

Alternate Oboe Fingerings: A means to improved technique, intonation and timbre through the “ears” of Dr. Alvin Koenig Fossner

By Lisa S. Silver
Riverdale, NY

Although the bassoon has voluminous fingering possibilities, its double reed relative, the oboe, has numerous fingering possibilities in comparison to the flute, clarinet and saxophone. In the case of the oboe, many of the alternate fingerings are much more than just a physical rearrangement of the fingers for a fast or difficult passage.

When appropriately used, alternate fingerings can actually improve intonation. This has strong pedagogical implications for advanced students of the oboe: they can choose the fingering that provides the best intonation and/or timbre for the situation at hand. This makes the oboe unique among the woodwinds. Dr. Fossner noted in his 1999 interview that although the clarinet has alternate fingerings, with the alternate fingerings on "the oboe - we're talking about a different timbre - a different intonation". (1999, p. 26) This article is only a glimpse of some of the important possibilities that exist for the orchestral and solo literature. It is hoped that these examples from the past will provide important tools for oboists/pedagogues, composers and conductors searching for the ideal sound in a given musical context.

Dr. Alvin Koenig Fossner, both a respected professional oboist/woodwind performer and pedagogue, did extensive research on the mechanics of woodwind instruments manufactured after 1860 for his 1969 doctoral dissertation at Teachers College, Columbia University. As part of his research he had access to the instrument collection of oboe manufacturer Alfred Laubin. (1969, p. iv) Dr. Fossner's depth of understanding of woodwind instrument design and his extensive performance experience make him an outstanding resource in this area, both through his writings and as an interview subject. The author of this article is grateful for both his practical insights into alternate fingerings on the oboe, as well as his informed historical perspective. Dr. Fossner was interviewed in person at Teachers College, Columbia University by Lisa Silver in March of 1999. Excerpts from that live interview have been edited slightly for ease of reading. A fingering chart from Dr.



Dr. Alvin K. Fossner

Fossner is attached for ease of reference.

Some of the examples below are in specific tonal contexts. (See the attached fingering chart for the numbered examples.)

AF: ...the intonation, depends on the particular context, if the note is a leading tone in a particular tonality or whether it's a third in a tonality. The pitch is different. ... So some of these fingerings do make a big difference. ... And students should learn how to apply them themselves. Every once in a while, during a lesson with Gillet ... He'd say, "That next phrase [in the new etude assigned], you bring it in next week. Show me what you can do." And the idea was for me to apply all the things that he had been doing [demonstrating in the lesson], the general principles that I was supposed to have learned and then see if I could apply them to the new etude on my own. ... that's something nice to do with a student once in a while. (1999, pp. 10-11)

Some of these fingerings are pretty clear to use, but some need a little explanation. (1998, p. 1)

1) A darker B-natural when going from third space C to third line B, especially in G major: "...I just add the G# key to the C[fingering]. It makes a duller, darker B, a little flat, which is perfect in G major or when I want the note to fade away." (1998, p. 1 and 1999, p. 10)

2) A "fuller, sharper C". (1998, p. 1)

3) "...handy when slurring down from a high

Fingering Examples

1. F# (1) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12

2. G (2) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12

3. A# (3) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12

4. B# (4) fingering: 1st oct. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12 Eb

5. C (5) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12 2nd oct.

6. D# (6) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12 2nd oct. Eb

7. E (7) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12 2nd oct.

8. F (8) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12 2nd oct.

9. G# (9) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12 2nd oct.

10. A (10) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12 2nd oct. F

11. B# (11) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12 1st oct.

12. C# (12) fingering: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12 2nd oct. C

© 1998 Dr. A.K. Fossner

C#." (1998, p.1)

4) "...an F-sharp on the top line... in G, you want it higher. ...in the key of D, sometimes you want it lower. ...the Eb-key, with the pinky on the right, brings the pitch down. And I do that a lot because [of] the context of the tonality, where the note lies within the scale." (1999, p. 11)

In addition to Dr. Fossner's indication for the F#, Sprenkle and Ledet (1961) point out that "Eb key may be added for resonance" to the F-natural on the top line of the treble clef staff. (p.

