

HOW TO BUY A TROMBONE

By Roger M. Verdi

Many young people say they are attracted to the trombone because "it looks like fun." Well, it is fun! The only brass or wind instrument that has a slide to change pitches, the trombone is an entertaining and rewarding instrument for young and old alike. It is also extremely versatile. Trombones are found in wind bands, orchestras, marching bands, jazz and rock bands and other chamber ensembles. Most school music programs will give a young trombonist plenty of opportunities to perform.

BACKGROUND

The trombone is the middle instrument in the brass family, functioning one octave below the trumpet and one octave above the tuba. Trombones also have their own family and come in a variety of sizes. Young students begin on a basic B-flat tenor trombone, the instrument most often found in bands and orchestras. There is a lower relative to the tenor trombone called the bass trombone. Bass trombones have extra tubing with one or two thumb-operated rotor valves, and a larger bell. Frequently, a bass trombone is used as the lowest member of a trombone section. Another member of the trombone family is the E-flat alto trombone, a higher-pitched cousin sometimes found in orchestras. Tenor trombones may also have an *f* attachment, extra tubing with a thumb-operated rotor similar to bass trombones. This extra tubing preserves the basic tenor trombone while providing the option of additional lower register. Valve trombones - instruments with trumpet-like piston valves - do exist, but are seldom used and considered a rarity. Tenor trombones also come in different sizes. Wider-dimensioned or large-bored instruments provide a darker, fuller sound, while small-bored instruments provide a brighter, clearer sound. For all the variety of the trombone family tree, all students should start out with the basic B-flat tenor trombone, and pursue other options after a period of study.



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IS IT HARD TO PLAY?

The trombone is a middle-range instrument. Its sound, while full and large, does not have the forceful prominence of the trumpet. However, the trombone's middle-register status does not limit the instrument to accompaniment lines - trombones do have solo or feature parts. Trombonists, like all brass instrumentalists, must therefore develop an embouchure or correct lip formation, to produce a tone and move from high to low registers. Under the guidance of a qualified teacher, a student will produce a tone and play a few notes at the first lesson. With continued instruction and about half an hour of practice a day, most students will progress rapidly. As noted earlier, many young people say the trombone slide looks fun. Some others say it looks hard. Valves do seem like a more efficient means of changing notes. A trombonist must move the slide several inches as quickly as a trumpet player depresses valves. In practice, however, most students learn to move the slide in a quick and fluid manner. The trombone slide has seven positions, each position giving a series of notes depending on embouchure tension. As a student develops pitch recognition, he or she learns correct slide placement, not unlike a string player learning where to place fingers on a fretless fingerboard. Students who listen to recordings and live performances of slide trombonists in both the jazz and classical arena will hear musicians whose skill often surpasses that of valve instrument practitioners. With proper instruction and a serviceable instrument, most students progress rapidly and find the trombone not hard, but rewarding and fun.

BUYING YOUR FIRST TROMBONE

The staff of any reputable musical instrument store can assist you in purchasing your first trombone. The

director of the school music program as well as private teachers will certainly have opinions as to brand and instrument features. If possible, it is useful to have a teacher or experienced player present while selecting an instrument.

Student, intermediate and professional trombones

Most major instrument manufacturers offer a line of instruments for the beginning student. These instruments are priced in the \$600 range. An intermediate instrument might cost \$900 to \$1,000 while a professional model will run \$1,400 or more. A parent shopping for an instrument may ask why the extreme price range or question the difference in student and professional models. Student instruments are designed for student use. While serviceable and adequate for the young player, student instruments do not have the superior craftsmanship found in professional model instruments. It is advisable that young students begin with a basic student model. The essentials of slide, bell and mouthpiece are all included in good working order and should provide a young student years of pleasure. If a student possesses a high level of interest after two or three years of study, the purchase of an intermediate or professional instrument is advisable. Professional trombones show greater craftsmanship and produce a more refined sound than student model instruments. As noted earlier, even the basic tenor trombone will come in different bore sizes and designs. As a student progresses, the type of music he or she is interested in will dictate what type of professional instrument to buy. For instance, a student interested in jazz might favor the brighter sound of the narrow-bored trombone. A student pursuing orchestral music might prefer the broader sound of the large-bored instrument. Often professionals will own several trombones and make changes depending on what type of music they are called on to perform. As always, the help of both private teacher and music director is critical in selecting the right instrument.



NEW VS. USED

Buying a used instrument is another option in selecting a trombone. The instrument's one moving part, the slide, should be checked first and most carefully. Small dents to the exterior of the slide may severely hamper its operation. The inner slide, plated with chrome, may also show corrosion and wear. Dents in the bell section are not as critical, but may affect the sound and be costly to remove. The condition of the instrument's finish or lacquer should also be considered, as it is the instrument's protection against corrosion and rust.

PICKING A MOUTHPIECE

Most student instruments are equipped with a beginner-sized mouthpiece, generally marked 12C. This is usually adequate for the beginner. Generally as a student grows and progresses, changing to a larger-size mouthpiece is recommended. All students are different, and as always the advice and guidance of a qualified teacher is recommended.

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED?

These accessories will get you started.

1. Slide cream. Most music stores will offer a specially formulated cream for use on trombone slides. This is superior to oil which can lead to sluggish slide movement.
2. Mouthpiece brush, and cleaning snake. Frequent cleaning of the instrument will keep it in good working order.
3. Method books, recommended by your teacher or band director, are available at most music stores.
4. A portable folding music stand.

WHERE SHOULD YOU PURCHASE YOUR TROMBONE?

Most new instruments will come with a manufacturer's warranty. This implies that the instrument may need repair work, either from accidental damage or manufacturer's defect. Many instrument retailers have a repair and maintenance shop. Buying from a retailer offers this convenience.

Buying from a mail-order company is also an option. If you choose this option it is advisable to investigate whether there is a qualified repair shop in your area. It is also possible to buy from a private seller. In this case it is advisable to check all parts of the instrument, and make certain there is a technician in your area qualified to service the instrument. Above all, Have fun!

The performance of music is meant to be fun, so enjoy it! The trombone, a unique and enjoyable instrument, will provide students with years of pleasure. Participation in musical organizations is great fun at all levels.

Playing the trombone, an instrument found in nearly all musical settings, is a great way to enjoy participating in a wide array of musical activities.

Roger Verdi is a free-lance performer and teacher in the New York area. He currently performs with the Modern Brass Quintet, New Philharmonic of New Jersey, and Opera Northeast. He is adjunct professor of trombone at Kean University.