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# Performing Mozart's *Oboe Quartet* on Classical Oboe Today

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**M**ozart's *Oboe Quartet in F Major* K.370/368b (1781) is central to oboe repertoire for both period and modern instrument performers. In this study, I interviewed seventeen period oboe specialists based in the United States and Canada. I seek to show the performing practices of the Mozart quartet by today's Classical period instrument practitioners.

## Instruments and Technique

Period performers today employ a variety of instruments to perform music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. For the purposes of this article, Classical oboe is defined as an oboe that has from two to fourteen keys and a narrow bore used roughly 1760-1825.<sup>1</sup> With a comparatively narrower bore than both the Baroque oboe and modern oboe, the Classical oboe is characterized as "the greyhound or racehorse of the oboe group, and (like the music it played) its character was quick and evanescent."<sup>2</sup>

Two main types of Classical oboes were revealed in the study: two-keyed and multi-keyed (usually eight-keyed). All performers surveyed use oboes pitched at A430, the current standard for Classical pitch.<sup>3</sup> The two-keyed oboe was regularly used in Mozart's day. However, today's period performers, who often maintain instruments that span two or more centuries of development, may only own a later Classical oboe, which has multiple keys.<sup>4</sup> Performers interviewed own Boxwood, Grenadilla, Ebony, Rosewood, and Cocobolo instruments. Among the players I interviewed, oboes by Mary Kirkpatrick, Sand Dalton, and Harry Vas Dias were particularly popular (see table 1).

PLAYERS	MAKER OF COPY	MAKER OF ORIGINAL	WOOD	KEYS
3	Mary Kirkpatrick	Jakob Friedrich Grundmann	Boxwood	2
3	Harry Vas Dias	Heinrich Grenser	2 Boxwood 1 Grenadilla	2
2	Sand Dalton	Grundmann	unspecified	2
1	Alfredo Bernardini	Grundmann	unspecified	2
1	Grant Moore	Thomas Cahusac	Boxwood	2
1	Bosworth and Hammer	Grenser	Boxwood	2
1	Robinson	Christophe Delusse	Boxwood	2
1	Ponselee	Grundmann & Johann Friedrich Floth	unspecified	5

PLAYERS	MAKER OF COPY	MAKER OF ORIGINAL	WOOD	KEYS
1	Harry Vas Dias	Grener	Rosewood	3-6
2	Dalton	Grundmann	Boxwood	5-8
3	Sand Dalton	Johann Friedrich Floth	1 Cocobolo 1 Ebony 1 Grenadilla	8
1	Toshi	Grener	Boxwood	9

Table 1. Classical Oboes Used Today as Reported in Study Conducted May-June 2016

There are three key and hole setups revealed in the survey: two keys with twinned holes 3 and 4 (figure 1 and 2); more than five keys with twinned fourth hole (figure 3); two keys with twinned hole 4. By far, the least common is two keys with twinned hole 4.



Figure 1. Mary Kirkpatrick, Classical oboe in Boxwood after Jakob Friedrich Grundmann



Figure 2. Joel Robinson and Geoffrey Burgess, Classical oboe in Boxwood after Christophe Delusse



Figure 3. Sand Dalton, Classical oboe in Grenadilla after Johann Friedrich Floth

Some performers play on eight-keyed oboes with the same finger technique they use on their Baroque oboe, while others treat this with a different, nineteenth-century technique. This later technique utilizes cross-fingerings and key fingerings, longer phrases, and a less involved embouchure.<sup>5</sup> Oboists who play on eight-keyed instruments while employing Baroque technique avoid using keys beyond the first two (C and E-flat). Some oboists go so far as to plug up holes of unwanted keys with wax or tape. Several players tune the oboes by the following methods: adding wax to the top or bottom of tone holes; manipulating the bore; or by removing wood with a file or sandpaper.

The study revealed the following uses of the slur key:<sup>6</sup> as an octave key, no use, or flick technique, where the key is depressed briefly at the start of a pitch and then released once the note speaks. Here again, we see a variety of techniques even when similar instruments are in hand.

