

## Obtaining an instrument

There are four options to consider:

- School instruments (for children)
- Renting
- Buying new
- Buying second-hand

### School instruments

If you are trying to obtain an instrument for a child always start with the school.

Check whether there is an instrument available. Bear in mind that instruments might become available during the school year as some children give up playing. If your child is soon to go to secondary school there might be an instrument available there, so waiting a few months might save you some effort and money.

Schools sometimes have their own stock of instruments which they will provide for free or at a very low rental. Sometimes they rely on an outside agency to supply rental instruments. Whether it is the school or an outside agency that is supplying the instrument it is important to check your obligations – are you expected to pay to service the instrument or repair it if is damaged? What happens if is lost or stolen? And what are the terms of the rental agreement?

One drawback of school instruments is that sometimes the instruments are old and of such poor quality, or in such poor condition, that they are only useful to get a child started and the child soon needs a better instrument.

If the school cannot directly or indirectly provide an instrument then I would recommend renting an instrument from a shop for the first 3 months. Once you have established whether your child is genuinely interested then consider buying a new or second-hand instrument.

### Renting an instrument

Renting can be a cheap way of obtaining a reasonable quality student instrument from the start, and is a particularly good idea if the player is not sure about what type of instrument they want to play, or if they will stick at it; three months is long enough to find out, and then it is best to buy an instrument – perhaps the instrument that has been rented, if it is of reasonable quality and it makes financial sense to do so – get a teacher's or repairer's opinion of the instrument first though.

I advise those people considering renting to ring around various retailers to compare the costs and conditions of rental. It is best to focus on "bricks and mortar" shops that have a repairer on the staff (so that you know the instrument you rent is working properly). There is usually a minimum rental period and an option to buy the instrument with a proportion of the rental payments being deducted from the sale of the instrument. It is best to do the sums to work out the best value scheme – beware - some schemes are definitely bad value! Check the length of the rental agreement; the price of the instrument if you do buy it after three months; what models of instrument are available to rent; and if they are new or second-hand. Locally, **Peterborough music shop** operates a rental scheme, for other retailers operating rental schemes please look at my information sheet "General information 5 – useful websites".

### Buying a new instrument

It is best to buy from an established "bricks and mortar" shop that has a repairer working at the shop, (this could be your local shop or it could be via the Internet), if this is not possible then check

what the shop's policy is in regard to the warranty.

It is important to bear in mind that *woodwind instruments rarely work straight out of the box* – they are not like electronic goods – they need to be checked, preferably by a repairer, and sometimes the instruments need to be “set-up”. Some brands are better than others but none are 100% reliable; this applies to student, graduate, and even professional instruments. No manufacturer supplies instruments that are working as well as they can – it would be too costly for them to do so – instead they supply instruments that are hopefully set-up adequately (when they leave the factory) for the target market. It is not unusual for brand new instruments to require a service! In the case of student instruments it is easy to blame the player rather than the instrument – particularly if the instrument is new. If a player is having problems with an instrument have it checked out by a repairer.

If you buy from a shop with a repairer, even on-line, the instrument is more likely to be working properly, and, if things do go wrong whilst the instrument is under warranty, it is easier to get it sorted out. Also shops with repairers are much less likely to sell poor quality unreliable instruments because they are the people who have to deal with the warranty problems.

If you are considering buying an instrument for your child then bear in mind the following. If the child receives instrumental lessons at school then usually you can buy a new instrument VAT free – ask the child's instrument teacher. If your child's teacher or school cannot help, then telephone some music retailers to see if they can assist. It is certainly worth investigating because new instruments bought this way are almost as cheap as second-hand instruments; if your child is about to change school compare the purchasing options at the primary and secondary school – it might be worth waiting until the child is at the new school.

The one problem of buying through a school is the after sales service. Schools tend to buy at the cheapest price possible and some suppliers cut costs by not having the instrument checked and set up by a repairer. This is not usually a problem for an absolute beginner because they are not playing the instrument to its full potential, but sometimes an instrument can be so badly set up as to cause problems from the outset, it is then difficult to get the problems sorted out because you are not in direct contact with the original supplier. I sometimes deal with parents who have encountered this problem and really the quickest and easiest way to solve the problem is for them to bring the instrument to me and pay for it to be repaired accepting the fact they got a bargain price when they bought the instrument. It is because of these “setting up” problems that I strongly recommend you stick to the manufacturers I suggest (see below) – these manufacturers usually set up their instruments adequately, but if they are poorly set up then the cost of correcting them is usually less than for other makes.

## **Budget instruments**

There are many “budget” instruments available from various shops (and on-line) that are considerably cheaper than the established brands such as Buffet, Jupiter, Trevor James, Pearl, and Yamaha. Many of these instruments are of poor quality and will have a very limited lifetime, either because they will soon need repair (but many repairers will not work on these cheaper instruments) or they simply do not meet the needs of any but the absolute beginner. Some budget instruments are of reasonable quality for the price, but there is no “brand consistency” so it is impossible to recommend any particular make or model.

## **Buying a second-hand instrument**

The advice here is much the same as for new instruments – it is best to buy from a “bricks and mortar” shop that has a repairer working at the shop – check if the instrument has been serviced and whether there is any form of warranty.

If you are buying locally from a private individual I strongly recommend that you bring the instrument to me (before you buy) for an assessment of its value and the cost of any repairs it needs (and it may need some repairs because people rarely sell an instrument they have just had serviced). I do not charge for this assessment. If this is not possible then play the instrument yourself or take some one who can play the instrument.

There is also the possibility of buying second-hand instruments on-line either directly from a private individual or through a third party website. Obviously you cannot play or check over the instrument so the most important thing to establish is what happens if the instrument doesn't work – can you get your money back? Many Internet traders sell second-hand (and new) instruments in poor condition and frequently buyers find it necessary to have their recently purchased instruments repaired! Often an instrument that originally seemed a bargain ends up an expensive nightmare. Some traders falsely claim that an instrument is in good condition relying on the fact that inexperienced players will not realize the instrument is faulty; other traders claim that an instrument has been "serviced" when really they have only checked there are no screws loose.