

Learning an instrument as an adult (July 2019)

This article is for adults who want to learn an instrument. It is aimed at Woodwind players but holds true for learning any instrument.

I have divided this article into headings that correspond with the most common scenarios:

- I have never played an instrument before
- I want to return to playing the instrument I used to play a long time ago
- I played an instrument before a long time ago and now I want to try a different instrument
- I already play an instrument but I want to try a new instrument

Note that adults and children learn in very different ways – the exercises I suggest later in this article would usually be too boring for a child to persevere with but they are an efficient way to make progress for an adult.

1. I have never played an instrument before

Most adult learners think that the most important issue is whether they have any innate ability however the most important issues are really the time available and the ability to self-motivate.

Time: when you first start to learn you need to set a side about 10 minutes each day (ideally). You should not spend any longer than this because you will strain your embouchure (the muscles controlling your lips). When you are learning to play an instrument you are actually learning to control and exercise various combinations of muscles, and like any physical exercise, you should only gradually increase the amount of time you spend on exercise. With a wind instrument you have to start by learning to control the muscles in your mouth (jaw, tongue, lips) to create a sound and at the same learning how to control the muscles in your chest involved with breath control to sustain the sound. Finally you have to learn to control the muscles in your hands to press different keys to produce different notes. After a few weeks once you have progressed through some basic exercises (see below) you may be able to reduce how often you practice (to no less than 3 times per week) and increase how long you practice (to half an hour).

Self motivation: nobody is going to make you practice except yourself. The best thing to do is to make it as easy as possible to practice. Create a space to practice and leave the instrument there assembled and ready to play; leave all learning aids such as books there ready to use; and make sure you can access the internet from this space to use the vast amount of free online resources. Create a habit of practicing at a regular time – this is easiest to do by linking it to another habit you already have – for instance if you regularly take the dog out for a walk in the evening then you could practice immediately after your return.

Some people find it difficult to self-motivate – so don't make this a hurdle – contact a teacher perhaps even before acquiring an instrument because they may be able to help with that too.

The instrument: beginners often try to learn to play on instruments that do not work well – thus making it difficult to learn. This is because they have reasoned that they do not want to spend too much on an instrument because they might not stick at it - so they have bought a budget instrument (and such instruments often do not work properly) or bought a cheap second-hand instrument (usually in poor condition) or borrowed an instrument (usually in poor condition). The best thing to do is to rent a new good quality instrument – regard the money spent as money spent on finding out whether you will be able to learn to play rather than money spent on an instrument. At the end of the initial rental period you will know whether you want to continue or not and that is the time to spend money on an instrument. I would particularly recommend renting a new Yamaha instrument from **Dawkes music** (www.dawkes.co.uk) who operate a good rental scheme with a 3 month minimum rental – the shop is located in Maidenhead but they can mail the instrument to you – Yamaha instruments are very robust and reliable.

If you already have an instrument then get it checked (by a repairer or a teacher) to see if it is operating correctly.

Getting started – some basic exercises

It is good idea to eventually get a teacher but for the first few weeks, if you can self-motivate, I would recommend not having a teacher and instead working through the exercises I have outlined below (first read my information sheets about the instrument you are learning - e.g. The Flute – a beginner's guide to the instrument - to identify the parts of the instrument).

With wind instruments the first thing to master is producing a sound from the top of the instrument so it is not necessary to assemble the instrument, instead learn to get a sound from the top part only:

- Flutes and Piccolos– use only the head-joint (hold the head-joint in your right hand)
- Saxophones – use only the reed (strength 1 or 1.5) and mouthpiece fitted to the crook
- Clarinets – use only the reed (strength 1 or 1.5) and mouthpiece fitted to the barrel
- Oboe – use only the (soft plastic) reed
- Bassoon - use only the reed and mouthpiece fitted to the crook
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Practice the following embouchure control exercises:

- producing a sound immediately when you blow
- producing a sound that doesn't 'wobble'
- producing a sound for longer periods of time (5 seconds minimum up to 10 seconds)

These exercises can be very tiring and leave you feeling a bit light-headed so do not practice for more than 10 minutes. You can break up the exercises by reading about the instrument and learning where your thumbs and fingers go on the instrument (you do not have to assemble the instrument to do this).

