

## **Strategies for Teaching Small Bassoonists: The Tenoroon** **Adam Schwalje**

The size of the bassoon is a major challenge for beginners. Smaller students simply cannot fit their fingers around the instrument. To check the hand size of students before they commit to beginning study, I suggest using a set of pvc pipes or wooden dowels, sized to the thickness of the bassoon, and with “tone holes” drilled or drawn on them. The dowels should not only check the size of the student's grasp, but also the stretch of the fingers, especially in the right hand. Students whose hands are too small for the regular bassoon should consider one of the options I describe below.

Today, most bassoonists begin on some other instrument, often clarinet. The logic for this is that, first, the clarinet is smaller and therefore can be played by younger students. Second, the clarinet uses similar fingerings as the bassoon on similar notes; for example, the bottom G's on both instruments have similar fingerings. Unfortunately, this note does not sound the same pitch on both instruments, nor does it look the same on the staff. Clarinet and bassoon are not similar in most regards. Double reed vs. single reed, treble clef vs. bass clef, different fingerings, different embouchure, all make this a less than perfect solution.

Other instruments have faced similar difficulties of size. One can scarcely picture a five-year-old playing a double bass! For string instruction, the solution is to begin students on miniature instruments. Thus, the three-year-old violin student does not play on a full-sized violin; instead, his or her violin is one-sixteenth or even one-thirty-second the size of a normal instrument. As the student grows, size of the instrument is also increased, until full size is reached.<sup>1</sup>

The situation for wind instruments is more problematic. While smaller string instruments can be constructed in such a way as to make their pitches equal to those of their full-size counterparts, reducing the length of wind instruments necessarily changes their pitch. The solution for the flute has

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Ward, “It’s a Small World,” *Strings* 21, no. 7 (Feb 2007): 94-95.

been modification of as many elements as possible without shifting the instrument's key, resulting in the curved headjoint and elimination of the bottom notes in Jupiter's Prodigy flute model.

A similar option for bassoon is the short-reach instrument. These are available through Fox Products, and have slightly modified keywork for those students who are uncomfortable with the reach required on the larger instrument. Short-reach instruments are generally just as expensive as their full-sized counterparts, but provide the advantage of playing at the same pitch as the standard bassoon. The



*Fig 1: Quart bassoon, quint bassoon, and octave bassoon. Photo courtesy Guntram Wolf. Used with permission.*

amount of benefit derived, though, is minimal: short-reach instruments are only suitable for those beginners whose hands are very nearly large enough for the full-sized bassoon.

For even smaller beginners, I suggest using a smaller-sized and higher-pitched bassoon. Bassoons of different sizes have been manufactured since the time of the Renaissance bassoon consort. As in similar ensembles of recorders, bassoons came in many sizes and keys.<sup>2</sup> Modern manufacturers still make three of these instruments, besides the modern bassoon: from largest to smallest, the quart bassoon in F, the quint bassoon in G, and the octave bassoon in C. There is also a French-system basson being manufactured in E-flat.

Collectively, these small bassoons are called “tenoroons,” “fagottinos,” or “mini-bassoons” (see Fig. 1).

My research, undertaken through a grant from the University of Colorado at Boulder, indicates that in the case of the bassoon, the size problem can be successfully remedied by use of the tenoroon. I

---

<sup>2</sup> William Waterhouse, *The Bassoon* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2003), 30.

was able to start an elementary-school aged child, who was otherwise too small to play the bassoon, on the quint bassoon. She participated in band, weekly lessons, and played in group lessons and recitals. After the grant period of one year, she switched to a standard-sized bassoon. She experienced a very quick adjustment period and no loss of ability on the larger instrument.

The practice of starting bassoon instruction at young ages is not widespread in the United States, though in Europe use of the mini-bassoon is becoming more common due to the marketing efforts of tenoroon makers like the German manufacturer, Guntram Wolf and the British woodwind company, Howarth of London. Europeans have already begun to accept the tenoroon: its use is specifically sanctioned in the 2006 Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) syllabus for instrumental exams.<sup>3</sup> Using the tenoroon has also proven to be successful in Germany for students as young as age six.<sup>4</sup> Students who are able to begin bassoon as young as six years of age, regardless of method, might be expected to perform at a much higher level than the student who begins bassoon at twelve or fourteen years of age, but the potential effects of large-scale tenoroon instruction on the bassoon students and music programs of Europe remain to be studied.

For purposes of teaching, the octave bassoon, while perhaps most desirable for its smallest size, is, with current manufacturing processes, too unstable in pitch. The quint bassoon, which will fit most six-year-olds comfortably, is most useful. These instruments cost approximately half of what a bassoon costs, at around US \$2500.<sup>5</sup> It is possible that with increased demand, the price would decrease over time. And since, in the United States, the bassoon has traditionally been given to students by school

---

<sup>3</sup> Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, *Bassoon Complete Graded Examination Syllabus* [online]; available from <http://www.abrsm.org/resources/bassoonSyllabusComplete08.pdf>; Internet; accessed 23 March 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Heide Bönig, „Schon ab 6? Das Fagottino im frühinstrumentalen: Unterricht Methodisch-didaktischer Vergleich von drei Unterrichtskonzepten“ (“As early as six years of age? Teaching fagottino to young children: A comparative study of three teaching approaches for their methodological and didactic conceptualization”) (Degree dissertation, Hochschule für Musik und Theater „Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy“ Leipzig, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> This is the cost of Miller Marketing’s quint bassoon, which is widely available in the United States.

music programs, it is my hope that the usefulness of the tenoroon will cause it to be supplied in the same way.

