

HOW TO BUY A TUBA

By Stan Gorbatkin

The tuba is a very rewarding instrument to play as it provides many performance opportunities for musicians of all ages. Students pursuing playing the tuba can look forward to meaningful and exciting music-making experiences in bands, orchestras, and chamber groups. Additionally, unlimited solo opportunities are available for tuba players of all ages. Within an ensemble setting, the tuba is considered a vitally important instrument, as it is the "foundation" of the group. As the tuba serves melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic functions in today's repertoire, tuba players will enjoy the low mellow sound of the tuba, which they are able to produce in a variety of settings.

History

The tuba, which is the lowest pitched instrument in the brass family, was patented in 1835 by Prussian bandmaster Friedrich Wilhelm Wieprecht and German builder Gottfried Moritz. This effort was a result of many attempts to add a bass voice to the brass family. As the tuba joined the established members of the brass family, (trumpet, French horn, and trombone), the range of the brass section was greatly expanded. Throughout the 20th century, the recognition of the tuba as a "legitimate solo instrument," was most influenced by three individuals - Harvey Phillips, William Bell, and Arnold Jacobs. Due to their outstanding influence and contributions, it is paramount that these individuals are mentioned within this brief history.

Harvey Phillips, retired tuba professor from Indiana University, is known as the "Paganini of the tuba" for his virtuoso playing. Additionally, he is known as the "Iacocca of the tuba" for his exemplary efforts to elevate the tuba's stature. Phillips' predecessor at Indiana University, William Bell, is often referred to as the "father of the tuba," due to his writing some of the first solos and resource materials for young players, and for teaching many of the outstanding tuba performers and teachers, including Harvey Phillips. And of course, Arnold Jacobs (1915-1998), who served as principal tuba player for the Chicago Symphony from 1944-1988, is considered by many to be the greatest tubist in the world. Internationally recognized as an educator, Jacobs taught tuba at Northwestern University for more than 20 years, and gave master classes all over the world. His research and teaching, related to breathing techniques, positively influenced literally thousands of musicians around the world.



Is the Tuba Hard to Play?

A common misconception is that the tuba takes more air than any other instrument. In fact, beginning flute students often experience more dizziness than beginning tuba students due to the lack of resistance a flute presents.

Like all brass instruments, the tuba requires buzzing into a mouthpiece, which is then amplified by the instrument itself. For some students, the larger mouthpiece size of the tuba is a more natural fit than mouthpieces for the other brass instruments. Additionally, students with braces often have an easier time with the tuba than with other instruments. As smaller sized tubas are now readily available, students need not be exceptionally tall in order to play the tuba. Sometimes, when size is an issue, a young student may begin study on the baritone horn or euphonium and switch to the tuba one or two years later.

The Tuba Family - Which instrument is right for me?

The contemporary tuba family consists of many instruments of various size, function, and fundamental pitch. Below you will find some basic information regarding specific instrument types within the tuba family. The BBb tuba is the most widely used type of tuba, particularly among elementary, middle, and high school students. Most student model BBb tubas manufactured today have upright bells and are equipped with three or four piston or rotary valves. The fundamental pitch is, of course, Bb, for which the tuba is named.

In many schools you may find older BBb "bell front" or "recording" tubas, which were very popular in the mid-20th century. If in good condition, these tubas are also highly suitable for students participating in school concert band settings.

- **BBb tubas** are readily available in a scaled-down version to help deal with challenges presented by young students. Sometimes referred to as a $\frac{3}{4}$ -size BBb tuba, this instrument is significantly smaller and lighter than a full-sized tuba. This is a very popular option, particularly for elementary and middle school students.
- **CC tubas** are similar in size to their BBb counterparts. These tubas, with a fundamental pitch of C, are most often used in orchestras and by professional players. Students planning to pursue advanced studies on the tuba should consult their directors, private instructors, and potential university professor to discuss the possibility of switching to a CC tuba while pursuing advanced studies. As tubas are non-transposing instruments, students making this switch will be learning new fingerings as part of the transition. (This is in contrast to other instrument families such as the saxophone or clarinet, which account for transposition within the music, allowing for the same fingerings to be used with various keyed instruments within their families.)
- **F and Eb tubas** are smaller in size and have fundamental pitches, which match their names. These instruments are often used as supplemental instruments by performers for solos, chamber groups, or to accommodate other special performance demands. As mentioned before with the CC tuba, individuals playing these instruments would need to learn fingerings specific to each instrument.
- **Euphoniums**
The euphonium is considered to be a member of the tuba family, even though its range parallels that of the trombone. The euphonium is a valve instrument which looks like a very small tuba. Many students who begin instruction on the baritone horn will eventually play the euphonium.
- **Sousaphones**
The Sousaphone, named after John Philip Sousa, was developed by the famous bandmaster to provide more appropriate sound direction in a concert setting. Prior to the advent of the Sousaphone, bands under Sousa's direction used the Helicon. Although the Helicon wrapped around the player's shoulder like a Sousaphone, its upright bell produced a sound unsuitable for concert settings.

