

Breaking Barriers for American Band Directors and Bassoonists

Part 2: Bassoon Origins Survey

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The article appearing below is a modified version of the second part of the author's 2023 University of Minnesota doctoral thesis. The first part of this important work was published in our previous journal (DR Vol. 47, No. 2) and the third part, including data from a survey of band directors' inclusion of the bassoon in their ensembles, will be printed in an upcoming edition of The Double Reed.

The Surveys

Over the years, I have met and worked with many amateur and professional adult bassoonists, bassoon teachers, bassoon students of all levels and ages, and band and orchestra directors of all ages and levels. From our shared experiences with the instrument, much about young bassoonist demographics, their origin stories, and the barriers they face when learning the instrument are already generally known, even without concrete evidence to back it up. For example, all teachers, students, and band directors know that most bassoonists start on another instrument or have some musical background before learning the bassoon. But do we know why? Do we know exactly what the trends are? Do we know which instruments tend to switch to the bassoon most frequently, or the reasons students have for switching? Throughout my research, I realized that while bassoon teachers, band directors, and students may see the answers to these questions as common knowledge, they would at the same time likely all have slightly (or greatly) different answers based on their individual lived experiences.

To more clearly articulate the details of how bassoonists become bassoonists in the United States, it was essential to go straight to the source. To gather this data, I created two separate surveys: one for bassoonists who started playing the bassoon in public schools in the USA (that data being presented in this article), and one for current and former band directors teaching in the USA (appearing as a future journal article). Over 250 individuals from more than 26 states completed the two online surveys. Ultimately, understanding the trends and issues of a bassoonist's journey combined with the specific barriers that band directors face with the bassoon may lead to a better understanding of how to build a better foundation for beginner bassoonists across the country.

Bassoon Origins Survey

The bassoon origins survey was created to better understand trends in when, how and why bassoonists start learning the instrument, as well as to find possible trends in the barriers

they face along the way. I applied for ethics approval for this survey through the IRB and received approval as exempt. The survey was distributed online via email and social media, with three qualifications to create more concise results: 1) The person must be 18 years of age or older at the time of filling out the survey, 2) The person must identify as either a primary bassoonist or play bassoon as a strong and regular secondary instrument, and 3) The person must have studied in a public primary or secondary school in the United States. Graduation year, school location, and current occupation of the bassoonist were not factors in this research; the questions were designed to assess possible barriers to bassoon access in the collective United States regardless of these demographics. Filtering out unfinished or duplicate surveys from the final data, 189 bassoonists from 26 states participated in this survey. Below are the results.

Bassoon Origins Survey Results

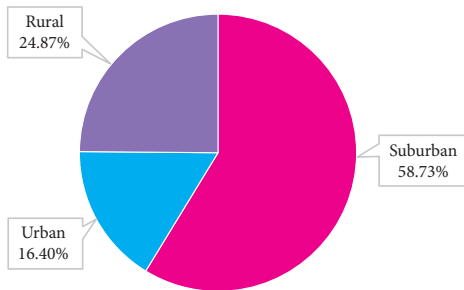
The survey consisted of eleven core questions. Questions 1–9 are represented through graphs, while questions 10–11 were long-answer questions, discussed in the next section.

Q1.

In what type of environment was/is your elementary, middle or high school where you played/play the bassoon?

- Suburban 111
- Rural 47
- Urban 31

School Environment

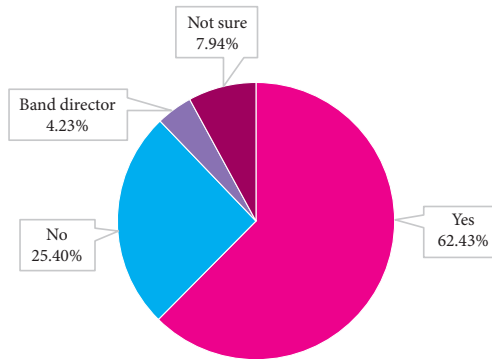


Q2.

