

Equipment Selection

The selection of proper equipment can be an especially daunting task. Players looking for high-quality instruments will make a material investment third only to their cars and houses in terms of expense. These instruments will affect the way they play, what they sound like, and how they feel about what they're playing. Upon entry into any large music store, the potential instrument buyer receives a barrage of information on dozens of brands of instruments, mouthpieces, reeds, ligatures, and other accessories. Further compounding the problem is that the relationship between player and equipment often takes several months to develop, much longer than the time allowed to return the purchase in most cases. The following will hopefully clear some confusion and help the purchaser cut a swathe through the jungle of instrument purchase. The selections I give for equipment are influenced not only by my own tastes, but by what has worked and continues to work for the majority of music schools and professional players.

Saxophones

For new professional horns, the only brands worth looking at are Selmer and Yamaha. For Yamaha, any horn whose model number's first digit is six or higher will be a great professional horn. For new Selmers, look at the Series II, Series III, or Reference horns. The Yamahas sometimes play slightly better in tune, and the Selmers sometimes have a slightly darker sound, depending on the lacquer. For student horns, I would still stay with Selmer or Yamaha, although Keilwerth also makes a good student horn. Some other brands which are gaining ground with professional players are Keilwerth, Yanagisawa, and Cannonball. Don't let a salesperson talk you into a horn just because of brand name, though. Let your ear be the final judge. If you can find an old Conn or King horn (i.e. pre-1950's) in an ad paper or on the web, those are also good horns, although you should NEVER, EVER buy a horn without being able to try it out first. The ultimate used horns, in my opinion, are the Selmer Mark VI or Balanced Action. If you can find one of those and can afford it, get it.

Clarinets

For new professional clarinets, the quality of wood is usually the best on Buffet and Leblanc, with the Buffet R-13 being the runaway favorite for many generations of clarinetists. Currently, many different types of R-13's are being manufactured, including "Elite" and "Vintage." Any of these will do, so long as the wood is pure. LeBlanc horns tend to play slightly better in tune, but their mechanisms are more temperamental and the sound is not quite as sweet. The Leblanc models to search for are Concerto or Opus. Again, there are some other brands which are lately gaining a foothold into the market, like Yamaha and Selmer. As far as student horns go, Buffet, Yamaha and Vito all make decent plastic clarinets. I would not recommend older used clarinets of any brand, mostly because of the deterioration of the wood leading to the phenomenon clarinetists refer to

as a “blown out” instrument. While there is some disagreement as to whether this phenomenon is real or imaginary, it is true that for whatever reason, older clarinets just don’t seem to sound as good as newer ones.

Flutes

The world of flute buying is quite a bit more complicated. Whereas with saxophone and clarinet there are a few time-honored brand names which most people tend to gravitate towards, the flute community seems to attract many smaller custom flute makers. The player looking to upgrade his instrument, then, is confronted with a confusingly large number of brands. So, instead of first listing brand names, I’ll suggest some things to look for in a flute. Generally, the heavier the metal, the sweeter the sound and the more the instrument projects. In order from lightest to heaviest, common flute metals are nickel, silver, gold, and platinum. Some flutes are also made of grenadilla wood like their baby piccolo sisters. This is a somewhat exotic choice that I recommend only if you really know what kind of sound you’re looking for. Always buy and open-hole flute with a B foot. Even though you rarely use the low B, it is generally agreed among professionals that having the B foot enhances the rest of the low range. Flute players also generally agree that open holed flutes sound better and play better in tune, besides necessitating proper finger technique. Soldered tone holes, french pointed arms, and various different headjoint shapes are also things to research before making your purchase.

Haynes and Powell have traditionally been the two twin towers of the American flute world, though lately they have been supplanted by the myriad of excellent flutes made in Japan. Some of these names are Sankyo, Muramatsu, Yamaha, Nagahara, and Miyazawa. Other makers whose flutes you’ll often see in professional orchestras are Brannen-Cooper, Tom Green, Robert Bigio, Altus, Burkhart-Phelan, Straubinger, Weissman, Trevor James and Pearl. Once again, let your ear be the final judge. I currently play on a \$2000 Emerson which plays better than any \$6000 flute I’ve ever tried. For student flutes, Yamaha, Selmer, Emerson and Gemeinhardt all make solid instruments.

Double Reeds

Although I play double reeds, my knowledge of the various brands of oboe and bassoon makers is quite limited. I know Yamaha, Fox, MCW, Selmer, Buffet and Loree make good professional oboes, with the favorite being Loree. Fox, Puchner, and Heckel make very good bassoons. These instruments can be quite expensive, though, especially bassoons. If you are a good enough bassoon player to contemplate buying a \$20K Heckel, your discernment in bassoon quality is well above the scope of this article. My suggestion is to play whatever student instrument you have, or whatever instrument you are borrowing from your school, as long as possible so you can save enough money to buy a really nice instrument.

