



# Buying a musical instrument — making the right choice

A guide brought to you by the Music for All Charity

# Welcome to the amazing world of playing a musical instrument!

Music is a wonderful and engaging pursuit for any child or adult and there is considerable evidence of the positive effects of music making for everyone.

This is over and above the sheer fun and enjoyment of playing an instrument.

Making music also:

- Builds greater social and team skills
- Improves reasoning capacity and problem solving skills
- Improves maths and language performance
- Improves memory, concentration, creativity, self-esteem and self-discipline

Music is an essential part of the fabric of our lives. It is an extremely powerful means of communication, playing a role in many of our social institutions and religious rituals. Making music can break down cultural barriers and strengthen social unity.

This booklet has been produced by the Music for All charity (MfA), which is the UK charity that believes "Making Music Changes Lives".

Many of the best known instrument manufacturers and shops have helped us to collate the publication and we are very grateful for their support. We have, however, deliberately kept the book "brand free" in order to leave all the information as impartial as possible and to allow you to make informed choices about what you wish to purchase.

The Music for All charity networks with hundreds of quality musical instrument shops throughout the UK and you can find your nearest one by going to our website [www.musicforall.org.uk](http://www.musicforall.org.uk) and clicking on the "Practical Help" tab. We also have a "Find a music teacher" section in this tab, which may be of use.



# Some truths about making music

**TRUTH 1:** Everyone is musical and nearly all of us have the ability to sing and to play an instrument. Of course some of us have more aptitude than others. That's natural in exactly the same way that some people are more gifted than others in sport, or any other area of learning.

**TRUTH 2:** Because everyone is musical, everyone can develop their musical skills to the point that they are able to. Very few of us will become professional musicians but most of us can have a life of enjoyment and achievement through making music.

**TRUTH 3:** There is no one way to learn to play an instrument. Over the years various methods and approaches have been developed. Each approach will suit one person but not necessarily another. Individuals need to find a style and approach that best suits them.

**TRUTH 4:** Music is often best enjoyed when it is shared with others. That 'other' can be a teacher or a member of the family. They can be friends, or a class of other players, a band or a whole orchestra. The important thing about making music is that you make your music with other people as soon and as often as you can.

**TRUTH 5:** All music is made up of the same core elements such as melody, rhythm, harmony and tone. These precepts of music are evident in all styles from classical to rock. There is no best music through which to learn nor is there any right order as to which style should come first. Success and enjoyment are

more dependent on the learning approach and the student's motivation and goals than whether you are playing Blur, Bhangra or Bach.

**TRUTH 6:** There are two major aspects to music, playing an instrument and understanding and being musical (some people call it music theory). These two elements are not separate subjects and should be integrated in the process of learning and developing as a musician.



# Getting the best out of this guide

This publication exists to give you a brief overview of the main instrument categories, followed by a short guide of “what to look for” when purchasing a quality musical instrument. The information has been collated with children, adults, parents and teachers in mind and we hope it is useful to all!

## SOME GENERAL THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU BUY

There are many things to think about when choosing a suitable instrument including:

- the age of the student (if of school age)
- the kind of music you want to play
- the amount you can afford
- the practicalities (such as size and portability of the instrument)



## STUDENT OR BEGINNER INSTRUMENTS

On the surface it is easy to think that a student or beginner instrument is just a cheaper version of what the professionals play. While student instruments are certainly less expensive, they are not what ‘cheaper’ normally implies (ie less well designed or manufactured). In fact a good student instrument offers special attributes that assist the learner to progress and enjoy their music making.

This includes things like less resistance being built into a student woodwind or brass instrument so the instrument easier to blow for an inexperienced player. (‘Resistance’ refers to how much pressure or effort is required to make the sound, and is influenced by the

careful design of mouthpieces and bodies). A lower action on a guitar makes playing easier and more fluent for young or inexperienced hands. (The ‘action’ is the distance between the fret board and the strings.)

## GET TO YOUR LOCAL MUSIC SHOP!

Whether you are starting or already play, the best advice anyone can give you is to go out to your nearest music shop and play all the instruments you can until you find the one that suits you and your budget best. There is simply no substitute for trying and selecting the instrument you will make your own.

## BUY, RENT OR BORROW?

You may not wish to buy an instrument immediately in case it turns out not to suit you or your child. Some Music Services and schools offer instruments on loan to beginners; many others (including some retailers) operate rental systems that, for a modest fee, provide for an experimental trial period. (Music Services are organisations around the country that provide music tuition in state schools and at local Music Centres. Go to [www.musicmark.org.uk/members](http://www.musicmark.org.uk/members) to find your local one.) This is invaluable for the more expensive instruments as it allows you or your child to get a feel for what is involved in learning, playing and maintaining the instrument before actually buying one.

Some shops working with local schools operate the VAT-free Instrument Purchase Scheme (A.I.P.S.) and it is worth asking about if this if

buying for a child who is at a state school or academy."

Many shops operate finance schemes to help spread the cost of an instrument purchase.