Once you can reliably produce a sound immediately that you blow, and the sound you produce does not wobble too much, and you can produce that sound for a minimum of 5 seconds then you are ready to start using your fingers.

With the whole instrument assembled (refer to my information sheets on how to assemble an instrument) cover the relevant (tone) holes as listed below:

- Flutes and Piccolos – left thumb on thumb-plate nearest the head-joint, left hand finger 1 on first plate
- Saxophones – left thumb on the thumb button but not touching thumb key, left hand finger 1 on first plate
- Clarinets – left thumb on the thumb hole but not touching thumb key, left hand finger 1 on first plate
- Oboe – left thumb on the thumb plate (if it has a thumb-plate) but not touching thumb octave key, left hand finger 1 on first plate
- Bassoon – left thumb on the crook key only, left hand finger 1 on first plate

Now repeat the embouchure exercises – they will be more difficult because you will have to get used to supporting the whole instrument:

- produce a sound immediately that you blow
- produce a sound that doesn't 'wobble'
- produce a sound for longer periods of time (5 seconds minimum up to 10 seconds)

Once you can reliably play this first note (and it may take a few practice sessions) move on to adding finger 2 of the left hand, then finger 3, then finger 1 of the right-hand, then finger 2, then finger 3 (note that when introducing the right hand fingers players often forget to keep the left hand fingers in position – standing in front of a mirror and looking at your fingers while you play the exercises can be helpful).

The temptation is to rush these apparently simple exercises, but make sure you take things slowly – never practicing for too long and only moving on when you have mastered the previous exercise. This should take a few weeks and at the end of it you should be able to place your thumb and six fingers on the instrument and blow into it to reliably produce a sound immediately; and the sound you produce should be reasonably steady and last for a minimum of 5 seconds. Now you are ready to start learning how to play the instrument – at this point it would be very beneficial to have a teacher – not least because they can check that your embouchure is correct.

2. I want to return to playing an instrument that I used to play a long time ago

Almost all of the content in section 1 will be relevant so please read it.

If it is very long time since you played the instrument you will need to re-train you muscles and I recommend you work through the exercises outlined in section 1 – you will find that you make quick progress as your muscles begin to ‘remember’ their musical functions but do not be tempted to rush things.

If you intend to use the old instrument that you used to play then it is critical that you have it checked (by a repairer or teacher) to see whether it is functioning adequately – it almost certainly is not! You might be able to get a sound out of the old instrument – and if so that will be good enough for the initial embouchure exercises, but once you are using your fingers to play notes you will probably find the instrument leaks badly and makes it difficult to play the lower notes.

If you do not have an instrument I would recommend renting – for details see above in section 1.

3. I used to play an instrument before and now I want to learn a different one

A great deal of the skills acquired when learning the first instrument will be relevant to the new instrument regardless of the difference between the two instruments, and these skills will quite quickly come back to you once you are practicing regularly.

If you are intending to learn a wind instrument then please read the advice in section 1.

4. I already play a wind instrument but now I want to try a new wind instrument

If you have been playing long enough (minimum 2 years) you will have developed a stable embouchure for your current instrument – that means the muscles can instantly remember what shape to hold and how to manipulate this shape as necessary to produce the sound you want – it becomes second nature and as a player you are rarely conscious of this.

If you learn a new wind instrument the muscles have to learn and remember a new shape and how to manipulate this new shape – you have to be consciously aware of this process and it can be tempting to rush this process and over-exert the muscles – if you do this you will find your original embouchure will be less reliable – so start by playing the new instrument for only a few minutes each day and gradually increase the time over a numbers of weeks.

Players who play more than one wind instrument – particularly if the instruments are not from the same family of wind instruments – may experience ‘embouchure interference’. For example a player of both the Flute and Clarinet might find they cannot play the Flute immediately after playing the Clarinet because they cannot form the embouchure correctly. If this is the case then the problems can be reduced by careful structure of practice regimes – for instance practice the instruments on different days. If the player is working towards exams in both instruments then take the exams for each instrument at different times of the year and, when it is getting close to the exam date stop playing the non-exam instrument altogether until the exam is over.

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