

## **PBONE OR NOT PBONE?**

By Steve Giddings

I recently purchased a pBone, which is a new plastic trombone distributed by Selmer/Bach designed as a completely functional, durable, lightweight and absolutely affordable musical instrument. As soon as I heard about it, I wanted it. This was way before it was even available in Canada. It was as recent as August that Selmer/Bach became the only distributor of the instrument and Jiggs Wigham became the sole endorsee. When I found out I could have one ordered in through my local Long and McQuade, I was right on top of it. At first glance, it looks very much like a toy, complete with its "Made in China" sticker, but don't let its looks fool you.

Here are the specs:

- 0.500 small bore.
- 8.25 inch bell.
- Clear plastic 12C-ish mouthpiece (approx 24.55mm cup diameter).
- Accepts all standard small shank mouthpieces.
- Movable main tuning slide (imagine that!).
- Metal counterweight for balance.
- Slide lock.
- Carbon fiber inner & outer slide tubes. (it says fibre glass on the care card, I can't tell the difference)
- Brass slide stockings.
- Ergonomic handgrip.
- Weighs about 1¼ pounds (800 grams).
- Black nylon O-style "gig" bag.

## **THE REVIEW**

### **SOUND**

I am very impressed with the horn's sound. It is very similar to a brass trombone minus the high end of the sound spectrum. This means that it does not project as well as a brass horn and can sound much more mellow than its brass counterpart. Unfortunately, the pBone comes with a very light, plastic mouthpiece that makes this much more apparent, while adding some fuzziness to the sound just to rub it in a little. Thankfully, it can be fitted with any small shank mouthpiece. I found that using a small metal mouthpiece, like a YAMAHA 45C or equivalent, gives back some of the high end of the sound to the instrument for a much more characteristic sound.

### **RANGE**

The range of the instrument is exactly the same as a brass trombone but not as consistent. I find that from first space A to around middle C sounds very typical of any brass trombone. The higher register sounds somewhat brighter and the lower register sounds a little dull but still very impressive.

### **PLAYABILITY/INTONATION**

Most brass players would agree that a well made horn will sometimes be so responsive that it could almost "play itself." This horn does play well but does not play itself. Its response is a little slow, but being made from plastic this is to be expected. However, to make up for it, it has very good intonation once you get used to the fully functional slide, bringing me to my next observation.

## SLIDE ACTION

I am very picky about my slides and I did not know what to expect from a fibre glass slide. Of course, it is exactly what you would expect from a fibre glass slide - slow and sticky. At the same time, it is about as slow and sticky as a typical junior high school trombone slide but it is said to improve over time as the slide wears itself in. Another plus is that there is very little maintenance for taking care of the slide. A simple spray with water and a wipe will do the trick. Although slide grease is not required, it can still help in improving the slide action a bit. The slide's stickiness does make it difficult to perform extremely intricate tuning adjustments on the fly.

## MAINTENANCE

There is a "Jiggs pBone Care Card" that is supplied with the horn that reads:

- Avoid extreme temperatures (hot or cold) that may have an adverse effect on the material.
- Over time, your pBone's slide will break itself in. It will feel smoother as you use it more. This comes from the use of brass slide stockings inside the hand slide.
- Clean the slide regularly using water or a light solvent. This will prevent build up on the slide's stockings.
- Slide grease or cream is not necessary for use of the instrument.
- You **CAN** use water or lubricant if you choose as it will not damage the fibre glass slide.
- When using a mute, insert carefully and do not twist into the bell. Extemporaneous force can break the bell and/or dislodge it from the seam.
- Most importantly – **HAVE FUN!!**

## PBONE'S APPLICATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Although the pBone was not specifically designed as a cheaper alternative to the student model horn, there are many applications for this well engineered instrument in the Canadian music classroom.

The instrument's durability and affordability make it ideal for schools and beginners. At \$150, the pBone is completely affordable for most schools and individual budgets. If the pBone's wide range of colours is not enough to convince you, the price and quality will! Another reason it's perfect for school band programs is its durability. When I teach beginner trombone lessons, there is always at least one student whose slide inadvertently clangs to the ground, knocking it out of alignment and making for slow and sticky slide action for the rest of the year. The horn could be used for beginning students who are not used to being mindful of a slide. That being said, the student should still be taught proper care practices but if a slide does fall off of a pBone, it's fine! Once the student is able to prove that he or she can take care of their plastic horn, they would be able to "graduate" to a brass horn. There would be many less maintenance bills for the realigning of fallen slides at schools where pBones are used regularly.

In addition, because they are made of plastic, they are not susceptible to "red rot" which happens to a brass instrument once the lacquer starts to wear off and the instrument ages. They are also less prone to the green gunk that builds up inside brass horns because that green gunk is a product of the oxidization process that goes on when brass gets wet and is left for a period of time. This build up of gunk can, over time, cause the main tuning slide to seize up. The main tuning slide is much less likely to seize up due to the absence of the green gunk and the fact that

plastic is not sensitive to the fluctuation of temperatures keeping it from constantly contracting and expanding. Not being sensitive to temperature changes also keeps the tuning of the instrument from fluctuating wildly.

It would also be that perfect horn to use as a teaching instrument in the classroom. Using trombone stands can be very safe but if an accident prone student walks by it and gives it a bump, it could tumble over. With a brass horn, even a small tumble could be catastrophic, but a plastic instrument is much less likely to get damaged under the same circumstances.

Its lightweight attributes also make it perfect for use in marching bands. If your school has a marching band some students may find it difficult to carry a brass trombone for long periods of time. If so, have them try a pBone. It would also be beneficial during those choreographed pep rallies that some school marching bands take part in. Essentially, dancing or moving around in many different directions with other musicians right beside or in front of you while playing a trombone is not a good idea but if anything does happen, a teacher would be glad their students were using pBones.

As a trombonist, I have been theorizing getting a class set of pBones for my students at my elementary school to inspire an entire year of trombone players. Somehow, I have a feeling that the junior high band teacher might not like that! That being said, depending on the size of your school, having a class set would mean that some students would be required to buy their own mouthpieces as to not spread around germs. Decent plastic trombone mouthpieces cost between \$15 and \$30 each. It would even be fun to have a few of them just to have students try in class or learn as part of a class project without worrying about the instruments being damaged.

Although the pBone was not specifically designed for students, it can be used in the classroom offering many benefits for students and teachers. I am very curious to hear if any band directors or general music specialists have already integrated this trombone into their classrooms and what their thoughts are on using the instrument. To conclude, the pBone is a surprisingly well made horn and I can't wait to see the improvements that will most likely be developed over the next few years.