



**LET'S PLAY**

*English Horn*

By Grover Schiltz

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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 is intended to introduce the English horn to students and teachers who may already have some knowledge of the oboe. Many of the techniques and skills used to play the oboe are similar on the English horn, so it may be useful to revisit them.

Anyone with more than a casual interest in music is acquainted with the beautiful and unique sound of the English horn. Its alto quality enriches the tonal palette of any ensemble. It has one of the loveliest solo repertoires in the wind literature. It gives a distinctive stamp to Dvorak's "New World Symphony", Berlioz' "Roman Carnival Overture", and Rossini's "William Tell Overture", just to name a few compositions firmly fixed in the literature. It is equally at home in the Orchestra or the Wind Ensemble.

Since the English horn is in F, it will sound a 1/5 below the written pitch. Every oboist should have the opportunity to play the English horn and learn some of these famous solos. In many smaller ensembles, the second oboist is called upon to double on both oboe and English horn. A player who can do so is just that much more valuable to the ensemble.



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## STARTING THE STUDENT ON THE ENGLISH HORN

Usually, the first exposure to the English horn will be after the oboe has been played for some time. Most elementary schools have neither the budget nor the advanced scoring in the music being performed to require an English horn. However, from the eighth grade onward, one may encounter material in the repertoire calling for the use of the English horn. Also, students in larger metropolitan areas may have access to all-city bands or orchestras or honors groups. The oboe is the basic instrument, and with a background of some study, the transfer to the English horn can be quickly made.

Since the instrument is larger and heavier, many people find that a neck strap is advisable. A saxophone type adjustable strap with a wide collar works very well. It may be found that a stout rubber band or other elastic coupling makes a good link between the hook of the strap and the ring on the thumb rest. This supports the weight of the instrument without giving up control of the position of the reed in the embouchure. Since long sessions with a heavy instrument can result in tendonitis, this can be an important factor.

## CHOOSING EQUIPMENT

The difficulty of the repertoire can be a factor in choosing the model of English horn needed. However, an instrument of any level should have a free, even response over the range, an even tone quality and a good scale. Many English horns in the past have had problems with an unstable third space C which would drop in pitch on diminuendo. This fault has been largely eliminated by the development of better bocals. Another problem has been the tendency of the instrument to develop a “gurgle” upon diminuendo on low E or E $\flat$ . A third trouble spot to check lies in the upper register on high A $\flat$ . It should be well up in pitch and not have a “sagging” quality. Top of the line instruments will have a full mechanism, including a 3rd octave key for pitches above E $\flat$  in the third octave.

## ASSEMBLY AND CARE OF THE ENGLISH HORN

The English horn is assembled in the same manner as the oboe. Of great importance in the process is the careful and proper alignment of the bridging keys between the upper and lower joints. The use of a bit of cork grease on the cork joints is good, since it does away with the tendency to “force” the fit of the joints. If the joint is unstable, there may be too much cork grease, which can be removed with a tissue.

There are two bridging keys between the upper and lower joint. On one side is the trill key bridge for the C-D trill. On the other side is the bridge for the fingering combination for C and B $\flat$ . Assembly of the upper and lower joints is easily accomplished by observing from the back of the instrument, the better to see the alignment of the bridging keys. The bell joint presents no problem, since there is only one bridge.

The English horn also uses a bocal, which extends from the top of the instrument, curving toward the player. The reed tube slips over the top of the bocal, completing the assembly. Some players find it very useful to use a piece of thin rubber or plastic tubing as an airtight bond at the juncture of the reed tube and the bocal. A short piece of aquarium tubing works quite well. In addition to making a good seal, this prevents the reed from slipping off the bocal during performance.

- Always soak the reed while putting the English horn together. Dip the reed in water, shake off the excess water and let it stand for a few minutes before playing on it. If left standing in water, the reed becomes quite open and difficult to manage. If water is not available, the reed can be moistened with saliva.



BELL



LOWER JOINT

- 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 turning in a clockwise direction until the bridge mechanism is properly aligned. Be careful not to bump the "arm" above the F# key. Do not hold onto the C, C#, and E<sub>b</sub> spatula cluster.
- Cradle the thumb rest in the left hand. 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 tube slips over the top of the bocal.
- Wooden instruments need care! Extremes of temperature can be deadly. Never play an instrument when it is

cold. Let it come to room temperature or warm it under a coat or sweater next to your body. The most crack-prone area of an oboe or English horn is the area between the trill tone holes in the upper joint. Often a tiny crack can develop almost unseen, which can seriously hamper an instrument's playing ability. A good test for air tightness is to cover all the tone holes in the top joint and insert a rubber stopper in the bottom of the upper joint. Try to create a vacuum by sucking out the air from the top of the joint. If it won't hold a vacuum, you may need to see a repair-person to check for a crack. The newer plastic and composite instruments do away with that particular problem.

