

The Contrabassoon

Welcome to the wonderful world of the contrabassoon! An exciting world it is, with lots to learn. Here are some tips for getting the best experience with a contrabassoon, along with some references if you'd like to study its history and playing ability further.

Planning ahead is the name of the game with the contrabassoon—it's not easy to store, move, set up, or play, and it deserves special care since it is rare, fragile, and expensive. Most times, bassoonists are asked to "double"—which means it will take more time to gather, transport, AND set up both instruments and their stands. I often get to rehearsal about 20 minutes early just to make sure I'm ready to go. The most important thing to know is that the Contrabassoon is NOT a bassoon, though it has similar qualities and timbre. Differences include:

- Fingerings
- Tone production
- Reed
- Intonation adjustment
- Assembly & Maintenance
- Technical ability and range

Instruments

Every single contrabassoon you play throughout your life will be different. This is probably the most interesting factor—just because it is manufactured by the same company doesn't mean it will play the same way, or have the same intonation and technical tendencies. The shaping and placement of keys differs between bassoon manufacturers, which makes switching to a new instrument very challenging! For example, the nature of the middle E \flat fingering creates the absolute need for an alternate E \flat key. This alternate key is sometimes placed as a RH "side key" that you press with your pointer finger knuckle, and sometimes it is placed as a thumb key above the B \flat key. The most popular instruments are made by Fox, since they produce the highest quality "rumble" that professional players look for. Other popular manufacturers are Mollenhauer, Puchner, Wolf, and Heckel. The issue with lower cost contrabassoons is usually they are made similarly to bassoons in theory—so they play like bassoons, which means they don't get as much resonance, projection, or depth of sound. Good contrabassoons today, even used ones, range from \$30,000 to \$40,000. Most professionals come to own their own contrabassoon if they specialize in it, but not until further into their career. Professional orchestras always own their own instruments, as do most larger universities and some smaller private ones.

Fingerings

This is the most fundamental part of the contrabassoon. Most fingerings are closely related to bassoon fingerings, but since the contrabassoon does not have any open holes, we rely on different keys to act as octave keys, resonance keys, and stability keys. Stability is a huge topic on the contrabassoon—if you play through B \flat Major scale on the contrabassoon with regular bassoon fingerings, you'll find some notes don't transfer (like half-hole G and middle E \flat), some notes will be wildly out of tune, and once you get up into the higher register, the fingerings just don't work. Make sure when you are learning that you are actively seeking out the help of a fingering chart (or multiple ones!) and experimenting with the options they give you in reference to the piece you are working on, or key area you are in.

The Reed

The contrabassoon reed is visibly almost double the size of a normal bassoon reed. For this reason, it's extremely important to carry a water cup with you when you play the contrabassoon—they take about a minute to soak, and will dry out while you wait through ridiculous amounts of rests. The best reeds are made by professional contra players. Some recommendations for reeds are Mark Ortwein in Indianapolis, Norbert Nielubowski in Minneapolis, Bocal Majority Store in Texas, and GoBassoon.com (Dr. Leigh Munoz, in Tennessee).

The Fast System

The problems of the fingering system for any note above the C on top of the staff provided an opportunity for Arlen Fast, a professional contrabassoonist with an experimental idea. Essentially, he drilled 5 extra holes in the metal tube of the contrabassoon (this tube leads to the bocal) and connected current fingerings to these holes, as well as added a new key to facilitate better intonation and response of the higher fingerings. The Fast System is not necessarily default on new contrabassoons, but it provides for more possibilities. [More about the Fast System can be found here.](#)



Regular LH Thumb & metal piping



Fast System LH Thumb & metal piping

Tone Production

It's important to remember that the contrabassoon is NOT a bassoon. This means the tone production (and breathing) will be totally different. The contrabassoon uses WAY more air than most wind instruments (comparable to the B \flat Contrabass Clarinet), and the music you'll play reflects that setback, with rests popping up every 2-8 bars, depending on the tempo. If you are ever faced with a passage that surpasses your ability to continue producing sound with your air, find a creative place to breathe, or ask the conductor for some help, especially around fermatas. As for tone production, focus more on warm, open air than ever before. The voicing of the contrabassoon is ALWAYS "OHHHHH". You might find moving back to the bassoon after playing contra that you are WAY better at playing low notes. The key to contra = LOTS OF AIR + RELAXED, OPEN THROAT. Before I play a big concert or rehearsal, I'll do breathing exercises similar to a free diver to increase my oxygen capacity and keep my lungs ready for movement.

Intonation and Adjustment

The contrabassoon has a wonderful addition: a tuning slide! On the bottom half of the instrument between the two wooden pieces, you'll find a metal U-shaped slide with a handle of some sort on it, usually a ring. This is how you tune a contrabassoon! Tuning depends on the combination of the reed, embouchure, fingerings, the bocal, and of course the tuning slide. It's extremely hard to get a tuner to hear the low notes of the contrabassoon, so it's better to tune to a piano in a practice room, or the bassoonist sitting next to you in rehearsal. The trick is: if you think you're in tune, you're probably a bit sharp, and you'll be sharper as rehearsal goes on. ***Intonation is to be constantly maintained by the player throughout rehearsals and concerts.*** The large amount of time we spend sitting through Tacet movements, or doubling on bassoon, causes concern for temperature changes in the instrument, which causes the intonation to change. Usually music will be written in a way so that you can adjust as you go during rests, and you'll get used to this through experience. Don't ever trust the setting of the tuning slide when you take it out of the case, especially if multiple people are using it at a time.

Assembly

The instrument is set up in one piece, so you don't have to do much assembling there. The bocal is still separate, but needs cork grease just like a bassoon bocal would. Make sure you have it with you! Every contrabassoon comes with some sort of adjustable pin fitted with a rubber stopper to adjust the height of the instrument, like a cello or a bass clarinet. When adjusting the pin, make sure to be aware of your surroundings. Lay the contrabassoon upside down on your lap (bell down) and adjust the pin as needed. This might require some experimentation with different chair heights!

Maintenance

When something seems off, it's best to make sure you're taking the contrabassoon to a reputable contrabassoon repair tech. Make sure to ask questions and make sure they know what they're doing before you have them repair things. If you are in doubt about an issue, consult a professional bassoonist with contra experience. The tuning slide can be greased anew with simple Vaseline, but should ALWAYS be wiped clean before applying new grease. Wipe it off with a paper towel, or use a bit of Naptha to remove residue.

After playing, every player should empty the tuning slide by sliding it off completely (carefully), dumping the spit, and sliding it back on (carefully!) The metal can dent easily, so make sure not to drop the U-tube, or force it back in. Take your time!

Resources on Contrabassoon:

[A Bundle of Joy](#) by Maarten Vonk, ISBN 9077204474

[Woodwind Instruments and their History](#) by Anthony Baines, ISBN 0486268853

[The Bassoon and Contrabassoon](#) by Lindesay Langwill, ISBN 9780393336627

[The Contra-Bassoon: A Guide to Performance](#) by Cornelia Biggers

[Test Pieces for Orchestral Auditions \(Edition Peters\)](#): Bassoon/Contrabassoon

["The Bassoon" Series Vol. VI: The Contrabassoon](#) by Werner Seltmann and Gunter Angerhofer