

Instrument Buying Guide

Beginners always need high-quality instruments to succeed in their music

In life, we all have the ability to set priorities based upon our value systems. Accordingly, we allocate our resources, including time, energy and money. If, for example, you wanted to become the best possible golfer, you might take lessons, subscribe to magazines, watch videos, and purchase a well-made set of clubs. The clubs alone could cost you thousands of dollars, but you justify the expense because high-quality equipment increases your chances of success and consequently, happiness.

Q: "What does a quality instrument have to do with music education?"

A: In a word, "Everything!"

Choosing the right instrument will mean that money was well spent. It will also mean that the student will get the most success and enjoyment from playing music. Good quality equipment makes the development of a new skill much easier. It doesn't matter whether the new challenge is learning to play golf or a clarinet - the lower the quality of equipment being used, the more difficult and frustrating the development of skills will be.

Unlike a lawnmower or toaster, a musical instrument is an extension of the player. An instrument is a very personal item because it virtually becomes part of the person playing it. This is why the issue of quality is so important when acquiring that first instrument. High-quality equipment will help any level of learner improve, and it is especially important to the progress of a beginner.

As with any other product on the market, musical instruments are not all created equally. Quality standards vary from pure rubbish to very desirable for the student. To the untrained eye, a toy or an imitation product made off-shore in a third world country and sold as a "store-brand" may look similar to serious instrument, but in reality is very different. This is how some retailers mislead unsuspecting parents into buying less expensive and inferior products. This is why parents should arm themselves with knowledge when acquiring an instrument.

"If a parent buys or rents the cheapest thing they can find, they will almost be guaranteed not to have to spend money on music again"

The beginner's task is the most difficult. Everything is new, and with every step a challenge. There are so many physical and mental tasks to master that the last thing a beginner needs is problems with his or her equipment, which can turn an already difficult process into a series of insurmountable tasks. This is especially true in the case of

elementary-age students learning to play band instruments for the first time. A poor quality instrument will only frustrate the beginner. It will play out of tune, not produce notes properly, go out of adjustment and have poor tone quality. These are all issues that will contribute to a decrease in self-confidence and will result in a loss of interest in playing. A young student will not have the experience to know that his or her instrument is bad, they will simply think that they are not good at music and will want to quit. Sadly, when kids quit music, they usually quit for life!

"Parents usually must be educated to the fact that choice of instrument for their child can have a major influence on the child's success or failure."John Whyte
(Chicago Area Music Educator)

Each year, many students begin instrumental study with excitement and anticipation only to be discouraged by the frustration of playing poorly made or antiquated instruments that play badly and are incapable of producing a characteristic sound, even when the student is doing everything correctly. The list of potential problems inherent in low-grade band instruments is virtually endless and certainly too long to detail in this article.

"Quality should be your most important consideration when looking for a band instrument."

Most parents feel intimidated by having to purchase something they feel they know nothing about. The good news is that they do not have to be experts at all. It's as simple as just buying quality. As with any other product, a brand-name instrument, purchased from a knowledgeable dealer, will automatically guarantee that you have made a smart purchase by buying the right product. There are obvious steps that can be taken in advance, though, to ensure that beginning band students avoid the frustration and eventual failure that can result from attempts to learn on unplayable instruments. Parents of prospective music students should do the following:

Learn about the product you will be spending money on. Call all of the stores that deal with wind instruments in your area and ask as many questions as possible. There is no such thing as a "dumb question".

Do not spend your money at a store simply because of the way it appears and happens to be near-by and convenient. These factors have nothing to do with quality of the instrument or expertise of the staff, and will not necessarily produce the best value for your dollar.

Remember that the company, which supplies your school, may not be suitable for your own personal needs as a private consumer.

Purchase only a Brand-Name instrument made by a reputable instrument manufacturer. Never buy a "No-Name" or "Store-Brand" product.

Buy only from local full-service wind instrument specialists with a reputable on-site repair shop. Never purchase from a store that sends out repairs to an outside repair facility. These type of stores usually do not have the necessary knowledge to deal with wind instruments. A qualified repair technician will always be the most knowledgeable individual to consult about your instrument.

Buy from the experts: a company, which sells and services only wind instruments. "General" music stores that sell guitars, drums, keyboards and accordions, often do not have the expertise to know the intricacies of wind instruments.

Buy from a company that will be there for you after the sale and one that provides a solid one-year unconditional warranty on every instrument that they sell.

Do not commit yourself too fast. Take your time and investigate all of your options.

Be careful, never buy an instrument from someone who doesn't know what they are selling you.

Don't be intimidated by musical instruments. It's amazing what you can learn in one afternoon of investigation and shopping around using the Yellow Pages.

"The driving force behind all of our efforts is the issue of quality."

Although some parents have enough experience with musical instruments to understand the need for high quality, most do not have the background, and can easily make a mistake. Parents must realize that the instrument they give their child can have a major influence on the child's success or failure during the first year of instruction. This is especially true when obtaining an instrument through a source other than a wind instrument specialist.

Risky instruments include those from a relative or friend, cheap "store-brand" instruments, want-ads, department store catalogues, pawn shops, flea markets, general music stores, garage sales and - worst of all - the attic. More often than not, if an instrument is acquired through one of these sources, the student will end up either with an instrument that is substandard in quality and/or will need expensive repairs or one which is not worth repairing at all. Many parents who do not know what they are buying can end up buying an instrument from someone who doesn't know what they are selling. This scenario usually ends up being detrimental for everyone involved, with the student being most directly and most adversely affected.

Music teachers are educators first and foremost, and may not be specialists in knowing the subtleties and intricacies of band instruments. They may not be familiar with all of the different instrument brands and models and they may not have the experience necessary to spot potential problems with instruments that you will later have to deal with. By

consulting a Professional Wind-Instrument Repair Expert, YOU will gain from the experience and the knowledge of an individual who deals with instruments exclusively, and who therefore can give you thorough and accurate information. As with cars, many of us drive, but most of us are not automobile experts or mechanically trained.

"Where the instrument is purchased is just as important as which instrument is purchased."

The most obvious means of ensuring that a beginning music student has a high quality and playable instrument is to buy a new or used instrument from a reputable woodwind and brasswind specialist who is also a professional band instrument repair technician. A repair technician will have the necessary knowledge to evaluate any instrument based on his/her experience in repairing hundreds of similar instruments. Also important to remember, is that any repair technician who has pride in his/her work and a reputation to uphold will sell only instruments of quality and perfect playing condition. A repair technician will give a solid warranty and he/she will be there for you if problems arise with your instrument.

"No-name", "store-brand" or "off-brand" instruments are usually so poorly designed and built that they will never function at the level of a "Brand-Name" instrument. To invoke an old maxim; "You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." In other words, a poorly made instrument will always play poorly, no matter what steps are taken to improve upon it. The bottom line is that a "low-quality" instrument will do the student more harm than good, decreasing the student's likelihood of success.

At every opportunity, parents should be encouraged to obtain the best student instrument they can afford. Their children will thank them - musically - every time they perform. Most importantly, music will stay with them for the rest of their lives.