Did/do you have access to a bassoon teacher in your location for in-person lessons when you started the bassoon? (regardless if you studied with them or not)

- Yes, there were bassoon teachers offering lessons 118
- I could not find any teachers available 48
- I'm not sure/didn't check 15
- My band director was a bassoonist and taught me the bassoon 8

Private Teacher Available?



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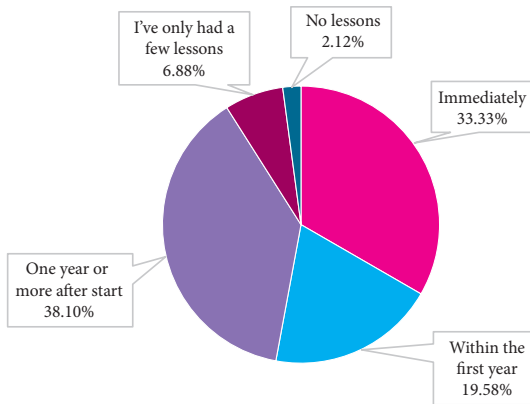
Almost 67% of bassoonists had a teacher available to help (professional or band director bassoonist) who was a bassoon specialist, regardless of if they took lessons or not.

Q3.

If you did take bassoon private lessons for at least 3 months consecutively, please indicate when exactly you started taking private lessons after you started learning the instrument.

- I learned on my own for more than a year but ended up taking private lessons eventually. 72
- I did not learn anything on my own – I took lessons immediately when I started bassoon, either from my band director or a private bassoon teacher. 63
- I learned on my own at first, but started taking lessons within the first year of playing the bassoon. 37
- I have taken a bassoon lesson here and there but have not taken bassoon private lessons for any significant amount of time with one teacher. 13

When did you start taking lessons?



Notes:

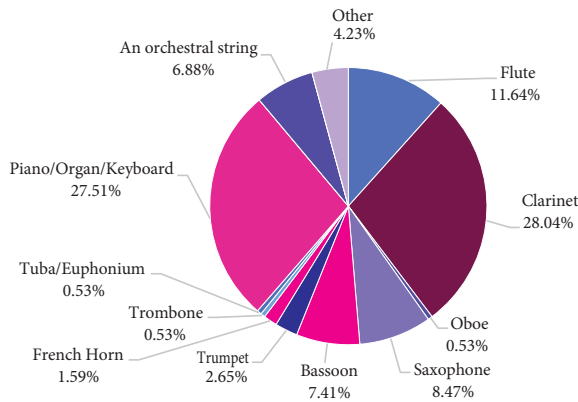
- Almost 98% of bassoonists took at least a few lessons with a teacher at some point.
- 91% of bassoonists took lessons for at least three months at some point.
- The most popular trends were starting lessons right away (33.33%) or starting lessons more than a year after starting to play the bassoon (38.10%).

Q4.

What instrument was the first one you ever learned?

• Flute	22
• Clarinet	53
• Oboe	1
• Saxophone	16
• Bassoon	14
• Trumpet	5
• French horn	3
• Trombone	1
• Tuba/Euphonium	1
• Piano/Organ/Keyboard	52
• Voice	0
• An orchestral string	13
• Guitar/Bass	0
• Percussion	0
• Other	8

