

The Saxophone – a beginner’s guide to student instruments

Although Saxophones are made of metal they are classed as woodwind instruments because of the way the sound is produced.

Saxophones come in various different sizes, which make up the Saxophone family. Beginners usually start on either of the two most common members of the family – the “Alto” Saxophone or the “Tenor” Saxophone; the “Soprano” and “Baritone” Saxophones are best left alone until the player has mastered the Alto or Tenor (or possibly the Clarinet).

Adults can start on either the Alto or Tenor - Alto Saxophones are usually cheaper but it is best to start on the size that produces the sound they like; children usually start on the Alto simply because it is smaller and lighter.

The Saxophone is played by attaching a reed (a small piece of cane) to the mouthpiece and blowing. The player presses keys on the instrument to produce different notes.

The parts of a Saxophone

- The **mouthpiece** – onto which a **reed** is fastened using a **ligature**.
- The **crook** – a short curved tube to join the mouthpiece to the body.
- The **body** – which has a socket at the top to receive the crook and a lot of **keys** (which are operated by the player so that the pads cover or uncover the various tone-holes to make different musical notes)

The metal keys on the Saxophone make up the mechanism of the instrument. The keys are supported between metal pillars on screws or rods. Most of the keys have a wire spring that keeps them held open or held shut. Most the keys also have a key cup in which there is glued a pad to cover the tone-hole. The keys also have cork or felt glued on to function as a stop so that each key opens the correct amount. The pads, corks, and felts on the instrument (and also the adhesives which keep these items in place) deteriorate over time. On older or poorer quality instruments the mechanism itself starts to wear and the keys can become loose or jammed.

The mouthpiece is the part of the instrument that has most influence on the tuning and tone of an instrument. The reed is held on the mouthpiece by means of a ligature which can also influence the sound produced.

Although not a part of the instrument there are four other vital accessories:

- The **case** - a badly fitting case will damage the instrument when it is being transported
- The **mouthpiece cap** - this protects the mouthpiece if it gets dropped and also protects the reed when the mouthpiece is packed away with the reed still fastened to it.
- The **slings** – this must be comfortable, easy to adjust, and most importantly it must link securely to the body of the instrument; slings with a simple “open” hook sometimes slip off the instrument and the player then drops the instrument with catastrophic results – a good sling has a “closed” hook.
- The **end plug** – this fits into the top of the Sax body when it is in the case and prevents the Octave bridge key from getting bent.

Special Saxophones for children

Recently one manufacturer (Trevor James) has produced an Alto Saxophone especially for children - it is called the 'Alpha': it does not have some of the higher and lower notes; it is lighter than a standard Alto; and it has modifications for smaller hands. Traditionally children have started on the Recorder, then moved to the Flute or Clarinet, and then moved onto the Saxophone when they were able to support the weight of the instrument and reach all the keys. With this new instrument children could move straight from Recorder to Saxophone (as soon as they have their front adult teeth).

This is a recent innovation and it is yet to be seen if teachers and schools will adopt it (currently Saxophone is usually only taught at Secondary schools).

Variations in design

Modern Saxophones do vary a little in the design of the mechanism therefore each one can feel slightly different to the player. They can vary in tuning to some degree - with poorer quality instruments being difficult to play in tune. Also they vary regarding the tone they produce although this is largely down to the mouthpiece.

There are only two aspects of design that really vary from the point of view of a beginner (excepting the Trevor James alpha Sax for children):

Finish: on Saxophones all metal work is either lacquered or plated to protect the metal from corrosion. Normally on student instruments the whole instrument is lacquered with a clear, gold, or black, lacquer. Sometimes the body and crook are lacquered but the keys are nickel plated for extra protection.

High F#: in the last 10 years or so Saxophones have featured an additional key. This additional key extends the normal range of the instrument up to high F#. For beginners up to grade 5 this key is not necessary but it is certainly useful above grade 5.

Categories of student instruments

Student instruments can be divided into four categories.

Budget student instruments: these are models that are often sold on-line or by local retailers who do not specialize in music. They are much cheaper than the recognized brands and often cheaper even than second-hand standard student instruments. This is because these new instruments are of poor quality and will have a very limited lifetime, either because they will soon need repair (but many repairers will not work on these cheaper instruments) or they simply do not meet the needs of any but the complete beginner. Some budget instruments are of reasonable quality for the price, but there is no "brand consistency" so it is impossible to recommend any particular make or model.

Older student instruments: these are models that have not been manufactured for many years but were solidly made. They are suitable for up to and including grade 5 if in good condition.

Standard student instruments: these are models manufactured within the last 10 years. They are reasonably well-made and suitable up to and including grade 5 if in good condition (and probably beyond with a suitable mouthpiece and regular servicing). Models include: some Artemis models, Buffet Crampon 8001, Elkhart series II, Jupiter 500 series, Trevor James "Classic", and the current Yamaha YAS275

Premium student instruments: these are models manufactured within the last 10 years. They are very well made and are suitable up to grade 8 (when Custom serviced). The best examples are the Jupiter 700 series, the Trevor James "Horn Revolution".

Manufacturers and models

There have been dozens of different manufacturers and hundreds of different models over the years. I recommend the following established brands.

Jupiter: Jupiter manufacture 3 models of Saxophone – the 500 series (currently model 565); the 700 series (currently model 769); and the 900 series (currently model 969). I particularly recommend the 700 series.

Trevor James: Trevor James manufactures a number of models of saxophone, and until recently only targeted the student market. Their Saxophones are favored by teachers and I particularly recommend the “Horn Revolution (II)” series available in Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Baritone

Yamaha: Yamaha manufacture a complete range of Saxophones from student to professional and the Yamaha 62 Alto is a particular favourite among professionals. Although the Yamaha student model is a good instrument, I think the Jupiter and Trevor James student models are better value for money.

Play-testing a Saxophone before purchase

For a complete beginner this is impossible because the player won't be able to produce a sound. If the player has been playing for 2 or 3 months and can produce a reliable sound then it is worth getting the player to try the instrument before purchasing because the player might find one instrument easier than another; this is largely down to the mouthpiece and the reed, but the positioning of the keys also makes a difference.

Each make and model of student Saxophone should be supplied with it's matching mouthpiece (e.g. Yamaha instruments have a Yamaha mouthpiece). Student Saxophone mouthpieces can be quite different from each other and so can feel different to what the player is used to. The player should play the instrument for a few minutes to adjust to the feel of the mouthpiece. It is also important that a player tests an instrument with the correct reed strength. The player will have got used to a particular reed strength for the mouthpiece they have been learning on, however that reed strength might not be suitable for the mouthpiece of the instrument that they are considering buying; if the player finds the instrument hard to blow, or squeaky, they should try playing it with reeds that are a grade softer and a grade harder than what they are used to.

Occasionally the situation arises where a student has been learning on an instrument using a professional mouthpiece. If the student owns the mouthpiece then it is worth testing the new instrument with both the supplied mouthpiece and the professional mouthpiece (providing the professional mouthpiece can fit onto the crook of the new instrument).

The positioning of the key-work on a Saxophone does vary from model to model and this is worth considering: the player should check that they can reach the little finger keys comfortably, can play the Bb bis key (the pearl on the Bb key adjacent to the B key) comfortably, and can operate the octave mechanism comfortably.

If the player is having difficulty with the instrument (even if they feel at ease with the mouthpiece, the reed, and the key-work) it could be down to how well the instrument is working (bear in mind that even brand new instruments might not be working well).