

HOW TO BUY A STEP-UP TRUMPET

BY DR. KEITH WINKING

I STARTED PLAYING CORNET IN THIRD grade and switched to a professional trumpet my second year – not due to any great improvement on my part, but because my older brother who was going to high school switched from trumpet to French horn and I inherited his trumpet. I thought that I sounded a lot better on the trumpet, but at that time in my life I was also convinced that a new pair of sneakers would enable me to run faster and jump higher.

Even though I switched to a professional trumpet at an early age, generally the ideal time to purchase a step-up instrument occurs at the transition from junior high/middle school to high school. I spoke with several successful junior high band directors about this and they all agreed on this timetable but also pointed out that exceptions can be made in the case of an advanced and noticeably dedicated student. Students entering high school are also often inspired by the level of “older” players around them as well as exposure to more challenging and sophisticated music.

When buying a step-up instrument, parents must consider whether their child is mature enough to appreciate and care for the instrument. I remember teaching a seventh-grader several years ago with well-to-do parents. They wanted the best for their child so, against my advice, they purchased the most expensive trumpet on the market. Within months, this beautiful instrument looked like it had been through a war zone.

By purchasing a professional trumpet for their kids, parents are showing their commitment in support of their child and their musical pursuits. Although it is next to impossible for kids at this age to really commit to anything, a new horn is, in essence, the child’s commitment to continue playing throughout high school and hopefully college and beyond.

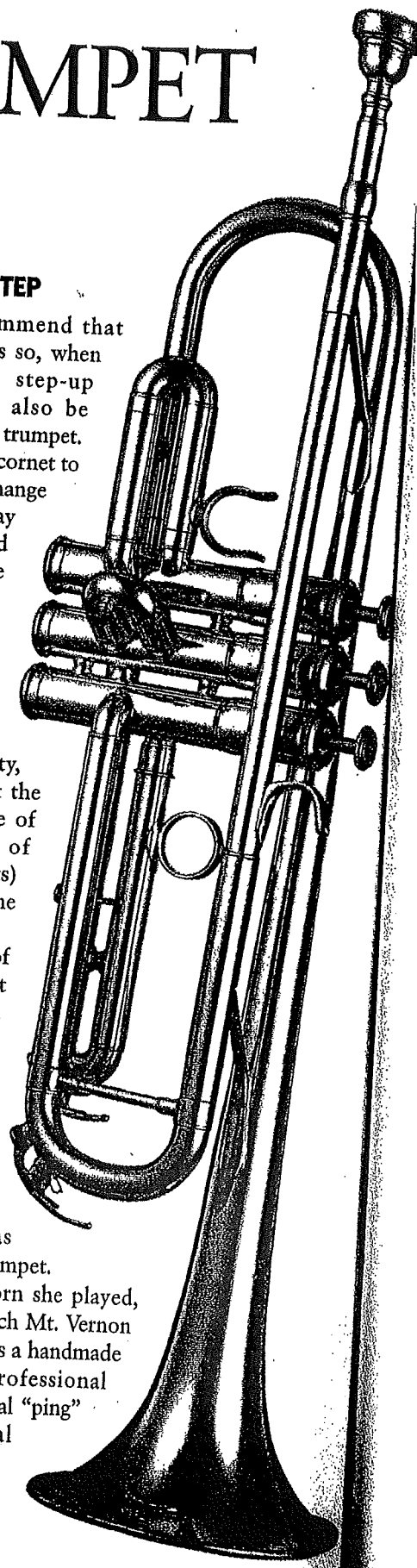
Editor’s Note:

“How to Buy a Step-Up Trumpet” continues our series of instructional guides on the principal band and orchestral instruments. SBO grants permission to photocopy and distribute the article to both students and parents. Other articles from this series are available online at www.sbo magazine.com.

THE NEXT STEP

Many schools recommend that students start on cornets so, when students move to a step-up instrument, they will also be changing from cornet to trumpet. Though the change from cornet to trumpet will not really change students’ abilities one way or another, it can and oftentimes does inspire them to practice with renewed enthusiasm. At this stage of a student’s development, a step-up horn might not produce any immediate noticeable differences in tone quality, range, flexibility, etc., but the quality of sound and ease of playing (characteristics of higher-quality instruments) will become apparent in the long run.

During my junior year of college, at one of our first concert band rehearsals, a new student pinged the bell of my trumpet and proclaimed that it was not a professional trumpet because it did not make the same sound hers did – which her high school band director “assured her” was the sign of a professional trumpet. I don’t even recall what horn she played, but at the time I played a Bach Mt. Vernon Stradivarius trumpet, which is a handmade and highly sought-after professional trumpet. There is no universal “ping” sound on professional trumpets and it is amazing the number of myths like



this floating around about what differentiates a professional instrument from a student/intermediate one.

