

Saxophone Equipment

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Not even the best equipment can hide or fix one's fundamental flaws as a performer. However, for the fundamentally sound student, playing on the highest quality equipment can make a tremendous difference. Each player is different and will almost certainly need to **experiment** to discover her/his ideal setup. Buy the best equipment you can afford! When you try new equipment, pay careful attention to your sound, intonation, ability to articulate (if applicable), control, and especially the **feel** of the equipment in question.

Saxophones

Selmer and Yamaha have long dominated the marketplace, and are still some of the very best choices among saxophones. I consider three levels of instruments:

Beginner Horns

Selmer 400 Series

Yamaha YAS-26 (Alto); YTS-26 (Tenor)

Intermediate Horns

Selmer AS42 (Alto); TS44 (Tenor)

Yamaha YAS-480 (Alto); YTS-480 (Tenor)

Yamaha YAS-62 (Alto); YTS-62 (Tenor)

Professional Horns

Selmer Series II or Series III

Selmer Reference 54 or 36 (tenor)

Yamaha YAS-82Z (Alto); YTS-82Z (Tenor)

Yamaha YAS-875EX (Alto); YTS-875EX (Tenor)

Base your selection on sound quality, craftsmanship, intonation, and comfort. Many musicians, especially jazz players, prefer older, vintage horns. While these horns are, in many cases, substantially more expensive, they may deliver the specific sound that you seek. Playing the **Selmer Mark VI, Balanced Action**, and other vintage horns can be a highly rewarding experience that may well be worth the investment.

Mouthpieces

Of all the equipment choices saxophonists confront, choosing a mouthpiece can be especially bewildering due to the sheer number of options, particularly for jazz players. Experimentation is critical when it comes to finding a good mouthpiece. Many players own multiple mouthpieces that they use for different purposes. The list below has the average student in mind. I list the traditional choices for classical mouthpieces and some medium faced, standard jazz mouthpiece choices. There are a number of people who make custom mouthpieces, of course, and there is also a vintage mouthpiece market, so the choices are probably endless! Use this list as a starting point.

Soprano Saxophone

Classical

Selmer C*, C, D, or S90 (170 facing)**

Vandoren Optimum SL3 or SL4,
Vandoren V5 S15
Rousseau 3R

Jazz

Selmer D, E, or F

Meyer 6 or 7
Otto Link tone Edge 5*, 6, or 6*
Vandoren V16
Claude Lakey 6*

Alto Saxophone

Classical

Selmer C*, C or S90 (170, 180, or 190 facing)**

Vandoren Optimum AL3 or AL4,
Vandoren V5 A28
Rousseau 4R

Jazz

Meyer Rubber 5M, 6M, 7M, or Meyer G
Style 5M, 6M, or 7M

Morgan 7M
Beechler M5S

Selmer E or F

Vandoren V16 A5, A6, or A7, or Java
A35
Claude Lakey 6*

Tenor Saxophone

Classical

Selmer C*, C or S90 (170, 180, or 190 facing)**

Vandoren Optimum TL3 or TL4,
Vandoren V5 T20
Rousseau 5R

Jazz

Otto Link 6*, 7, 7*, 8, or the “New
Vintage” in the same facings
Berg Larsen 100/0, 105/0, 110/0, or
higher
Morgan 7M
Vandoren T45, T55, T75

Baritone Saxophone

Classical

Selmer C*, C or S90 (170, 180, or 190 facing)**

Vandoren Optimum BL3 or BL4,

Vandoren V5 B25 or B35

Rousseau 5R or 6R

Jazz

Berg Larsen 110/0, 110/1, or higher

Otto Link 6, 6*, 7, 7*, 8

Meyer Rubber 6M, 7M, 8M

Rousseau JDX 5

In general, saxophonists who are beginning to play jazz should use mouthpieces with medium facings and openings. Also, mouthpieces to be **avoided** include “no-name” mouthpieces, mouthpieces that “come with the instrument,” (especially for beginner horns) and mouthpieces that are in any way chipped, broken, or damaged.

Ligatures

The ligature on the mouthpiece **does** make a difference! There are many brands from which to choose, so some experimentation may be necessary to find one that fits your mouthpiece and provides the best possible fit. Some that are commonly used include the Vandoren Optimum, Rico H, Bay, Brancher, Francois Louis, Ishimori, and several others.