These instruments have modern keywork and bore design, and can use a regular bassoon reed. The reed is slightly more effective with some minor modifications: a shorter reed with a narrower shape gives a range from the instrument's low Bb (Bb1 on the modern bassoon) to high Bb (Bb4 on the modern instrument). This compares with a top note of G4 or A4 on an unmodified reed. Articulation in the high register is also predictably improved with these modifications. The range limitations slightly impact use of the tenoroon, but only for teaching the most advanced young students: one would hope that by the time students are ready to learn the notes C5 and D5 and up, they will be playing on a full-sized instrument.

Fingerings are the same between the Heckel-system bassoon (which is the system used in most places outside of France) and the Heckel-system tenoroon, with two main exceptions. First, there is no whisper key on many quint bassoon models, which instead use an always-open vent in the bocal. The instruments have an immovable peg where the whisper key would normally sit. This could be replaced with a moving key to encourage use of the whisper key where appropriate; otherwise, the student is likely to not use the whisper key at all. The second fingering difference is for the notes F#1 and F#2 – on the tenoroon, these notes must be played with the low F key depressed. While this fingering will work on the modern bassoon, the low F key is not required. The habit produced by using the low F key is not detrimental, and will probably be extinguished over the course of study on the full-sized instrument.

The transition from smaller-sized instruments to larger sizes is surprisingly easy. By the time students are ready to switch, the smaller instrument should be too small – students' hands will actually be more comfortable on a larger instrument. I have had the opportunity to switch one nine-year old girl from the quint bassoon to the full-size version. The transition was smooth, and she regained her

previous level of playing within two weeks. That is not to say that all transitions will be so smooth, but the challenges involved are more akin to switching to a different model of instrument (finding where the keys are, feeling the new balance) than specific issues related to the tenoroon to bassoon switch.

There is, of course, no band method book for the tenoroon. The quint bassoon is in the key of G, so that including the tenoroon in the concert band only requires a tenor saxophone part. Quint bassoon students can use the same trick to play tenor saxophone music that bassoonists use to play alto saxophone music: put it in bass clef, add three flats, and otherwise read the music as it is written. So, if the tenor sax part has a printed C (concert B-flat), the tenoroon student will play an Eb (also concert B-flat). This method is relatively straightforward, but students will need extra attention when reading accidentals.

The diagram illustrates the transposition process for a tenor saxophone part. It consists of three staves of music in 4/4 time, all in the key of B-flat major (three flats).  
1. The top staff, labeled "tenor saxophone reads", is in a treble clef. The notes are G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5.  
2. The middle staff, labeled "quint bassoon reads", is in a bass clef. The notes are G3, A3, Bb3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.  
3. The bottom staff, labeled "both sound", is in a treble clef. The notes are G3, A3, Bb3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.  
Vertical lines connect the notes across the staves to show their alignment. The first two staves are separated by a brace on the left, and the bottom staff is also bracketed on the left.

Tenoroon students can use any bassoon method, as long as the teacher is cognizant of the few differences noted above. Piano and duet parts should be transposed to the correct pitch. I have developed a curriculum designed specifically for tenoroon or bassoon students, which is available from [http://www.woodwindvoices.com/adam/projects\\_bsnMethod.htm](http://www.woodwindvoices.com/adam/projects_bsnMethod.htm).

Using the tenoroon to teach small bassoon students is a logical development in bassoon

pedagogy. Its use will allow more students to begin studying bassoon at an earlier age by reducing issues of size and cost. Though the tenoroon is not yet available from the corner music store, the following list of manufacturers can provide instruments throughout the world.

**LIST OF HECKEL SYSTEM MINI-BASSOON MANUFACTURERS AND DISTRIBUTORS:**

<p>Howarth of London 31 Chiltern Street London W1U 7PN England <b>020 7935 2407</b> www.howarth.uk.com</p>	<p>Mini-Bassoon PLUS+ (key of G) £1,936.17 excl VAT Tenoroon (key of F) £2,038.30 excl VAT</p>
<p>Mr Guntram Wolf Im Ziegelwinkel 13 D-96317 Kronach Germany <b>0049-9261-506790</b> www.guntramwolf.de</p>	<p>Fg 8 plus (key of C) € 1.743,70 excl VAT Fg 5 plus (key of G) € 2.420,15 excl VAT Fg 4 plus (key of F) € 2.588,25 excl VAT</p>
<p>Miller Marketing Co., Inc. P.O. Box 822 Wayne, PA 19087 USA <b>1-610-278-5017</b> www.millermarketingco.com</p>	<p>Bassetto model B95 and B98 (key of G) approx. \$2500</p>

*Adam Schwalje is the full-time second bassoonist and contrabassoonist with the Macau Orchestra, and teaches at the Macau Conservatory. He has earned the DMA from Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM), and the BM and MM degrees from the University of Colorado at Boulder.*