

GETTING STARTED IN ORCHESTRA

by David Topolovec



A Parent's Reference Guide for New Orchestra Students

I've had the distinct pleasure of working with thousands of students as an Orchestra Director at Wauwatosa West High School and Whitman Middle School. Over a career spanning 34 years, I taught orchestras as small as six students, and as large as 145 students! The beauty of orchestra is that it's remarkably accommodating for students of all walks of life. Anyone can participate and succeed as a student musician. It's a wonderful experience watching a student progress from learning the basic mechanics of tone production to playing in harmony with an ensemble.

If your student is just getting started in their orchestra careers, my colleagues at White House of Music and I are there to help provide you with all of the tools needed to successfully pursue successfully playing a string instrument for life.

Introducing Your Student to Orchestra

Perhaps your student recently participated in one of our Demo Nights, school recruiting events, or enjoyed a concert series that really caught their attention. Experimenting with a variety of instruments

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can provide students with an opportunity to test the feel and sound of the various string instruments, helping them determine which option they might be best suited for.

If you're unsure of which instrument to select, feel free to visit any one of our multiple locations across Southeast Wisconsin, including our [String Shoppe](#) in Waukesha. Our resident experts would be more than happy to provide concierge service to help your student in selecting the instrument of their choice.

Our [Lease to Learn instrument rental program](#) provides students with the ability to gain equity with their rental, providing steep discounts on future purchase opportunities. The [White House of Music Maintenance and Repair Program](#) also serves to keep their instrument in tip-top shape, which quite often comes in handy when considering the rough and tumble lifestyle of many young students.

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What Accessories Will Your Student Require?

While instrument selection is important, choosing the correct accessories can have an equal impact on your student's success. Your rental instrument will typically come with a fiberglass bow using real horse

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hair. This provides the student with a durable solution that offers good sound, aiding them in developing tone.

Other accessories that may be required include quality rosin, cleaning cloth, and shoulder rest. Elementary school students will typically start with a shoulder sponge for added comfort, eventually transitioning to a regular shoulder rest as they begin developing shifting and vibrato in middle school.

Additional items your student will need include their music books and a music stand (this is quite important in encouraging proper posture when practicing.) Additional items that may be needed include a tuner, mute, a Dampit, and a metronome. Advancing musicians may keep additional extra strings on hand, although White House of Music does offer complimentary string replacement through the Maintenance and Repair Program.

What Care and Maintenance Will an Orchestra Instrument Require?

With orchestral instruments, the surrounding environmental conditions will have a profound impact on the sound, tuning, and upkeep of your string instruments. Having a climate-controlled [practice space](#) is essential in keeping your instrument working at its best.

Excessive humidity can ruin the sound of an orchestra instrument, requiring service from a repair technician. Excessive dryness can separate seams at the top and bottom of the instrument. Air conditioning will help dehumidify the practice space in the summer, and a humidifier will help reduce dryness throughout the long Wisconsin winters. Dampits can also be purchased to help maintain proper humidity for your instrument in dry environments.

Keeping your instrument clean will also help keep it performing well. Wiping down exterior surfaces where rosin may collect will also serve to keep your instrument in tip-top shape. For any additional feedback or assistance answering questions regarding specific instrument maintenance, feel free to reach out to the [White House of Music repair team](#).

How Much Should My Orchestra Student Practice?

The amount of practice required will vary based on your student's skill level, goals, and the type of orchestra program offered through their school. The frequency and duration of practice sessions vary considerably by age. Younger students will typically have shorter practice sessions, as the material may be fairly basic and repetitive. The shorter attention spans of younger students is another variable to consider when scheduling practice time. Consistency and the number of practice sessions is much more important than the length of a session. Your orchestra teacher will let you know the practice expectations.

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The learning curve for young orchestra musicians varies significantly when compared to students of other musical instruments. With many instruments students pick up on the basics on tone production fairly quickly before plateauing in their advancement. With orchestra instruments, students will have to spend a considerable effort in learning tone production, developing proper posture, and technique. However once these fundamentals have been mastered, the student will rapidly progress in their skills. It's important to be supportive and patient as they work to develop these skills. Don't be concerned if it takes some time to master a string instrument. That's perfectly normal!

While orchestra programs are extremely accommodating and allow for participation of students of all skill levels and aspirations, occasionally parents and students have career aspirations in the musical field. If your student is interested in pursuing a career in music, it's very important they start much earlier in their training, as this career path is highly competitive. The best way to improve your student's odds of success in this endeavor is to find the best private lessons available. Feel free to contact us to help pair your student with a teacher that specializes in their instrument of choice. [One-on-one instruction](#) is always better for helping identify minor corrections that might not be observed during larger class lessons.

Developing Skills in Orchestra

Participation in orchestra extends well beyond the classroom. The ongoing practice and teamwork experienced between musicians increases student focus, helping them better follow verbal directions. It also helps students develop critical listening and critical thinking skills. Orchestra students excel in their attention to detail and encourage them to continually improve in their development as musicians.

As with all other music ensembles the orchestra performs a wide and varied repertoire of music. Whether exploring full symphonies, pops orchestras, chamber ensembles, pit orchestras, and many modern music genres, there are more orchestra opportunities for students today than ever before.

One of the most fulfilling aspects of orchestra is the teamwork and camaraderie that it fosters. It's a wonderful thing when people from all different backgrounds can come together and work as one to Make Music for Life.

If your student is planning on participating in orchestra in the upcoming school year and you have any questions, feel free to contact me at the [Brookfield](#) White House of Music store. I would be more than happy to help answer them!

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Selecting an Instrument for the Advancing Student

Selecting an instrument for purchase is an extremely personal decision. As a student advances, they are able to ask more of the instrument. It is important that a student choose an instrument that not only fits their ability now, but can respond as they progress. String players choose by feel, sound, and response. It is very important that the student choose their instrument by playing the actual instrument. Please be wary of purchasing an instrument through the internet, as quality and sound may prove to be fairly hit-or-miss.

Along with the instrument, they will be purchasing a wood bow or carbon fiber bow that mimics wood response. Bow design, weight, flexibility, and balance will have a significant effect on the sound of the instrument. Along with our staff, guidance from the school orchestra director and/or private teacher is encouraged and welcomed in choosing an instrument and bow. Our [String Shoppe](#) stocks a wide selection of fine quality step-up instruments and bows that can be tested prior to purchasing.

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