

Choosing the Best Band Instrument for You

There are many factors to consider in choosing an appropriate instrument to play in the Elementary Band Program. The following information is designed as a guide to help your child make a smarter choice.

Each section below explains the different instruments in the band program. Both the positive aspects of each instrument, and those aspects that might make the instrument more of a challenge for your child are presented. **In the end, your child should choose the instrument that sound best pleases them. Students are more likely to practice if they enjoy the sound of the instrument they choose.**

FLUTE



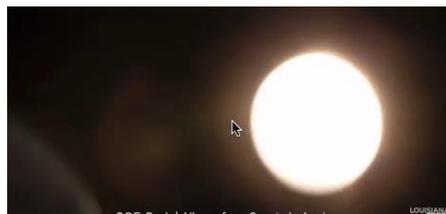
Physical Consideration: The flute requires all 10 fingers to work independently, while being held off to the side. It can be difficult to make a sound at first. It takes some coordination and lots of practice. Students must use lots of air to make a sound, and therefore it may not be appropriate for students with asthma or upper respiratory difficulties. Students often experience difficulties in the when first learning to play the flute until they become accustomed to using enough air support.

Sound Quality: The flute is a woodwind instrument. It has a soft, delicate sound. It plays the highest notes in the band and often plays the melody. At first, it may sound “airy” until the student learns to control their lips.

Other Considerations: The flute is the smallest band instrument which makes it easy to carry. The case does not have room for the lesson book, so students must have a separate bag for that. It may take time to produce a clear/pure tone on the flute, and it takes commitment, and LOTS of practice!!!

How does the flute sound?

Emmanuel Pahud, CPE Bach, Allegro
from Sonata in a minor



OBOE



Physical Considerations: The oboe requires all ten fingers to work independently. It is held comfortably in front of the body, but requires a larger finger spread than any other woodwind instrument. It may be harder for students with small hands, but be patient, you will grow.

Sound Quality: The oboe is a woodwind instrument with a very unique rich and prominent sound. It plays on the higher side, but not as high as flute. It often plays the melody or interesting harmony parts in the band. It can be difficult to make a sound on oboe at first due to the **double reed** and the precise nature of the instrument. It takes a lot of patience, commitment, and PRACTICE!

Other Considerations: The oboe can be a difficult instrument to get started on due to the finger spread and the difficulty of making a good sound at first. Students who choose oboe should be very dedicated and committed independent learners who do not get frustrated easily and are willing to work hard. Oboe is also one of the more expensive instruments to rent and maintain. It uses a double reed to make sound, and **one reed costs about \$10-12**. Students should be able to use a reed for a month or two if they take care not to chip or damage it. Four to five reeds should last a student the whole year if they are not damaged.

Beginners should buy “medium soft” strength reeds. For students who are up to the challenge, oboe is a very fun and rewarding instrument! Again, the case is too small to carry your lesson book, so a separate bag is recommended.

How does the Oboe sound?

11 year old, Olivier Grangean
Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra



with the

CLARINET



Physical Considerations: The clarinet requires all ten fingers to work independently. It is held comfortably in front of the body. Students must be able to cover the “tone holes” completely with the pads of their fingers, so students with very small or thin fingers may be better off starting on saxophone or flute. As a beginner, you do have smaller hands you may have difficulty reaching the lower notes until you grow.

Sound Quality: The clarinet is a woodwind instrument that has a sweet and gentle sound when played properly. It has a large range from low to high, but generally plays mid to high notes in the band. It plays a lot of melody and interesting harmony parts. In the beginning, clarinet is prone to “squeaks” until the student learns to control the air and lips, but this is part of the learning process.

Other Considerations: Clarinet uses a reed to produce sound, which means reeds must be purchased regularly. A single reed costs about \$2, and a box of 10 reeds costs about \$14. Students should go through about 2 boxes of reeds per year. Beginners should start with a reed strength of “2” and move to a “2 ½ “ by the end of their first year or beginning of their second year. The clarinet is small, light, easy to carry, and usually includes a space for the book inside the case. It is a great beginning instrument.

