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[Articles](#) - Playing the E flat Clarinet

Playing the piccolo or to use its other name, the E flat clarinet, can be unpleasant experience!

There is some debate as to whether one should think of the E flat as a piccolo, i.e. little clarinet, or as an extension of the normal clarinet family. To clarify, should the sound of E flat be small scale or try to match the rest of the clarinets? You can decide for yourself, much of the repertoire for the E flat is written at high dynamic levels implying that composers intend it to have its own voice.(Excerpts Shos 6 Rite Mahler 1) This can make the Eflat player rather unpopular with any nearby colleagues.

In an orchestral context, the E flat is often playing with the real piccolo in at the same pitch, well nearly!

Intonation is probably the most important aspect of playing any instrument, but especially the E Flat.

There are many issues that affect this.

Choice of instrument is critical, there are many variations and it would be wrong to mention any specific make or model, however there are some real bargains to be had at the lower end of the market from some of the better Chinese instruments.

Make sure that you use your ears and a tuning machine to select the right one for you. You are unlikely to find any clarinet which plays really in tune at all dynamic levels, but try to find one that has the compromises that you can either have worked on by a specialist repairer, or that you think will be manageable.

It is absolutely critical that there is a complete air tight seal for the E flat to work at all, make sure any instruments you try have been properly set up. Buying from a major dealer should make sure that this will be the case.

Many players look for an instrument with the best sound, but in reality,

the tuning can be the most important aspect of selecting an instrument.

The mouthpiece can affect the tuning and sound quality massively. A good mouthpiece can make a bad instrument sound good, but a bad mouthpiece will make a good instrument sound bad. Try to have a reasonable choice and look for something that is not too open, as the Eflat requires less amplitude of the reed to produce the best results.

In a previous review the Vandoren Klassik ligature (German style) was mentioned as being the only ligature that can be used on both Bflat and E flat equally well, do try it for yourself. Using other reeds on the E flat, perhaps the Vandoren White Master clarinet reed, can work very well.

Try to play an Eflat for some time before you purchase one as it does take time to adjust to is idiosyncratic behaviour.

Many players find the pitching of notes something of a problem. This may be because we all build in the expected pitch and sound of notes on our regular Bflat, which is confusing when the expected note doesn't emerge! Knowing where the note should be in your head before playing it is an important musicianship skill that we should all aspire to possess. Many of the problems associated with the ancillary clarinets are a result of our mis-pitching.

The approach to producing the right air stream is critical on the Eflat. This is too large an area to be covered fully here, but in essence aim to have a fast stream of air that can be altered according to the register you are playing in, the higher the faster!

A lack of control of the air stream can result in what can be described as random harmonicking, or to put it another way, squeaks, and on the E flat there will be no hiding!

The symphonic repertoire is a rich source of material for the Eflat player and can be used for practice by even the less experienced player.

One of the most straight forward excerpts, and most difficult, is the solo from Ravel's Bolero. The notes are not too difficult at first, but to play this solo well, in tune and in time is quite a challenge. Add in the exact dynamics and accents and there is several weeks work here.

There is a good reason why this solo is always on the orchestral extract list for auditions, it is very revealing.

Another such moment comes at the end of the first movement of Mahler's 9th Symphony, where the Eflat, after blowing at some very loud dynamics, is left on its own in decreasing dynamics that test the nerves of the very best players, one of the scariest moments in the entire clarinet repertoire.

All of the excerpts that have been mentioned so far are included in the Peter Hadcock orchestral excerpts book published by.....a useful addition to any clarinet players library as it offers some suggested fingerings. These may or may not work depending on your instrument, you will need to learn some alternative fingerings, for example most E flats will need the top F venting with the right hand sliver/forked F# key. Top D# will need several alternatives depending on the context, think of it as a brain workout.

As the Eflat spends a lot of time playing with the piccolo and higher strings, it might necessary to be a little sharper than you would normally especially as the piccolo goes sharper when played loud and the clarinet does the opposite.

My personal exercise for the Eflat consists of playing as much of the time as possible in the upper register without the register key. This forces you to use the correct air speed and helps create a true legato. Try it on the clarinet too, you will be amazed how much it can improve your playing.

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