**"Take it away"** is a publicly funded scheme that supports music education by providing interest free loans to help you spread the cost of buying a musical instrument. It is available through a network of registered member retailers in England and Northern Ireland.  
[www.takeitaway.org.uk](http://www.takeitaway.org.uk)

The instrument must be appropriate for you, however you intend to obtain it. Learning on a sub-standard instrument is extremely demoralising and will prevent you from progressing. You do not have to buy the most expensive instrument, but it must be fit for purpose and properly set up to suit you – try to consult a teacher or music shop. If you are offered the loan of

an instrument by a friend or family member, or are considering the purchase of a second-hand instrument, a teacher should check it for suitability before it is used. However good an instrument is, it may not necessarily be appropriate for you. Most young string players, for example, begin learning on specially-made smaller instruments and will find it very uncomfortable (if not impossible) to play an instrument that is too large.

## CONCLUSION

The best advice is to talk to other musicians, music teachers and music stores to advise on the brands and models to look out for. These are the people with the experience to direct you to the kinds of products that they trust to do the job for them. There is no shortage of great products and brands so you will usually be spoilt for choice!



# Ukulele

The ukulele is a very popular instrument for beginners as it is easy to learn and small enough to carry around. With just four nylon strings, a beginner can easily pick up their first few chords and start playing. Since the 1990s the ukulele's popularity has been enhanced by YouTube video performances and by its take-up as an alternative classroom teaching instrument.

There are four main sizes of ukulele: soprano, concert, tenor and baritone. The soprano is the most traditional and most popular as it makes a classic ukulele sound.

The concert ukelele is larger than the soprano, and has a bigger body and a longer neck with slightly more room between the frets. Like the soprano, it has a typical ukulele sound that is slightly louder. The tenor ukulele is larger again with a deeper, more resonant sound than the soprano and concert ukuleles. The largest of the range is the baritone ukulele which sounds more like a classical guitar and has a different tuning, tuned the same as the four highest strings on a guitar. It is often seen as a transition instrument to the guitar.

There is a huge range of songbooks and teaching guides available with easy chord-based arrangements for songs you know. Many of these have access to online resources and videos. Another easy way to learn is to join a local ukulele group and enjoy playing together with fellow players of all abilities.

## What to look for:

1. Avoid the very cheapest models – As a beginner, the cheapest models may offer problems such as uneven frets and poor intonation. Good quality beginner models will have a well-finished fingerboard and quality geared pegs as these are easy to tune.
2. Long term – If you are thinking about playing long term, buy a model that will take you further in your playing. For example, choose a ukulele with solid tonewoods or better quality strings.
3. Buy an electronic tuner – This will make tuning your ukulele a much easier process.
4. Case – Check if your ukulele includes a gig bag or case. If not, you should buy one to ensure that you are transporting your instrument safely.
5. Care and Storage – Ukuleles are particularly sensitive to humidity and temperature. The ambient temperature should be between 20c and 25c. Be careful, as the wood could warp if it gets too hot.
6. String change – Your ukulele strings should be changed if they start to sound unusually dull, or if you notice any discolouration.



# The guitar family of instruments

There are 3 main types of guitar: Acoustic Guitar, Electric Guitar and Bass Guitar.

Guitars are highly popular starter instruments, and there are many theories on which kind of guitar to start on. However, it is most important to choose an instrument that reflects your musical tastes. For example, if you like hardcore death metal, an acoustic guitar won't necessarily be the best instrument for you! Many guitars also come in smaller sizes to suit younger players.

## Acoustic Guitar

The acoustic guitar is affordable, easy to transport and quiet enough not to disturb others during practice. It's relatively easy to get a nice sound, which is encouraging for a beginner, and it doesn't need any additional equipment like amplification.

There are two types of acoustic guitar: nylon strung acoustic and steel strung acoustic.

Nylon strung (also called classical guitar) offers the most comfortable playing experience as the strings are easier on the fingers. Classical guitars are considered the best for beginners, as they're easier to play and the lighter string tension makes it much easier to press the string down into the fretboard to sound a note

The steel string acoustic guitar is a more modern form of guitar that produces a brighter, louder sound. They are often used for pop, folk, rock and other styles.



## Electric Guitar

In the past, guitar teachers felt that it was important to obtain a good technique on an acoustic guitar before playing an electric, but attitudes have changed, and as long as the correct tuition is given, an electric guitar is just as good a starter instrument.

Like the classical guitar's nylon strings, the electric guitar also has thinner, lighter strings that are closer to the fretboard and offer a good level of comfort for the beginner.

As electric guitars don't have a hollow body to amplify the sound, magnetic pickups are used underneath the strings which need external amplification. This means you will also need a guitar amplifier and an instrument cable to connect it with. Electrics are generally played with a plectrum and you'll also need a strap.



## Bass Guitar

The bass guitar is similar in appearance and construction to an electric guitar, except with a longer neck and scale length, and generally it will have 4 strings.

If low end thunder is more your thing, consider a bass guitar. Since the 1960s, the bass guitar has largely replaced the double bass in popular music. The bass guitarist is responsible for anchoring the harmonic framework and establishing the beat.

These instruments are very easy to handle for the beginning player, and you can play an acoustic bass, or an electric bass.



## What to look for:

1. **Sizes:** Guitars come in a variety of sizes, and a full size one is generally suitable for ages 10-12 and upwards. Smaller sizes are available for younger students.
2. **What suits you:** You should buy the guitar that plays, sounds and looks the best for you. The expertise of the maker and the degree to which an instrument is handmade are of major significance for the development of tonal quality
3. **Packages:** Most shops will offer a complete starter package to get you started that includes all you will need, check these out as many offer good value
4. **Try before you buy:** If possible, buy the instrument in store and not online – you need a chance to see, touch and feel the instrument. They will also help you with tuning and maintenance. They're likely to have information to help you find a teacher, and may even have teaching facilities on site!
5. **Guitar shows:** Look out for a guitar show or convention in your area, there will be a variety of products to try and see, demonstrations, and experts with a wealth of knowledge and advice.
6. **Lessons:** Invest in music tuition; by far the most important investment of all. It's all too easy for an instrument to be bought and just sit in a corner gathering dust – get an inspiring teacher and get playing!