- The instrument should be swabbed out after each use with a silk swab (taking care not to force the swab through). Occasionally, carefully oil a wooden instrument bore with bore oil.



UPPER JOINT



BOCAL

## ASSEMBLY AND CARE OF THE ENGLISH HORN (CONTINUED)

### THE BOCAL

The bocal is extremely influential in the sound and tuning of the English horn. Bocals are available in varying lengths, with #1 being the shortest, and #3 being the lowest in pitch. Individual bocals can vary in tone color, response, and dynamic range, so it is important that the instrument you choose has a well made bocal to complement it. Treat the bocal with care, so as not to bend or dent it, and clean it out periodically with warm water, a mild detergent and a pipe cleaner.

### ADJUSTMENTS

Unless you have had some experience with adjusting woodwinds, it is best to let an experienced repairperson handle adjustments. Often, a small problem can become a big one with a screwdriver in untrained hands.

### REEDS

The English horn reed differs from the oboe reed in two ways. First, the reed is not inserted into the body of the instrument, but is instead fit over the end of the bocal.

Second, the reed usually has a thin brass wire wrapped twice around the reed about 6mm above the winding. The wire is not essential, but it serves to stabilize the size of the opening. The length of the reed and staple together is from 53 to 56mm. The material in the oboe manual pertaining to the adjustment of reeds is equally applicable to English horn reeds. Only the proportions are somewhat larger. For anyone who wishes to go into reed making in greater detail, a fine reference is David Weber's book "The Reed Maker's Manual." An accompanying videocassette is available. Another fine text is "The Oboe Reed Book" by Jay Light.

### 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. They do not permit thorough drying of the reed between uses.

## EMBOUCHURE



Photo by Bev Schiltz

Rest the reed on the lower lip so that the tip lies mid-way on the lip. As a breath is taken, the lower lip is rolled in over the lower teeth. The upper lip goes over the upper teeth providing a double lip embouchure. Students transferring from clarinet to English horn frequently have difficulty at first tucking in the upper lip.

The reed should be at a position where just the tip is in the mouth and about half of the cane is exposed on the outside.

Too much reed in the mouth (down to the winding) will result in harsher tone and sharper pitch. The teeth are spaced so that the lip rests on them. There is plenty of room for the reed to be held loosely and not clenched tightly. The lips act as a cushion for the reed and should be thought of as rounded and soft and supple like forming

the syllable "O" and not "E". Avoid the "smile" or "stretched rubber band" embouchure.

Control is achieved by very subtle changes in the tension of the lips of the reed. With the proper embouchure formed, very little, if any, of the red part of the lip will be visible. When playing the English horn, the instrument should be held so that it forms a 45° angle with the body. Do not hold the instrument too closely to the body or straight out like a trumpet. Good posture is important whether standing or sitting. A straight back allows full air capacity to the lungs for proper breath support. Deep breathing and the use of the abdominal muscles below the diaphragm is the basis for good tone quality and control. A beginner may find it advantageous to produce a sound on the reed before trying it in the instrument.



Photo by Bev Schiltz

## THE COMMERCIAL REED

Serious students of the English horn 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.

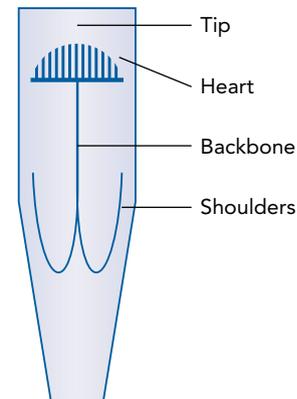
The grading of English horn reeds as soft, medium or hard has little relationship to the fact and varies from one manufacturer to another. Many commercial reeds are too soft. Try reeds from several manufacturers to determine which is most consistent and best suited to your instrument and style of playing.

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

FRENCH or  
“SHORT SCRAPE”



AMERICAN or  
“LONG SCRAPE”



## ADJUSTING THE COMMERCIAL ENGLISH HORN REED

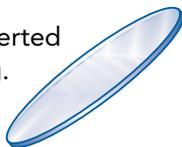
It is important to know the techniques used in adjusting commercial reeds. The following four pieces of simple equipment are essential for students to begin adjusting reeds:

### 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.



### 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 fishskin tightly around the reed, starting midway or less up the reed. Pull tightly around the reed spiraling downward 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.