With regard to the high notes, there are varying views of high note facility in connection with reed making and technique. Some players consider notes above  $D_3$ <sup>7</sup> to be a type of extended technique on the Classical oboe, only used in a limited amount of repertoire. Notes above  $D_3$  are uncommon in orchestral literature during this period, and do not occur in a printed fingering chart until 1792.<sup>8</sup> These players advocate for a setup that prioritizes tone and comfort in the following range:  $C_1$  through  $D_3$ . However, other players consider notes above  $D_3$  (E-flat<sub>3</sub>,  $E_3$ , and  $F_3$ ) to be within the range of normal technique on the Classical oboe. Classical oboe literature, especially solo repertoire, utilizes the high range more regularly than earlier music. By the 1770s, use of notes above  $D_3$  was increasingly common in solo and chamber literature. The mean range of notes in Mozart's *Oboe Quartet* is a fourth above those in Bach's obbligato arias,<sup>9</sup> and virtuoso oboists of the day including **Friedrich Ramm**, **Johann Christian Fischer**, and **William Thomas Parke** were known to regularly exploit the upper extreme of the oboe's range. Oboists who see high notes as part of the expected technique of the instrument prioritize a setup that facilitates ease in production in all registers of the instrument.

### Classical Oboe Reeds

All period instrument practitioners who participated in the survey play exclusively or primarily on their own reeds utilizing a variety of equipment and measurements. Players regularly experiment with reed making materials, measurements, and methods. Although we have some evidence about late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century reed making,<sup>10</sup> period performers today use reed making tools and processes that are deeply influenced by modern reed making methods. Most oboists in the study purchase cane marketed as "Baroque oboe cane." This cane comes in diameters 14mm-16mm from vendors including Bard Historical Cane, Reeds 'n Stuff, and Kredo. Three players process and gouge their own cane. One person uses English horn cane, which is appreciably narrower diameter than Baroque oboe cane. Since shaping and tube openings vary significantly, it is difficult to assess the efficacy of diameters of cane in period instrument reed making.

Reed makers in the study shape cane by hand or with a shaper tip, such as those carried by Westwind Double Reed and cane providers listed above. Although the majority of surveyed oboists use hand-shaped cane, several players sometimes use shaper tips for Baroque oboe, Classical oboe, or English horn. Classical reeds are shaped to be between 8mm and 9mm across the top and 5.5mm to 6.5mm at the throat. Some players tie to the tube, whereas others tie over the tube. Oboists who tie over the tube do not tie tightly to the tube at the throat.

Tie and scrape processes of the reed makers are similar to modern oboe reed making. Reeds are most often tied with FF nylon thread; some are tied with polyester, silk, or EE nylon thread. Players utilize typical materials for sealing reeds including: beeswax, paradigm, Teflon tape, fish skin, nail polish, or no extra sealing method (thread alone). Some reed makers use wire to maintain openings or help with sealing. The total reed length varies greatly in part because the length of staples varies from 35mm-43mm. As with Baroque oboe, the bottom halves of staples are covered with thread rather than cork. Rather than measuring the total length of a blank, period players regularly discuss the length of the staple and the length of the lay—the point from the folded at the tip to the first wrap of the throat. The lay in a tied blank was reported as 24mm-28mm and did not correlate with staple length.

Most players employ a scrape recognizable as a close cousin of the American long scrape—tip with inverted “v” or “u” shape and long back. However, the reeds tend to feature channels of nearly uniform thickness rather than distinct windows at the top of the back, below the heart. Two players use a short scrape. Two other players reported scrapes they consider medium: there is bark at least a third of the way up the reed, and there is scraping work deeper than pith below the tip. Four oboists reported varying scrape length in accordance with needs of repertoire; these players use a medium scrape rather than a long scrape for pieces that sit high in the tessitura of the oboe.

Don't go whittling away just yet! Reeds are only one of many elements in playing. Period clarinet and recorder players, including Eric Hoerich, have advocated for greater fluency in alternate fingerings by their double reed counterparts as part of regular technique in period instrument playing. Sometimes the question is not, 'how many reeds have you made?' but 'how many fingering charts have you consulted?'

## High Note Fingerings

For oboists learning to play period instruments, high note fingerings are one of the more difficult things to understand. Initially, the long high note fingerings on Classical oboe seem wholly illogical and torturous. Since the oboe has a conical bore, it over-blows the fundamental pitch at the octave then at the fifth above that in alignment with the harmonic series (octave → fifth → fourth, etc.).<sup>11</sup> For example, if I play  $C_1$ , I can over-blow that note both to  $C_2$  and then to  $G_3$ . However, due to elements of instrument construction including holes, keys, and bore, notes above the fundamental utilize fingerings that are different than fundamental note. Although long fingerings were known since the early eighteenth century, they were

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not regularly used until the last quarter of the century.<sup>12</sup> In the study **John Abberger** recommends alternate fingerings (not shown below) in a few places where a note is approached by slur or trill.

