

How to Select an Instrument – The Pros & Cons of Each Band Instrument

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Many students at the elementary level have a difficult time selecting an instrument to study, mostly because they are not familiar with all of the different instruments of the band. This document should help to introduce the different instruments and help with the selection process. For each instrument, there is a listing of “pros” and “cons”. I have also put whether each instrument can participate in Jazz Bands and Orchestras at the more advanced levels. *A “good” band must have a balance of all instruments to be successful!*

WOODWINDS

Flute

This is the smallest and highest-sounding instrument in the band.

PROS – Small, easy to carry when in case. Relatively inexpensive to rent. Many private instructors available in Fremont area.

CONS – This is the most difficult instrument to start on in beginning band. Some students cannot play this instrument well due to facial characteristics (lip size, etc.). Difficult to hold, especially with small hands. Many students play flute, so much more competition to get into advanced groups, honor bands, youth orchestras, etc. in the future.

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – No

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – Yes

Oboe

This is a double reed instrument, about the same size as a flute or clarinet when assembled.

PROS – Small, easy to carry when in case. Not as many students play this instrument, so more opportunities to play in groups. Many private instructors available in Fremont area.

CONS – Somewhat difficult to play at times. Instruments & supplies can be expensive. Limited number of oboists allowed in each group.

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – No

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – Yes

Clarinet

This is a single reed instrument, similar in size to flute & oboe when assembled.

PROS – Small, easy to carry when in case. Relatively inexpensive to rent. Easily transferable to other instruments (bass clarinet, oboe, bassoon, saxophone). Many private instructors available in Fremont area.

CONS – Somewhat difficult to play at times. Students must have large enough hands to cover tone holes with all fingers. Many students play clarinet, so much more competition to get into advanced groups, honor bands, youth orchestras, etc. in the future.

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – No

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – Yes

Alto Saxophone

This is a single reed instrument (similar to clarinet), made of brass. It is larger than most other elementary band instruments.

PROS – Relatively easy to learn (although easy to learn “badly”). Easily transferable to other instruments (other saxophones, oboe, bassoon, bass clarinet). Many private instructors available in Fremont area.

CONS – Large, heavy instrument. Difficult to manage for small students. Limited performance opportunities in advanced groups (not used in orchestras). Expensive instrument to rent (more than double the cost of some other instruments). Many students play alto saxophone, so much more competition to get into advanced groups, honor bands, etc. in the future.

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – Yes

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – No

Tenor Saxophone

This is a single reed instrument (similar to clarinet), made of brass. It is larger than most other elementary band instruments. Tenor saxophone is larger and lower sounding than alto saxophone.

PROS – Relatively easy to learn (although easy to learn “badly”). Easily transferable to other instruments (other saxophones, oboe, bassoon, bass clarinet). Many private instructors available in Fremont area.

CONS – Large, heavy instrument. Difficult to manage for small students. Limited performance opportunities in advanced groups (not used in orchestras). Expensive instrument to rent (more than double the cost of some other instruments).

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – Yes

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – No

BRASS

Trumpet

This is the smallest of the brass instruments. It is the highest-sounding and “brightest” sounding of the brass instruments. **Students who currently wear braces or who will wear braces in the future SHOULD NOT play trumpet as it will be VERY painful!**

PROS – Smallest of brass instruments. Relatively inexpensive to rent. Few supplies needed for purchase. Easily transferable to other brass instruments (French Horn, trombone, baritone, tuba). Trumpet is one of the most important instruments in the band. Is BOTH a jazz and orchestral instrument.

CONS – Difficult for some students to hold/play. Has a lot of resistance when blowing through. Most difficult of brass instruments to play well.

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – Yes

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – Yes

French Horn

Horn is a mid-range brass instrument. It is highly recommended that students studying horn have had some previous musical experience (piano, etc.).

PROS – This is a very important instrument to the success of bands and orchestras at all levels. Not many students play French Horn, leading to many opportunities for performances in different types of advanced level groups. Good French Horn players are always in high demand at every level of music!

CONS – Difficult instrument to play and control. Private lessons are very strongly recommended (although could be done with a high school student). Expensive instrument to rent/purchase.

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – No

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – Yes

Trombone

Trombone is one of several instruments classified as “low brass”. Low brass instruments are THE MOST IMPORTANT instruments in a band!

PROS – The smallest of the low brass instruments. Easily transferable to other low brass instruments later on (baritone & tuba). Relatively inexpensive to rent and maintain. Is BOTH a jazz and orchestral instrument. Very important to the success of a band, making players in high demand at every level. One of the easiest instruments to produce a sound on for almost all students.

CONS – Because there are no keys or valves on a trombone, it is difficult to play fast moving notes.

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – Yes

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – Yes

Baritone

Baritone is one of several instruments classified as “low brass”. It is similar to trombone, except with valves. Low brass instruments are THE MOST IMPORTANT instruments in a band!

PROS – One of the easiest instruments to produce a sound on for almost all students. Easily transferable to other low brass instruments later on (trombone & tuba). Very important to the success of a band, making players in high demand at every level.

CONS – Expensive to rent/purchase. Not used in jazz bands or orchestras. Somewhat large and bulky.

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – No

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – No

Percussion

Percussion is a collection of instruments that involves the use of sticks or beaters. This is the only instrument selection that is not a “wind” instrument (involving blowing air through the instrument). Students studying percussion MUST learn both drums & keyboard mallet instruments. *Piano experience is **strongly recommended for percussionists!*** (Drum Set is NOT used in the Elementary Bands!) **Percussion requires constant focus and concentration at very high levels all the time – much more so than ANY other band instrument. Students who have a difficult time focusing should NOT play percussion!**

PROS – Does not involve “blowing”. Very important to the success of a band/orchestra. Somewhat inexpensive to rent/purchase equipment at the elementary level (costs increase later).

CONS – Difficult to learn all of the different instruments (especially if no piano experience). Requires a lot of “musical independence”, since there is generally only one person playing each percussion instrument at a time (especially at more advanced levels). A lot of students play percussion, leading to more competition to get into advanced groups, youth orchestras, honor bands, etc. Students playing percussion will need to rent/purchase several different instruments, leading to higher costs.

JAZZ INSTRUMENT – No (Unless student studies “Drum Set” privately in addition to concert percussion.)

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENT – Yes