Players also are beginning to use a very thin plumber's tape, available in hardware stores. It is available in dispensers like adhesive tape. It has the advantage of being self-adhesive. It also stays in place under moist conditions.

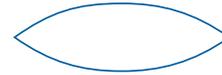
## PITCH OF THE REED

Pitch of the reed is determined by:

1. **LENGTH** of the reed – The reed should play the instrument in tune when it is placed over the bocal to the stopping point. Most English horn reeds are from 53 to 56mm in length.
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 small. The wire can be tightened to improve the size of the opening.
3. The bocal 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 too 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 –

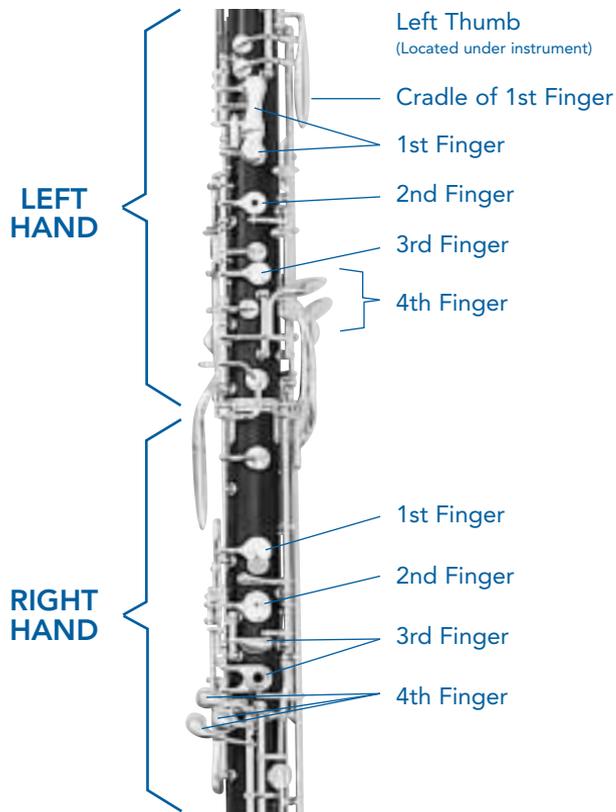
1. Make the very end of the reed tip thinner.
2. Remove a little wood from behind the reed tip.
3. If it appears that the back is still too thick, scrape a bit more off, particularly if the low notes do not respond. Be careful not to remove the “backbone” or the reed will become flat, or the octaves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

## ENGLISH HORN FINGERING CHART

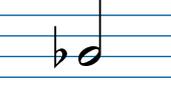
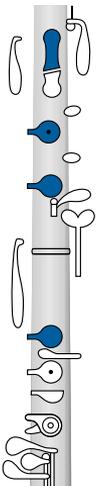
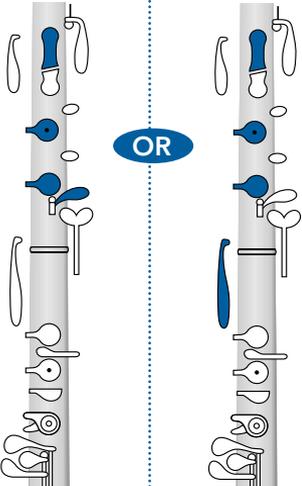
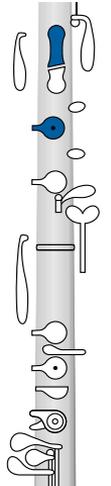
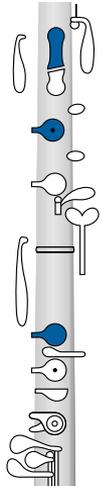
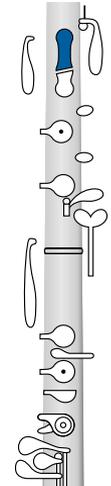
The following is a basic fingering chart that is used for tuning Fox and Renard oboes. The English horn has approximately a 2½ octave range and very few alternate fingerings. The one exception is “Forked F”. Many students brought up in a band program acquire the habit of using only the “Forked F” fingering. “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.



B $\flat$	C	C $\sharp$ - D $\flat$	D	E $\flat$ - D $\sharp$	E	F	1.	2.