# Piano



The piano is a wonderful instrument that encompasses harmony, melody and rhythm. It enables you to learn general musicianship skills that are applicable to all kinds of music. There is a wide range of sheet music available for the piano that covers a huge and varied repertoire from classical and jazz right through to blues and pop music so that it can appeal to people of all ages and ability.

There are two main types of piano, the 'traditional' acoustic piano and the digital piano, both of which have their pros and cons. The acoustic piano has a mechanical 'action' where pressing the key moves a felt hammer, which hits the metal strings to produce the sound of varying volume through the wooden soundboard, (hence the name Pianoforte!).

The digital piano is a clear alternative to the acoustic. As always, you get what you pay for, the better the model, the closer it is to an acoustic piano, the more realistic the touch and tone will become. The big advantage of the digital piano is that the volume level is totally controllable, and can also be used with headphones.

They may also come with a range of other instrument sounds, and on some models can be used with music software on a computer. It should be pointed out that certain (more expensive) acoustic pianos are now available with a "quiet piano" system, which allows silent practice through headphones.

## What to look for:

1. **Decide what sort of piano you are looking for** – Do you want an Upright, Grand or Digital Piano. Do you want a “quiet piano” system, or do you want the ability to have an automatic self-playback system?
2. **Do you want to buy a brand new piano, or a second-hand instrument?** – Many of the leading brands now offer affordable options, and purchasing a new piano means you can rely on the quality as it will also come with a manufacturer guarantee. If you buy a restored second hand piano, or a nearly new one from a showroom, you should also get a guarantee. Don't be frightened to ask.
3. **The size of the instrument** – When looking to buy a traditional piano (Upright or Grand), do bear in mind the size of the instrument and where it will go in your home. It has to be able to turn tight corners, be carried up a small flight of stairs, or be turned on its end to fit into a lift.
4. **It is always best to see, hear and try before you buy** – Take your time to visit a few piano shops where the staff will be able to offer you expert advice.
5. **Make sure you sit down and play the piano in a shop** – It should be responsive to your touch and most importantly, have a tonal quality that you like. Be sure to play all of the notes, especially at the extremes of the instrument (the very top and the very bottom) to give you a good indication of the overall tonal quality.
6. **Soundboard and strings** – The two major factors that affect the tone are the soundboard area and the length of the strings. As a general rule, the bigger the piano, the better it is. It is worth considering the largest piano to suit your home

and budget. Remember not to buy too big a piano for the size of room. Too big is just as bad as too small.

7. **Maintaining your piano** – Acoustic pianos are made from natural materials that are susceptible to changes in temperature and need to be tuned professionally on a regular basis. Keep in touch with your piano shop, they will be able to advise on maintaining your piano.
8. **Regulation and tuning** – Once you have bought your piano, ensure that the chosen showroom and workshop will check over the piano, carrying out a full regulation, and tuning prior to delivery, as well as a follow up tuning after delivery once the piano has had the chance to settle down.



# Portable Keyboard

The electronic keyboard is a very practical and low cost way to start playing a keyboard. Many will come with basic keyboard skills instructions.

Whereas a digital piano will usually have a fairly standard and basic feature set, portable or 'home' keyboards come in a variety of different keyboard lengths and sizes, and generally include a host of digital sounds and accompaniment features. They usually have built-in speakers, and battery operation is common with smaller models.

These portable keyboards take full advantage of digital technology, providing auto-accompaniment features which quickly allow beginners to play pieces of music. Drum, bass and chord parts can be triggered, shaped and stored

in memory using the left hand, whilst the right hand plays the melody. Schools often choose portable keyboards to provide entry-level instruction for young beginners. These allow immediate results to be mixed with basic teaching and can act as an introduction to the piano, when it is felt that the student has reached a sufficient standard. Remember to look for two headphone sockets so that a tutor can listen in as well!





## What to look for:

1. **5 octave (61 black and white full-size keys) keyboard** – This length of keyboard allows full piano repertoire to be played and is ideal for the beginner. Don't forget a height adjustable stand for the keyboard.
2. **Full-size keys** – This means the keys are the same size as an acoustic piano.
3. **Touch sensitive (also known as touch responsive) keys** – This means that, like an acoustic piano, the volume of the notes is louder when the keys are struck harder. Also known as semi-weighted or fully-weighted piano-action keys.
4. **Sustain pedal input** – This allows connection of a sustain pedal, which enhances the expressiveness of the performance.
5. **USB or MIDI connections to PC** – With 'sequencing' software installed within a PC, these connections allow players to record, store and arrange music within a PC environment.
6. **Digital effects** – Such as reverb, chorus and delay enhance the overall sound of the instrument.
7. **On-board song recording** – (Or sequencer). This allows players to record their own performances and store within the keyboard. Many instruments offer 'multi-track' recording.
8. **'Hybrid' keyboards** – These are keyboards that offer an extended range of keys (76 or 88 notes) which combine the functions of a keyboard with more piano like performance potential.