38)

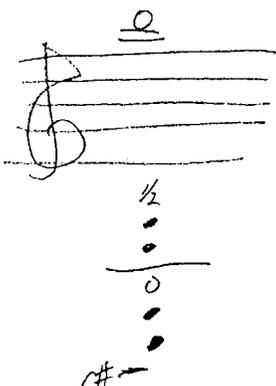
5 & 6) "I use #5 a lot". It is a harmonic A and is very secure and in-tune. The same thing goes for the Bb in #6." (1998, p.1)

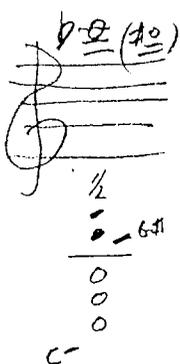
7) "I find that the B in #7 is much fuller and more secure than a regular B. It also is a nice easy way to get to B from an A#." (1998, p.1)

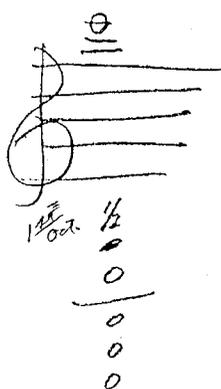
8) "...gives a fatter high C." (1998, p.1)

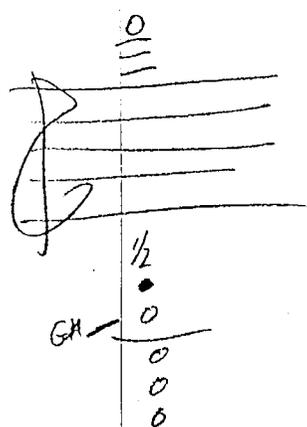
9) "... a terrific high C. When I have to play the note pp or match the high C of a flute it is a real life saver." (1998, p. 1)

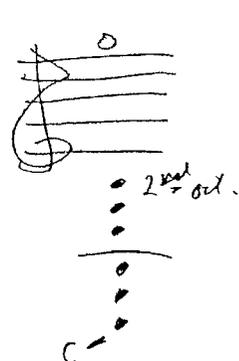
10) "...high C is a harmonic fingering that

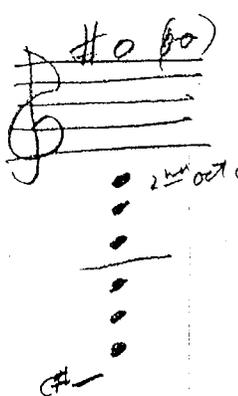
13. 

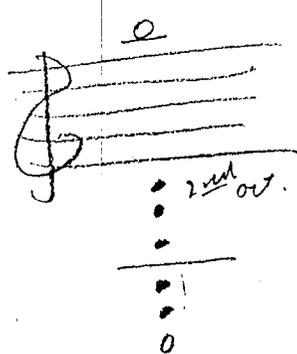
14. 

15. 

16. 

17. 

18. 

19. 

OBOE HARMONICS - AL LAURIN
ALL WITH 2nd OCTAVE KEY



SP = SPATULA KEY BETWEEN 1st + 2nd FINGERS

B \flat = HEAD DOWN SMALL KEY THAT MAKES B \flat (WITH 3rd FINGER) (tone hole)

© 1998 Dr. A.K. Fosshner

slurs well from the harmonic B, but does not always attack securely." (1998, p.1)

11) "...is a good high C# in a fast passage with big slurs down to low C#." (1998, p. 1)

12) "...is the C# that Gomberg [New York

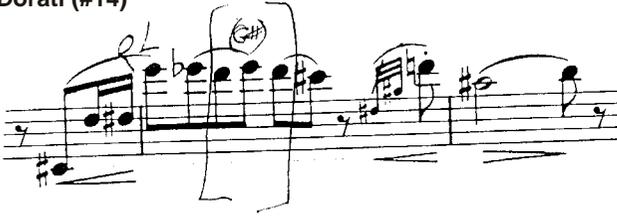
Philharmonic] had his students use. It is the best C# on the oboe - very full and stable. I do not use it in technical passages, but if I have to come in on the note, or sustain it, it works great!" (1998, p.1)

Fingering Examples

Doráti (#13)



Doráti (#14)



Goossens (#15)



13) "You [the author] have used #13 [on the downbeat of m. 11 in *La cigale et la fourmie* from *Cinq Pièces pour le Hautbois* by Doráti]. It is the only way secure way to slur up to a high D. It is also a solid high D to attack." (1998, p. 1)

14) "...is the high D fingering with the G# key added. English oboists always use this Eb." (1998, p. 1) Author's note: This is very convenient on beat 2 of m. 17 of the above piece when the oboist must move rapidly from high D to Eb and back again.