THREE LEVELS OF TRUMPETS

For many years, trumpets were divided into two categories: beginning and professional models. Now there is an emergence of a third category, intermediate/mid-level. These trumpets contain features of both pro-line and student-line instruments. Recently, a parent contacted me about buying a step-up horn for their son, who was entering high school. They told me that he was not really that interested in music and wanted to stay in band throughout high school mostly for the social aspect, so the parents did not want to invest in a professional trumpet. They were able to purchase a lower-priced intermediate trumpet that will probably suit his needs. If he becomes more interested in playing and possibly wants to continue in college, I would encourage them to move up to a professional-level trumpet.

There have never been iron-clad rules governing what constitutes a professional trumpet, and it is even more difficult to define these days since many features previously used exclusively on professional horns can now be found on virtually all levels of horns. An example of this is first and permanent third valve saddles/triggers, which for years were not usually found on student-line horns. The third valve saddles/triggers were also never universally found on all professional horns. For years, I heard some band directors proclaiming that all beginning trumpets had removable third valve rings, but the Martin Committee, Selmer pro models (Radial II's and K Modified) and Olds pro line trumpets all had removable rings.

While trying out professional trumpets, there will probably be two aspects immediately apparent to young players. The first is that on student line horns the action on the valves tends to be a little stiffer whereas professional trumpets are much smoother. Most professional trumpets are made with monel valves and most beginning trumpets are made with nickel-plated valves. There are some professional trumpets with nickel-plated valves – especially older models – which is fine, but generally the quality of the valves on student-level instruments is not as high, so the valves tend to be a little sluggish.

The second noticeable difference is that student-line trumpets tend to have smaller lead pipes and bells, which offer some resistance. Professional trumpets are made with larger lead pipes and bells and, because of this, are a little more open and free blowing. You have to reach a certain skill level before you even notice that beginning horns tend to offer more resistance. I recommend that, when the time comes for students to purchase a step-up horn, whenever possible, ask a professional/teacher to try the instrument out first. Even though professional players will sound great on virtually any horn, they will quickly notice any weaknesses with the instrument.

SILVER-PLATE VS. LACQUER

One common misconception is that all professional trumpets are silver-plated. I worked at a music store while

in graduate school and remember a parent coming in to purchase a new silver-plated "professional" trumpet for his child and refusing to even look at lacquered horns – even though, at the time, the lacquered horns the store had in stock were superior. I tried to convince the parent that the lacquered horns were better and they thought I was some kind of used-car salesman trying to pawn off junk horns. Although it is true that the majority of professional trumpets today are silver-plated, you can purchase beginning and intermediate silver-plated trumpets as well as professional lacquered ones. Silver-plated horns are supposed to be brighter, and the theory is that silver plate is relatively thin and harder so it vibrates with the brass, while lacquer is thicker and soft, producing less vibration. From my experience, most silver-plated horns are brighter, but I have also played many dark sounding silver-plated ones as well as bright-sounding lacquer trumpets, so it really depends on the individual instrument. I still own both silver and lacquer trumpets and bought all my instruments based on how they played – not on what kind of finish they had.

MOUTHPIECES

When students move to a step-up horn, it is also common practice to change mouthpieces. Everyone has unique lip and teeth structure so there is not a "one size fits all" mouthpiece. Changing mouthpieces can have a big impact on a student's playing, an issue too in-depth to address here and one that warrants a separate discussion.

Recently, a new student trumpet came on the market and several area professional/teachers were at a local music store testing them as possible new horns for their students. The professionals all sounded great on the horn, which was more of a testament to their abilities than the quality of the trumpet. I recall one of my teachers telling me that he never knew a trumpet player who got a lot better or a lot worse with a new horn. It is important for students to know this and to keep it in mind when looking to purchase a step-up instrument.

Keith Winking is a professor at Texas State University, where he teaches trumpet and directs the Texas State Jazz Orchestra, and is a member of the SouthWest BrassWorks. He received his undergraduate degree in music education from Quincy University, his M.M. in trumpet performance from Texas State, and his D.M.A. in trumpet performance from the University of Texas at Austin. Winking has presented solo and ensemble concerts and clinics throughout the United States, Canada, Sweden, Japan, Switzerland and Russia. He is a freelance trumpet player performing with many local and national groups, including the Austin Symphony, the Austin Jazz Orchestra, James Brown, the Manhattan Transfer and the Austin Sinfonietta. He has presented papers at the International Trumpet and New York Brass Conferences and also published articles in The International Trumpet Guild Journal and the International Jazz Educators Journal. Winking is a voting member of the National Association of the Recording Arts and Sciences (Grammys) and a clinician for the Selmer Company.