

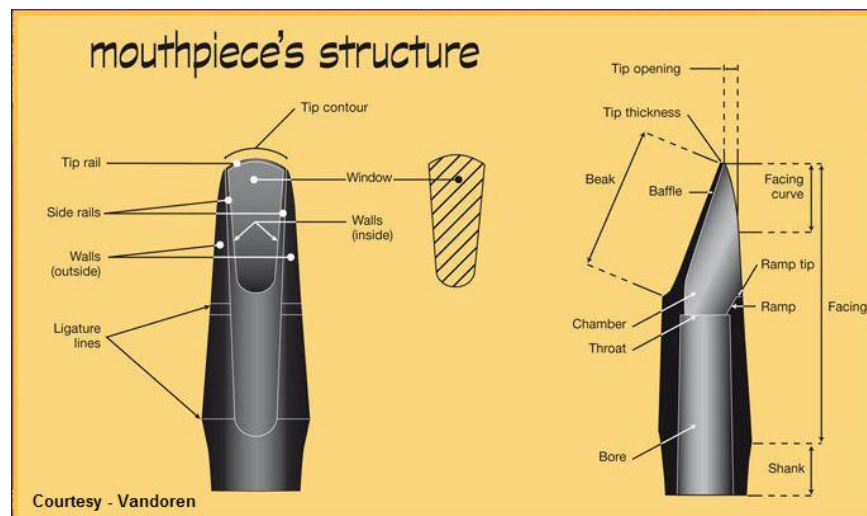
The Saxophone Setup

Choosing the right equipment

The most important aspect of being a saxophonist is the most overlooked, sound. Whatever genera of music you play, the first thing the audience hears is your sound. The two main factors that affect a persons' sound are air, and proper equipment setup.

Mouthpieces and Saxophones and Reeds, Oh My

Mouthpieces - The mouthpiece is the one piece of equipment that affects the sound more than any other.



Important Characteristics:

Tip Opening - The distance from the reed and the tip, measured in thousandths of an inch

-Smaller = easier to control, Larger = harder to control, but louder

Baffle - The sealing of the mouthpiece. Baffles are sometimes labeled 0-3, zero being highest and 3 being lowest

-Higher = warmer and more control, Lower = brighter and less control

Chamber -The inside open area of the mouthpiece

-Small = brighter and more focused,

-Medium = darker and still focused,

-Large = darkest and least focused

Table - The flat part of the mouthpiece where the reed sits

Rails - The thin side part of the table

Shank - Opposite end of the tip

Mouthpiece Material:

Wood - Darkest, warmest sound, easy to control

Hard Rubber (Ebonit) - Dark, warm sound, easiest to control

Metal - Brighter, edgier, more difficult to control

Plastic - cheap generic option for beginners

-VERY IMPORTANT NOTE: A mouthpiece should be symmetrical and have an almost perfectly flat table. Unevenness will prevent the reed from sitting flush against the mouthpiece, allowing air to escape between the reed and mouthpiece, making it extremely difficult to produce a solid sound.

Reeds - It's crucial to match the right reed to the mouthpiece. A bad reed can render a mouthpiece useless.

Reed Material:

Plastic - Durable, long lasting, least desirable sound

Wood - Most sensitive, most preferred sound

Fiber Cell - Mixture of wood and plastic, long lasting, bright sound

Reed Strength:

Lower Strength - Less fibers in the wood, use on larger tip opening mouthpieces

Medium Strength - More fibers in the wood, use on medium tip opening mouthpieces

High Strength - Most fibers in the wood, use on smaller tip opening mouthpieces

-note: Each company has their own way of measuring reed strength. Refer to a "Reed Comparison Chart" which can be found in the Woodwind and Brasswind catalogue or the Internet.

After choosing the right reed material, strength and brand, you want to find the most symmetrical reeds in the box. Those will be your best reeds.

Reed Care:

Reeds are like baseball pitchers, they need to have a rest rotation in order to have a long, productive career. You should have four or five reeds in rotation at any given time, playing one reed a day, then they have three or four days off (unless you have a big game and you want to start your star “reed”). When your reed is done for the day, make sure to wipe both sides off on your pant leg to remove any “gunk” before storage. The best storage for saxophone reeds is a flat surface with a bit of pressure from the top side. *Selmer* makes an excellent reed case that does exactly this, and comes with the option of holding 5 or 10 reeds. This reed rotation and storage system should give you four or five MONTHS of quality reed life, but eventually they stop responding well. We perceive this as “softness,” this is FAULSE. True, the reed cannot vibrate as much, but this is due to “gunk” that has built up on and in the reed. Solution, hydrogen peroxide soak. The peroxide will remove all this “gunk” buildup, bringing your run-down reed back to the prime of its life for another few months. This process can be done about three or four times before the reed needs to be retired, but you’ve gotten almost a year and a half of excellent usage from only four or five reeds...think of the money you’ll save on buying fewer boxes of reeds and less aspirin to counter the headache of breaking in new ones every month.

