

Saxophone Miscellany

The Saxophone was invented by Adolphe Sax in 1841. He wanted to create an instrument that would be both louder than any woodwind instrument and the more versatile than any brass instrument, and would therefore fill the then vacant middle ground between the two sections.

He patented the Saxophone in 1846 in two series of seven instruments each. The "military" series was pitched in Bb and Eb and was designed for military bands; this series has proved extremely popular and instruments from this series (which has been extended to 9 instruments) are now also found in Concert bands, Big Bands, Pop music and Jazz. The "orchestral" series was pitched in C and F and was intended primarily for classical music but it proved less popular and only a few members of the series were actually made. Most saxophone encountered today are from the Bb/Eb series but there are a few vintage saxophones remaining from the less popular C/F series and one manufacturer has started producing some of these instruments again.

Military series - Bb/Eb Saxophones

- Bb Sopranissimo -6 fingers Sounds C; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Ab(4) above middle C. Also called a **piccolo soprano** or by the brand name **Soprillo**. Not originally part of the family but developed later. Straight body; cost \$2900 in 2004.
- Eb Sopranino -6 fingers sounds F; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Db(4) above middle C. Rarely seen - usually straight but available with curved body.
- Bb Soprano -6 fingers Sounds C; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Ab(3) below middle C. Usually straight but available with curved body; the straight version is often supplied with a curved and a straight crook. A straight version with a bell curved slightly upwards and top end curved slightly downwards was marketed as a **Saxello** in the 1920s.
- Eb Alto -6 fingers sounds F; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Db(3) below middle C. The instrument is usually curved but Keilworth do a straight model. A rare version of the instrument exists with 1 extension key referred to as A sounding C3 (an octave below middle C). A straight version with a bell curved slightly upwards and top end curved slightly downwards was marketed as a **Saxello Alto** in the 1920s.
- Bb Tenor -6 fingers Sounds C; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Ab2 (tenth below middle C). Usually curved but available with straight body. A straight version with a bell curved slightly upwards and top end curved slightly downwards was marketed as a **Saxello Tenor** in the 1920s.
- Eb Baritone -6 fingers sounds F; lowest standard note referred to as Bb sounding Db(2) one octave below Eb Alto; commonly has 1 extension key referred to as A sounding C(2) two octaves below middle C (similar to Bass clarinets). Looped neck and curved body but a straight version has been made.
- Bb Bass -6 fingers Sounds C; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Ab(1) two octaves below Bb Soprano. A rare version of the instrument exists with 1 extension key referred to as A sounding Gb1. Looped neck and curved body.
- Eb Contra-bass -6 fingers sounds F; lowest standard note referred to as Bb sounding Db(1) one octave below Baritone. Looped neck.
- Bb Sub Contra-Bass -6 fingers Sounds C; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Ab0 one octave below Bass. Not originally part of the family but developed later.

Orchestral series – C/F Saxophones

The instruments pitched in C are sometimes referred to as “C melody Saxophones” – the most common one being the C melody Tenor Sax commonly called the “C melody”.

- F Sopranino -6 fingers sounds G; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Eb(4) above middle C. Scored for by Ravel but it is not known whether this instrument was actually made.
- C Soprano -6 fingers sounds D; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Bb(3) below middle C. Mass produced between 1919 and 1929. Popular in 1920s because player could play from Piano score without transposing and could take the flute or Oboe part; modern production has resumed (**Aquilasax**). Getting mouthpieces can be a problem - modern small chamber Bb Soprano mouthpieces can sometimes work.
- F Alto -6 fingers sounds G; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Eb(3) below middle C; usually called mezzo-soprano, only manufactured by Conn in 1928-29.
- C Tenor -6 fingers Sounds D; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Bb(2) ninth below middle C. Usually called the C melody Saxophone. Popular in 1920s dance music; vintage instruments still played; modern production has resumed (**Aquilasax**). Getting mouthpieces can be a problem: vintage mouthpieces are too muted for today’s sound; modern Alto or Tenor mouthpieces can sometimes work.
- F Baritone -6 fingers sounds G; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Eb(2) one octave below F alto; only a few prototypes were made.
- C Bass -6 fingers Sounds D; lowest note referred to as Bb sounding Bb(1) one octave below C Tenor. Only one instrument known to have been made, and that by Adolphe Sax himself.

Related Instruments

The definition of the Saxophone is a conical bore instrument played with a single reed that overblows an Octave. Related instruments that fit this category are:

Sarrusophone: invented in the 1850s, it had a similar design to the saxophone with the same range of pitches, but played with a double reed. Later these instruments were fitted with single reed mouthpieces but still retained a distinctly different tone to saxophones. Only the large contrabass Sarrusophone had any success but these days musical parts written for it are usually played on the Contrabassoon.

Tárogató: the modern Tárogató was invented by Vencel Jozsef Schunda in the 1890s. It uses a single reed (unlike its historical predecessor also called a Tárogató but played with a double reed). The instrument is usually made of Blackwood and the most common size is the soprano in Bb which is about 74 cm in length and has a mournful sound similar to a cross between an Oboe and a soprano Saxophone. A family of seven sizes, of which the largest was a contrabass tárogató in Eb, has been made. The modern Tárogató has gone in and out of production but is currently made in Hungary.

Tubax: this has a narrower bore than the Saxophone (but exists in the same pitches and with same fingering system) giving a more “reedy” tone. It was developed in 1999 by the German instrument maker Benedikt Eppelsheim. There are only three sizes: Eb contrabass saxophone (playable with Baritone Sax mouthpiece), C subcontrabass, and Bb subcontrabass.

Aulochrome: a double soprano saxophone (it has two mouthpieces and looks like two soprano saxophones held together) invented by Belgian instrument maker Francois Louis in 2001.