

## HOW TO BUY A STEP-UP FLUTE

by Richard Hahn

Making the transition from an entry-level instrument to one that offers professional styling and features is an important step for most students. Often, the ability to successfully transition to a quality instrument at this stage will determine whether or not the student remains committed to playing the instrument. Research shows that a student can make significant progress when stepping up to an instrument that is more professional in its look, feel and tone. In the process of stepping up, a student often intuitively senses success and accomplishment, and this feeling can become the foundation for continued growth as a player for many years.



When a young flutist has become secure in both technique and tone production, and has developed the knowledge and ability to properly care for his/her flute, it is appropriate to graduate to a more sophisticated instrument. However, even after upgrading, it's a good idea to keep the "old" flute ready for "tough duty" performance situations, such as marching band or athletic events.

In working with students in clinics around the country, I am frequently asked what to look for in the purchase of a step-up model flute. Following are some important factors to consider before buying a new instrument.

First and foremost, a step-up flute should have a solid silver headjoint from a manufacturer that offers a selection of different headjoint styles. A solid silver headjoint produces a dramatically clearer tone than that of a plated headjoint. This alone can translate into more excitement and commitment from the player. This headjoint selection option results in a variety of tone and response enhancements and enables the student to select a headjoint that best fits his/her embouchure and tonal style.

Generally, a French, or open-holed model, is the best step-up flute choice, unless the student has extremely small hands or a disability associated with any of the fingers. The flute of choice should also have a low B footjoint. Many manufacturers offer the option of an in-line or offset G-A key on their models. While the traditional French model flute is an in-line instrument, many people prefer the offset G-A key, believing that it fits the hand more comfortably. There is no acoustical difference.

### **Advantages of the French model flute include:**

- Encourages good hand position development, which, in turn, improves technique.
- Produces a more resonant tone that will carry better.
- Provides the ability to use special fingerings that involve partially covering the holes. This is important for adjusting the pitch when playing at extreme dynamic levels.
- Enables the student to play quarter-step and other pitch alterations required by many modern compositions.
- Allows for multi-phonetic tone production - the ability to play more than one note at a time.

### **Advantages of the low B footjoint include:**

- Reduces the tendency for the instrument to play sharp in the third register while increasing the darkening of the third register's tone color so that it better matches the lower registers.
- Some manufacturers include a special key on the low B footjoint (commonly called a "gizmo key"), which facilitates the accurate production of high C.
- The ability to reach the fourth octave, an octave that cannot be played on an instrument lacking the low B footjoint.

Most professional model flutes feature thin-walled headjoints and pointed pad cups. Thin-walled headjoints allow quicker response and increased tonal resonance. The pointed pad cups transfer the motion of the key to the center of the pad cup, helping to eliminate the possibility of leakage in pads that are not covered by

the fingers. The professional model flutes also often have white gold springs that allow for a lighter and quicker action, making more difficult musical passages less technically challenging to play.

The wide range of options available in both conservatory and professional model flutes allows a player to select the instrument that best fits his or her particular preferences and needs. The variety of flute models and options available on the market today inevitably makes the decision-making process more complex. For this reason, I encourage those at the point of graduating to a conservatory or professional model flute to ask for guidance from a teacher or an authorized dealer. Sales representatives are trained to answer specific questions and provide counsel, but even more importantly, they can offer a customer the opportunity to play a variety of instruments. The ability to compare instruments before buying is critical to making the best possible selection.

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**Editor's Note:**

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