

Woodwind Instruments

Woodwinds are a type of musical instrument that make their sound when a musician blows air into or across the mouthpiece. They get their name from the fact that most of them were once made of wood. Today many are made of other materials such as metal or plastic.

There are a lot of types of woodwinds including the flute, piccolo, oboe, clarinet, saxophone, bassoon, bagpipes, and recorder. They all look somewhat similar in that they are all long tubes of various sizes with metal keys that cover the holes when played to make different notes. The bigger the woodwind instrument the lower the pitch sound they make.

Woodwinds can be divided up into two main types of instruments. Flute instruments and reed instruments. Flute instruments make sound when the musician blows air across an edge in the instrument while reed instruments have a reed, or two, that vibrate when the air is blown. We'll discuss this more in *How Woodwinds Work*.

Popular Woodwinds

- **Flute** - There are a wide variety of flute types. The kinds of flutes you mostly see in western music are called side-blown flutes where the player produces sound by blowing across an edge on the side of the flute. These are popular instruments for the orchestra and are often used in jazz as well.



Flute



Saxophone

- **Piccolo** - The piccolo is a small, or half-size, flute. It's played the same way a flute is, but makes higher pitched sounds (one octave higher).
- **Recorder** - Recorders are end-blown flutes and are also called whistles. Plastic recorders can be inexpensive and are fairly easy to play, so they are popular with young kids and students in schools.
- **Clarinet** - The clarinet is a popular single reed instrument. It's used in classical, jazz, and band music. There is a wide variety of clarinets making the clarinet family the largest of the woodwinds.

- **Oboe** - The oboe is the highest pitch member of the double-reed family of woodwind instruments. The oboe makes a clear, unique, and strong sound.
- **Bassoon** - The bassoon is similar to the oboe and is the lowest pitch member of the double-reed family. It is considered a bass instrument.
- **Saxophone** - The saxophone is considered part of the woodwind family but is sort of a combination of a brass instrument and the clarinet. It's very popular in jazz music.
- **Bagpipes** - Bagpipes are reed instruments where the air is forced from a bag of air that the musician blows into to keep full. They are played throughout the world, but are most famous in Scotland and Ireland.

Woodwinds in the Orchestra

The symphony orchestra always has a large section of woodwinds. Depending on the size and type of orchestra, it will have 2-3 each of the flute, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon. Then it will typically have 1 each of the piccolo, English horn, bass clarinet, and contrabassoon.

Woodwinds in Other Music

Woodwinds are not only used in symphony orchestra music. They play an important role in jazz music with the saxophone and clarinet being very popular. They are also widely used in marching bands and in various types of world music throughout the globe.

Fun Facts about Woodwinds

- Not all woodwinds are made out of wood! Some are actually made from plastic or from different types of metal.
- Up until 1770 the Oboe was called the hoboy.
- Clarinet player Adolphe Sax invented the saxophone in 1846.
- The lowest notes in the symphony are played by the large contrabassoon.
- The flute is the oldest instrument in the world to play notes.

Don't forget to answer the questions that go with this sheet!