

A Parent's Guide on How to Choose a Band Instrument

All major instrument manufacturers make several levels or categories of instruments.

There are three major classifications: **Student**, **Advanced Student**, **Semi-Pro** and **Professional**

Even within these three main categories there are subcategories due to the fact that some models within a category are more advanced and are better quality than others.

Obviously student instruments are the least expensive, Semipro is in the middle and Professional instruments will cost the most to buy. One should not decide by price alone when purchasing an instrument. You should always consider who the instrument is for and how it will be used and handled. This is the most important consideration. Even if you are embarrassingly rich, and have more money than sense please don't buy a 4 thousand dollar professional instrument for your 10 year old beginner. On the other hand, if you are very cheap don't buy a basic student instrument for a serious, talented and dedicated student.

Matching the right instrument to the right player is critical. Having the right instrument will provide you with the best value and the most enjoyment for years to come.

Description of the Categories:

Basic Student

Generally speaking these instruments are built for economy and durability. The least expensive of all instruments, these are instruments best suited for the absolute beginner who is not sure if he or she will like music. This is also the best category for someone who is not very meticulous and is rough on their things or one who is not focused enough. This does not mean that all student instruments are low quality, some are quite good. It simply means that they are created for a certain type of player, specifically the beginner.

Most young teens fall into this category but many times parents are wrong about their child's commitment level. Often we see that the parent does not believe that their child will enjoy music or stick with it. Many times the opposite happens and the student really takes to it and enjoys it.

Who its for:

- The absolute beginner,
- The parent who is on a very tight budget,
- Parents that would normally rent an instrument but are smart enough not to,
- The rough kid who does not take care of his or her things like they should,
- The player who will use the instrument in tough conditions, such as marching,
- The student who is not focused enough on music,
- The student who just takes music because he has to,
- The student who always has to be told to practice,
- The student who takes music for fun but will not make music an important part of his or her life,

Basic Student Flutes are typically designed with closed hole keys, also known as "plateau style". These flutes are made of nickel and are silver plated (not solid silver) and are designed for durability and easy response for the inexperienced player. A silver plated flute is preferred to a nickel plated flute, these typically are the lowest quality flutes on the market.

Basic Student Clarinets are made of plastic to be cost effective. They require basic maintenance and are not susceptible to cracking or environmental conditions like wood instruments. You can get some very high quality student plastic clarinets. They will do everything that a top professional instrument will do, so there is no loss by going with a good student clarinet. They are great for marching as well.

Basic Student Trumpets are made more crude and the workmanship is less precise. The machining of the parts is rougher in appearance and not as nicely finished. The instrument is not as ornate, which does not really matter to a beginner or someone who is in a marching band. Good quality basic student instruments play very well despite the lower price. The valves are made with looser tolerances than higher priced horns, so they should always move freely as long as there is no dirt or dents in the valve casings. Beautiful craftsmanship is kept to a minimum. The cases are usually molded plastic or of simple plywood construction. Perfect for a beginner or even beyond. Also great for the abuse of marching bands.

Basic Student Trombones are characterized by workmanship which is not as refined. The machining of the parts is more crude and not as nicely finished. Quality student trombones can play very well despite the lower price. The hand-slide is made with looser tolerances for a looser fit and is not as smooth. For this reason this can be advantageous since the slides should be less susceptible to imperfections, dirt or minor dents in the slide tubes. Beautiful craftsmanship is kept to a minimum. The cases are usually molded plastic or of simple plywood construction. These instruments are perfect for a beginner and even beyond. Also great for marching bands.

Basic Student Saxophones have keywork and mechanisms which are simplified to promote more durability and less repairs. These instruments are often made of thicker metal to make them less susceptible to dents. The parts are rougher in appearance and the mechanism is more durable but less precise when compared to more expensive saxophones. The cases are made to be functional and not to be stylish. Perfect for the beginner, marching bands, young student or hobbyist.

