

Bassoon Modifications for Small Hands

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The bassoon is a large instrument and persons with small hands can have difficulties playing on it. There are several modifications that can aid in the playing of the bassoon for such persons.

Model 51

The Renard model 51 is specifically made for young players with small hands. For schools seeking an instrument for players in grade school or middle school this model is ideal. However, it is not comfortable for normal full size hands and should not be used in a high school or for adult players.

The model 51 bassoon has a full size body with modifications to the keywork that accommodate small hands. These modifications include a plateau key for the third finger hole of the wing joint and repositioned low E \flat and D \flat keys on the bass joint for the left little finger. On the boot joint the B \flat trill key for the third finger has been deleted allowing the G key, the low F key, the little finger F \sharp key and the little finger G \sharp key to be repositioned upwards approximately 5/8" (16mm). In addition, the thumb G \sharp key and the C \sharp trill key have been deleted. A handrest is not normally included with this model as it would be inconsistent to the needs of small hands. A high D key is an available option but consideration should be given to the accessibility of this key or the need of it for beginning players.

Features of this special model can be adapted for addition on other models. With the exception of the plateau key however, they are not available on other Renard models.

Fox Professional Models

Almost any special modification can be applied to Fox Professional model bassoons. This certainly includes all of the various modifications described in this article. Bassoonists desiring other modifications are encouraged to contact Fox Products Corporation directly about their ideas.

Plateau Key

This is always the first alteration that should be considered for small hands. Easing the stretch needed to close the third finger hole of the wing joint can improve the comfort of playing. It also makes access to the high C and D keys easier for the left thumb. For many persons adding a plateau key is all that is required. A plateau key is easily added at any time in the life of any bassoon.

By definition, a plateau key is simply a padded key that closes a hole that would otherwise be closed directly by a finger. Technically, the low E (or pancake key) is a plateau key; it is needed because the tone hole under it is too large for a person's thumb to close it. In general usage for bassoons, the term "plateau key" with no other information always refers to the plateau key for the third finger hole of the wing joint, replacing the normal ring key.

Plateau keys are often considered "student" keys. Many players avoid them with the idea that only a real ring key should be considered "correct." This idea is wrong. The plateau key is used to make reaches more comfortable for small hands. Small hands are more common among students but adults can also have small hands.

It is possible to have a plateau key made in addition to a ring key. The two keys can be made so that they can be interchanged. It is necessary to reverse the direction of the spring tension and to check the adjustment of the key when the other key is installed.

Plateau keys can also be made for other open finger holes. In general, these are strongly discouraged. They can get mechanically complicated and can cause more trouble than they are worth. They are appropriate for persons with special needs, for instance, for persons with nerve damage that can no longer feel the finger holes to know that they are actually closing the holes properly.

Deleting the B \flat Trill Key

The B \flat trill key operated by the third finger of the right hand is a key that many players never use. It can be eliminated and most players won't even miss it. With the B \flat trill removed, the G spatula for the third finger and the F, F \sharp and G \sharp spatulas for the little finger can be repositioned closer to the top of the boot joint.

The normal displacement is about 3/8" or about 9.5mm. The amount of displacement on a model 51 (5/8" or about 16mm) is too much to be comfortable for adult hands. This change can allow a more relaxed span for short fingers.

This is a radical change that is practical to make while the instrument is being made but impractical to retrofit on an existing instrument. This modification is available on Fox professional models. It is a standard part of the Renard model 51 but is not available on other Renard models.

Repositioning the Low E \flat /C \sharp Keys

When the bassoon is equipped with a plateau key the little finger keys for the left hand can be repositioned to take advantage of the plateau key's extension.

The displacement is usually on the order of 1/4" toward the bell. This is sufficient to make a normal ring key inaccessible. This modification should only be considered along with a plateau key.

This modification is only available on Fox professional models.

Rollers

Avoid adding additional rollers. Small hands will prefer small keys.

Adding a roller to a key requires enlarging the key to accommodate the roller. When several rollers are added together in sequence, such as for the right thumb, the added distance from one extreme to the other can be substantial.

Rollers also place extra demands on the way fingers are placed on a key. The roller itself is an unsteady position for the finger to rest and the finger must move past the roller to get a stable position on the key. Without the roller it is possible for the finger to find a stable position closer to an adjacent key.

Additional keywork

Take care when selecting optional keywork. Too much keywork may get in the way and make access to the necessary keywork more difficult.

Some keys may have alternate ways of being added to a bassoon that might be better choices. For instance, the standard high E key places the high E touch above the first finger hole. Selecting the offset high E key would place it below that hole in a position that might be more accessible.

Other keys are almost certainly inappropriate for small hands. For instance, the little finger whisper key would almost certainly be out of reach beyond the low C \sharp key. On the other hand, if the low E \flat and C \sharp keys were replaced by a single spatula low E \flat /D \flat mechanism the little finger whisper key would become comfortably accessible.

Altering normal keys

Requests are sometimes made for lengthening keys, such as the F, F \sharp and G \sharp keys for the right little finger. Care should be taken of such alterations. Lengthening the low F key, for example, results in an increased arc of movement. This can result in a position when depressed that will make it difficult to move to the G \sharp key. In this instance it might be preferable to delete the B \flat trill and relocate these keys higher on the boot joint.

Handrests

The use of handrests by persons with small hands should be examined carefully. Careful selection of an appropriate style of handrest can be important.

The use of a tall or large handrest would be counterproductive. Consideration should be given to cutting down the length of the handrest's shaft to shorten its height.

The use of a "palm guard" style handrest rather than the conventional wood or plastic handrest should be considered. This metal guard provides much the same function as the conventional handrest but remains close to the body.

Special modifications in general

Fox Products Corporation has a long list of options available on new bassoons. Most of these modifications can also be added to older instruments.

Not all of the modifications described in this article are listed in the options price list. There are many things we can do that we choose not to publish. Inquiries about special modifications should be made directly to Fox Products. We will be glad to consider any idea.

Advice about bassoons is always available from Fox. We look forward to hearing from bassoonists and we always enjoy talking about the instruments.

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