

Refinishing: To do or not to do—That is the question!

Chip Owen

Bassoons are long lived instruments. A properly maintained instrument is capable of a usable life well in excess of half a century. Any instrument that lasts that long will inevitably need to undergo a substantial restoration at some point in its lifetime. Deciding when to do it is the first problem to be solved.

Is this instrument worth the effort?

Every maker has made instruments that are simply not worth the effort of reclamation. At one end of the scale some makers have made no instruments worth the effort. At the other end of the scale every instrument from certain makers will have value, but not always as instruments that can be used for performance.

Is the existing finish restorable?

Some types of finishes can be restored without refinishing the instrument. Typically, these are high value instruments; the appearance of the finish is frequently part of the value. Restorable finishes are usually based on a soft natural oil varnish. They wear smoothly without chipping off. On the other hand, finishes that form hard shells, such as lacquers, tend to break off in chunks leaving well defined edges. These finishes are not restorable and will require complete removal before refinishing can proceed.

Is the existing finish repairable?

Refinishing is a major project. Drastic changes are being inflicted upon the instrument. If the existing finish can be repaired this should be considered as a preferable alternative. Unfortunately, the proper repair of any finish usually requires some knowledge of the type of finish being repaired. A technique that fixes one type of finish may destroy another type.

Types of Finishes:

Oil Varnishes: The better makes of bassoons use oil based varnishes. These tend to be softer than the more modern finishes. The instruments are perceived to play better as a by product of the softer, more flexible finish. Oil varnishes wear away more smoothly than lacquers and plastic finishes and a very typical wear pattern can be seen on any Heckel bassoon.

Lacquers: Lacquers tend to be brittle finishes. Their primary benefit is to the maker as they can be applied within a very short time span. Lacquered bassoons eventually look bad because of the broken appearance of the finish.

Plastic Finishes: I'm lumping several modern finishes together under this heading. Polyurethane is the most familiar plastic finish. This is a good durable finish but it is not possible to do a good job of repairing a polyurethane finish. Acrylic enamel is used on all Renard and older Fox bassoons. Generally this has proven to be a durable finish that can be repaired effectively.

Stains:

Heckel bassoons and some other German makes use color in the finish itself. As a result, the color wears away as the finish is worn. Repairing a colored finish can be difficult as the thickness of the finish directly affects the density of the color.

Most often, the wood is stained before the finish is applied to the stained wood. This is usually a simpler approach. Since the color remains even when the finish is worn or missing a coat of finish can be applied to the wood without a problem of matching the color.

Avoid using common hardware store wood stains. These are usually meant to be used on soft woods such as pine. They don't give sufficient color density to look good on maple. It is better to use water soluble aniline dyes. These have better color penetration, can yield better color density, can be applied more evenly and can be mixed to give any desired color. NGR (Non-Grain Raising) stains are also an excellent choice in pre-mixed stains. Alcohol soluble aniline dyes tend to fade faster than water soluble dyes and are more difficult to apply evenly. Oil soluble aniline dyes are useful for mixing into varnishes and lacquers to apply colored finishes.

Revised October 20, 2001