Advanced Student

These instruments cost slightly more than basic student instruments but they are more refined in terms of both workmanship and precision of mechanics.

Who its for:

- Absolute beginners who are very interested in playing the instrument
- The student who has already played for a few years on an instrument and now wants to play a better instrument.
- The beginner who had prior musical training such as piano lessons.
- The adult amateur player who plays for enjoyment.

Please Note: Advanced Student instruments are very fine quality and even professional players can play one of these instruments without feeling handicapped in any way. This category is your best value since serious beginners will not outgrow this instrument and can make it a lifetime investment.

If you choose this category your child can play it throughout high school without needing to get a better instrument.

Advanced Student Flutes are closed-hole flutes but they usually play and sound much like a professional flute. They are silver plated but the mechanisms are very tight and precise, the embouchure plates have been designed in such a way so that these instruments are great performers in the hands of a complete beginner or anyone with a few years of experience.

Advanced Student Clarinets are made of wood. The wood however is not the premium, aged wood found in Professional instruments. Often imperfections in lesser grade wood are hidden by fillers and dies. Otherwise these instruments are similar in many respects to professional clarinets. Many of these instruments are identical to basic student instruments but with a wood body. In this respect they tend not to be a great value. Tone quality is subjective so any tonal improvement over a plastic student clarinet is also subjective.

Advanced Student Trumpets are instruments which are made to have smoother valve action and they have generally nicer finished parts and a better case. These instruments are usually a very good value for the grade school or the high school student. They have tighter fitting valves which makes them more efficient with less air loss in the valve casings. These instruments also have added features such as fast moving, fine-tuning 1st and 3rd slides, adjustable 3rd slide finger rings for comfort and upgraded cases.

Advanced Student Trombones are a good value because they are an improvement overall from a basic student trombone in that the slides are much smoother, the intonation is better, the plating on the inside slides are thicker and thus more durable. They are better finished with more precision and closer tolerances over basic student trombones. They also have nicer cases.

Advanced Student Saxophone - A great deal for the beginner or the advanced student as well. Some of these saxophones are very good quality. They have smoother, more quieter key action, better intonation, fit and finish is improved and come in better cases. These instruments generally feel very good to the player since the action is lighter, smoother and without any looseness in the keys. Much more care is taken in the manufacturing process when building these instruments. Also much more care is taken in the set up so that pad air leaks are eliminated at the factory and tone holes are leveled perfectly.

Intermediate (Semi-Pro)

These instruments are usually purchased by saxophonists wanting all of the benefits of a professional saxophone at a lower price. Some great bargains can be had in this category. These instruments lack the hype and the image of the top line instruments but you get virtually the same quality in craftsmanship and sound for hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollar less. If you know what to shop for in terms of brands and models you will get a wonderful instrument which will last a lifetime. If you just want a great instrument and don't care about the prestige of owning the top model, then this is your category.

Who its for:

- The very serious high school student, - The college student - The serious adult amateur player

Intermediate Flutes most often feature open hole (French-style keys) and a solid silver headjoint and a B-foot joint. Some are entirely made of solid silver except for the keys which are silver plated. The solid silver head makes for an increase in tonal quality and some feel that it justifies the added expense. The B-foot extends the lower range by one note and the open-hole keys allow more flexibility in sound and pitch.

Intermediate Clarinet - These instruments are made of Grandialla wood as are professional clarinets. Keywork, intonation, craftsmanship and materials are similar or identical to top line professional clarinets. These instruments have upgraded cases, better quality mouthpieces and tight and smooth mechanisms. The mechanism is also closer to the body, just like on professional clarinets. The key action is effortless smooth and quiet.

Intermediate Trumpets are close in quality to the finest professional trumpets. These instruments can cost several hundred dollars less but are still based on comparable professional models. They have all the features of a professional horn but are built with the use of less expensive manufacturing techniques to keep the price lower. These instruments are also built on the regular production line, while professional trumpets are built in separate batches or even in separate facilities using more hand craftsmanship. Semi-pro trumpets usually do not have the many options that one can get when ordering a professional instrument.