As with all wind instruments, high notes on Classical oboe are produced by overblowing a fundamental pitch. Sometimes, a speaker key or leaking air from the first hole serve to stabilize the high note.<sup>13</sup> The high register E-flat<sub>3</sub> fingering is an over-blown A-flat<sub>1</sub> fingering. E-flat<sub>3</sub> is the second harmonic of the fundamental A-flat<sub>1</sub>. A-flat (fundamental A-flat<sub>1</sub> → first harmonic A-flat<sub>2</sub> → second harmonic E-flat<sub>3</sub>). As shown in Table 2, all of these E-flat<sub>3</sub> fingerings are based on an A-flat<sub>1</sub> fingering with a leaked first hole; other fingers are added to stabilize the pitch. Below are fingerings for E-flat<sub>3</sub>, E<sub>3</sub>, and F<sub>3</sub> given by the oboists I interviewed. Although enharmonic notes were often provided with a separate fingering (i.e. E-flat as different than D-sharp), they are treated below as equivalent. For a discussion of historical fingering charts, see **Bruce Haynes**' article "Oboe Fingering Charts, 1695-1816."<sup>14</sup> The F<sub>3</sub> (table 2) is an over-blown B-flat fingering: B-flat<sub>1</sub> → B-flat<sub>2</sub> → F<sub>3</sub>. Therefore, we expect for the fundamental note (B-flat<sub>2</sub>) to be related to the fingering for the overblown note (F). However, every fingering indicated in the questionnaire results involves an overblown G<sub>1</sub> or A<sub>1</sub> with added fingers instead of B-flat<sub>1</sub>.

A half-hole may signify the finger slightly shading the hole, covering it almost entirely (leaking only a slight bit of air), or something in between. This depends on the player, the instrument, reed setup, etc. If you are practicing notes with half-holes on a Baroque or Classical period instrument, experiment with the amount of shading on the hole. Typically, players cover the bottom part of a hole, leaking from the top, but occasionally it is useful to allow air to leak through the side of a hole instead.

NOTE	LEFT HAND			RIGHT HAND	OBOE TYPE
A-flat <sub>1</sub>	1	2	3(1/2)		<i>all</i>
E-flat <sub>3</sub>	1(1/2)	2	3	5 6	E-flat key two-key
"	1(1/2)	2	3(1/2)		E-flat key two-key
"	1(1/2)	2	3(1/2)	5	E-flat key eight-key
"	slur 1(1/2)	2	3	5	E-flat key eight-key
"	slur 1(1/2)	2	3(1/2)		E-flat key eight-key
"	slur 1(1/2)	2	3(1/2)	6	E-flat key eight-key
"	slur 1(1/2)	2	3(1/2)	5	E-flat key eight-key
"	slur 1(1/2)	2	3 A-flat key		E-flat key eight-key
A <sub>1</sub>	1	2		<i>E-flat key</i>	<i>all</i>
E <sub>3</sub>	1(1/2)	2	3	5 6	E-flat key two-key
"	1(1/2)	2	3(1/2)	5 6	E-flat key two-key
"	1(1/2)	2	3(1/2)	5 6	E-flat key eight-key
"	slur 1(1/2)	2	3 A-flat key	4(3/4) 5 6	E-flat key eight-key

NOTE	LEFT HAND			RIGHT HAND			OBOE TYPE	
<i>B-flat</i> <sub>1</sub>	1		3				<i>all</i>	
F <sub>3</sub>	1(1/2)	2	3		6	E-flat key	two-key	
"	1	2			4	E-flat key	two-key	
"	1	2			4(3/4)	5	E-flat key	eight-key
"	1(1/2)	2	3(1/2)		4	5	E-flat key	eight-key
"	1	2	3(1/2)		4(3/4)	5	E-flat key	eight-key
"	slur	1	2		4(3/4)	5	E-flat key	eight-key

