

Choosing a Bassoon: Heckel, Fox, and Sundry Others

It can be very confusing to choose a bassoon. It can also be costly and nerve wracking (mostly because it's costly). Below are some slightly biased suggestions on what you should purchase with what you have.

If you have **unlimited funds** you should consider purchasing a **Heckel**. As to which one, that is more difficult to answer.

Modern Heckel bassoons are costly and heavy. A new one will also need to be played in, which means you will pay a lot and not know what its true voice is for about a year. New Heckel bassoons also often need adjusting once they arrive on your side of the pond, which costs more money and time. There is also usually a waiting list, so do not expect a brand new bassoon to show up on your doorstep a week after you order. The upside to all of this is that you get the modern Heckel sound...and you have a NEW HECKEL! Now those are some bragging rights!

The **Heckel Crest** is a slightly less expensive alternative to the modern Heckel. Instead of being constructed by a single highly skilled craftsman, the Crest is made in a more assembly-line-like fashion. This makes it slightly cheaper. Some people like them, some people don't. The Crest is subject to all of the issues mentioned above: price, necessary adjustments, playing in, and wait time.

The more common route followed by those who purchase a Heckel bassoon is to buy a **historical Heckel**. ("Historical" is simply the word used here to differentiate between *new* and *used* Heckel bassoons.) There is nothing wrong with playing an older instrument. In fact, the benefits are so numerous that the majority of American players opt for the historical option. One benefit is that the instrument is usually already played in (unless it has been sitting in a closet for years—it happens), so you already know what it sounds like. What you hear is what you get. This means that there are no surprises when it comes to sound.

Heckel bassoons from different time periods tend to have different characteristics, so you have a wide variety of options as far as tone color goes. Do your research into what series (they go by thousands: 7000, 8000 series, etc.) may best suit your needs. Do keep an open mind, though, since each series has its gems as well as its clunkers. If a bassoon older or newer than the one you were looking for has a great sound, then it has a great sound! Historical Heckel bassoons tend to be a lot like people: even though each one is unique, most of them fall into the overarching realm of normal. Like people though, there are also the rare supermodels as well as the occasional Gollum.

The downside of searching for the perfect historical Heckel is that you have to wait until someone is selling. Each year there are many Heckels for sale, but there is no guarantee that you will find the one you need. When they do go up for sale, they are often far away. Some people will ship them out for trial (cash on demand, typically)

but many other people require you to come to them. NEVER BUY A USED HECKEL YOU HAVE NEVER PLAYED! Sometimes people expect top dollar for a bassoon simply because it was made by Heckel. Truth be told, there are a lot of Heckels out there that are not worth the money.

Historical Heckels will come in all states of repair. Many have been recently serviced and their advertisements will usually say so. Others will need work as soon as they are purchased. One can usually haggle a bit off of the price if a bassoon is going to need extensive work. Pads or finger tubes may need to be replaced, the bore may need oiled, or the mechanism may need to be modernized. When purchasing an older instrument, do keep in mind the extra cost of making it playable to your standards. Also keep in mind that a dry bassoon will play and sound different from one that is well maintained. Purchasing such a bassoon can be risky, but it can also be very well worth the risk.

Also consider the bocals. Are there one or more included? If so, are they quality? Will you need to purchase a new bocal to match your new instrument? It is commonly accepted that all “pre-war” bassoons and many “post-war” bassoons are best matched with “pre-war” bocals. As there is a finite amount of Heckel bocals made before WWII, the price for a “pre-war” is significantly higher than the price for a modern bocal.

Heckels can be found for sale on a few different websites. A good site to check regularly is the IDRS (International Double Reed Society) forum, open to the public through www.idrs.org. Word of mouth is also extremely important in the small community of bassoonists, so keep in touch with people “in the know.” The annual IDRS conference is also a great place to try instruments for sale, as people come from all over—many with the express purpose of selling a bassoon. Additionally, Heckel bassoons have been seen advertized in the IDRS’s *The Double Reed*, as well as in the AFM’s monthly magazine.

When looking for a historical Heckel, exercise patience. This is a huge investment. Do not settle for an instrument about which you have serious reservations.

If you have slightly less money to work with or if you, like me, truly enjoy their sound, a solid bet would be a **Fox** (though any prudent and thorough shopper should also check out the beautiful instruments made by Moosmann, Püchner, and Yamaha). Fox’s bassoons have become stronger decade by decade and are today among the most uniformly dependable bassoons on the market. I have few qualms recommending someone purchase a new instrument from this company. It is also perfectly acceptable to purchase a used Fox horn from the past fifteen years or so, provided it is in good condition and you play it before purchasing. This is especially true of the student models: the Fox Renard line has been a quality instrument for some time. On the professional end of the spectrum, many people like the very newest instruments.

Fox is constantly working to improve their product, so a professional bassoon made just last year will often possess a noticeably better tone quality than one produced two decades ago. Fox bassoons are also like people: each one is unique. However, Fox tends to produce more consistently normal people...I mean bassoons.

