

Some Thoughts on Purchasing a Bocal

1) Quality bocals include the following brands: Leitzinger (German), Heckel (German), Yamaha (Japanese), Fox (American), and Bell (Canadian).

2) When choosing a bocal, it is best to try many different ones at one go (with sensible breaks, of course).

The absolute best thing to do is to play numerous bocals from numerous makers at the yearly International Double Reed Society (IDRS) conference.

Trying bocals by mail often entails putting down a sizable deposit for each bocal (some places hold a credit card # or check) and paying shipping/insurance charges. Testing by mail also ensures that you will only be able to try a small number at a time. However, sometimes it is the only workable option.

Leitzinger bocals are available only through Forrests in California, www.forrestsmusic.com

Heckel bocals are most readily available in the states through Nielsen Woodwinds in Chicago, www.nielsen-woodwinds.com. Many people opt for making the pilgrimage instead of going through the mail. Mrs. Nielsen, who runs this shop, keeps an enormous quantity of bocals for trial and sale. She is very skilled at helping people through the process of choosing a bocal, though she does remain relatively neutral in her opinions.

Yamaha bocals are available through a few different dealers, including Nielsen and Midwest Musical Imports, www.mmimports.com.

Fox bocals are available through many approved Fox dealers. You can find their contact information on Fox's website, www.foxproducts.com. If one asks politely, one can also sometimes try bocals at the factory location in South Whitley, Indiana.

Bell bocals are available only through Benson Bell, www.bellbassoons.com.

I recommend calling these suppliers and saying something along the lines of "I'm looking for a new bocal for my (insert bassoon make and model here) bassoon and I would like to try as many as is reasonably possible. What is the best way for me to do so?"

3) When purchasing a bocal for *general* use (not, for example, to squeak out extremely high notes—that's a whole different matter),

Ensure its intonation. Bring a tuner and **pay special attention to the TUNING OF THE OCTAVES!** If a bocal sounds beautiful but causes you to play out of tune, it is not worth the money.

Play the bocals with a knowledgeable person present. The way a bocal sounds up close is not a good indicator of how it will sound at a distance. Once you have personally narrowed down your selections, have the other person listen while in the room and then again outside the room (at a

distance with the door open). Certain characteristics such as projection and tone will be more evident at that distance.

If you are in school, make every effort to play the bocals for your teacher before you purchase. Keep in mind that you and your teacher may still be working on bringing your tone to its fullest potential. You will want a bocal your teacher believes will help rather than hinder you.

Use your good reeds. Don't initially test a bocal on a reed you know is bad. However, before you purchase, it may be interesting to know how that bocal handles a "B reed." Is it finicky? Is that a problem?

If you have the time, try to **make a reed for that bocal.** This will allow you to see what you're in for in the long run.

Balance the tonal benefits against the cost. If the bocal you are considering is not *significantly* better, is it worth the price?

4) The perfect bocal for you and your instrument will not often be the same as the perfect bocal for someone else and their instrument. **Do not buy a bocal simply because someone (other than your teacher, perhaps) says it is good.** If it doesn't work for you, it doesn't work.

5) If you purchase a new bassoon, you should not expect the new bocal you purchased for the old bassoon to work perfectly on the new one. The good news is that good bocals tend to retain or even gain value.

6) A new bocal (or a new instrument, for that matter) will NOT solve all of one's problems. New equipment will actually often *create* a few problems initially as you get used to its idiosyncrasies. A new bocal will not *make* you play in tune or with a better tone. It will simply *help* you to do so.

7) It is rare to purchase a new bocal and think "I'm set for the rest of my life." In fact, the process often leaves you with more questions than answers. BUT, you will never find those questions or gain the experience until you go through the process. AND, in the end, the improvement in sound will be worth it.