

My Life with the Bass Oboe

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Holst, Tippett, Grainger and Delius all knew that there was something very special at the bottom of the oboe section.

I think it would be true to say that I began playing the bass oboe by accident. It all began one day when I went into Howarth's and saw a brand new Lorée instrument on display. I had often thought that I would like to try a bass oboe or heckelphone, but had never had the opportunity. After a little consideration, but with no knowledge of the instrument, no reeds and no idea how to make any, I decided to take it on approval. Several staples and some pieces of Glotin "Bass Oboe" cane were, however, provided with the instrument. I was very lucky in that I was able to borrow a couple of reeds to give it an initial blow. These reeds had been made for an old instrument which was clearly shorter than the new one, and therefore the results were rather flat, but I was able to copy them to make something which I hoped would be sharp enough.

A couple of weeks later I was working with the Halle Orchestra and their manager said "I hear you have a bass oboe; are you free on ...?" At this point I was still at a very early stage of deciding whether I really wanted to keep this instrument, but I was so excited by the challenge of having to perform on it that soon I decided to buy it. This was the beginning of many visits to Howarth's, where Graham Johnson made his usual wonderful job of tuning it for me. I am still grateful for his patience and skill.

About five weeks after buying it, I found myself playing the Tippett *Triple Concerto* (for violin, viola and cello) with the Halle, which has, perhaps, the most challenging of all the bass oboe parts. It is unusual in that it uses the 2nd octave notes of the instrument to great effect whereas, until this point in history, most bass oboe parts had been quite low — taking over below the cor anglais.

The modern bass oboe was developed by Lorée around 1890 as a bass for the oboe section. It seems to have been used at this time exclusively in Britain, where Delius wrote for it to great effect. One of the most beautiful pieces of his writing — and one of my favorite things to play — is in the *Mass of Life* where there is an exquisite trio for oboe, cor anglais and bass oboe. He also wrote some other lovely parts — in *Dance Rhapsody No. 1* and *Fennimore & Gerda* for instance — and also some very dull ones, eg. the *Requiem*.

Of course, the mainstay of the repertoire is Holst's *The Planets*, which I have played more times than I can remember. Fortunately the music is so brilliantly written that I never get bored with hearing it and I am always finding some new harmony or tone color. However, the piece does have one "unhappy" moment when the bass oboe has to come in *piano* on a bottom



CBSO Oboe Section rehearsing *Asyla* by Thomas Adès - Jonathan Kelly, Karon O'Conner, Peter Walden and Janice Knight.

**Bass Oboe Fact-file:**

Range: One octave below the oboe (but without lowest note)

First known: 1825 (Triébert and Brod)

Established: 1889

Maker: Lorée

B in Saturn after about 20 bars of very quiet music. The reed for the piece has to be made more or less around this B, so as to ensure that it will speak softly and reliably. It is always a very nerve-racking moment, especially on recording sessions when the section is often repeated over and over again. I have participated in quite a number of recordings of *The Planets* and am always pleased when Saturn is finished with.

I also have to be grateful to Holst for writing this piece since it has been the means of giving me some very interesting experiences abroad. A few years ago I was asked to play *The Planets* with the Bayerische Staatsoper orchestra in three performances in Munich. The first thing that was needed when I arrived for rehearsal was that one of my colleague oboists had to remove a few millimeters from a crook with a hack-saw so that I could get up to their pitch (A=443). I had a wonderful week in Munich, despite the freezing January weather.

Just recently I travelled to Las Palmas and Granada to do a couple of performances of the piece with the Orquesta Filharmonica de Gran Canaria, directed by their British principal conductor Adrian Leaper. It was a great privilege to be staying for two days beside the Alhambra Palace, also to have plenty of time for sightseeing in Granada and sea bathing in Las

Palmas. (I needed the shortened crook for these performances too.)

A recently revived piece of repertoire for the bass oboe is Percy Grainger's *The Warriors*, which he describes as Music to an Imaginary Ballet. It has a very big bass oboe part, including a taxing solo, accompanied by prepared piano and percussion instruments, with the unusual directions "nasal" and "snarling" and at the same time "languishing" which seems to me to be contradictory. I have already recorded the piece twice — with the Philharmonia and Elliott Gardiner and the CBSO and Rattle. It had its first Prom performance recently, which I also played, with the BBC Philharmonic and Hickox.

Some newer pieces are also being written to include the bass oboe, by composers such as Marc-Anthony Turnage and John Caskin. Much of my autumn is being spent with a new piece by Thomas Adés which I will be playing in England, Austria and Switzerland. So far I have only seen the score, and the bass oboe part begins on a top E_b — a note I don't think I've yet performed in public!

I am sometimes asked if the heckelphone is an alternative to the bass oboe, since it covers the same range. This instrument was commissioned by Wagner, who died too soon to use it, but it was taken up by R. Strauss. The two instruments are not really interchangeable (though I was once booked, accidentally, I think, to play some of *Salome* in a Prom). The bass oboe is a mellow, large cor anglais whereas the heckelphone is a much bigger-bored instrument developed by Heckel to have great fullness and power and is not really directly related to any other family of instruments. It is often now played by a bassoonist, since its reed is allied to a bassoon reed. The fingering, however, is more like oboe fingering. A few composers, e.g. Bax, have designated a part as "Bass Oboe (or Heckelphone)", but the results must be very different if the heckelphone is used.

There are a few solo bass oboe pieces; two of these were written by John Blood and Gillies Whitaker. It is also used, especially in the USA, as part of a quartet of oboes or of a wind band. However, I see it mainly as a beautiful orchestral instrument which I greatly enjoy playing and which has given me many interesting opportunities, though, regretfully, there will never be enough work to make it anything like a full-time occupation. ❖