# Drums

Drums are the standard backing instrument in many genres of music including rock, soul, jazz and latin, and together with the bass guitar make up the 'rhythm section'.

A typical drum kit comprises 5 drums: bass drum, snare drum and three toms; hi-hat, crash and ride cymbals; and stands and pedals.

Playing cymbals can wear out your sticks quickly, so it's a good idea to buy several pairs (5A is a good weight to start with), and if you plan to move your kit around, you may wish to protect them with a set of cases.

The drum kit can be loud although the sound can be reduced considerably by using sound damping pads that are placed on or removed from the drumheads and the cymbals in a matter

of seconds. They are not expensive.

An alternative is the electronic drum kit, which can be used with headphones. These have been growing in popularity over recent years. However, to produce a sound audible to others, (for example, when you join a band), you will need some sort of PA (typically a powered monitor) which adds to the cost.



## What to look for:

1. **Value for money** – Check carefully whether the deal includes all stands and pedals (usual on entry-level and some intermediate kits) and cymbals (usually only on basic starter kits).
2. **Building** – Whether the kit comes boxed for self-assembly, or already built and tuned by the dealer (some good dealers will offer this service – tuning a drum kit is a skill which comes with experience).
3. **Stool** – Whether or not a height adjustable stool is included.
4. **Cymbal Material** – What the cymbals are made of (basic ones are brass; bronze gives a better tone and durability).
5. **How many drums are in the set** – Five are standard, and most tuition books are scored for five drums.
6. **Quality** – Of the stands, pedals and drumheads, all of which can get considerable wear and tear.

# World Percussion

World percussion covers a vast range of instruments, both ancient and modern, that are either played with the hands or struck with a beater. Percussion is important in music education as it develops rhythm and has links with mathematics, history and culture.

Using world percussion is an excellent way of adding intriguing and unusual sounds into your music and many of today's top artists employ many percussion sounds. The most recognised world percussion instruments come from Africa, South America and the Caribbean.

African percussion mainly uses hand drums called Djembes to build complex rhythms. They come in various sizes. The bigger they are, the deeper the note. Also in common use are basket shakers called

Caxixi and Gourd Shekeres. Doumbeks are like smaller djembes, and originate in North Africa.

Latin percussion also involves passion and energy by using hand drums, known as Congas, Bongos and Cajons. Congas typically come as a set of two or three, often on stands to improve resonance.

Bongos are generally placed between the knees. Cajons are effectively 'sit on wooden boxes', often with internal sound effects such as a snare. There are also hand-held instruments like Tambourines, Maracas and other shakers; Claves; Cabasas; Bells and Blocks.

Caribbean steel pans are made from old oil drums of different sizes tuned with different notes and the different sized pans make up steel pan bands.

## What to look for:

1. **Quality** – be sure you get the best quality by buying from a music outlet, not a gift shop or tourist outlet.
2. **Material** – Percussion instruments can be made of traditional materials like wood or a modern day equivalent, eg fibreglass, which may be more durable. Heads may be natural (animal hides) or man-made. Natural heads are more authentic but tuning can be affected by changes in temperature or humidity. Replacing a natural head is a job for a skilled craftsman. Man-made heads can be replaced easily provided the drum has tuning keys.
3. **Specialist steel drums** – Steel drums are a very specialist market. Search for a music outlet that imports authentic instruments from Trinidad & Tobago.
4. **Have fun!** – Be sure to experiment and above all have fun! World percussion groups and events have an amazing energy and are very inspiring.



# Music Technology

All musicians use music technology in one form or another. Music technology encompasses how music is recorded, composed and produced. There are two distinct areas of music technology: hardware and software. Hardware generally covers the computer (laptop), microphones, MIDI controllers (keyboards), audio interfaces (soundcards), headphones and monitor speakers.

**Software** is everything inside the computer, so generally a sequencer program (or DAW, short for Digital Audio Workstation) a notation program and various plug-ins (effects/virtual instruments).

Music technology is seeing tremendous growth. This is due to its accessibility and the speed of development and innovation. All musicians can engage in music technology

regardless of ability, age or cost. It is also standard in all educational music departments, and essential for passing Music GCSE, A-Level exams and beyond. It is also useful for recording any performance be it a rock band, exam grade or school choir concert.

A lot of music software can now be found as iPad and iPhone apps. This helps to increase flexible use of music software and most apps can work in tandem with their full program versions. These musical 'tools' are very useful for all musicians, from a fully functional metronome like the Smart Click metronome, digital tuners, PDF readers and fully functional sequencers like GarageBand and Cubasis.



## What to look for:

1. **Mac or PC** This is the biggest decision you need to make. You need to decide what computer you're going to use because this will determine what software is compatible. Both work very well, but there is a big price difference with Mac computers being a lot more expensive than a PC. You can only use Apple's GarageBand and Logic on a Mac (they do not work on a PC), but other programs such as Cubase, Ableton, Pro Tools, Dorico and Sibelius work on both Mac and PC.
2. **Microphones** are available at a wide range of prices. There are two main types of microphone: a dynamic mic and generally the more expensive condenser mic. The main difference is that the condenser mic needs a power supply.

