

The Saxophone – getting more from the instrument

A suitable mouthpiece

A surprising number of Saxophones are paired with unsuitable mouthpieces. The mouthpiece is the critical component of the instrument and is largely responsible for the tone, tuning, intonation, response, and dynamic range. If the instrument is in good condition then usually you should be able to play the instrument evenly and easily throughout its compass, and to play in tune (+/- 20 cents). I strongly recommend that you check that the mouthpiece is suitable for the instrument and if it is not then buy a new one (of either student or professional quality).

Only try mouthpieces after the instrument has been fully serviced (within the last year) otherwise you will not be accurately assessing the qualities of a particular mouthpiece – instead you will be assessing how different mouthpieces respond to problems with the instrument. Bear in mind that you may have to try different strength reeds if the tip opening or lay of the mouthpiece is different to your current mouthpiece.

A new crook

Recently manufacturers have been making premium crooks that can be bought separately. Crooks are second only to the mouthpiece in terms of the influence on tone, tuning and response. Players might simply want to replace their crook because it has got dented or excessively corroded in the bore, or they might want to experiment to see if they can improve the sound of their instrument by trying other crooks. As with mouthpieces it is important to make sure the instrument is working properly before testing crooks, in particular the player's current crook should not be loose in the socket at the top of the instrument.

A good ligature

On a student mouthpiece the ligature is usually made of metal and has two screws. The ligature should fit onto the mouthpiece without twisting or bending and the two screws should be parallel. With the reed off the mouthpiece the "bands" (sides) of the ligature should nearly meet when the screws are tightened; with the reed on, the space between the bands should be less than 1.6 mm (1/16"). If the ligature does not fit properly, or if the metal has become distorted, then the reed will not sit on the mouthpiece correctly - the instrument will not play as easily and as well as it should, and you should consider buying a new ligature.

There are many good makes and models of ligature - if the manufacturer of the mouthpiece you are using makes a matching ligature or recommends a particular make then buy that one, otherwise try Rovner or BG. To fairly assess a ligature your Saxophone must be in good condition.

Tuning and warming up

The mouthpiece will have an optimum tuning position on the crook cork – in this position the instrument should play in tune – the exact location will depend on the player but once it is established always locate the mouthpiece in the same place. If you are having problems keeping in tune with another instrument then either your instrument, or the instrument you are trying to tune to, is out of tune; changing the position of the mouthpiece will not solve this problem.

A Saxophone takes a while to reach playing temperature and therefore initially plays flat – warming the crook in your hand (**not** by blowing into it) before playing helps reduce this problem (likewise moderate warming of the body of the instrument over a radiator will help too – and it will also help the mechanism reach its correct operating temperature more quickly).

Do not adjust the position of the mouthpiece to compensate for the initial flatness, instead try to spend a few minutes before a performance playing the instrument, particularly the lower notes; if this is not possible then correct the tuning using your embouchure. During performances it is best for the player to keep hold of their Saxophone (rather than place it on a stand) so it stays warm and in tune.

Servicing the instrument

Make sure your Saxophone is regularly serviced so that you can get the most from it. I recommend graduate and professional Saxophones have a **custom service** to make them play as well as possible.

The instrument is stripped down and cleaned *throughout*. The mechanism of the instrument is made to operate as quietly as possible and to feel as balanced as possible; this is done by removing all play or binding from the mechanism, balancing the spring action, and using felt instead of cork on most articulated keys and some specific key heels. All pads are made to seat as well as possible – this may involve re-aligning keys and levelling tone holes.