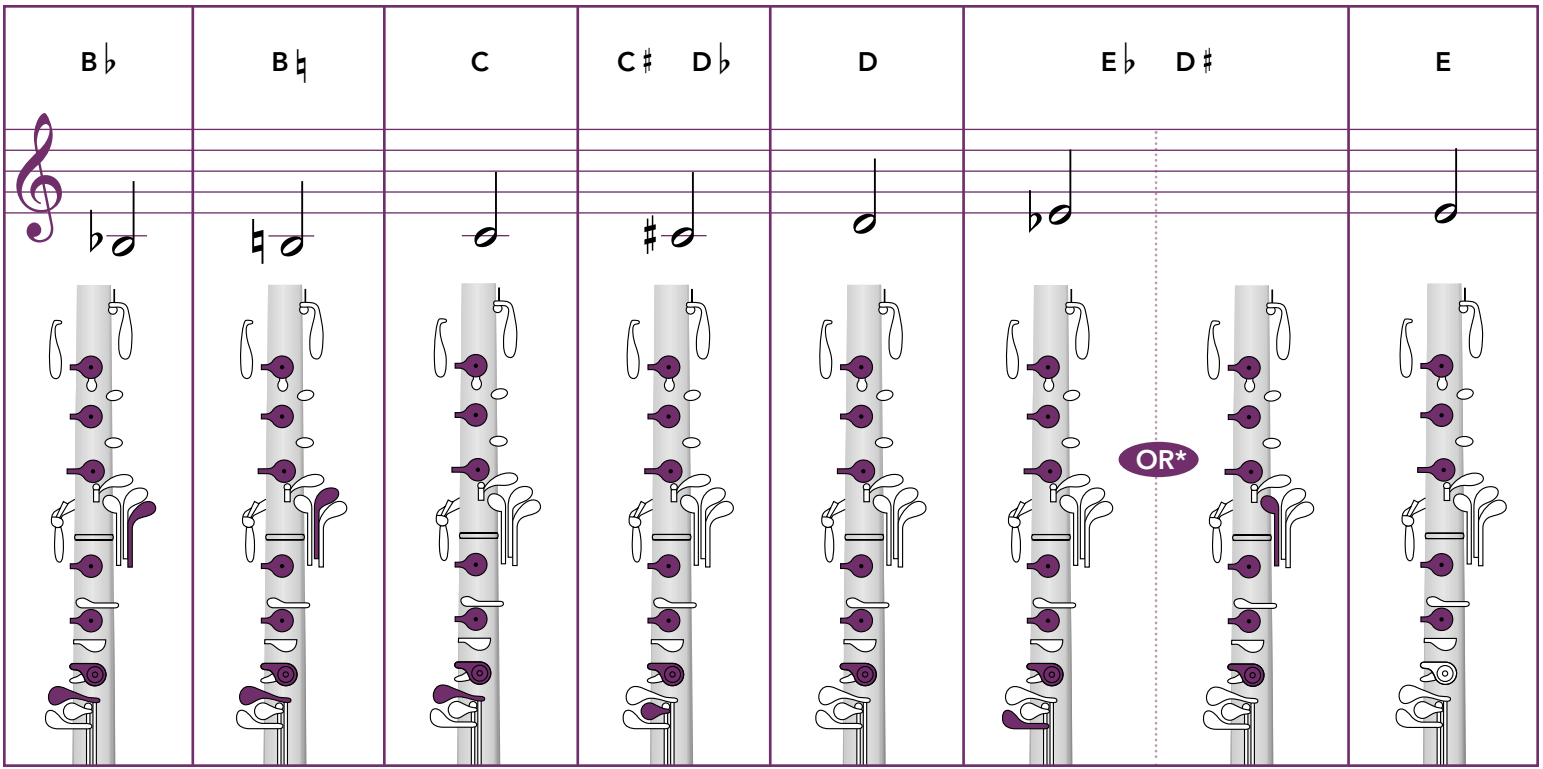
D. THE REED IS TOO FREE AND EASY TO BLOW –

1. Too much wood has already been taken out of the reed or the tip may be too thin. Clip the tip and readjust.
2. Proceed as in B-2 above. It is possible that the reed will become too short and sharp while doing this. If this happens, discard the reed and try another. You can always take more wood out of a reed but obviously it is impossible to put it back.

