

## **GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE OBOE AND ENGLISH HORN**

The oboe, pitched in C, and its cousin, the English horn (EH), pitched in F, are members of the woodwind family. To play both instruments, a double reed serves as the mouthpiece. The reeds, which are hand-made by professional players themselves, are different for the oboe and EH. As well, when playing the EH, the reed is first placed on the end of a metal “bocal” (or crook) which is inserted into the top joint of the EH. The instruments have a conical bore (unlike the clarinet which has a cylindrical bore). Most professional model oboes and English horns are made of wood, although student and professional instruments these days can be made of plastic or a synthetic hybrid. I own synthetic top joints for two of my oboes, and the third one has a liner to keep it from cracking. I also use a synthetic top joint on my oboe d’amore and have an EH synthetic top joint in addition to the wood ones that came with my two instruments when I purchased them. The top joints of oboes and English horns are particularly prone to cracking in Vancouver, perhaps due to the often sudden and dramatic shifts in humidity typical of the weather here.

### **RANGE**

The oboe, pitched in C, and EH, pitched in F, have a range of just over 2 ½ octaves—from Bb below middle C on the piano to G above the staff. We can play as high as Ab and A, but playing in that range is not the norm. Note that the EH cannot play below a fingered low B (concert E). There is no key, as there is on the oboe, to play a fingered low Bb (concert Eb).

### **LEGATO PLAYING**

Composers have awarded many of the orchestral repertoire’s most expressive and lyrical melodies to the oboe and the EH. It was the chance I might get to play these famous melodies that attracted me to the oboe in the first place. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Dvorak, Mahler and Strauss, just to name a few, all wrote memorable solos for the oboe and English horn that require the player to sing on his/her instrument like an opera star. We can play long phrases without having to breathe as often as a flute player would and welcome melodies that require a full range of expression in order to communicate the music effectively.

### **ARTICULATION**

Double reed instrument players are capable of articulating in different ways. We can play repeated short notes quickly and with clarity or in what we call a legato-tonguing style. Legato tonguing to an oboist means notes are articulated with no space between them. Many oboists can double-tongue, but my advice is not to write repeated articulated notes faster than quarter = 132 if you want me to be able to play your music comfortably. I have a fast single tongue but cannot single tongue as fast as someone who double-tongues well.

### **EXTENDED TECHNIQUES:**

#### **MULTIPHONICS**

If you are planning to include multiphonics in your piece, please include multiphonic fingerings in your music. There are a wide range of multiphonics that can be produced on the oboe and EH. I highly recommend consulting the amazingly comprehensive book by Libby Van Cleve, “Oboe Unbound” for excellent suggestions <http://libbyvancleve.com/oboe-unbound> Working

together with an oboe player who could demonstrate different multiphonics for you would be advisable if it's an option.

### **HARMONICS AND ALTERNATIVE TIMBRES**

The oboe and EH can produce lovely harmonics that have a dreamy, soft and ethereal sound quality. They are produced by using the second octave key and overblowing a low note to sound an octave and a fifth higher. Not all brands of oboes easily produce the same harmonics but in general fingered C, Db, D, Eb, E sounding G, Ab, A, Bb, B should work well on most instruments. Put the harmonic symbol above the note to be heard, not the note to be fingered, or as in the sample below, you could show both the fingered note as well as the sounding note.

Below is a link to Jeffrey Ryan's solo work for oboe or EH, "Quince." I recorded the piece on both instruments for Jeff's recently released album "My Soul Upon My Lips." The music is a good example of how to indicate both multiphonics and harmonics. The piece also calls for alternative timbres, for which Jeff supplied fingerings. Libby's book also offers excellent suggestions for alternative timbre fingerings.

<https://jeffreyryan.com/wp-content/uploads/QuinceOboe.pdf>

### **DYNAMICS**

Playing very softly in the low register of the oboe can be a challenge depending on the type of reed the player is using. It is easier to play softly in the low register on the EH than on the oboe. That said, the oboe is generally a more brilliant sounding instrument and can usually be heard within a wind section even if the music calls for tutti loud playing. The English horn has a more mellow timbre, and the sound can easily be drowned out when competing with a lot of other instruments.