How does the Clarinet sound?

Doreen Ketchens, New Orleans Jazz Clarinetist



ALTO SAXOPHONE



Physical Considerations: The alto saxophone requires all ten fingers to work independently. It is slightly larger than the other woodwinds but uses a neck strap to support the weight of the instrument, which hangs to the right side of the body while sitting or standing. (A padded neck strap is recommended but is not standard with most rentals). Even smaller students with small fingers can be successful with alto sax. It requires more air than clarinet, but not as much as flute. It is therefore an acceptable choice for students with asthma. Its use of the upper lip is similar to clarinet, making it a good choice for students with cleft lip as well. The case is a little heavier to carry, but is not unmanageable.

Sound Quality: The alto saxophone is a woodwind instrument with a louder, fuller sound than the other woodwinds. It has amid-range in the band, and plays some melody as well as interesting harmony and countermelody. It is a great jazz instrument, so students looking to play in jazz band in middle school may be interested in this instrument. It is difficult to control the volume of the saxophone initially, so expect it to be fairly loud. It is somewhat prone to “squeaks” at first, but this is part of the learning process.

Other Considerations: Alto saxophone uses a reed to produce sound, which means reeds must be purchased regularly. A single reed costs about \$3, and a box of 10 reeds costs about \$20. Students should go through about 2 boxes of reeds per year. Beginners should start with a reed strength of “2” and move to a “2 ½” by the end of their first year or beginning of their second year. The alto sax is a little more expensive than some of the other instruments due to its construction, but it is a great beginning band instrument.

NOTE: *Because it produces a loud sound, the number of Saxophones selected each year is limited. If your child is interested in playing the Alto Saxophone, they should be sure to turn in their band selection form early.*

How does a Alto Saxophone sound?
Cannonball Sax Band playing, “Uptown Funk”
by Bruno Mars



TRUMPET/CORNET



Wynton Marsallis, *Jazz Trumpeter and educator, Pulitzer Prize winner.*

Physical Considerations: The trumpet/cornet is held in the left hand and played with the first three fingers of the right hand. It is held comfortably in front of the body. The use of the lip muscles is very important, and therefore it may not be appropriate for students with cleft lip. Trumpet/cornet works best for students with slightly smaller or thinner lips, but can be played successfully with almost any size lip. It also requires the use of a steady air stream, so practicing is important to build up your breathing capacity.

Sound Quality: The trumpet/cornet is a brass instrument with a high and brilliant sound. Brass instruments are louder than woodwind instruments, and they are easy to hear in the band. The trumpet/cornet is the highest brass instrument and plays a lot of melody. It is also used in jazz music. The trumpet/cornet (and all brass instruments) requires buzzing the lips together to make sound. It takes time to build these lip muscles to play different notes, but with consistent practice, you will be a pro in no time.

Other Considerations: Brass instruments require use of the ear to hear different notes and buzz the lips accordingly. Therefore, students with a “good ear”, and can sing “on pitch” tend to be more successful with the trumpet and other brass instruments. The trumpet itself is a nice compact size and weight, and it’s a great band instrument.

How does a Trumpet sound?

Wynton Marsalis
Haydn Trumpet Concerto



FRENCH HORN



Physical Considerations: The French horn is held with the right hand inserted into the bell and played with the first three fingers of the left hand. You do not have to be left handed to play French horn, and it is usually not an issue at all to play with the left hand. It can be awkward at first to position the French horn into proper playing position, but with practice you will succeed. As with trumpet, the use of the lip muscles is very important, The French Horn, like the Trumpet/Cornet requires the use of a steady air stream, so regular practicing is a must.

Sound Quality: The French horn is a brass instrument with a smooth and beautiful rich sound. It plays in the middle range for brass instruments, and usually has very interesting countermelody and harmony parts as well as some melody. Like trumpet/cornet, it takes time to build lip muscle for different notes, but it's possible to make some sound right away. Of all the brass instruments, it has the largest range from low to high. It is louder than most woodwind instruments, but a little quieter than most of the brass instruments.