3. An **audio interface** (or soundcard) is very important, as it helps to convert an analogue sound (e.g. voice) to a digital sound very quickly, cutting out latency. Microphones and electric instruments can be plugged directly into the audio interface and then recorded into the computer. Once the sound is inside the computer (using DAW software), you can mix and master the music before producing a recording. The versions with two inputs and two outputs are the most popular and good for reducing latency.
4. **Sequencer software.** A sequencing program or DAW is mainly used to record, edit, mix and produce a piece of music. You can however also record, compose and 'play' instruments from within the software to create music. There is a variety of different versions of sequencer software from entry level to advance. You can also get free light versions to help get you started with some tech hardware.
5. **Notation software.** You are able to write music directly into a computer using a notation software program, rather than pen and paper. This tends to speed up the process and gives you a good clear printed version of the music. The music you write also plays back the sound as you write it.
6. **Updates/upgrades.** The biggest issue with music tech is the speed with which technology is now being developed. This is especially true with software. Not keeping up to date with changes can disadvantage musicians. This is particularly true for students as it can affect exam results. It is often cheaper to update regularly, rather than leaving it for a few years.
7. **MIDI keyboard controllers** are piano keyboards that you can plug into a computer to create music. They are often 'dummy' keyboards with no 'on-board' sound. This is because the sound is produced by the software program within the computer software. They come in different sizes depending on how many piano keys you need and the size available to you.
8. **Headphones and monitor speakers.** You need to be able to hear the music you are creating and this can be done using headphones or through a pair of monitor speakers. Headphones are useful if there are lots of people around, but to get the best results when mixing, it is best to use a pair of monitor speakers. Headphones should generally be 'closed back' headphones and it's worth taking into account how long the lead is. You do not need a long lead on a pair of headphones! Monitor speakers come in a variety of sizes and these depend on the size of the room you are using.
9. **Help and support.** There are many video and training courses available online. These often offer a free 'taster' lesson followed by a course that covers various aspects of a particular software program. YouTube offers lots of free tuition.
10. **Exams and grades.** You can now take a Graded Exam in Music Production. This is with the Rockschool (RSL) examination board, ideal for secondary school students and for keen music production musicians. You can even gain useful UCAS points when passing grades 6 to 8.

# Clarinet



The clarinet is a very versatile reed instrument, used in both chamber and orchestral music. It was Mozart's favourite and it has been played in jazz ensembles by great players such as Sidney Bechet and Benny Goodman.

There are many different types of clarinet, but the Bb soprano clarinet is the most common and popular choice.

Cheaper clarinets are made from man-made materials and are generally the best choice for beginners. More expensive models are made

from hardwoods such as African Blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*) and produce a better tone. More advanced players should consider a wooden instrument.

The instrument separates into five smaller sections to pack away. The use of cork grease helps to make a smooth connection when assembling the parts of the instrument.

Clarinet reeds can be bought individually or in boxes of 10. Beginners should start off with softer reeds marked 1 ½ or 2 to produce an even tone and pitch.

## What to look for:

1. **Choose a reputable/well-known brand** – A good quality instrument is more reliable and easier to maintain, and is a better investment in the end!
2. **Material** – Clarinets can be made from synthetic materials or wood. Many student instruments are made from plastic or ABS resin, which can make them more durable for children. Wooden models have a richer, warmer sound and should be considered for advancing players.
3. **Keywork** – The key mechanism should be nice and smooth, it should not rattle or click against the body or other keys. Good quality keywork will stay correctly adjusted for longer and will be more durable.
4. **Mouthpiece and Reed** – When trying out different clarinets, it is advisable to use the same mouthpiece and reed, otherwise the different tone qualities may be due to the different mouthpieces.
5. **Straps** – For smaller children, there are straps available that will help reduce the weight of the instrument and can reduce the chance of repetitive strain injury. Thumbrest cushions are also available to make holding the instrument more comfortable.
6. **Cleaning Materials** – When purchasing the instrument, you will need to ensure you have appropriate cleaning materials. A cleaning swab should be used to dry out the instruments after each time the instrument is played.
7. **Reeds and ligature recommendations** – The reeds and ligature greatly affect the sound and response of a clarinet. Ask a teacher or music shop for their recommendations.

# Oboe

The oboe is a double reed instrument from the woodwind family. It produces a bright and penetrating tone and can be usually heard in orchestras, concert bands or films.

You produce a sound by blowing air through a reed made from two blades of cane. The reeds come in different strengths ranging from soft to hard. Beginners should start off with a soft reed to help them produce even tone and pitch. Reeds can wear out quite quickly and/or break so it is a good idea to have replacement reeds ready to play.

There are many models of oboe suitable for all levels of players. Student instruments have less complex keywork, and special beginner instruments are available to make the oboe simpler and lighter.

## What to look for:

- 1. Choose a reputable/well-known brand** – A good quality instrument is more reliable and easier to maintain, and is a better investment in the end!
- 2. Reeds and Maintenance** – As well as the cost of the instrument, remember that you will also need to factor in the cost of reeds and maintenance.
- 3. Show a teacher** – It is a good idea to show a new instrument you are thinking of buying to a teacher or someone who already plays first, before completing the purchase. They, or a specialist music shop, will be able to advise you on the best model to buy.
- 4. Cleaning** – Ensure you have appropriate cleaning materials for your instrument. Using them after every time you have played will help to protect the instrument and keep it working well.
- 5. Rubber Thumbrest Cushion** – Some people find it more comfortable to use a rubber thumbrest cushion whilst playing. It is also possible to get a sling to help support the instrument.
- 6. Materials** – Oboes can be made from woods such as African Blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*) or Cocobolo (*Dalbergia retusa*). They can also be made from synthetic materials.
- 7. What's best for you?** – Choose instruments best suited for your ability.



