

Introduction to a Brass Band

How do brass instruments work?

At the most basic level, a brass instrument is a very long metal tube that is wrapped around itself. Consider, for example, the **bugle** shown here:

See how it is a coiled tube, with no extra valves? This is the most simple form of a brass instrument.

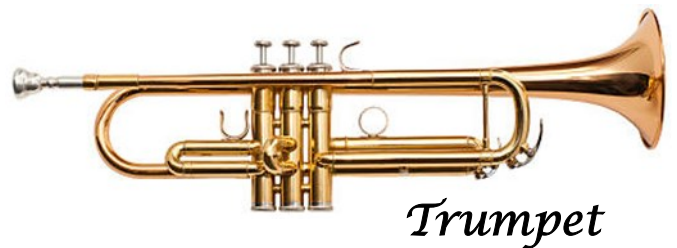


When a musician blows a buzzing sound into the mouthpiece of their instrument, the vibrations are amplified along the full length of the instrument's tubing, eventually producing the bright, brassy noise we know and love. By changing how you blow you can alter the pitch of a note. A tighter embouchure (mouth position) will produce a higher note, while a looser embouchure will produce a lower note.

An instrument such as the bugle is limited in how many notes it can play. By adjusting your embouchure you can move from a low C, to a G, then up to a higher C, but what about all the other notes in between? That's where valves come into it.

A **trumpet**, like the one shown here, is essentially a bugle, but with extra lengths of tubing attached. Each of the three valves work to direct the air into these different passages, changing the overall

distance the air has to travel, and thus producing different notes. Through adjustments to one's embouchure and the various combinations of valves, modern brass instruments are capable of playing full chromatic scales.



While there are a wide array of instruments in the brass family, only certain ones are included in brass bands. A brass ensemble should have a mellow, blended sound; almost like a choir of voices. While the bright, shrill sound of a trumpet,

or the soaring tones of a French horn sound amazing against the backdrop of a concert band or orchestra, they would not blend with the overall sound of a brass band. For this reason, brass bands feature a very specific range of brass instruments. Let's meet them!

Components of a Brass Band

Cornet

Cornets are the highest-pitched instruments in a brass band. They are very similar to trumpets, but their tubing – while the same length – is wider, thus producing a more mellow sound that blends nicely with the rest of the band. The cornet section is split into many different parts, with the front row – or “solo cornets” – often playing the melody line, while the back row play an assortment of harmonies or countermelodies, depending on each piece. Brass bands usually also include one “soprano cornet”. This is actually a slightly different instrument; it looks similar to a standard Bb cornet, but with shorter tubing, allowing it to reach even higher notes.



Cornet Section

Flugel Horn

The flugel horn is pitched the same as a cornet – and again it's overall tubing is the same length – but it has a still wider bore, giving it a lovely broad sound. Generally, a brass band will only have one flugel player, and the parts played are often melodies or countermelodies that join with either the cornets or the tenor horn section. The unique sound of flugel horns also make them a popular instrument in jazz ensembles.

Tenor Horn

The tenor horn has slightly longer tubing than the aforementioned instruments, giving it a lower range. This additional tubing also adds weight to the instrument, so unlike the higher instruments – which are held up horizontally – the tenor horn is held upright against the body when playing. The tenor horn is generally exclusive to brass-only ensembles, where it plays a part correspond-

ing to the saxophone of other groups, but blending nicely into the sound of the brass band.

Baritone Horn

The baritone horn is essentially a larger version of the tenor horn, and is pitched lower still; in fact, its notes are played one full octave (scale length) lower than the cornets. It often plays harmony parts to accompany the euphoniums, adding depth to the sound of the band.

Euphonium

The euphonium is like the “solo cornet” equivalent of the lower brass section, often playing bass melodies or countermelodies. It is pitched the same as a baritone horn, but with an additional fourth valve which opens up a whole extra length of tubing, allowing them to reach a wider array of notes.

Trombone

One of the most iconic brass instruments has to be the trombone. Rather than using valves to redirect air, the trombone has a moveable slide which manually alters the length of the tubing, and makes it a very interesting instrument to watch! Some trombones have a trigger attached which opens additional tubing making it easier to reach a wider range of notes (just like the fourth valve on a euphonium), and the big bass trombone, with its even wider bore and double-trigger, can even rival the tuba for low notes.



Trombone Section

Bass

While known as “tubas” in other ensembles, once they are in a brass band, these instruments are called “basses” (that’s pronounced like “base”, not like the fish...). These 4-valved giants are the heart-beat of a brass ensemble, playing dark, low notes that complete the deep harmonies of the group. Bases come in a couple of different sizes and pitches. Most brass bands feature Eb bases, which play an octave below the tenor horns, and Bb bases, which play an octave below the euphoniums; that’s two whole octaves lower than the cornets!

Percussion

While not actually a brass instrument, no band would be complete without its percussion section. These talented musicians play everything from booming bass drums to dainty triangles, from the maracas to the 4-piece tuned timpani (AKA kettledrums), and from the rockin' drum kit to the melodic glockenspiel. They add an assortment of unique sounds and rhythms that really tie the whole band together.



*Glockenspiel- part of the
Percussion section*