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Hi everyone, and welcome back to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast where we explore the music we love and the instruments and people who make it. I'm your host, Carly Seifert, creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so glad you're here today.

We are right in the middle of our series getting to know the four families of the orchestra. So far we've spent time with the strings and, last episode, the woodwinds, where we learned that every woodwind starts with your breath. Today we're moving on to a family that's loud, bright, and a whole lot of fun: the brass.

At the end of last episode, I mentioned that my daughter plays the trumpet, which is a brass instrument, so I'll admit right up front that this is a family I'm a little partial to. There's nothing quite like the sound of a roomful of brass players warming up.

Now, last time I had you take a deep breath. This time, I want you to try something a little sillier. Press your lips together and blow until they buzz — kind of like a raspberry, or like you're pretending to be a motorboat. Go ahead, I'll wait. (brief pause) That buzzing of your lips is exactly how every brass instrument makes its sound. Hold onto that, because it's the secret to the whole family.

Before we start listening, I made something to go along with today's episode, just like last time. It's called the Brass Family Spotter, and you can download it for free in the show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/183. As you listen, you can use it to spot each brass instrument as it shows up — there's a place to check off the ones you hear. If you'd like to follow along, go ahead and pause for a moment to print it out.

Okay — let's talk about what makes a brass instrument part of the brass family.

You might guess it's because they're made of shiny metal, and most of them are. But remember the saxophone from last episode? It's made of metal too, and it's a woodwind. So the metal isn't the secret. The

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secret is that buzz you just made with your lips.

A brass player presses their lips against a little cup-shaped piece called a mouthpiece, and then they buzz their lips right into it. That buzz travels through a long, curled-up tube of metal, and out comes a big, bold sound. (And the tubes really are long — if you could unwind all the tubing in a trumpet and stretch it out straight, it would be several feet long — and with the extra valve tubing, over six feet!)

So if buzzing your lips makes the sound, how do brass players change from one note to another? There are two ways.

Most brass instruments — the trumpet, the French horn, and the tuba — have little buttons on top called valves. When the player presses different valves, the air takes a different path through the tubing, and the note changes.

But one brass instrument does it a completely different way, and it's my favorite to watch. The trombone doesn't have buttons at all. Instead, it has a long slide that the player pushes out and pulls back in to find each note. We'll come back to that one, because it makes a sound you can spot a mile away.

Now for the fun part — let's listen to each member of the family.

We'll start with the trumpet. The trumpet is the highest and brightest of the brass, and it's built to grab your attention. For hundreds of years, trumpets were used to make announcements, to signal soldiers, and to play fanfares — those short, bold bursts of music that make it feel like something important is about to happen. One of the most famous examples is Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man," which we have a whole episode about back in Episode 115.

Can you hear how bold and confident that is? That's the trumpet doing what it does best.

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The French horn — or just “horn,” as many musicians call it, is next , and here's where our story from last episode comes back around. Do you remember in Peter and the Wolf — from Episode 122 — how the bird was a flute, the duck was an oboe, the cat was a clarinet, and the grandfather was a bassoon? Well, there's one character we didn't talk about last time. The wolf. And Prokofiev gave the wolf to a group of French horns.

Hear how those horns can sound a little dark and a little scary there? That's one side of the French horn. But the very same instrument can also sound warm and noble and grand, like some of the grand horn melodies in Holst's "The Planets," which we covered in Episode 131. The French horn has one of the widest ranges of feeling in the whole brass family.

Then we have the trombone, the one with the slide. Because the player can move that slide smoothly while they play, the trombone can make one of the smoothest and most recognizable slides between notes in the whole brass family. That swooping sound has a name — it's called a glissando — and once you know to listen for it, you'll catch it everywhere.

The trombone has a special place in our family, actually. When my youngest was little, we discovered a New Orleans musician who goes by the name Trombone Shorty, and he completely won us over. We drove hours to hear him play live more than once back when we lived in Montana and have continued to attend his concerts in Atlanta whenever possible. If you want to hear what the trombone can really do, we devoted a whole episode to it back in Episode 71.

Listen for the way the notes slide right into each other. That's the trombone, and nothing else sounds quite like it.

And finally, the biggest member of the family: the tuba. The tuba is the lowest brass instrument. It is so large that players usually rest it on

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their lap, on the chair, or sometimes on a special stand. And in marching bands, you might see its cousin, the sousaphone, wrapped around the player's body. Its job isn't usually to play the melody. Instead, the tuba plays those deep, low notes way down at the bottom that hold the whole group up, kind of like the roots of a tree you can't see but absolutely need.

Can you feel how that low rumble seems to come up through the floor? The tuba may be the gentle giant of the group, but take it away and the whole brass section feels like it's floating with nothing underneath it.

So let's gather the whole family together one more time. Every brass instrument makes its sound the same way — by buzzing your lips into a mouthpiece and sending that buzz through a long, curled tube of metal. The trumpet, French horn, and tuba change notes with valves, and the trombone uses its slide. From the bright, attention-grabbing trumpet, to the noble French horn, to the swooping trombone, to the deep, steady tuba, the brass family brings the power and the sparkle to an orchestra or band.

If you printed out your Brass Family Spotter, take a look now and see how many you found today. And if you didn't get to it, that's okay — you can grab it any time in the show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/183, and listen back through with it in hand, or with the playlist of songs featuring brass family instruments in the show notes.

Next time, we'll finish building our orchestra with the very last family — the percussion. These are the instruments you hit, shake, scrape, and tap, and there are more of them than you might think. It's a fun one to end on.

Until next time — keep listening, keep learning, and keep making music. Thanks for joining me on Busy Kids Love Music!