

# A Plain and Easy Introduction to Playing the Heckelphone

or

## “Don’t HECKEL me, I’m on the PHONE!”

by Andrew Shreeves

New York, N.Y.

The telephone rings. Your favorite contractor is asking you to cover the Heckelphone parts in an upcoming concert that includes *Ameriques* by Edgar Varese, *Salome’s Dance* by Richard Strauss, and *Suite of Serenades* by Victor Herbert. A stickler for authentic instrumentation, the music director has borrowed an instrument from the Museum of Prematurely Neglected Woodwinds for the occasion. Are you available? Will you play?

Panic strikes. You dimly recall having seen a picture of a Heckelphone once, but have certainly never played one. (Do you even know anyone who has?) The technique and the reeds are things you can only imagine. What will you do?

Say yes. To help you get off to a quick start, I’d like to share some of what my experiments and my colleagues have taught me since I accepted an offer not unlike this one.

### General:

First, check the instrument to see whether the pads seal and the keys work. If it truly is from a museum (don’t laugh!) it may have suffered years, even decades of neglect. You may need to have it serviced before you can play the first note.

Even though the Heckelphone is a long instrument, it should stand straight on the floor when played. Sit on a taller chair or on extra cushions if necessary, especially if you use the floor peg. Placing the bell forward or to the right may bring the reed to the height of your embouchure, but will place additional tension on your neck or on your arms. Best not to do it.

### Reeds

Are there any reeds in the case? If so, cross your fingers and give them a try. You probably shouldn’t expect much from these reeds, since their very presence in the case argues that they were not worth keeping. On the other hand, you might be pleasantly surprised. When I began playing the Heckelphone I was given an assortment of reeds with the instrument. There were several very leaky bassoon-style reeds with electrical tape instead of conventional bindings. They didn’t play at all. There was also one English horn-style reed which, in spite of its age, played very well and got me through my first few performances. Years later, Richard Nass, English hornist of the Metropolitan Opera, told me that he played that very reed and instrument around 1950. He had hand-shaped the cane and bound it onto a brass tube custom-made for him by Hans Moennig<sup>1</sup>. Thanks for a fine reed, Dick!

When I began making my own reeds I opted for a different approach, using profiled bassoon cane and a Heckelphone shaper, mandrel, and reamer made by Heckel. These tools are relatively expensive, however, and may not be worth the investment for you if you don’t plan to play much Heckelphone.

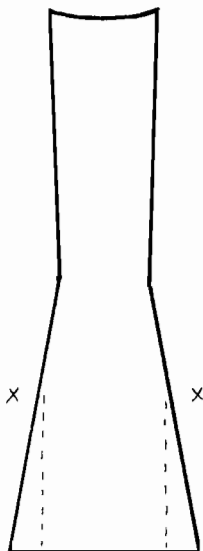
Fortunately, there are easier and less expensive ways to make good reeds. If time is short to the first rehearsal, and/or you don’t care to become too involved in reed-making, you can adapt a bassoon reed to fit onto your bocal. The Heckelphone bocal is both fatter and more abruptly tapered than the bassoon bocal, which presents a problem: enlarging the tube opening with a bassoon reamer may remove too much cane from the throat. One way to avoid this is to ream the opening until the mouth of the tube is just large enough for the bocal to enter, then enlarge the mouth and first wire areas only, using a small round file. You may find bassoon reeds altered in this way satisfactory for all your needs, especially if bassoon is your instrument. The dimensions of Heckelphone reeds which I purchased from Heckel some years ago were very like those of bassoon reeds purchased from other sources<sup>2</sup>. The main differences were a much wider throat, no middle wire, and binding extending to the top wire.

As previously mentioned, the Heckelphone can also be played with an English horn-style reed, which offers some important advantages for oboists. The blades can be scraped and adjusted using most of the same techniques and tools you use with your oboe reeds. The resulting reed performs and feels more like an oboe reed. Since forming a reed around a mandrel is fundamentally different from binding a reed onto a metal tube, you may want to ask a bassoonist colleague to help you with the following procedures<sup>3</sup>.

Begin with a piece of bassoon cane that has been shaped, profiled, and folded. If you have a choice of shapes, remember that a little wider heel dimension will make for a better fit on the Heckelphone bocal. Also, Heckel’s shaper, which I would characterize as English horn-like, measures fully 10mm. at the throat<sup>4</sup>.