15 & 16) "I have shown you [these]. They are good high E and high F fingerings. They come in very handy in fast technical passages." (1998, p. 2) Author's note: This high E fingering works especially well in the Goossens *Concerto Cadenza* when slurring from high D to high E in the second nontuplet of the *rapido* section. (The "chord" could be thought of as a C^{9#5}).

17) "...a harmonic G that I use frequently when I want to play that high G softly, without having the note drop off on me." (1998, p. 2)

18) "...also a harmonic fingering that works quite well in soft passages." (1998, p. 2)

19) "...the regular harmonic fingering for high B." (1998, p. 2)

What follows is an explanation of Al Laubin's oboe harmonics with the second octave key that are "boxed off" on the chart.

... [these] were given to me by Al Laubin many years ago. Nora Post had never seen them and was anxious to get a copy for herself. Al used them when tuning the upper register when he made an oboe. They are based on the harmonic fingerings used in the Classical 5 key oboe. They are very stable and very in tune. When he adjusted the regular tone holes to match these fingerings, the horn was in tune. (1998, p. 2)

Dr. Fossner included an explanation of the fingering indications in the "box".

There is a little spatula alongside the 1st finger on [the] top joint. You slide the finger across and hold both the first plateau key and the spatula with the same first finger. You also have to hold down the small pad that makes the Bb with the left-hand third finger. Lifting up that third finger lets the note go from A to Bb. You use the same spatula key for the B fingering and lifting the fifth finger raises the B to C." (1998, p. 2)

In conclusion, Dr. Fossner advises consistent practice of these fingerings in musical contexts: not just as "isolated" fingering exercises. He said that with most of his students, they study with him three to four years before feeling secure enough to choose alternate fingerings. (1999, p.16)

...the thing with alternate fingerings is this, if you know them, and you know they're available, and that's it, they don't really help you very much. ...You have to practice. So when you practice through an etude, if there are two or three fingerings available for a note, play it through once with one fingering and play it through with another fingering. Get comfortable. So when the situation comes up, uh, it works. Otherwise, it just adds another complexity. The ones [on the attached chart] are ones that, uh, are pretty useful that I use. (1999, pp. 3-4) After a certain

amount of time... you know all the combinations that are available for the notes. Don't trap yourself into using only one all the time. You know, at a certain point, you're free of the teacher. ...You do what's comfortable for you. (pp. 15-16).

And with my students, ...after a while, [they] become aware that I tell them to do the same thing in the same kind of situation. And after a while, I notice, I'm not telling them anymore. (p. 17)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Benade, A.H. "On the Mathematical Theory of Woodwind Finger Holes." *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 32: 12 (December, 1960), 1591-1608.

_____. "On Woodwind Instrument Bores." *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 31: 2 (February, 1959), 137-146.

Fossner, A.K. Fingering chart of alternate oboe fingerings and harmonics with accompanying explanation. Haworth, NJ: November 4, 1998.

_____. "Significant Changes and Improvements in Certain Woodwind Instruments Since 1860." Unpublished Ed.D. Dissertation. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1969. Typewritten.

Green, E.A.H. (1987). *The Dynamic Orchestra: Principles of Orchestral Performance for Instrumentalists, Conductors and Audiences*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Jackson, M. "The Oboe: A Study of Its Development and Use." Unpublished Ed.D. Dissertation. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1962. Typewritten.

Silver, L.S. Fingering notations from oboe lessons with Dr. Alvin Koenig Fossner on Goossens' *Concerto* and Doráti's *Cinq Pieces pour le Hautbois*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, October 1998 - March 1999.

_____. Taped interview of Dr. Alvin Koenig Fossner. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, March 22, 1999.

Sprenkle, R. and Ledet, D. (1961). *The Art of Oboe Playing*. Princeton, NJ: Summy-Birchard Music.

About the Author ...

Lisa Silver is in the doctoral program in Music and Music Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Goossens *Concerto* excerpt reprinted with the kind permission of Leduc; Dorati *Cinq Pieces* excerpt reprinted with the kind permission of Boosey & Hawkes.