Oboe Fingering Chart

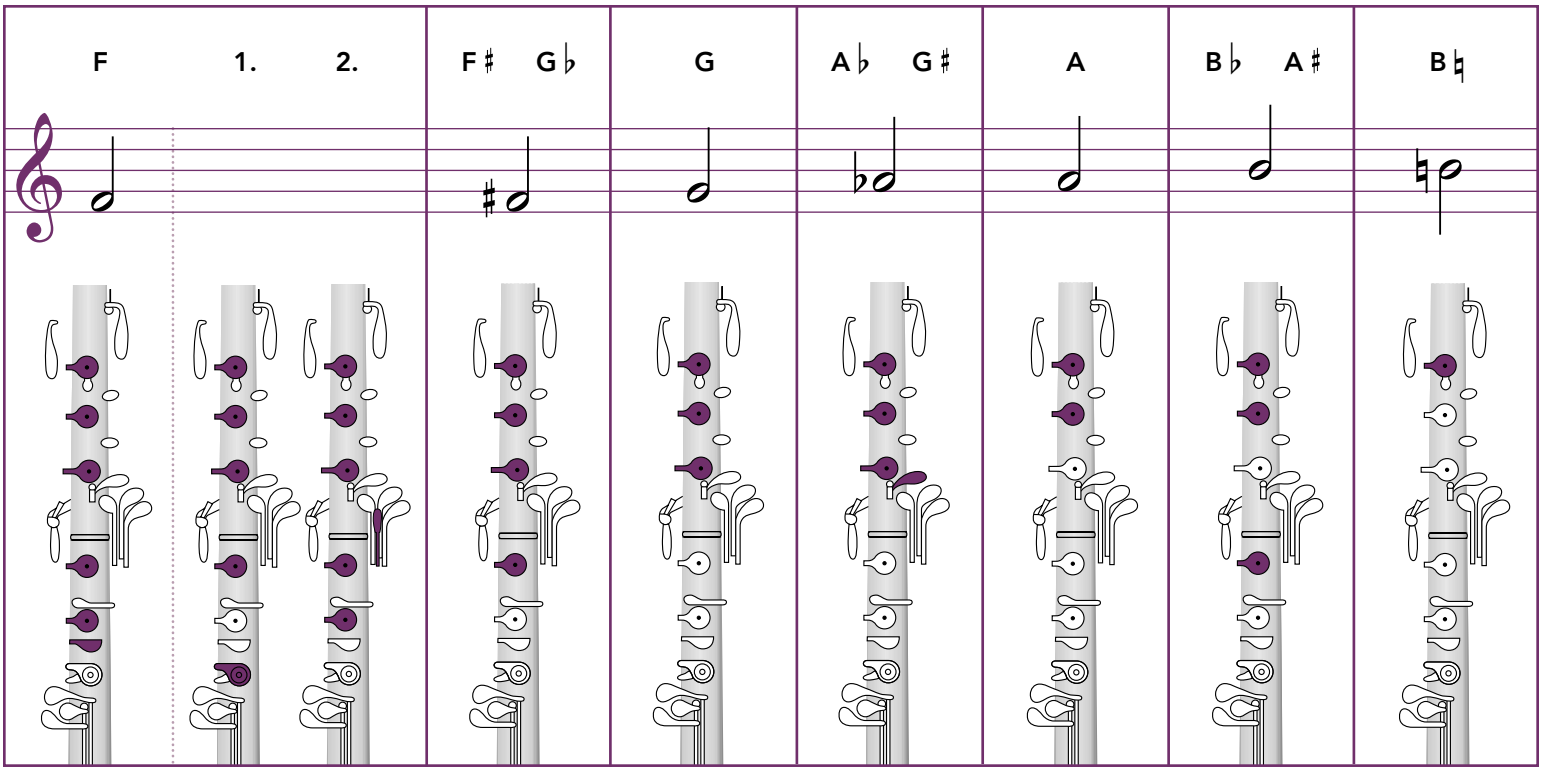
The following is a basic fingering chart that is used for tuning Fox and Renard oboes. The oboe has approximately a 2½ octave range and very few alternate fingerings. The one exception is "Forked F". Many students brought up in a band program acquire the habit of using only the "Forked F" fingering. "Forked F" is an alternate fingering to be used when necessary: when "F" occurs before or after E♭, D, C♯, low C, low B or B♭. The basic fingering for "F" (or the left "F" key on those instruments that have it) produces better intonation and noticeably better tone quality.