# Saxophone



The saxophone was invented by the Belgian woodwind maker Adolphe Sax in the mid-19th century. Its sound is produced using a reed, so even though it's made of metal it is considered part of the woodwind family. Although some composers adopted the saxophone as part of the orchestra, it gained more popularity in military bands due to its big sound, and was later made famous by great jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker and John Coltrane.

The saxophone family consists of seven instruments, but the most popular beginners' instruments are the alto and tenor

saxophones. Due to the size and weight of the instrument, children traditionally start playing the alto around age 8 and the tenor around age 12. New models have also been developed to make the instrument lighter and more manageable for younger children to play.

Saxophone reeds are made of cane, and will wear and split with use. It's a good idea to buy a few replacement reeds, which can be bought either individually or in boxes of 10. They come in different strengths ranging from 1 – 5. Beginners should start on reeds marked 1 ½ to 2 to make an even tone and pitch.

## What to look for:

1. **Make and Model** – There are lots of choices of make and model. Make sure you select one that is comfortable for you to hold and play.
2. **Size** – Your hands should be able to reach around the palm keys without accidentally opening them. These are the three keys that stick out towards your left hand. It also important that your third fingers on each hand can reach their keys without too much of a stretch.
3. **Quality** – You should choose an instrument from a reputable brand to ensure the instrument is good quality. Poor quality instruments are difficult to maintain and will not always work correctly, this is most apparent on the low notes, which may not sound if the keys do not shut fully.
4. **Extras** – Remember that in addition to purchasing the saxophone, you will also need to buy reeds and have the instrument maintained.
5. **Cleaning** – When purchasing the instrument, you will need to ensure you have appropriate cleaning materials. A cleaning swab should be used to dry out the instruments after each time the instrument is played.
6. **Strap** – Make sure you have a good quality neck strap to help support the weight of the instrument. Other methods of support are also available including harnesses that go across your shoulders for comfort.
7. **Reeds and Ligature** – The reeds and ligature greatly affect the sound and response of a saxophone. Ask a teacher or music shop for their recommendations. As well as making the instrument easier to play, this will help you produce the sound that you are looking for.

# Trumpet

## What to look for:

1. **Finish** – The most common finish for student models is clear or gold lacquer. The lacquer protects the instrument and is easy to keep clean. Unlacquered trumpets will look 'dull' and have a matte finish. They are harder to keep clean. Some players prefer a silver plated finish. These have a smooth rounder sound and a more regular response throughout their range. They tend to be more expensive and heavier. Plain brass and nickel finishes are not recommended for health/legal reasons.
2. **Ease** – Beginner trumpets should be easy to blow and have accurate intonation. The trumpet's bore size affects how resistant it is to blow. Most student trumpets have a medium-large bore.
3. **Valve Quality** – The valve body is the heart of the instrument. Best quality valves are normally of monel. If buying a second hand instrument the way to check valve wear is to unscrew a valve top and let the valve come out about a couple of inches (5cm) and then try to move the valve sideways in the valve casing. If there is lateral movement (in other words if the valve 'rocks' from side to side), the valve could be worn and therefore would not be airtight. Another way to check if the instrument is airtight is to put water through it, and once there is enough water inside, hold it still and see if there are any drips. Possible leak points are joints, water keys and valves.
4. **Mouthpiece** – A good mouthpiece is very important. If you get the right one you can keep that mouthpiece with you as you progress up the grades.



The trumpet is one of the most versatile instruments, standing its ground in every music genre imaginable. It's both the smallest and the highest sounding brass instrument.

The modern 3 valve trumpet was first developed by Bluhmel and Stoezel and is popular in orchestras and jazz bands.

The Bflat trumpet is the most common and so is the most sensible choice for the student or

beginner. As with the flute, it requires good breath control.

Important accessories for the trumpet are valve oil and a cleaning kit to keep the instrument in good working order.

There are products available that can adjust volume levels of trumpets, such as mutes. There are even "quiet" brass instruments specifically designed for this.

# Flute



The flute is one of the mostly frequently played woodwind instruments, and the transverse flute is the standard orchestral design, so-named because it is held horizontally and air is blown across the mouthpiece rather than into it. It is usually made from metals like nickel or silver, or sometimes hardwoods like Grenadilla.

As a result of how it is played, the tone is much breathier and softer than the recorder, but it does need a lot more puff (air), so for younger children there

are smaller flutes available. These are approximately 7cm shorter than the normal flute, allowing fingers to reach all the holes and pads easily. In addition to this, they weigh less (approx. 325g) and are easier to play, requiring less breath than standard flutes.

Because of the special breathing, sound generation and fingering techniques required, it is best to get professional tuition and guidance from the outset, as is the case with all woodwind instruments.

