

A Maker's Look at the Haka Oboe, Gemeentemuseum Ea-6 1952

When I received an request from Lou Zeekaf about a year ago to reproduce the fine Haka oboe in the Haags Gemeentemuseum (Ea 6-1952) I was intrigued. He was keen to have all historic details such as the extra E flat key (for left-handed playing) and the unusually small cove areas for the double holes. His desired pitch of A:405 had been my best estimate of the Haka's pitch when I measured it in August of 1981 and was also what I had found best with a couple of earlier attempts to copy it. This time my own measurements were supplemented by photos from Jan Bouterse's extensive work, "Dutch Woodwind Instruments and their Makers." It has been a very rewarding process to revisit this fine Haka original as a model.

The first steps were the same as for any of my oboes, the pieces roughly cut, turned, and bored several months in advance. Extra time was given in a partially reamed and turned state so that the resulting thin and thin-walled pieces wouldn't warp, because like other Dutch oboes, the Haka is delicately constructed, having a wide bore but small outer diameter. Overall the turning is very stylish, beautifully thought out and executed, with an evident concern for keeping a low profile, as in the key mounting rings which are quite low. Details of turning include a little bead above the lower key mounting ring which Bouterse describes as the "middle key ring." This protects the projecting upper end of the C-flap (or appears to), and if the end of the key lines up with it when at rest, it is a nice visual detail. In my view the length of the flap in this design is somewhat a holdover from Renaissance times when positive leverage in keywork was the goal, more than fast action or the ability to slide from one key to the other. (Later one finds a shorter distance between the top of the flap and its pin, so that the mounting ring encompasses the whole upper part of the flap, and the projecting tip which engages with the touch can be made to line up with the small bead at the top of the mounting ring, another visually neat solution.)

An interesting corollary to the low profile mounting rings is that the key channels need to be relatively deep, and the central channel is continuous. Haka takes advantage of the middle part of this channel to put the middle spring unusually far down. Normally at the bottom of the upper mounting ring, here it is set into the sides of the channel about 10mm below the ring. It functions well there and the extra length strikes me as a good way to accommodate the wide action of the key without fatiguing the spring.

Tuning the Haka turned out to be an education in the importance of bringing everything into balance and getting the top opened fully. Sometimes when tuning an oboe I leave the narrow point in the top joint a touch small, to be opened as I play in the oboe and see how it responds. But on the Haka, the high notes (above a") simply wouldn't work at all with the narrow point only about 6.2. When brought out the last 0.2mm to 6.4, and tapered above and below to match the original, the results were no less than astounding, the way all the notes to high d''' popped out, and with the same reed. Various reed designs were tried. A short staple (50mm) and large reed (28x10.5) can give a luscious tone and response in the low register. Better for overall stability especially of the e'' is a staple 58mm (5.3 at the bottom) with a short reed (24x10). For this style I have found the readily available Chiarugi 60mm staples to work well, with the tip hammered and filed for more ovality, and 1-2mm removed from the bottom. They are more open than what I usually make, and a good balance with the large bore of the Haka.

Another factor is the reed's flexibility. I have been using 0.65mm cane (Alliaud or Marion) from Stephen Bard, but not just as it comes -- I thin the middle area on the inside where the tip will be to .61-2, and the sides of the cane extremely thin. That way the hard part of the cane forms the corners, for a clean and easy response, and less scraping is required to get the reed to crow freely. With a free-blowing reed the whole range from c' to d''' has a quick response, and the low f' can easily be played without the Eb key, something unusual in an oboe this early. The f-hole and other fingerholes have come out very close to the original sizes (within 0.1mm.) The Eb, C, and tuning holes are a few tenths of a mm larger in order to bring them in tune and to enable playing in Eb. Some Dutch oboes seem to be tuned with sharp keys in mind, and are referred to by Jan Bouterse as "d-sharp/f-sharp oboes."

One design feature of interest to other makers - I would consider raising the upper mounting ring by 2mm, to bring the C-touch closer to the sixth hole. Currently it's a bit of a stretch, depending on one's little finger, and the touches are too much in line with each other sideways; they work in a better relationship when in a line more diagonally. (I made a very slight adjustment in this direction in the copy.) One can keep the Eb hole where it is, and shorten the touch part of the key slightly, keeping it low and snug against the mounting ring-- no need to make the key longer. The C-touch would be lengthened only in the shank.

I am reminded of something Michel Piguet said, that the early baroque oboes were thought of as imitating the sound of the voice, and the classical oboe as imitating the violin. With the Haka's light construction and wide bore, the sound is certainly vibrant and voicelike. It is a delight to play.



The staining is finished and the pieces washed in baking powder paste and rinsed off.



The key pin hole drilling process, using a bow drill.



1C = keywork: e-flat key and c-key.



The holes have not been darkened yet and still need some finishing on the edges; 2 reeds with 50mm and 58mm long staples.



Three pairs Chiarugi staples: unaltered; hammered (to increase the ovality); filed as well to thin the sides near the tip and to increase the angle.



The angle visible from the side view, and the resulting ovality from the top view.



The finished Haka hautboy in front of its case.