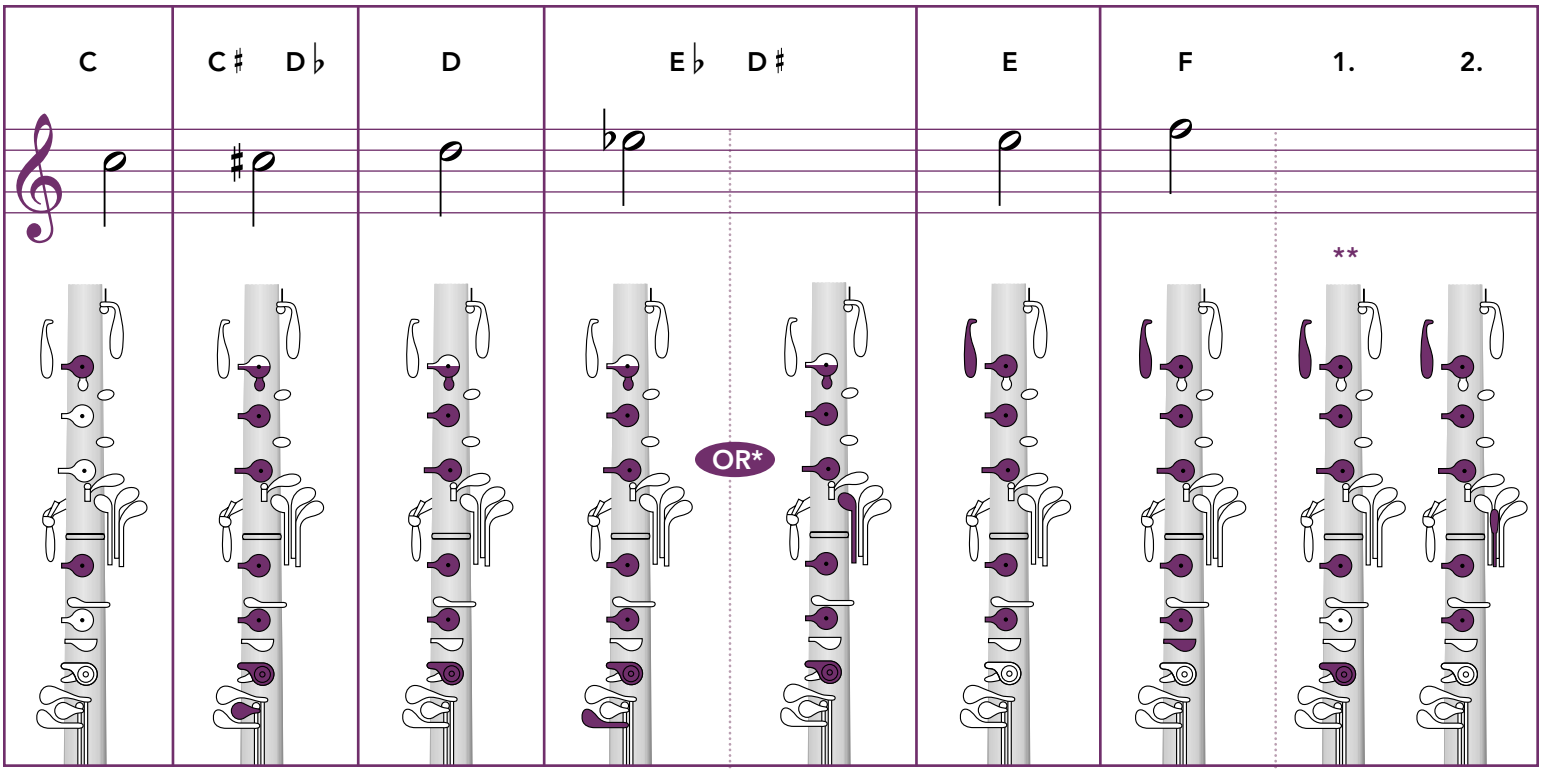


NOTE: Not all brands of student oboes have a low B♭.

* Use left-hand E♭ key if before or after D♭ (C♯).