## What to look for:

1. **Get the teacher's advice before shopping** – They will have to teach the child and will want to be sure you are buying a good quality instrument.
2. **Make sure you buy a flute of the correct specification** – Closed hole keys with an offset G, an E mechanism and a C foot joint is the most common in the UK.
3. **Finish** – There are different finishes of flute available. The most popular for beginners is a silver plated finish, comfortable to hold and easier to keep clean.
4. **Checked and Tested** – When buying the flute, ensure it has been checked and tested properly, as flutes have intricate parts which, if not set up correctly, can make it difficult to play. This includes making sure the joints are not too loose or too tight.
5. **Tips for a younger player** – If the flute is for a small child, a curved head flute may be required to avoid strain issues with the player. Some curved head flutes are also supplied with the straight head joint making the transition to a standard flute easy as the child grows. Check with the teacher if this is necessary and always follow their advice.



# Bassoon

The bassoon is one of the lowest sounding instruments from the woodwind family. It is most commonly found in orchestras or concert bands and can also be found in seemingly unusual settings, such as jazz ensembles. The bassoon is often used in comedy settings too!

The bassoon is played with a double reed, and sound is produced by blowing through the two blades of cane. Bassoon reeds are not categorised into strengths so it would be useful to talk to a teacher or music shop so they can recommend a soft reed for beginners.

Full-size bassoons are

large and can be heavy. Because of this, models have been developed that are more suitable for young children to play. Most bassoons are made from maple. There are instruments made from synthetic materials available too, however wooden instruments are recommended.



## What to look for:

- 1. Size and weight** – Choose an instrument that is a suitable size and weight for you.
- 2. Cases** – Full-size instruments can come in a selection of cases. Pick one that protects the instrument whilst not adding too much to the weight of the instrument.
- 3. Supporting the instrument** – The weight of the bassoon needs supporting when playing the instrument. There are different ways to do this, including slings, harnesses and other supports like a spike or knee rest. Try a selection to see which works best for you.
- 4. Cleaning** – It is important to clean the bassoon after each time you play it. Swabs/pull throughs are the most reliable method and there are specially sized ones for each part of the bassoon to ensure it is cleaned properly.
- 5. Crook** – The bassoon uses a metal tube called a crook to join the reed to the main body of the instrument. This can be bent and broken easily. Always use a crook case when storing.
- 6. Assembly** – The large wooden joints can be awkward to hold when assembling the instrument. Ask a teacher or experienced player to show you the parts where particular attention is needed during assembly. Keep the cork joints well-greased to ensure ease of assembly.



## Violin and Bowed

The size of the violin is very important. Unsuitably sized instruments will affect the student's playing ability: too small and the

student will be cramped, too big and the arms and hands will be over-stretched. If the student is a child, they will move up sizes until they reach full size. Ask your teacher or get "fitted" at your local music shop.

As a guide, a 4/4 violin is normally suitable for most secondary school age children, a 3/4 for 7 – 10 years, a 1/2 for 6 – 8 years and 1/4 for 5 – 7 years. There are smaller sizes below this for even younger children. There is also a range of sizes available for violas, cellos and double basses.

The violin is both a solo and ensemble instrument, and makes an ideal choice for someone who wants to join an orchestra and play with other musicians.

Practising and performing in groups assists in learning an instrument more quickly, as more advanced students will help you. Although there are notable players in jazz and folk music, most music written for the violin is from the classical repertoire, and this should be taken into account when taking up your first instrument, as you will generally practise harder when you enjoy the music you're playing!

### What to look for:

- 1. Condition of the Instrument** – Violins are made of wood and it is important to examine the body of any violin, both new and old. New instruments made from un-seasoned wood may have bulging ribs, heavily warped fingerboards, and possible shrinkage cracks. Tell-tale signs are in the neck and bottom rib (especially on cellos).
- 2. Alignment** – Check to make sure that the neck of the violin is set straight. Make sure the bridge is centered between the f-holes, then sight up the fingerboard to see if it aligns with the bridge. If the bridge has to be off-set to one side to line up, then the neck is out of line. If the neck is skewed, playing becomes very difficult as the strings will want to fall off the side of the fingerboard.
- 3. Fingerboard** – The best wood for wear and fingering is ebony although other hardwoods are used. The nut which divides the strings at the top of the fingerboard must have equal string spacing and the grooves correctly cut for the type of string used. If changing from metal core to synthetic core strings, the nut grooves will need adjusting or broken strings will result. The fingerboard should be slightly convex down the length to prevent buzzing.
- 4. Pegs** – Usually made from ebony, rosewood, hardwood or boxwood. On in-expensive violins an "ebonized" hardwood or fruitwood peg can be used. Whatever the material

used, the peg needs to turn smoothly and stay in place. A jerky turn will break strings, while slipping pegs obviously don't hold pitch. Basses have machine heads because of the huge tensions involved. Are they well fitted and do they turn smoothly?

- 5. Bridge** – This should be tailored to each individual instrument. Some important things to look for are: Wood quality, as a poor soft piece of wood will not offer enough sound resistance and will wear out quickly. Is the height of the bridge right? This, and the height of the strings over the fingerboard are vital. Too high and the strings are very difficult to press down, too low and there is a chance the strings will buzz.



