

NEW TO THE MARKET

In recent years, woodwind manufacturers have proved perhaps the most keen to innovate in order to reach different parts of their instrument group's market. From stripped-down versions of professional models to unashamedly plastic, undeniably appealing products, Chris Walters profiles the market

The best student woodwind instruments are more than just cheap, combining affordability with durability, ergonomic efficiency and a responsive playing experience. This winning formula might seem obvious enough, but the variety of ways in which manufacturers try to crack it means that discernment is usually required in order to match an instrument perfectly to a learner. This article, therefore, offers a summary of the different kinds of student woodwind instrument available, along with suggestions for pairing these with particular types of learner.

Basic models

A first type of instrument to consider is the range of models made by big-name companies like Buffet and Yamaha. Their beginner flutes, clarinets and saxophones (instruments which, incidentally, are much more widely produced as student models than oboes and bassoons) are essentially basic versions of higher-end models. This means that, for example, Buffet's latest student clarinet (the Prodigé, retailing at about £400) is a fully chromatic B flat clarinet made of plastic resin rather than wood, with keywork of a slightly lower quality than on Buffet's professional instruments. This and the equivalent model by Yamaha (the YCL255S, also around £400) could in theory be used for repertoire of any level, making them viable options for cost-conscious enthusiasts of all ages and standards. They are not, however, specifically engineered for the very youngest learners.

The fact that these instruments borrow design elements from their more expensive cousins doesn't mean they don't feature innovations of their own, though it's not always easy to identify what these are. The Buffet website says that the Prodigé's bore 'allows an unprecedented ease of play and projection of sound', but what this means in terms of design and engineering will be beyond most people's understanding. Nevertheless, it's usually safe to assume that the bigger manufacturers will have engaged in a certain amount of research and



A Lambeth Music Service player with a Howarth junior oboe



Howarth's Junior MX clarinet: 'We try to keep as many things as normal as we can, as these are the things that will help a child progress'

testing which, combined with their long experience of production, typically results in instruments that are durable, reliable and responsive to the way beginners tend to blow.

An important point here is the need to avoid significantly cheaper and often obscurely branded equivalents. Many parents will spot what looks like an inexpensive but otherwise normal flute online or in a high-street discount store and make the purchase, not realising that what they have just acquired is best described as a flute-shaped object. Horror stories abound – from insurmountable tuning problems to repair costs higher than the original price of the instrument – meaning that such bargain-basement items cannot be recommended.

New or novelty?

A second type of student instrument is one that makes less of an attempt to

ape grown-up models, instead making a virtue of design targeted at younger learners. Leading the charge here is Nuvo, a brand that developed from the Lyons C clarinet, an instrument which first appeared in 1991. Somewhat out of its depth in a Brahms sonata, this quirky instrument nevertheless enabled a generation of younger children to try the clarinet, despite the fact that its lightweight plastic body – including keys – was barely recognisable as one. Nuvo has now developed the model into the similar but more colourful Clarinéo, which it markets alongside other cheerfully plastic instruments including the jFlute, jSax, TooT (a fife) and DooD (a single-reed, chalumeau-type instrument). The engineering and economy of Nuvo's products are impressive, and while teachers will have their own views on the challenges of transitioning from, say, the jSax to a saxophone proper, these instruments are fun and educational for children as young as five – and anyone with an eye for a gadget.

Small but perfectly formed

A third type of instrument is a hybrid of the first two, and it is perhaps in this category that the most interesting design and development can be found. Howarth of London is a major player in this arena, with a range of instruments including the junior oboe, mini bassoon and Junior MX clarinet. According to Howarth's education manager, Laura King, the idea behind the company's junior instruments is to 'adapt traditional models so they're simpler and lighter. We try to keep as many things as normal as we can, for example the materials, as these are the things that will help a child progress and keep them motivated.' In practice, this means that the Junior MX clarinet has a reduced key mechanism to play the limited set of notes required for first access tuition,



The Howarth mini bassoon plays higher, but continuity is achieved through material and build quality

reducing its weight; the junior oboe is made of African blackwood, just like any other oboe – but again, reduced keywork provides only what is needed in the early stages of learning. The result is a lighter, cheaper instrument but with the familiar oboe response.