Table 2. High note fingerings on Classical oboes today as reported in study conducted May-June 2016

## Performing the Quartet

Surveyed oboists offered tips for performing the quartet. Most were variations on **Geoffrey Burgess'** advice, "Leave it until you have played a good number of other works for the same instrumentation. Oboists naturally want to play this piece...but there are other works which are more typical and will give the player(s) a deeper appreciation of Mozart's composition." A succinct instruction comes from **Gonzalo Ruiz**: "if you need advice you should probably leave it alone." Regarding the high notes, "there is such an embarrassment of riches in this wonderful piece...musically the high notes are completely secondary" (**Curtis Foster**). **Luke Conklin** echoes this sentiment: "do not neglect the musicality and expression of the whole piece because you are so obsessed with nailing the high E's and F's."

With regard to editions, five oboists consult the facsimile (MS 230),<sup>15</sup> but perform from other editions including Bärenreiter, Neue Mozart Ausgabe,<sup>16</sup> Breitkopf, and International. One player performs from the facsimile alone. Another player uses the Artaria edition from 1801, one of the earliest published versions of the piece.<sup>17</sup> Several performers wrote that they regularly change articulations from what is printed on the page. Regarding the rapid sixteenth notes in the 4/4 section of movement 3 (figure 4): surveyed editions reflect most or all of the printed articulations in MS 230. However, performers regularly change these articulations by adding slurs over groups of notes or the entire passage so that it can be played rapidly and so that they reflect articulation indicated in other parts of the movement (figure 5). In the second movement, there is a fermata in m. 31. Thirteen players improvise a short cadenza or lead-in ornament. Several players write out possibilities for these lead-in ornaments after practicing improvising short cadenzas or lead-in ornaments.<sup>18</sup>

## Fight Back: Resist the Canon!

Five of these players stressed that this is one piece in a repertoire of late eighteenth-century chamber music for oboe and strings. Therefore, although the Mozart *Oboe Quartet* holds central prominence in our literature and hearts, I urge you to look at

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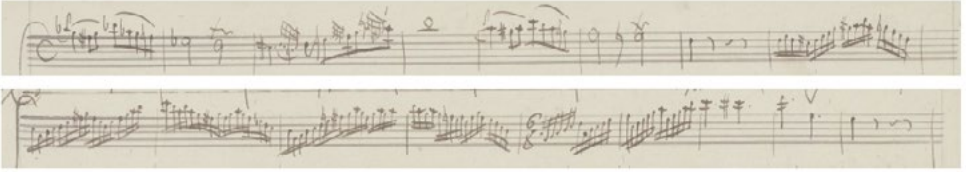


Figure 4. Mozart, quartet for oboe and strings in F, K.370/368b, third movement, mm. 100-112. MS 230, Bibliothèque nationale de France département Musique

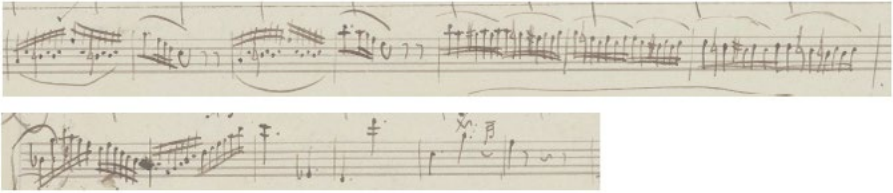


Figure 5. Mozart, quartet for oboe and strings in F, K.370/368b, third movement, mm. 139-151. MS 230, Bibliothèque nationale de France département Musique

other pieces as well. There is a wealth of literature for quartet of oboe and strings composed between 1760 and 1825 including works by: Johann Andreas Amon, Johann Christian Bach, Charles Boscha, Friedrich Dotzauer, Franz Krommer, Andreas Lidl, Carl Philip Stamitz, Johann Baptist Vanhal, Georg Druschetzky, Joseph Fiala, and Louis Massonneau. If you're looking for pieces that offer more challenging virtuosity than the Mozart quartet, **Debra Nagy** recommends exploring works by Ludwig August Lebrun.

