

## The Clarinet – a beginner’s guide to student instruments

Although Clarinets are classed as woodwind instruments, all modern student Clarinets are made of plastic. Older student instruments and modern graduate and professional instruments are usually made of wood (which helps give them a richer tone).

There are many different sizes of clarinet that make up the Clarinet family. Beginners start on the most common member of the family – the 'B flat soprano' Clarinet, it is so common that people usually just call it *the* Clarinet. Other sizes of Clarinet are best left until the B flat soprano has been mastered.

There have been some attempts by manufacturers to make specific children’s versions of the Clarinet (either with less keys or a smaller size) but I recommend learning on the normal version of the instrument. Children usually start Recorder at the age of 7 or 8 before progressing onto the Flute; this is partly because it is best for children to wait until they have their front adult teeth before learning the Clarinet. A particularly small child might need a special sling to support the weight of a Clarinet. Children who are ultimately interested in playing Saxophone have usually started on the Clarinet (or Flute) until their fingers are big enough to reach all the keys of the Saxophone (although the new Trevor James Alpha Sax means they can now start on Saxophone straight away).

The Clarinet is played by attaching a reed (a small piece of cane) to the mouthpiece and blowing; the player covers or uncovers holes on the instrument to produce notes.

### The parts of a Clarinet

- The **mouthpiece** - onto which the **reed** is fastened using the **ligature**.
- The **barrel** - a short tube to join the mouthpiece to the top joint.
- The **top-joint** - which has a corked **tenon** at either end and a lot of metal **keys** (which are operated by the player so that the **pads** cover or uncover the various **tone-holes** to make different musical notes).
- The **bottom-joint** - which has one corked tenon and also some keys.
- The **bell** - which fits onto the end of the bottom joint.

The metal keys on the Clarinet make up the mechanism of the instrument. The keys are supported between metal pillars on screws or rods. Most of the keys have a wire spring that keeps them held open or held shut. Most of the keys also have a key cup; a pad is glued into the key cup to cover the tone-hole. The keys also have cork or felt glued on to function as a stop so that the keys open the correct amount.

The pads, corks, and felts on the instrument (and also the adhesives which keep these items in place) deteriorate over time. On older or poorer quality instruments the mechanism itself starts to wear and the keys can become loose or jammed. Clarinets need to be regularly serviced to remain in good playing order – if you are considering buying a second-hand instrument then get it checked over before purchase to make sure it is in reasonable condition.

The mouthpiece is the part of the instrument that has most influence on the tuning and tone of an instrument. The reed is held on the mouthpiece by means of a ligature and that can also influence the sound produced.

Although not a part of the instrument there are two other vital accessories – the case and the mouthpiece cap. A good fitting case protects the instrument during transport - a bad fitting case will damage the instrument! The mouthpiece cap protects the mouthpiece if it gets dropped (and it often does) and also protects reeds if they are left fastened to the mouthpiece.

## **Variations in design**

Modern Clarinets vary little in the design of the mechanism so they all feel more or less the same to the beginner. They can vary in tuning to some degree – with poorer quality instruments being difficult to play in tune. The 'bore' of the instrument does vary slightly so there is a difference in tone between different makes and model of Clarinet.

There are only three aspects of design that really vary from the point of view of a beginner:

**Plating:** the mechanism is either nickel or silver-plated. Silver plating looks nicer if kept clean and the player's fingers are slightly less likely to slip off the keys, however it is not as hard wearing as nickel plate.

**Finish:** on most student instruments the plastic finish is glossy, on some it is matt or satin or brushed wood effect.

**Thumb-rest:** the Clarinet rests on the player's right hand thumb when being played, and the position of the thumb-rest influences how the right hand fingers reach the keys. Most Clarinets have a thumb-rest that is in a fixed position; some have a thumb-rest that is adjustable (by the player). For the vast majority of players the fixed thumb-rest is already in the best position for their hand, but if it isn't then it is possible to a repairer to re-position it.

## **Categories of student instruments**

Student instruments can be divided into four categories.

**Budget student instruments:** these are models that are often sold on-line or by local retailers who do not specialize in music. They are much cheaper than the recognized brands and often cheaper even than second-hand standard student instruments. This is because these new 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 complete 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. Some music shops stamp their own brand name on imported budget instruments.

**Old student instruments:** there are hundreds of models of student clarinet that have been manufactured over the years but are no longer in production – many of these instruments were well made and can be suitable up to grade 5 and perhaps higher if they are in good condition.

**Premium student instruments:** these are models manufactured within the last 15 years. They are very well made and are suitable up to grade 8 (when Custom serviced). The most popular models are the Yamaha YCL250 (and the older YCL26) and the Buffet B12, but the Jupiter 631 and the Schreiber 6010 are good instruments too.

**Advanced student instruments:** these are wooden versions of the premium student models (Yamaha YCL450 and the older YCL34; Buffet E11, Jupiter 737, Schreiber 6025). The wood enhances the feel and tone of the instrument. Note that Leblanc have introduced the "Bliss" range of clarinets that may be considered advanced student instruments – Leblanc are a respected manufacturer of quality instruments and there are several innovative features to the design of these instruments however there is one major drawback – they are fitted with distinctive black synthetic pads that are unavailable to repairers.

## Manufacturers and models of student instruments

There have been dozens of different manufacturers and hundreds of different models over the years. I particularly recommend the following established brands.

**Buffet (Crampon):** Buffet Clarinets are well made and are very popular with teachers and players alike. The current Buffet model is the **B12** which has been around for a long time; there have been several different versions but they are essentially all the same with only cosmetic differences (note there was a B10 model but it was a lower quality student model that I never recommended). Manufacture of the advanced student **E11** clarinet is being moved to France and new E11 instruments will be stamped E11 France. (Note there also exists a brand called the 'Buffet Evette' which is not made by Buffet Crampon – it is a lower quality instrument and I do not recommend it).

**Yamaha:** Yamaha student Clarinets are very well made and are very popular with teachers and players alike. Yamaha only manufacture one student model, though there have been different model numbers over the years reflecting slight changes in design. The current Yamaha student model is the **YCL250** which, because of exchange rates, is a little over-priced at the moment. The advanced student models are the older YCL34 and newer **YCL450**.

**Jupiter:** Jupiter is a brand name owned by KHS music instrument Co. The Jupiter brand is reliable and includes a range of quality student instruments. The clarinets are well made and are growing in popularity. There are various Jupiter student models, but the **JCL631sII** and **JCL737** are the most widely available models.

**Schreiber:** Schreiber are a German company that have been manufacturing quality instruments for over 80 years but have only recently produced clarinets for the British market under their own name.

## Play-testing a Clarinet before purchase

For a complete beginner this is impossible because the player won't be able to produce a sound. If the player has been playing for 2 or 3 months and can produce a reliable sound then it is worth getting the player to try the instrument before purchasing because the player might find one instrument easier than another; this is largely down to the mouthpiece and reed.

Each make and model of student Clarinet should be supplied with its matching mouthpiece (e.g. Yamaha instruments have a Yamaha mouthpiece). Student Clarinet mouthpieces are not radically different from each other but they may feel a bit different to what the player is used to.

It is important that a player tests an instrument with the correct reed strength. The player will have got used to a particular reed strength for the mouthpiece they have been learning on, however that reed strength might not be suitable for the mouthpiece of the instrument that they are considering buying. If the player finds the instrument hard to blow, or squeaky, they should try playing it with reeds that are a grade softer or a grade harder than what they are used to.

If the player is still having difficulty with the instrument it could be down to how well the instrument is working (bear in mind that even brand new instruments sometimes do not work properly).