

# Instrument transpositions

*a primer for MUS 312... and always!*

Learn it, love it... and for prospective band directors especially, know it cold!

## Concert pitch → Notation    Notation → Concert pitch

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### C instruments

flute, piccolo

oboe

bassoon (contrabassoon)

trombone, bass trombone

euphonium, baritone BC

tuba

all pitched percussion

all string instruments

Reads as written.  
(no transposition)

Sounds as written.  
(no transposition)

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### B-flat instruments

clarinet

bass clarinet

contrabass clarinet

(soprano saxophone)

tenor saxophone

(bass saxophone)

trumpet (cornet, flugelhorn)

baritone TC

Reads M2 up.  
(Concert B-flat = written C)

Sounds M2 down.  
(Written C = concert B-flat)

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### E-flat instruments

E-flat clarinet

alto clarinet

contra-alto clarinet

("E-flat contrabass clarinet")

alto saxophone

baritone saxophone

Reads m3 down.  
(Concert E-flat = written C)

Sounds m3 up.  
(Written C = concert E-flat)

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### F instruments

(English horn)

French horn

Reads P5 up.  
(Concert F = written C)

Sounds P5 down.  
(Written C = concert F)

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*You should know: M2 = major second, m3 = minor third, P5 = perfect fifth.*

## Know this too.

**For all information above: "Octave transpositions notwithstanding."** (For example, a tenor saxophone actually reads a *major ninth* up — that is, an octave plus a M2 — and sounds a major ninth down.)

Instruments in parentheses aren't commonly found in school bands, but you should know them anyway.

"Concert pitch" means the *sounding* pitch, i.e., the pitch you'd hear or play on the piano. When we say "concert B-flat," for example, that means everyone is *sounding* a B-flat, even though clarinets and trumpets are reading a C, horns are reading an F, alto saxophones are reading a G, and so on.

It is YOUR responsibility, as the director, to know these transpositions — NOT your students' responsibility (at least at first). Please DON'T burden a beginning student with information such as, "well, when I say 'concert B-flat, that means you transpose a whole step up,'" and so on. At first, they will understand (by assimilation, essentially), that the term "Concert B-flat" means a particular pitch on their given instrument. Later — LATER! — you can explain transpositions as needed. ***Yes, it's important for them to know this — it's just not important NOW. I can't emphasize this enough.***

*But wait... there's more!*

## And this.

*“My gosh, Dr. M., could you possibly have made the font size any smaller?”*

*Hey... I'm trying to keep this to one page. Besides, you need to learn this information to the point where you don't need to read this anymore.*

*Hint:* No bass clef-reading instrument ever transposes.

*Hint:* Baritone saxophone and contra-alto clarinet (which are E-flat instruments reading treble clef) can read bass clef tuba or string bass parts “without transposing”: Give them the part, tell them to imagine treble clef and the transposed key signature, then read as-is. (They may have to adjust for accidentals.) The reverse is true, too, for tuba and string bass players, though they're usually less happy about it.

Tuba presents a special case. There exist B-flat tubas, C tubas, E-flat tubas, etc., however, tuba parts are always “in C” and are not transposed. The player actually learns a different set of fingerings for each different kind of tuba, thus in effect “transposing” the parts. (You'll sometimes see B-flat tubas referred to as double-B-flat tubas — “BB ♭” — indicating the octave transposition.)

Baritone TC and Baritone BC are actually the same instrument — the parts are just written differently. Baritone TC parts are usually for trumpet players who are switching to baritone (or euphonium) and haven't yet learned to read bass clef.

Baritones (i.e., baritone horns) and euphoniums are not the same instrument. (It's been my experience that euphonium players, or at least euphonium owners, will be quick to correct you if you call them “baritones.” Fine.) For the record, baritones are cylindrical-bore instruments, and thus sound brighter, while euphoniums have conical bores, thus sounding more mellow. In bands, they will virtually always play the same parts.

Trumpets are cylindrical. Cornets are conical. Many writers for band used to distinguish between the two different sounds (i.e., trumpets are a bit brighter, and cornets are a bit mellower), and some still do. (Solo parts were typically given to cornets, while trumpets had harmonic rhythms; some folks lament that trumpets having the primary melodic lines make the band sound too bright overall.) But kids nowadays pretty much only have trumpet instruments, so it's common to give kids either part, regardless of what instrument they actually have. Again, both are B-flat transposing instruments.

“Double” French horns are actually two instruments in one — an F horn and a B-flat horn — BUT for parts purposes, they're always F transposing instruments. (They just learn different fingerings for the B-flat side.)

There exist C trumpets, D trumpets, etc., and piccolo trumpets too (usually pitched in B-flat, but can be A instruments too, given a longer lead pipe) but you will hardly see them in band scores. (C trumpets are common orchestral instruments.)

A clarinets exist, too. It's not uncommon for the serious orchestral clarinet player to have both B-flat and A clarinets.

All clarinets and all saxophones read treble clef... even the very biggest ones. Note fingerings are virtually identical within each instrument family.

Bassoons, trombones, and cellos sometimes read tenor clef, especially when they're playing in their upper registers. Okay, euphoniums sometimes, too.

Violas almost exclusively read alto clef. They might read treble clef in the upper registers.

Beware of older band scores which may have parts written for instruments which are now either obsolete or are found almost exclusively in orchestral settings: D-flat piccolo, F or C saxophones (very old), E-flat horn.

Alto flutes? They're G instruments. (I had to look that one up.) They read a P4 up and sound a P4 down. Bass flutes are C instruments.

People use the term “contrabass clarinet” to refer to both “real” contrabass clarinets (which are B-flat instruments, or more specifically, double-B-flat instruments) *and* contra-alto clarinets, which are actually E-flat instruments (okay... double-E-flat). Sometimes you'll even hear people refer to a contra-alto clarinet as an E-flat contrabass clarinet, which is somewhat of a misnomer. There often aren't even parts for either of these instruments in a band score, anyway, so contra-alto clarinet players may just read a baritone saxophone part (same transposition), and contrabass clarinet players may just read a bass clarinet part (same transposition, but sounding an octave down, which can be weird). Skilled players on either instrument may be able to do their own transpositions (when given a part for another instrument), sometimes even at sight. For band scores that *do* have “contra clarinet” parts — E-flat contra-alto clarinet parts are somewhat more common nowadays, whereas B-flat contrabass clarinet parts are seen a bit more in older pieces. You'll almost never see both parts included, and even if you do, they're likely the same line of music (unless you're playing some sort of clarinet ensemble piece). Regarding the instruments themselves — contra-alto clarinets are a bit more common in school band programs, too; they're smaller and are a bit more mechanically sound than the contrabass clarinets, which are a bit unwieldy (and are often made entirely of metal).

Don't even ask me about recorders. Talk to Dr. Harding.