

BY HELEN MINSHALL

'PLASTIC OR NOT?'

Back in the dark ages of 1985 when I began my career as a brass teacher, instruments were ridiculously expensive, and beginners at the time would sometimes start off on the oldest, smelliest of school or band instruments, all dented and in battered cases.

Some 30 years later, here I am constantly reflecting and adding to my experience of working with young brass players, and how times have changed! As with every other gadget or toy, old and battered simply doesn't cut it with the children of today. The instruments have to be attractive to look at, clean, bright and shiny. Going back about 10 years ago, there was a phase when the latest trend was coloured plastic mouthpieces, and my students were turning up to lessons with these in every colour under the sun, including dayglo pink, electric blue, bright yellow and siren red, carefully chosen to reflect

individuality; often these were unsuitable in size and didn't enhance their sound or the appearance of their instrument, although the colours made them very popular. It wasn't long before plastic instruments came along, with varying degrees of success, and of course children found these colourful instruments very appealing.

Last summer I bought 50 pBuzz's for my company, Minshall Music Ltd, to use in primary schools in Bolton, Salford and Cheshire, and also with cubs and scout troops, and what a fantastic investment they've been, at less than £20 each. I've had such fun experimenting with them. At first I thought they would work best with the younger students in the 6/7 age group, but at one school I used them for a 6 week block of lessons with every class from year 1 to Year 6 (age 5-11), using a variety of appropriately challenging lesson resources, and they all absolutely loved learning to play them. Of course, it's essential to boil the mouthpieces out between classes. Head teachers, governors and those managing ever diminishing school budgets expect to see fast results these days, and there's quite a bit of pressure and expectation for us teachers to achieve something of quality in a relatively short space of time, but I reckon pBuzz's tick all the boxes for making this possible.

At the start of each lesson I usually hand them out and let the children have a few minutes of free blowing, before progressing to the proper lesson warm up. Their mellow tone doesn't cause ridiculous noise levels, and is much easier from a class management aspect. We warm up with call and response exercises with backing tracks in a variety of styles (this always adds excitement to the experience) leading to simple tunes; often a tune with one or two notes can sound very effective in a relatively short space of time. My daughter Samantha Raisbeck and I have on several occasions worked with 2 classes at the same time – 60 children

in total, with half on pBuzz's and the other half on samba instruments. The excitement and energy this creates using a simple two-note pattern and samba accompaniment has to be seen to be believed. In a very short time you can have a full class of children playing simple 1-5 tunes by ear. A lot of our work is full class Brass Wider Opportunities, and I use pBuzz's for the first 6 weeks of lessons, to establish good basics such as breathing, posture and note production without the added complication of valves. We sometimes sing a new tune first, then try to play it, and the pBuzz's range of F-C is in a perfect register for young voices. I find that after 6 weeks on pBuzz's, once the children move onto metal instruments, they make progress much more quickly.

Regarding pBones, I own two – a black one and a pink one. I work regularly up and down the country with a Bavarian Band, the Blue Barons, and find them so light and easy to use, as part of my job is charging round the audience getting everyone swaying and clapping along. Dancing around on chairs and tables with a light plastic instrument is so much better than worrying about damaging a slide. My pBones have paid for themselves over and over again. They are fairly robust and this makes them an excellent beginner instrument for children; easy to assemble and transport around. The pBone Mini in Eb is accessible even to the youngest of beginners, and a full class set of 30 of these will be my next investment. I've rarely had problems with the slides, and the lightness of them makes them very popular indeed. Of course, you're never going to get the sound you would from a metal instrument, but as a cost effective and attractive instrument for beginners, you can't go far wrong.

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