Frequently Asked Questions
About Oboe Repair
By Nora Post

- **How often should my instrument be serviced?**

If nothing goes wrong, I suggest that instruments come back about once every two years for routine servicing. This means oiling and cleaning the mechanism, cleaning the octave vents, replacing the octave pads, and doing whatever else needs to be done. While every instrument is different, servicing often includes reseating leaky pads, changing pads that are over the hill, replacing worn bumper corks, recorking tenon joints if needed, etc. True servicing means a lotFor more than turning the adjusting screws! It is about keeping your instrument in the kind of condition it was in when you purchased it. I can't overemphasize the importance of this last one.
Oboe repair is a specialized art, and there is so much bad repair out there. We see so many instruments for resale, for example, and the biggest problem is simply that they are years overdue for basic maintenance. Because good repairers are so few and far between, players don't expect the minor miracles that great repair work can achieve. A case in point: a customer called and wanted us to sell her AK Lorée. Everyone who played it told her it was over the hill. It hadn't been serviced since she bought it, about eight years ago. We told her we would have to repair the oboe anyway prior to selling it, so why didn't she try it again after it was repaired to make a final decision? We fixed it and sent it to her. She called with "Oh my God, it's awesome! Wow, I can't believe the difference! She kept her oboe….

- **How much does it cost to repair my instrument?**

Most repairers bill by the hour, so the cost depends entirely on what needs to be done. Unfortunately, there is no way to guess what an instrument needs without seeing it. However, there's an old saying that it costs about $100 a year to maintain an oboe. I think that's just about right, although this is only a very rough estimate. Everything depends upon how hard an instrument has been played, how well an owner has cared for the instrument, as well as what typical repairs for each manufacturer entail. A plastic oboe with Teflon-tipped screws will need a lot less repair than an all-wood oboe with piles of those little bumper corks that can and do wear out! Needless to say, an English horn or oboe d'amour that is rarely played needs to come in a lot less frequently than an oboe that is played two or three hours every day.

- **Is it always worth the cost of repairing my oboe?**

Most of the time, yes.
The only exceptions are poor quality beginner oboes that have no real value, or extremely old instruments--and here I mean instruments whose playing qualities are iffy at best--where the condition of the mechanism can defy getting them into good condition at any kind of reasonable cost. For example, I just received a fifty-year-old English horn from a university that was probably never very good in the first place; the bocals are terrible, the case looks like it was World War I surplus, and the manufacturer has been out of business for generations, i.e. there are no parts. These are some of the reasons that old instruments lose so much of their value; these are the tough calls. But in most cases, any repair work increases the value of the instrument and is easily recovered by a higher asking price if an instrument is for sale. With the more questionable instruments, I just talk it over very honestly with the owner once I have seen the instrument. As far as the cheap beginner oboes are concerned, it can actually cost more to repair them than they are worth. If you are considering an extensive repair on an instrument, be sure that the value of the instrument justifies the repair expense. In most cases, it does. Also, try to be as sure as you can that your repairperson knows what they are doing. We just overhauled a Cabart oboe, for example, the owner had spent about $400 having the worst quality work done. It was worse than doing nothing, and we had to tear it all out and start from scratch.

- **Why don't more players keep their instruments in good repair?**

There are several considerations here:

1) Access to good repairers. We see so many people who have had oboes fixed (if you can use the word) by completely incompetent people. So, from their point of view, why spend money on repairs if nothing is fixed and it doesn't play any better after the repair? Good question…
2) The mindset of a throw away society. North America has traditionally replaced oboes more frequently that other Western countries. But with prices getting so rarified, I thing this is changing, and we will become more like the European and British players who spend more on repair, but tend to keep their instruments longer.

- **Why are there so few good oboe repairers?**

Ironically, the answer is that very few repairers do well financially. The repair sections of the major manufacturers in Europe all run at a financial loss every year. The makers offer these services because they feel that they must, not because they are generating any profit. In other words, it's the sales that finance the repairs. For a small sole proprietor repairer without instrument sales to subsidize repairs, this is a real problem. Thus, behind every talented repairer you will find a very capable working spouse!