Using a small diamond nail-file, or other such tool, narrow the blades so that the sides become parallel, and the tip width is 11.5-12mm. This can be done wet or dry, but should be done with the cane folded, so that both blades will be reduced at the same time. When the tip is 11.5-12mm. wide, use some very fine sandpaper (#600 or so) to smooth the end of the parallel part of the blade into the throat (marked “X” in Illustration 1). Your bassoonist friend can help you with forming the tube, placing the wires, and binding the blank. The

finished reed might be about 57-59mm., somewhat longer than an average bassoon reed. Finish the reed in your favorite style of oboe scrape. I find that my best reeds crow octave 'A's or a littler higher.



Shreeves:  
HECKELPHONE  
Illustration 1

**Mechanism and Fingerings:**

Unfortunately, not all Heckelphones were built with the full conservatory keywork familiar from the modern oboe. Many older instruments were built with simpler mechanisms<sup>5</sup> which are not simpler for the player. Depending on your instrument, you may have to do without most of the trill keys, articulated G#, and mechanical linkages between C#-D#, low B-C#, and low C-D#. In addition, your instrument will have either right-hand side keys for middle and upper C and Bb, or a split touch-plate for the right-hand first finger, one half of which is used for C and Bb, and the other half for F# and below. Finally, low Bb (and A, if your instrument

has one) is played with the right thumb, and there is usually a single automatic octave key.

The precise finger coordination required by the lack of pinky-key linkages and the presence of side keys for C and Bb greatly increases the difficulty of passages such as the following:

**SALOME**  
Scene 3



Shreeves: HECKELPHONE: Illustration 2, Part 1

**SALOME**  
Scene 4



Shreeves: HECKELPHONE, Illustration 2, Part 2

Don't let the keywork discourage you. Many of these same features are also found on the Boehm

clarinet, and clarinetists routinely triumph over the technical difficulties they present.

Old fingering charts, like the one in the Barret Oboe Method, can be useful in developing a repertoire of fingerings that work on your instrument, especially in the range above the staff. If standard oboe fingerings don't work for you in the highest register, try some of these.

A		o o ■ g#	■ o o
G#	OK	■ o o g#	■ ■ o eb
		φ o ■ g#	■ o o c
G	OK	■ o ■	o o ■ c
F#	OK	■ ■ o g#	■ o ■ c
		o ■ o g#	■ ■ ■ eb
F	OK	■ ■ o g#	■ ■ ■ eb
		■ ■ o g#	o ■ ■
E	OK	■ ■ ■ g#	■ ■ o
D#	OK	φ ■ ■ g#	■ ■ ■
		φ ■ ■ g#	o o ■
D	OK	φ ■ ■	o o ■
C#	OK	φ ■ ■	■ o ■ c#
		φ ■ ■	■ o o

■ = closed  
o = open  
φ = half-hole

Shreeves: HECKELPHONE, Illustration 3

In closing, let me leave you with what I hope will be a helpful thought. In the Heckelphone world there seem to be no distinct schools of playing, no eminent teachers, and almost nothing that can pass

for orthodoxy. In the absence of any preferred path we are free to be eclectic in finding the means to our musical ends. Any colleague may be the source or valuable advice; my favorite high register fingering was given to me by a bass saxophonist!

So, when your favorite contractor calls and asks you to play the Heckelphone, don't panic. Don't hesitate. Just say yes.

<sup>1</sup>When I inquired a few years ago, Heckel said they could supply tubes for the Heckelphone.

<sup>2</sup>The shape evident in these reeds was in marked contrast to the shaper I bought from Heckel, which is English horn-style.

<sup>3</sup>You also might want to consult a book on bassoon reed making. One that I can recommend is *Bassoon Reed Making* by Mark Popkin and Loren Glickman (Northfield, IL: The Instrumentalist Publishing Company, 1987)

<sup>4</sup>This is large by bassoon standards, but it satisfies the criterion of Popkin and Glickman, who suggest (pp. 15f) that the appropriate throat dimension equals half the circumference of the small end of the bocal plus a compression allowance of .5 to 1mm. For the smaller of my two bocals (#3) this indicates a throat dimension of 9.1 to 9.6mm., and for the larger (#4), 9.6 to 10.1mm. They also suggest (pp. 37f) that beveling the edges of the shaped cane can reduce the throat diameter of the finished reed by about 1mm., so that throats as small as 9mm. can be produced using Heckel's shaper.

<sup>5</sup>Heckel continues to offer these simpler models alongside their conservatory models.

*Andrew Shreeves, a New York oboist, has played heckelphone with the Metropolitan Opera and with the Paul Whiteman Aeolian Hall Orchestra. He is also staff Musicologist for the American Society of Composers, Authors & Publishers (ASCAP).*