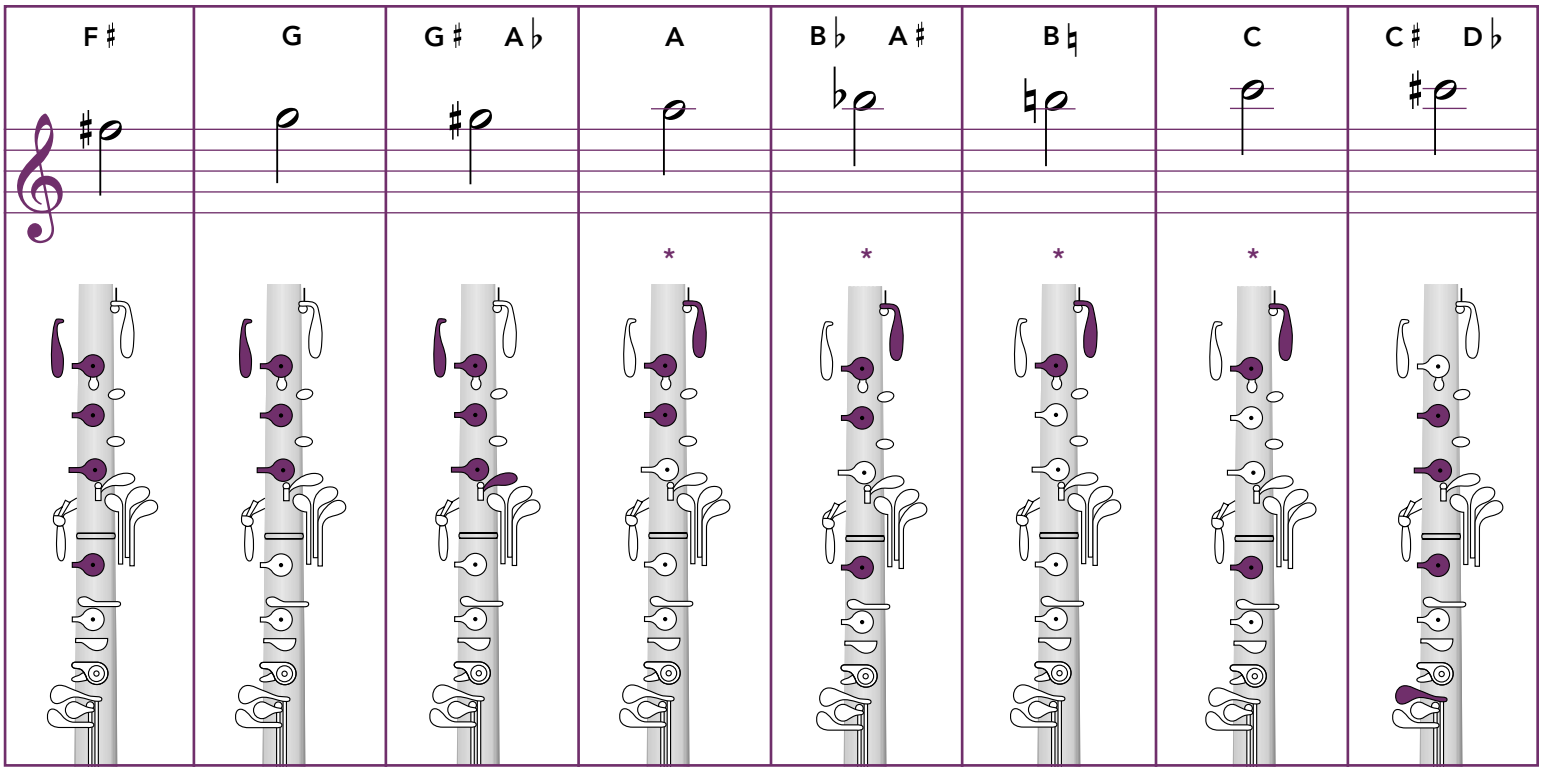


1. Forked “F” (See page 14)
2. Left-hand “F”

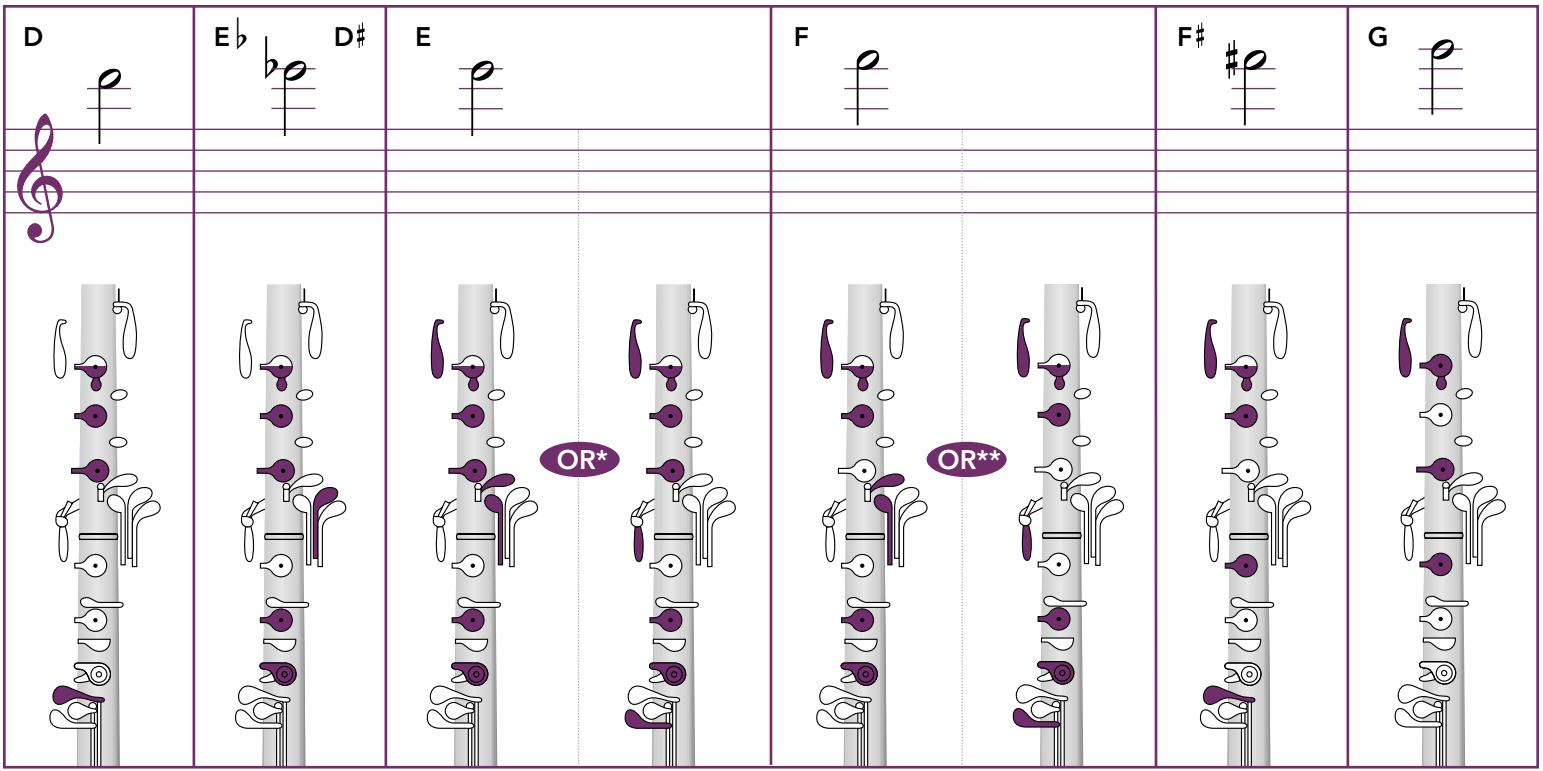


1. Forked “F” (See page 14)
2. Left-hand “F”

* Use left-hand E♭ key if before or after D♭ (C♯).
** E♭ Key may be used with Forked “F” for stability on some instruments.



* Left Thumb Key may be left down to ease facility on A, B♭, B♮ and C.



* Use before or after high E♭ (D♯).
** Use before or after E♭ (D♯).

Fox Products Corporation

Shipping Address Only:

Fox Products Corporation
6110 South State Road 5
South Whitley, Indiana 46787, USA

Phone: 260.723.4888
Fax: 260.723.6188
www.foxproducts.com
mail@foxproducts.com

Mailing Address Only:

Fox Products Corporation
P.O. Box 347
South Whitley, Indiana 46787, USA