- **What are the most common problems new oboes have during the first year?**

The two most common problems are cracks and binding keys. In some ways, the source of both problems is the same. Oboes love humidity. They are fine in the heat, but they don't do well in the cold. The reason they dislike the cold so much is that once most of us turn up the heat in our homes, the humidity gets very low. So the winter is prime crack season in the Northeast, the upper Mid-West and much of Canada. Likewise, dessert climates have very little humidity. Take away the humidity, and an instrument may crack. This is why I always provide humidifiers with the oboes I sell. Similarly, if the wood shrinks in a cold climate with low humidity, the distance between the posts becomes shorter as the wood shrinks. This is especially common during the first winter for new oboes. People call us to say some of the springs aren't working. That's always the tip-off that the keys have bound up. It isn't the springs; it's wood shrinkage that causes these problems. Problems with springing are usually associated with old instruments--the metal becomes brittle with age and use. That's a completely different issue; it is rare to see any kind of springing problem on a young oboe. But on a new oboe, as the distance between the posts is shortened, the keys are quite literally bound up between the posts. So, they stop working, of course! The most common places this occurs are the short lateral keys (first octave, F resonance, left Eb and low C# keys), and the long assemblies like the C to D trill assembly on the upper joint, and the low B/Bb/left Eb rod on the lower joint. English horns can be even worse because there is even more wood to shrink, and they are usually not played as frequently as oboes. If we all lived in a nice humid climate like New Orleans, this would not be much of a problem. On the positive side though, once an instrument gets through its first winter, these problems are usually over. The whole issue is having the wood acclimatize to where it is living, and that's a very different proposition for someone in Portland, Maine than it is for someone in Portland, Oregon. In terms of prevention, there are several things that can help. First and foremost is the use of humidifiers in the case. This is an absolute must during the months of the year the heat is on in your home. Likewise, if you live in a climate that uses a lot of air conditioning (which is a de-humidifier), the use of humidification is also very important. Playing an instrument regularly is also vital re: avoiding problems. While you want to break in a new wooden oboe conservatively, it is also important that it is played regularly, even if it is only for short periods of time each day. Nothing helps all the keys bind up faster than putting a new oboe or English horn away and not playing it for a long stretch during a very cold winter! Ouch!

- **What are the most common cracks? Are all cracks serious?**

The classic garden-variety crack is between the trill keys, sometimes extending down into the half-hole key. That's the most common crack I see. Other common upper joint cracks extend from the octave vents, or north from the trill keys, through the third octave key tone hole, or through various posts. All of these are repairable, and should be repaired as soon as possible after a crack is noticed. With upper joint cracks, it is important to repair cracks quickly, so that they do not spread. Even a well-repaired crack can sometimes re-open—you never know what a piece of wood will do! When this does happen, the crack can be reglued and, sooner or later, the wood will settle down. On the middle joint and bell, the cracks are virtually always at the tenon joints. These cracks are simply the

result of wood shrinkage. The wood shrinks over the metal tenons at the joints, the metal can't shrink, and the wood just cracks open. Because these are stress cracks, they do not travel; they absolutely cannot go anywhere. Thus, they are low priority, but they should be repaired. These usually occur during a very cold winter or other situations of extreme low humidity.

- **What do I do if my instrument has cracked?**

Stop playing it and call your repairperson! Since most cracks are the result of moisture hitting the inside of the upper joint, if you stop playing the instrument, it can start to really dry out. In time, the crack will usually close. This doesn't mean it doesn't need to be fixed, but it does explain why cracks are often smaller by the time they arrive here than they were when an instrument was shipped. This is very common, and I often ask people to enclose a drawing of the crack, slowing how long it was before they shipped the oboe to us. Not every crack will close up over time, but the vast majority will. The only exceptions are the stress cracks at the tenon of either the middle joint or the bell. They can't close down because they are on top of metal. On the other hand, these are benign cracks, and are low on the totem pole of urgency. But if you have a crack in the top joint, it's best to have it repaired ASAP.