First Instrument Learned



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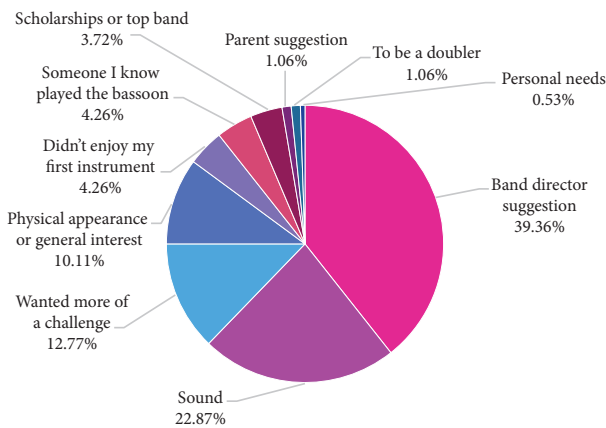
- Top answers: Clarinet (28.04%) and Piano/Organ/Keyboard (27.51%).
- Almost 93% of bassoonists who still play today started on a different instrument, indicating some musical background and knowledge of notes and rhythms before starting the instrument.
- 48.68% of bassoonists still playing today who started on different instrument started on a woodwind instrument (other than bassoon). Only 5.30% switched from brass, and 6.88% switched from an orchestral string instrument.

Q5.

Which of the following was your #1 strongest reason for choosing the bassoon?
(Choose one only)

- My band director suggested it (whether you wanted to or not) 74
- Sound (you saw a demonstration, watched a video, or heard a soloist play). 43
- I wanted more of a challenge than my first instrument 24
- Physical appearance (without hearing the instrument at all) 19
- Someone I know played the bassoon. 8
- I didn't enjoy my first instrument 8
- I wanted scholarships for college, or I was motivated to move up to the top band faster. 7
- To be a doubler 2
- Parent suggestion 2
- Personal needs (ex. Wanted own stand to see better). 1

Reasons for Choosing the Bassoon



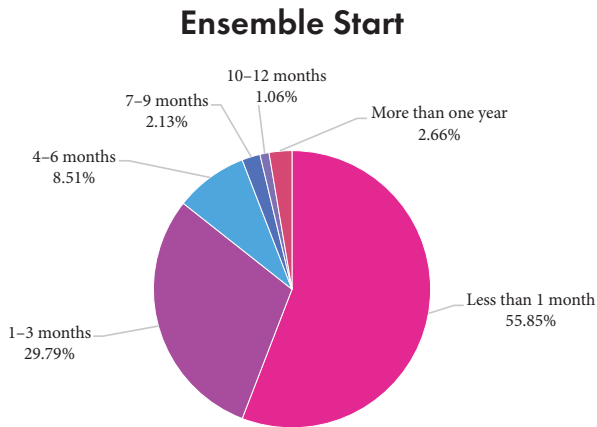
Notes:

- *Band director suggestion was the #1 reason*
- *Sound was the second most popular reason to play bassoon*

Q6.

When you started the bassoon, how soon after you had the instrument in your possession did you start playing in an ensemble?

• Less than 1 month	105
• 1–3 months	56
• 4–6 months	16
• 7–9 months	4
• 10–12 months	2
• More than one year	5
• I have never played in an ensemble	1



Notes:

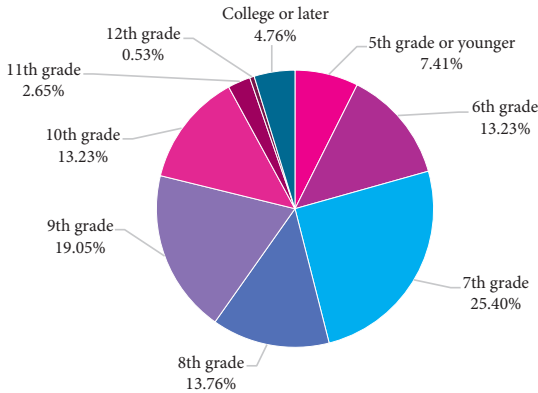
- Nearly 56% of bassoonists started playing in an ensemble within one month of starting to learn the instrument.
- Nearly 86% of bassoonists begin playing in an ensemble within the first 3 months of study.
- Answers to Q6 and Q7 (below) show that 87% of students who started within 3 months were in the age groups of 6th–10th grade, with significant emphasis on 7th grade.

Q7.

How old were you when you started learning the bassoon?