-VERY IMPORTANT NOTE: A warped or uneven reed will not sit evenly against the mouthpiece, allowing air to escape between the reed and mouthpiece.

Ligatures - The most important aspect of a ligature is that it holds the reed securely to the mouthpiece, while allowing for the reed AND mouthpiece to vibrate freely.

Ligature Material:

Leather - Darkest

Wood - Dark

Metal - Brightest

Types of Ligatures:

Wrap Around: Darkens the sound by hindering vibration in the reed and mouthpiece.

Standard One/Two Screw: Standard ligature, wraps around mouthpiece, but less material than a wrap ligature. Versatile

Minimal Contact: The theory is this type of ligature allows for maxim vibrations, giving a fuller sound.

Mouthpiece/Reed/Ligature Seal Test - If all three pieces of equipment are working properly, you should be able to create a vacuum seal with the reed. With the reed and ligature set to play on the mouthpiece, place the opening at the shank (where the neck slips into the mouthpiece) against the palm of your hand. Make sure it is fully sealed at this end. Now, suck all the air out of the mouthpiece while lightly pushing the reed towards the mouthpiece with your tongue. If everything is sitting evenly, the reed should become tight against the mouthpiece, creating a vacuum seal inside. If no seal can be created, try a different reed and or ligature. If no reed can seal, have your mouthpiece taken to a professional repairman to check for unevenness.

Saxophones - The important parts of a saxophone are that it plays in tune, and has the characteristics you are looking for.

Beginner - A beginner saxophone should not be difficult to play, have a set sound, and play in tune. There are few good choices of beginner saxophones, *Conn-Selmer, Yamaha, Jupiter*. Local dealers usually carry good saxophones at this level. The most important aspect of this level is that this instrument requires minimal air to operate.

-VERY IMPORTANT NOTE: A beginner saxophone player should play on BEGINNER equipment unless supervised by a professional. Beginners lack the control, air production and core sound for professional level equipment, not to mention lack of mindfulness to properly care for an expensive machine (intermediate saxophones are not a bad idea, but are still more expensive and still require more air). One should wait and see if the student is interested in pursuing development first). Vintage and damaged equipment for a beginner is a sure way to discourage the student.

Intermediate - Intermediate saxophones should be the next step in the developing saxophonist. They still have a set sound, but one that is better than beginner saxophones. It's still important at this stage of development to have an instrument with a fairly set sound. The main difference between beginner and intermediate is better material and requires more air. There are more selections of good intermediate saxophones. *Yamaha* makes a very good intermediate saxophone. Again, see your local dealer.

Professional - The saxophones at this level have more of an individual sound, rather than the set sound. There are more choices at this level. Material, craftsmanship are at the highest level here. *Selmer Paris* has the most individual sound out of all the current production professional saxophones. *Yamaha, Yanagisawa* and *Keilworth* make very good professional saxophones, but tend to have more of a set sound than *Selmer*. All professional level saxophones require a great deal of air to operate properly.

Vintage Saxophones - Be careful with vintage saxophones. They can be amazingly good, or bad. *Selmer* and *Conn* are the most sought after vintage saxophones. They provide the most individual sound of all levels. Vintage instruments should ONLY be used once a player has developed a good tone and able to produce a good amount of air to operate.

Other Important Saxophone Characteristics:

Lacquer - Lacquer affects the tone quality of the saxophone, and looks cool too...

Bare Brass (no lacquer) - Allows the instrument to vibrate at its max

Black - Darkest sound

Brush/Matte - Dark

Gold - Middle of the road

Silver Plate - Brightest

Resonators - Located in the center of a saxophone key pad, they reflect sound off the pad

Plastic - Reflects a lot of sound, but keeps the sound warmer

Metal - Reflects most sound, gives more “edge” to the sound

Final Notes: These external devices are designed to allow a person's own sound to come out with more ease. The most important aspects of developing a good sound occur before the reed starts to vibrate. A person will sound like there self on any instrument/reed/mouthpiece combination. But without the right equipment matchup in proper working order, the player will struggle and spend more energy making the hunk of brass work. As Joe Allard once said, “when you remove all extraneous though, all that's left is the music.”