Howarth's junior clarinets share these same principals, but their bassoons are slightly different. The mini bassoon (pitched in G) and the tenoroon (in F) are smaller and higher than the regular bassoon, enabling learners to start at a younger age. Transitioning to the full-size bassoon is more of an adjustment than between the junior and normal oboes, but continuity is assured by the 'real' playing experience of the smaller versions, created by mirroring the build quality and materials of the parent instrument.

Another transposing instrument made by Howarth is its E flat flute, »

“TEACHERS WILL HAVE THEIR OWN VIEWS ON THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSITIONING FROM, SAY, THE JSAX TO A SAXOPHONE PROPER”

commissioned by Lambeth Music Hub for whole-class band projects. This may seem unlikely, but it means that the flute (in E flat), clarinet (in B flat) and alto sax (in E flat) all produce the same pitches from the same fingerings (think about it!), enabling clever group pedagogy. Despite all this innovation, King says that Howarth's biggest competition remains 'the cheap student instruments – instruments that don't work well, go out of regulation or get bent. Kids end up fighting against them.'

Where Howarth has made strides with its oboes, clarinets and bassoons, Trevor James, a manufacturer of flutes and saxophones, has done something similar with its Alphasax, a simplified alto that sounds and plays as normal but with less weight and fewer keys. 'About ten years ago, teachers were taking keys off standard altos and filling holes with cork to help younger learners,' says Jean-Paul Wright, Trevor James' creative director. 'This made us think there was an opportunity to create something unique, firstly by addressing the weight and secondly the balance of the instrument on the body. We took off low notes that are not needed for Grades 1 and 2 and removed the high-note palm keys too, resulting in an instrument that's a third lighter than a normal alto.' The Alphasax and all the junior instruments made by Howarth can be highly recommended as beginner models, encouraging mature sound production while offering intelligent adaptations to help remove obstacles for younger learners.

Accessories are also being made for younger learners, among them Howarth's simple-fit mouthpiece and ligature system, where the reed slots straight into the clarinet mouthpiece, eliminating the fiddly task of tightening the ligature. Another stalwart in this area is Yamaha's range of clarinet and saxophone mouthpieces, which are highly affordable and perfectly designed for younger and older learners alike. Many other good brands are also available – try Jupiter for its excellent range of student band instruments and John Packer for its child-friendly simplified C clarinets – but a full run-down of this lively ecosystem is beyond the limits of the space available here.

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Complete with a hipster-led marketing campaign and launched at Frankfurt's Musikmesse earlier this year, Yamaha's new **Venova** (below) is based broadly on the soprano saxophone.

The instrument is made with ABS resin, and its shape includes a meandering pipe – closing the distance between tone holes – and a striking 'branched pipe', added to allow the cylindrical-bore instrument to sound more like a conical-bore saxophone. Yamaha claims a fully chromatic two-octave range with fingering 'similar to recorders'.

The package comes with a mouthpiece equivalent to Yamaha's 4C (the instrument is compatible with soprano saxophone

mouthpieces and reeds), as well as a synthetic reed, mouthpiece cap and case – and an owner's manual and 'Let's play Venova!' guidebook. This features instructions and hints ranging from setting the reed and ligature to embouchure, tone control, fingering charts, and two versions each of 'When the Saints Go Marching In' and 'Amazing Grace'.

The instrument is available in the UK for around £80.

» In other manufacturing news, Stentor Music became the UK distributor of Jupiter's range of woodwind and brass instruments last month www.stentor-music.com/brands/jupiter/



A final motto? Survey the options, put some thought into your decision and remember that investing in a good instrument is investing in having a good experience as a learner. **MT**

www.howarth.uk.com
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www.tjsaxes.co.uk
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