

Obtaining a Woodwind instrument (June 2022)

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 to the absolute beginner then I would recommend renting an instrument from a shop for the first three months. Once you have established whether your child is genuinely interested then consider buying a new or second-hand instrument.

On-line 'shops'

If you are not trying to obtain an instrument from a school you will be looking at shops either locally or on-line. When looking on-line it is very important to establish the credibility of the shop you are dealing with and where it is located. Ask yourself two questions – firstly is the 'on-line' shop genuine or is it a scam? (i.e. you pay your money and never see an instrument) and secondly, if you are happy it is not a scam, - how will the on-line shop help me if there is something wrong with the instrument I receive?

It is very simple to avoid the majority of scams – once you have done your on-line research telephone the shop before making any transaction and ask a few simple questions about the instrument you are considering renting or buying – if you never manage to speak to anybody or they don't seem to know the answers to your questions then do not go through with the transaction.

How helpful a shop can be, if the instrument you receive is not working properly, will largely be dictated by the location of the shop. Shops selling through Amazon or ebay could well be located outside of the UK, and even shops with their own '.co.uk' web address may not be located in the UK – so always determine the location of the shop (this can sometimes found by clicking the 'about' or 'contact' button on their website). If the shop is outside the UK you have two hurdles to overcome if the instrument you receive is not working – what are your consumer rights (and how can they be enforced) and how do you return the instrument if necessary. To avoid the possibility of being scammed, or having difficulties if the instrument goes wrong, I would strongly advise you purchase from shops within the UK who have an actual 'bricks and mortar' presence somewhere.

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 are not sure they will stick at it; three months is long enough to find out. After that 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 before buying it though).

I advise those people considering renting to research various retailers to compare the costs and conditions of rental. 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 price of the instrument if you chose to buy it. Check the length of the rental agreement; the price of the instrument if you do buy it after three (or more) months; what models of instrument are available to rent; and if they are new or second-hand. It is best to do the sums to work out the best value scheme – beware - some schemes are definitely bad value!

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, if you choose to rent from a shop that does not have an in-house repairer I would recommend you rent a new Yamaha instrument because Yamaha instruments are very robust and reliable and Yamaha factories have the best quality control so their instruments usually work straight out of the box.

I particularly recommend renting an 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. Locally, **Stamford music shop** operates a rental scheme with a 6 month minimum rental – under their scheme it is best to rent a cheap second-hand instrument (but return it at the end of the initial rental period); for other retailers operating rental schemes please look at my information sheet 'General information 5 – useful websites'.

At the end of the initial rental period of any scheme – consider your options again. The money spent on the initial rental enabled you to find out whether the player was committed to learning the instrument. If the player wants to continue then the cheapest option in the long run is to buy a new or second-hand instrument (perhaps the one you have rented, but only if this instrument is good value and will have a long life-time).

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! Players often blame themselves, rather than the instrument, for poor performance – 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 if the purchase is made 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 (through the Assisted Instrument Purchase Scheme) – 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 (and set this cost against the fact they got a bargain price when they bought the instrument). It is because of these 'setting up' problems that I strongly recommend Yamaha instruments when buying directly from a school - Yamaha have the best quality control so the instrument should reach you in good condition. Other makes I recommend are Buffet, Jupiter, Trevor James, Pearl - these instruments are equally good when working properly but the manufacturers don't have the same level of quality control as Yamaha and so it is better to test them before purchase.

'Buy back' schemes

Some retailers offer 'buy back' schemes where if the instrument you purchased is returned in good condition within a set time, they will buy the instrument back from you at a percentage of the price you paid. This is an alternative to renting but you will need to 'do the maths' to weigh up the pros and cons when comparing renting with 'buy back'.

Budget instruments

There are many 'budget' instruments available from various shops (and on-line) that are considerably cheaper than the established brands mentioned above. Many of these budget 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 service an instrument before selling it). If this is not possible then play the instrument yourself to test it or take it to someone who can play the instrument to test it.

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! An instrument that originally seemed a bargain can end 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' or 'overhauled' when in fact they have only checked that there are no loose screws.

There is also the issue of accidentally buying stolen goods - if possible, get the serial number (as well as the model number) of the instrument you are considering buying and check it against the lists of stolen instruments at the following site before you purchase.

<http://www.musicalinstrumentsales.co.uk/stoleninstruments.html>

Also check the stolen instrument list on General Information sheet 5 in the information index on this website (<http://www.stevetadd.co.uk/pdf/Info%20-%20General%205b.pdf>) – this list is provided by NAMIR Ltd the UK based professional trade body of Instrument repairers.

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