

# TIME FOR AN UPGRADE

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## WHEN AND WHY TO UPGRADE

If your child continues to study, practice, and play their instrument, there will likely come a day when their private teacher suggests an upgrade to a better-quality instrument. What this means is that your child has progressed to the point that the instrument is beginning to hold them back, technically, musically, or both. For young string players, this is usually an issue of graduating to the “next size up” in student-scale instruments. Student instruments, particularly those in the woodwind and brass families, are built for durability and designed to withstand the bumps, bangs, and rough handling that are likely to occur in the hands of a third- through sixth-grade beginner. They are not built with buttery, ringing sounds or lightning-fast technical passagework in mind.

Upgrading a musical instrument can be a tough decision in a lot of families because instruments can be costly. Parents may feel pressured to buy a better instrument to allow their child to succeed, while the child, who is most likely aware of the cost issues, feels pressured to promise that they will practice every day and play the new instrument for many years to come.

When the time comes to consider upgrading, your child’s private teacher will be able to guide you to the next level of instrument quality, and should also be able to help you decide on a brand and a price range. Don’t be afraid to look at used instruments; brass players sing the praises of certain older instruments, as do many other instrumentalists. If you do buy an older instrument, it may be a good idea to invest in a new case, one that is as protective as possible and doesn’t carry the aromas of years of use. Here too, your child’s private teacher can help you make a decision.

If both parents and child can put the pressure aside for a bit, the upgrade decision presents a good opportunity to talk about how much your child is enjoying their musical experience. If your child is quite serious about their musical endeavors and thinks they may want to make a career somewhere in the music field, this is a good time to learn about some of the career options available to musicians. Even if your child is absolutely determined to make the flute their life’s work, this is definitely not the time to invest tens of thousands of dollars on a handmade, professional-level instrument. Unless you find a

used, professional-level instrument at a great price, which happens most often with brass instruments, you should consider a good-quality intermediate, or “step-up,” instrument. Your child’s teacher will be able to provide a list of appropriate instruments and information on where to buy or rent them.

Never buy an instrument unless you hear it played by your child and/or their teacher. Your child’s teacher may suggest that you take an instrument “on approval” from a local store or online retailer, and bring it to a lesson before you commit to buying it. They may also offer to go with you to try different instruments at a music store. Your child’s teacher is your best resource for making sure you procure the instrument your child needs.

## KEEPING A MARCHING BAND INSTRUMENT

By the time your child enters high school and has advanced beyond the beginner’s instrument on which they started, you may find yourself faced with the issue of taking the new, more expensive instrument outdoors for marching band. Bands march regardless of rain, snow, or blistering heat. Some instruments simply can’t go outside, many others really shouldn’t. Wooden clarinets and piccolos, for instance, should never be subjected to the changes in temperature or moisture involved in marching-band use. The wood is very likely to crack from such exposure to the elements. Some cracks in these instruments can be repaired, but often it leads to a sad end for a very nice instrument.

Even metal instruments can take a significant beating in a marching situation, both from the rough handling they receive in intricate maneuvers and from the likelihood of damaging collisions with other players. An on-field collision can be disastrous, causing a deep crease in a trombone slide that can render it unplayable, or crushing a trumpet bell.

I always highly recommend that people keep their student-line horn for marching band. Student horns are meant to sound pleasant and to blow freely, but they are not top-quality instruments. At the same time, the intermediate or top-quality instruments are not meant to take the bumps a fifth grader will give an instrument.

You don't want your brand new \$2000 trumpet to hit the ground while you're marching because the trombones stopped and you didn't.

~Vince Petta, musician, music store manager, White House of Music, Germantown, Wisconsin.

Many schools provide some instruments for marching purposes. Silver piccolos, which are too shrill to be used in most indoor performances, are perfect for marching. Plastic piccolos and clarinets are also perfect for marching, and are usable indoors. Schools usually keep a stock of sousaphones and perhaps mellophones, marching French horns, for students to use.

If you own only one instrument and it should not be used in a marching band, you may want to buy a well-worn, used instrument that has already seen some marching days. Garage sales, Craigslist, pawnshops, and even bulletin boards at local high schools or colleges may offer leads. Flea markets or thrift shops may also be a source for these instruments. The rule of thumb is simply that it has to be playable and pitched in the right key. If you're not sure, don't buy it. These "beater" instruments may not be pretty, but as long as they're playable they will do the trick for footballs games and parades.

## PARTING WITH AN INSTRUMENT

Whether your child advances to the point of needing an instrument upgrade or decides to stop playing altogether, you may at some point find yourself with an instrument to sell. Selling a musical instrument can be both very easy and very difficult. It's easy in that there is always a new crop of young players who need instruments. Band and orchestra conductors often know of someone who's looking for an instrument. It's a good idea to have the instrument inspected by a repair technician before you put it up for sale. Show the receipt and comments from the technician to prospective buyers, so that they know what they are buying.

The difficult part of selling an instrument is that, unlike a pair of skis, a musical instrument becomes an extension of a player's body. People become very attached to their instruments. I've heard a great number of musicians talk about instruments they've sold over the years, wondering what has happened to them and regretting ever parting with them.

Be sensitive to your child's attachment to their musical instrument; sometimes it's just a matter of them getting used to the idea of selling it. A few weeks of playing an upgraded instrument may take care of their angst over parting with the old one. As your child graduates from high school, the idea of selling their clarinet may be very upsetting. However, by the following summer you may get a completely different response. By then your child may have decided that they really miss playing and may want to sign up for the college marching band or university orchestra, or they may be ready to let go of the instrument. You might also suggest lending or renting the instrument to someone you know until your child feels comfortable parting with it.