Intermediate Trombones are close in quality to the finest professional trombones. These instruments can cost several hundred dollars less but are still based on comparable professional models. They have all the features of a professional horn but are built with the use of less expensive manufacturing techniques to keep the price lower. These instruments are also built on the regular production line while top of the line trombones are built in separate batches or even in separate facilities using more hand craftsmanship. Semi-pro trombones usually do not have the many options that one can get when ordering a professional instrument.

Intermediate Saxophone - Keywork, intonation, craftsmanship and materials are similar or identical top line professional saxophones. These instruments have upgraded cases, tight and smooth mechanisms. The key action is effortless and quiet. Cost is lower than comparable professional instruments since less hand work is utilized in the construction.

Professional

What can I say? If you have the bucks the musical ability, appreciate the finest things in life and know how to take care of fine instruments then this is your category. This category offers the most recent advancements in instrument design, materials and tonal characteristics. You will also have the image of "owning the best", which will not necessarily make you the best player. You can go mild or wild in this category. You can purchase some conventional professional instruments which are exceptional in quality but are not that fancy or you can go wild and get an instrument made of radical materials or employing revolutionary new designs and finishes. As with anything, the sky is the limit. If you choose your model correctly you will get a top of the line instrument and it will still be very affordable.

Who its for:

- A professional player or someone who makes at least some money playing their instrument.
- Very serious and aspiring young musicians who never have to be told to "practice"
- The amateur player who aspires to be a professional player,
- The instrument collector, who collects the finest instruments,

Professional Flutes have a solid silver head, body and foot sections as well as solid silver keys. The silver material adds to the resonant qualities of the instrument. As the price and quality of an instrument increase, so do the availability of options, performance capability, degree of hand craftsmanship and most importantly tone quality. These are the best sounding flutes available designed for solo performance where the flute is the featured instrument in a concert setting. Hand craftsmanship produces an instrument of the highest tonal quality and best response. Some options include a choice of exotic materials such as solid gold and platinum and other features such as the hand cutting of the embouchure hole, C# key, Split E key, French pointed key arms, and white gold springs.

Professional Clarinets are designed for optimum sound, intonation and technical facility. These instruments feature the latest advances in instrument design. Some of the features are undercut tone holes, for better intonation and tone, specially tapered (and often polished) inner bores for evenness of tone color throughout the instrument, the choicest wood and sometimes thicker walls for a darker sound. Professional clarinets also sometimes offer additional keywork to assist in the performance of difficult classical music.

Professional Trumpets are instruments for the long term player. These instruments will last a lifetime of hard professional use. Tone quality is the most important goal in designing these instruments. They also have the best intonation and can often be customized to the wishes of the serious experienced player. Some of the custom options are different bore sizes, different wall thicknesses, triggered slides, different lead pipe choices, different bell sizes, bell shapes, bell materials, etc. These instruments can be custom tailored to the specific tonal and music style of the player.

Professional Trombones are instruments for the long term player. These instruments will last a lifetime of hard professional use. Tone quality is the most important goal in designing these instruments. They also have the best intonation and can often be customized to the wishes of the serious experienced player. Some of the custom options are different bore sizes, different wall thicknesses, unique valve designs, different tubing wraps, interchangeable leadpipes, different bell sizes, bell shapes, bell materials, etc. These instruments can be custom tailored to the specific tonal and music style of the player.

Professional Saxophones - These instruments are usually chosen by the most discriminating players. They offer the best tone and intonation. The workmanship is meticulous, adjustment is perfect, tuning is as good as it gets and tone quality is paramount. An investment for life, these instruments are often available in fancy finishes and with elaborate hand engraving. Some vintage professional saxophones end up being sought after as collectors items.