- 5th grade or younger 14
- 6th grade 25
- 7th grade 48
- 8th grade 26
- 9th grade 36
- 10th grade 25
- 11th grade..... 5
- 12th grade 1
- College or later 9

Bassoon Starting Age



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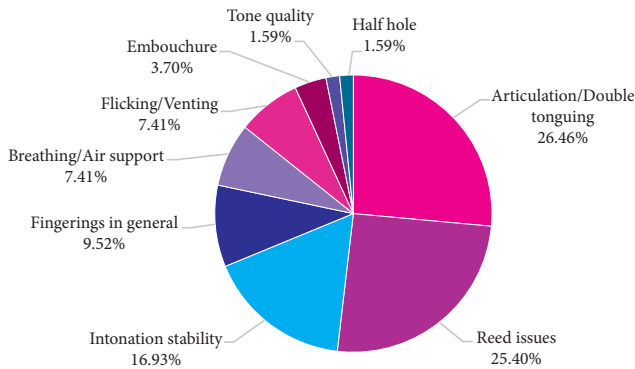
- 7th grade is the most common starting age for bassoonists at 25.40%.
- 9th grade is the second most common starting age at 19.05%.
- 84.67% of bassoonists switch sometime between 6th and 10th grade.

Q8.

Which of the following techniques have you struggled with the most throughout your time as a bassoonist? (not which one you dislike—but which one is most challenging to remember or execute)

- Articulation/Double tonguing 50
- Reed issues 48
- Intonation/Stability 32
- Fingerings in general 18
- Breathing/Air support 14
- Flicking/Venting 14
- Embouchure 7
- Half hole 3
- Tone quality 3

Most Challenging Issue



Notes:

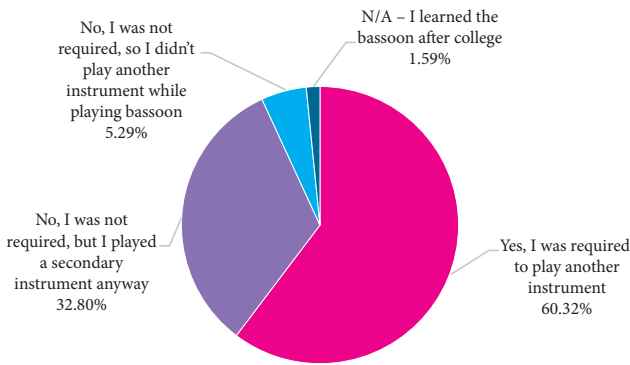
- *Most popular answers are Articulation/Double Tonguing (26.46%) and reed issues (25.40%).*

Q9.

Were/are you required to play a secondary instrument for marching or pep band in high school or college that was not the bassoon?

- Yes, I was required to play another instrument. 114
- No, I was not required, but I played a secondary instrument anyway. 62
- No, I was not required, so I didn't play another instrument. 10
- N/A – I learned the bassoon after college 3

Secondary Instrument Continuation



Notes:

- 60.32% of bassoonists are required to play another instrument throughout high school and college for marching or pep band.
- 93.12% of bassoonists continue to play a secondary instrument whether they are required to or not.

Bassoonists in Their Own Words

Bassoonists have never had a one-size-fits-all journey to finding the instrument. Though their origins are a bit more diverse, it is important to understand all the ways in which lifelong bassoonists came to play the bassoon, as well as how they became motivated to learn the instrument. This survey showed that nearly 93% of respondents started their musical journey on a different instrument, which means we can start to notice trends in their reasoning for these switches by listening to their stories, and thus develop a successful method of nurturing more lifelong bassoonists. In the next section, I present a number of answers to survey questions 11 and 10 (in that order to allow for better flow in this article) to let bassoonists say in their own words how they came to play the bassoon and to share thoughts on any barriers they faced in choosing and continuing to play the bassoon throughout their life. (Note: Responses have not been edited for grammar or spelling.)