The downside of buying a Fox instead of a Heckel is that you will never get the "Heckel sound." A good Fox's sound will be close, and beautiful in its own right, but it will not be that of a Heckel.

Unlike Heckel, which has a grand total of 1.5 bassoon models (the Crest being the .5), Fox has many different models.

Student models (Renard):

Fox Renard bassoons are a great idea for beginning and young bassoonists. Certain models are appropriate for fifth graders up through the last year of an undergraduate music degree.

There are six different models of Renard bassoons: **41, 51, 220, 222, 240, and 260.**

Models 41 and 51 are typically school instruments. The bodies are made of polypropylene (a plastic) instead of wood. They can take a lot of abuse and sound very nice. The Model 51 is designed for small hands, with certain keys moved closer together to allow more comfortable playing. Small hands aside, if you are purchasing a plastic bassoon, I would recommend spending the extra money on a Fox Model IV—it is a much more advanced instrument.

The Renard 220, 222, and 240 are wood-bodied student instruments (maple). The 220 and 222 are "long bore" models which literally means they are actually a bit longer/taller than the "short bore" 240. The 220 and the 222 sound exactly the same. In fact, they *are* the same, except the 222 has fewer keys and is therefore less expensive. If you want to play the same bassoon from middle school through undergrad, the 222 is not the best option. Instead, opt for either the 220 or the 240. Between the 220 and the 240, different people have different opinions. The 240 is slightly more flexible while the 220 is more stable.

Up until very recently, the 240 was the apex of the student model offerings from Fox. However, in 2013, the company started rolling out its new 260, its first foray into thick wall student instruments (more on thick wall bassoons below). The 260 is a very nice horn but it does cost a bit more. Its viability in the student market is yet to be seen as a person with enough funds to purchase the 260 might easily be convinced just to go whole hog and buy a pro instrument.

When purchasing a student-level instrument, the list below ranks them in descending order, with the preferred at the top:

Renard 220/240/260

Fox Model IV

Renard 222

(Models 41 and 51 are usually not appropriate for college-level study)

Pro Models:

The Fox professional models include the **I, II, III, IV, 101, 201, 601, and 660.**

Models I and II are identical except the Model I has more rollers and is more expensive. The extra rollers are largely unnecessary. The Model I and II instruments are modern versions of the original Fox bassoon. They are currently not in high demand, though the company has recently been making some impressive improvements to the instrument.

Models III and IV are also essentially the same. The Model III is simply a fancier looking Model IV polypropylene bassoon. They are the nicest plastic bassoons on the market and are often used by professional players at outdoor events.

The Fox 101 and 201 are again like the I and II in that the 101 is just the 201 with more rollers and a bigger price tag. The 201 is a highly respected professional instrument that is played the world over. It has a sweet, modern sound that blends well in any ensemble.

Remember the long bore Renard 220 and the short bore Renard 240? Well, the Fox professional models 601 and 660 have the same relationship. The long bore 601 is actually longer than the 660. Heckel excluded, these two instruments are currently the industry standard in the United States. The 601 is a great instrument for second bassoon parts. They have a warm, rich sound and are very stable in the low range. The 660 tends to be more flexible and is a more soloistic instrument. If given the choice between the two, I would always recommend the 660, as it proves to have a richer tone color as well as a much more responsive high range. Without the perfect bocal, many older Fox 601's will not play well in the extreme upper register, where control and reliability are imperative.

The Fox 601 and 660 are also described as "thick wall" bassoons. This means that the wood is actually thicker than that of other bassoons. This results in a slightly more vibrant sound but also creates a larger, heavier instrument that is sometimes difficult for a smaller person to manage. The most noticeable sound difference between the 601/660's and the 101/201's is that the 601/660's can take a more intense air speed/quantity. The 101/201's tend to shut down after a certain amount of air is reached, while the 601/660's sound just keeps growing. The decision between the two styles of bassoon really comes down to one's style of playing: those with a gentler breath-approach to playing the bassoon usually prefer the 101/201.

Fox has recently released a new professional model, the 680. It is marketed as a modernization of the thick wall concept, designed for evenness of tone, better pitch,

and better response. As it is such a new instrument, it is yet to be seen if it will catch on. Initial reports (and sales), however, indicate that it will.

When purchasing a professional-level Fox bassoon, the list below ranks them in descending order, with the preferred at the top:

Fox 660/680
Fox 201
Fox 101
Fox 601
Model II
Model I
(Renard 240)
(Renard 220)
Model IV
Model III

The complete Fox list would then look like this:

Fox 660/680
Fox 201
Fox 101
Fox 601
Model II
Model I
Renard 260/240/220
Model IV
Model III
Renard 222
Renard 41 or 51 (small hands)

Other quality professional bassoons include those made by Yamaha, Moosmann, and Püchner. Before purchasing such an instrument, be sure to contact professionals who play that brand. More importantly, do everything you can to attend an event (such as the IDRS convention) where you can play and compare multiple instruments from multiple makers in a relatively short span of time. This way, you will be able to make an informed decision and avoid any sort of buyer's remorse down the road.