## Conclusion

The Mozart *Oboe Quartet* is ubiquitous in oboe pedagogy and literature. Before venturing into championing it with the fervor of its original muse, Friedrich Ramm, conquer the transitional technique that is Classical oboe playing. Although this study focused on current trends of performing this piece on Classical oboe, some players in the survey performed the piece on both period and modern oboes. For several players, although the technical challenges of the piece shift when using a different tool to perform them, the interpretation remains similar. Still, other performers advocate for allowing the instrument to inform our interpretation: “the sound, the blend, the challenges of fingerings...the instruments themselves teach us so much about a period piece like the Mozart *Oboe Quartet*, and the end result is very satisfying” (**Sarah Davol**).



Thank you to the oboists who took the survey:

2 Anon.	Sarah Huebsch	Marc Schachman
John Abberger	Matthew Jennejohn	Lani Spahr
Geoffrey Burgess	Debra Nagy	William Thauer
Luke Conklin	Kristin Olsen	Joel Verkaik
Sarah Davol	Meg Owens	
Curtis Foster	Gonzalo Ruiz	

## Endnotes

- 1 For a detailed account of the history, development, and use of Classical oboe see Chapter 4 “From Classical hautboy to keyed oboe, 1760-1825” in Geoffrey Burgess and Bruce Haynes, *The Oboe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
- 2 Burgess and Haynes, *The Oboe*, 86.
- 3 A430 was not the only or even the most common pitch during this period. Bruce Haynes, *History of Performing Pitch: The Story of “A”* (Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002), 302.
- 4 For history of new added keys, see Bruce Haynes, “The Addition of Keys to the Oboe 1790-1830,” *Journal of the International Double Reed Society* No. 22 (1994), 31-46.
- 5 Haynes and Burgess, *The Oboe*, 103.
- 6 Also known as the speaker key, Schleifklappe, or hohe F-Klappe.
- 7 Pitches are shown here as C1 through F3. This indicates pitches from the bottom range of the Classical oboe (C4, or “middle C”) to the highest note documented in this study (F6). For a comprehensive list of historical fingerings, including charts F-sharp6 and G6, see Bruce Haynes, “Oboe Fingering Charts, 1695-1816.” *The Galpin Society Journal* 31 (1978): 68-93. doi:10.2307/841191.
- 8 Haynes, “Oboe Fingering Charts, 1695-1816.”
- 9 Haynes, “Mozart and the Oboe,” *Early Music* 20, no. 1 (1992): 43-63.
- 10 Philip Bate, *The Oboe: An Outline of its History, Development and Construction*, Third Edition (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1975), 18-19.
- 11 Murray Campbell and Clive Greated, *The Musician's Guide to Acoustics*, 1987 (Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 81. For discussion of harmonics (overblowing notes on modern oboe to the note an octave and a fifth above the fundamental note), see Libby Van Cleve, *Oboe Unbound: Contemporary Techniques, Revised Edition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 8.
- 12 *The Oboe*, 101.
- 13 For use of speaker holes and octave vents in playing in the high register on woodwind instruments in general, see ch. 10 “Woodwinds” in Arthur H. Benade, *Horns, Strings, and Harmony* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1960).
- 14 Haynes, Bruce. “Oboe Fingering Charts, 1695-1816.” *The Galpin Society Journal* 31 (1978): 68-93. doi:10.2307/841191.

- 15 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, "Quatuors. Hautbois, violon, alto, violoncelle, KV 368b, Fa majeur" (MS 230, 1781), Bibliothèque nationale de France département Musique, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb427264796> accessed 18 November 2016.
- 16 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Quartett in F für Oboe, Violine, Viola und Violoncello KV 370 (368b), VIII:20/2, 65 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke, ed. Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum Salzburg (Kassel, 1955–91) online [http://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/nma/nmapub\\_srch.php?!=1](http://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/nma/nmapub_srch.php?!=1), accessed 18 November 2016.
- 17 For more on Artaria, see Rupert M. Ridgewell, "Mozart and the Artaria Publishing House: Studies in the inventory ledgers, 1784-1793," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Royal Holloway, University of London, 1999). See also *Wolfgang-Amadeus Mozart, Quartour pour hautbois, violon, alto et violonelle, K. 370 (368 b) Manuscrit autographe - 1781: Édition originale - 1800*, Facsimilé Jean-Marc Fuzeau Collection Dominantes, ed. Michel Giboureau (Courlay, France: Éditions J.M. Fuzeau, 1997).
- 18 "The Fermata" in Clive Brown, *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 588-598. See also Frederick Neumann, *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).