Origin Stories

Q11: If you'd like to tell me a brief version of your personal beginning bassoon story, good or bad, please do!

Band Director's Suggestion

The most cited reason for musicians playing the bassoon is that they receive a band director's suggestion. Some of the most common reasons a band director suggests a change of instrument are when that student is either a great or mediocre musician at their current instrument or is bored with their current instrument. Some students are just great at their instrument but are seeking more of a challenge. One bassoonist said, "I was really good at sax, clarinet, and bass clarinet in high school, so my band director encouraged me to learn bassoon." In some cases, switches facilitated by music teachers are simply to fill a need. One bassoonist claimed that they started playing bassoon for the spring musical, *My Fair Lady*, and another said that their orchestra director was buying a bassoon for the school and wanted to make sure someone was playing it.

Once in a while, there are just too many kids in any given section to make playing in band fun:

I became an instrument geek the day the band director in my elementary school came in to demonstrate instruments we could learn to play. My music teacher suggested clarinet, so I started with that. I (and my parents) were sort of surprised at how quickly I became somewhat proficient at it, and was 1st chair in the band by the end of the year. To my parents' surprise, I didn't lose interest after a few months, but rather sought out more lesson books and music to play. I got to junior high school and looked around 7th grade band and saw several dozen clarinet players. I wasn't sure I wanted to face that much competition, so I switched to bass clarinet. There were still 5 bass clarinets in the band. I was happy playing bass clarinet, but I think my band director realized I'd be bored with the bass clarinet parts if I stayed there.

All these stories have one common thread: a band director encouraged a student to try something new, and therefore created a positive change for that student.

No Interest in Other Instruments

Many bassoonists in this survey tried the instrument due to a lack of interest in their first instrument(s) or a failure to succeed at their first instrument. One bassoonist says,

I began playing clarinet in 6th grade and I HATED it, although I loved being in band. I had been constantly asking to switch instruments, and when I brought up bassoon (not even knowing what it really was), my teacher lent me one and I've been playing ever since.

A student with plenty of musical experience explains how the bassoon captured their interest:

I started the summer between 5th and 6th grades. My older sister brought home a bassoon from the middle school I would be attending in the fall. I had already played piano, flute, saxophone, baritone, trombone and continued piano lessons all through high school. None of those previous wind instruments held my interest. My father played trombone in a community band and I would go to rehearsals with him to observe. One bassoon in the band—I loved that she was the only one and not one in a big section. That drew me to the bassoon. When I started 6th grade I was put directly into the 8th grade band. First piece was Mozart 40 with tenor clef. My dad taught me to read tenor clef and I was hooked.

One bassoonist who started playing the bassoon at age forty in a community group got their start on clarinet, but quickly grew bored with the instrument—the politics of the section leader positions held by clarinetists more experienced than themselves kept them from being able to even audition to become first chair. The band bought a used bassoon at their request, and they enjoyed it far better than their experiences in the clarinet section.

Technical Issues

Even when a student's interest is in a certain instrument, that does not always mean they find technical success. Many bassoonists in this survey stated that some kind of issue on another instrument caused them to try the bassoon instead. A bassoonist who now has a successful freelance career and a doctorate in bassoon shared their story:

I really wanted to play the bassoon or the tuba when doing instrument fittings going into 6th grade. My band director was excited that I wanted to play bassoon, so he had me try clarinet, sax, and flute, but I couldn't make any of them work, and I could decently buzz, so he put me on trumpet to go on the tuba path. I ended up being a mediocre trumpet student, and no one else wanted to switch to bassoon, so he asked me if I wanted to switch after about 6 weeks. I said yes, and the rest is history!

Sometimes the suggestion to play another instrument stems from a physical issue, as it did for this bassoonist:

As a trombone player, my band director noticed I played with the instrument pointing toward the floor. He asked to have a look at my teeth and noticing I had an overbite, suggested I try the bassoon.