Other Considerations: Due to the difficulty of positioning the instrument and the difficulty of producing the correct pitch (more so than other brass instruments), students who choose French horn should be very dedicated and committed independent learners who do not get frustrated easily and are willing to work hard. Good chorus students, strings students, and piano students often make good French horn players. More than any other instrument, a "good ear" is required to play French horn. It is also one of the most expensive instruments to rent. Sometimes your band teacher has an instrument for you to borrow. Check with him or her first.

TROMBONE



Melba Liston, *1st woman trombonist in the Big Band era; she played with Dizzy Gillespie* and was the focus of the book, “Little Melba and Her Big Trombone” by Kathryn Russell Brown, published by Barnes and Noble in 2008.

Physical Considerations: The trombone is held in the left hand while the right hand grasps the “slide” and moves it to the desired position. Because of the slide, this instrument may not be appropriate for every student so the baritone would be a better choice. It takes a little more coordination to hold than other instruments, but most students are able to handle it. Like all brass instruments, it requires the use of the lip muscles and breath control. Trombone is unique because it uses a slide and not valves.

Sound Quality: The trombone is a brass instrument with a full, low sound. It can be played loud but also soft and sweet. The trombone is the lowest of the brass instruments offered, has a large range, and is used in jazz music. It often plays low bass lines, fun countermelody and harmony parts, and melody in the band. It is unique in that it is the only instrument that can make a “sliding” sound called a glissando due to the slide. It uses the buzzing of the lips to make sound like all brass instruments.

Other Considerations: The trombone reads in bass clef, which is new to some students, but can be learned quickly with consistent practice. Piano students or cello students who know bass clef already have an even quicker time learning trombone. Due to the slide, students with a “good ear” and the ability to “sing on pitch” are more successful on trombone. It has an oblong case, but it is not unmanageable. Trombone is very unique and is a great beginning instrument.

BARITONE



Physical Considerations: The baritone is cradled in the left hand against the body and played with the first three fingers of the right hand. Like the other brass instruments, this instrument requires use of the lips to change pitches as well as a steady air stream. It is a little larger and heavier so smaller students will have to adapt to the instruments weight to play properly. The instrument does come in various sizes to help with the size issue.

Sound Quality: The baritone is a brass instrument with a full, low sound very similar to the trombone. It shares the status as the lowest of the brass instruments offered. It too plays low bass lines, fun countermelody and harmony parts, and melody in the band. It uses the buzzing of the lips to make sound like all brass instruments.

Other Considerations: The baritone is a wonderful starting instrument, and one of the easiest instruments to begin making sound on. Keep in mind that sometimes your bus driver may not allow this instrument on the bus for safety reasons so ask if there are school owned baritones available to help alleviate some of this problem.

PERCUSSION ~ BELLS OR SNARE DRUM



Physical Considerations: Percussion requires the use of both hands, and students stand to play (although arrangements can be made for students unable to stand). Percussionists learn to play multiple instruments with different techniques, so it is a good choice for students who pick things up quickly and have good coordination and a good steady beat. The idea that “anyone” can play percussion is somewhat of a common misconception. Percussion instruments are actually some of the most difficult instruments to learn properly. Students with a good steady beat and good hand-eye and body coordination are the most successful at learning percussion. *****Therefore, any student interested in playing percussion/bells must pass a rhythmic/steady beat reading test *before* you are selected for the band.**

Sound Quality: Percussion instruments are typically the loudest in the band, although a practice pad to use while practicing at home is provided. The bells or snare drum are what your child will be focusing on in lessons, although they may play other instruments in the concert (for example: Triangle, cymbals, cowbell, tambourine, jingle bells, woodblock, and claves)

Other Considerations: Percussion also requires dedicated practice and commitment. Students who wish to play in the Percussion section need to remember they are the “heartbeat” of the band, and just like a human heart, if you miss a beat, you throw off the entire group. Keep in mind that students who “just want to play drum set” may be better off taking private drum set lessons. They will not learn to play drum set in band. For students up for the challenge, playing percussion is a very unique and rewarding experience!