- **Can I avoid all these concerns with a plastic oboe?**

For the most part, yes. This is the reason many of the European oboe makers have shifted to offering instruments in either all wood or wood with a plastic top joint. All of the non-professional instruments made by Rigoutat and Howarth, for example, are available either way. I am not that big a fan of all plastic; all-important cracking issues concern only the upper joint, so I consider all plastic to be over-kill. As a repairperson, I enjoy working on wood more than plastic, but that's just personal preference, of course.

The only real problem with plastic is that it can stop playing when it gets cold. Wood, on the other hand, tends to keep playing. With plastic, it's very important to allow the instrument to warm up to room temperature. If you put a Fox oboe in the refrigerator for a few hours, for example, it won't play when it comes out! While this may sound silly, it's really no different than waiting for a bus in Chicago during January.

- **What are the serious repair issues that can potentially affect the playing qualities as well as devalue an instrument?**

Cracking through to the bore, which I mentioned above, is the #1 offender here. I personally won't take an instrument for resale if it has cracked all the way down the upper joint and through more than three tone holes (assuming that the crack has not gone through to the bore). An instrument with several less serious well-repaired cracks can be fine, although the instrument is worth a bit less than the same oboe without any cracks. Another red flag is pitted or corroded plating. The sweat/perspiration on some people's skin can create a number of repair issues—rusted out adjustment screws, keys, drill rod, springs, etc. Although pitted keys may not affect the playing, they just clobber the resale value of an oboe. It's just one of those things…

- **Why is it that repairers often try to avoid working on extremely old instruments?**

These instruments have a lot of wear in the mechanism, and it's really tough to get these horns into reliable playing shape. There is usually too much play in the keys, the tone hole edges are often in very poor condition, the springs are usually old and brittle; these are the instruments that can be full of nasty surprises! A repairer has to be very, very careful even taking an instrument like this apart, because springs can just break off as the keys are taken off. These are also the horns where you run right into lots of earlier poor quality repair work—bad crack work, terrible soldering jobs, etc. Alas, everything that can go wrong usually does, repairs usually go very slowly, and the results sometimes don't justify the time and expense of the work, in part because the instrument may never have been a good one in the first place. From the point of view of a person who takes pride in their work, I hate putting a reed into an instrument after all that work only to find that I really don't like the instrument. That, right there, is why repairers don't want to work on junk. I am proud of my work and I want any instrument to play well when I am done. The frustrating part of all this is that the amount of work is the same, whether the instrument is a good one or a bad one…

- **What kinds of repairs can be done quickly, and which ones take more time?**

Most repairers need at least a month to do a complete overhaul. Plating can take even longer. Cracks involving replacement tone holes can take a week or two, but cracks that don't go through the tone holes go a lot quicker. Most instruments I see are probably in and out within a week of when I get started on the repairs. If it's routine servicing, I might actually work on an instrument for a couple of days. Allowing time for shipping, a week or ten days is about right. Every repairperson has a different style, but I certainly do a better job if I have the time I need to do it right. There are things that need to be set up and left to dry until the next day. There are certain things I can do for someone in a jam, but they would be done better if I could really take the time I need. Especially when I have done a lot of work on an instrument, it's really important to take some extra time at the end to make sure everything is settling in OK. I am frequently told that I work a lot faster than most, and I believe it. But I still need the time I need, and I really don't like handing an instrument back to someone when I know it needs a lot more work, but they need it for a concert that night! Oh, well…

- **How do I know if my oboe needs to be serviced?**

In my opinion, the life expectancy of octave pads is about two years. The very first tip-off that your instrument needs work is that your first octave pad starts to stick. It's almost never a springing issue; the problem is that the pad needs to be changed. If you have skin pads on the low notes---low B and Bb, for example--look for discoloration and fraying on those pads. Check to see if the joints wobble when the instrument is assembled. Check for suction on the joints. If an instrument isn't reasonably airtight, it needs to be repaired. For oboes that have bumper corks throughout, take a look at them. If they are shot, they will have little holes where the adjustment screws go right through them--or they will have just fallen off. There may be keys where the action is sluggish, and this can be due to a number of different causes.