Adult Learning

Some bassoonists did not find instruction until they were adults, as this student shares:

I started taking regular lessons during my bachelors degree. I advanced much more quickly on the bassoon than the oboe (my primary). The professor even talked to me about switching major instruments. I took private bassoon lessons during my bachelors, masters, and doctoral coursework and it was my minor during doctoral studies.

Individuality

My personal switching story always includes “there were thirty flutes in a ninety-person band—so I switched to bassoon.” Many other bassoonists have also experienced the desire to be in a smaller section, or to be more independent. This bassoonist’s story shows the value of trying the bassoon after experimenting with other instruments:

At the start of eighth grade, the band director knew that I wanted to play something where I would be on only one who played it. We tried the bari sax, but the instrument the school owned had problems, and it really didn’t work. Then he asked me if I’d be interested in playing the bassoon—I didn’t even realize the school had a bassoon.

This person goes on to say that they went home that night and worked through half of the Rubank Elementary Method—they were hooked.

Outside Influence

Even if the student does not know what a bassoon is, sometimes they end up playing it their whole life—like this bassoonist:

I started on flute in 6th grade, there were too many flutes in 7th grade so the band director asked if any flutes wanted to switch to bassoon. I sort of knew what it was, and it sounded interesting. Never looked back.

Highly motivated musicians sometimes get bored with their current instrument and need more of a challenge. This bassoonist was inspired by a performance:

I heard a woodwind quintet at a concert at Austin Peay State University in sixth grade. I had started band on tenor sax, and was already bored with beginning band. Luckily, when I asked, New Providence Middle School had an old dusty bassoon.

The Bassoon Origins survey results showed that nearly 93% of bassoonists who took the survey started on a different instrument, and the same amount decided to continue playing a secondary instrument in marching band despite whether or not they were required to (60% of those surveyed *were* required to play a secondary instrument for marching band). These stories are just a select handful out of an ocean of bassoonists' experiences, but a few things are clear: almost every answer includes a band director's encouragement, a previous instrument, or some kind of musical background. These findings suggest that these factors are essential to creating more lifelong bassoonists.

School Rules

Every experience is unique, as are school music programs and their rules. Some bassoonists who shared their story mentioned a specific barrier that caused them to choose the bassoon later, meaning they ended up studying a different instrument first. One bassoonist mentions that their elementary school did not allow 5th graders to start on certain instruments: "I started playing flute in 5th grade but moved on to bassoon in 6th when we were allowed to try 'auxiliary' instruments." Another bassoonist had a similar experience specific to starting double reed instruments:

I eagerly counted the days until I could play bassoon! Clarinet was my gateway instrument. We were not allowed to start double reed instruments until after sixth grade. I leapt into learning bassoon that summer and have been playing it ever since!

One bassoonist says they did not have band class as an option below the high school level:

In music class, I had seen the picture of the bassoon on the posters with all the instrument families, and for some reason I was enamored by this instrument. My elementary and middle schools did not have bands, so I was not in band until high school when I learned the whole woodwind family and some brass instruments before I even got to play the bassoon. I was hooked immediately and taught myself throughout high school.

These situations are unique to each school, but they are not as uncommon as one might think. Barriers like lack of band class happen most often in communities with low populations, specifically rural communities. Some 5th graders are also still too small to begin learning the bassoon. These barriers are not necessarily negative, but they certainly give us perspective on why bassoonists' paths to learning the instrument are often so unique from those of other instrumentalists.

Self-Taught Bassoonists

One very common story heard from bassoonists is about self-teaching. Many of the stories already shared here have mentioned this, and it should not be taken lightly. Self-teaching can be both a good and a bad thing. In today's world of YouTube videos and educational websites, a person could learn the bassoon fairly easily on their own to a certain level before seeking lessons, if they ever do seek further instruction. Many of the participants of the

Bassoon Origins survey learned the bassoon long before the Internet became a learning tool. Here are some parts of stories that mention self-teaching:

I completely taught myself bassoon! I have never taken a lesson and none of my band directors ever played the bassoon.