- 6. Soundpost** – A small and IMPORTANT length of wood that sits vertically in the violin under the treble (E string) side of the instrument. Some instruments are delivered without the soundpost in (if so do not throw away) or if the soundpost falls down it needs to be in place before the instrument is played. Bringing the strings to pitch without a soundpost can severely harm the instrument.
- 7. Tailpiece** – The tailpiece wood usually matches the pegs and chinrest. Some violins have a metal tailpiece with integral adjusters (do the small screws turn smoothly?) The choice of material will be influenced by the type of strings used.
- 8. Strings** – There is a vast range of strings available. Most beginner instruments come with metal factory strings fitted. These are fine, but the quality of tone is limited. Upgrading to better quality metal strings helps both the tone and tuning. Other strings are made with a synthetic core or natural gut core, all usually wound with metal.
- 9. Bow** – Bows come in sizes to match the instrument. Usually made from wood (or fibre-glass/carbon fibre). Choosing the right bow is important. Check when you look down the length of the bow, is it straight? When you look side-on, does it have a camber? Does the bow feel right in the hand (if it's too heavy it will be difficult to control, too light and it may jump about). Does it tighten up smoothly? (Too stiff and little hands will find it difficult). For advice ask both your teacher and the shop. NB: Do not leave the bow under tension as this can damage it.
- 10. Left-Handed Violins** – Nearly all violins are right handed. Occasionally a left-handed violin is made if the student cannot hold the instrument or bow conventionally. Beware of so-called left handed violins as these are invariably right handed ones with the strings and bridge turned round

# Recorder



The recorder often provides the first tuned musical instrument playing experience for children.

The first school recorder is usually made from ABS resin, although many professional players prefer wooden recorders. Wooden recorders are harder to play consistently as tuning varies with different atmospheric conditions and they take more looking after. As such, wooden recorders are not suitable for beginner groups.

The descant recorder is easy to play and is the most popular model used in schools. Internationally it is sometimes referred to as the soprano model. There are various sizes of recorder – the treble (internationally referred to as the alto) is the next popular model and for ensemble playing the soprano, tenor and bass recorders are also used.

The descant and tenor recorders are in the key of "C" whilst the soprano, treble and bass are in the key of "F".

## What to look for:

- 1. If the student is at school** – get the teacher's advice before shopping; they will often want the whole class to have the same brand of recorder.
- 2. Construction** – A recorder can be of one, two or three piece construction. If the student is at school, check which version the teacher would like the children to play. Normally the three piece construction is the preferred descant choice as there is flexibility with individual tuning and finger positioning for small hands. However some teachers prefer the single piece model as there is less to fiddle with!
- 3. Pieces** – On a three piece recorder the top part is the head joint and you blow into the beak of the head joint. The middle part is the body joint and the bottom is the foot joint.
- 4. Cleaning** – Good recorders are supplied with a cleaning rod, pot of joint grease and a fingering chart.
- 5. Toys** – There are toy recorders on the market. The best way to ensure you get a properly tuned instrument is to buy it from a musical instrument retailer.
- 6. Protection** – The recorder is a finely engineered musical instrument and should be supplied in a protective bag; its joints should be regularly greased and should fit together snugly. To separate the instrument twist the joints – do not pull apart.
- 7. Watch out** – There are 'German fingering' models on the market, these recorders are different and should not be purchased for normal use in the U.K.
- 8. Special adaptations** – For anyone with finger or hand difficulties there are some specially adapted recorders available.

In our view, EVERYONE should have the opportunity to learn to play music. Sadly, many people are not fortunate enough to have access to musical instruments or ways to help them to learn and discover. This is where we come in.

- We donate instruments and music tuition to individuals who need our help.
- We make grants available to address the musical needs of community music groups and educational organisations.
- We bring free of charge 'Learn to Play' experiences to people of all ages and backgrounds.
- We promote the life-changing benefits of music making.

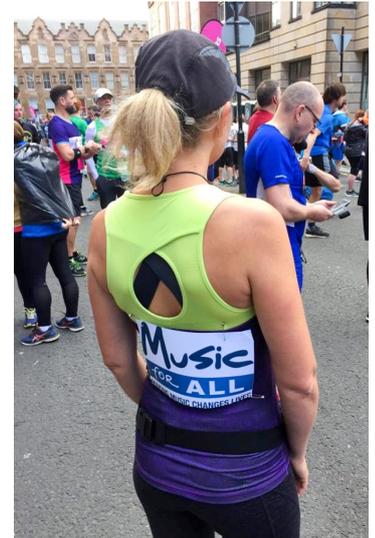
Now that you've read our advice on buying a musical instrument, we have lots of resources available to help you to continue your musical journey. Please visit [musicforall.org.uk/practical-help](http://musicforall.org.uk/practical-help) to find a music teacher, music shops, online teaching programmes, music groups and well-being advice for musicians.

## How can you help?

**Become a Member** via a monthly donation and help support musicians – young and old. Each member will receive a Music for All wristband, a Music for All badge and a quarterly Members Newsletter. But more importantly, your membership will make an invaluable contribution to a Charity that changes lives through music.

**Fundraise** – we are delighted that more and more events are being held by the public around the country to fundraise for Music for All. All monies raised go directly into helping others learn and discover through music. Get in touch to find out how you can support the future of musicians across the UK!

**Donate** – Our charity is extremely grateful for any support it receives and always ensures that your donation goes directly into actions to help people experience the wonderful world of music making. Making a donation is easy, just visit [www.justgiving.com/musicforall](http://www.justgiving.com/musicforall)



# Music for ALL

MAKING MUSIC CHANGES LIVES

We would like to thank the following companies for all their help in collating this guide:



Contact us:

01403 800500  
[hello@musicforall.org.uk](mailto:hello@musicforall.org.uk)

Music for All  
Bailey House  
4-10 Barttelot Road  
Horsham  
West Sussex  
RH12 1DQ