Mouthpieces

A word about mouthpieces: because each manufacturer has their own numbering system for the size of the facing, it is necessary to have a facing comparison chart, such as the one Woodwind and Brasswind publish in their quarterly catalogs. I would never recommend a mouthpiece with a baffle unless you are playing jazz, and even then I would stay away unless you know exactly what you're looking for and are prepared to deal with many discrepancies in pitch. Also remember that a mouthpiece with a wider facing will require a softer reed, and vice versa.

The aspiring professional saxophonist will probably want at least two mouthpieces for each horn – one for jazz, and one for classical music. The classical mouthpiece of choice for soprano and alto is a Selmer S80, C* facing. For classical tenor and baritone, the Selmer S90, 190 facing works even better. A similar-feeling mouthpiece which responds better but is a bit brighter is the Eugene Rousseau New Classic series. I would look at an NC4 facing for soprano or alto, and an NC5 facing for tenor and baritone. A newer mouthpiece many classical players are switching to is the Optimum made by Vandoren.

Jazz mouthpieces are more varied from player to player, but there are still some “standard” mouthpieces that sound good in most situations. For alto sax, a rubber Meyer mouthpiece in either a 5M, 6M, or 7M facing has proven to work well for many players in many styles. For tenor, the metal Otto Link, 6* facing is currently the mouthpiece of choice. For baritone, a rubber or metal Berg Larsen 115 or 120 facing works great.

The clarinetists' choice of mouthpiece has traditionally been more limited. I recommend that the student should limit himself to the more classical mouthpieces, even if he intends to play jazz. I have personally never been a fan of the bright, nasal “jazz clarinet” sound. Players such as Benny Goodman, Eddie Daniels, and Bob Mintzer have demonstrated that it is possible to play stylistically appropriate jazz and project in a large ensemble without sacrificing most of their overtones and richness of timbre, as jazz mouthpieces sometimes do. The first mouthpiece brand to look into would be Vandoren, with the B45 and B46 being the most popular. This is the runaway favorite for Soprano clarinet (B44 for Eb clarinet). Many other brands make good models today, such as Bay, Morgan, San Francisco, Selmer, and Pyne. These brands should still be compared to the Vandoren, however – that being the industry standard – to make sure that tone, flexibility, and intonation are all “up to snuff.” Also, if you can find an old Kaspar mouthpiece, look into buying one. Selmer C* mouthpieces are the favorite for alto, bass and contrabass clarinets, with Vandoren and Bay running a close second and third.

Reeds

There is less variance in reeds than in mouthpieces, simply because a reed needs to be a certain shape in order to work properly. Therefore, characteristics to search for in reeds are consistency in cane and consistency in strength. The most popular reeds for both

clarinet and saxophone are those made by Vandoren. For Bb or A clarinet, try the V12 (silver box) Vandorens. Generally, for all the mouthpieces mentioned above, reeds in strength of 3 to 3 1/2 should suffice (maybe increasing to a strength 4 for bari sax or bass clarinet). Rico now makes an actual jazz reed which I find to be very responsive and warm on both alto and tenor saxophone. I have also used and liked Hemke reeds for classical saxophone, Alexander reeds for jazz saxophone, and Gonzalez reeds for both saxophone and clarinet. I recommend experimenting with many different brands of reeds to find what you like best, because it is a very personal choice. With double reed players, it's an even more personal choice, since you will be making yours from scratch. Because there is no mouthpiece, the quality of the cane and precision of the cut is that much more important. With any reed instrument, your body will be in more intimate contact with the reed than with any other part of the instrument. It's also fun, because experimenting with reeds is a good deal cheaper than experimenting with mouthpieces or horns. Because the reed is the part of the instrument that actually vibrates and thus produces the sound, reed selection is crucial. This will be dealt with in greater detail in another article.

Ligatures

I have never known a ligature to have more than a very subtle effect on my sound. However, since I also know that the majority of saxophonists and clarinetists disagree with that statement, I would recommend getting a second opinion from a few other players. What I do notice is that more reeds seem to respond better to better ligatures. Thus, by getting a more expensive ligature, the student is increasing the percentage of usable reeds, actually saving himself money in the long run. The ligatures I recommend for all sizes of clarinet and saxophone are those made by Bay, Winslow, or the Optimum made by Vandoren.