I taught myself a new note each day and played only those notes during ensemble rehearsal. By the end of the year, I had a pretty decent range.

Fast forward to my freshman year, this same director handed me a bassoon and a fingering chart and told me to see what I could do. I loved it.

My cousin decided she wanted to play saxophone instead so I got her bassoon. I had had oboe lessons but didn't have access to a bassoon teacher when I started so I translated what I could from oboe to bassoon. It gave me a huge step up than trying to learn completely from scratch on my own.

Some of these self-taught bassoonists mention finding a teacher later in their story, but most remain neutral in their opinion of being self-taught—they do not openly associate this experience with being positive or negative. I believe this stems from the fact that being self-taught is directly related to self-motivation, which is a determining factor in how successful a student is at learning an instrument on their own. Only 33% of bassoonists took lessons immediately after getting the instrument in their hands, and nearly another 20% took lessons within the first year of learning the bassoon on their own. When asked how quickly they were expected to play the bassoon in class after receiving the instrument, nearly 56% of participants said they started playing in band within one month of learning the bassoon. Self-motivation to learn the instrument combined with the interaction in an ensemble almost immediately become two of the most important factors to consider when starting a new bassoonist.

Bassoonist Barriers

Q10: If you encountered any challenges while you played the bassoon (finance issues like affording an instrument/reeds/accessories or taking lessons, distance to a teacher or ensemble to play with, availability of instruments, lack of good resources, etc.) please tell me your story.

Reeds

Every bassoonist who took the Bassoon Origins survey was asked to identify a barrier they faced while trying to learn the bassoon in two different ways—once in a multiple-choice question specific to what their biggest barrier was throughout their time as a bassoonist, and once in long-answer format to provide a background story. In the multiple-choice question, the answer “Reed issues” made up 25% of answers out of various technique issues, but the more specific answer of finding and affording quality reeds came up many more times in the

written stories. Even more common in participants' stories was a barrier generally defined as "Lack of resources." These barriers are important to recognize as we move forward in our efforts to recruit, retain, and nurture future bassoonists.

It is no secret that the quality of the reed makes a huge difference in sound, but one of the most common barriers for young bassoonists is finding a consistently good source of reeds in the first place. Simply put, one bassoonist wrote, "Having good reeds is a constant challenge." Another describes their experience with reeds made through big companies and sold through general music stores that do not hold their reeds to high standards of performance: "I had to play on store bought reeds which I did not know were so bad at the time." Many young bassoonists only play what they are given, and most times, they are not sure what exactly a good reed is:

I only got Jones reeds, so I didn't know what a good reed was supposed to feel like or look like. It took me a while and [some] major changes up through my undergrad and a bit into my masters to not be fighting my reed and instrument to play.

Though many may not realize it early on, bassoonists who do not have another bassoonist to play with regularly usually have no concept of what the bassoon should sound like. One bassoonist describes this in relation to reeds:

I had no idea what a good bassoon sound was. I started on bass clarinet and the sound concept between the two is quite different. I had no money for lessons and my band director was a brass player. In college, finances kept me from learning/buying all the things for reed making, so I always struggled to have a good reed to practice on.

Personal finances usually have a strong impact on having a great source of reeds, as this bassoonist testifies to: "Reeds were always an issue, particularly as a beginning high school player who couldn't afford much. I limped through on some very bad reeds."

Lack of Finances

The bassoon is not an instrument that is typically easy to afford. All the factors that contribute to having a great foundation on the instrument are mentioned in survey answers at some point as a financial barrier: reeds, renting or buying instruments, lessons, books and music, rides and gas, and reed tools are all mentioned. One bassoonist shares their story:

I had to work to pay for my lessons, books, and reeds. I found rides to and from lessons as my parents were farmers and not available. The instrument was a Fox and owned by the school. I never owned a bassoon all through school, including college, they were always supplied and very few others played them. Didn't buy my own until 30-ish years after college when I realized I missed playing. Got a bargain one in my late 50s.