1. Forked "F" (See page 16)
2. Left-handed F

\* Use left-hand E $\flat$  key if before or after D $\flat$  (C $\sharp$ ).

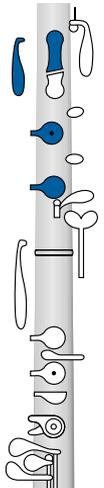
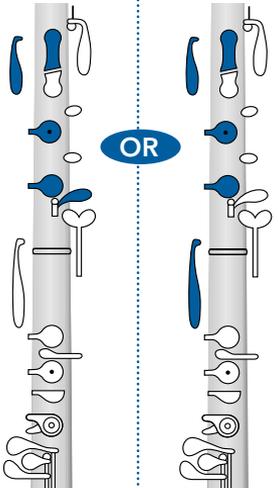
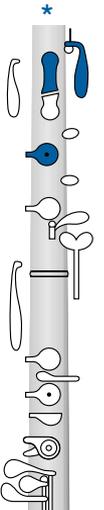
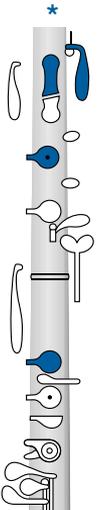
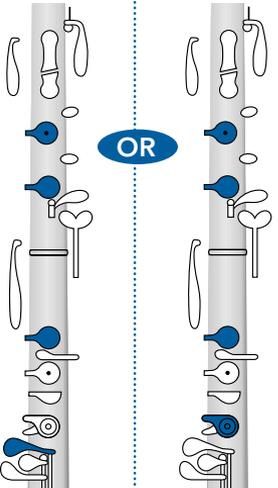
F# - Gb	G	Ab - G#		A	Bb - A#	Bb	C
							
							

OR

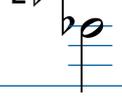
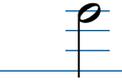
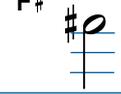
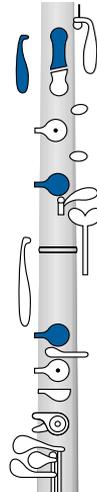
C# - D $\flat$	D	E $\flat$ - D $\sharp$	E	F	1.	2.	F $\sharp$

1. Forked "F" (See page 16)
2. Left-handed F

\* Use left-hand E $\flat$  key if before or after D $\flat$  (C $\sharp$ ).  
 \*\* E $\flat$  Key may be used with Forked "F" for stability on some instruments.

G	G# - A $\flat$	A	B $\flat$ - A#	B $\natural$	C	C# - D $\flat$
						
						

\* Left Thumb Key may be left down to ease facility on A, B $\flat$ , B $\natural$  and C.

D	E $\flat$ D $\sharp$	E	F	F $\sharp$	G
					
					

OR\*

OR\*\*

\* Use before or after high E $\flat$  (D $\sharp$ ).  
 \*\* Use before or after E $\flat$  (D $\sharp$ ).

## METHODS AND TUTORS

Since the fingerings, basic playing techniques and embouchure are so similar, any good oboe method is equally applicable to the English horn. Rubank and Belwin, among others, publish beginners books. After that, Kenneth Gekeler and David Hite have published some useful material. From there to the Barret "Standard Oboe Tutor" and the Ferling "48 Etudes."

## SOLO AND ENSEMBLE MATERIAL

The list of solo material for English horn is rather sparse, in comparison with that of the oboe. Most of the literature for English horn and piano is either transcription or 20th century composition. There is a bit of chamber music available from the classic period. Mozart has written an Adagio for English horn which has been arranged for both wind and string chamber groups. Beethoven has written two trios for two oboes and English horn. Again, most of the ensemble material dates from the 20th century. A good example is a quartet for English horn and strings by Jean Francaix.

## HELP SITES

For those with computer access, help is just a few clicks away. The complete journal of the International Double Reed Society, 25 years worth, is available online at <http://idrs.colorado.edu>. This site contains a wealth of information on every aspect of double reed playing, including recording reviews, music reviews, and reed making articles, just to name a few topics. It also contains a file of advertisers, together with their websites. Online catalogs give information on reed tools, music, supplies and recordings. Also on the Internet one can find oboe chat rooms, publisher websites and dealer websites. A useful booklet entirely about the English horn and its music has been compiled by a Swedish player named Bo Eriksson. The mailing address is:  
Alta Music Co.  
c/o Bo Eriksson  
Klisatravagen 38  
138 33 Alta  
Sweden

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