

## The Piccolo – a guide to the instrument

The Piccolo is the smallest member of the flute family. Although Piccolos are classed as a woodwind instrument, all modern student piccolos are made of plastic and/or metal with only older student instruments and graduate and professional instruments being made of wood.

The modern Piccolo is fitted with Boehm key-work so the fingering is the same as a flute (without the two lowest notes). Occasionally you may come across a simple system Piccolo – this looks similar to a modern Piccolo but has a different system of key-work – it is the fore-runner of the modern Piccolo and is only really suitable for folk dance music and marching tunes.

The Piccolo is usually taken up by flute players as a second instrument. I would recommend that a flute player gets to a least grade 3 before considering playing Piccolo; this is because the player will then be able to play-test Piccolos themselves to some extent and this is essential - only the player can assess which instrument is the easiest for them to play.

### The parts of a Piccolo

- The **head-joint** - this has the **embouchure hole** into which the player blows.
- The long tube called the **body** on which are found most of the **keys** - the player's fingers operate these so that various **pads** either cover or uncover the **tone-holes** to make different musical notes.

The metal keys on the Piccolo make up the mechanism of the instrument. The keys are supported between metal pillars on screws or rods. Each key has a wire spring that keeps it held open or held shut. Most of the keys have a key cup in which there is glued a pad to cover the tone hole. The keys also have cork or felt glued on to function as a stop so that each key opens 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. Piccolos 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.

Although not a part of the instrument, there is one other vital accessory – **the case**. A case that holds the instrument snugly will protect the instrument during transport (a badly fitting case will damage the instrument!).

### Variations in design

Modern Piccolos vary little in the design of the mechanism so the key-work feels more or less the same under the fingers. However they do vary in how easy they are to sound – this is completely subjective and so it is important for the player to play and compare instruments. They can vary in tuning to some degree – with lower quality instruments being difficult to play in tune – particularly in the higher registers. They also vary in tone, which is why more expensive instruments are made of wood, and have wooden or solid silver head-joints.

There are only three aspects of design that really vary:

**The head-joint:** a student instrument has either a silver-plated metal head (fitted to a plastic body) or a plastic head-joint (fitted to a plastic body). A graduate or professional instrument has either a wooden or solid silver head-joint (fitted to a wooden body) which helps give the instrument a richer tone.

**The body:** a student instrument has either a plastic body or a silver-plated metal body. A graduate or professional instrument has a wooden body, which helps give the instrument a richer tone.

**The embouchure:** on metal head-joints there is a lip-plate, on plastic head-joints there is no lip-plate, on wooden head-joints there may or may not be a lip-plate. Some players prefer a lip-plate others do not – it is completely subjective so the player must try head-joints with and without lip-plates.

**The key-work:** although nearly every modern Piccolo has exactly the same key-work and so feels the same under the fingers, the quality, and therefore the reliability, of the mechanism does vary. Piccolo mechanism is miniature and intricate, and the more you pay for the instrument the better the mechanism.

## Categories of instruments

Piccolos 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.

**Student instruments:** these are plastic or metal bodied instruments; for the beginner it is worth trying all makes and models to find which one is easiest to play. If the player is not already a flute player I recommend the Yamaha YPC32 as this is student model most teachers prefer. Established Piccolo brands are Gemeinhardt and Yamaha but recently Jupiter, Trevor James, and Pearl (who have all been manufacturing other woodwind instruments for some time) have produced their own student models.

**Graduate instruments:** “graduate” is a term used to describe instruments that are a step up from student instruments but are not professional instruments. They are aimed at players who want a serious instrument but don’t want to stretch to the expense of a professional instrument. Graduate Piccolos have wooden bodies, better tuning, (meaning it is easier to play them in tune – particularly in the highest register) and a better tone. There are only three current models to try: the Gemeinhardt 4W, the Yamaha YPC62, and the Yamaha YC62M.

**Professional instruments:** these instruments are manufactured to a superb standard. The head-joint is made of wood or solid silver. The mechanism is made to the highest tolerances possible and the padding is to the highest standard possible. The manufacturers currently making professional models are: Phillip Hammig, Seaman, Yamaha, and Zentner.

## Play-testing a Piccolo before purchase

Whatever the ability of the player the most important thing is to warm the instrument up correctly before play-testing it - *do not blow into the instrument* – this will immediately create condensation in the instrument and distort the tuning - instead hold the instrument in your hand for a couple of minutes to warm it up. When you are comparing instruments make sure you warm each one each time before you play it and, when you put the instrument down to try another, make sure it is *resting with its keys uppermost*.

When comparing instruments obviously try the different makes and models available, but also try 2 or 3 instruments of the *same* make and model (this is because sometimes, due to poor quality control at the factory, some brand new instruments might not be working well as they should be).