One bassoonist describes their dire reed situation: "I would play on the same 1–2 reeds for months and years because I simply could not afford to pay for them." Sometimes, help comes along. One bassoonist describes how their private teacher helped their parents purchase

their instrument, and another describes their story here: “My family was really poor and we couldn’t afford any of the reeds or accessories. Thankfully my middle and high school directors both knew our family well and added it to their budget.” Many bassoonists in the survey describe difficulty finding affordable reeds and instruments, even after college. “Bassoons are expensive and my family made sacrifices to afford a nice one,” writes one bassoonist. Many of these bassoonists describe borrowing instruments for many years in high school and college, even as music majors. Almost all of them mention how the low quality of the instruments held them back from their full potential in some way.

Distance

Location is one of the main barriers to accessing a specialist bassoon teacher. Many bassoonists mention the distance they had to travel to find a teacher as being a major reason for their struggle to learn the bassoon. Though almost 98% of bassoonists surveyed claimed to have had private lessons at some point with a bassoon specialist, 38% of participants reported not having lessons until after the first year of playing the instrument. This bassoonist did not have their first lesson for a while:

There were no teachers within an hour radius of me when I started bassoon in high school. I ended up going into music education in college, and I didn’t have my first bassoon lesson until I was studying in college.

Others describe driving over an hour, or up to 180 miles away to reach a bassoon teacher. Some had basic lessons with their band director:

The nearest bassoon teachers were in the cities, 45 min–hour from where I lived. From 5th–11th grade, I would have lessons with my band director, who was only able to address generic musical concerns. It wasn’t until 11th grade that I finally began commuting to the city for lessons with a professional bassoonist.

Some private teachers work out a system to help students with access issues:

I ended up meeting my first bassoon teacher (and a lifelong friend) at a symphony. He lived 30 miles away, but I was lucky enough he didn’t charge me per lesson, instead per month with how ever many lessons I needed.

Lack of Educational Resources

The lack of readily available information on the bassoon and its quirks is a huge barrier for bassoonists, no matter their situation. Many bassoonists describe a lack of educational resources along their journey. This bassoonist describes a situation that most bassoonists can relate to:

It was difficult finding an instrument, it was impossible to get any tailored feedback about why I was having difficulties (my band director knew very little bassoon-specific

or relevant to double reeds), I was not able to take private lessons, I did not play with any other bassoonists for a long time so I had no reference for what I should sound like at what level.

Another describes the issue of finding a bassoon specialist teacher in the area:

My first private lessons were from an oboe player. I didn't start with a great bassoon teacher until high school. When I got to college, I had to undo some things.

Other Barriers

Some barriers mentioned by bassoonists in the survey could apply to any instrument. Parental support is incredibly important, and this bassoonist describes a lack of that support:

My parents were lukewarm about music... I got little or no support from them. More active and guiding parents might have opened more doors more quickly.

One barrier mentioned a few times is simply having small hands for the instrument. Another issue is overuse of certain bassoonists due to low enrollment:

I required elbow surgery due to being overused in ensembles at the collegiate level. I was rehearsing 20+ hours a week on top of other courses because of lack of bassoonists within the program, and lost time for homework, coursework, self-care, and solo practice time.

Though plenty of barriers exist for all bassoonists, these stories are provided by people who still play the bassoon today, which shows a common quality of perseverance in musicians who have a true love for the instrument. Only 67% of participants reported having a bassoon specialist private teacher in the area regardless of whether they studied with them. Now that the Covid-19 Pandemic has created a new kind of normalcy for online lessons, some of the distance barriers mentioned may be less of an issue today. However, there are still plenty of issues that need new solutions if we are to move forward with the nurturing of new bassoonists.



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