- **Bent Keys**

Bent keys are very common. Keys can bend when an instrument is dropped, they can bend if the case is a bad fit or poorly designed, and they can bend in shipping (see below). Most common, though, are bent keys due to assembling as instrument incorrectly. Assembling an instrument incorrectly can bend the bridge keys at both joints. They can literally be torn off. On the top joint, along with the keys tearing off, the bridge keys from the lower joint usually slice through the G# pad first. All cases of split G# pads are the result of this--there is no other way this can happen! An oboe needs to be put together in small little wiggles, not the big twists that can bend the keys! Another big offender is a bent low C# key. When the long C# assembly is bent, you can play a C#, but you can't go from C# to a C--the C# won't go down. In this case--and this is very, very common--the long rod from your right hand pinkie down to the actual C# key gets bent. This is usually the result of grabbing the middle joint across that long C# mechanism when assembling and disassembling an instrument. Do this a few thousand times, and there will be problems! I always suggest that people grab the middle joint anywhere except where that long assembly is located--either above or below it--so that the C# assembly doesn't get bent over time. The fact that this is the most common bent key on an oboe is fair warning to hold the lower joint in any area except the low C# assembly when assembling it.

- **Can an instrument be damaged in shipping? If so, what are the most common things that can happen?**

All things considered, it's pretty rare for an instrument to be damaged in shipping, but it does happen. Most common is that the F#-G# connector key on the middle joint gets bent. This is to say that the connector key with the adjusting screw from the middle joint gets bent down. This completely disables the lower joint of an oboe, and you cannot play below G. In lucky cases, you can turn the adjusting screw counterclockwise and solve the problem. In most cases, though, the key is bent too far to allow for this to be a solution. Another common problem is for the low Bb key to get pushed into the low B key at the top of the middle joint where these two keys are next to each other. Sometimes this can be fixed by very carefully pulling the Bb key out away from the B key with your fingers. Given the number of instruments we see each year, the number of instrument that have bent keys due to shipping

is probably less than one percent. Not bad at all, when you think about it. But it does happen from time to time. I remember once when a Fed Ex truck ran over two oboes of mine in Pennsylvania…

- **What exactly is a complete overhaul, what does it cost and how long does it take?**

A full overhaul entails cleaning the body, keys, repading the entire instrument, spring work, tenon corks, bumper corks---in short, the works. Prices can start at about $1,000 and it usually takes at least one month. At the Laubin oboe shop, for example, replating and/or crack work is additional. This is how most of us do it.

- **You said you did six things to fix a problem, but you still aren't sure you fixed it. Can you explain?**

Yes. There are certain pesky little repairs where you will never know what the exact cause of the problem was, so you do absolutely everything you can, hoping that one or more of the things you have done will solve the problem. Chronic water problems in the octave keys are like this, for example. I can polish the bore, clean the octave vents, seal them, change the pads and oil the bore, but I still don't know if someone will get water after an hour of playing. In these cases, I just do everything and hope for the best.

- **What are the worst repair problems?**

There's an old saying that you can't fix something if it ain't broke. The worst problems are the problems that miraculously repair themselves before the instrument gets here. If we can't find the problem, ho can we fix it? These are the challenges for which Advil was created!

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- Nora Post answers questions asked by Oboe players on Oboe repair. These questions include:

1. How often should my instrument be serviced?
2. How much does it cost to repair my instrument?
3. What are the most common problems new oboes have during the first year?
4. What are the most common cracks? Are all cracks serious?
5. Can I avoid all of these concerns with a plastic oboe?
6. What kinds of repairs can be done quickly and which ones take more time?
7. Etc.

- For each question Nora Post gives a detailed answer with information she has gathered from other resources as well as her own personal knowledge. This is a wonderful article for oboe players and music teachers.