Marching bands at all levels typically use sousaphones as they are easier to carry and direct the sound more appropriately for parade or field show settings. Elementary and middle schools often purchase fiberglass Sousaphones, which are significantly lighter than their brass counterparts. Brass Sousaphones are capable of producing a better tone quality, however the weight of the instrument is usually problematic for younger students. Sousaphones are not recommended for use other than in the marching band setting. Sousaphone intonation is typically poor, and a student's ability to produce a good characteristic tone is mitigated by the design of the instrument.

How many valves are necessary?

Although a three-valve instrument is highly suitable for a beginning tuba student, securing an instrument with a fourth valve is desirable for students as they move into their third or fourth year of study. The fourth valve greatly assists intonation in the lower register by directing the air through extra tubing, much like an F attachment on a trombone. Advanced student models of BBb and CC tubas rarely have fewer than four valves. Often, professional model tubas will have a fifth valve or rotor to help further facilitate alternate fingerings, and to provide better response, intonation, and tone quality in the extreme low register.

Pistons vs. Rotors

Although beginner model tubas have piston valves, some manufacturers of advanced student and professional models offer rotary valves, which resemble mechanisms commonly used on French horns. The "feel" of the valve action is much different with rotors, and should be carefully considered before a major purchase is made.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, a majority of the higher-end tuba manufacturers used rotary valves. Today, professional models with piston valves are now more readily available. For the advanced student or professional making a purchase, personal preference will be the biggest factor in making this choice.

How do I go about obtaining a Tuba?

Tuba players most often begin by renting or using a tuba from the school they attend. With a new tuba price range of \$1,600 - \$5,000 for a student model, parents are not usually able or expected to make that type of investment until their child has shown ongoing interest and success. Although the details of school-owned

instrument use or rental vary greatly, in most school band programs, students are able to secure access to a school-owned tuba through high school. Beyond high school, students choosing to continue their participation in a musical ensemble may also have access to instruments owned by their college or university. Clearly, any tuba students thinking about pursuing a career in music performance or music education should begin thinking of ways to finance the purchase of their own instrument as early as possible. Typically, these students make their first purchase in the later part of their high school years, or immediately following high school graduation. Students wishing to purchase a tuba should consult their instructors to assist in making an appropriate selection. Local dealers do not typically stock large numbers of tubas, as they typically fill school orders in response to bid specifications for specific instruments. However, if a local dealer is an authorized representative for the brand you are looking for, they should be able to place an order for you. Additionally, some of the larger music catalog centers deal directly with some of the major tuba manufacturers.

Most commonly, individuals purchasing more expensive tubas do so through companies specializing in tuba importing and sales. School directors and private instructors typically have information to access these sources, as well as information on high-quality used instruments.

Accessories

For the most part, beginning tuba students should start out with a mouthpiece that has a wider rim and shallower cup. This will facilitate more control and stability. As students progress, mouthpieces with thinner rims will generally provide more flexibility. Also, a deeper cup will help in producing a darker, fuller sound. Directors and private teachers should assist individual students in selecting a mouthpiece, as each student is different. As with selecting instruments, trying out many mouthpieces is helpful before making a purchase.



When pricing a tuba, be sure to see if the price includes a case. In many instances, tuba cases are sold separately. Many individuals purchase a soft "gig bag" type case, as they are lighter and less expensive. Keep in mind, however, that only hard cases can provide maximum protection of your instrument.

For young students who may have trouble holding a tuba, devices that support the weight of the instrument are readily available. These devices are relatively inexpensive and are usually available through local music dealers.

Stan Gorbatkin received his undergraduate degree in music education at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, where he studied tuba with Fritz Kaenzig and played in bands under the direction of Harry Begian and James Curnow. Prior to attending the U. of I., he attended Joliet Junior College. He also holds a master's degree in music education from VanderCook College of Music, where he studied tuba with Roger Rocco. Gorbatkin has 15 years of experience directing bands in public schools, and he has taught at the elementary, middle school, high school, and junior college levels. He currently serves as assistant principal at Still Middle School in District 204, which serves the Aurora-Naperville area of Illinois. Gorbatkin can be contacted at: Stan.Gorbatkin@jpsd.org.