

Clarinet Trivia

When talking about “the clarinet” you generally mean the **Bb (soprano) Clarinet**. It is one of the younger wood-wind instruments, having been invented around 1700. All clarinets have a bore which is basically the same diameter along the body of the instrument. This cylindrical bore differs from the saxophone’s conical bore and gives the clarinet its characteristic tone. Prior to 1820, the reed went on the top lip. Romantic Era composers like Carl Maria von Weber, Schumann, and Brahms really showed the full potential of the clarinet as a solo instrument. It wasn’t until the start of this period, that the reed was turned around to be played on the bottom lip. Both in sound and playing techniques, the clarinet is one of the most flexible of all instruments - which is one reason why it is often substituted for violins in band arrangements of orchestral works. A typical Bb soprano clarinet is 26 inches long.

The **Eb (sopranino) Clarinet** is the smallest of the standard clarinets and is only 19 inches long. Although the Eb is somewhat of a rarity in middle and high school bands, it is a staple instrument in college and other wind ensembles.

The smallest clarinet is the **Ab (piccolo) Clarinet** checking in at 14 inches long. Not quite an octave higher than the Bb, it is the highest pitched clarinet produced.

The **Eb Alto Clarinet**, at 43 inches long, is said to be the modern form of the bassett horn. You find alto clarinets in wind or symphonic bands, but rarely in classical symphony orchestras.

The **Bb Bass Clarinet** was developed some 60 years after the ‘clarinet’, though it was not until the 1830s that Adolphe Sax developed one with significant acoustical improvements that became the basis for current design (about 10 years before Sax developed the saxophone). The bass clarinet is 4.5 feet long, and has a tone range that is wider than any other wind instrument.

E Eb Contra Alto Clarinet sounds an octave below the Eb alto, and 2 octaves below the Eb clarinet. It is used mostly in concert bands and clarinet choirs where it usually, but not always, plays the bass line. At 7 feet long, it is the second-largest member of the clarinet family in regular use, larger than the more common bass clarinet but not as large as the BBb contra bass clarinet.

The **BBb Contra Bass Clarinet** is the largest of all clarinets in regular use - about 9 feet in length. It is one octave lower than the bass clarinet, 2 octaves lower than the “regular” Bb clarinet, and almost 3 octaves lower than the Ab piccolo clarinet.

Both the E Eb contra alto and BBb contra bass clarinets are built in two configurations: a ‘straight’ clarinet style, looking much like a longer version of the bass clarinet (made of wood and metal; or all metal); and an all-metal version known as a “paperclip” due to its tighter, folded shape.

