

# The trombone essay sample



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The trombone is certainly the most recognizable wind instrument, being the only one with a true slide section. The trombone has been in existence for centuries under various forms and names, but has remained relatively unchanged for a majority of that time.

In the 15th century, when trombones developed from the Renaissance slide trumpet, they were called trombone in Italian and Posaune in German, just as they are today. In English, however, they were known as sackbuts.

The slide trumpet was unique because its mouthpiece could telescope into the adjacent lead pipe, thereby shortening the instrument and changing the pitch. The sackbut kept the sliding idea, but separated the sliding area from the bell; that way the bell always remained the same distance from the mouth of the player.

The oldest sackbut still in existence today was built in 1551. The bell of the Renaissance instrument was smaller than today's trombone, its walls were thinner and it had no water key. Most sackbuts were in B flat (actually a very sharp A), similar to today's tenor trombone. By 1650, the right hand grip (the vertical tube that connects the two horizontal tubes of the slide) was added, allowing the right hand to execute the sliding motion more easily. Four sizes of sackbuts gave the musician considerable range; alto, tenor, bass and double bass were all used.

By the mid 1550's, composers realized that sackbuts blended well with the voice; more and more church music was written for choir and accompanied by sackbuts and cornets (not the cornet related to the valve trumpet). For over 100 years, the sackbut was considered an ecclesiastical instrument.

Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli wrote many pieces specifically for St. Mark's in Venice, which had two choir lofts facing each other. Sackbuts and cornets played to each other from these lofts known as cori spezzati.

The sound of the sackbut became associated with death and the underworld;

Monteverdi used them for this very reason in his opera Orfeo (Orpheus and the Underworld).

Although used in church music (particularly for doubling the lower voices,) and in small ensembles, the trombone did not become a part of the orchestra until the 18th century. At this period the instrument had strong associations of the ecclesiastical and the supernatural. Gluck wrote for the traditional trio of alto, tenor and bass (e. g. in the oracle scene of *Alceste*), as did Gossec, who also scored for the single trombone joined to a bass part. Mozart used trombones only in his operas and sacred works; his dramatic use of the instrument is particularly well exemplified by the supper scene of *Don Giovanni*, and he provided a notorious solo for the instrument in the 'Tuba mirum' of the *Requiem* (not without precedent in his earlier church music). In Germany the reorganization of military bands gave the trombone the role of strengthening the bass line, though the trio was maintained in large infantry bands as well as in the orchestra. Technical changes included realignment of the old high A pitch (of the tenor) to concert and band pitch B flat. and acceptance of seven chromatic slide positions instead of the previous diatonic positions. At the same time the trend in France and Germany was towards performing all orchestral trombone parts on the B flat tenor instrument.

In the 19th century, Beethoven, Berlioz, and other composers included the trombone in their symphonies. Romantic composers considered the trombone capable of expressing a broad range of emotional situations: Berlioz said the instrument could portray everything from ‘religious accent, calm and imposing ... to wild clamors of the orgy’. With its formidable reserve of power it is not surprising that the trombone was sometimes, used as if loudness were its main attribute. After the rotary valve was patented in the mid 1800’s, the first B flat/F trombone was invented. An F attachment added to the trombone allowed the player extended range. By depressing the valve, the player could make use of the additional notes made possible by the extra tubing. The valve trombone, also invented at this time, was popularized because it allowed trumpet players to ‘cross over’ more easily, but today its role is mostly confined to the jazz idiom.

Jazz has had an enormous influence on the popularity of the trombone and on the development of its technique. Glissandi, micro tones, multiphonics, vibrato and extended range are examples of the legacy of jazz. Jazz trombonists, using a variety of mutes for expressive effects, have shown that a greater range of timbre is available than is usually employed even by modern symphonic composers. Vibrato, always a technical possibility has become part of the trombone soloist’s style. Slide technique has become more flexible, and the instrument’s range has been extended at both ends, making the feasible range of the tenor trombone from E, the lowest pedal note, to G sharp or above. Although the trombone is now seldom heard in the concert hall as a solo instrument apart from jazz, several 19th-century players made reputations as soloists, including C. T. Queisser and F. A.

Belcke in Germany, and in France A. G Dieppo, whose *Méthode* (1840) indicates that he used a slide tenor of curiously slender proportions (a bore of 1 cm and bell of 12 cm).

Very narrow bores are indeed found in some surviving French trombones of the period. In the past 100 years, the size of the bore and bell has increased, giving the trombone greater power and volume. The modern trombone is not really all that different from its medieval ancestors. It still has the distinct s-shape. The proportions of the instrument are somewhat different however. The modern trombone comes in various sizes, but in general is larger in bore than its predecessors. Its characteristics are a cylindrical bore, meaning that the diameter of the tubing stays relatively the same throughout the length of the horn, a hand slide, and a bell section that extends out proportionately about 1/3 of the length of the slide when assembled. The bell section is different than that of the early trombone. The flare is now more sudden and closer to the end of the bell section, rather than being funnel-like.

The three types of trombones most often used today are the alto trombone, tenor trombone, and bass trombone. Of these three, the most common is the tenor trombone. The tenor and bass trombones are typically in the key of B flat. The alto, more rarely used, is typically in the key of E flat, or sometimes F. The alto, by its name, is the highest pitched trombone. There is also a higher soprano trombone, which in reality is a slide trumpet.

These are rarely seen and if ever used are typically played by a trumpet player due to the size of the mouthpiece. The tenor is the middle pitched trombone. Its range is often extended lower by an attachment of extra

tubing which is used by activating some type of valve. These attachments usually pitch the trombone in the key of F. They are often referred to as an F trigger attachment, or just F-attachment. The bass trombone is the low instrument of the family. It is still in the key of B flat like the tenor, but has a much larger bore size. It also often has two trigger attachments of different keys, usually F and another key, extending its range even lower. There is also a lower contrabass trombone which is rarely used but is still a very interesting trombone.

### Bibliography

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