Reeds

Reeds make our sound, so woodwind players have a love-hate relationship with reeds. Reed companies continually are hard at work trying to create more consistent reeds, but because they are working with a product of nature, that work is an ongoing experiment. Consistency is certainly the major point of frustration when it comes to reeds, so we need to learn to be patient when we deal with our reeds!

There are many different reeds on the market, designed with either or both the classical or jazz/commercial player in mind. Different brands have slightly different reed strengths, so some experimentation may be required to achieve the best fit. While I personally use the same traditional blue box Vandoren reeds for both classical and jazz playing, here is a list of additional options.

Classical Reeds

Vandoren Traditional 3 or 3.5 strength

Vandoren V12 3 or 3.5

Rico Reserve 3.5

Hemke 3.5

I generally use a half strength softer on soprano than alto, and possibly a slightly harder reed on baritone. The Vandorens tend to run slightly harder than the others.

Jazz Reeds

Vandoren Traditional, Java, ZZ

Rico Select Jazz Unfiled

Lavoz

Rico Royal

I don't recommend specific strengths here because the reed will need to be matched to the mouthpiece. Some mouthpieces require a softer or harder reed. Start with your "normal" reed strength and adjust if necessary.

Synthetic Reeds

More companies, like Légère, are producing synthetic reeds. Like all reeds, they have received mixed reviews, but it may be worthwhile to experiment with them. I don't use them regularly, but I know musicians who do (and like them a lot), and I do keep one in my tenor case. Just in case...

Reed Care

If there are a myriad of choices when it comes to equipment, reed care elicits the widest variety of responses. I recently asked a number of my colleagues what they do to their reeds, either before they play them or once they are playing them regularly. I heard everything from "I lick them, play them, and chuck them if they don't work," to very elaborate schemes involving humidity control, to one colleague who stores some of his reeds in vodka! Here are some things that might help:

1. Be sure that the reed gets soaked before it is played on any given day. I see too many students who play on a dry reed and then wonder why their tone isn't perfect. Soak the **whole** reed, not just the tip, and be certain that it gets soaked completely. The reed is like a sponge and absorbs water. When we play it, it is like the sponge you wrung out after you did the dishes – it isn't dripping, but it's still wet. Some musicians fill sterilized film canisters or prescription bottles with water and soak the reeds in them.
2. With some of my reeds, I will use 600 grit sandpaper, placed rough side up on a square of glass (buy a cheap picture frame and remove the glass) and sand the back to ensure that it is flat. Some folks also "burnish" or "polish" the top side of the reed as well.
3. Some folks believe in maintaining the humidity level of the reeds, especially if

they travel frequently or live in a volatile climate There are several ways to experiment with this. The idea behind this is that the soaking and drying cycle that we put reeds through is ultimately what shortens their life, so keeping them at the same moisture level all the time may increase their life and/or make them more consistent.

4. Many folks use a reed knife and/or clipper to work with their reeds on an ongoing basis. This requires some skill, patience, and practice, but those who are good at it swear by it.

Other Accessories

Here are some other pieces of equipment that every saxophonist should have:

1. Many folks use EZO denture cushions as a covering for their bottom teeth. They are very effective and once you use them, you will never go back! Buy the pink box marked “Lower Heavy.” You can find them at some pharmacies and online at Amazon.
2. Metronome, preferably a loud one, and a tuner that both sounds a pitch and shows you your pitch accuracy. There are many good smartphone metronome and tuner apps that work perfectly well, so there’s no excuse not to have a metronome and tuner!
3. A recording device. I use the Zoom H2 digital recorder by Samson, but once again, a smartphone or tablet app should be fine. Being able to listen to our own playing in a critical, objective way is absolutely essential.
4. Some things to help with better ergonomics, including a good neckstrap, one that is not too stretchy (like the Neotech straps). For musicians with back or neck problems, try a harness, especially when playing the bigger horns. There are lots of new neckstrap concepts on the market today that are worth experimenting with.
5. A good set of ears! Remember that we all teach ourselves how to play. Your teacher is a merely a guide and another objective set of ears. Also, use your ears to listen to **everything!** Immerse yourself in all kinds of music!