

Trombone Buying Guide

Types of trombones

There are three major types: straight tenor, trigger-type tenor (also referred to as F-rotor or F-attachment), and bass trombones. Valve trombones and alto trombones are specialty horns we won't discuss here.

The straight trombone is the simplest, with no tubing inside the main section. The F-rotor trombone has extra tubing within the main loop. It's a straight trombone until this tubing is activated with a trigger. This makes the horn longer, changing its tuning from Bb to F. More about the advantages of this later. The bass trombone is a larger bore version of the F-rotor trombone that adds a second rotor to extend its low-end even further.

Typically, students start with a straight tenor trombone and later graduate to a horn with the F-rotor, but this isn't a hard and fast rule. If you don't use the trigger, the F-rotor horn plays exactly the same as a straight trombone. You can wait to learn the F-rotor when you're ready. On the other hand, for many applications, even advanced players stay with a straight trombone.

Student, intermediate, and professional

These are standard classifications from manufacturers that frequently appear in our catalog as part of the name. While they do refer to the overall quality and feature sets of the instruments, they are not precise classifications that reference specific features and will vary from brand to brand. Use them for general guidance.

Large bore, small bore

The bore of a trombone is the inner diameter of the inner slide and is expressed in thousandths of an inch. The range is from about .481" (for students) to .547" (for symphonic use), on up to .562" (for bass trombone). Smaller bore horns have a brighter, more focused sound; while larger bores tend toward a darker or warmer and bigger sound. Bore size also affects a horn's resistance or back pressure. A smaller bore creates more resistance, a larger bore less. More resistance is usually better for student players because it makes it easier to support a tone. Amount of resistance is also a matter of taste. Some players prefer more resistance, some less.

Another variation is the dual-bore trombone. This simply means that the slide is smaller on one side and expands to a larger diameter on the other. It gives the player more initial resistance from the narrower bore, but then opens up for a bigger sound. Student level trombones will seldom if ever have a double bore. It is a step-up feature.

For the beginning player — especially young players — it is best to choose a smaller bore horn, somewhere in the range from .481" to .525" because it takes less air to support a usable tone. Intermediate players may want a medium or larger bore instrument for a fuller and potentially more forceful sound, but this isn't a hard and fast rule. Symphonic trombonists tend to use the larger bore trombones, typically around .547". Bass trombones usually have a bore up around .562".

The F-rotor factor

An F-rotor adds complexity and extends the trombone's capabilities. Most importantly it adds notes to the horn's low range. It also provides alternative ways of playing certain passages, making them easier.

There are two basic types of F-rotor. A traditional or standard wrap has more bends in it which makes it more compact but also increases resistance. The open wrap type has fewer bends for a freer-blowing trombone.

Bells

Trombone bells can be made of yellow brass, red brass, or silver. Yellow brass is most common. The other metals color the sound in subtle ways. Rose brass is warmer and silver warmer yet.

Cosmetic considerations

Lacquer finishes are the most common. Plated finishes are regarded as higher-quality finishes because they have less dampening effect on vibration. Most consider silver-plated horns to be flashier, but they require more maintenance because they tarnish. And though a snazzier looking horn may not sound significantly better than another, what good looks can do is engender pride in the instrument, inspiring more devotion to practice and care for the instrument.

Summing it up

The biggest factor in which trombone you choose is, of course, the amount you can appropriately spend. Beyond that, your needs and level of musicianship should determine your choice. Choose a smaller bore horn for the beginning student. One that is designated as a student model will likely be a more durable instrument. Consider a medium bore horn for the intermediate player, as well as such step-up features as an F-rotor, dual bore, rose brass or sterling bells, and plated finishes. We hope the information provided here helps you choose a trombone that is perfect for your needs.